

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

A Study of his Plays and his Ideas about Society

by

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INTRODUCTION

A "professional talk-maker" — this is what George Bernard Shaw called himself at the end of one of his plays, Too True to be Good. This is positively true, as any single one of his plays demonstrates. It is widely recognized that he stands second only to Shakespeare among the British playwrights.

It is of course by his plays that Shaw will be remembered in the future, although in any full-length study of him the writer would have to deal with the enormous amount he wrote on other subjects such as art, politics, sociology and philosophy. He had already been publicly acclaimed as a dramatist by 1894 with Arms and the Man; and the Nobel Prize which was awarded to him in 1925 was an indication of his world-wide reputation at that time. Yet in 1925 he was only half-way through his writing career. He was writing up to the moment of his death in 1950.

In his numerous plays, long and short, and his other writings, Shaw influenced new ways of thought by the display of his own unrivalled intellectual freedom, which sometimes shocked the people of his time beyond measure and caused bitter criticism from his detractors: it should be recalled that British society then was only just passing out of the Victorian Era when strict conventions were regularly observed. Shaw always criticized the society of his time; and it is his social aspect as found in his plays and their prefaces that will be mainly dealt with in this thesis.

From the beginning of his theatrical career, Shaw had deliberately avoided solemnity in his treatment of important subjects, turning on them instead his flashing wit and buoyant humour. He had serious arguments to give his audience; yet he held, rightly, that an audience will not listen attentively to them unless they are offered in a light, entertaining form. To rouse his audience's attention, he often went further than the ordinary dramatist in writing things he did not really mean. This is what we come to call his tongue-in-the-cheek attitude; one that we find very characteristic, more or less, in all of his plays. It is this attitude that sometimes makes it difficult to define Shaw's own ideas.

Throughout his public life, Shaw played the part of a man in a mask. To understand him as he was we must, therefore, attempt to penetrate his mask. And there is the man, the rarest of all creations: a great character whose active brilliance of intellect, humorous sanity, and fearless pronouncement of the truth as he saw it, influenced the social and political thought of his age to an incalculable extent.

NOTE

Because of the limited library facilities in Bangkok, I have been unable to consult as much of the standard material on Shaw as I would have wished. It will be seen from the foot-notes that my main reference works have been St. John Ervine's Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends and Shaw's own writings. This has imposed a severe limitation upon my work, but at the same time it will be recognized that St. John Ervine's study, with its wide scope and scholarly detail and judgment, has provided a solid basis for comment.

I must express my deep gratitude to Professor Prince Prem Purachatra and Miss June Derrick who, apart from their invaluable supervision, have lent me books that have been of great use in the preparation of this thesis. I am also in debt to the Librarians of Chulalongkorn Central Library and the British Council Library in Bangkok for giving me books on long loan.

A.L.

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