HAVING THE LAST WORD: PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT IN BERNARD SHAW

BY J. L. WISENTHAL

ELLIE. This gentleman wants to know is he never to have the last word?

LADY UTTERWORD. I should let him have it, my dear. The important thing is not to have the last word, but to have your own way.

MANGAN. She wants both.

LADY UTTERWORD. She wont get them, Mr Mangan. Providence always has the last word.

*Heartbreak House*, Act II

Shaw’s first play was a collaboration of sorts with William Archer, and one of his last was a collaboration of sorts with William Shakespeare. The play that eventually became *Widowers’ Houses* began in 1884 with an agreement between Archer and Shaw that the former was to provide the plot and the latter the dialogue. The arrangement broke down after a few weeks when Shaw said to his collaborator, “Look here, I’ve written half of the first act of that comedy, and I’ve used up all your plot. Now I want some more to go on with.” Archer’s plot was of the school that dominated the English theatre in the late nineteenth century, that of the French well-made play—the school of Scribe and Sardou, in which plot and incident are the essence of tightly constructed works. Shaw used Archer’s plot, but in a way that made a mockery of the type of play Archer had in mind. In Bernard Dukore’s words, “The entire play may be regarded as a demonic parody of the well-made play, whose features . . . it utilizes.” Whereas in Archer’s plot the young man was virtuously and heroically to reject the father-in-law’s tainted money, in Shaw’s play Trench is made aware of the fact that he is just as guilty as the slum landlord and in the end he marries the daughter without rising to any heights of virtue or heroism. When Shaw returned to his shorthand manuscript three years after the 1884 attempt, he gave the first two acts to Archer to read, warning him in advance that he had turned his plot into a different type of play. “The central notion is quite perfect; but the hallucinations

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with which you surround it are absent: you will have to put them in
yourself,” he wrote.

The bathing place is impossible; and I don’t see how the long lost
old woman is to be introduced without destroying the realism
and freshness of the play; she would simply turn the thing into a
plot, and ruin it. . . . You will perceive that my genius has
brought the romantic notion which possessed you, into vivid
contact with real life.  

By the time Shaw added the third act in 1892, he was entirely on his
own, without any pretence of a collaboration. He had taken
Archer’s scenario as a starting point, and had gone his own way
from there.

In 1936, half a century after the attempted collaboration with
Archer, Shaw provided a new final act for Shakespeare’s Cymbeline.
Once again he proved himself an awkward collaborator, who declined to respect the contribution of his partner. In his
Foreword to his version of Act V, Cymbeline Refinished, he declared himself dissatisfied with the way in which Shakespeare
resolved the complications of his plot by the revelation of Iachimo’s
deception and the true identities of the princes. “Having become
interested in Iachimo, in Imogen, and even in the two long lost
princes,” Shaw said, “I wanted to know how their characters would
react to the éclaircissement which follows the battle” (VII, 183).
In Shaw’s version the resolution of the plot is not the resolution of the
human problems of the play; it is not so much an ending as the
beginning of a new set of problems of conduct, and a potential new
play that would be a sequel to Cymbeline. In the original Cymbeline
Iachimo’s confession leads to a reconciliation between Post-
humus and Imogen, but Shaw’s post-Ibsen Imogen is not so easily
contented. “All is lost,” says the disillusioned heroine near the end
of the refinished act: “Shame, husband, happiness, and faith in
Man. / He is not even sorry”; and her last words in the play are, “I
must go home and make the best of it / As other women must” (VII,
198–99). Just as Shaw’s Imogen refuses to conform to the demands
of Shakespeare’s genre that there be general reconciliation, so do
the princes refuse to accept their new roles as romance requires.
They reject their position as heirs to Cymbeline’s throne, and they
reject Cymbeline himself as a father:

BELARIUS. . . . Come hither, boys, and pay
Your loves and duties to your royal sire.
GUIDERIUS. We three are fullgrown men and perfect strangers.
Can I change fathers as I’d change my shirt?
CYMBELINE. Unnatural whelp! What doth thy brother say?
ARVIRAGUS. I, royal sir? Well, we have reached an age
When fathers’ helps are felt as hindrances.

(VII, 196)

Shaw’s Imogen, disgusted with Posthumus’ behaviour towards her, exclaims bitterly: “My husband thinks that all is settled now / And this a happy ending!” (VII, 194). Imogen is protesting here not only against Posthumus, but in effect against the type of play that Shakespeare put her into. In Cymbeline Refinished, as in Widowers’ Houses, Shaw has used his collaborator as a sparring partner. In Elizabethan romance, as in the nineteenth-century well-made play, the plot works out the problems, and the characters unhesitatingly accept the solutions. In Shaw’s versions of Shakespeare and Archer, the characters’ vitality and originality assert themselves, and human will is not subject to the requirements of genre. Therefore, contrary to the plots that Shaw was working with—or working against—the threads are not all tied together at the end. When we reach the end of either Widowers’ Houses or Cymbeline Refinished we are left with a feeling of dissatisfaction; the discords have not been harmoniously resolved, and more action seems to be required. In both works this effect is part of Shaw’s dramatic strategy, to leave his audience feeling that the action is not complete and that any resolution is in their hands and is their responsibility. Another part of the dramatic strategy in both works is to frustrate the audience’s expectations. The audience of Widowers’ Houses would not of course know Archer’s exact original plot, but an audience in 1892 could certainly be relied upon to be familiar with the conventions of the well-made play. Widowers’ Houses conforms sufficiently to these conventions to arouse expectations that the conflict between the slum landlord’s money and the prospective son-in-law’s conscience will be resolved by some device of plot, which would perhaps reveal the landlord as blameless or the young man as independently wealthy. But the third act of Widowers’ Houses declines to follow such a course, and the play produces its fullest effect on an audience that is simultaneously aware of both the original genre and the Shavian reversals. In the case of Cymbeline Refinished this simultaneous awareness is more obvious, in that anyone who reads Shaw’s version of Act V is likely
to know Shakespeare’s play. Although Shaw printed *Cymbeline Refinished* as a separate play in his collected works, it makes no sense outside its Shakespearean context.

Shaw seems to have found it congenial to take on the job of finishing other people’s plays. His speciality as a refinisher was to tamper with the genre or the general effect of the original. One minor, partial instance of this practice occurred in 1909–10, when Harley Granville Barker needed a push to complete the penultimate act of *The Madras House*. Charles Frohman and J. M. Barrie, Shaw recounted, “appealed to me to reason with him. I took a shorter way by finishing the act myself and giving the woman the best of it (his sympathy was with the man). He was infuriated, and finished the act in his own way at once” (VII, 609). Another work reprinted among the “Uncollected Dramatic Writings” in the final volume of the Bodley Head *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces* is “A New Ending for Clemence Dane’s *Cousin Muriel,*” which Shaw wrote for Edith Evans in 1940 (see VII, 652–57). Shaw gives the play a happy ending by allowing Muriel, who has been caught altering her employer’s cheques, to argue her case and win him over. Here as in *Cymbeline Refinished* Shaw has transformed the ending of the original play by giving human will ascendancy over the revelations of plot.

And then there is Shaw’s translation of Siegfried Trebitsch’s *Frau Gittas Sühne*. In 1920–21 Shaw translated this play by his German translator as *Jitta’s Atonement*—but given Shaw’s proclivities with other people’s plays we must think of the word “translate” both in its usual sense and in the sense of “change in form . . . transmute . . . transform, alter” (*OED*). For Shaw has taken the sad melodramatic plot and turned it into Shavian comedy by allowing the characters to exercise common sense and good humour. In particular, the ending has been altered to a point that would justify “Jitta Refinished” as a title for Shaw’s work (which he included in the canon of his own plays, incidentally). Shaw achieves a happy ending not by manipulating the plot but by having the characters react differently—in a more human and less melodramatic way—to the situation in the original play.7

These are the clearest examples of Shaw’s “collaborations,” in which he has the last word at the expense of his collaborator’s contribution. But in fact this type of collaboration can take more indirect forms, and it is a common feature of Shaw’s work. Consider his relationship to Shakespeare, for example. *Cymbeline Re-
finished does in an overt way what Caesar and Cleopatra does indirectly: both plays rewrite Shakespeare. An intelligent response to Caesar and Cleopatra requires the audience to keep in mind Shakespeare’s version of the two principals in Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra, respectively. Shaw makes certain that an alert audience will not overlook the Shakespearean competitors. Caesar and Cleopatra has a number of allusions to Antony and Cleopatra, including references to Antony, Cleopatra’s royal barge, and dolphins, and we are reminded of Julius Caesar in this bit of dialogue in Act II:

CAESAR. Go, Ptolemy. Always take a throne when it is offered to you.

RUFIO. I hope you will have the good sense to follow your own advice when we return to Rome, Caesar.

(II, 202)

and in Rufio’s reference in the final act to the dangerous daggers awaiting Caesar on his return to Rome (II, 288). As in Cymbeline Refinished, Shaw is trying to improve on Shakespeare, and in Caesar and Cleopatra he is correcting Shakespeare’s portraits of Caesar and Cleopatra to bring out Caesar’s greatness and Cleopatra’s inferiority. One can see Shaw’s play as a kind of prologue to Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra, so that we have a Shavio-Shakespearean Roman trilogy in which the first play subverts the subsequent two.

Even without the Shakespearean allusions, a play about Julius Caesar and Cleopatra is bound to direct our attention beyond itself to Shakespeare and to history, and to set up an outside frame of reference. This technique of the double perspective is characteristic of Shaw’s work. In his early novel An Unsocial Socialist, the last word is given to the main character in the form of an Appendix entitled “Letter to the Author from Mr Sidney Trefusis.” Trefusis tells the author, “I am sorry you made a novel of my story; for the effect has been almost as if you had misrepresented me from beginning to end.” He offers corrections and some indication of what has happened to him and other characters since the conclusion of the novel. Like the “Revolutionist’s Handbook” appended to Man and Superman and the epilogue to Pygmalion, this appendix supplies a competing point of view, an outside perspective that takes us beyond the imagined world of the main work. In the case of An Unsocial Socialist Shaw invents his own collaborator, the cen-

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central character who had provided the plot by giving the author permission to make use of his life story.

In *Man and Superman* (in its published form) the character John Tanner is given the last word in that his statement of faith, the “Revolutionist’s Handbook,” is printed in its entirety as an appendix to the play. Like Trefusis’ letter to the author of *An Unsocial Socialist*, Tanner’s “Revolutionist’s Handbook” is at once part of the fiction and external to it. Another outside perspective is present within the play itself: the Hell Scene in Act III, which is Tanner’s dream. Here he is given the last word in the sense that his vision goes outside the main action of the play and profoundly alters our response to the work as a whole. Yet another outside perspective is indicated in the stage direction that introduces Octavius in Act I: “Mr Robinson is really an uncommonly nice looking young fellow. He must, one thinks, be the jeune premier; for it is not in reason to suppose that a second such attractive male figure should appear in one story” (II, 535). This introduction is available only to the reader of the play, but Shaw presumably intends that a turn-of-the-century theatre audience familiar with Victorian stock-company stereotypes should be misled into thinking that this nice looking young fellow must be the Juvenile Lead. Thus the audience’s attention is directed towards a conventional alternative to *Man and Superman*, to which the action that follows serves as a corrective.

In *Pygmalion* too, the audience is expected to have another kind of play in mind, and here the counterpoint effect is central to Shaw’s dramatic strategy. The nature of the submerged play is suggested by Shaw’s subtitle: “A Romance in Five Acts.” The sequel that follows Act V explains that the play is “called a romance because the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable” (IV, 782), but even with respect to this meaning of “romance” Eliza resists the logic of the plot and thus rebels against the genre. Like the princes in *Cymbeline Refinished* who prosaically refuse to accept their transformation, so the “duchess” in *Pygmalion* protests (in Act IV) that she was better off as a flower girl, and she rejects the life for which the transformation has prepared her. And while in *Cymbeline Refinished* we have the challenge to romance when the obstacles to the love between Posthumus and Imogen are not completely removed (because of Imogen’s continuing resentment), so in *Pygmalion* the marriage between Higgins and Eliza, which the genre calls for, fails to occur. The play goes as far as it can to frustrate the conventional expectations of an audience. It provides

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“a robust, vital, appetizing sort of man” as the eligible bachelor for Eliza, and throws out various suggestions of romantic or sexual involvement. There is the “seduction scene” in Act II, where Eliza is tempted with chocolates; there is Higgins’ remark to his mother in Act III, “I’ve picked up a girl” (IV, 722); there is Eliza’s reference in Act IV to the ring Higgins bought her in Brighton; and there is Pickering’s comment in Act V that the police inspector who has been called in to find Eliza “suspected us of some improper purpose” (IV, 758). All of this serves to remind the audience of the sort of play they are being denied—the play that is being subverted by _Pygmalion_. Then at the end of the play there is a marriage, and most of the characters go off happily to the wedding. But the marriage is that of the heroine’s _father_: the ultimate slap in the face for the romantic conventions that an audience has been led to anticipate. The father is the traditional comedic obstacle to the fulfilment of young love, and here it is he rather than the daughter-heroine who marries at the end.

At the end of the play itself, that is—for as in _An Unsocial Socialist_ and _Man and Superman_ there is a passage of ambiguous status tacked on after the main work concludes. Here the playwright intrudes to disabuse the reader of any false expectations that he may still harbor. The point of this epilogue is what does _not_ happen, and Shaw makes the ending of Eliza’s story as remote from romantic comedy as possible. Eliza resists the genre of the submerged play to the extent that—for good, sensible, human reasons—she marries the insipid nonentity Freddy and opens a florist’s and greengrocer’s shop. The epilogue maintains the approach of the actual play in arousing expectations in order to defeat them:

Now here is a last opportunity for romance. Would you not like to be assured that the shop was an immense success, thanks to Eliza’s charms and her early business experience in Covent Garden? Alas! the truth is the truth: the shop did not pay for a long time, simply because Eliza and her Freddy did not know how to keep it.

(IV, 794)

The assumption that underlies _Pygmalion_ is that it is salutary for an audience to be disillusioned and compelled to think about human problems in a direct and original way, without the convenient mediating support of romantic conventions that distort human

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realities. Shaw’s method in *Pygmalion* could be described as a type of collaboration. In order to bring the romantic notions which possess the audience into vivid contact with real life, he places behind the play itself an alternative that embodies our conventional preconceptions. Thus the play provokes the audience into seeing that the way of *Pygmalion* is that of life and humanity (in Shaw’s view), while the way of the implied, background play is that of mechanism and illusion.

II

When Shaw told Archer in 1884 that he had written only the first part of their proposed play and had used up all of Archer’s plot, he was not just indulging in a Shavian joke. He was unconsciously enunciating one of the structural principles of many of his subsequent works. He believed that “plot has always been the curse of serious drama, and indeed of serious literature of any kind” (Foreword to *Cymbeline Refinished* [VII, 182]). One of his structural principles, therefore, is to use up the plot and get on with the real drama. The serious dramatic interest lies in what happens afterwards—after the complications, contrivances, revelations, and explanations. As *Cymbeline Refinished* demonstrates, Shaw is more concerned with the way people respond to events than with the events themselves.12 “The second-rate dramatist,” he wrote in 1896, “always begins at the beginning of his play; the first-rate one begins in the middle; and the genius—Ibsen, for instance—begins at the end.”13 Shaw’s complaint about some contemporary plays is like his objection to our truncated lives in *Back to Methuselah*: they never get beyond the trivial preliminaries, and they end just when they might become interesting. In 1895, in another of his theatre reviews, Shaw commented on a play entitled *The Divided Way*, objecting to the fact that the heroine commits suicide when faced with the dilemma that she is married to a man she does not love and is unable to marry the real object of her affections, his brother. If the playwright would bring his heroine back to life, Shaw suggests, “we should have a remarkably interesting play on top of the romantic one.” Then we could see the woman facing her problems and trying to work them out, and we could see what happens when she leaves her husband and marries her brother-in-law. “Like all romantic plays which create a strong illusion,” Shaw says, “this one irresistibly raises the question how its final situation would do for the starting-point of a realistic play. All Ibsen’s later plays, from

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Pillars of Society to Little Eyolf, are continuations of this kind.”14 Or as Shaw wrote elsewhere, *A Doll’s House* “began with the happy ending of all the drawing-room comedies in vogue at that time” (Author’s Note on *Candida* [I, 599–600]).

This same attitude is evident in advice that Shaw gave privately to fellow writers about plays they had written. In 1894 Henry Arthur Jones, at the height of his reputation, published *Judah*, a melodramatic piece about a provincial nonconformist minister in love with a young woman faith healer who is exposed as a fraud. Shaw was not satisfied with the work. “Judah amused me,” he wrote to Jones. “It consists of clever preliminaries; and when the real play begins with the matrimonial experiment of Judah and Vashti, down comes the curtain as usual.”15 Ibsen begins his plays at the end, while the lesser playwright ends at the beginning. Similarly, Shaw in 1911 gave Maurice Baring some advice on how to revise a play he had written (*The Double Game*), in an unpublished letter that is indirectly revealing about Shaw’s own dramatic practice:

I have read the play, and ask you, as man to man, how you expect anybody to be satisfied with a play which stops violently at the beginning. . . . Nothing can be more interesting than the situation of the girl. She has proceeded on an ideal to which she believes her man corresponds. At a crucial point she finds out that he is what the English criminal classes call “a copper’s nark.” Now the expectation of seeing how she will readjust herself to this change in her outlook is quite thrilling. It is to this that the whole play has led up. If you are not equal to the occasion, there is nothing for you to do but shoot yourself. Instead of which, you shoot the girl, and say to the audience “Now that the girl is dead, there’s no more to be said. Good night.” There are no eggs rotten enough, no cats dead enough, to do justice to such a silly trick. You see it, dont you?

The true dramatic question, Shaw points out, is whether the girl will continue to love the man in spite of the revelation. “The scene in which this is answered is the scene of the play: without it there is no play: all that goes before is only the Scribean exposition by the butler and the housemaid more ingeniously done.” Shaw challenges Baring in a way that is reminiscent of the collaboration with Archer twenty-seven years earlier: “If you can finish it, do. If not, sell it to me for five shillings; and I will finish it.” The play must be resolved by the heroine’s will, not by outside circumstances of plot. “There must be no murder and no suicide or regicide or Siberia or any

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other nonsense. You have ingeniously managed to set the girl absolutely free from the pressure of circumstances at the last moment; and she has therefore no excuse for not going through with her problem.”

In his own works Shaw often reveals what happens after the conventional plot reaches its conclusion, so that the heart of the work forms a kind of epilogue. In his second novel, written in 1880, the hero and heroine marry halfway through the book, and the rest of the novel explores the consequences of their misalliance. In a conventional novel the main characters might be parted in the middle and then marry at the end; in Shaw’s *The Irrational Knot* they marry in the middle and part at the end. When Shaw reread the book in 1905 he was pleased to discover that he had produced “a morally original study of a marriage” that anticipated *A Doll’s House*. In his next novel too, *Love among the Artists*, the two couples are married by the end of Book I, and Book II studies the consequences. In Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, the climax—the revelation of the father-in-law’s sordid trade and the young man’s unconscious complicity in it—comes at the end of the second act. The third act is a disappointment to the audience, but I think it is a deliberately administered one; the results of the revelation are dramatically and morally unsatisfactory, and the play’s point is that such is the nature of real life in our present type of society.

The structure of *Mrs Warren’s Profession* is similar to that of *Widowers’ Houses*, in that the big recognition scene occurs at the end of Act II and then the rest of the play shows the characters reacting to the new situation. In a conventional well-made play the heroine might have rejected her mother in Act II on discovering that she was a “fallen woman” and then would have come to accept her by the end of the play because she was a good woman in spite of everything. Shaw places the reconciliation scene in the middle of the play:

MRS WARREN [fondly] I brought you up well, didn’t I, dearie?

VIVIE. You did.

MRS WARREN. And youll be good to your poor old mother for it, won’t you?

VIVIE. I will, dear. [Kissing her] Goodnight.

MRS WARREN [with unction] Blessings on my own dearie darling! a mother’s blessing!

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She embraces her daughter protectingly, instinctively looking upward for divine sanction.

(I, 316)

In the submerged play that *Mrs Warren’s Profession* is competing with, this would be a perfect final curtain scene, but for Shaw the revelation and reconciliation are at the beginning of the serious action, not the end. Vivie accepts her mother as a former brothel-keeper and then rejects her as a conventional mother: a nice reversal of traditional expectations. There is another reversal of expectation, too, that also takes the form of a false ending. In Act III Vivie discovers that she may be the half sister of Frank Gardner, the young man who wishes to marry her. Frank is carrying a rifle, which Vivie aims at herself after this revelation—but the episode, which would also make an excellent climax to the submerged melodramatic courtesan play, is insignificant in the development of Shaw’s play. Shaw raises the issue of incest in order to tease the audience by dropping it as trivial and irrelevant. Mrs Warren’s Profession, after the “final curtains” of the second and third acts, proceeds to its main business, Vivie’s self-liberation in Act IV. This final act can be seen as an ironic epilogue to the rest of the play, turning the melodramatic comedy of Act II and melodramatic tragedy of Act III into the tragicomedy of Vivie’s common-sense rejection of her artistic acquaintance, her suitor, and her mother. As in *Cymbeline Re-finished* and other plays for which Shaw provided endings, he transforms the mood and genre—except here he is refinishing his own play. Once the comic and tragic plots have been used up then the play goes off in its own direction.

*Candida*, like *A Doll’s House*, begins with the happy ending of all the drawing-room comedies in vogue in the late nineteenth century. The quarrel between the Christian Socialist clergyman and his capitalist father-in-law, which might have been the focus of someone else’s play, has taken place three years before the play begins, and the happy marriage which might have concluded someone else’s play is the opening situation of Shaw’s. Thus *Candida* begins with a conventional happy ending, and then in Act III the plot ends just as the crucial part of the play begins. Ibsen in *A Doll’s House*, Shaw wrote in a 1937 program note to *Candida*, defied the old-fashioned construction of the well-made play. “He made what was then an outstanding innovation by first finishing his story completely, and then, instead of bringing down the curtain as

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quickly as possible, making his characters sit down to discuss the play and draw the moral. Now this is what happens in Candida" (Author’s Note, I, 600). In the final act Candida makes her choice between her husband and the young poet. This stage scene, however, is not the climax but the preliminary: the real question is why she has chosen the husband and how the poet will respond to his rejection.

Although Major Barbara is a much more complex play—and a much greater one—its structure is similar in this respect to that of Candida. Conventionally, and in terms of plot, the big scene in Major Barbara is Cusins’ revelation about his birth in the final act:

CUSINS. Well, I have something to say which is in the nature of a confession.
SARAH.
LADY BRITOMART. \{ Confession!
BARBARA.
STEPHEN.
LOMAX. Oh I say! . . .
CUSINS. . . . then I stooped to deceive her about my birth.
BARBARA [rising] Dolly!
LADY BRITOMART. Your birth! Now Adolphus, don’t dare to make up a wicked story for the sake of these wretched cannons. Remember: I have seen photographs of your parents; and the Agent General for South Western Australia knows them personally and has assured me that they are most respectable married people.
CUSINS. So they are in Australia; but here they are outcasts. Their marriage is legal in Australia, but not in England. My mother is my father’s deceased wife’s sister; and in this island I am consequently a foundling. [Sensation].

(III, 163–65)

Barbara’s comment here is “Silly!”—and that is just the point. In the submerged play, the Victorian play about class barriers, this would be the climax, the culmination of the plot and the end of the play. Shaw, on the other hand, reduces it to the level of a silly joke that has no serious bearing on the real issues of the play (except thematically, as an instance of the relativity of moral codes). Major Barbara is a play of paradoxical reversals, and one reversal here is that whereas in Victorian drama (and in literature generally) characters would prove their legitimacy in order to gain their position in society, Cusins proves his illegitimacy in order to qualify as heir to the munitions works.20 Furthermore, this supposedly shatter-
ing, culminating revelation does not end the play but in a sense begins it; the traditional conclusion is Shaw’s point of departure. The heart of Major Barbara is the discussion that follows Cusins’ confession. As in Mrs Warren’s Profession, family relationships in themselves are insignificant: the illegitimacy here is no more important than the incest in the earlier play. As in Cymbeline Refinished, eligibility as heir on grounds of birth is insignificant too. Like the princes, Cusins is a reluctant heir. “There is an abyss of moral horror between me and your accursed aerial battleships,” he tells Undershaft (III, 165). The question is not a technical one of the circumstances of one’s birth, but a human one of the activity of one’s will. Cusins must make up his mind, and it is mind—as opposed to mechanism—that Shaw’s plays keep bringing us back to. And so the final twenty pages of the play are devoted to discussion and decision, and the essential part of the play comes after the conventional ending.  

The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet has as its subtitle “A Sermon in Crude Melodrama,” which in itself suggests the paradoxical juxtaposition of two genres, a Shavian technique that we looked at earlier. The melodramatic plot (as in The Devil’s Disciple) has to do with a man on trial for his life who is saved at the last moment. The plot therefore ends when the trial ends, but the play does not end there. On the contrary, it is while the jurymen are leaving the box that Blanco suddenly rushes from the bar and jumps up on a table, declaring, “Boys, I’m going to preach you a sermon on the moral of this day’s proceedings” (III, 795). Then comes the central part of the play.

Fanny’s First Play carries further the structural principle of having the ending in the middle of the play. It does explicitly what many of Shaw’s other plays do implicitly. Here the plot and the reaction to it are literally separate plays: Fanny’s play and the frame that surrounds it. After the curtain comes down on Fanny’s play the rest of Fanny’s First Play is an epilogue devoted to a discussion of what we have just seen.

Back to Methuselah is structurally very different from Shaw’s other plays, in that it is a cycle of five plays, roughly on the model of Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung. What is relevant to my present argument, though, is the fact that the goal of living 300 years, which is the basis of the cycle’s overall plot, is achieved in the middle of the cycle. The middle play is entitled The Thing Happens, and the

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two succeeding plays explore the results. Once more in Shaw’s

dramatic world, it is what happens after the thing happens that is

the real point.

Too True to be Good, like Fanny’s First Play, is explicit about

this principle. The first act in a sense brings the comic pattern to

completion in that the Patient is liberated from her illness, from her

illusions, and from the tyranny of her mother. This makes Acts II

and III an epilogue about the results or aftermath of the Patient’s

escape. As soon as she leaves her bedroom, the Monster (the mi-
crobe whom she has infected) sits up and concludes the act as fol-
lows: “The play is now virtually over; but the characters will dis-
cuss it at great length for two acts more. The exit doors are all in

order. Goodnight” (VI, 455–56). Here we have the outside

perspective that takes us beyond the main play, the challenge to the

audience’s conceptions of dramatic structure, and the suggestion

that the discussion—the human reactions—may be more important

than the plot.

III

Shaw has been quoted as saying in an interview that critics

should begin their interpretations of his work with the idea that
“Mr. Shaw’s plays begin where they end and end where they
begin.”

My plays [he explained] are interludes, as it were, between two

greater realities. And the meaning of them lies in what has pre-
ceded them and in what follows them. The beginning of one of

my plays takes place exactly where an unwritten play ended.

And the ending of my written play concludes where another play

begins. It is the two unwritten plays they should consider in

order to get light upon the one that lies between. 22

We have been taking Shaw’s advice in looking at his plays in rela-
tion to implied, unwritten ones, and in considering the significance

of external frames of reference. We have seen that the beginning of

one of his plays takes place exactly where an unwritten one ended,
in the sense that he disposes of the unwritten play and then pro-
ceeds with his own, or with the central part of his own. What then of

the unwritten play that follows the ending of Shaw’s play? Let us

look at Candida again. As we have noticed, it begins where an
unwritten play ended in that the conflict with the woman’s father is
in the past, and the happy marriage is well under way, and also in

that the conventional ending of the woman’s choice is Shaw’s be-
ginning of the crucial and final scene of his play. The play has yet another false ending, however. In the final lines the poet leaves the house, and the husband and wife embrace by their cosy domestic hearth. But then comes another of those passages of ambiguous status, an intrusion that is part of the fiction but not part of the fiction. This time it is the notorious stage direction that concludes the play, which gives the playwright the last word: “They embrace. But they do not know the secret in the poet’s heart” (I, 594). As in the case of the epilogue to *Pygmalion*, this stage direction merely confirms what is in any case dramatized in the final scene of the play that the audience sees on the stage. Marchbanks has outgrown Candida and the romantic domestic bliss that she represents; he is headed for greater things. The stage direction emphasizes the fact that the static, conclusive ending of the domestic tableau is illusory. The stage direction draws our attention away from the domestic drawing room to the night outside, away from the problem that has (perhaps) been resolved to the dynamic principle of growth and development inherent in the poet Marchbanks. Thus the ending of *Candida* turns the play into a prologue to a work about Marchbanks: what will he do with his “man’s voice”? In *Pygmalion*, the play in a way becomes the prologue to a short story about what Eliza will do once she becomes a woman. *Candida* leaves its sequel unwritten.

These endings that are beginnings are very much part of Shaw’s general outlook. In his Hegelian view of history, process never stops; every dialectical resolution is merely a resting place or jumping-off point. There is no finality in life or history; every ending is a new beginning; there is always something to add. In Shaw’s evolutionary universe the Day of Judgment is not the end of history but rather a beginning. In *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* the Angel announces that “This is the Judgment Day.”

MRS HYERING. But where does the end of the world come in?

THE ANGEL. The Day of Judgment is not the end of the world, but the end of its childhood and the beginning of its responsible maturity.

(VI, 821, 825)

Even if the human race should come to an end, Shaw suggests repeatedly, the Life Force would then try a new experiment and life would go on to another stage.

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For Shaw there is always something to add. There is always a last word because there is never a last word. This is true of his view of history and it also expresses itself in other ways. Shaw writes a play and then has the last word by writing a preface later for its publication. Then he quite often adds a postscript to the preface, to bring it up to date or to include an afterthought. The Preface to the original 1907 edition of John Bull’s Other Island, for example, has a postscript written after the sheets had passed through the press, then another postscript headed “A Year Later,” and then there is a preface to the original preface, which Shaw wrote for the 1912 publication of the play, and a further postscript in 1929, headed “Twentyfour Years Later.” There is a similar series of epilogues in the Constable Standard Edition volume (put together by Shaw himself) entitled Essays in Fabian Socialism: the last two sections are headed “Fabian Essays Twenty Years Later,” Shaw’s Preface to the 1908 edition of Fabian Essays in Socialism; and “Fabian Essays Forty Years Later: What They Overlooked,” his Preface to the 1931 edition.

Shaw’s sense that there is always another last word to be had is an important element in his dramaturgy. Every drama must present a conflict, he wrote in the Preface to Plays Pleasant, and “The end may be reconciliation or destruction; or, as in life itself, there may be no end” (I, 373).23 Shaw’s plays are open, living, growing structures, and they cannot be concluded with neat mechanical precision. Some of his plays have no ending at all, and just stop in the middle of a conversation or speech, with the implication that the discussion will continue later. At the end of Getting Married, for example, Mrs George refers to the thing that a woman wants most from marriage. Considering her authoritative role in the play as a kind of inspired prophetess, her view would be highly relevant to the discussion. But she asks the ascetic chaplain for his view:

MRS GEORGE. . . . Perhaps Anthony here has a glimmering of it. Eh, Anthony?
SOAMES. Christian fellowship?
MRS GEORGE. You call it that, do you?
SOAMES. What do you call it?

(III, 661)

And that is the last we hear of the matter, for Mrs George is called away before she can answer, leaving the question hanging in the air. Here Shaw is again teasing his audience and directing our at-
tention beyond the play to an unwritten one that would continue the discussion.

Too True to be Good ends in the middle of the preacher’s concluding sermon. His last words are in the printed text but are not meant to be heard distinctly by the audience in the theatre. The speaker is enveloped by fog, and his sermon just drifts off into nothing. Then the playwright gives himself the last word in a substantial stage direction in which he says that although “he has given the rascal [i.e., the preacher] the last word” his own favorite is the woman of action. Here the outside perspective undermines the final speech even further than the stage action does, and it refers us to the possibility of action beyond the play.

Many of Shaw’s plays, like Candida, have the suggestion of action beyond the play in an unwritten epilogue or sequel. In The Man of Destiny, for example, the sequel is Napoleon’s subsequent career in history, to which the play is a prologue, while in The Apple Cart, On the Rocks, and Geneva the epilogue (at the time of the respective plays’ composition) is not only unwritten but unknown; the plays remain to be continued by history. At the end of Major Barbara Undershaft has the last word, but any last word is only provisional, and the ending can be seen as a prologue to the sequel that would reveal whether Cusins and Barbara are able to accomplish their intentions as inheritors of the munitions works. At the end of Androcles and the Lion Androcles’ safety is assured, but the real subject of the play is not this question of plot but rather the larger issue of emerging Christianity. Lavinia proclaims her intention to “strive for the coming of the God who is not yet” and we learn that her arguments with the Roman captain will continue after the final curtain (IV, 634). In Heartbreak House Providence has the last word, as Lady Utterword claimed it does, but this last word is a growl of disgust in the form of enemy bombs. In another sense the last word of the play (apart from Randall’s flute) is the final lines of dialogue:

MRS HUSHABYE. But what a glorious experience! I hope they’ll come again tomorrow night.

ELLIE [radiant at the prospect] Oh, I hope so.

(V, 181)

These characters, like Lavinia in Androcles, have their minds on the future, and what the future will bring at the end of Heartbreak House is unknown.

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The last word of *Back to Methuselah* is “beyond.” The play seeks
to cover human history from beginning to end, but the end is an-
other beginning. The final play of the cycle, entitled *As Far as
Thougth Can Reach*, takes place 30,000 years hence, and when it
ends we are taken back to the beginning with the reappearance of
Adam, Eve, the Serpent, and Cain, and then we are taken further
back to Lilith, who preceded them in time. But this does not imply
the cyclical pattern it appears to, for Lilith speaks not of the past but
the future. After all the progress that *Back to Methuselah* has de-
picted, life is still in its infancy, Lilith declares, and she concludes:
“It is enough that there is a beyond” (V, 630–31). One might set
next to this phrase the last lines of *The Simpleton of the Unexpected
Isles*:

PRA. All hail, then, the life to come!
PROLA. All Hail. Let it come.

(VI, 840)

Shaw’s final play, *Why She Would Not*, written in July 1950 a few
months before his death, has (in one draft, at any rate) this as the
conclusion to its last speech: “We must leave the world better than
we found it or this war-ravaged world will fall to pieces about our
ears” (VII, 679). It is fitting that Shaw’s last word, dramatically
speaking, should look to the future and impose a responsibility on
his audience as his legacy.

The Preface to *Pygmalion* begins, “As will be seen later on, Pyg-
malion needs, not a preface, but a sequel, which I have supplied in
its due place” (IV, 659). Sometimes the ending of Shaw’s written
play concludes quite literally where another work begins. *Pygmal-
ion*’s sequel is a short story, and *Androcles and the Lion* has an
epilogue at the end in the form of an essay on the timelessness of
the play’s theme of martyrdom: another of the author’s intrusions
that introduce a new perspective. The fifth act of *The Doctor’s
Dilemma* is an epilogue in dramatic form, which takes place well
after the main action of the play and reverses the position of Sir
Colenso Ridgeon, who has been victorious in the first four acts but
is now humiliated. And “*In Good King Charles’s Golden Days*” has
a kind of epilogue, in that after the long discussion in Sir Isaac
Newton’s house in Act I there is a brief domestic second (and final)
act that shows Charles in a very different light, as the faithful hus-
band of Catherine of Braganza.

Shaw does of course have one play with an explicit Epilogue.
Saint Joan exhibits many of the characteristics of Shaw’s dramatic art that I have been discussing, and I believe that the structure of Saint Joan can be most fully understood and appreciated in the light of the issues I have raised. We have seen, for example, that Cymbeline Refinished and Pygmalion reject the conventions of their genre by taking the story further than the conventions of romance permit. Now the structure of Saint Joan is suggested in a sentence in the Preface to the play: “The romance of her rise, the tragedy of her execution, and the comedy of the attempts of posterity to make amends for the execution, belong to my play and not to my preface, which must be confined to a sober essay on the facts” (VI, 66). Saint Joan exhibits in a striking way the mixing of genres that we have seen in Mrs Warren’s Profession and elsewhere in Shaw’s work. The romance of the early scenes is not enough, and the play goes on to show the struggle and defeat that result from Joan’s rapid rise. It is true that the historical record demands that her story be taken further than her successes at Orleans and Rheims, but the point is that in Saint Joan the historical record and Shaw’s genius find a remarkable meeting ground (in this respect and in others too). The historical record, however, does not require the play’s next—and much more jarring—reversal. The romance of her rise is not enough for Shaw, and neither is the tragedy of her execution. On the whole Saint Joan without its Epilogue looks most like a tragedy, and it is characteristic of Shaw to undermine the generic conventions of his submerged play. In Major Barbara the submerged comedy should end with the union of Barbara and Cusins after Cusins’ revelation about his birth. The play does end with the union of the young couple, but this is really just a detail that is overwhelmed by the big issues of the discussion in Act III, which widens the context and makes the future of society predominate as an issue over the present personal happiness of Barbara and Cusins. In the submerged tragedy of Saint Joan death should be the end. And the play proper does end with Joan’s death. Shaw is consistent with his usual practice, however, in arousing expectations of tragedy in order to defeat them. That is why he has the Archbishop say in the Cathedral scene, “The old Greek tragedy is rising among us. It is the chastisement of hubris” (VI, 146). Here our attention is drawn away from the play itself to the dramatic tradition of which it is supposed to be a part. But the play surprises and challenges us by moving beyond tragedy. The play that precedes Saint Joan in the Shaw canon is Jitta’s Atonement, completed less than two years before

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Saint Joan was begun. Needless to say they have little in common, but there is this one point of contact. In both plays Shaw has taken the somber and tragic and turned it into the colloquial and comedic. He has taken a genre and style and then has deliberately proceeded to distort them. Thus we move in Saint Joan from the formal trial scene in the hall of the castle to the informal atmosphere of Charles’s bedroom, with the king “reading in bed, or rather looking at the pictures in Fouquet’s Boccaccio with his knees doubled up to make a reading desk” (VI, 190).

In Major Barbara marriage does not have the last word; there is more to be said after the comedic pattern is fulfilled. In Saint Joan death does not have the last word; there is more to be said after the tragic pattern is fulfilled. Both plays—like so many others of Shaw’s—go on after the plot has been used up. The plot of Saint Joan ends with the burning, but as usual Shaw wants to examine the results of the event rather than remaining satisfied with the event itself. As usual Shaw treats the conventional ending as his point of departure. “As to the epilogue,” he protests in his Preface, “I could hardly be expected to stultify myself by implying that Joan’s history in the world ended unhappily with her execution, instead of beginning there” (VI, 75). In the play itself, after the burning, Warwick meets Ladvenu as the latter returns from the execution:

WARWICK. I am informed that it is all over, Brother Martin.

LADVENU [enigmatically] We do not know, my lord. It may have only just begun.

(VI, 189)

And Ladvenu concludes his account of the execution by saying with conviction: “This is not the end for her, but the beginning” (VI, 189). When the executioner assures Warwick, “You have heard the last of her,” Warwick has the last word in the scene: “The last of her? Hm! I wonder!” (VI, 190).

The Epilogue to Saint Joan, like the Hell Scene of Man and Superman, creates a fresh perspective and makes us see the action of the main play in a new way. In both cases our vision is extended so that our context is now the whole of history and not just turn-of-the-century London or late mediaeval France. (The same is true in a minor way of the little “epilogue” to Androcles and the Lion.) In these plays we are made to look ahead. Joan’s death is not an ending but a beginning, and indeed the Epilogue itself is not an ending but a beginning. The last word is given to Joan, after her admirers have slipped away when she refuses to accept her role as dead saint

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and talks about returning to earth as a living woman: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" (VI, 208). The Epilogue offers no resolution, but points us to the future. The issue finally is not what has happened to Joan but what will happen to her: when will the earth be ready to receive such a person? The play ends with a question, and as in Shaw's other plays the last word is that there is no last word.

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FOOTNOTES

1 The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with Their Prefaces (7 vols. London: Max Rheinhardt, The Bodley Head, 1970–74), 5.130. Subsequent quotations from Shaw's plays, prefaces, and related articles are from this edition, with volume and page numbers indicated parenthetically in my text.

2 Shaw is being quoted here by Archer, in an 1892 newspaper piece that Shaw used in his Preface to the 1893 edition of Widowers' Houses (1.38). Shaw's own account in this Preface is similar, except that he says he was in the middle of the second act when he needed more story to go on with. Cf. "How William Archer Impressed Bernard Shaw" (1927), Pen Portraits and Reviews (London: Constable, 1949), pp. 21–22. For a more detailed account of the collaboration between Shaw and Archer, see Jerald E. Bringle's Introduction to Widowers' Houses: Facsimiles of the Shorthand and Holograph Manuscripts and the 1893 Published Text (New York: Garland, 1981).


5 Cf. Grace Tranfield near the end of The Philanderer: "They think this a happy ending, Julia, these men: our lords and masters!" (1.225).

6 Cf. Brecht's Epilogue to The Good Person of Szechwan:

Ladies and gentlemen, don't feel let down;
We know this ending makes some people frown.
We had in mind a sort of golden myth
Then found the finish had been tampered with.
Indeed it is a curious way of coping:
To close the play, leaving the issue open.

(Plays 2, tr. John Willett [London: Methuen, 1962], 311.)

7 Jitta's Atonement is in Vol. 5 of the Bodley Head Collected Plays with Their Prefaces, with a Translator's Note. A straight non-Shavian translation of Trebitsch's play has been published as Jitta's Atonement: Shaw's Adaptation and the Translation of Trebitsch's Original (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979), with an introduction comparing the translation with the German original. Dukore (pp. 203–11) also discusses Jitta's Atonement in relation to the original.

8 Shaw may also have felt tempted to try his hand with Othello. He said to Maurice Baring about this play, "You always want to get up and shout that the handkerchief is

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a plant, and that what you really want to know is how the miscegenation will turn out if it gets fair play” (Feb. 27, 1918, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. © The Bernard Shaw texts 1983 The Trustees of the British Museum, The Governors and Guardians of the National Gallery of Ireland and Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). It is worth noting here, too, that the play of Shakespeare’s to which Shaw responded most fully was Hamlet, which transforms the Elizabethan revenge-play convention in a way that anticipates Shaw’s reworkings of the dramatic traditions he exploits.

9 See my introduction to Bernard Shaw, The Man of Destiny and Caesar and Cleopatra: Facsimiles of the Holograph Manuscripts (New York: Garland, 1981), pp. xiv–xv. The title of Caesar and Cleopatra itself constitutes a direct challenge to Antony and Cleopatra; Shaw wrote in 1913 in defence of his unerotic Caesar that “the very first consideration that must occur to any English dramatic expert in this connection is that Caesar was not Antony” (“Caesar and Cleopatra, by the Author of the Play” [2.314]).


11 This stage direction is briefly discussed in Martin Meisel, Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater (1963; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 35. Much of Meisel’s commentary on Shaw’s use of nineteenth-century dramatic genres is relevant to the issues I am exploring here.


14 Our Theatres in the Nineties, 1.258.


16 Shaw to Maurice Baring, March 4, 1911, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Cf. Shaw’s advice to Frank Harris about his play Mr and Mrs Da ventry: “Fortunately for you, the play is a real beginning. You have hardly dug a foot into the vein as yet. The husband’s suicide is all my eye. What you must do now is to begin a sequel to the play as follows:—” and Shaw offers a scenario in which the husband’s shot is not fatal and the situation develops as a problem of conduct (Shaw to Frank Harris, Nov. 4, 1900, Collected Letters 1898–1910, ed. Dan H. Laurence [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972], pp. 194–95).


19 See Meisel, p. 145. His whole chapter on Mrs Warren’s Profession in relation to the late Victorian courtesan play (pp. 141–59) has a bearing on my argument.

20 Meisel, p. 296n.

21 Cf. Dukore, p. 85: “If plot were all, as it is in the well-made play, the resolution of the technical details might end the play. But with social and moral questions paramount, the plot cannot be so easily resolved.”


23 I have touched on this matter of endings in The Marriage of Contraries: Bernard Shaw’s Middle Plays (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 20–21.

24 Dukore reveals that the final lines of this speech were added during rehearsals when it was found that the curtain would not come down quickly enough to cut the speaker off (p. 25).

25 “It was a great experience hearing G.B.S. read Saint Joan for the first time, to me, Lewis Casson and Cherry-Garrard (of the Antarctic). The first scene took one’s breath away by its audacity. . . . Three scenes followed, full, crammed full of thought, of daring imagination, until the wind changed on the Loire and we all gasped. G.B.S. said: That’s all flapdoodle up to there—just ‘theatre’ to get you interested—now the play begins’” (Sybil Thorndike, “Thanks to Bernard Shaw,” in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, Theatrical Companion to Shaw [London: Rockliff, 1954], p. 14).

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