Shaw Before His First Play

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Published by ELT Press


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6 The Embryo Playwright in Shaw’s Early Novels

Bernard Shaw’s “lively and talkative spirit,” James Joyce once observed, “cannot stand to be subjected to the noble and bare style appropriate to modern playwriting. Indulging himself in wandering prefaces and extravagant rules of drama, he creates for himself a dramatic form which is much like a dialogue novel.” What Joyce had not realized—perhaps because of the oblivion into which Shaw’s early fiction had already fallen by 1909—was that Shaw’s own dialogue-novels were the wellspring from which Shavian drama issued. Early in his playwriting career Shaw called attention to an umbilical relationship between his prentice novels (1879–1883, 1888) and the plays of his literary maturity, and scattered haphazardly through the observations of his myriad critics and biographers are further references to the relationship of one play or another to the novels. Still other unnoticed parallels exist, some of them, certainly, not coincidental; for it is a rare author who does not consciously or unconsciously pillage his own early work. “I may dodder and dote; I may potboil and platitudinize,” Shaw once wrote when bowing out as drama critic for the *Saturday Review* in 1898: “I may become the butt and chopping-block of all the bright, original spirits of the rising generation; but my reputation shall not suffer: it is built up fast and solid, like Shakespeare’s, on an impregnable basis of dogmatic iteration.” He was then only forty-two, hardly beyond his adolescence as a playwright, and fifteen years beyond the last completed novel of his literary puberty.

In the prentice novels the embryo playwright emerges. As early as 1887 (Shaw’s first completed play was produced five years later), Swan Sonnenschein, publisher of the fifth novel, had seen the makings of a successful dramatist in the commercially unsuccessful *An Unsocial Socialist* and had confided his observations in a letter to its author: “If you were to stick to novels or go in for plays (which are even more suited to you, in my opinion), I believe this book, in common with all your others, if there are more than ‘[Cashel] Byron,’ would work into
a good circulation.”\textsuperscript{2} Although the 1890s were to prove Sonnenschein prescient, Shaw, still unconvinced that his future lay beyond the novel, put between himself and playwriting success an aborted sixth fiction and futile attempts to create interest among publishers in the five novels he publicly disparaged and privately cherished.

An early review of the English edition of Shaw’s novel \textit{The Irrational Knot} (serialized in 1886 but not published as a book until 1906) recognized the relationship to the plays, and used it to disparage him as a novelist by adopting the platitudes of critical scorn of Shaw the playwright:

This is a very early “G.B.S.” but in every way characteristic of that witty and irresponsible genius.... The characters have no trace of life, they are merely animated theories. The dialogue is not dialogue at all in the accepted sense; it is an alternating discharge of tracts and sermons.... There is no doubt that this is a genuine “G.B.S.” This much is clear to anyone acquainted with the later books. But the Shavian essence is so much overlaid by the crudities of juvenile and undigested philosophy that we can readily understand why the book was still-born.\textsuperscript{3}

That there was a structural relationship between early Shavian fiction and later Shavian drama was observed as early as 1905 in a shrewd appraisal by Holbrook Jackson:

The more or less still-born novels bore many of the characteristics of the stage play. They were largely carried on by means of dialogue interspersed with the minimum of description and the maximum of explanation—in which last he has always been a master. These novels were really embryonic stage-plays, transitional drama; and what actually happened, when they became the genuine article, was a rearrangement of their parts rather than an alteration in their matter. The description became the scenario, amplified before each act in the printed plays; the explanation became the now famous prefaces and appendices, or else formed a considerable and increasing part of the dialogue which, with little alteration, conveyed the action in much the same way as it did in the novel.\textsuperscript{4}

A decade later, Percival Howe also pointed out (in his brief \textit{Bernard Shaw. A Critical Study}) that the moments of animated discussion in the novels were much like the plays. To prove his point he transposed dialogue from the narrative form into the dramatic mode and drew a parallel between the proposal scene in \textit{An Unsocial Socialist} and scenes between Valentine and Gloria (\textit{You Never Can Tell}), John Tanner and Ann Whitefield (\textit{Man and Superman}), and Charteris and Julia (\textit{The Philanderer}). Howe also likened the opportunities Shaw made in his plays for descriptions of characters to similar passages in the novels, using descriptions of Mr. Jansenius (\textit{An Unsocial Socialist}) and Mrs.
Douglas (*The Irrational Knot*) as examples. Showing that similar parallels existed with regard to descriptions of interiors, he demonstrated that when blocks of scene description were lifted from the novels and transposed into the historic (or dramatic) present, it appeared again that the novelist-turned-playwright was unwilling to surrender the enjoyable liberties of fiction when adopting the tight, bare straitjacket of contemporary playwriting.⁵

The novels were less a false start for Shaw than a start at finding himself. His first major biographer, Archibald Henderson, observed about Shaw’s second novel, *The Irrational Knot*: “The nascent dramatist often speaks out in this book—note the melodramatic Lalage Virtue [Susanna Conolly]—but nowhere more characteristically than in the trenchant deliverance of the justly vexed Elinor [which ends with the words, “at last I have come out of a scene without having forgotten the right thing to say!”].”⁶ Also looking at *The Irrational Knot* (in 1916), Dixon Scott saw in both the speeches of Elinor McQuinch and Ned Conolly and the incisive character descriptions in the novel the beginnings of Shaw’s mature style, developing from his venturing out into “cut and thrust” platform work. It was inherently dramatic prose, Scott wrote, because Shaw was using language “written to be uttered with physical forcibleness on the rapid levels of man-to-man speech.”⁷

The sense of the stage in Shaw’s dialogue had already inspired James Huneker’s comment, “*An Unsocial Socialist* contains at least one act of a glorious farce,” while J. S. Collis noted later that the most effective parts of the novels were those essentially dramatic, when the heroes and heroines “rise to their feet and deliver long lectures on Socialism and Art, and when the dialogue is sometimes as good as the dialogue in his plays.”⁸ Much later, Richard Dietrich observed wryly that “there is a scene in *An Unsocial Socialist* when [Jeff] Smilash [the hero in down-scale disguise], goes into the cottage [which is his hideout] and seconds later [Sidney] Trefusis comes out, that particularly reminds me of the ‘Superman’ comic strip routine in which Clark Kent, ‘mild-mannered reporter,’ disappears into a phone booth and seconds later out pops Superman, with red cape and bulging biceps.”⁹ The bizarre scene is pure theater.

Shaw the playwright could never separate himself from Shaw the novelist. His ideas for plays often overflowed the form, necessitating his characteristic long prefaces (sometimes—as with *Androcles and the Lion*—longer than the play itself), notes and appendices (as in *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Man and Superman*), and, with *Pygmalion*, a prose-
Bernard Shaw Before His First Play

fiction sequel, where we learn what happens to Eliza after the curtain drops. *Candida* opens (in print) with pages of description setting the Morell residence above a Victoria Park in the East End never to be seen from the stage or the seats, cataloging the books in the Rev. James Mavor Morell’s bookshelves which no one in the audience could possibly read. In two novels (*Immaturity* and *Cashel Byron’s Profession*) Shaw had already employed an epilogue, and a third—*An Unsocial Socialist*—overflows into an epilogue apology in the form of a “Letter to the Author” from the fictional hero.

Harry Trench, protagonist in Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses* (1885 and 1892), and Sidney Trefusis (*An Unsocial Socialist*, 1883) both face the prospect of deriving their income from sources they hold to be immoral. However, such income allows them to live well and be well connected socially. While the source is repellent to them, reality compels them to be less than idealistic about accepting the tainted wealth. In each case their original complicity is unwitting, but neither can—despite early idealism—quixotically reject the income. Trench embraces the monstrosity. Trefusis, however, first rationalizes that “A man cannot be a Christian in this country,” and arrives at the unsentimental realization that his good works are dependent upon his acceptance of a repellent income. That virtue is often a willing parasite upon sin is the similar paradox Major Barbara’s Salvation Army must accept if its purposes are to be furthered. Thus the Army—at first to the horror of the idealistic Barbara Undershaft—accepts contributions from a distiller and a munitions maker. In the same fashion, gentility fattens upon immorality in *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. Shaw has observed (ignoring Trefusis): “There is an economic link between Cashel Byron, Sartorius [*Widowers’ Houses*], Mrs. Warren, and Undershaft: all of them prospering in questionable activities.” Erich Strauss suggested that Shaw used the romantic dimension in *Widowers’ Houses* to suggest that his “acquisitive” women represent capitalism and the rational women (like Vivie Warren) socialism. Thus Harry Trench surrenders his social scruples when he marries Blanche Sartorius, as Cashel Byron withdraws from capitalistic enterprise when he marries Lydia Carew. Strauss further saw Trefusis and Trench as complementary figures, and he extended the parallel to their love-interests as well.¹⁰

Shaw would pilfer from his own fictional plots. Much of his second play, *The Philanderer* (1893), again recalls *An Unsocial Socialist*. In both novel and play the hero is pursued by one woman (with whose affection he is sated) while he pursues another. James Huneker wondered:
“There is a role played by a character—Shaw?—which recalls Leonard Charteris in ... *The Philanderer*. All of his men are modelled off the same block. They are a curious combination of blackguard, philosopher, ‘bounder,’ artist, and comedian.” Archibald Henderson describes Trefusis’s first wife as “that forerunner of Julia Craven [in *The Philanderer*], the romantic little Henrietta Jansenius,” who just as this type (the acquisitive or Pursuing Woman) has her origins in the novels, so does her opposite, the Shavian “New Woman.” Her origins appear in the working-class Harriet Russell of *Immaturity* and Elinor McQuinch of *The Irrational Knot*, both determined rationalists. Strauss only traced the “New Woman” as far back as Shaw’s fourth novel, Lydia Carew in *Cashel Byron*:

The normal type of possessive, romantic, and emotional creature stands for the world as it is, and particularly for capitalistic society, the essence of this world. For this very reason Bernard Shaw needed a different, or indeed an opposite, type of woman to represent a new and saner world, though not necessarily Socialism. This type is self-possessed, realistic and intellectual, and can be traced back at least as far as ... the heroine of *Cashel Byron’s Profession*. She makes her first appearance in Shaw’s plays in the character of Grace Tranfield, in *The Philanderer*. ... [Charteris] stands between two women who can be regarded as classical representatives of Shavian womankind, Grace Tranfield and Julia Craven.11

Early on, Shaw acknowledged the relationship between the novels and *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1893): “The tremendously effective scene—which a baby could write if its sight were normal—in which [Mrs. Warren] justifies herself, is only a paraphrase of a scene in a novel of my own, ‘Cashel Byron’s Profession’ (hence the title, ‘Mrs Warren’s Profession’), in which a prize-fighter shows how he was driven into the ring exactly as Mrs. Warren was driven on the streets. Never was there a more grossly obvious derivation.”12 Having quickly forgotten the chapters of the abortive novel he abandoned in 1888, he missed noticing that Mrs. Warren, who like her sister refused to work for a pittance, and succumb early to lead poisoning in a white lead factory, choosing, rather, a less moral occupation, may have owed her alternative to Dr. Kincaid’s choice of profession. What the poor need, Kincaid explains:

ninety-nine in a hundred of them—is rest and sufficient food, but you might as well prescribe sable cloaks and diamond rings. It is really very poor practice to sit there telling women with from nothing a week upward to eighteen shillings that what their baby wants is nourishing food. Roughly speaking, nearly every case you get in a London hospital is complicated by drink, overwork, or starvation. Then there is a lot of white lead poisoning, housemaid’s knee, sweep’s cancer, and other things that needn’t be.13
Not only was *Mrs Warren’s Profession* indebted to *Cashel Byron*, Shaw explained to Archibald Henderson, but so was *Major Barbara* (1905):

You see, long ago, I wrote a novel called Cashel Byron’s Profession, in which I showed the strange anomaly of a profession which has the poetry and romance of fighting about it reduced to a perfectly and wholly commercial basis. Here we see the pressure of economics upon the profession of prize-fighting. After a while, I wrote a play which I called *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. I showed that women were driven to prostitution, because the economic conditions of modern capitalistic society forced them into a life from which, in another state of society, they would have shrunk with horror. Here we see the pressure of economics upon the profession of prostitution. Finally, there came Major Barbara. Perhaps a more suitable title for this play, save for the fact of repetition, would have been Andrew Undershaft’s Profession. Here we see the pressure of economics upon the profession of dealing in death and destruction to one’s fellow-creatures. I have shown the conflict between the naturally religious soul, Barbara, and Undershaft, with his gospel of money, of force, of power and his doctrine not only that money controls morality, but that it is a crime not to have money. The tragedy results from the collision of Undershaft’s philosophy with Barbara’s.¹⁴

One can also see novelistic anticipations of other aspects of *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. Alick West observed that Vivie Warren leaves her mother for the same reason Ned Conolly leaves Marian in the last pages of *The Irrational Knot*—on the intellectual ground that she is still a conventional woman at heart, bound by conventional morality. Vivie herself resembles another character in the novel, Nelly McQuinch, who is also proud, independent, shocking, “advanced”—a Vivie without the mannish flourishes. Joseph McCabe saw other traits of Vivie in Mary Sutherland, of *Love Among the Artists*, who is “equally delightful and impossible in her placid intellectuality—an early Vivie Warren. The letter in which she accepts an offer of marriage might relate to the purchase of a sewing machine. There is the same discord in family life and the same scorn of the middle class and its conventions.”¹⁵

*Arms and the Man* (1894) is an early example of the Shavian inversion of standard theatrical situations—one of the hallmarks of his early drama. Yet in the earlier novels, Robert Smith (*Immaturity*) is content when an attractive, romantic, eligible female leaves him alone and marries someone else; Conolly and Marian (*The Irrational Knot*) marry at the beginning of the novel and part at the end; Owen Jack (*Love Among the Artists*) rises from frustration and failure to spectacular success—and is less happy as a result; and the seemingly anti-romantic Unsocial Socialist, Sidney Trefusis, by neglect drives a loving wife to her death and then falls in love with a girl who has not yet completed finishing
school. Much of Shavian drama is constructed around the reversal of conventional expectation. In *Widowers’ Houses* the hero nobly refuses to live on his fiancée’s tainted dowry, only to discover that his own income is equally tainted. Julius Caesar turns out to be as far from a conventional conqueror-hero as Candida Morell is from a conventional wife and mother. One of the most typical inversions is in *How He Lied to Her Husband* (1904), a self-spoof of *Candida*, where the husband, Teddy Bompas, is not outraged by his wife’s extracurricular dalliance with a young poet, but is furious instead at Henry Apjohn’s cautiously feigned indifference to the charms of Aurora Bompas. If there is anything Bompas cannot tolerate, it is lack of interest in his wife, who he thinks (flattering his own taste in a mate) is irresistible. When he discovers that the poet’s passionate verses had actually been written to his wife, Bompas is proud and happy.

*Arms and the Man* is a typical reversal situation: the soldier-hero is really a coward in battle, and proud of it. Again conventional standards are held up to ridicule, this time the theatrical view of war. Mrs. Skene, in *Cashel Byron*, anticipates this view of war as just another profession, as Ned Skene’s boxing is to her: “I shouldnt like to see him in the ring no more than the lady of an officer in the Guards would like to see her husband in the field of battle running his sword into the poor blacks or into the French; but … it’s his profession.”

William Irvine saw in two early Shavian military men, Caesar and Bluntschli, echoes of another novel, *The Irrational Knot*, “for as a dramatist Shaw exploits the comic possibilities of utilitarianism. He frequently applies the standard of utility under incongruous and paradoxical circumstances…. In the plays Bluntschli—except for one or two pleasant lapses into sentiment—reduces war and romance at their most theatrical to the crassest considerations of bourgeois utility, and Caesar does the same for world conquest.” Irvine suggests “with some exaggeration” that Shaw discovered the dramatic possibilities of the Benthamite example in Ned Conolly. “He introduced him into fiction and in Bluntschli he put him on the stage…. He transferred utilitarian dullness into epigram and paradox.”

The curtain in *Candida* (that the committed artist must not and should not need love: “the secret of the poet’s heart”) is Shaw’s return to the closing scene in *Love Among the Artists*, where the career-obsessed composer-hero—although the dream of an adoring wife teases him bitterly—rejects the notion of love or marriage. In the play young Eugene Marchbanks turns his back on what he now sees as the trap
of a dubious happiness and escapes into the night, secure in his sense that a higher destiny than domesticity awaits him. “No matter: I am free: I am myself again,” says Owen Jack to himself in *Love Among the Artists*. “Back to thy holy garret, oh my soul!” The lines suggest the self-dramatizing poet Marchbanks. Shaw the playwright had an interest in soliloquy. Another theme running through the Marchbanks-Candida relationship is anticipated in Conolly’s confession to his wife Marian in an even earlier novel, *The Irrational Knot*: “When I was a romantic boy, any good woman could have made a saint of me. Let them fall in love with you as much as they please. Afterwards they will seek wives according to a higher standard than if they had never known you. But do not return the compliment, or your influence will become an evil one.”

As direct kin to Shaw’s play, however, *The Irrational Knot* is less crucial than *Love Among the Artists*, an early attempt at a Candida which deals also with genius. The principal male characters contrast lives either devoted exclusively to art or diverted by marriage. But *Love Among the Artists* is an oversimplification. Even the dullest reader sees at a glance that handsome Adrian Herbert will achieve a respectable failure and charmless Owen Jack a terrifying success. *Candida* presents a more subtle situation. James Morell and Eugene Marchbanks are—almost—ordinary people who see success with different eyes. Jack and Herbert are less illuminating because their destinies are formulaic. In *The Irrational Knot*, Nelly McQuinch tells of shocking people by her latest novel, where the hero is the villain and “the heroine loves the villain and tells him so without waiting to be asked.” Perhaps her inversion of melodrama was no conscious source for *The Devil’s Disciple* (1897), but the foreshadowing of the villain-as-hero plot is all the more provocative for its source in a another remark by the novel’s Shaw-in-petticoats, a frequent spokeswoman, from the beginning, for unpopular Shavian ideas. Conolly in the novel seems to be an experiment in the ambiguous hero, irritating to early Shavian audiences as the lack of black-and-white characters forced them to make their own ethical and moral choices. So Conolly’s sister, Susanna—a troubled woman with many admirable qualities—offends a self-righteous minister by persuasively defending her legally unsanctified marital bed. Each Conolly, in some measure, appears to be a preliminary sketch or an ancestor of a later Shavian character; however the most interesting foreshadowing of the future playwright emerges in Conolly’s severe catalogue of his wife’s false ideals and her instincts to defend them: “There is no institution so villainous but she will defend it; no tyranny so oppressive but she will
make a virtue of submitting to it; no social cancer so venomous but she will shrink from cutting it out, and plead that it is a comfortable thing, and much better as it is. She knows that she disobeyed her father, and that he deserved to be disobeyed; yet she condemns other women who are disobedient....” The lines suggest the cadences of Don Juan’s attack upon the moral hypocrisies of Dona Ana in the Hell Scene of *Man and Superman*.

*Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) seems the culmination of earlier Shavian working models of Men of Destiny. “Mr. Shaw’s Caesar,” J. M. Kennedy once wrote, “is not, of course, a calm statesman and soldier, but simply a rather superior and somewhat disputatious member of the Fabian Society, and his Cleopatra is merely Lydia Carew or Ann Whitefield in another disguise.” Kennedy shrewdly looked backward to the novels for the play’s inspiration, but Caesar was more than another Shavian raisonner-hero. In his notes appended to *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shaw pointed out that Caesar’s dominating trait was originality: “Originality gives a man an air of frankness, generosity, and magnanimity by enabling him to estimate the value of truth, money, or success in any particular instance quite independently of convention and moral generalization.” The naturally great man, Shaw explained, was unfettered by convention because he possessed an original morality—a personal (as opposed to conventional) scale of values. “Original morality” is thus the stuff from which Shavian heroes and heroines are made, and their possession of it is a major criterion of their greatness or their potential greatness, whether they be saints—as Joan—or scalawags like Dubedat. In Shaw’s first fiction, *Immaturity*, the concept is already present in embryo. Asked if the self-assured seamstress Harriet Russell acts like a lady, the poet Patrick Hawkshaw replies: “No. There is no point of comparison. But she is original; and that saves every situation.”

Each of the other novels has its “original” characters: Conolly, Jack, Miss Carew, Trefusis, even Dr. Kincaid of the novel fragment of 1887–1888. The first that Shaw identifies as such, however, are Ned Conolly and his sister Susanna:

The drunken prima donna of a bygone type of musical burlesque is not depicted as an immoral person, but as a person with a morality of her own, no worse in its way than the morality of her highly respectable wine merchant in its way. The sociology of the successful inventor [Conolly] is his own sociology too; and it is by his originality in this respect that he passes irresistibly through all the readymade prejudices that are set up to bar his promotion.
The composer Owen Jack, of *Love Among the Artists*, a man of original morality himself, seems also to be Shaw’s preliminary venture in another phase of his campaign against nineteenth-century drama. He contended as a critic that the costume-melodrama then often accepted as historical theater was instead a romantic fraud. Attempting to overturn it, he pioneered a form of stage biography based upon real historical research, purposeful anachronism to accent the theatrical dimension, and heroism ironically deflated to the prosaic. Shaw himself later called Jack “a British Beethoven,” noting that he had given his irascible Welshman many of the personal mannerisms of the German, going even farther by making him more of an outsider in his society. To Hesketh Pearson, Jack thus became “the first of a line of historical characters whose imputed share in Shaw’s powers of entertainment makes them a good deal more pleasant than their originals could have been.” Setting his Beethoven in Victorian England and endowing him with unheroic and unconventional qualities, Shaw strove for a more honest perspective in which to view on stage authentic greatness.

Owen Jack appears to be the first of Shaw’s figures of destiny who, with great goals to pursue, will not be turned from their purposes by the petty passions and preoccupations to which ordinary humans are subject. That Jack is an early experiment in the form is evidenced by his almost succumbing to his passions until he realizes that they will divert him from his purposes. Like the later Caesar and Joan, he is also an idealization of the lonely genius who realizes the necessity of repudiating all duty except that to one’s own inner voice. Perhaps it is here, too, in the character of Owen Jack, that the Shavian rejection of happiness as a goal in life has its beginning. The heightening of life within one’s self is a greater goal, as mad old Captain Shotover explains to Ellie Dunn in *Heartbreak House*, and Shaw in person contends in the preface to *Man and Superman*: “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

The refusal to pursue happiness is a concept that Shaw repeats throughout his plays: Father Keegan in *John Bull’s Other Island*, who rejects “the horror and tedium of pleasure”; Marchbanks who rushes out into the night with the secret in his heart of the folly of happiness; Don Juan who departs from the pleasures of Hell to escape to the dullness of Heaven; Owen Jack in *Love Among the Artists*, who curses the
few moments when he allowed himself to think of it; and Captain Sho-
tover who recalls the “rot” of happiness. Shaw dramatizes a distaste for
happiness as an end. In his very first novel, *Immaturity*, despite its being
written when he was still a callow and unemployed twenty-three, he
has Harriet Russell retort as much to the painter Cyril Scott, when, im-
pulsively, he predicts a life of tranquil joy for them as she warily accepts
his proposal of marriage: “I have no intention of being unhappy. But
there are different kinds of happiness. We are very happy now, roaming
idly about the river on a lovely summer day…. Still, would a life of this
kind be bearable, much less delightful?”

That on reflection Scott knows better is already clear when he tells
the parasitic Hawkshaw: “What is there to live for but work? Everything
else ends in disappointment. It’s the only thing you never get tired of,
and that always comes to good.” In *Immaturity*, Shavian ideas, aborn-
ing, and to be exploited all his long life, tumble out in profusion—on
art, music, theater, Shakespeare, poetry, philistinism, courtship and
marriage, dress, vegetarianism, religion and salvationism, death and
funerals, government, work ethic, economics, eugenics, medicine, phon-
etics, parents and children. Although Shaw edited and revised patches
of the handwritten manuscript in the 1920s for its belated publication,
nothing substantial was added or altered.

One of Shaw’s most extreme uses of cockney appears in *Captain
Brassbound’s Conversion* (1899) in the impossible language of Felix
Drinkwater, alias Brandyfaced Jack. Shaw claimed to Archibald Hen-
derson that his attempt in drama at reproducing the dialect of the Lon-
don cockney was the only accurate effort of the kind in his time. In his
novels appear earlier experiments at dialect, slang, and what Shaw in
*The Irrational Knot* called “official Board School English.” The Irish
butler in *Immaturity*, Cornelius Hamlet, is given a phonetic brogue.
Conolly’s clerks in *The Irrational Knot* speak phonetically spelled cock-
ney: “Thets wot Aw loike in Conly. He tikes them fellers dahn wen
they troy it on owver im.” In *Love Among the Artists*, Owen Jack is a
Henry Higgins-like professor of elocution; and also in the cast is Pri-
ivate Charles, a rude soldier-bandsman, whose uncultivated enuncia-
tion, further soddened by drink, is reproduced phonetically. A comic
variation emerges in the “grotesque country cockney” Shaw coins for
Jeff Smilash, the alter ego of the Unsocial Socialist, Sidney Trefusis.

Shaw’s fascination with phonetics and dialects had originated in
the years of *Immaturity*, when these interests were absorbed from his
companions at the Zetetical Society, James Lecky, the Oxonian Henry
Bernard Shaw Before His First Play

Sweet, the Alsatian singer Richard Deck, and Chichester Bell of the telephone family. Through the plays it continually manifested itself, not only through minor characters but major ones as well, from Lexy and Burgess in *Candida* and Broadbent’s valet Hodson in *John Bull’s Other Island* to Eliza Doolittle, pupil of Professor Higgins and heroine of *Pygmalion*.

*The Admirable Bashville*, or *Constancy Unrewarded* (1901, appearing a year before Barrie’s *The Admirable Crichton*) has a special place in any account of the relationships of the novels to the plays. It is the only legitimate offspring, the subtitle acknowledging it as “being the novel of Cashel Byron’s Profession done into a stage play in three acts and in blank verse.” The aura of theatricality about the novel attracted numerous aspirants to play the boxer-hero role on stage, even before Shaw had any idea to dramatize it himself and protect his copyright. Without permission or payment of royalties, Harrison J. Wolfe adapted a four-act play from the novel and presented *Cashel Byron* in a special matinee at New York’s Herald Square Theatre on 27 December 1900. On learning of it, Shaw hurriedly dashed off an adaptation of his own. The time limit (he had only a week in which to complete a dramatic version) was his excuse for using the “childishly easy and expeditious” Elizabethan blank verse. Besides, Shaw admitted,

> I am fond of blank verse. Not nineteenth century blank verse, of course, nor indeed with a very few exceptions, any post-Shakespearian blank verse.... I like the melodious sing-song, the clear simple one-line and two-line sayings, and the occasional rhymed tags, like the half-closes in an eighteenth century symphony, in Peele, Kyd, Greene, and the histories of Shakespeare. Accordingly, I poetasted *The Admirable Bashville* in the primitive Elizabethan style. And lest literary connoisseurs should declare that there was not a single correct line in all my three acts, I stole or paraphrased a few from Marlowe and Shakespeare (not to mention Henry Carey); so that if any man dared quote me derisively, he should do so in peril of inadvertently lighting on a purple patch from Hamlet or Faustus.

With tongue in cheek, Shaw burlesqued his novel, exaggerating such preoccupations of his as parent-child antipathy by changing the scene where Lydia conceals Cashel, fleeing from an illegal prize fight, who gives himself up to the police rather than be rescued by his mother. And with mock piety, Shaw testified that *Bashville* was his most conventional play:

> I observed the established laws of stage popularity and probability. I simplified the character of the heroine, and summed up her sweetness in the one sacred word: Love. I gave consistency to the heroism of Cashel. I paid to Morality, in
the final scene, the tribute to poetic justice. I restored to Patriotism its usual place on the stage, and gracefully acknowledged The Throne as the fountain of social honor. I paid particular attention to the construction of the play, which will be found equal in this respect to the best contemporary models.

When the Repertory Company of The Playhouse, Liverpool, planned to revive the play in 1928, Shaw wrote the producer a letter of advice, closing with an afterthought: “I am sorry to have to add that as the British public cannot understand a literary joke, the play simply bewilders the audience, except when they take the big speeches seriously, and applaud them, especially Cashel’s ‘repudiation of gentility.’” The speech Shaw alluded to parodies many preoccupations of the Shavian novels and plays:

So cruel are all callings. Yet this hand,
That many a two days bruise hath ruthless given,
Hath kept no dungeon locked for twenty years,
Hath slain no sentient creature for my sport.
I am too squeamish for your dainty world,
That cowards behind the gallows and the lash,
The world that robs the poor, and with their spoil
Does what its tradesmen tell it. Oh, your ladies!
.... And your medicine men!
Groping for cures in the tormented entrails
Of friendly dogs. Pray have you asked all these
To change their occupations? Find you mine
So grimly crueler?

Before Shaw’s play crossed the Atlantic, another dramatization of the novel reached the stage, at Daly’s Theatre in New York, on 8 January 1906. It was a three-act version by a prolific adapter of the time, Stanislaus Stange. Although (perhaps because) the famous boxer James J. Corbett played Cashel Byron, the production lasted sixteen performances. An off-Broadway production in 1956—Shaw’s text, this time—had better casting, better reviews, and better box office—evidence, perhaps, that The Admirable Bashville was that rare species of classic, the actable literary parody, a breed barren of worthy offspring since the days of Fielding (Tom Thumb) and Sheridan (The Critic).

Man and Superman (1901–1903) is foreshadowed in motif, especially in the Hell Scene, by an autobiographical short story of the novel period based upon his own seduction in 1885, “Don Giovanni Explains” (1887), written as Shaw was embarking upon an abortive sixth novel. The play’s more direct relationships to the novels lie elsewhere, one of them in the raisonneur-character of John Tanner. Shaw, Dixon Scott
wrote, turned his novels into “mimic debating societies, not only rising in the name of each character in turn (Conolly, Lydia Carew, Cashel, Trefusis) to deliver a short address on some selected topic, but actually turning as many of the characters as possible into working models, draft sketches, of [what] ... he had resolved Bernard Shaw must become.” Arthur Zeiger concluded that everything about An Unsocial Socialist is (from the standpoint of the plays) “characteristic Shaw”—personalities, style, and structure: “The high-comedic style is that of his great plays. A periphery of deliberate perversity contains the core of deep seriousness. [The aspiring radical politician Sidney] Trefusis is an analogue of Tanner in Man and Superman. The irony inherent in the anti-climax of the final chapter is a typical Shavian device. And even the appendix is, in effect, a miniature Preface.”

John Tanner claims at the close to be a victim of the “Life Force.” (Trefusis confesses only to be in the grip of an unidentified “force.”) “The energetic, sometimes daimonic women,” Eric Bentley wrote, “are the first Shavian incarnation of ‘vitality,’ later known as the Life Force,” adding further that it was Lydia Carew of Cashel Byron’s Profession who provoked Robert Louis Stevenson’s postscript in a letter to William Archer: “I say, Archer, my God, what women!” When Lydia announces that her determination to marry Cashel is “a plain proposition in eugenics,” she announces what is to become the doctrine of the Shavian “evolutionary appetite”—termed the “life instinct” or Life Force—in Man and Superman. (As early as Immaturity the elderly artist Jim Vesey advises Cyril Scott: “Marry the woman who will bring you the finest children ... and you will never find out that you might have done better by choosing elsewhere.”) By far the longest exposition of the principle appears in the tetralogy Back to Methuselah (1921), where the Life Force operates by both eugenic breeding and longevity. Here, in the fifth play of the series, As Far As Thought Can Reach, the personification of this instinct in the pursuing female reaches its apex. The Life Force emerges as a human egg (in which futuristic childhood and adulthood take place) cracks open and a physically mature female steps out. She looks about her and sees a mature male (three years of age), Acis. The Newly Born’s first words are “I love you, Acis. I must have you all to myself. Take me in your arms.”

Other late Shavian plays illustrate the doctrine first put into practice by Lydia Carew and Cashel Byron—that two people of very different character and background can be united by the unconscious wisdom of sex attraction. Yet to the ever paradoxical Shaw, that biological wisdom
fails, as their children will not possess Cashel’s brawn, but his brains, and the frail Lydia’s physique. In *Village Wooing* (1933), “Z” is a typical Life Force–inspired female, in this case a shopgirl trapping a cultured author of travel books into matrimony. On her success she boasts: “And now I’ve nailed you, I wonder at my own nerve.” “A” reluctantly admits that he is equally astonished. “I’m not a bit like that, you know,” she confides, “really. Something above me and beyond me drove me on. That’s why I know it will be all right.” But the genetic outcome, if any, is left unknown.

An extended—and ironic—Shavian experiment in eugenics appears in the zany “extravaganza” *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934), where East and West are blended. Two English couples (each with typical elements of conventionality for Shaw to ridicule) engage in group marriage with an Oriental priest and priestess (Pra, the Shavian raison-neur, and Prola, the Superwoman) and produce attractive offspring from their joint mating. “Its object,” Pra explains to Iddy, the Simpleton (a marooned Church of England clergyman), “was to try out the result of a biological blend of the flesh and spirit of the west with the flesh and spirit of the east…. We have produced four children, two of each sex, and educated them in the most enlightened manner we were capable of.” Yet the experiment fails, as the offspring, however attractive, are biologically and intellectually sterile. Judgment Day comes to eliminate the useless, and the superchildren vanish.

The paradox embedded in each eugenic fiasco seems to be that simplistic experiments often fail, for “creative evolution” is a lengthy multi-generational process. Lydia Carew learns “that heredity is not so simple a matter as her father’s generation had supposed.” Yet biology keeps getting additional chances. According to Lady Chavender in *On the Rocks* (1933), “Our breed needs to be crossed with the gutter or the soil once in every three or four generations. Uncle Theodore married his cook on principle; and his wife was my favorite aunt. [Aloysia] Brollikins may give me goose flesh occasionally; but she won’t bore me as a lady daughter-in-law would.”

The Life Force is also evident, with mixed results, in *Buoyant Billions* (1947), where its male victim explains lamely: “Nature has struck this blow at me: I can neither explain it nor resist it.” Shaw’s ironic preoccupation with creative evolution increased as his own life span diminished. In the “Fifth Fable” of *Farfetched Fables* (1948) the scene is a “Genetic Institute,” a laboratory of the future, where men who have discovered how to manufacture humans biochemically now want to go
even further. The Hermaphrodite declares a final eugenic goal: “I tell you again and again we shall never make decent human beings out of chemical salts. We must get rid of our physical bodies altogether, except for stuffed specimens in the Natural History Museum. I don’t want to be a body: I want to be a mind and nothing but mind … a vortex in thought.” It is a goal far beyond the most far-fetched promptings of Lydia Carew sixty-six years before.

Shaw began his campaign against English politicians and Parliament as early as his first novel, *Immaturity* (1879), in his satirizing of Foley Woodward, M.P., whose secretary Robert Smith, the fictional immature Shaw becomes. Woodward makes his one speech a year—always the same speech. “All you have to do,” he instructs Smith, “is to fill it up with this year’s names and figures, and just alter it enough to save appearances. Anything will do for the fools to see in the paper. I won’t read half of it.” Also in the novel is a precursor of the political world of the Broadbents and the Doyles, as, when the novel was first published more than a half century after it had been written, “the household of the Irish M.P. Foley Woodward, and above all his delicious, and deliciously named, servant Cornelius Hamlet,” appealed to a reviewer. “Here already is the brogue and vitality of the Barney Dorans and Haffigans we are to meet years after in *John Bull’s Other Island*.21 Irishmen are presented as being just as backward as in the later play, and Englishmen come off little better. “I cannot understand,” says Hawkshaw, a Scot, to Isabella Woodward, “how you Irish people are so far behind your time….What a pity it is that your culture is not equal to your brains.” “How about the English,” counters the feisty Miss Woodward, “whose brains are not equal to their culture? But don’t fancy that I am disposed to defend my country. I hate Ireland. It is the slowest, furthest behind its time, dowdiest, and most detestably snobbish place on the surface of the earth.”

Shaw’s diatribe against the medical profession in *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906) was foreshadowed in earlier plays, such as *The Philanderer* and *You Never Can Tell*, where, as in *Widowers’ Houses*, a major character is a new medical graduate. In a later play, *Too True to Be Good*, most of the first act is a satire on medical practice. Yet the earliest “big scene” exposing the hypocrisy and chicanery G.B.S. regularly attributed to physicians appears in a novel—the lengthy deathbed scene in *An Unsocial Socialist*, where, “sooner than betray his colleague’s inefficiency, [the specialist called in] would have allowed him to decimate London.” Also, Shaw’s unfinished sixth novel may have been intended as an early
Doctor’s Dilemma. Hero and villain (the elder physician’s medical ethics are questionable) are both doctors, one schooled and licensed, the other a quack. (Other than for the difference in professions, the novel might have become a try at a triangle on the Candida model, as Shaw himself suggested many years later, for the young doctor and the elder doctor’s unhappy wife were being directed toward an emotional encounter when Shaw aborted the novel.) In the person of Louis Dubedat, its hero, The Doctor’s Dilemma is also about how to recognize and deal with the vagaries of artistic genius. Though Shaw in the novels was generally unconcerned with a utilitarian function for any art other than his own, he made several studies of the difference between the genuine artist and the pseudo-artist (the pretender, the dilettante, the basely commercial or professional). Artists are significant characters in all the novels—poets, artists, pseudo-artists, and patrons. By his third novel, Love Among the Artists, the conflict of the true with the false in art becomes the focus of the entire novel, and characters representing Shavian attitudes about art appear in most of Shaw’s plays. One reviewer, unprepared by conventional drama for this new type of theatre, wrote of a later example: “Here is the final exaggeration of all of Shaw’s tendencies as a dramatist. Action has totally disappeared and all the characters sit on chairs, hour in and hour out. And in the place of human emotion is the brain of Shaw bulging larger and larger, filling the stage, hard and brilliant, glittering like a jewel.”

Prone to hyperbole, Sidney Trefusis in An Unsocial Socialist predicts that works of fiction will be “superseded by interesting company and conversation, and made obsolete by the human mind outgrowing the childishness that delights in the tales told by grown-up children and their like.” Though Shaw’s discussion plays are literally discussions and debates—ideas in conflict—there is always a genuine core of plot, usually a situation talked about, which is resolved through the action of the play. (“I can guarantee you against any plot,” Shaw exaggerated in his preface to Love Among the Artists.) The criticism about plotlessness in his novels and plays never disturbed him. The abortive early collaboration with William Archer resulted in Shaw’s rejecting more plot from Archer and completing Widowers’ Houses. Having just published (serially) An Unsocial Socialist, he readily admitted being weak on plotting but contended that his dialogue was incomparable, prompting Archer, unsuccessfully, to volunteer to supply the deficiency. Coincidentally, it was at the same time that Shaw had sent The Irrational Knot to John Mackinnon Robertson, Annie Besant’s sub-editor on Our Corner.
Robertson, who had been reluctant to serialize the novel, preferred instead—although either way it would be Mrs. Besant’s covert subsidy to Shaw—to publish *Love Among the Artists*. “I’m not going to be insulted … by being told … that it won’t suit,” Shaw objected to Robertson, who hadn’t read the earlier work. “Run it through … and when it is finished … perhaps you may get the other to follow it if you behave yourself and refrain from telling Mrs Besant that my books are immoral and dull.”

Robertson more than obliged. “I’ve finished the ‘Knot’ today,” he wrote Shaw on 10 February 1885. “It’ll do. Conolly is a new character in fiction & the latter part of the story is as strong as it is original.” On second thought, three weeks later, he sent Shaw a manuscript play of his own about which he confessed little regard, adding: “Suppose we do a play together? But the trouble is that neither of us is a plottist. Only I would keep your plot within the bounds of common sense—my own Quixoticism was perfectly conscious.”

He had come to the same conclusion as William Archer the year before: Shaw was a dramatist concealed in novelist’s clothes, long in dialogue but short in plot. Later, Shaw was eager to make fun of the allegation when in 1908 a supposed interviewer from the *Daily Telegraph* (7 May 1908) prodded the playwright for “some notion of the plot” of *Getting Married*. Self-drafting the exchange, Shaw offered some paradoxes which were more accurate than the *Telegraph*’s readers could have realized:

“The play has no plot. Surely nobody expects a play by me to have a plot. I am a dramatic poet, not a plot-monger.”

“But at least there is a story?”

“Not at all. If you look at any of the old editions of our classical plays, you will see that the description of the play is not called a plot or a story, but an argument. That exactly describes the material of my play. It is an argument—an argument lasting nearly three hours, and carried on with unflagging celebration by twelve people and a beadle. They are all honourable, decent, nice people. You will find the materials for their argument in the Church Catechism, the Book of Common Prayer, Mr Sidney Webb’s Letters to the Times on the subject of the birth-rate, the various legal text-books on the law of marriage, the sermons and table-talk of the present Bishop of Birmingham and the late Bishop of London, ‘Whitaker’s Almanack,’ ‘The Statesman’s Year-Book,’ ‘The Statistical Abstract,’ the Registrar-General’s returns, and other storehouses of fact and succulent stores of contemporary opinion. All who are intelligent enough to make these their daily reading will have a rare treat; but I am bound to add that people who prefer novelettes will have to pay repeated visits to the play before they acquire a thoroughly unaffected taste
for it. If you would like me to go into the subject of the play in detail, I shall be delighted to do so.”

“Thank you,” said the interviewer, hurriedly, “I am quite satisfied, and space even in The Daily Telegraph is limited….”

The closest approximation to the discussion play in the novels is the second (and last) part of An Unsocial Socialist, where the scene is a country house, as in Misalliance or Heartbreak House, and through linked conversations on the usual Shavian preoccupations, the outcome of the opening situation is determined by the curtain. A similar setting (with a larger cast) first appeared in Shaw’s first novel, where its diffuse second and third parts consist mainly of argument and gossip at “Perspective,” the suburban mansion of the aesthetic art entrepreneur Halket Grosvenor. Discussing a reprint of its successor, The Irrational Knot, which continues some of the characters in Immaturity, a critic commented that Mrs. Conolly “runs away with Sholto Douglas, her lover of the unreal world of Heartbreak House.”

A structural aspect of the Shavian drama-as-conversation is that the play of ideas subordinates the action to comedy of incident: the intermingling of the serious and the burlesque and the exploitation (although updated) of the petty tricks and artifices of the Victorian stage. In The Irrational Knot, foreshadowing a device that would suffuse the plays, the alcoholic Susanna, to detain a clergyman on a rescue mission, implores: “Wait and have some luncheon. Why, Doctor, I really think you are afraid of me. Do stay.” He resists. “Impossible! I have much business to which I am bound. Pray, let me go,” he pleads piteously, ineffectually struggling with Susanna, who has now got his arm against her breast. “You must be mad!” he cries, drops of sweat breaking out on his brow as he feels himself being pulled helplessly towards the ottoman.

“Oh, how rough you are!” she exclaimed in her softest voice, adroitly tumbling into the seat as if he had thrown her down, and clinging to his arms; so that it was as much as he could do to keep his feet as he stooped over, striving to get upright. At which moment the door was opened by Marmaduke who halted on the threshold to survey the two reproachfully for a moment. Then he said: “George, I’m astonished at you. I have not much opinion of parsons as a rule; but I really did think that you were to be depended on.”

The scene suggests the later Shaw as well as the stage business of Noël Coward or even the farce of Michael Frayn. An episode much like it occurs in Shaw’s one-act farce How He Lied to Her Husband (1904), and another in the Interlude in The Apple Cart (1929), although the
Bernard Shaw Before His First Play

Orinthia-Magnus encounter in *The Apple Cart* had an erotic predecessor when life anticipated art; the infatuated Shaw was wrestled to the floor by the vampish Stella (Mrs. Patrick) Campbell to embarrass him into being late for an appointment with his wife—and a servant discovered the entangled pair. King Magnus’s lines to Orinthia, which cleverly keep her—for the most part—from the culmination she seems to seek, have a precursor, also, in *An Unsocial Socialist*, where Trefusis tells Henrietta, the adoring wife with whom he cannot live except for an occasional holiday: “The first condition of work with me is your absence. When you are with me, I can do nothing but make love to you. You bewitch me....”

Most strikingly, too, the King’s great speech on the constitutional limitations upon the British monarchy is foreshadowed by the impassioned Trefusis, which demonstrates as well that Shaw’s nineteenth-century views on government were unchanged despite his apparent political heresies:

“What private man in England is worse off than the constitutional monarch? We deny him all privacy: he may not marry whom he chooses, consort with whom he prefers, dress according to his taste, or live where he pleases. I don’t believe he may even eat or drink what he likes best: a taste for tripe and onions on his part would provoke a remonstrance from the Privy Council. We dictate everything except his thoughts and dreams; and even these he must keep to himself if they are not suitable, in our opinion, to his condition. The work we impose on him has all the hardship of mere task work: it is unfruitful, incessant, monotonous, and has to be transacted for the most part with nervous bores. We make his kingdom a treadmill to him, and drive him to and fro on the face of it. We send him forth through our crowded cities, proclaiming that he is the source of all good and evil in the nation; and he, knowing that many people believe it: knowing that it is a lie, and that he is powerless to shorten the working day by one hour, raise wages one penny, or annul the smallest criminal sentence, however unjust it may seem to him; knowing that he is not bullet proof, and that every king in Europe has been shot at in the streets; he must smile and bow, and maintain an expression of gracious enjoyment whilst the mayor and corporation inflict upon him the twaddling address he has heard a thousand times before. I do not ask you to be loyal, Erskine; but I expect you, in common humanity, to sympathize with the chief figure in the pageant, who is no more accountable for the manifold evils and abominations that exist in his realm than the Lord Mayor is accountable for the thefts of the pickpockets who follow his show on the ninth of November.”

Still another memorable speech in Shavian theater has its predecessor in the novel, which its author quarried subconsciously if not directly: Don Juan’s dramatic litany about the Devil’s friends. One can
hear the lines anticipated by Trefusis’s description of the corruption and hypocrisy of English polite society as “A canting, lie-loving, fact-hating, scribbling, chattering, wealth-hunting, pleasure-hunting, celebrity-hunting mob, that, having lost the fear of hell, and not replaced it by the love of justice, cares for nothing but the lion’s share of the wealth wrung by threat of starvation from the hands of the classes that create it.” (By the time Shaw wrote “Don Juan in Hell” he knew better than to defeat his dramatic purpose with Marxist rhetoric and dropped the class-struggle tags, which in any case would have been incongruous for Don Juan even if appropriate for John Tanner.) Even the “duel of sex” proposal scene concluding *Man and Superman* has its predecessor in *An Unsocial Socialist*—and with the same result: a promised betrothal despite the husband-to-be’s knowingly absurd and futile refusal to permit marital considerations to interfere with his political commitments.

While the conflict of ideas is pursued at a higher level, deliberately implausible incidents occur in both the novels and later plays. In *An Unsocial Socialist*, for example, Trefusis punctuates a political point by shooting the heads off busts in his study with a pistol which just happens to be handy. No Shavian novel is without such absurdities, which may conceal deeper meanings. In the plays we find such equivalents as the dialogue between Tanner and his chauffeur Henry Straker in *Man and Superman*, where all that can be seen of the intellectual mechanic are his legs protruding from beneath an automobile; the shrewd appraisals of England made through the bumbling slave Britannus in *Caesar and Cleopatra*; Thomas Broadbent’s ill-fated attempt (in *John Bull’s Other Island*) to transport a squealing pig in an automobile; and the arrival of the fearsomely energetic Polish heroine Lina Szczepanowska in *Misalliance* via an airplane crash into John Tarleton’s greenhouse. Another implausible scene in the play involves the inept would-be assassin, Julius Baker, hiding with a pistol in the portable Turkish bath. Alick West calls “Gunner” Baker “a caricature of Shaw’s earlier self. A clerk, a degraded Robert Smith (the hero of Shaw’s first novel), whose protest against the drudgery of clerking borrows what vitality it has from *Immaturity*.25 The vitality of incongruous incident—a current running through the stream of Shavian discussion and cerebration—is explained by Percival Howe—that Shaw’s “grave message … would issue gravely if it were not for the instinct of absurdity which has never deserted him.”26

The interplay of mentor and disciple has always made for engaging drama, a fact that Shaw seemed to grasp instinctively when he began
writing fiction. With a sure sense of paradox he portrayed his first such relationship in *Immaturity* as one between an immature, self-appointed tutor paralyzed with inhibition and a mature, self-assured pupil: Robert Smith and Harriet Russell. In *The Irrational Knot*, Conolly attempts to re-educate his wife and succeeds so well that she realizes their marriage was a mistake. In *Love Among the Artists*, Shaw developed a formula which, transferred to the plays, created one of his greatest popular successes. In one of the parallel plots of the novel, Owen Jack, formerly “professor of music and elocution” at Alton College, instructs Magdalen Brailsford in voice, elocution, and poise. She proves so adept a pupil that she eventually rises to star billing as an actress. After her success she seeks affection (and perhaps matrimony), having fallen in love with him in spite of his abrasiveness as a teacher and as a person. However tempted, Jack is obsessive about music, which dominates his life, and rejects love and marriage. If the names of mentor and pupil be changed to “Professor” Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, with Eliza’s portrayal of a duchess considered her acting triumph, the scaffolding of the novel is a striking anticipation of *Pygmalion*. Jack is a clear precursor of Higgins, with an acute ear for slight distinctions in pronunciation, so exacting and critical that he exhausts Madge at every lesson. Often she breaks down and weeps. Still, like Eliza, after she has profited and recovered from his unmanly abuse, she is grateful to him for abetting her success, falls in love (in her fashion), but, fortunately for her, is rebuffed.

The scene in which Madge is given lessons in voice is so strikingly like that of Eliza and Higgins that it suggests Shaw used the novel as direct quarry for the play (and later film version), even to the warmly protective housekeeper, the motherly Mrs. Pearce in *Pygmalion*. Overcoming her impatience, Madge learns to speak with purity and distinctness, even beginning to look upon mannerisms for which she had ridiculed famous actors as enviable conditions of their superiority to herself. She does not enjoy her studies, for Jack is punctilious; and her romantic recollection of their first meeting at Paddington is soon forgotten in the dread he inspires as a master. Long after she has become accustomed to endure his criticism, she can hardly restrain her tears when he emphasizes her failures by meanly mimicking them, which is the most cruel, but not the least effective, part of his teaching methods. Jack is demanding, even in his rare cheerful moods, and all but violent in his angry ones; but he is indefatigable, and drives her to overcome what he considers slovenly colloquial speech. As she progresses, he demands subtle refinements that she cannot distinguish. He repeats
sounds (as Higgins would) that he insists are as distinct as day from night; he rages because she perceives no difference between them. He insists that she is grinding her voice to pieces when she is hardly daring to be audible. Often, when she is longing for release, he keeps her until Mrs. Simpson, always present, can bear it no longer and interferes in spite of the frantic abuse her intervention during the lesson invariably provokes. Magdalen would have given up altogether but for her fear of the contempt she knew he would feel for her, but like the later Eliza Doolittle she perseveres into a brilliant success.

Another of Shaw’s young heroines also grows in grace, womanliness, and sophistication, and is drawn to the cynical hero, who has educated—even disillusioned—her through his goadings, counsel, and discipline. When successful, Cleopatra, too, is rebuffed. The pattern is repeated in various ways in other plays—as with the sardonic Dick Dudgeon and the proper housewife Judith Anderson in The Devil’s Disciple, and Ellie Dunn and gruff old Captain Shotover in Heartbreak House.

Eliza’s father, the “dustman” Alfred Doolittle, represents another character type with persuasive antecedents in the novels. Cashel Byron, the unschooled prizefighter, is the first of a series of comic philosophers who include Henry Straker and Alfred Doolittle. From Mrs. Hoskyn’s soiree following Herr Abendgasse’s lecture, “The True in Art,” where Cashel’s pugilistic metaphors produce guffaws but are shrewd criticism, to the fifth, futuristic, play in Methuselah, naiveté conceals striking truths. In As Far As Thought Can Reach, the Maiden tells Strephon: “I used to [want to touch you]. We used to think it would be nice to sleep in one another’s arms; but we could never go on to sleep because our weight stopped our circulations just above the elbows. Then somehow my feeling began to change bit by bit. I kept a sort of interest in your head and arms long after I lost interest in your whole body. And now that has gone.”

Incidents as early as Immaturity where Shaw de-romanticized sexual attraction demonstrate repugnance turned physical: the discomfort of Cyril Scott in kneeling to propose to Harriet and the sharp, conical buttons on a dress interfering with Hawkshaw’s clutch at the unwilling Isabella Woodward. The awkwardness (or downside) of sexual attraction emerges often in the later Shaw, as with young Bentley Summershays happily enduring the thrashing of Lydia, the Polish aviatrix and dominatrix in Misalliance. It appealed to Shaw’s anti-romantic bent to de-sentimentalize the mechanics of passion. In You Never Can Tell, the romantic if analytical dentist, Valentine—perhaps the only one of
his vocation then in drama—explains amorous attraction to the eager Gloria Clandon as “chemistry.” Tanner blames his impulsive last-act embrace of Ann Whitefield on the Life Force. Parallels appear earlier in the novels. When Cashel Byron comes to the point of embracing the heroine, he is ashamed of it as something personally humiliating, a weakness he cannot overcome. The acme of sex as physically repellent and even disgusting appears at the end of the first act of *In the Beginning*, in *Back to Methuselah*, when the serpent whispers to Eve the secret of the creative act. The stage directions read: “Eve’s face lights up with intense interest, which increases until an expression of overwhelming repugnance takes its place. She buries her face in her hands.”

The inversion of romance in the Shavian love scene was, from its beginnings in the novels, essential to Shaw’s sense of paradox—the reversal of audience expectation. That he knew, and experienced, romantic love is clear from his sentimental, even gushy, letters to his mistress Florence Farr. Yet from the start he could look wryly at the reality of physical attraction between the sexes. When Harriet accepts Cyril Scott’s proposal in *Immaturity*, “He caught her hand, and stooping, kissed her with as much arder as a gentleman, however short his stature, can, when standing, display in saluting a lady who is sitting, without losing his balance. Then he knelt on one knee beside her chair.” When Harriet bade him rise and be more serious, as marriage was a very serious thing to consider, “Scott, heavily discomfited, was yet glad to obey, not merely because his position was hurting his knee, but because he suddenly saw that his conduct was unbecoming, and that she was more serious about him than he had yet been about her.”

De-romanticizing romance was not unique with Shaw, but certainly characteristic. From Jonathan Swift to, in G.B.S.’s time, Aldous Huxley, it was an effective weapon for the satirist. In Shaw’s one-act *Village Wooing* (1933), a late example, Shaw prefaced the lover’s rapturous description of the ecstasy of fulfillment by having him warn his beloved: “I am a poet; and I know that to be in your arms will not gratify my senses at all. As a matter of mere physical sensation you will find the bodily contacts to which you are looking forward neither convenient nor decorous.” A few years later, Charles II in “*In Good King Charles’s Golden Days*” (1939) reveals to his queen toward the close his disillusion with his seraglio of beauties by repeating the adage: “They are all alike: all cats are grey in the dark. It is the souls and brains,” he assures her, “that are different. In the end one learns to leave the body out.” Much earlier, in *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, Kitty Warren contends that
the physical sordidness of prostitution in practice is no worse than the experience of nursing; and in *Arms and the Man*, the war-disheveled Captain Bluntschli shies away in Raina Petkoff’s bedroom from kissing the smitten heroine’s proffered hand: “Better not touch my hand, dear young lady. I must have a wash first.”

Other than in subtlety and style, not much changes over the decades in Shaw, although the late-Victorian novels and plays required a restraint about sex, even for G.B.S., to assure publication and production (as *The Philanderer* and *Mrs Warren*, early on, failed to pass the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship). In *Farfetched Fables*, written in Shaw’s ninety-second year, the preoccupation reaches a near-final resolution, when Shamrock asks Rose why, far back in the nineteenth century, sex was considered unmentionable in books or conversation:

ROSE. Simply because their methods were so disgusting that they had no decent language for them. You think their methods were like ours, and their passions like ours. You could not make a greater mistake.…To initiate birth they had to practice personal contacts which I would rather not describe. Strangest of all, they seemed to have experienced in such contacts the ecstasies which are normal with us in our pursuit of knowledge and power.

This is far from the anti-romanticism of *Immaturity*, but that novel, written almost seventy years before, may be where it all began.

When William Archer had praised *The Admirable Bashville* as a burlesque of *Cashel Byron’s Profession* and suggested that Shaw do more in that vein (he actually did, in spoofing *Candida* in *How He Lied to Her Husband*), he replied: “Unfortunately, as I have to write the works I burlesque, I should have to spend the latter half of my life caricaturing the former half, which I am likely enough to do without any prompting and with the most serious intentions.” And he did. *The Millionairess* (1936) seems almost a second burlesque of *Cashel Byron’s Profession*. Traces of Lydia Carew in the novel appear even earlier in Aloysia Brollikins of *On the Rocks* (1933). Pursuing the handsome, naive son of Sir Arthur Chavender, the Prime Minister, she justifies herself idealistically to her future father-in-law in Lydia-like terms: “I am a reading thinking modern woman; and I know how to look at these things objectively and scientifically…. Evolution is telling me to marry this youth. That feeling is the only guide I have to the evolutionary appetite…. The thing that wants to develop the race. If I marry David we shall develop the race. And that’s the great thing in marriage, isn’t it?” Epifania Oggnisanti di Parerga, of *The Millionairess*, however, is a hyperthyroid Lydia Carew, and, like Lydia, a millionairess sufficiently possessed by what
appears to be the Life Force to marry a handsome Cashel Byron-like pugilist, Alastair Fitzfassenden. Also like Miss Carew, she is acquisitive in temperament and ruled in her choice of a husband by the advice of her late father. When Epifania falls out of love she apologizes, frankly: “Well, you were young; you were well shaped; … you were a magnificent boxer; and I was excited by physical contact with you.”

The dominant Shavian preoccupations reappear in *The Millionairess*, as in most of the novels and plays. They include the irrationality of marriage and divorce laws, biology dictating marriage, the pursuing woman and the reluctant male, ironic perspectives upon physical love, ridicule of conventional morality, and satire of doctors and medicine. However its primary source is the same novel that inspired *The Admirable Bashville*. Alastair is Cashel reduced to an amiable nonentity, but this time the Lydia equivalent is transformed, beyond her inherited wealth, into a young and formidable Beatrice Webb, a comic heroine patterned upon a real-life Fabian heroine devoid of any sense of humor.

In *Farfetched Fables* (1948) appears the last Shavian literary recollection of *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, in the lineal descendant of the African king captured by the British in 1879, when Shaw was writing *Immaturity*. The Zulu chieftain was parodied first in the boxing novel, where the bloody bout seems at odds with what he had been told about Christianity, even more fully in *The Admirable Bashville*. In a bare-knuckle spectacle for the edification of Cetewayo, the Cashel of the novel and its burlesque whips Jim Paradise. In the eccentric extravaganza of Shaw’s dotage Cetewayo becomes “the South African negro Hitler, Ketchewayo the Second…. The fellow made a Declaration of Independence for Zululand with himself as emperor.” With this, the direct relationships between the novels and the plays appear to end, a faint echo in the fading twilight of Shaw’s career.

An indirect connection has been suggested for Shaw’s last work, *Why She Would Not*, a playlet which he had just completed at the time of the fall in his garden in the summer of 1950 that led to his death in November. It may be a thin remake of *The Millionairess*, and thus *Cashel Byron* twice removed. However fading in memory in his nineties, it is remarkable that the novels were so tenacious an aspect of Shaw’s subconscious. Even if we reject some of the apparent foreshadowings of the plays suggested by the early fiction, many others are irrefutable. Since the Shavian canon of plays is now part of the classic repertory, the failed novels of the 1880s have not really failed after all.