Bernard Shaw

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IN SHAW’S next collection of plays, *Three Plays for Puritans*—consisting of *The Devil’s Disciple* (1896), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* (1899)—as well as his play about a prizefighter, which follows them, he continues to mine the topics of slavery to duty and tricks of the governing class, but with a difference no less crucial than that between the pleasant and unpleasant plays. The title of the new group of plays is only partly ironic. They are for puritans chiefly, as Shaw explains in his preface, because their subject is not romantic love, which was the staple of plays in the then-current London theatre. Only in the first of his plays are most of the characters actually puritans, and only in the first and third do the titles suggest puritanism. In refusing to make the title characters of the second play romantic lovers, as the eponymous characters of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* are, Shaw perhaps mock-puritanically thumbs his nose at what London theatergoers might expect in a play about Caesar and Cleopatra. He acts similarly when he has the leading man, who is the title character of the first play, deny he is in love with its leading lady and when he does not make the hero and heroine of the third romantic lovers. By contrast, the leading man and leading lady of his play about prizefighting, *The Admirable Bashville* (1901), which is not a play for or about puritans, are in love with each other.

Neither are the plays for puritans in the sense that they are religious, for Shaw considered conventional nineteenth-century English religious drama to be merely “pseudo-religious,” as their heroes and heroines do good “on strictly commercial grounds, reluctantly exercising a little virtue on earth in consideration of receiving in return an exorbitant payment in heaven....”¹ Only the first play may be said to deal with religion, and the most genuinely religious person in it is, ironically, the title character, who does good for its own sake, not only expecting no reward, but actually anticipating being hanged for his action. In fact, as he stands before the gallows, he reminds a chaplain, who has been brought to prepare him to meet his god, of the Biblical commandment against killing. The chaplain is embarrassed and the general who is ultimately responsible for his fate urbanely admits that the chaplain’s professional opinions seem sufficiently incongruous for the occasion that the cleric might do well to delay them until such time as they will not inconvenience the person to whom they are directed.
**The Devil’s Disciple**

Because *The Devil’s Disciple* is set in New Hampshire in 1777, during the American Revolution, one might expect that it would dramatize the hypocrisies of duty in religious and military contexts. Both expectations are barely met. The play’s few references to duty have the conventional meaning of responsibility or obligation, and they do not suggest the hypocrisy that is Napoleon’s connotation of the term. For example, the first reference to duty is Mrs. Dudgeon’s loveless and pitiless complaint, when her younger son informs her that her husband has just died, that “instead of staying at home where his duty was, with his own family,” he went to his brother, a rebel whom the British hanged, and died, “leaving everything on my shoulders.” She calls his conduct “downright sinful.”

Although her conception of duty is bound to her self-interest, it is, all the same, a conventional view of duty. Reverend Anderson explains that even if he were in danger, as Dick Dudgeon says he is, he has pastoral duties he should not forsake. After Anderson learns that the British have arrested Dick but before he finds out that they have done so thinking Dick was he, his wife Judith tries to prevent him from going to the jail to see Dick. “My dear, your duty,” he says, about to remind her that as his wife she is obligated to support his ministerial responsibilities. Her interruption shocks him: “(fiercely) What do I care about my duty?” She explains that she is doing her real duty, which is “to save you, to leave him to his fate” and then, under her husband’s prodding, she reveals the truth about what Dick did.

Neither character uses the term to advance his or her self-interest. Conducting Dick’s court martial, Major Swindon, irritated by General Burgoyne’s urbane sarcasm, explains: “I am only trying to do my duty under excessively trying circumstances.” Burgoyne tells Dick that “if we should have the misfortune to hang you, we shall do so as a mere matter of political necessity and military duty.…”. When Burgoyne prepares to write a safe-conduct pass for an officer of the New Hampshire militia to see him, Swindon objects, again on the basis of military obligation: “It is my duty to tell you, sir, that I do not consider the threats of a mob of rebellious tradesmen a sufficient reason for our giving way,” which is standard usage of the term. *The Devil’s Disciple* demonstrates that Shaw does not always use the term duty ironically, as he has Undershaft and Napoleon use the word.

**Caesar and Cleopatra**

In the 1912 prologue to *Caesar and Cleopatra*, the Egyptian god Ra addresses English audiences on similarities between Rome and Britain, informing them that the Romans of old—actually, the governing class of ancient
Rome—presumed to tell the gods that the path “to riches and greatness is through robbery of the poor and slaughter of the weak.” Therefore, these Romans, like contemporary Englishmen, “robbed their own poor until they became great masters of that art and knew by what laws it could be made to appear seemly and honest. And when they had squeezed their own poor dry, they robbed the poor of other lands, and added those lands to Rome until there came a new Rome, rich and huge.”

The phrases about the values of the Romans echo Napoleon’s about the English. Although Ra adds that “men twenty centuries ago were already just such as you” (ignorant twentieth-century spectators), “no wiser and no sillier,” he does not use the term duty to characterize or to justify the actions of the Romans.

In the play itself, some characters use this word derisively. Caesar mocks the employment of such principles as “a wise severity, a necessary protection to the commonwealth, a duty of statesmanship” as specious excuses to avenge oneself on one’s enemies, calling them “follies and fictions ten times bloodier than honest vengeance!” He does not hypocritically call collecting taxes the duty of a conqueror of the world but rather, realistically and as Undershaft might call it, the business of a conqueror of the world. With a Wildean aphorism that is appropriate to an aesthete whose credo is art for art’s sake, Apollodorus states, after a Roman soldier uses the word duty, that “when a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares that it is his duty.”

An important character who sincerely believes in what Caesar derides as follies and fictions, whose viewpoint is consequential in terms of our theme, is Caesar’s secretary, appropriately named Britannus, whom Caesar describes as “an islander from the western end of the world, a day’s voyage from Gaul.” When Caesar informs the Egyptians that he needs money, Britannus corrects him in what Napoleon would call a typically English manner: “My master would say that there is a lawful debt due to Rome by Egypt and that it is Caesar’s duty to his country to require immediate payment.” After Caesar lets his enemy Lucius Septimius go free, Britannus reprimands him: “Your duty to Rome demands that her enemies should be prevented from doing further mischief.” Shaw adds a telling stage direction: “Caesar, whose delight in the moral eye-to-business of his British secretary is inexhaustible, smiles indulgently.” Later, Caesar explains his commonsensical reason to Rufio: “every Egyptian we imprison means imprisoning two Roman soldiers to guard him.”

To Britannus, even attire is a matter of morality. Trying to improve his master’s character by having him dress like his own countrymen, he reproaches Caesar: “What Briton wears clothes of many colors as you do, instead of
plain blue, as all solid, well esteemed men should? These are moral ques-
tions with us.”14 When Caesar prepares to jump into the water and swim to
shore, Britannus admonishes him not to let himself be seen in the fashion-
able section of Alexandria until he has changed his clothes.

Although Caesar and Cleopatra is set in the time of its principal characters,
people who are our contemporaries, as Ra observes, are just like people who
are theirs. One way Shaw dramatizes this observation is to bring to Egypt an
Englishman who treats such concerns as taxes, military imprisonment, and
clothing as convictions of duty and morality. As Stanley Weintraub cleverly
says, after quoting Britannus, the play takes place in the first century B.C.E.
“in a mid-Victorian Egypt.”15

Captain Brassbound’s Conversion

When the title character of Captain Brassbound’s Conversion wants to sell
his uncle, Sir Howard Hallam, as a slave to Sheikh Sidi el Assif, he does not
disguise his motive: vengeance against Hallam for having failed to prevent
the injustice done to Brassbound’s deceased mother, who was Hallam’s sis-
ter-in-law. Lady Cicely gets Brassbound to admit that when his mother was
alive he was not always good to her and she points out that Hallam claims
that at the time the law dealt unfairly with her he was not in a position to
help, but she does not initially make Brassbound waver. He invokes neglect
of duty to justify his belief that Hallam was perfidious. Hallam failed to do
“his duty as a brother!” “Are you going to do your duty as a nephew!” she
retorts, anticipating Undershaft’s retort to Lady Britomart. Refusing to be
taken in by her verbal quibble, Brassbound insists: “I am going to do my
duty as a son; and you know it.”16 Like his uncle, a retired judge, Brass-
bound uses a conviction of duty and justice to rationalize revenge; and Cic-
cely points out that by doing the equivalent of dressing himself in ermine and
calling what he does justice, he is behaving just as his uncle used to do. Final-
ly, she converts Brassbound—but not Hallam—to the principle of Shaw’s
Caesar, abjuring vengeance. With this renunciation, Brassbound feels that
his life has lost its meaning and is empty. “You might as well talk like the
missionary and tell me to do my duty,” he tells her. “Oh no thank you,” she
responds. “I’ve had quite enough of your duty and [Hallam’s] duty. Where
would you both be now if I’d let you do it?”17 As we know, Hallam would
probably have been killed by the Arabs and Brassbound would have been
on trial before a navy tribunal.

The Admirable Bashville

In The Admirable Bashville, duty plays a small but consequential role.
While the mind of the prizefighter Cashel Byron is on Lydia, with whom he
has just fallen in love at first sight, his trainer, Mellish, warns him that unless he concentrates on his coming fight, he will lose the bout:

Have you forgot your duty to your backers?
Oh, what a sacred thing your duty is!
What makes a man but duty? Where were we
Without our duty?

The duty Mellish stresses is not to the sport or Cashel’s prominent position in it but to those who invested capital for Cashel’s labor. Having elevated the notion of Cashel’s duty to his backers to what is hallowed, Mellish further expands it to a national tradition and starts to quote Admiral Horatio Nelson, who in 1805, when the Battle of Trafalgar, the decisive naval battle of the Napoleonic War, was about to begin, ordered his signal flag to send the message: “England expects that every man will do his duty.” Derisively, Cashel interrupts Mellish after he says “every man”: “Shall twaddle / About his duty.” Disdainfully, Cashel adds, “when thou playst the moralist, by Heaven, / My soul flies to my fist, my fist to thee…. Since a reference to fighting reminds Cashel of his mother, Mellish seizes upon the prizefighter’s allusion to urge that this “sainted woman” would command him to obey his trainer. The admonition is wasted on Cashel, who professes: “Two things I hate, my duty and my mother.”

At a stroke, Shaw satirizes two sacred cows.

Shaw goes no further in developing the theme of duty in *The Admirable Bashville*, but he does develop the subject of the governing class. Lydia would have him abandon his profession and become a gentleman. “A gentleman!” he exclaims, insulted. To become one would require him to “stoop /To be the thing that bets on me!” It would turn him into a ringside creature who “Gambles with basest wretches for my blood, / And pays with money that he never earned!” Sarcastically, resonating Napoleon’s speech about the English, he derides the governing class:

I am too squeamish for your dainty world,
That cowers behind the gallows and the lash,
The world that robs the poor, and with their spoil
Does what its tradesmen tell it.

Possibly, the reason for Shaw’s failure to develop the theme of duty is that he wrote the play, an adaptation of his novel *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (1882), in a hurry—one week, he claims in his preface.