



Plays: Mrs. Warren's Profession / Arms and the Man / Candida / Man and Superman

George Bernard Shaw , Eric Bentley (Foreword)

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George Bernard Shaw demanded truth and despised convention. He punctured hollow pretensions and smug prudishes - coating his criticism with ingenious and irreverent wit. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, and *Man and Superman*, the great playwright satirizes accepted attitudes toward woman's place in society, military heroism, marriage, the pursuit of man by woman. From a social, literary, and theatrical standpoint, these four plays are among the foremost dramas of the ages - as intellectually stimulating as they are thoroughly enjoyable.

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Roy Lotz says

No author who has ever known the exultation of sending the press into an hysterical tumult of protest, of moral panic, of involuntary and frantic confession of sin, of a horror of conscience in which the power of distinguishing between the work of art on the stage and the real life of the spectator is confused and overwhelmed, will ever care for the stereotyped compliments which every successful farce or melodrama exhibits from the newspaper.

It seems a mystery of science why some writing, though apparently skillful and stylish, sits dead on the page; and other writing, at first glance no different, roars into life, screaming at the top of its lungs. My most consistent impression from this collection was just this: Shaw turns the printed page into a loudspeaker. Reading through one of his prefaces is like standing right in front of him as he yells into your ear, close enough for his spittle to wet your face. It would be unpleasant if it wasn't so pleasant.

I do wonder how much Shaw actually enjoyed writing his plays. He was so loquacious, so energetic, so strident and vociferous, that the time and effort required to polish a play, to prepare his actors for performance, must have bored him a bit. I sometimes got the impression that the plays were just a sly way of getting his views heard; that they were intellectual versions of advertisements, slick productions meant to sell a product. It doesn't matter if they were; excellence is excellence, even if it arises from sordid motives.

To me, Shaw is at his best when he is in the comic mode. For all his intellectualism, all his activism, all his progressive and political preaching, he is capable of quite a light and airy touch. My favorite play in this collection was by far *Arms and the Man*; for there, Shaw's message and his medium coalesce into a perfect product, a convincing love story with an anti-war moral.

The most questionable of his plays, on the other hand, though by far the most ambitious, was *Man and Superman*. There, Shaw drops the act and simply inserts his views in a kind of Platonic dialogue. Not only is this heavy-handed story-telling, but the views he expresses are frankly ridiculous. It's not Shaw's fault that Hitler made eugenics so taboo; at the time, a lot of people were enthusiastic about the prospect of bettering the species, so we must give Shaw a pass there. Still, the extreme vagueness of the scheme, the extraordinary sexism, the scientific ignorance, the political arrogance, and the intellectual elitism, come together to make the whole thing smell rotten, and the love story didn't add enough perfume to cover it up.

An odd tension I noticed running through these plays was that between predictable plot and naturalistic personalities. The stories of these four plays were hardly innovative; the prospect of love or marriage provides the tension, and some concatenation of circumstances combines to provide a neat conclusion. Yes, the ending of *Candida* or *Mrs. Warren's Profession* were perhaps not the most satisfying; yet Shaw merely tweaks the expected, traditional ending, to give an added piquancy and savor; he still relies on the conventional machinery of plot. By contrast, his characters are often so wonderfully lifelike that it seemed odd they would fall into this neat pattern. This tension does not, however, detract from the plays; rather, I think it is an essential aspect of Shaw's taut and frenetic quality. The plays seem to strain at the seams, threatening to burst forth any minute; but the pressure is gradually relieved, the machine cools, and we arrive safely, albeit a bit ruffled, at our destination.

I had great fun reading these plays on my ride to work. Shaw really knows how to shake a man until he's wide awake. But Shaw is exhausting after a while. I think I need to take a break and let the ringing in my ears go away before I can listen any longer; and I should probably wipe the spittle off my face.

Phillip says

There are times when Shaw is incredible. He can be so funny, in that dry snarky way late 19th century Englishmen could. And I absolutely love *Arms and the Man*. But I have a couple of issues with the other plays here. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* didn't make that much of an impression on me, though I imagine it would be more shocking to a contemporary audience not used to seeing sexuality displayed on stage. I didn't care for the end of *Candida*, mostly because it seemed like a very conventional ending to a play that seemed to set itself up for an unconventional ending. And *the Man and Superman* was pretty good, except that it was so overly long. The play is definitely not stageable as written; a former prof told me he had seen it staged leaving out the "Don Juan in Hell" section, but even leaving that out the play seems really long.

The way Shaw creates his women is pretty fascinating though. He seemed really interested in the notion of the New Woman, and I'm not sure whether he approves or disapproves of her.

James says

Three of the plays were quite funny. *Man and Superman* was pretty much interminable. I get that long-windedness is part of Tanner's character, but come on. Plus the long, unpleasant dream sequence in Act 3, and the fact that it takes up most of the book, means I have to give this three stars.

Dr.J.G. says

Man And Superman: -

The idea had been around for a while, in various - genuine, not cartoon - forms, one supposes. At any rate various people developed it according to their best capacities of conception and perception. And it was a natural idea, after all. When one looks at evolution, it is only natural to expect that it might not be yet finished, and there might be higher rungs. If one thinks of creation, why suppose it is over? Who are humans to dictate that Divine can appear only once or is finished with Creation?

George Bernard Shaw goes here into a hilarious look at things as they are and then into what might, what magnanimity they can achieve at the next stage; at life force that dictates people marry and reproduce, albeit calling it romance and love; at limitations of best and sharpest intellect when faced with life force; and in an inspired act, at concepts of heaven and hell as they really should be seen, rather than the silly prevailing ones.

Truly delightful, one of the most hilariously delightful works of Shaw, and that is saying a lot. It leads you to think deep within while you are too busy laughing to notice it.

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Candida: -

Revolutionary, as much else by Mr. Shaw, this work, about a luminous woman with her own mind and strength and wisdom - perhaps much like your wife or mother, at that - and entirely worthy of more than reading. About love and truth about love, and about marriage. About strength, and about one's responsibility.

Once it was understood without hypocrisy that a man looked for a wife who could make a home for him, and a woman had to make the best possible choice at every moment, either gambling on getting a better offer, or taking the best she had, in marrying a man who could provide for the home she would make. Few were lucky to find love as well, at the same time - most did the best they could, and things have not changed in this respect, only there is more hypocrisy in name of love.

Love is not so easy to either find or choose or live with.

Love might very well be a man too young to provide a family for the woman whom he fell in love with - she might be married, with a family, if she is lucky, not still waiting and dispirited. Will she then choose him? Or will conservative values win and she advise the younger man, the lover, to go find someone appropriate?

If she does, it might just be that she has wisdom and courage to name the real reasons for her decision, and explain them. A woman - a wife and mother, in potential and instinct even when not de facto - chooses the weaker one, to care for and to protect with all she has to give, which is love and care and understanding and more.

A scrawny young poet, and a respected much loved minister, who does the woman choose? Or does she have to choose between them?

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Arms And The Man: -

What seems obvious might after all not be so, and those that are seemingly snobbish and haughty might be not as affluent after all as those that seem casual or even comic. Those that speak of love and are rewarded for their bravery might have never experienced either.

And then there is Switzerland, the beautiful land with snow and meadows and chocolate and cheese, and contradictions - a country that never fought a war in recent history but has always hired out mercenaries to every nation.

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Mrs. Warren's Profession: -

Age old dilemma of society - "respectable" vs. the other side, and the need of one for the other. It must have of course been extremely controversial when it was written - and published - but this writer was always more than equal to any criticism and could always argue either side of a debate with reason.

This one is not a comedy, though, and one is presented with Mrs. Warren's side quite reasonably.

Michelle says

Great, humane, insightful plays. Only read Candida and Mrs. Warren's Profession but really enjoyed them.

Sebastyne says

I love GBS, he is the most observant writer who has a canny understanding of how people function. The little details that most people miss are in his writing, making it such a delight to read! Sometimes he could be called long winded, but he wants to fully give you an understanding of what is happening, and he does it with so much observation - I found it surprising how he could describe fashion in such detail that most women would fail at it.

But I mostly enjoyed the conversation in Hell, between the Devil, Don Juan and the statue of a man Don Juan killed in a duel, in the play Man and Superman, included in this book.

Jeremiah Henry says

The plays, of course, are fantastic. This edition is very cheap though. I suppose it's a good buy on a budget, but I would recommend reading from a copy that's a bit more ergonomic.
