Bernard Shaw
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IN THE FIRST FEW YEARS of the 1920s, Shaw did not treat the themes of slavery to duty and tricks of the governing class in terms of World War I. Nevertheless, he pointedly has Reverend Haslam in Part II (“The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas”) of his allegory or parable Back to Methuselah (1920) allude to it. Both Lubin, based on H. H. Asquith, who was Prime Minister during the first part of the war, and Franklyn Barnabas, the father of Haslam’s fiancée, had sons who were killed in the war, which they themselves survived, yet neither mentions the subject in their discussion of politics. Haslam could not ignore this fact because he was of military age and were he not a parson he would have been drafted and perhaps killed as well: “To me the awful thing about their political incompetence was that they had to kill their own sons.” His fiancée admits that she “was just as bad as any of them.” To boost patriotism and promote enlistments, “I sold flags in the street in my best clothes.…”¹ In this play, Shaw’s brief handling of the themes that are the subject of this book is allegorical. Although he deals with slavery to duty in Jitta’s Atonement, he does not do so in terms of the recent war, even though—or perhaps because—the play is an adaptation of a work in German, Frau Gittas Sühne, by Siegfried Trebitsch, an Austrian who translated Shaw’s plays into German; and their countries, although not the two men, were belligerents during the war.² Shaw also deals with the themes of this book in Saint Joan (1923), but this play is set in a fifteenth-century war in which the English were defeated.

**Back to Methuselah**

Although Back to Methuselah contains neither the term duty nor the phrase governing class, three of the five plays of this Metabiological Pentateuch, as Shaw subtitles the work, include concepts that suggest both. In Part I (“In the Beginning”), Cain imagines becoming one of those who govern others. “Why not tame men and women to work for us?” he asks Adam. “Why not bring them up from childhood never to know any other lot, so that they may believe that we are gods, and that they are here only to make life glorious for us?” Adam is momentarily tempted, but Eve “contemptuously” berates
Cain’s idea because it would create “unnatural monsters” in order for him and Adam to become “utterly lazy and worthless” and because the “tamed human animals may find work a blasting curse.”

Cain anticipates the Englishman that Shaw’s Napoleon describes in The Man of Destiny (Back to Methuselah also has a character called Napoleon). When, as quoted earlier, this Englishman wants to do anything, he waits until he acquires a passionate assurance that it is his sacred obligation to do it. Accordingly, Cain makes a distinction between the voice that Adam and Eve hear and the voice that whispers to him. “I call yours the Devil. Mine I call the Voice of God.” Clearly, Cain has created a god in his own image, one who justifies his arrogant selfishness and confirms his view that “no man is his brother’s keeper, because his brother can keep himself.” Although Cain does not use the expression, his invocation of God in order to validate his desire to rule is a trick of the governing class, of which he would become a founder. Ironically, Shaw has the unwholesome Cain utter the words of Tennyson’s eponymous Sir Galahad, “My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure.”

After this, we do not have long to wait before the conception of duty arises, although it first comes from Adam, not Cain. Upon Cain’s inchoate admission that whereas he does not know what he wants, other than “to be something higher and nobler than this stupid old digger” who helped Cain’s mother bring him into the world, Adam reacts: “(in sullen rage) I have half a mind to shew you that my spade can split your undutiful head open, in spite of your spear.” “Undutiful! Ha! ha!” exclaims Cain, emphasizing Adam’s word through repetition. To Adam, duty is what one must do, by which he means to obey one’s father. However, Cain takes it to mean that people should obey human beings like himself (the governing class), whom they ought to consider gods.

In Part IV (“Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman”), which takes place in the year 3000 C.E., the British Prime Minister has come from Baghdad, now the capital of what has become the British Commonwealth, to Galway, to seek the advice of an oracle as to what his government’s course of action should be. Zoo, a longliver (one whose life span is three centuries, which is the norm in the British Isles), tells the Elderly Gentleman, a shortliver (whose life span, which is usual elsewhere in the Commonwealth, is the same as ours today), one of the tricks of the class that governs those who lack the longevity of the former. Although the Prime Minister, Zoo explains, pretends he is visiting Galway in order to receive guidance from a longliving oracle, the longlivers know that the purpose of his trip is that when he returns he will be able to speak with the authority of one who has personal-
ly conversed with an indescribable personage: “He will pretend that all the measures he wishes to take for his own purposes have been enjoined on him by the oracle.”

This is precisely what happens. The Prime Minister—who is “a typical politician,” that is, a man who “looks like an imperfectly reformed criminal disguised by a good tailor”—arrives to see the oracle. He blathers, using the clichés of professional politicians, before getting to the question he considers momentous, which is whether his party should dissolve parliament and hold an election soon or whether it should wait until the following spring. “Go home, poor fool,” replies the oracle—precisely the same response, a longliver points out, received by the Prime Minister’s predecessor, who consulted the oracle fifteen years earlier. The Prime Minister recognizes that the longliver is right and that his predecessor, upon returning home, invented an oracular-sounding response that linked the future prosperity of the Commonwealth with the success of his political party. He decides “to tell the exact truth,” which means not the exact words the oracle said to him, but that “the oracle repeated to me, word for word,” what it said to his predecessor. In this case, the trick of the governing class is to invent a pretext designed to keep a political party in power.

Among the characters in Part V (“As Far as Thought Can Reach”), which takes place in the year 31,920 (exactly, as Shaw has a character in the play point out, thirty thousand years after he completed the Pentateuch), a sculptor—appropriately named Pygmalion—has created artificial living human beings, a man and a woman who to the people of a year that is as far as the thought of 1920 could reach are prehistoric, which is to say that they have the same physical digestive and reproductive systems, as well as the same mental framework, of people of 1920. More than these: having been taught to talk and read, Ozymandias (who quotes Shelley’s poem for which he is named, calling himself “king of kings” and enjoining his listeners, “Look on my works, ye mighty; and despair”) and Cleopatra-Semiramis (named for the Egyptian queen and the legendary Assyrian queen) brag and lie, are greedy and lustful, and hate or love without considering either facts or their own limitations. Furthermore, they hold the same conventional ethical views and are as unaccustomed to thought as most non-regal Westerners who were contemporary to Shaw and, mutatis mutandis, to us. Even though the man cannot form an opinion until he has read the day’s newspaper (today he would have watched television instead), both “think that they think,” as the He-Ancient later puts the matter. Despite their incapacities, they claim kingship and queenship, demanding that it is the duty, although they do not use the word, of those who attend them to worship
them. The relationship that they require is one between master-mistress and slaves. They do not recognize that, as the He-Ancient observes, paraphrasing Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Mind*, “when the master has come to do everything through the slave, the slave becomes his master, because his master cannot live without him.” Since Pygmalion’s animated twentieth-century like people are unable to cope in a world of ancients who live longer than the three century longlivers of “Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman,” they willingly die.

**Jitta’s Atonement**

Whereas Alfred Doolittle complains of having been transformed from a rebel against middle-class morality, which he is at the start of *Pygmalion*, to a victim of it, which he becomes at the end of the play, Bruno Haldenstedt, a married professor, and his lover Jitta Lenkheim, who is married to another professor, have at the beginning of *Jitta’s Atonement* long been its victims—slaves of the duties exacted by middle-class morality. Paradoxically, Jitta’s husband, Alfred, who shares a first name with Doolittle, is not at all bothered by middle-class morality. Shaw may deliberately aim to have this Alfred resonate Doolittle, since in Trebitsch’s original play the character’s first name is Alfons; but Shaw does not anglicize Jitta’s Doolittle-like question to her lover about whether he is succumbing to middle-class morality, perhaps because to do so would make a link with *Pygmalion* too obvious. If Shaw does not so aim, Alfred may be an ironic allusion to Tennyson (for whom, in *Heartbreak House*, Hesione infers that Boss Alfred Mangan was named)—ironic because Lenkheim, like Mangan, is not poetic.

What prevents Bruno and Jitta from openly declaring their love for each other, says Bruno, is that he could not face the suffering of his wife Agnes. To Jitta, consideration for Agnes does not restrain her, but the scandal that would ruin Bruno professionally does. “Oh, the life of a University professor,” he complains. “His respectability kills his mind. His wife’s respectability kills her soul.” In effect, they are slaves of duty except when Bruno and Jitta are in the apartment that she romantically calls their “dreamland.”

Lest we imagine that these two characters, enslaved by the duties exacted by middle-class morality, are the splendid, superior souls they imagine themselves to be, we should consider the view of Shaw, who describes Jitta as “one of those attractively refined women whose wistfully sensitive unsmiling mouths and tragic eyes not only make imaginative men fancy unfathomable depths in their natures, and something undefinably sad and splendid in their destinies, but actually force this conception on the women themselves, however commonplace their characters and circumstances may be.” Whereas she is merely the wife of a college professor who has fallen in love with another professor, to her and her
married lover “her life is as dignified and beautiful as her face, and their relations as nobly tragic as their eyes.”

After Bruno dies of a heart attack and Jitta leaves so that no one could connect her with him, her husband deduces that they were having an affair, which she admits. Ironically, this woman, who like her lover had derided the duties exacted of them by middle-class morality, later views herself according to its rules. “I am no good,” she tells her husband, and “I have no right to be in any decent house (she turns to the door).” Where will she go? “Into the streets,” she theatrically envisions. “Oh, damn your heroics!” exclaims Alfred. Unlike Nora Helmer, she is unable to leave, “suddenly becomes weak, and reels against the head of the sofa.” After he helps her to a seat, he sarcastically remarks: “It serves you right.”

Before dying, Bruno had put Alfred’s name on the title page of the manuscript of his book—an academic, psychological tome formidably titled “Fetters of the Feminine Psyche,” which suggests some sort of enslavement, possibly to duty—so that Alfred, who Bruno imagines would be delighted at the chance to bask in unearned glory, which only Jitta would know is a reflection, would see the book through to publication. What Bruno had not counted on is that Alfred, before he learns that his wife was the woman with Bruno when he died, refuses to put his name to a book he thinks is probably rubbish. What follows when she reveals that she was the woman is partly a satiric variation of the last scene of A Doll House. “You cant settle an affair like this by looking like a martyr and walking out into the street,” Alfred tells Jitta. Even if she has no regard for him, she should consider Bruno’s widow and daughter. “For their sake I am prepared to endure your presence in my house.” Jitta reacts “(with faint surprise and some irony) You can bring yourself to that? You can still bear to look at me?” Insisting that their marital relationship is over, Alfred explains that they need not separate. “People can live miles apart under the same roof. That is how you will have to live with me.” If she has any sense of decency, he adds, she will not subject either him or Bruno’s widow and daughter to public scandal. Except when company is present, he insists, he is finished with her. “Not one word will I ever speak with you again when we are alone together.” His proposed course of action does not make him a Shavian realist, and Jitta’s romantic attitude toward life coexists with a realistic understanding of her husband’s ways. “Oh, Alfred,” she responds, “you will tell me so ten times a day. Dont let us talk nonsense.”

When he maintains he will not speak a word to her and wishes he had never met her, she replies, “It sounds too good to be true, Alfred.” Turnabout, however, is fair play. If she agrees to his conditions, he must agree to hers, which is to pretend to be the author of Bruno’s “great book.” “But I tell you
I don’t believe a word of the silly thing,” he protests—before, we should note, he has read it. They agree to table the issues for a while.

Far from being as enslaved as Nora Helmer, Bruno’s and Agnes’s adult daughter Edith is not bound by the sense of duty that bothered her late father and Jitta. She wants more information about him and his lover. “I wish you could persuade my mother that I could do much more for her if she would tell me all her troubles,” she pleads with Alfred. “I am no longer a child. There is nothing now that cannot be spoken of quite frankly before me.” She recognizes, as she tells Jitta, that her father “never found in his home what he needed and longed for” and that her mother was not the right woman for him. She could even love the other woman because that woman made her father happy. “Perhaps you did not understand father,” she tells her mother, who still treats her as if she were a little girl. “I wonder what you would say if you really knew,” says Agnes, to which Edith replies, “(scornfully) If I really knew! Do you suppose any girl of my age nowadays does not know more than you were ever taught?” To her mother’s horror, Edith tells her that she knows how her father died. Prudently her fiancé warns her to “be careful not to idealize a person you don’t know,” especially in his relationship with women—advice that she ignores.

Aware that her daughter views her father as if he were a picture-book saint, Agnes asks Jitta to talk to her about him since she pays no attention to what she herself says. Jitta agrees and tells Edith that while it is easy to imagine that the woman whom her father loved was worthy of his love, “the real person always kills the imagined one”—an aphorism, Edith recognizes, that her father had used. Under Edith’s scrutiny, Jitta admits what she has longed to confess, that she was the lover of Edith’s father. Edith is delighted and Jitta is happy that Edith has become more like a daughter to her.

When Alfred returns, his conversation with Jitta turns to the question of duty, although they do not use the word. She reminds him that ever since he swore he would not speak to her again when they were alone, he has done nothing else. Unperturbed, he reminds her that she once swore to be faithful to him. “How you enjoy being miserable, Jitta!” he exclaims. She considers herself a figure of romance, to whom everything that happens is extraordinary because it happens to her, he points out, whereas what she did was what many other women did, except for how it ended, which was accidental. When she was put to the test, he adds, she acted sensibly, not romantically. She kept her head and did the right thing, thereby preserving her and his reputation, preventing a scandal, and making her lover’s wife and daughter less unhappy. In other words, instead of arranging to be “found stretched
on his dead body, with the limelight streaming on your white face, and the band playing slow music, “she did her duty to all concerned.”

Alfred then discloses that he will undutifully break the promise she exacted from him about being the author of Bruno’s book, which he has since read. Apart from his conviction that no one would believe he wrote it, he considers it to be “the most utter tommyrot that was ever put forward as a serious contribution to psychology.” It contradicts everything that was taught to him and that he has taught to others. Angry, Jitta argues that its departure from conventional wisdom does not prove it is nonsense and does prove Alfred is an idiot. “I may be an idiot,” he retorts; “but my idiocy is the accepted idiocy taught in the University at which I am a professor; and his idiocy is not taught anywhere.” He has to earn a living for them, he reminds her, and Bruno’s book would ruin both of them. All she can do is to persuade him to edit the book, which she manages to do by announcing, in the presence of Alfred and Bruno’s widow, that he will edit it, which makes it difficult if not impossible for Alfred to deny without offending Agnes. In accomplishing this, Jitta fails to reject her slavery to middle-class duty but at the same time fulfills her duty, if only in part, to her dead lover.

Saint Joan

It took an Irish playwright to turn a French saint into an Englishman. Shaw’s Napoleonic characterization of the quintessential Englishman also holds for the female of the species when she takes upon herself a role that is traditionally male, as the title character of Saint Joan does. To rephrase Napoleon’s analysis in The Man of Destiny, when an Englishwoman, like an Englishman, wants something, she does not act until there comes into her mind a conviction that she has a moral and religious duty to conquer whoever possesses what she wants. Becoming irresistible, she pursues her purpose with a steadfastness that derives from a strong religious conviction and a deep sense of moral responsibility. As this play demonstrates, what is true of an Englishman or Englishwoman is true of a French woman.

Readers who do not consider this grouping of Joan of Arc and Tom Broadbent to be convincing but find it odd or peculiar—perhaps even a compelling reason to send the writer who couples them to the stake—might bear in mind that the source of the zeal or belief of both characters has no verifiable basis. When Robert de Baudricourt analyzes the origin of God’s command to Joan, via the voices of St. Catherine and St. Margaret, to be Joan’s imagination, the teenage girl agrees, for the reason that this is how God’s messages come to people. Her quip is clever and it silences Baudricourt, but even if we grant the existence of God and his saints, Baudricourt may be right. Later, when Joan interprets the ringing of the bells in terms of her voices,
Dunois “not sympathetically” tells her that one can hear whatever one imagines in their chiming and that he would think her “a bit cracked” if she had not given him sound reasons for what she wanted to do. Joan insists that she finds the reasons only after she hears her voices, but it may be, rather, that she is able to articulate her reasons after an imaginative leap, in which neither God nor logic plays a role. Like Broadbent, she has what Napoleon would call and what she does call a divine mission.

Joan’s very first statements bespeak her religious conviction. Forthrightly, without wasting time, she tells Baudricourt that God has commanded him to give her a horse, armor, and a few soldiers to send her to the Dauphin, who will give her all the troops she needs to end the siege of Orleans. Naturally, Baudricourt is astonished, but she astounds him further by her unflustered self-assurance:

ROBERT (contemplating her in a stupor of amazement) Well, I am damned!
JOAN (with unruffled sweetness) No, squire: God is very merciful; and the blessed saints Catherine and Margaret, who speak to me every day [he gasps], will intercede for you. You will go to paradise; and your name will be remembered for ever as my first helper.

Because she believes herself to be instructed by God, she has no doubt that she will accomplish her mission. She has already persuaded Poulengey to help her—what she aims for is certain to happen, says Poulengey, for “Her words and her ardent faith in God have put fire into me”—and he, together with John of Metz, whom she has also convinced to back her, helps to win over Baudricourt, but not before he cross-examines her.

Specifically, she relates, God has told her to raise the blockade of Orleans, have the Dauphin crowned in Rheims Cathedral, and drive the English out of France. To Baudricourt’s assertion that neither she nor ten thousand like her can stop the English, she responds with conviction, “One thousand like me can stop them. Ten like me can stop them with God on our side.” “This may be all rot, Polly,” he cannily tells Poulengey afterward; “but the troops might swallow it, though nothing that we can say seems able to put any fight into them. Even the Dauphin might swallow it. And if she can put fight into him, she can put it into anybody.” As she demands, he sends her to the Dauphin, to be escorted by Poulengey and a few others.

Notice that Baudricourt does not immediately fall under the sway of Joan’s conviction, which she considers to be divinely inspired. He is a member of the governing class. When Joan tells him that her lord has sent him orders him to give her the wherewithal to go to the Dauphin, he erupts: “(outraged) Orders from your Lord!” He instructs her to tell her lord that he is neither duke nor peer at the orders of her lord but is the squire of Baudricourt and
takes orders from no one but the king. What he ultimately does is a trick of the governing class: he uses her persuasive powers to achieve his own end, to rid France of the English, which in this instance is the same purpose as hers.

Other members of the governing class, who have higher ranks than Baudricourt, act similarly, performing tricks of their class to achieve their ends. In the throne room in the Dauphin’s castle, the Archbishop knows why Joan will recognize that Bluebeard is not the Dauphin and will single out the real Dauphin: not because she will miraculously learn the truth from God but because “She will know what everybody in Chinon knows: that the Dauphin is the meanest-looking and worst-dressed figure in the Court, and that the man with the blue beard is Gilles de Rais.” When the Duke de la Trémouille protests that her identifying the real Dauphin will not therefore be a miracle, the Archbishop—who is used to miracles since they are part of his profession—explains that a miracle “is an event which creates faith,” this being “the purpose and nature of miracles.” However simple such events may be, “if they confirm or create faith they are true miracles.” Just as La Trémouille, a diplomatist and soldier, could not make his subjects pay war taxes or persuade his soldiers to be willing to die in battle “if they knew what is really happening instead of what seems to them to be happening,” because they would not believe it—which suggests a Shavian view about World War I—so “the Church must “rule men for the good of their souls as you have to rule them for the good of their bodies. To do that, the Church must do as you do: nourish their faith by poetry.” If Joan’s apparent miracle confirms or creates faith, it would further empower the Archbishop, who does not publicly call what she does a hoax. When Joan identifies Bluebeard, who sits on the Dauphin’s throne, and then picks out the real Dauphin from the crowd, the Dauphin embraces her actions as a miracle because “she knew the blood royal,” which empowers him enough to challenge those at court who question his right to the throne: “Who dare say now that I am not my father’s son?” As the Archbishop does, the Dauphin uses her identification of him as a trick of his class to bolster his authority.

Like a Napoleonic Englishman in the respect that Joan is like one, Bishop Cauchon invokes God, or rather the Catholic Church through which he believes God speaks, to validate his duty. He is willing to convey Joan to the secular arm to be burnt, should the Court of the Inquisition find her guilty of heresy, because doing so would be his religious duty and responsibility, however painful or horrible such a duty might be, for he is convinced that compared to the horror of heresy her incineration would be insignificant. Furthermore, he has already determined that she presumptuously acts not only in opposition to the Church but also “as if she herself were the Church.
She brings the message of God to Charles; and the Church must stand aside. She will crown him in the cathedral of Rheims: s h e not The Church! In his view, which as stated is similar to Joan’s, it is his religious duty to act as he does. He thereby maintains the supremacy of the Church in all religious matters.

During Joan’s trial, which the Church administers, the clerics are the governing class. Their notions are meaningless to Joan, and their cross-examination consists of tricks to trap a prisoner who is accused of the crime of heresy. Why did Joan try to escape from jail by jumping from a tower? “Why would anybody leave a prison if they could get out?” she retorts, adding, “If you leave the door of the cage open the bird will fly out.” To D’Estivet, “That is a confession of heresy” because “if you are in the hands of the Church, and you willfully take yourself out of its hands, you are deserting the Church; and that is heresy.” To Joan, such a view is preposterous. “But you will not talk sense to me,” she tells Cauchon when he advises her that her impertinent answers are doing her no good. As for torture, “I cannot bear to be hurt; and if you hurt me I will say anything you like to stop the pain. But I will take it all back afterwards; so what is the use of it?”

Because torture is customary, according to Courcelles, it should always be done, and it is therefore his duty to torture a heretic, by which he means one who is accused of heresy. Like Joan, his sense of religious duty justifies what he wishes to do. All of these clerics use legalistic terminology, a trick of their class, to find her guilty of heresy. Only after she has been found guilty does the Inquisitor admit that the girl did not understand what they were saying.

In the Epilogue, Joan assesses her judges, who acted in accordance with their duty to God as dictated by the Church: “They were as honest a lot of poor fools as ever burned their betters.” Cauchon arraigns the reversal of that court’s judgment as destructive of faith and undermining the Church’s foundations. Suddenly, “A clerical-looking gentleman in black frockcoat and trousers, and tall hat, in the fashion of the year 1920” (three years before Shaw wrote this play) arrives to announce that Joan has just been canonized. All the men who earlier denied her now praise her. When Joan proposes that she return to them as a living woman, none of them agrees; and despite her canonization, the Inquisitor, still a slave of duty to an office of the Church as it existed in his lifetime, tries to explain: “I do not see how The Inquisition could possibly be dispensed with under existing circumstances.”