Bernard Shaw
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SHAW’S IMMERSION in and crusade in behalf of Ibsen’s drama was not confined to his lecture on Ibsen and his book about Ibsen’s plays. For instance, he wrote three articles about *A Doll House*, including a review of its production in June 1889, and in August 1891 he coached Florence Farr in the role of Rebecca West in Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, which he read with her.1 “When Shaw himself began to practice the drama instead of criticizing it and theorizing about it,” Nethercot points out, “he carried on his campaign in the first three plays, although, somewhat surprisingly, he failed to make his new interpretations of duty and idealism as central a source of dramatic conflict as Ibsen had done.”2 Nevertheless, after the production of his first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, at J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre, critics recognized that Shaw was following in Ibsen’s footsteps: “the London Ibsen,” “a zealous Ibsenite,” and “the high priest, one may say, of Ibsenism” are typical of the labels they attached to him.3 No wonder: Ibsenism was the flavor of the day, so to speak. Shaw was a major contributor to the Ibsenist vogue, even going so far as to say of one vehemently anti-Ibsenite novelist, poet, and dramatist: “Mr Buchanan’s plays bore me; and his views do not interest me in the least: I had grown out of them before I was born.”4 Moreover, the first play Grein had produced at his theatre was *Ghosts*, which was considered scandalous.

The themes that Nethercot cites in Shaw’s first three plays—*Widowers’ Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1893)—which make up the first volume of his first collection of plays, *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (the latter is the first volume), published in 1898, are important in the first play and are crucial in the third. Shaw’s second play is “impishly ‘Ibsenist’ in the sense that the breed of new woman (which as a breed Ibsen had never remotely advocated) is important to the plot.”5 Shaw flaunted his kinship with the Norwegian master. Of *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, he boasted: “I have once more shared with Ibsen the triumphant amusement of startling all but the strongest-headed of the London theatre critics clean out of the practice of their profession.”6

In the Pleasant Plays, the themes are less prominent, appearing in *Arms and the Man* (1894), *The Man of Destiny*, as analyzed in the first chapter, and *You Never Can Tell* (1896). Perhaps surprisingly, a wife’s duty to remain with
her husband is not an issue in *Candida* (1894), which more than any other play by Shaw resembles *A Doll House*. When Morell asks his wife Candida to choose between himself and his rival Marchbanks, neither his question nor her response contains the word duty. Marchbanks understands her perception that she belongs to herself, not to either man; and she also suggests, without using the word, that she is not duty bound to either. In these early plays, Shaw attacks the orthodoxies of the past. As his dramatic techniques and concerns developed, his plays would help to create the orthodoxies of the future.

**Widowers’ Houses**

In *Widowers’ Houses*, Lickcheese explains that the government may need streets on which Sartorius’s slums are located in order to extend its offices. Because this would make the land more valuable than it presently is, Sartorius’s business interests require that he improve the property. Coke— who drafts correspondence for Lickcheese’s land development business, as he earlier drafted correspondence for his friend Trench, Sartorius’s mortgagee, in behalf of what Trench hoped would be an engagement of marriage to Blanche Sartorius—is on hand to help persuade Trench to join the venture. Typically, Coke prefers to put the matter in a more high-minded way than Sartorius and Lickcheese do, a manner that Napoleon would call thoroughly English: “(austerely) No, Mr Lickcheese, not trying to persuade him. No: this is a matter of principle with me. I say it is your duty, Henry—your duty—to put those abominable buildings into proper and habitable repair. As a man of science you owe it to the community to perfect the sanitary arrangements. In questions of duty there is no room for persuasion, even from the oldest friend.” Hypocritically, Sartorius concurs with Coke’s formulation: “I certainly feel, as Mr Coke puts it, that it is our duty: one which I have perhaps too long neglected out of regard for the poorest class of tenants.” Lickcheese claims to be persuaded that this is the case: “Not a doubt of it, gents: a dooty. I can be as sharp as any man when it’s a question of business; but dooty’s another pair o’ shoes.”

Recognizing that these invocations to duty merely mask economic self-interest, Trench repudiates the feigned high principles of the others: “Well, I dont see that it’s any more my duty now than it was four months ago. I look at it simply as a question of so much money.” “Shame, Harry, shame! Shame!” exclaims the moralist Coke, with the air of having been offended. Trench, who has lost his scruples, summarizes the issue realistically. The slums are to be razed in order “to make way for the new street into the Strand; and the straight tip now is to go for compensation…. Well, it appears that the dirtier a place is the more rent you get; and the decenter it is the
more compensation you get. So we’re to give up dirt and go in for decency.” As Sartorius concludes with Anglican disingenuousness, “Dr Trench puts the case frankly as a man of business. I take the wider view of a public man. We live in a progressive age; and humanitarian ideas are advancing and must be taken into account. But my practical conclusion is the same as his. I should hardly feel justified in making a large claim for compensation under existing circumstances.”

These men are not slaves of duty. To most of them, duty is a catchword that provides a moral justification for their actions. Only Cokane really seems to believe what he is saying, and if he is a slave to duty, he like they ensures that, to use a phrase attributed to Benjamin Franklin, he does well by doing good.

**The Philanderer**

The characters of *The Philanderer* include both authentic Ibsenites—people of genuinely advanced views, such as Grace—and those who pretend to be Ibsenites, such as the title character, Charteris, who uses the language of advanced men and women in order to philander among women, and Julia, who is at heart an old-fashioned woman desiring a conventional marriage with a man who is an Ibsenist. None of them is a slave of duty. Charteris verbally adopts advanced views, and he mocks marriage and its duties because he aims to have casual affairs rather than a committed marital relationship.

As he calmly reminds Julia, whom he has been trying to discard in order to devote his philandering time to Grace, Julia had agreed that marriage degrades women, for when they marry they sell themselves to men for the social status of wives and the right to be supported by their husbands. For this reason, “It was understood between us as people of advanced views that we were not to marry”; and he contends that “you cannot be an advanced woman when you want to bring a man to your feet, and a conventional woman when you want to hold him there against his will.” Whereas advanced people, he emphasizes, develop friendships, conventional people marry. Friendship too has duties, he slyly argues, the first of which is “unhesitating uncomplaining acceptance of a change of feeling from either side. You chose friendship instead of marriage. Now do your duty, and accept your notice.”

Although Julia refuses to be a slave of this type of duty, Charteris cleverly arranges for her to agree to marry a doctor who loves her. However, Grace sees both characters for what they are. Nothing, she tells Charteris, would induce her to marry him. “Never make a hero of a philanderer,” Shaw has her instruct everyone in the play’s final line—perhaps poking fun at audi-
ences who assume that the protagonist of a play is its hero and certainly emphasizing that while Charteris is the play’s chief character, he is far from a conventional hero. In terms of one of the themes we are pursuing, Margery Morgan is accurate when she states: “Society as a doll’s house, or perpetual nursery, for the childishness of women denied freedom and responsibility until they are incapable of both cripples its men too.”

**Mrs Warren’s Profession**

The title character of *Mrs Warren’s Profession* does not use the word duty to pursue or further her economic interests, but life has taught her that duty and morality are tricks that the governing class employ to ensure that the governed comply with what is in the former’s economic interests. Her experiences and observations emerge in her two dialogues with her daughter, Vivie, at the end of the second and fourth acts.

In the first dialogue, Kitty Warren tells Vivie of her poverty-ridden childhood and explains why she became a prostitute. Initially, she discloses the results of her two half-sisters dutifully complying with what society expected them to do. One got a job in a factory that manufactured white lead, which can paralyze one’s hands and cause death from lead poisoning; in her case, it did the latter. The other was characterized to Kitty and her sister Liz as a model woman because she married a laborer in the Royal Victualling Yard at Deptford, where sheep and cattle were slaughtered, and where food was processed and stored; there, she maintained her family, including three children, in one room on eighteen shillings a week, until her husband became a drunkard. “That was worth being respectable for, wasnt it?” Mrs. Warren asks derisively. She and Liz went to a church school until Liz ran away. The clergyman repeatedly warned Kitty against following the example of Liz, who he predicted would wind up jumping off Waterloo Bridge, the inevitable end of a prostitute. “Poor fool: that was all he knew about it!” Kitty disdainfully exclaims, adding that she was more afraid of the white lead factory than of drowning. The cleric secured her a position as a scullery maid in a temperance restaurant. Afterwards, she became a waitress and later a barmaid at Waterloo Station, serving drinks and washing glasses for fourteen hours a day, for which she received four shillings a week and her board.

One night, Liz happened to come to the bar—elegantly clad, with a fur cloak, and plenty of money. When Liz saw that her sister was attractive, she berated Kitty as a fool for working behind a bar, wearing away her health and good looks for the profit of others. Dismissing the clergyman’s injunctions, Kitty also became a prostitute and joined Liz as co-owner of a brothel in Brussels, which she contends was a better place for a woman than the factory in which one of her half-sisters was poisoned:
None of our girls were ever treated as I was in the scullery of that temperance place, or at the Waterloo bar, or at home. Would you have had me stay in them and become a worn out drudge before I was forty?... Do you think we were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shopgirls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we could trade in them ourselves and get all the profits instead of starvation wages? Not likely.

She deems herself justified not only from a business point of view but also from “any other point of view,” including that of morality or duty. “What is any respectable girl brought up to do but to catch some rich man’s fancy and get the benefit of his money by marrying him?—as if a marriage ceremony could make any difference in the right or wrong of the thing! Oh! the hypocrisy of the world makes me sick!”

What Mrs. Warren chose was superior to any other employment prospects open to a poor woman. “It cant be right, Vivie, that there shouln’t be better opportunities for women,” she maintains; in fact, “it’s wrong. But it’s so, right or wrong; and a girl must make the best of it.” For a lady, it would not be worthwhile: “If you took to it you’d be a fool; but I should have been a fool if I’d taken to anything else.” If she had followed the clergyman’s advice on morality and duty, as Mrs. Alving does in *Ghosts*, her life would have consisted of “Scrubbing floors for one and sixpence a day and nothing to look forward to but the workhouse infirmary.” Although Mrs. Warren does not use the word duty, she implies it by invoking morality, and right and wrong.

In her second dialogue with Vivie, she admits she is still in business as the owner of a string of brothels. She is wealthier than Vivie can possibly imagine, she discloses, which for Vivie means a life of luxury rather than of drudgery for paltry rewards. She then delivers her most compelling argument, which is that convictions of right and wrong, of morality and immorality, are tricks of the governing class to keep the poor disempowered: “you dont understand: you’ve been taught wrong on purpose: you don’t know what the world is really like.” Ideas of “right and proper” are “only a pretence, to keep the cowardly slavish common run of people quiet.” The “managing people”—that is, the governing class—know what she says is true. Vivie does not understand this because “your head is full of ignorant ideas about me. What do the people that taught you know about life or about people like me?” They are “fools! Would they ever have done anything for you if I hadn’t paid them?” She had Vivie raised to be respectable, which Vivie could not continue to be without her mother’s money and influence.

When Vivie in spite of her mother’s arguments rejects her, Mrs. Warren, falling back on the conventional morality she had refuted, uses the word duty for the first time: “You’ve no right to turn on me now and refuse to do your duty as a daughter!” By now, Vivie is proof against this: “My duty as
a daughter! I thought we should come to that presently.” No slave of duty, Vivie rejects all filial obligations her mother demands. However, Mrs. Warren is strong-willed, not spineless: “Oh, I know the sort you are: no mercy for yourself or anyone else. I know. My experience has done that for me anyhow: I can tell the pious, canting, hard, selfish woman when I meet her. Well, keep yourself to yourself: I don’t want you.” If Vivie were a baby again, she would raise her “to be a real daughter to me, and not what you are now, with your pride and your prejudices....” She laments “the injustice of it!”

I always wanted to be a good woman. I tried honest work; and I was slave-driven until I cursed the day I ever heard of honest work. I was a good mother; and because I made my daughter a good woman she turns me out as if I was a leper. Oh, if I only had my life to live over again! I’d talk to that lying clergyman in the school. From this time forth, so help me Heaven in my last hour, I’ll do wrong and nothing but wrong. And I’ll prosper on it.

“Sulkily” admitting that Vivie would be a fool not to reject her, she exclaims: “Lord help the world if everybody took to doing the right thing!”18 She leaves her daughter, refusing even to shake her hand.

Although Mrs. Warren, in conducting her own life, was not a slave of duty, she had her daughter raised according to a moral code that is a trick of the governing class and, too late to have a practical effect, she uses the term duty to try to win her daughter’s devotion. When Mrs. Warren, cast off by Vivie, in turn rejects her daughter, her rejection is also too late to have a practical effect.

**Arms and the Man**

In the sense we have used the term so far, duty to society is not integral to *Arms and the Man*. However, as three of this comedy’s four male characters are soldiers, and as war and military behavior are among the themes of the play, *Arms and the Man* deals with duty in the army. After Raina, “disdainfully” and “with cutting emphasis,” reprimands Bluntschli—who points out that if any of her countrymen recognizes his uniform he will be killed—“Some soldiers ... are afraid to die,” he responds, “with grim goodhumor,” that in reality all of them are afraid to die, adding: “It is our duty to live as long as we can.”19 Instantly, the pragmatic realist deflates the romantic view of military duty.

In addition, the play reflects the view that duty requires, among other things, unquestioning obedience by soldiers to their superior officers, who bully them when they consider such mistreatment to be useful. Duty is therefore a trick of the military hierarchy, whose officers govern soldiers of the lower classes who are not officers. When Bluntschli, whom Sergius, an amateur, therefore unskilled officer, calls “every inch a soldier,” gives him
papers with orders, each marked with the time that soldiers should deliver them, Bluntschli, albeit with some self-conscious hyperbole, tells him and Petkoff to immediately see the men that are to carry out these orders and “Tell them that if they stop to drink or tell stories—if they’re five minutes late, they’ll have the skin taken off their backs.” Sergius, “stiffening indignantly” at treating men under his command in this manner, declares that he will convey the message, but “if one of them is man enough to spit in my face for insulting him, I’ll buy his discharge and give him a pension.” More accustomed to the conventional military method of giving orders to troops, Bluntschli “confidentially” suggests to Petkoff: “Just see that he talks to them, properly, major, will you?”

Later, Louka asks Sergius if he is really brave. After seriously considering the question, he concludes that in battle he proved to be brave. She asks if the men whose fathers are poor were less brave than men like him, whose father is rich. “Not a bit,” he replies “with bitter levity.” All of them “slashed and cursed and yelled like heroes,” actions that he dismisses, since “the courage to rage and kill is cheap.” He has a dog with similar courage, but the dog nevertheless lets the groom thrash him, which is typical of a soldier. Slaves of duty, these “poor men can cut throats; but they are afraid of their officers; they put up with insults and blows; they stand by and see one another punished like children: aye, and help to do it when they are ordered.” As Shaw said in his own person in “A Dramatic Realist to His Critics,” armies are able to function not by the valor of enlisted men “but by the lack of it; not by physical courage … but by civic impotence and moral cowardice. I am afraid of a soldier, not because he is a brave man, but because he is so utterly unmanned by discipline that he will kill me if he is told, even when he knows that the order is given because I am trying to overthrow the oppression which he fears and hates.”

To Sergius, “the man who will defy to the death any power on earth or in heaven that sets itself up against his own will and conscience: he alone is the brave man.” When the decisive moment comes, he is such a man. Sergius uncustomarily apologizes to the servant Louka but characteristically refuses to withdraw his promise to marry her if he touched her again, which he does, since—true to his self-defined code of honor—he never withdraws. Far from being a slave of duty, Sergius is a man of honor. In the former instance he apologizes, because doing so conforms to his personal view of right and wrong; but in the latter he rejects conformity to the duty of his social class to marry one of its own, because this convention demands what is against his conscience. As Alfred Turco states, similarly, Sergius “can rise to sense just as Bluntschli can fall into nonsense.”
As for tricks of members of the governing class, Nicola explains to Louka not so much the cunning stratagems of people in the upper classes as their power over the likes of her and him when lower-class people try to rise from their poverty or act in a way that is against the interests or reputations of their employers. Instead of revealing a secret she knows about Raina, he advises, Louka should keep it to herself and make their mistress, Catherine, believe that no matter what she knows, the mistress can depend on her to not to let it out and to serve the family devotedly. If Catherine suspects that Louka is defying her, she would fire the servant and if Louka were to tell secrets about any member of the family, Catherine would discharge her for lying; and not only would no one else give her a job, but Catherine would also ensure that Louka’s father would not stay on his small farm much longer. Later in the play Shaw dramatizes Nicola’s advice. Because Nicola lies about Petkoff’s coat being in the closet, Catherine praises him for being a good servant and Bluntschli gives him a gratuity for backing up Catherine’s and Raina’s lies about him.

**You Never Can Tell**

Whereas Torvald Helmer’s wife leaves him at the conclusion of *A Doll House*, Fergus Crampton’s wife—who like Helmer’s revolts against slavery to duty—does so eighteen years before *You Never Can Tell* begins. Whereas Helmer’s wife leaves her three children with her husband, Crampton’s wife takes her two or three year old daughter, and the male and female twins with whom she is pregnant, with her. Whereas we do not know what Nora Helmer does after the final curtain of *A Doll House*, we know what Crampton’s wife does: she adopts the name Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon (evidently not her maiden name, or Crampton would recognize it when he later hears it), goes to Madeira, Portugal, and earns the money to raise her children by writing a successful series of books on how people should behave and what they should do in the imminent new century before them, the titles including *Twentieth Century Parents*, *Twentieth Century Conduct*, *Twentieth Century Creeds*, and even *Twentieth Century Cooking*.

As Shaw describes her, Mrs. Clandon is a veteran of what used to be the forefront of the women’s rights movement, she dresses in a businesslike manner that precludes sexual attractiveness, she feels more strongly about social issues than about individuals, and she is sympathetic and humane in her deportment. As he dramatizes her single-parent family, she has raised her children in accordance with what she imagines will be twentieth-century principles. Clearly, slavery to duty, as the nineteenth century conceived it, is not part of the equation. According to her, there are two sorts of family life. The type with which her seventeen-year old twins, Philip and Dol-
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ly (their older sister, Gloria, is twenty), are familiar has at its basis mutual respect, and the right of men and women to privacy and independence. The other sort (that of Crampton, whose name she does not mention, and of the century in which they live is implicit), from which she liberated her children, has at its core domination of husbands over wives and of parents over children in every area of life; privacy is excluded; and duty, as well as obedience, morality, and religion, are tyrannical. However, as her twins remind her, her twentieth-century principles (they do not use the term duties) include her own obligations, such as the requirement to answer all her children’s questions truthfully.

The children’s father, the fifty-seven year old Crampton, follows the sternest and most dogmatic moral doctrines of the nineteenth century. When he was a child, he learned manners by the lash, a principle he extols, and he is, as Valentine calls him, “hard as nails.” When he goes to lunch with his children in the second act, at which time he learns they are his children, Philip asks that he be allowed to discharge his “first duty as host”—not as son—by ordering wine for Crampton. Although Crampton has not seen his older daughter since she was a child and has not previously seen the twins at all, his parental feelings are shattered and his heart is torn by their treating him politely and, in the case of the twins, cheerfully as a guest rather than as a father. “Do you know what is due to me as your father?” he asks Gloria, and he lists “duty, affection, respect, obedience” as his due. She thereupon argues, to his dismay, that her duty is only to what she considers right and noble, and that not only is affection beyond her control, she is unsure what the word means.

Although Crampton initially demands what he considers his parental rights, he becomes grateful, in the final act, when his older daughter offers to shake hands with him. At first pleased when Gloria calls herself her father’s not her mother’s daughter, he becomes angry when she characterizes this as a comedown, then capitulates, admitting that he sometimes becomes irritable and agrees not to say a word against her mother. He also submits to Dolly’s demand that he agree that her costume is pretty. Philip charms him by calling him dad, after which Philip, in an aside, asks his mother and Gloria whether they feel the pathos of the moment. Crampton even agrees to Gloria’s insistence that he give the impecunious Valentine, whom she decides to marry, a settlement. At the play’s end, he gleefully chuckles as he follows his children into the garden, where a dance is in progress and where joy will presumably be unconfined.

You Never Can Tell represents the triumph of Mrs. Clandon’s way of parenting over Crampton’s—liberation from slavery to duty and the replace-
ment of societal demands by freely given affection. The conflict between Crampton and his children, particularly Gloria, derives from the clash between a culture of parental control by the father, which the play undermines, and those of freedom from the duties demanded by such control, which the father ultimately endorses.