
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VIII.

IS BERNARD SHAW AMONG THE PROPHETS?

BY THE REVEREND WINFRED CHESNEY RHOADES.

A FEW months ago one of the New York theaters announced the production of a play which was promptly heralded as being indecent. This happy advertisement of the play as indecent produced a great demand for tickets, and persons who were eager to witness the performance of "Mrs. Warren's Profession" paid as high as thirty-five dollars for one seat in the orchestra. After a single performance, further acting of the play was prohibited by the police commissioners. The universal condemnation of the press, and the notoriety that must accompany official suppression of a play, had succeeded, however, in making the name of George Bernard Shaw known to a multitude of people who had never heard it before. During the last two or three years, allusions to Mr. Shaw, and caricatures of his interesting physiognomy, have been multiplying in the public prints; and now it is said that he has at last "arrived," because his name is becoming known to the "general reader." One of the New York journals spoke of the demand for Bernard Shaw's books as the feature of the fall trade.

The latest writer of rapidly selling books is not always worthy of serious attention. But when a man sets up as a prophet and becomes a cult, when he is the possessor of remarkable abilities as a self-advertiser, and when he puts his philosophy into precisely that form of literature that will catch the ear of more of his fellow-men than almost any other form, those who are concerned about the welfare of society must ask who he is and what

he is doing. But, alas, when you ask, "Who is Bernard Shaw, and what is he doing?" you find that he is a man of whom it is the fashion to speak very disrespectfully at the present time. He who sets up as a prophet is the target for general sneers and derision. A recent poet voices "a mental attitude of Bernard Pshaw" in some verses of which the following are samples:—

"I'm a Socialist, loving my brother
In quite an original way,
With my maxim, 'Detest One Another'—
Tho, faith, I don't mean what I say.
(It's beastly to mean what you say.)

"For it's fun to make bosh of the Gospel,
And it's sport to make gospel of Bosh,
While divorcées hurrah
For the Sayings of Pshaw
And his sub-psychological Josh."

A publication called the *Theater* speaks of Bernard Shaw as a man "seriously attempting, at times, to set the world afire merely to see it burn, and with the same idle purpose of the small boy who applies a match to the back stairs of a tenement-house 'to see the engines run.'" The *Outlook* calls him a "yellow journalist on the stage." Mr Royal Cortissoz, the critic, expresses doubt as to whether Mr. Shaw himself knows "whether he is in jest or earnest, whether he is really anxious to make a safe port, or, in sardonic mood, would rather like to cast the ship upon the rocks." Mr. James Huneker says that Bernard Shaw bathes humanity in muriatic acid, and deceives us into laughing while we squirm. Alas, for the feelings of Bernard Shaw the Prophet! The louder he shrieks, the more he is laughed at. Probably more ingenuity of wit has been expended upon him in the last few years than upon any other man now writing.

And, indeed, as you begin to read his plays you wonder whether he is anything more than a voice,—the voice of an

egotist drunk with the thought of his own infernal cleverness. He seems like one determined to be talked about at any cost. He reminds you of the man told about by Sienkiewicz, who "carries his ego like a glass of water filled to the brim." His ego is always slopping over. In one mood he impresses you as being so anxious to be before the public that he is willing to play the buffoon to get there, like young fellows that are sometimes seen in society. In another mood he impresses you as one who has resolved to be famous, even if he must be infamous to be so. He likes nothing better than to scandalize his audience. In his "Revolutionist's Handbook" he speaks of "the domestic miseries of the slaves of the wedding ring," and in play after play he represents this beautiful truth dramatically. He makes harsh and disgusted fun of the good old British institution known as home life. Nothing sacred is sacred to him. There is no sacred; it is all sardonic and diabolical laughter. To him there is nothing good and there is nothing true, and he makes fool's sport of it. He sums up Ibsen's teaching in the sentence: "The golden rule is that there is no golden rule." And he considers this Ibsen's great merit. In "Man and Superman" he makes the devil an attractive, genial, reasonable, beneficent personality, and he disposes of Christian faith in this fashion: "For your bad deeds, vicarious atonement, mercy without justice. For your good deeds, justice without mercy." "Hell is the home of honor, duty, justice, and the rest of the seven deadly virtues. All the wickedness on earth is done in their name: where else but in hell should they have their reward?" In the "Revolutionist's Handbook" he declares that "a man should stand for his belief, against law and religion"; and he counsels parents as follows: "Do not give your children moral and religious instruction unless you are quite sure they

will not take it too seriously." There is just enough truth in Bernard Shaw's teaching to make it more diabolical.

These first impressions of Bernard Shaw (and some of them are last impressions also) represent the popular way of talking about him. But Mr. Shaw considers himself a prophet, and whatever his critics may think of the worth of his message, he is preaching a message to the world—rather, shouting it to the world, or shrieking it to the world. This message is proclaimed in novels, essays, and plays, the plays being the latest instrument. Mr. Shaw is an Irishman living in England, with a clever Irishman's keenness of wit and adroitness of tongue. He began his career as a newspaper critic of the theater, the opera, the concert hall, and the art gallery. Later, he wrote five or six novels. And a few years ago, when there was an attempt to start an independent theater in London, in which modern dramatic masterpieces should be acted, he generously undertook the writing of modern dramatic masterpieces. The first of these masterpieces, entitled "Widowers' Houses," had a magnificent run of two performances. The second, "The Philanderer," was thrown aside by the author as too difficult for the actors available. The third, "Mrs. Warren's Profession," was prohibited by the government censor, and therefore was also not performed. Then Mr. Shaw gathered these three plays into one volume, and published them under the title of "unpleasant plays."

Unpleasant they certainly are. They put the spectator into a society made up of social parasites, vampires, and animals, libertines, roués, idiots, hypocrites, and colossal egoists. "Widowers' Houses" is the story of a young animal of the human species who wants to marry another young animal of the human species, and who, though at first deterred by a vestige of noble conscience when he learned the source of the female ani-

mal's income, after three acts yields to the temptation to become a vampire in society and secure the girl at the same time. "The Philanderer" tells the story of two modern young women, both of whom are eagerly pursuing an amorously-inclined, artistic sort of velvet-coated man, who has had his fun in making love to them and now wants to escape from both. The play centers about an Ibsen Club, and the extravagant follies of the ardent Ibsenites furnish Mr. Shaw with material for stinging and hilarious satire. "Mrs. Warren's Profession" has to do with a woman who is a professional prostitute, and whose business is the management of a syndicate operating so-called "private hotels" on the Continent. In this play Mrs. Warren defends her profession with all the power and cleverness that Mr. Shaw can call to his use, on the ground that a poor girl could do nothing else unless she wished to be always a slave to unrighteous labor conditions and impossible wages. In these plays, even the best of Mr. Shaw's heroines smoke cigarettes and cigars, and drink whiskey, as casually as they might hail a 'bus. Mr. Shaw describes the plays in his second volume as "pleasant" by contrast, because they deal "less with the crimes of society, and more with its romantic follies, and with the struggles of individuals against these follies." Of these, "Candida" has to do with a London clergyman of the Christian socialist type, and a poetic young fool of the nobility who makes love to the clergyman's wife: the minor characters consist of an ape of a curate, a caricature of a typewriter, and a vulgar father-in-law, all of whom come upon the stage in a state of intoxication. Although Candida remains true to her husband in the end, the play is not of the sort that leaves a pleasant taste in the mouth. And the other plays in this volume, however witty they may be, do not differ essentially from "Candida" in the quality of pleasantness; for, while there are undoubtedly many such people in

society as Mr. Shaw introduces his audience to, yet it remains gloriously true that society is not all made up of such people.

Mr. Shaw's most elaborate effort is "Man and Superman." This play is an approach to the literary form which Mr. Shaw thinks the fiction of the future may assume,—pieces of dialogue with a great deal of lengthy explanation between. The play dramatizes one of Mr. Shaw's pet ideas, which is that the current convention about men and women in affairs of the heart is false: men are not the aggressors, as commonly held, but women; women are the ardent ones, not men; women are the pursuers, men the pursued; men are no longer the victors in the duel of sex, but the victimized. Mr. Shaw says that the book is a study of the modern relations of the sexes, and in it things are talked of frankly that usually are not mentioned at all. The hero is a modernized Don Juan, according to Mr. Shaw: instead of being the pursuer of women for his own pleasure, he is pursued by them. He is represented as the author of a work entitled "The Revolutionist's Handbook," and this book Mr. Shaw prints as an appendix to the play. In the "Revolutionist's Handbook" Mr. Shaw gives utterance to his own socialistic and revolutionary ideas, and therefore the book as a whole, with its preface and its appendix, may be taken as the statement of a part, at least, of Mr. Shaw's philosophy. The theme of the book is marriage. The thesis is that marriage must be regulated in some way, if there is to be any improvement in society or any continuance of democracy. Marriage must be regulated in order that the Superman may be produced. The idea of the Superman is Mr. Shaw's latest development, and it is his nearest approach to constructive teaching. More of that anon. In this book he lauds the production of children, however they may have been begotten. Marriage is not sacred, but the bearing of children is praiseworthy. The very nature

of women makes them pursuers of men. "It is assumed that the woman must wait, motionless, until she is wooed. Nay, she often does wait motionless. That is how the spider waits for the fly. But the spider spins her web. And if the fly, like my hero, shows a strength that promises to extricate him, how swiftly does she abandon her pretence of passiveness, and openly fling coil after coil about him until he is secured forever!"

Now, is there anything in Bernard Shaw that the world of to-day needs? Is Bernard Shaw among the prophets? In answering this question let us take him at his best valuation. This is a risky thing to do, according to his critics. But let us assume that he has a serious purpose, that he is more than a shouter straining to attract attention to himself, that he is more than a dealer in shockingly clever paradox for the pleasure of making his name talked about. If, then, you read Bernard Shaw in this spirit, you find that underneath his cleverness, his paradox, his diabolical laughter, there is a tremendous social passion. He is a destroyer of ideals, but it is because there is something like a broken or lost ideal lurking in his consciousness. He is a killer of hopes because he wants to hope, but can see no place for hope in the world. This makes him a pessimist; for what is pessimism but an absence of hope? The fact is that Bernard Shaw is a disgusted man, and this mood of disgust inspires all that he says. In one preface he confesses to an onslaught on idealism which is both explicit and implicit. "Idealism, which is only a flattering name for romance in politics and morals, is as obnoxious to me as romance in ethics or religion. . . . I can no longer be satisfied with fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct, shedding fictitious glory on overcrowding, disease, crime, drink, war, cruelty, mortality, and all the other commonplaces of civilization." It is the failure to find his ideals in the world that makes Mr. Shaw the cynic that

he is. His whole attitude is that of a savagely disgusted man.

Professor Brander Matthews once said to one of his classes, in contrasting Emerson and Carlyle, that the difference between them was that one had the loving nature and the other the hating nature: Emerson loved good, but Carlyle hated evil. Bernard Shaw has the hating nature. He hates modern society and its organization. He agrees with a famous predecessor of his own nationality in looking upon the race of men as a race of Yahoos. He is so disgusted at the meanness and sordidness and personalities (to adapt his own word) of the world as he sees it that he must shriek out about it. His shriekings are the result of a socialistic passion, and are made for a purpose. "My conscience," he says, "is the genuine pulpit article; it annoys me to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making them think in order to bring them to conviction of sin." This accounts for Mr. Shaw's subjects and for his style. He does not want to make his readers enjoy what he writes; he wants to interest them and to make them mad. "'For art's sake' alone," he says, "I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence." He has a purpose in writing. It is to show things up. "In 'Widowers' Houses' I have shown middle class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth." The play is a terrible picture of those who ignorantly or indifferently, or with set and cruel purpose, make their fortune from pigpens and ratholes which are rented to the needy at fiendishly iniquitous rates. And there is more than one respectable and respected member of the Christian church who would do well to take to heart the savage cry of the play.

In giving his purpose in writing "Mrs. Warren's Profession," Mr. Shaw says: "I have gone straight at the fact that,

as Mrs. Warren puts it, 'the only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her.'" You may not agree with Mr. Shaw's conclusions, you may not believe in his methods, you may not like his play, but you cannot help feeling his moral passion when he makes Mrs. Warren's business partner say: "Why the devil shouldn't I invest my money that way? I take the interest on my capital like other people: I hope you don't think I dirty my own hands with the work. Come: you wouldn't refuse the acquaintance of my mother's cousin, the Duke of Belgravia, because some of the rents he gets are earned in queer ways. You wouldn't cut the Archbishop of Canterbury, I suppose, because the Ecclesiastical Commissioners have a few publicans and sinners among their tenants? Do you remember your Crofts scholarship at Newnham? Well, that was founded by my brother the M. P. He gets his twenty-two per cent out of a factory with six hundred girls in it, and not one of them getting wages enough to live on. How d'ye suppose most of them manage? Ask your mother. And do you expect me to turn my back on thirty-five per cent when all the rest are pocketing what they can, like sensible men? No such fool!" And when you read what Mrs. Warren's daughter said to this nobleman: "When I think of the society that tolerates you, and the laws that protect you—when I think of how helpless nine out of ten young girls would be in the hands of you and my mother—the unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully—," when you read this, you see that the play was not written to defend Mrs. Warren's profession, but was written out of a bitter heart to castigate society.

This indicates Mr. Shaw's moral earnestness. It also indicates his failure. He fails as a preacher, and he fails as a literary artist. It is not sufficient to castigate society. A remedy

must be pointed out, and men must be inspired. That is not a true work of art which merely paints a realistic picture of a small section of life. A slice of life is not art. To portray a slice of life is merely to state a problem. True art must offer some solution. Problems are not art. Poetic justice is art. Eternal remedies are art.

> "Said Life to Art, 'I love thee best
> Not when I find in thee
> My very face and form expressed
> With dull fidelity;
>
> "'But when in thee my craving eyes
> Behold continually
> The mystery of my memories
> And all I long to be!'"

No craving eyes behold a vision of beauty in Mr. Shaw. He is but another of those moderns who take you to the dissecting-room and lay bare the cancer-sores of society. These men are great on stating problems. They have lynx eyes for seeing difficulties. But they have no solutions to offer, and no inspiration to give, and this is their failure. They say this is realistic art. But it is not art at all. Art has hope, art has light, art has insight. There is a prophecy of protest, and its worth must be gladly granted. Protest is a great duty of the good citizen. But protest needs to be made healthy with idealism. It is well to face things as they are; but the man who is always boasting of doing this is more likely to be facing things as they are not. Mr. Shaw is a power in the way of showing things up; but when all has been said that can be said about this, that still remains true which Mr. Chesterton has so well pointed out, that the omission of "an enduring and positive ideal," the omission of "a permanent key to virtue," "this omission, good or bad, does leave us face to face with the problem of a human consciousness filled with very definite images of evil, and with no definite image of good." Society needs to have its badness

shown up. But it is not enough to show things up. Nothing can be gained until men are led to want better things, and are led to believe them possible of attainment. It would seem as if there were almost enough destructive prophets abroad; society needs constructive prophets who can point out a better way and win the indifferent and the hostile to enter it.

Mr. Shaw does not even try to make men want better things, because he does not believe better things possible of attainment. He therefore offers no solution to the problems he raises. He thinks the history of the world proves that there has never been any progress. "The moment we look for a reform due to character and not to money, to statesmanship and not to interest or mutiny, we are disillusioned." What men call progress is only the oscillation of the pendulum. Progress is impossible because men do not want it, he says, and he has no faith that men in general will ever want it. "It need not be denied that if we all struggled bravely to the end of the reformers' paths we should improve the world prodigiously. But there is no more hope in that If than in the equally plausible assurance that if the sky falls we shall all catch larks. We are not going to tread those paths: we have not sufficient energy. We do not desire the end enough: indeed in most cases we do not effectively desire it at all." Again he says, in an open letter to a friend: "I do not know whether you have any illusions left on the subject of education, progress, and so forth. I have none. Any pamphleteer can show the way to better things; but where there is no will there is no way." And he adds: "My nurse was fond of remarking that you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear; and the more I see of the efforts of our churches and universities and literary sages to raise the mass above its own level, the more convinced I am that my nurse was right." This is the cause of the tone that he adopts: his belief that there

is no will, and therefore no way. He says that he has found, in his experience, all the force of his onslaught "destroyed by a simple policy of non-resistance."

The respectable elements in society hear or read his attacks, but are as unimpressible as a piece of leather. And therefore Mr. Shaw makes it his mission to attack the respectable elements in society. In speaking of Bunyan he says that "the whole allegory is a consistent attack on morality and respectability, without a word that one can remember against vice and crime." And therefore he devotes himself to attacking the most obtuse elements in society,—morality and respectability. It is the morality and respectability that invest their money in concerns that fleece the public, or factories that employ child labor; the morality and respectability that are utterly indifferent, in any but the most formal and most superficial way, to the condition of their fellow men and women. So little faith has Mr. Shaw in these elements that he says in one place: "If we must choose between a race of athletes and a race of 'good' men, let us have the athletes: better Samson and Milo than Calvin and Robespierre."

I must repeat that Bernard Shaw's failure is in his lack of remedy and lack of hope. It is a pitiful failure. He lays bare certain diseases of modern society with startling clearness. He pictures with withering satire the sordidness, the meanness, the baseness, the hardness, the hypocrisy, of the modern social life. He reveals a passionate—almost frenzied—feeling beneath an unpleasing exterior. But when it comes to the place for a solution, he fails. And he fails because he has no relief in God and no faith in humanity. His nearest approach to a solution is in his recently developed Superman idea. This, he thinks, is the scientific solution of the difficulty. "Whilst Man remains what he is," Mr. Shaw says, "there can be no progress beyond

the point already attained and fallen headlong from at every attempt at civilization." "Democracy cannot rise above the level of the human material of which its voters are made." Therefore we shall come again to political smash unless we can have a democracy of Supermen. The production of nations of Cromwells, Napoleons, Cæsars, Luthers plus Goethes, is the only real change possible,—that is, nations of great men, heroes, Supermen. These Supermen of the future are to be secured by an evolutionary process, brought about by regulated reproduction. This regulated reproduction is to be obtained either by government action or on the initiative of committees of citizens. For this purpose men and women are to have free access to one another, without any regard to any marriage tie, but under control of the regulating authority, whatever it be. The old unconscious fertility is to be replaced by an "intelligently controlled, conscious fertility."

And this is the only solution that this prophet can offer to the problems caused by the sordidness and baseness of men! "The only fundamental and possible socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of men: in other terms, of human evolution. We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth." There is no hope for individual men; this prophet knows no regeneration. There is no hope for society; he has no expectation of progress. There is no improvement of the race through the improvement of the individual; he knows no leavening of the lump by the action of a little leaven. He knows only "intelligently controlled, conscious fertility."

And what is the conclusion of the whole matter? One turns from a reading of Bernard Shaw with a heartache that a man with such power, such clearness of insight, such social passion, should nullify it all by his crooked point of view. His irrever-

ence is merely an indication of a diseased mind. His laughter is as the crackling of thorns under a pot, because it is the laughter of one who hath said in his heart that there is no God. His solution of the problem of life is no solution, because it leaves the soul out of account. His books are unwholesome because they leave the reader in a state of suspicion, distrust, and dislike, as regards his fellow-men; because the author has no real heartache for suffering humanity, but only a bitter disgust at human nature; because the fun in his plays is based on charnel-house things that are not funny at all. His books are immoral because they are untrue to the real facts of life. He is a passing fad, because that which is not true to the deep facts of life never lasts. Mr. Shaw considers himself a realist of the realists: he thinks he sees things just as they are; but he does not, and the pitifulness of his failure lies in his colossal self-deception. And nowhere is he more wrong than where he pins his faith to the Strong Man, the Cæsar, the Napoleon, the Superman, and will not believe in the possibility of progress in the average man. Progress is vested in humanity, the average man, the weak man, and not in the Strong Man. And Mr. Shaw never fails more completely than when he refuses to preach ideals; for one of the greatest works of the man who would help his fellows is to raise the character and quality of their wants,—to make them want better things. Mr. Shaw thinks that men are self-deceived, and that he is undeceiving them. But he commits the crime of destroying their faith. For while self-deception is not good, faith is. And the salvation of man lies not in his believing things are better than they are, but in his believing things are going to be better than they are, and setting out with a will to make them so.