Bernard Shaw

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Published by ELT Press

Dukore, Bernard F.
Bernard Shaw: Slaves of Duty and Tricks of the Governing Class.
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Plays of the War Years

IT WOULD BE as inaccurate to call the ironically titled *Arms and the Man* an anti-war play as it would be to call it an anti-love play. As Michael Holroyd reminds us, Shaw changed its subtitle from *A Romantic Comedy* to *An Anti-Romantic Comedy*.¹ What the play is anti are romantic or idealistic views about love and war. To Shaw, as G. K. Chesterton says of the views expressed in this play, “romantic war is only butchery” and Shaw objects not to war but to the idealization and attractiveness people make of war. “‘War if you must,’” Shaw might say, says G. K. Chesterton, “‘but, for God’s sake, not war songs.’”² Similarly, during World War I, which began twenty years after the composition and first production of *Arms and the Man*, Shaw’s plays and the statements he made in his own person were not anti-war. Nevertheless, he later maintained that “the human costs of the Great War had depressed him beyond endurance....”³

During the war, the conception of duty assumed a new dimension and greater urgency than before. In *O’Flaherty, V.C.* (1915), and *Augustus Does His Bit* (1916), Shaw dramatizes different aspects of slavery to wartime duties. J. L. Wisenthal and Daniel O’Leary observe in their introduction to a collection of Shaw’s writings about World War I that while it raged his “attacks [were] against civilians rather than soldiers” and “he respected the relative efficiency of England’s military forces.”⁴ As he wrote in 1915, “The men of this country are being sacrificed to the blunders of boobies, the cupidities of capitalists, the lusts and lies and rancors of bloodthirsts that love war....”⁵ Wisenthal and O’Leary call attention to Shaw’s preface to *Heartbreak House*, in which he maintains that the “imbecility” of civilians “was deafening the heavens with its clamor....”⁶ He satirizes such imbecility in *Augustus Does His Bit*, as he does “the class prejudices of the bureaucrat.”⁷

During the war years, Shaw also recognized that soldiers had the opportunity to recognize class warfare for what it was, and in 1915, two years before the Russian Revolution, he predicted that “the war will leave the class struggle far more acute, more conscious, and more deeply stirred” than it had been before the war.⁸ That same year, he dramatized this consciousness in *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, which also derides “the patriotic illusions of the home front.”⁹ He saw, too, and dramatized his perception in *Heartbreak House*, how so-called “practical business men,” who had become wealthy “by plac-
ing their personal interests before those of the country,” were called upon to enter the government and, habituated to work for the financial interests of themselves and those on whom they relied for capital investment, demonstrated “not only that they were useless for public work, but that in a well-ordered nation they would never have been allowed to control private enterprise.”

**O’Flaherty, V.C.**

Before a word is spoken, indeed before a character enters the stage, *O’Flaherty, V.C.* starts on a note—actually, several musical notes—that project patriotism and duty. From a distance, a band plays the last four bars of “God Save the King,” then “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” as it marches away, until the music is no longer heard. Loyalty to the crown and the duty to serve in the armed forces during World War I set the tone of the play, which exposes wartime realities in Ireland and by extrapolation in England, that belie the tricks of the governing class aimed at making people idealize the patriotic glories of war.

The first two characters to enter are a commoner who as the title indicates has won the Victoria Cross, a tired Private Dennis O’Flaherty—based on Lance Corporal Michael John O’Leary, who received this prestigious decoration in February 1915, five months before Shaw began to write the play—and an English landowner, the enthusiastic, elderly baronet, General Sir Pearce Madigan. O’Flaherty would rather return to the comparative tranquility of the trenches than continue to try to recruit soldiers, which he considers the hardest work he has ever done. What with spending entire days standing up, shaking hands, making speeches “and—what’s worse—the listening to them,” crying out for crowds to give cheers for king and country, saluting the flag until he is stiff, listening to bands perform the two songs that open the play, and trying to make his eyes look as moist as if he were an illustration in a book, “I’m that bet that I hardly get a wink of sleep.” He swears that he never heard “Tipperary” until he returned from the battlefield, and that by now he is thoroughly sick of the melody.

As he has come to understand, a trick of the governing class is to make the people esteem king and country so highly that they will volunteer to fight and perhaps die for them. Although Sir Pearce understands how one can get fed up with such things, he points out what he considers a noble aspect of them: “After all, he is our king; and it’s our own country, isn’t it?” “Well, sir,” says O’Flaherty candidly, “to you that have an estate in it, it would feel like your country. But the divil a perch of it ever I owned.” As for the king, his mother would have whipped him if he ever suggested he had a king other than Charles Stewart Parnell, the late founder of the Irish Par-
Parliamentary Party and leading advocate, when he was a Member of Parliament, of Home Rule for Ireland. The Irish people, Shaw indicates through O’Flaherty’s frank exposition of his mother’s true feelings about Ireland and England, know that talk of king and country is cant. Her obsequious behavior toward Sir Pearce masks her true beliefs. When O’Flaherty was a boy, she taught him “to pray night and morning to St Patrick to clear the English out of Ireland the same as he cleared the snakes.” As for good Englishmen or famous Englishmen, she claims the former were good only because the Irish influenced them to do good deeds; and as for the latter, she is convinced that Shakespeare was born in Cork. He dreads the time, which he knows is inevitable, when his mother learns he has been fighting the Germans, not the English. So ferocious are her political views, he tells Sir Pearce, that if she had been in charge of the German army the Kaiser would now be dining in Buckingham Palace.

Furthermore, O’Flaherty recognizes that clergymen are, although he does not use the phrase, lackeys of the governing class. When his local priest told him it was his duty as a Christian and a Catholic to love his enemies, he replied that as a soldier it was his duty to kill them. The priest had no problem with this viewpoint: “you can kill them and do them a good turn afterwards to shew your love for them’ he says; ‘and it’s your duty to have a mass said for the souls of the hundreds of Germans you say you killed’ says he; ‘for many and many of them were Bavarians and good Catholics’.”

O’Flaherty admits he has no idea what the war he has been fighting is about. Sir Pearce is aghast that this soldier, who wears the Victoria Cross, Britain’s highest military decoration for bravery or valor, and has killed many Germans, can say he does not know why he did so. “I tell you no such thing,” O’Flaherty tells Sir Pearce. “I know quite well why I kilt them. I kilt them because I was afeard that, if I didnt, theyd kill me.” Although Sir Pearce, who has been in combat, understands this sentiment, he is baffled that O’Flaherty has no comprehension of the issues at stake in the war or even of patriotism. Patriotism, explains O’Flaherty, has a different meaning to each of them:

It means England and England’s king to you. To me and the like of me, it means talking about the English just the way the English papers talk about the Boshes. And what good has it ever done here in Ireland? It’s kept me ignorant because it filled up my mother’s mind, and she thought it ought to fill up mine too. It’s kept Ireland poor, because instead of trying to better ourselves we thought we was the fine fellows of patriots when we were speaking evil of Englishmen that was as poor as ourselves and maybe as good as ourselves. The Boshes I kilt was more knowledgable men than me: and what better am I now that Ive kilt them? What better is anybody?
Slaves of Duty and Tricks of the Governing Class

O’Flaherty’s war experiences have taught him more about war than his officers, his government, his church, and their propaganda machines would have him learn. “Why should I read the papers to be humbugged and lied to by them that had the cunning to stay at home and send me to fight for them? Don’t talk to me or to any soldier of the war being right. No war is right,” and no amount of holy water could ever make it right.\(^{15}\)

In addition to dramatizing tricks of the governing class, \textit{O’Flaherty, VC.} also dramatizes tricks of the governed classes, which are based on upper-class domination and the resultant animosities of those below them. However, Shaw portrays neither in simplistic terms. O’Flaherty’s mother, who was unable to bring up her own daughter on mother’s milk because she nursed Sir Pearce’s son instead of her own child, genuinely loves Sir Pearce’s children. O’Flaherty admits that she sold Sir Pearce his own geese, which Sir Pearce thought a fox had eaten, and that he himself stole those geese. Because of the conflicting needs of different social classes, neither he nor his mother considered these to be crimes. As they had to sell their own geese to pay rent to Sir Pearce to satisfy his requirements, it was only fair, in their view, to sell Sir Pearce his geese to satisfy their requirements. Shaw does not editorialize on the use of the poor to breast-feed the children of the rich instead of their own; he simply states the case. Neither does he emphasize the economic disparity between rental money paid to the landlord and the price of a few geese, which are not equivalent to each other; instead, he treats the matter comically and allows the audience to ponder how trivial the theft and selling of geese are, compared to the exploitation of the O’Flaherty family.

\textbf{Augustus Does His Bit}

As in \textit{O’Flaherty, VC.}, an encounter between a member of the governing class and one of the governed classes—which does not affect the main plot of the play, involving a trick played by a female member of the former class on the title character, who is of the same class—is at the heart of \textit{Augustus Does His Bit}. Entering the mayor’s parlor in the town hall of Little Piffington at the start of the play is Lord Augustus Highcastle, whom a stage direction identifies as “a distinguished member of the governing class….\(^{16}\)” Lord Augustus meets Horatio Floyd Beamish, the town’s clerk.

Among the laws enacted during wartime was the Defence of the Realm Act (1914), which among other provisions imposed press censorship and made a crime of speaking or writing against recruiting for the armed forces. Under this act and its various amendments—some provisions aimed to prevent anyone from doing anything that might be construed, however loosely, as jeopardizing the success of the British armed forces—the governing
class in this play finds itself, in Hamlet’s phrase, hoist with its own petard. When the clerk quotes the main part of an aphorism, dating to the eleventh century, “Hell, they say, is paved with good intentions,” Augustus, “springing to his feet,” cross-examines him as to whether he intends “to insinuate that His Majesty’s Government has done the paving. Defensively referring to the statute, the clerk swears, “I dont mean to insinuate anything until the Defence of the Realm Act is repealed. It aint safe.” Augustus orders a cup of coffee and two rolls to be ready for him at breakfast the next morning, only to be informed, “You cant have no rolls. The only baker that baked rolls was a Hun; and he’s been interned.” Augustus approves of the incarceration, but when he asks whether there was an Englishman to replace him, Beamish explains, “There was. But he was caught spying; and they took him up to London and shot him.” Augustus, ready with his own medieval aphorism, says of Little Pifflington that “it’s an ill bird that fouls its own nest.” “It wasnt me that let Little Pifflington get foul,” says the clerk self-protectively, “I don’t belong to the governing classes. I only tell you why you cant have no rolls.”

Lord Augustus’s efforts to impose his excessively zealous brand of patriotism on his subordinate demonstrate his perverse values and reveal the inability of him and government officials in general to think clearly. Extremely annoyed, he demands that Beamish finds an intelligent person to carry out his orders. The clerk proposes a street sweeper who used to be a teacher until the school was closed for lack of budget. The aristocrat is aghast that with the lives of Britain’s gallant soldiers and the fate of the British Empire at stake, the townspeople waste money by sweeping the streets. They had to, the Clerk explains, for when they stopped doing so the infant mortality rate rose significantly. “What matters the death rate of Little Pifflington in a moment like this?” the lord asks with a rhetorical flourish. “Think of our gallant soldiers, not of your squalling infants.” “If you want soldiers you must have children,” the commonsensical clerk tries to explain. “You cant buy em in boxes, like toy soldiers.” “Beamish,” Lord Augustus concludes: “the long and short of it is, you are no true patriot.” When he orders the clerk to replace the gas stove with an ordinary grate, Beamish points out that the Minister of Munitions has ordered him to use gas rather than coal because gas saves material. “Which is it to be?” he inquires. Baffled, therefore infuriated, Augustus answers, “(bawling furiously at him) Both! Don’t criticize your orders: obey them.” After this nonsensical—indeed, piffling—demand, Augustus adds a command with an unfortunate allusion to Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade: “Yours not to reason why: yours but to do and die. Thats war.” The reference, which is regrettable because the foray into
the valley of death brings together duty and the slaughter of several hundred soldiers, is nonetheless apt, because death is indeed a consequence of war.

Shaw portrays one result of the tricks of the governing class when it demands sacrifices and unquestioning patriotism by the governed without requiring regulations on capitalists and businessmen. Beamish requests a raise in salary. All the horrified Augustus can do is to remind him once again that the nation is at war and that Britain’s gallant soldiers are in the trenches, fighting and dying for him. “What are they dying for?” asks the clerk, who provides the answer himself. “To keep me alive, aint it? Well, what’s the good of that if I’m dead of hunger by the time they come back?” Augustus responds that in contrast to Beamish, “Everybody else is making sacrifices without a thought of self,” but the clerk corrects him: “Not half, they aint. Wheres the baker’s sacrifice? Wheres the coal merchant’s? Wheres the butcher’s? Charging me double: thats how they sacrifice themselves.” Because he wants to sacrifice himself the same way, he issues an ultimatum. Unless Augustus doubles his salary, he will resign. Contemptuously, Augustus calls him a “miserable pro-German” and threatens that if he says one more word, “I charge you under the [Defence of the Realm] Act with discouraging me.” Beamish “blenches and goes out, cowed.”19 The member of the governing class succeeds, as he inevitably must, for this law had, as Shaw said, “infinitely elastic provisions.…”20

In a few lines, Shaw encapsulates the idiocies of the governing class, which trick the populace. Augustus explains his war injury, a result of what is nowadays called friendly fire: a shot struck him in the head. “Had it penetrated to the brain I might never have sat on another Royal Commission. Fortunately we have strong heads, we Highcastles. Nothing has ever penetrated to our brains.”21 Shortly thereafter, the clerk is conscripted. Once the recruiting officer learned that Augustus was on the job, he concluded that the country would need another million men in the army and “he was going to take the old-age pensioners or anyone he could get.” Now that the clerk is a soldier, Augustus points out, Beamish has no legal redress for Augustus’s seizing him, rushing him out the door, and throwing him downstairs. “Thank heaven, the war has given us the upper hand of these fellows at last,” says Augustus, who maintains that “discipline is absolutely necessary in dealing with the lower middle classes.”22

**Heartbreak House**

Unlike *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, *Heartbreak House* does not dramatize slaves of duty.23 Like *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, it portrays tricks of the governing class, this time from the vantage point of a member of that class, Boss Mangan, whom Hector calls “the bloated capitalist.”24 When Mangan meets a man who
makes £100,000 per year, he claims, “I take off my hat to that man, and stretch out my hand to him and call him brother.” Shotover asks if this means that Mangan also makes a hundred thousand a year. “No. I can’t say that” is the response. “Fifty thousand perhaps.” “His half brother only,” concludes Shotover. Only half notwithstanding, the value of that yearly income today would be over £11 million. Although Mangan, like Undershaft, represents the real governing class, Shaw symbolizes the apparent governing class by surrogates, the wife and brother of Sir Hastings Utterword, who has been governor, in succession, of all the British colonies. Appropriately, Mangan is a dramatic presence on stage, whereas Sir Hastings, who is only a figurehead, is represented by other figures.

In terms reminiscent of Broadbent’s business scheme in *John Bull’s Other Island*, Mangan explains a trick of the governing class, which is his class. The trick is how he deliberately ruined Ellie Dunn’s father (and others) for his own enrichment. The business that Mazzini Dunn wanted to start was a new sort of enterprise. Mangan does not start new businesses, but lets others—“enthusiasts”—do so, using their money and that of their friends, in the course of which they exhaust themselves and their friends in trying to make their businesses succeed. Because these people lack sufficient financial experience, the businesses either collapse within a year or the owners must sell them—“that is, if they are lucky enough to get anything at all.” Very likely, the same happens to the buyers, who invest more money, time, and effort, after which they too have to sell the businesses. This is where “the real business man comes in: where I come in. But I’m cleverer than some: I don’t mind dropping a little money to start the process.” He recognized that Mazzini Dunn had a sound idea and that if given the opportunity he would work extremely hard to make it succeed. He also recognized that Mazzini “was a child in business, and was dead certain to outrun his expenses and be in too great a hurry to wait for his market,” thereby ruining himself. He explained the idea to venture capitalists whom he knew. They and Mazzini, who risked their money on his business, “were no more to me than a heap of squeezed lemons.” As Frederick P. W. McDowell adroitly describes this character, Mangan succeeds in business “because he has no moral inhibition” and “is more unscrupulous” than anyone else involved in a business that interests him. “Through superior cunning and resort to the law of the jungle in business, Mangan has lent Mazzini just enough money to float his enterprises but not enough to remain solvent. Mangan closes in at the kill and buys them up....” As Shaw describes the process, “The company which finally succeeds may be built on the money and work of three or four successive sets of pioneers who have run short of the cash needed for completion of the plant. The experienced men of the city know this,
and lie in wait until the moment has come for the final success.” Although they succeed, “the original shareholders, who had the intelligence to foresee the successful future of the business, and the enterprise to start it, are cleaned out.”

Without knowing these details, Mazzini, confirming Mangan’s assessment, understands that he and people like himself would ruin a business. “I’ve tried; and I know. We should spend too much on everything. We should improve the quality of the goods and make them too dear. We should be sentimental about the hard cases among the workpeople. But Mangan keeps us in order. He is down on us about every extra halfpenny. We could never do without him. You see, he will sit up all night thinking of how to save sixpence.” Implicitly, Mangan and capitalists like him do not care about the quality of the goods their firms manufacture and are unsentimental about hardships among their workers. In a sense, all the so-called “captains of industry” are frauds. Although there are some exceptions—a few manufacturers who understand their own industry—“they don’t make as high a rate of profit as Mangan does.”

A member of the governing class, Mangan has also been an important figure in the executive branch of the nominal government of the land. As he confides to other characters, “the Prime Minister of this country asked me to join the Government without even going through the nonsense of an election, as the dictator of a great public department.” “As a Conservative or a Liberal?” Lady Utterword asks him. “No such nonsense,” he responds. “As a practical man of business.” When she concludes that he must have given a large amount of money to the Prime Minister’s party, he disabuses her of this notion. “Not a penny out of my own pocket. The syndicate found the money: they knew how useful I should be to them in the Government.” Notice that his usefulness would be not to the public but to one part of the citizenry, the capitalists. To Lady Utterword’s inquiry as to what his administrative achievements are, he explains that they consist of an ability to prevent people in other departments from acting. Any time that any of them thought he would save the country, thereby preventing Mangan from receiving credit and the chance of a title, “I took good care that if they wouldn’t let me do it they shouldn’t do it themselves either. I may not know anything about my own machinery; but I know how to stick a ramrod into the other fellow’s.” He concludes with a rhetorical question: “If that isn’t a triumph of practical business, what is?”