



HISTORY, RELIGION AND GENIUS IN SHAW'S SAINT JOAN

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ABSTRACT

The distinction of G B Shaw's works lie in their lucidity and clarity. The writer was a tireless crusader for social rights and justice. He advocated the intellectual development of the people. The importance of ideas as the basis for dramatic conflict is the central tenet of his dramatic art. He preferred to open up the minds of his audience. As a free thinker and a believer in radical nationalism, his keen interest in dialogue and verbal wit often turns the stage into a forum for propagating ideas. *Saint Joan* foregrounds fundamentalism and justice. This paper takes into consideration Shaw specific features of dramatic art (Greene 1984) put in practice in *Saint Joan* to show how Shaw remains one of the pioneers in bringing polemical discourse and its ramifications onto the stage.

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INTRODUCTION

Shaw is a man who looks at the world primarily in theological terms and the epithet of his title Saint Joan makes clear the fact that a religious flavour would follow in what comes after (Shaw 1946). Thus one is deeply stirred by the intensity of religious emotion of the play. However an understanding of this requires knowledge of Shaw's concept of religion as Shaw is a religious man not in the conventional sense of the term.

Religion

Shaw's religion is the religion of Creative Evolution which affirms the individual will as the true motive power in the world (Cuddon, 1998). A fundamental tenet of his religion of Creative Evolution is that the will must not be suppressed but freed, and that a saintly deed consists not in immolating the self but in liberating the self. Shaw looked upon Saint Joan as a vital genius, a great experiment of the Life Force, a force representing the Will of God. But Catholicism, which could not tolerate the claim of an individual to divine revelation, found her guilty of offence against the Church and punished her. Thus Shaw's concept of religion clashes with the established religion. Shaw is depressed by the obstacles that man puts in the way of the Will of the God. Cauchon's cry in the epilogue that "must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those that have no imagination?" reveals the deep anguish in Shaw concerning religion. Joan says: "Oh God When will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" This also shows how the world remains hostile to a religion that can help man to rise higher in the scale of evolution.

But the end of the play shows the vindication of the claims of Shaw's religion of Creative Evolution. Thus Warwick in the Epilogue tells Joan, "Your spirit conquered us, madam, in spite of our faggots."

"Saint Joan" also becomes a religious play because of the presentation of the medieval church, its dominating presence and also the rise of Protestantism. In Scene II, when the Archbishop was informed about the miracles performed by Joan, he ignores them. For him miracles have to happen through the church. But Joan acts as if she herself were the church. Warwick sees Joan's idea as the protest of the individual soul against the interference of priests or peer between the private man and his God. In this sense Joan becomes the representative of Protestantism.

Though a strong religious flavour runs through "Saint Joan", it is also a play which showcases other features like the conflict between Nationalism and Feudalism and also Shaw's technique of incorporating ideas into his plays. Thus the play remains one of the important landmarks in the history of English drama.

History

Bernard Shaw, in his preface to "Saint Joan" says that the play is 'utterly historical.' To emphasize this Shaw asserts that it was written by Joan herself: "I have done nothing but arranged her for the stage. There really was such a woman. She did and said those things.." Though this claim on historicity by Shaw has been challenged by several critics, Shaw seems to have recreated the past on the stage with those little varieties which

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are required to condense a series of event over many months into three and a half hours.

All the characters in the play are historical --- Joan, Charles, Warwick, Peter, Cauchon, Dunois, La Hire, Robert de Boudricourt, Stogumber and they all acted and behaved in the manner as Shaw presented them in the play.

Shaw's portrayal of Joan's career and his representation of a number of incidents of her life with their dates and the names of the people are authentic. Joan could neither read nor write but was a born leader with a craze for soldiery and the rough life, compelling her uncle to take her to the Squire of Boudricourt, who got so impressed that he gave her a guard of men, armour and horse and she went off to the Dauphin at Chinon. Shaw's preface and play deals with other incidents in Joan's life authentically including her trial.

However, mere representation of facts and incidents from Joan's life does not completely make Saint Joan a historical play. What is also needed is an authentic atmosphere of the medieval age. The Middle ages stood upon a foundation of credulity. Shaw suggests the credulity of the age by a number of miracles --- the hens 'laying like mad', Joan's recognition of the Dauphin, the change of the wind on the Loire, the drowning of Glasdale etc. There is the feudal world where barons may make or break kings and are rivaled in authority only by the Church. The readers also learn of witchcraft and miracle, armour and ransom, pilgrimage and crusade, heresy and belief. The religious, social and moral institutions are presented in order to create a sense of the historical context.

However, inspite of the presence of the medieval atmosphere, "Saint Joan" is also charged with the intellectual ambience of Shaw and thus Joan can also be described as a Shavian heroine highlighting Shaw's sense of Evolutionary philosophy, nationalism and Protestantism. The preface to the play supports this perspective with parallelism drawn between medieval France and early twentieth century Ireland and English cruelty and injustice. In this matter, the historical dramatist is subdued by the iconoclastic wit.

Drama of ideas

Bernard Shaw is often described as the writer who has imported the real Ibsen spirit into the English drama (Shaw 1931). This holds little doubt as like Ibsen's plays, Shaw also followed the convention of presenting conflict of ideas through conflict of speech which highlight various issues like sexual equality, socioeconomic divisions, the effects of poverty, and philosophical and religious theories. The issues are highlighted by presenting them through what the character speak and discuss. Thus plays described as drama of ideas are bound to focus less on action and more on speech. Another aspect of the drama of ideas is the portrayal of realistic and rational issues.

Shaw's preface to "Saint Joan" reveals that the intellectual groundwork which unifies his purpose in writing the play is his vision of Joan as an agent of the Life Force. Shaw's thesis is that the 'instrument of a will or Life Force' uses human beings as agents for purposes wider than those of the individual. This Life Force or its agent is always opposed by the world that the agent seeks to change. But it is this force or the Will of God that urge human beings to move upward. Shaw's presentation and interpretation of his heroine in "Saint Joan" matches this idea of human agents used by the Life Force. This is made clear in the very 1st scene when Joan tells that St. Margaret and

St Catherine talked to her everyday, they gave her message from God and she has been sent to raise a siege of Orleans. Shaw looks at Joan as an instance of the Life Force at work.

However, Shaw is able to highlight yet another important issue or idea as it is called: great experiment of the Life Force like a Jesus, or a Joan, or a Galileo are always crushed by the established forces. Thus the lonely saint Joan is made to face trial and punished for heresy. But Shaw still believes in the victory of the Will of God. Thus Joan is burnt but her will survives with greater energy.

Another important feature of "Saint Joan" as a drama of ideas is that a parallelism is drawn between medieval France and the Ireland of the early twentieth century. Joan is presented as a nationalist and thus highlights the futility of England's attempt to impose its rule on another country. Joan's nationalism also highlights the everlasting conflict with feudalism or established forces. Shaw wants people to realize that this conflict is a historical process in which geniuses are perhaps still burnt. In this light "Saint Joan" exemplifies the theatre of ideas.

Character

Judged simply by the number of characters whom the reader can accept as convincing representations of historical persons, "Saint Joan" is a testimony to Shaw's dramatic creativeness (Larson 2002). Most outstanding among them is Joan herself. Shaw in a frank way said that he has dramatized the original document. This, however, does not hide Shaw's skill in character portrayal. Paradoxically Shaw has to establish Joan as both an ordinary and an extraordinary person. He must show Joan as a peasant girl, not different from others of her class and upbringing, who yet has an inner compulsion to obey her Voices and in her singleness of purpose. More than this Shaw reveals in Joan the qualities that mark her as a saint.

Throughout the play, there are proofs that Joan is a true French peasant, thoroughly practical and economical, as she shows herself in arguing with Baudricourt. Her fundamental commonsense is attested by her reasons for wearing men's clothing when she must live in the company of soldiers. As the daughter of a farmer she has helped in the fields, but asserts her ability to match any woman in Rouen in housework. This kind of matter-of-factness and doggedness also presents her as a daughter of the soil.

Shaw also does not present Joan as different from other girls in sensitivity of mind and body. Her vigour does not exempt her from weariness and the burden of loneliness. The fear of the stake drives her to her abjuration, though Shaw directs the readers to see her tormented by the rebellion of her soul against her mind and body. Her passionate outburst against the sentence of perpetual imprisonment also reveals her as a woman.

However, Shaw's Joan can be compared with his other heroines like Candida or Major Barbara. Joan is a woman who puts on man's dress and delights in manly pursuits. She becomes a military commander of almost incredible courage and strategic insight, worthy of comparison with Napoleon. In this regard Joan is the representative of women characters by Shaw.

At the same time Shaw portrays Joan as a Saint, a Nationalist and a Protestant. Joan hears voices and has visions. She has

orders from the God and informed by St Catherine and St Margaret. She represents the way the will of God gets manifested in the genius. She performs miracles. Like other saints also she is at first misunderstood thus punished for heresy. But Joan is also a Protestant as far as direct communication with the God is concerned. She is also a Protestant because she is anti-Catholic and anti-Church. Joan also represents nationalism and highlights the everlasting conflict of the genius with feudalism or established forces. In this way Shaw has created Joan as a character with many contraries. Thus, in the end, she is put to death to live forever in the hearts of men.

Tragedy

Depiction of Joan in literature was no novelty before Shaw (Tyson 1982). Mark Twain transforms Joan into a sweetly pathetic child saint, surrounded by ugly monsters. Schiller's Joan is a heroine who dies in the battlefield and thus rouses a great deal of sympathy. But Shaw's Joan is not a soft woman who melts men's hearts and causes despair, but a bossy one who stirs them. In this way Shaw avoids any melodramatic flavour in presenting the conflict of Joan with the authority and the church.

The magnanimity of the conflict presented in "Saint Joan" made Shaw claim that he was writing a classical tragedy. But Shaw has used the word 'classical' to refer to it as serious and not melodramatic and also it does not refer to classical canons of tragedy. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, contends that the death on the stage of a 'pre-eminently just or virtuous' person only outrages the sensibilities of the audience and that a tragic hero must not be a saint, but a man capable of committing a tragic error. Shaw, by contrast, shows that it is Joan's virtues and not her defects which bring about her death. It is equally difficult to perceive in Shaw's Joan either a flaw of character or an error of judgement. However, some commentators have observed that there is something of spiritual pride in Joan and she also errs by continuing to fight instead of going home.

Tragedy, for Shaw, is something different from the Renaissance interpreters. For him tragic subjects are those which present collision between different moral positions, both 'good' to their supporters and both make contradictory demands. For this Shaw wants that the audience sees Joan's trial not as a popular melodrama, but as the confrontation of opposite historical forces of greater significance. Shaw himself says that there are no villains in the piece. Thus Shaw forces the reader to look at the trial with the eyes of the fifteenth century and regard that its procedures are perfectly respectable. The defeat of the Prometheus like figure in this confrontation causes tragedy. In this regard Saint Joan remains a tragedy.

However, the defeat of the Prometheus like Joan, looked at from the perspective of history, lose some tragic quality and take some aspect of tragicomedy. Eventually the moment of tragedy gives way to the moment of philosophical amusement as the readers observe Joan's murder as one of those pious murders committed by 'normally innocent people in the energy of their righteousness.' In this way Shaw brings an element of comedy into his tragedy.

Shavian Play

The Victorian theatre presented a never-never world of wholesomeness, safe moral lessons, and harmless fun. That

real life was very different, a place of poverty, prostitution, disease, and it was not recognized by the theatre or its critics and supporters in the Press. Shaw eschewed romantic conventions and explored relevant and often controversial subjects.

Shaw's "Saint Joan" highlights one of the strongest influences of the dramatist on British drama--- the portrayal of strong woman character. Blanche in "Widower's House" is the first of those Shavian heroines who actively participate in love making. This new type of dramatic heroine or New Woman can be found in "Mrs Warren's Profession" and "Candida." The central character in "Saint Joan" is also woman who puts on man's dress and delights in manly pursuits. She becomes a military commander of almost incredible courage and strategic insight, worthy of comparison with Napoleon. Thus, presentation of independent women character is one of the iconoclasms of Shaw.

Shaw also holds the credit of introducing realism into the British drama by negating the Victorian romanticism (Nforbin 2009). This is more evident when Shaw deals with historical subjects. When Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra talk, they drop into the most familiar idiom of today. "Adrocles and Lion", though set in ancient Rome, highlights the littleness and frailty of the twentieth century society. "Saint Joan" also reveals how the high-minded and the best-intentioned members of society still misunderstand the genius and visionaries like Joan.

Shaw also contributed by infusing in drama a note of persuasive power. To serve this propaganda purpose, Shaw presented in his plays ideas. Thus Shaw shows less concern for action and dramatic situations and ideas are presented with the help of long speeches. The verbal exchanges among Warwick, Stogumer and Cauchon in the fourth scene of "Saint Joan" is an example of this. The plot develops through this internal action. This kind of innovative dramas are thought to have paved the way for later Symbolist drama and the Theater of the Absurd.

Shaw also demonstrated how social concerns can be expressed through comedy. "Candida", with social attitudes toward sex relations as objects of his satire, and "Pygmalion", a witty study of clever treatment of middle-class morality and class distinction, proved some of Shaw's greatest successes on the stage. In "Saint Joan" Shaw presents a comic view of the irredeemable stupidity of humanity: that humanity seems programmed to make martyrs and victims of its visionaries and never learn from them. It was for these ways of writing plays Shaw had a strong influence on the contemporary English drama.

Geniuses and saints

Shaw's "Saint Joan" can sometimes be compared to the medieval Miracle plays as those plays also portrayed the lives of the Saints and their miracles. Shaw's play also portrays the life of the historical character Joan and also the final punishment of Joan. The historical Joan is presented with all the other related characters and also with the medieval setting. Like other saints, Joan also performs miracles. The hens 'laying like mad', Joan's recognition of the Dauphin, the change of the wind on the Loire, the drowning of Glasdale are some of them. Like a saint, Joan enjoys revelations or powers of God's will. Like a saint, Joan practices heroic virtues and is able to sway the masses on her side. Even Shaw's claim on

historical veracity on the preface make the play the story of a saint and thus takes it closer to the genre of miracles plays.

However, "Saint Joan" is presented with a larger theme than only the life of a saint. From the scene IV onwards the movement of the play no more remains the movement of the people for national freedom. Rather Shaw goes on to portray a struggle. This is a struggle in which Shaw takes neither side. But this is struggle in which the divinely inspired individual finds herself alone. Shaw is depressed by the spectacle of the tremendous obstacles that man in his short-sightedness puts in the way of the Will. Couchon's cry in the Epilogue "Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those that have no imagination? reveals Shaw's purpose in writing the play. Joan's cry "Oh God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" also reveals how the play is more about a historical process. This is the process of a clash between the great experiments of Life Force and the already established order. The epilogue of "Saint Joan" completes this historical process by adding the note of realization. Though the epilogue is sometimes seen as an unnecessary addition, Shaw defended it saying that his purpose is the canonization of Joan. Warwick, in the Epilogue, aptly tells Joan: "Your spirit conquered us, madam, in spite of our faggots." Thus "Saint Joan" becomes the record of human misunderstanding.

Shaw's preface to "Saint Joan" provides another reason to believe that Shaw is more interested to highlight a general phenomenon in history. Shaw's comparison of Joan to Socrates reveals how the agents of the Life Force are misunderstood by men only to realize their values. In this light, "Saint Joan" can be described as something more than a historical play, or the Miracle play about a particular Saint, rather it is play that portrays a historical process.

CONCLUSION

The Epilogue of "Saint Joan" has been subject to acute literary controversy. Critics on both side of the Atlantic have unanimously decried its inclusion and have suggested that by its exclusion the play could be shortened and improved. Many viewers found its mixture of farce and satire more than a little disturbing and even inartistic. Some thought that it was an epilogue and therefore not part of the play anyway. But Shaw took no notice of them. He defended its inclusion by saying that the canonization of Joan was more important than her incineration. He says in his preface that he could not stultify himself by ending the play with Joan's execution since her history in the world began rather than ended with her execution.

Shaw has called his play "Saint Joan" instead of 'Joan of Arc' or "The Maid of Orleans" or something that suggests only the dramatization of the story that began in Domremy and ended in Rouen.

The final canonization of Joan was too near to the writing of the play for the implications of Shaw's title to be missed. But the epilogue is not only an additional scene to round off Joan's posthumous history. But it has a greater significance for which Shaw incorporates it into his play. It is Shaw's desire to show how the world treats those exceptional persons who from time to time reveal a spiritual nature and power whereby they transcend common humanity. For the Church they are saints of God and for Shaw they are agents of the Life Force. The world rejects them, then is forced to honour them. But it is never ready to receive them. In other words the epilogue is not fundamentally concerned with the Joan of Arc of history, not even with the canonized Joan of the Catholic church. But it is concerned with the Joan of Shaw's philosophy. For this the epilogue of the play gains great significance.

Shaw's epilogue is also important because Shaw needed it to make "Saint Joan" a tragedy of his kind. The tragedy consists in the fact that Joan had been punished with misguided justice by men who were not evil. The epilogue is required to highlight this nature of the people who punished Joan. Moreover, the epilogue also gives a touch of tragi-comedy to the play. Angels may weep at the murder, but the god laugh a the murderers. Thus a note of comedy is also introduced in the play with the help of the epilogue. For this the Epilogue of "Saint Joan" may be called an integral part of the play.

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