Farewell, Victoria!

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Exasperated Admiration: 
Bernard Shaw on Queen Victoria

In 1882, Cetewayo, King of the Zulus, was captured by the British. Brought to London to be impressed by English might at its peak before being restored to his diminished throne, he appeared tall and broad, and considered himself, at fifty-two, an “old man.” That August he had an audience with Queen Victoria, arriving in what the Queen called “a hideous black frock [coat] and trousers” over a colorful native tunic. Writing his fourth novel then (publishers had rejected the first three) in the quiet of the great domed British Museum Reading Room, a twenty-six-year-old Irishman with literary aspirations named Bernard Shaw put the Zulu king into his story, inventing a Colonial Office dilemma as to how to entertain Cetewayo.

In the novel, *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, where the hero’s profession is the socially unacceptable one of prizefighting, Cetewayo is taken to the ring to see what Cashel and his opponent—allegedly the two brawniest Englishmen—could endure. Shaw’s Zulu chieftain fears for his health in the polluted air of London, “filthy with smoke,” and fears for his life when he learns that European monarchs are the shooting targets of their citizens—that even “the queen of England, though accounted the safest of all, was accustomed to this variety of pistol practice.”1 The episode was Shaw’s first published reference to Queen Victoria. In his allusion to Victoria’s having become “accustomed” to assassination attempts—there had been seven of them—a tone of awe on the part of the young socialist and republican was palpable. Shaw might not admire the Queen’s politics nor the institution she symbolized, but he recognized that Victoria was a formidable lady. He would become the only Marxist member of her admiration society.

When preparations began to mark Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887, Shaw found himself suddenly writing again about his Queen. By the autumn of 1886 his five novels had all failed, only *Cashel Byron* managing a meager commercial success—not enough to warrant further attempts in fiction.
The fifth, *An Unsocial Socialist*, with a Marxist republican hero, was hardly noticed when published. To support himself, Shaw had taken to literary journalism, writing anonymous art reviews for the *World* and anonymous book reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The payment was meager—sometimes only a few shillings—but it kept him alive. He also wrote execrable political doggerel that no one would publish—at least not until the afternoon *Star* sought material. But whether Shaw published anonymously or pseudonymously, Queen Victoria would not hear of him, and although he was famous by the time she died at the turn of the century, almost certainly he was still unknown to her. Yet Shaw would be, throughout a life even longer than her own, a perceptive commentator on her life and reign.

Anticipating the Jubilee, the autumn publishing season in 1886 spawned book after book on the Queen. One, *Fifty Years of a Good Queen’s Reign*, by A. H. Wall, was offered to Shaw for an unsigned notice in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. As assignments went, it was one of his better ones—he was sometimes asked to make a paragraph out of a bushel of privately printed poetry or out of forgettable novels with such titles as *Fatal Bonds* and *The Evil Genius*. The Queen, at least, was a real human being, although Shaw found her fast disappearing into myth. “With her merits,” he wrote sardonically in his *Gazette* review,

> we are all familiar, and may expect to be more so before the last Jubilee bookmaker has given the throne a final coat of whitewash. We know that she has been of all wives the best, of all mothers the fondest, of all widows the most faithful. We have often seen her, despite her lofty station, moved by famines, colliery explosions, shipwrecks and railway accidents; thereby teaching us that a heart beats in her Royal breast as in the humblest of her subjects. She has proved that she can, when she chooses, put off her state and play the pianoforte, write books, and illustrate them like any common lady novelist. We can all remember how she repealed the Corn Laws, invented the steam locomotive, and introduced railways; devised the penny post, developed telegraphy, and laid the Atlantic cable; how she captured Coomassie and Alexandria, regenerated art by the Pre-Raphaelite movement, speculated in Suez Canal stock, extended the franchise, founded the Primrose League, became Empress of India.

This adulation, Shaw exaggerated, lacked authenticity and credibility. If the Golden Jubilee were to be a success, he ventured, “the sooner some competent cynic writes a book about Her Majesty’s shortcomings the better.” The problem was, as Shaw knew and did not say, that the radical press had been going that route for decades, and had failed to find much republican sentiment to exploit. Still, Shaw thought, people were moving away from passive reverence, and much of the public fulsomeness paid the Queen, he predicted anonymously,
will be pure hypocrisy.... Yet there must be much genuine superstitious loyalty among us.... Were a gust of wind to blow off our Sovereign’s head-gear tomorrow, “the Queen’s bonnet” would crowd Bulgaria out of the papers. Clearly the idea of Royalty is still with us; and it is as the impersonatrix of that idea that the Queen is worshipped by us. That feeling is the real support of thrones.3

Irishman though he was and Marxist though he claimed to be, Shaw discovered himself one of the Queen’s admirers, however reluctant, and he would conduct a curious love affair with her in print all his life. As art critic of the World he reviewed an exhibition of a portrait of the Queen (January 1887) twice her own tiny size painted from a photograph by Alexander Bassano for the government of the Punjab (Fig. 1). Rather than vent some sarcasm at the grotesque nine-by-six dimensions of the picture, Shaw contented himself with comments about the camera being “as attentive” to the Queen’s lace as to the Queen, which left the work as painted without a focus. Still, Shaw concluded, it was “by no means unsuccessful.”4 He felt much the same in March about Blake Wirgman’s Peace with Honour, a canvas of no great distinction (it “will serve its turn”) showing Victoria receiving the Treaty of Berlin from Disraeli in 1878. In the old-fashioned Great Power way of arranging things, Prince Bismarck and the Earl of Beaconsfield had settled a Balkan war between Russia and Turkey, Britain receiving Cyprus for its pains. Wirgman’s title had come from Disraeli’s triumphal statement on arriving back to London.

As a playwright eleven years later, Shaw would recall this phrase ironically in Caesar and Cleopatra. Now, only an anonymous and unimportant art critic, Shaw merely described “Her Majesty, mildly self-conscious, [who] sits at one end of a table, and Lord Beaconsfield condescends to her from the other, in a ‘genteel apartment’ pervaded by peace with honour. The old-fashioned furniture helps to give the picture an air of being a family portrait.... No one will guess that two such unassuming personages are Empress and Earl.”5

Later in the Jubilee year Shaw was less kind, not surprisingly, as he was acting for a socialist committee. To prepare themselves for the hoped-for day when a socialist party might emerge into power and members of the two-year-old Fabian Society might then hold high office, a number of Fabians took an active part in the “Charing Cross Parliament.” The mock legislature was a popular late-Victorian institution, following the extension of suffrage, and women participants were anticipating its further extension. The Charing Cross Parliament was named for the railway hotel in which it took place, where the Strand poured into Trafalgar Square below Charing Cross Road. It was more than a charade of forming an imaginary socialist government, for considerable research went into the preparation of the addresses, the draft legislation, and the conduct of debate.
Farewell, Victoria!

Fig. 1  Queen Victoria in a portrait photo by Alexander Bassano in 1885 just prior to her Golden Jubilee in 1887.

Courtesy of the Royal Archives, Windsor Castle
On 15 July 1887, the pretend parliament chose the militant Henry Hyde Champion as prime minister, with scholarly Sidney Webb as chancellor of the exchequer. The notorious advocate of free love and birth control, Annie Besant, became home secretary; the womanizing Hubert Bland was foreign secretary; the schoolmasterly Graham Wallas was president of the Board of Trade; and Bernard Shaw was president of the Local Government Board. Since the real parliament was traditionally opened by an address from the throne, Shaw drafted a “Queen’s Speech,” which Annie Besant then published in her magazine Our Corner (August 1887). In effect it was the first long speech that Shaw, the playwright-to-be, had drafted for a female character.

In her Autobiography Mrs. Besant recalled that the mock parliament debated with much vigour the “burning questions” of the day. We organized a compact Socialist party, defeated a Liberal Government, took the reins of office, and—after a Queen’s speech in which Her Majesty addressed her loyal Commons with a plainness of speech never before (or after) heard from the throne—we brought in several Bills of a decidedly heroic character. G. Bernard Shaw … and I … came in for a good deal of criticism in connection with various drastic measures.

Annie Besant was wrong about the Queen’s plainspokenness. Victoria in her own person used a directness of speech that Shaw could adopt without artificiality. She minced no words, not even with her prime ministers, once telling one of them that his putting off decisions “in the vain hope that matters will mend” was irresponsible, and when he pointed to the need for economies in the midst of a colonial war, she snapped: “This appears hardly the moment to make savings on the Army [budget] estimates.” What was different about the words that Shaw gave her was the content. What Shaw gave her to say was nothing she did not know; they would have disagreed only about the solutions. “I have summoned you,” the Shavian Victoria told her Parliament,

to meet in this, the Jubilee year of my reign, for the transaction of business of great importance, unfortunately delayed these many years, and now become indispensable. The state of my nation is such as must fill the most hopeful with anxiety. Owing to the operation of economic conditions which no application of the existing law can thwart, the vast wealth produced daily by the labor of my people is now distributed not only unequally, but so inequitably that the contrast between the luxury of idle and unprofitable persons, and the poverty of the industrious masses, has become a scandal and reproach to our civilisation, setting class against class, and causing among the helpless and blameless infants of my most hardworking subjects a mortality disgraceful to me as head of the State, and unbearable to me as a woman and mother. And since this is in nowise due to any stint of the natural resources whereby my oppressed people may better themselves if you apply yourselves to their enfranchisement with
due diligence and honesty, and without respect to persons; and since, too, every
day of avoidable delay is a day of avoidable and unmerited suffering to millions
of innocent persons throughout the realm, there will forthwith be submitted to
you a series of measures for the redress of their heavy and crying wrongs. And
... I perceive that the main source of these wrongs has been the misdoing or
neglect of those stewards to whom I and my predecessors gave the land that
they might faithfully administer it for the welfare of the realm.

Shaw’s Queen went on to enumerate an ambitious program of social leg-
islation, from redistribution of land and conferring the franchise upon every
adult man and woman in Britain, to the establishment of publicly owned
utilities, free public education, a graduated income tax, and the abolition
of all private charities in order to get at the causes of suffering rather than
the symptoms that charities strove to alleviate. Further, the speech prom-
ised the elimination of religious oaths, reduction of waste in government
departments, a review of the salaries of Cabinet officials, and self-rule for
Ireland. Only justice, she concluded, was the “safeguard of order, prosper-
ity, and stability.”

Shaw’s Victoria, unlike the aloof real one, was an ideal queen, a Platonic
philosopher sovereign; and in years to come he would create several mon-
archs in that image—Caesar, Charles II, and the invented King Magnus of
a futuristic Britain among them. Using Victoria herself would have been
impossible, as the censorship laws forbade dramatizing the life of a reign-
ing monarch or of one whose near kin were alive. He could only comment
upon her in print, as he did again in 1888, the next year, in reviewing what
he called “a colossal statue of the Queen,” outsized, but without “decep-
tion”—the likeness was “faithful and characteristic.” When they were not,
he would complain about the misrepresentation.

Although Victoria’s Jubilee was the occasion for national self-examina-
tion as well as pride, socialists largely took the former route. One of Shaw’s
friends, J. F. Oakeshott, a government employee at the Public Record Office,
used the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Penny Post—the first
nationwide postal system—to write an anti-Victoria diatribe. He offered it
to Truth. The proprietor, Henry Labouchere, a Radical M.P., was one of the
noisiest anti-monarchists in the realm.

Before taking it to Labouchere, Oakeshott showed it to Shaw, who declared
that it was unprintable and offered to improve it. Oakeshott had represented
the anniversary in the guise of a translation of rediscovered Egyptian hiero-
glyphics that suggested strong parallels of past with present. Shaw turned
the language of the satire into a pastiche of King James Bible prose-poet-
ry. Victoria, one learns, becomes a patron of the postal celebrations as “her
heart was stirred within her; for she said, ‘For three whole years have I
not had a Jubilee.’” The executives of the post office had mingled with the
Exasperated Admiration

socially prominent at a “conversazione” in the South Kensington Museum on 2 July 1890, while the workers themselves, who already had made the bureaucracy legendary in its efficiency, were uninvited. In Shaw’s version, “They of Tag and Rag that had been cast out were utterly forgotten; so that they were fain to cry aloud, saying ‘How long, O ye honest and upright in heart, shall Snobs and Nobs be rulers over us, seeing that they are but men like unto us, though they imagine us in their heads to be otherwise?’”

Every appearance of the venerable Queen was now a jubilee of some sort, but Shaw was not involved again until 1893, when Victoria officially opened the Imperial Institute, a sprawling monument to the empire on the South Kensington site informally known as Albertopolis, the burgeoning realization of Albert’s dream of a huge cultural and educational complex in South Kensington. The Star assigned three reporters to cover the events both inside and outside the Institute, with the intention, as an afternoon newspaper, to publish its accounts the same day. Whether Shaw did it for the money, which was not much—only thirty shillings—or was genuinely curious is unknown. His diary for 10 May 1893 only notes that he was to be inside the hall by 11:45 for the ceremonies that were to begin at noon.

As he walked to the Institute from his Fitzroy Square flat he could see the crowds gathering. Londoners had flocked to Buckingham Palace by early morning and filled the broad streets of South Kensington, parting only for the royal procession. “Horsetralian Lancers” and a column of sailors from the Excellent appeared early in the parade, and Her Majesty’s six cream-colored horses, with their colorful trappings, drew the royal coach near the end of the progress. The Star man alongside had the most sensational news to report: the Queen’s veil fell off as her carriage rumbled along, exposing Victoria’s “cheerful healthy countenance.” (It seemed a fulfillment of Shaw’s prediction far back in 1886 about the Queen’s bonnet.) Outside the Institute another reporter took up the narrative, and when Victoria entered at noon to inaugurate the enterprise for which she had laid the first stone during her 1887 Jubilee, the music critic for the World—once, as Corno di Bassetto, the critic for the Star—took up one of the few news reporting jobs of his writing life.

The anonymously written “Inside Ceremony” had the characteristic Dickensian resonances and musical allusions that marked it unmistakably as Shaw’s. He was also unmistakably in the palm of Victoria’s hand. The Queen’s poise as the principal actress on the national stage and her bell-like voice—which he admired and recalled all his life—caused most of his socialist antipathy to thrones to vanish. In part, one can assume that Shaw was writing in the warm, gently satirical tone called for by his editor, so that the
three reports would be consistent in approach to people and events. Yet he was also consistent with what he would say elsewhere and often.

To Shaw, the Queen was in her active post-Jubilee years when she symbolized England the best actress in the realm, despite her age and frailty. As she was helped up the steps to the stage by her sons Bertie and Alfred, the band playing “God Save the Queen,” Shaw wrote, giving his sentiments away beneath the irony—“Everyone is affected: the Star man WEEPS WITH LOYALTY.”

The portly Prince of Wales, Shaw observed, had little “artistic turn for the platform.... When he was done, the Queen, seated, shows him the proper way to do it. There is not an actress on the English stage who could have done it better—tone, style, all are of the best. The Star man’s artistic instincts get the better of him; he feels that it is a pity that so able an artist should be wasted on a throne.” A gold key is presented to the Queen, who examines it dubiously, then turns a lock which electrically sets bells ringing, and a royal salute follows from the artillery in the park:

Finally the Queen, using her walking stick a little, is helped down the steps by the Prince, [who is] President of the Institute, and [Prince Alfred,] the Duke of Edinburgh. The moment she reaches level ground she starts gaily off to shake hands with the Indian princes, like the Honorable Samuel Slumkey at the Eatanswill election. A wave of bobbing, curtseying and salaaming passes down the banks as she flows through them; the Court scampers off the platform and closes up in her wake; the band plays the March from “Le Prophete,” and the Star man vanishes from the hall and is at Stonecutter St. before the Queen is half-way to the main entrance on her way home.

While typesetters were working on Shaw’s report, which he had written in the hall as things happened, he went to a vegetarian restaurant nearby, the Central, and lunched. Then he returned to the Star to correct his proofs and walked home.

Eventually there would be an end even to Victorian jubilees, but not until 1897 had passed, and with it the Queen’s sixtieth anniversary on the throne. No legal or journalistic compulsion forced Shaw’s hand, and he chose the unlikeliest of events as his excuse, but again he found a way to write about Victoria, using the springboard of a Saturday Review drama column on a production of Ibsen’s most vilified play, *Ghosts*. “The Jubilee and Ibsen’s *Ghosts*!” he began his 3 July 1897 column:

On the one hand the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury: on the other, Mrs Alving and Pastor Manders. Stupendous contrast! how far reflected in the private consciousness of those two august persons there is no means of ascertaining. For though of all the millions for the nourishment of whose loyalty the Queen must submit to be carried through the streets from time to time, not a man but is firmly persuaded that her opinions and convictions are exact fac-
similes of his own, none the less she, having seen much of men and affairs, may quite possibly be a wise woman and worthy successor of Canute, and no mere butt for impertinent and senseless Jubilee odes such as their perpetrators dare not, for fear of intolerable domestic scorn and ridicule, address to their own wives or mothers.

“I am myself cut off by my profession from Jubilees,” he lied; “for loyalty in a critic is corruption. But if I am to avoid idolizing kings and queens in the ordinary human way, I must carefully realize them as fellow-creatures.” And so, while the nation was saluting Victoria at a naval review at Spithead, he told his readers, he was wondering, returning home from a performance of *Ghosts*, whether the Queen had been confronted at any stage in her life with the stark lessons imposed upon Ibsen’s Mrs. Alving. Both had grown up in the early nineteenth century, he explained, and Mrs. Alving, an intelligent and principled woman, had learned that life was corrupted not so much by the vices she was taught in her youth to reject, “but by the virtues it was her pride and uprightness to maintain.” “Suppose then,” he asked,

the Queen were to turn upon us in the midst of our jubilation, and say, “My Lords and Gentlemen: You have been good enough to describe at great length the changes made during the last sixty years in science, art, politics, dress, sport, locomotion, newspapers, and everything else that men chatter about. But you have not a word to say about the change that comes home most closely to me? I mean the change in the number, the character, and the intensity of the lies a woman must either believe or pretend to believe before she can graduate in polite society as a well-brought-up lady.” If Her Majesty could be persuaded to give a list of these lies, what a document it would be! Think of the young lady of seventy years ago, systematically and piously lied to by parents, govern-esses, clergymen, servants, everybody; and slapped, sent to bed, or locked up in the bedevilled and beghosted dark at every rebellion of her common sense and natural instinct against sham religion, sham propriety, sham decency, sham knowledge, and sham ignorance. Surely every shop-window picture of “the girl Queen” of 1837 must tempt the Queen of 1897 to jump out of her carriage and write up under it, “Please remember that there is not a woman earning twenty-four shillings a week as a clerk today who is not ten times better educated than this unfortunate girl was when the crown dropped on her head, and left her to reign by her mother wit and the advice of a parcel of men who to this day have not sense enough to manage a Jubilee, let alone an Empire, without offending everybody.” Depend on it, seventy-eight years cannot be lived through without finding out things that queens do not mention in Adelphi melodramas.12

Ibsen’s heroine learned from life, too, Shaw insisted, but her luck was worse. We had to “guard ourselves,” he thought, “against the gratuitous, but just now very common, assumption that the Queen, in her garnered wisdom and sorrow, is as silly as the noisiest of her subjects, who see in their ideal Queen the polar opposite of Mrs Alving, and who are so far right that the spirit of Ghosts is unquestionably the polar opposite of the spirit of the Jubi-
Farewell, Victoria!

lee. The Jubilee represents the nineteenth century proud of itself. Ghosts represents it loathing itself.”

When Shaw began *Caesar and Cleopatra* not long afterward he seems consciously to have written the play on two levels of time—the historical past and his own century. The young Cleopatra was sixteen in Shaw’s rewriting of history. Eighteen in reality, she was as old as Victoria at her accession. And the most powerful man in Cleopatra’s Egypt, Julius Caesar, was—in his early fifties—almost exactly the age of Victoria’s first prime minister, Viscount Melbourne. Was Victoria in love with her mentor? Rumor had it so, perhaps because Victoria had yet no husband and was largely innocent of men, and Melbourne was handsome, devoted, and avuncular. In one of the Victorian reverberations of the play, an elderly courtier, Pothinus, accuses the young Cleopatra of having been altered by her intimacy with the attractive Roman. “Do you speak with Caesar every day for six months: and you will be changed,” she says.

It is “common talk,” he goes on, that she is infatuated “with this old man.” If by “infatuated” one meant “made foolish,” Cleopatra counters, it was not so:

*Cleopatra:* Now that Caesar has made me wise, it is no use my liking or disliking: I do what must be done. That is not happiness; but it is greatness. If Caesar were gone, I think I could govern the Egyptians; for what Caesar is to me, I am to the fools around me.

*Pothinus:* Is Cleopatra then indeed a Queen, and no longer Caesar’s prisoner and slave?… Does he not love you?

*Cleopatra:* Love me! Pothinus: Caesar loves no one… His kindness to me is a wonder: neither mother, father, nor nurse have ever taken so much care of me, or thrown open their thoughts to me so freely.

*Pothinus:* Well: is this not love?… I should have asked, then, do you love him?

*Cleopatra:* Can one love a god?

Shaw’s Caesar has Melbourne’s mannerisms and vanities, his eagerness to instruct and his tendency to coin cynical aphorisms. Shaw’s Cleopatra has Victoria’s youth, innocence, terrible temper, and ambition to be more than a figurehead. (Foreign policy issues deliberately echo those of a later Victorian decade—the English 1870s.) Perhaps it was as closely as one could comment on the Victoria-Melbourne relationship in an age when the Lord Chamberlain’s Office censored plays for their politics and their allusions to the sovereign.

To Victorian diarist Charles Greville, Clerk of the Privy Council, the relationship of Queen and prime minister was unhealthy, as
while she … does everything that is civil to all the inmates of the Castle, she really has nothing to do with anybody but Melbourne, and with him she passes (if not in tête-à-tête, yet in intimate conversation) more hours than any two people, in any relation of life, perhaps ever do pass together…. He is at her side for at least six hours every day—an hour in the morning, two on horseback [in midafternoon], one at dinner, and two in the evening.

Such a “monopoly” of her time was injudicious and inconsistent with social usage. “But it is more peculiarly inexpedient with reference to her own future…, for if Melbourne should be compelled to resign, her privation will be all the more bitter on account of the exclusiveness of her intimacy with him.”\textsuperscript{15} In fact, Victoria would later thrive in her independence from Melbourne, while Shaw has Cleopatra—hardly a constitutional queen—plot to rid herself of external impediments to personal rule, Caesar among them.

For Cleopatra, both impediment and accomplice are joined in the person of a devoted slave who is paradoxically her most powerful courtier. In \textit{Caesar and Cleopatra} there is a grim drama in the duel between Caesar and the Queen’s lifelong nurse and servant Fttateeta, a formidable foe whose life only has meaning, and is fully used up, in loyalty to Cleopatra. Again there are Victorian resonances, as the character is not historical, but only a Shavian invention, and Victoria had an imperious and utterly devoted personal nurse and servant, Louise Lehzen. The Baroness Lehzen would do, and did, anything for Victoria—at least until Victoria married Albert, and he contended with Lehzen for power. Coming to the throne when barely eighteen, Victoria in her inexperience had depended upon Lehzen, who acquired a proliferation of duties and responsibilities in the royal household. As London gossip knew, Lehzen had a bedroom in Buckingham Palace next to Victoria’s, with an entrance cut through the wall at the young Queen’s direction in the summer of her accession. As Greville remarked in his diary (published, to Victoria’s indignation, in Disraeli’s time), when any of the Queen’s ministers came to see her, “the Baroness (Lehzen) retires at one door as they enter at the other, and the audience over she returns to the Queen.”\textsuperscript{16}

Prince Albert’s term for the Baroness was “the House Dragon.” Like the dragoness Fttateeta, Lehzen had to be eliminated, as Prince Albert realized. His contention with Lehzen, with the hasty and passionate Victoria caught between them, emerged quickly into public knowledge. By Shaw’s time, when Victoria was an old woman, it was already remote history.

Even Caesar’s tendering the island of Cyprus to the boy king Ptolemy as a sop to compensate for the loss of Egypt to Cleopatra is a Victorian reference. Impatiently, the boy’s adviser, Pothinus, dismisses the offer with the complaint: “Cyprus is no good to anybody.” “No matter,” says Caesar. “You shall have it for the sake of peace.” And Caesar’s English slave Britannus (another Shavian unhistorical invention) adds, “unconsciously anticipating
a later statesman,” Shaw notes in his stage directions: “Peace with honor, Pothinus.”

Shaw’s “later statesman” was Victoria’s favorite prime minister, Disraeli (Fig. 2), credited with the remark by people who had not realized that he was quoting a predecessor, Lord John Russell. Shaw, his stage directions made clear, was again deliberately recalling the Victorian age. The Victorian empire in its sunset years was Shaw’s aging Roman Empire, as we see again in the closing scene, where Shaw once more recalled his stint in the late 1880s and early 1890s as an art critic. It was not the heyday of English art. Just as its best drama was being produced by Irishmen, its best visual art was being imported from France and Italy or created by expatriate Americans. “I leave the art of Egypt in your charge,” says the departing Caesar to Cleopatra’s art dealer, Apollodorus. “Remember: Rome loves art and will encourage it ungrudgingly.”

“I understand, Caesar,” says Apollodorus in lines suggesting late-Victorian England. “Rome will produce no art itself, but it will buy up and take away whatever the other nations produce.”

“What!” Caesar exclaims, “Rome produce no art! Is peace not an art? Is war not an art? Is government not an art? Is civilization not an art? All these we give you in exchange for a few ornaments. You will have the best of the bargain.” In places a “Victoria and Melbourne,” “Victoria and Albert,” or a “Victoria and Disraeli,” Caesar and Cleopatra is more than Shaw’s look back at Rome.

In the last scene, Cleopatra appears suddenly at Caesar’s leave-taking, “cold and tragic, cunningly dressed in black, without ornaments or decoration of any kind, and thus making a striking figure among the brilliantly dressed bevy of ladies as she passes....” The Queen is in ostensible mourning for the loyal Ftatateeta, but if Shaw were playing his dramatized history lesson on two levels she may also have been representing the English queen who dressed resolutely in black for the thirty-nine years she lived after Albert’s death, well aware of the distinctive impression she would make among the fashionable dresses of aristocratic women and the brilliant court dress and uniforms of the men about her. In later years, Victoria loaded her mourning garb with jewels and diamonds, but Shaw would have known better than to make his parallel too obvious. Subliminal in places, mockingly direct in others, his teasing look at the Victorian age still fascinates.

The writing of Caesar and Cleopatra preceded only by months the beginning of the Boer War, and the play seemed art anticipating history in that a great power found itself bogged down and suffering military embarrassments in a colonial enterprise very far from home. Unlike most of his Fabian friends, Shaw refused to support the underdog, viewing “Oom Paul” Kru-
Fig. 2  “New Crowns for Old Ones!”

Disraeli offers Victoria the title he had pushed through Parliament, Empress of India.

_Punch_, 15 April 1876
ger’s Afrikaners as uncivilized fundamentalist throwbacks. Further, Shaw, always quick to applaud decisive leadership where he thought he saw it, perceived in Victoria, now past eighty, an active symbol of determination to win. Although the Queen threw her weight about in order to get the inept bureaucracy moving, Shaw later offered her more credit than was her due, given her constitutional limitations, in observing, in 1915: “It was fresh in my recollection that in the South African War we were both disgraced in the field and swindled in the Commissariat until Queen Victoria, in desperation, insisted on sending out Lord Roberts and getting rid of the worn-out and hopeless incapables whom the mob were cheering as madly as if they had been so many Nelsons and Napoleons.”  

The Queen could not insist, but she had belabored the sluggish War Office into sending Roberts, who had been stationed uselessly in Ireland.

In the gloom of “Black Week” in December 1899, when the war was going badly, Victoria had told the despondent Lord Balfour, whom Shaw knew, “Please understand, there is no one depressed in this house; we are not interested in the possibilities of defeat; they do not exist.” A few months later, when she made a progress through London to rally her people, Shaw was offended at what he interpreted as listless crowd behavior. “The Queen has just passed,” he wrote to Charles Charrington in March 1900. “A street full of rampant Fenians would have cheered her more heartily, if only out of … sentiment towards an old woman. These patriots have no guts in their bawling.”

In an even earlier play than Caesar, Shaw observed later, pleased with himself, he had anticipated Victoria. For Christmas 1899 the Queen had sought a symbolic present to send to her troops in the field as something special from her. Soon, ships were bringing every soldier in the field a flat tin box of chocolates with the Queen’s head embossed on the lid, a profile that Kipling pictured in “The Widow of Windsor” (1892) as her troops might have:

'Ave you 'eard of the Widow of Windsor  
With a hairy gold crown on 'er 'ead?  
She 'as ships on the foam—she 'as millions at 'ome,  
An’ she pays us poor beggars in red.

Every soldier in South Africa and in transports on the high seas was to receive such a box, bound in red, white, and blue ribbon, and had to sign a receipt for it. A hundred thousand slabs of chocolate went south, and legends grew about their efficacy. Some soldiers would not touch a morsel, determined to take the sacred gifts home. Sean O’Casey’s brother Tom returned to Dublin, “the Queen’s coloured box of chocolate in his kit-bag still full of the sweetmeat, for what soldier could eat chocolate given by a Queen?”
More than one box was reputed to have stopped a bullet. An authentic example was sent to the Queen by the medical officer treating Private James Humphrey of the Royal Lancasters on 28 February 1900. The forwarding note from the military hospital at Frere explained that the box had been in the soldier’s haversack. The bullet had gone through it and lodged in the chocolate rather than in Private Humphrey’s spleen. Victoria’s Private Secretary suggested that the Queen “would doubtless wish another box be sent to Private Humphrey.”

The gift was highly prized—a rare if not unique contact, the troops felt, with Her Majesty. Men refused £5—two months’ pay for a private soldier—for the Queen’s chocolate. On visits to hospitals, Victoria carried additional tin boxes, and one legless soldier declared gallantly: “I would rather lose a limb than not get that!” Widows and bereaved mothers were often sent the boxes together with the personal effects of a soldier buried far from home.20

Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* (1894), later musicalized by Oscar Straus without Shaw’s permission as *The Chocolate Soldier*, includes an early scene in which Captain Bluntschli confides that where other troops have kept cartridges, he had secreted supplies more valuable to a soldier—chocolate. For that and other reasons, Shaw explained to his German translator, Siegfried Trebitsch, in 1905, “the play was received, except by a few people, as an opera bouffe without music. The notion that soldiers ate chocolate was taken as a silly joke, and it was not until the South African War reminded the English of what war was really like, and Queen Victoria presented all the troops with boxes of chocolate, that *Arms and the Man* was justified.”

When Victoria died in January 1901, Shaw was indignant at the extended obsequies, during which the Queen’s tiny, withered body lay in state for a fortnight before the lengthy funeral in London and burial at Windsor. Always hostile to what he called the grotesque mummeries of traditional funerals, and particularly unhappy at what he perceived as the maltreatment of the dead Queen, he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Morning Leader*:

Sir

I am loth to interrupt the rapture of mourning in which the nation is now enjoying its favorite festival—a funeral. But in a country like ours a total suspension of common sense and sincere human feeling for a whole fortnight is an impossibility. There are certain points in connection with the obsequies of Queen Victoria which call for vigorous remonstrance. Why, may I ask, should the procedure in the case of a deceased sovereign be that which has long been condemned and discarded by all intelligent and educated persons as insanitary and superstitious? To delay a burial for a fortnight, to hermetically seal up the remains in a leaden coffin (and those who are behind the scenes at our cemeteries know well what will happen to that leaden coffin), is to exhibit a spectacle, not of reverent mourning, but of intolerable ignorance perpetu-
ated by court tradition long after it has been swept away in more enlightened quarters. The remains of the Queen should have been either cremated or buried at once in a perishable coffin in a very shallow grave. The example set by such a course would have been socially invaluable. The example set by the present procedure is socially deplorable. If at such a moment the royal family, instead of making each other Field Marshals, and emphasizing every foolish unreality and insincerity that makes court life contemptible, were to seize the opportunity to bring its customs into some sort of decent harmony with modern civilization, they would make loyalty much easier for twentieth century Englishmen.22

Shaw was using Victoria’s obsequies less to protest the insensitivities toward her person than to wage war on outmoded rites and practices, and Ernest Parke, proprietor of the Morning Leader and an old friend of Shaw’s, understood and politely declined the letter: “I am not anxious to run counter to [public] loyalty in its most solemn expression.” Then writing Man and Superman, Shaw would put into the Devil’s major speech in the “Don Juan in Hell” play-within-the-play a lengthy denunciation of the English love of funerals: “Their imagination glows, their energies rise up at the idea of death; these people: they love it.”

Victoria in death remained as important to Shaw as in life. However exasperated he may have been at her regressive concepts about government and society, he remained full of admiration for her person. When a selection of her letters through 1861 was published in 1907, Shaw quickly acquired the three volumes, writing to a young actress, Frances Dillon, who was to play Ann Whitefield in Man and Superman on tour, that a study of the late Queen’s letters would teach her how to remain ladylike yet dominate men, and how to remain majestically in mourning yet do what she pleased. “I strongly advise you,” he wrote to her on 21 November 1908, to read the letters of Queen Victoria through from beginning to end. Then try to imagine yourself Queen Victoria every night in the 1st Act. You will notice that Queen Victoria, even when she was most infatuatedly in love with Prince Albert, always addressed him exactly as if he were a little boy of three and she his governess. That is the particular kind of English ladylikeness in which you are deplorably deficient. An English lady in mourning is a majestic and awful spectacle. No matter how improperly she may behave, an English lady never admits she is behaving improperly. Just as there are lots of women who are good-hearted and honest and innocent in an outrageously rowdy way, so are there ladies who do the most shocking things with a dignity and gentility which a bishop might envy. Ann is one of the latter sort; and this is what you have not got in Ann. Ann’s dignity, her self-control, her beautifully measured speech, her impressive grief for her father, which absolutely forbids her to smile until she is out of mourning, a sort of rich, chaste, noble self-respect about her which makes you feel that she belongs to carriage folk and is probably very highly con-
nected, must be splendidly and very firmly handled on the stage in order to give
effect to her audacity.23

Shaw had written Man and Superman in the years just after Victoria’s
death, and one can see in his Ann Whitefield and in her mythic incarna-
tion Doña Ana the shrewd utilization of mourning to achieve strategic ends.
Like Victoria, Doña Ana wears mourning all her life, and reveres a statue of
the deceased she has had erected (the Queen, of course, had Albert statues
erected wholesale around England).

The “carriage-folk audacity” that Shaw put into his Ann Whitefield went
as well into his mourning widow of a few years later, Jennifer Dubedat of
The Doctor’s Dilemma, and is also given to the upstart heroine of Pygmalion.
In lines added for the film, Shaw has Eliza Doolittle exclaim to Professor
Higgins after the ball at which she has triumphed: “I don’t think I can bear
much more. The people all stare so at me. An old lady has told me that I
speak exactly like Queen Victoria. I am sorry if I have lost your bet. I have
done my best; but nothing can make me the same as these people.”

“You have not lost it, my dear,” Colonel Pickering assures her, understand-
ing the phenomenon of her superiority. “You have won it ten times
over.”

Shaw emphasized the point to the actress Dorothy Dix in 1914, when he
coached her in the role for a touring company. Eliza should not, he warned,
produce “the effect of giving herself airs by imitating a lady badly. She is
not imitating at all: she is pronouncing as Higgins has taught her; and his
Miltonic taste must be assumed to be first rate. And she must be very much
in earnest. Play it as if you were reciting Shakespeare for a prize in fine dic-
tion—classical English, like Queen Victoria’s (she spoke extremely well)—
not smart drawingroom English.”24

Victoria’s voice rang through Shaw’s memory all his life. When, in the
infancy of radio, he advised Cecil Lewis, a BBC producer, on broadcasting
“the invisible play,” he pointed out how the medium might use effectively
talents robbed by age from the live theater. “Many actors and actresses who
have lost their place on the stage through losing their youth, their good looks,
and their memory, could do admirable work for broadcasting. Queen Vic-
toria had a beautiful voice and first rate delivery at an age when she could
not have played any part on the stage presentably except the nurse in Romeo
and Juliet.”25

But Victoria remained to Shaw more than a voice. She was, in his view,
a dominating personality who made use of character as compensation for
her miseducation. For Back to Methuselah, written in the last years of a war
that proved how little men had learned about governing themselves, Shaw
composed a post–World War I conversation between a philosophical writ-
er and two politicians. H. H. Lubin, the ex-prime minister, is a thinly veiled
caricature of H. H. Asquith, who took England into the war in 1914; Joyce
Burge, his successor, is an equally unconcealed Lloyd George, who finished
out the war at Downing Street. Have you read the recent political autobiog-
raphies, Franklyn Barnabas asks, those that reveal the true inside workings
of the Victorian England they inherited?

*Lubin:* I did not discover any new truth revealed … *Barnabas:* What! Not the
truth that England was governed all that time by a little woman who knew her
own mind?

*Lubin:* That often happens. Which woman do you mean?

*Barnabas:* Queen Victoria, to whom your Prime Ministers stood in the relation
of naughty children whose heads she knocked together when their tempers and
quarrels became intolerable. Within thirteen years of her death Europe became
a hell.

*Burge:* Quite true. That was because she was piously brought up, and regarded
herself as an instrument. If a statesman remembers that he is only an instru-
ment, and feels quite sure that he is rightly interpreting the divine purpose,
he will come out all right, you know.

*Barnabas:* The Kaiser felt like that. Did he come out all right?

Even then, in the reflection of Shaw’s sardonic mirror, Victoria appears as
an enduring reproach to the character and quality of the statesmanship that
came after her, and even to much of it which she endured in her own time.

Almost certainly thinking of Victoria, Shaw had written to Sylvia Brooke,
the Ranee of Sarawak (wife of the “White Rajah”), in 1913: “Women make
the best sovereigns. The Salic law is a mistake: it should be the other way
about. Constitutional monarchy is not a man’s job: it is a woman’s. The rela-
tion of a king to his ministers is intolerable: the relation of a queen to them
is much better.” But that Victoria, raised as she was, could bring it off was
to him a triumph of character. As he put it in *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide,*
his political handbook of the late 1920s: “Nowadays a parlormaid as igno-
rant as Queen Victoria was when she came to the throne would be classed as
mentally defective.” Yet, he added: “Queen Victoria managed to get on very
well in spite of her ignorance” because “civilized life and highly civilized life
are different: what is enough for one is not enough for the other.” Later in
the book he noted the limits of her pragmatism. For example, “Queen Vic-
toria shewed her practical common sense when she said that she would not
give a title to anyone who had not money enough to keep it up; but the result
was that the titles went to the richest, not to the best.”

18
Two years later, in his preface to his prophetic political play *The Apple Cart*, he observed how Victoria’s combination of keenness of mind and continuity of office sometimes made it possible to prevail over her constitutional limitations and her elected officials:

George the Third and Queen Victoria were not, like Queen Elizabeth, the natural superiors of their ministers in political genius and general capacity; but they were for many purposes of State necessarily superior to them in experience, in cunning, in exact knowledge of the limits of their responsibility and consequently of the limits of their irresponsibility: in short, in the authority and practical power that these superiorities produce.

The play itself borrowed a lesson from Victoria. Shaw explained his device a decade later, after an authentic abdication had rocked Britain. In *The Apple Cart*, a king brings about the resolution by threatening to abdicate:

And note well … how natural and reasonable and probable the [action in the] play is, and how improbable, fantastic, and outrageous the actual event was. There was not a single circumstance of it which I should have dared to invent. If you could raise Macaulay or Disraeli from the dead to see *The Apple Cart* just to ask him “Could this thing actually happen?” he would have replied “Oh, quite probably. Queen Elizabeth threatened to abdicate; and Queen Victoria used to hint at it once a week or so.”

She would abdicate, Victoria once told her Private Secretary, Henry Ponsonby, who was her conduit to Gladstone, “rather than send for or have any communication with that half-mad firebrand who wd soon ruin everything & be a Dictator. Others but herself may submit to his democratic rule, but *not the Queen.*”

Particularly when trying to get her way with Gladstone, Victoria would threaten to step down in favor of Bertie, the aging playboy Prince of Wales. It was a consummation that even the prime minister hoped devoutly would be delayed. Gladstone had often urged the Queen to offer the portly prince more to do in order to learn the job that would inevitably be his, but only the extreme radicals in his party pressed for the Queen’s exit. “If only our dear Bertie was fit to replace me!” Victoria would confide. Shaw’s King Magnus offers to abdicate in favor of his son Robert, Prince of Wales. “He will make an admirable constitutional monarch,” Magnus explains. “I have never been able to induce him to take any interest in parliamentary politics.”

A cabinet minister agrees: “Personally I get on very well with the prince; but somehow I do not feel that he is interested in what I am doing.” And the other ministers agree that the king’s good sense and interest in government, even when they disagree with him, are preferable to the unpredictability of Prince Robert. A very different monarch and princely successor in a very different time, the pair in the *Apple Cart* court are nevertheless a
Shavian tribute to a stratagem by which Victoria attempted to stretch her waning powers as sovereign.

Dignified good sense was something Shaw associated with Victoria both seriously and in fun, his kind of fun represented by lines an outraged bishop would sputter in the 1938 play of European politics, *Geneva*. His grandson at Oxford, he moans, has joined a “Communist club.” And his granddaughter has become a nudist: “I was graciously allowed to introduce my daughters to good Queen Victoria. If she could see my granddaughter she would call the police.” On the other hand, Shaw would have been glad to call in the police to remove the art that continued to clothe Victoria in the ungainly regalia and poses of royalist pomp and respectability. In 1919, when the *Arts Gazette* asked readers to identify the ugliest statue in London, Shaw was quick to respond that there was no single candidate for the dubious honor, yet he perceived a single subject. “As an old Victorian,” he wondered what crime Queen Victoria committed that she should be so terribly guyed as she has been through the length and breadth of her dominions. It was part of her personal quality that she was a tiny woman, and our national passion for telling lies on every public subject has led to her being represented as an overgrown monster. The sculptors seem to have assumed that she inspired everything that was ugliest in the feminine fiction of her reign. Take Mrs. Caudle, Mrs. Gamp, Mrs. Prig, Mrs. Proudie, and make a composite statue of them, and you will have a typical memorial of Queen Victoria. Now if this were a bold republican realism which disdained courtly sycophancy, it would be at least courageous, if unkind. But it is pure plastic calumny. Queen Victoria was a little woman with great decision of manner and a beautiful speaking voice which she used in public extremely well. She carried herself very well. All young people now believe that she was a huge heap of a woman…. How could they think anything else, with a statue at every corner shrieking these libels at them? The equestrian statue in Liverpool is the only one that is not an act of high treason, and even it makes her commonplace in size.29

Just as the ugly statues were “lying reproaches,” so the aging Shaw felt were the outmoded perceptions of the Queen. In a socialist lecture in 1918 he suggested that the spread of public education had so standardized British attitudes, from the nursery to the dinner table, from the pulpit to the jury box, that “Even Queen Victoria is now too liberal for us.”30 The reason? Victoria remained to him the prime example of the successfully self-educated person. The experience gave her, he thought, advantages not only over most formally educated people, but particularly over her university educated parliamentarians and prime ministers. To the later Shaw, she could do little wrong. He recalled in 1913 and again in 1930 that she had “stood up valiantly for Wagner when the Philharmonic Society, in a moment of madness, engaged him as conductor for a season; but she could [not] save him from
Fig. 3  Queen Victoria on the Promenade at Cimiez, the Riviera.

*Vanity Fair*, 17 June 1897
the wrath of the critics and the professional musicians.” 31 Again she was the inspired, self-educated Shavian amateur—Shaw himself, we might infer.

In 1937, in the post-Strachey period—a time, as Shaw put it, “when the writings of Sigmund Freud had made psychopathy grotesquely fashionable”—“Everybody was expected to have a secret history unfit for publication except in the consulting rooms of the psychoanalyst. If it had been announced that among the papers of Queen Victoria a diary had been found revealing that her severe respectability masked the daydreams of a Messalina, it would have been received with eager credulity.” 32 But not by Shaw. Even in 1940, discussing London hotels with his German translator, when Shaw suggested two comfortable establishments that were not “smart,” Victoria was his touchstone. “Smartness,” he went on to explain, “was not considered respectable by the old Queen.” 33

Well into his ninth decade, he felt no need to explain who “the old Queen” was. He may have claimed all his days to be an unreconstructed Marxist, but he knew the truth of the matter was that he was really, as he had confessed on occasion himself, “an old Victorian.” 34