George Bernard Shaw: 
Women and the Body Politic

Michael Holroyd

“I say, Archer, my God, what women!” R. L. Stevenson exclaimed to William Archer after reading Shaw’s “shilling shocker” Cashel Byron’s Profession. From Mrs. Warren, Major Barbara, and St. Joan, to Lina Szczepanowska the Polish acrobat-pilot of Misalliance, Lysistrata the Powermistress-General from The Apple Cart, and the affluent domineering Epifania Fitzfassenden of The Millionaires, the formidable phalanx of new women—unwomenly women—boss women—that was to advance from Shaw’s plays wonderfully justifies Stevenson’s exclamation.

“I am a first class ladies tailor,” Shaw admitted to Mrs. Patrick Campbell. But some women saw his creations as an embarrassing army of dummies. For them, the best of Shaw in this respect was his insistence on the virtue of independence. Vivie Warren in Mrs. Warren’s Profession achieves this, as Shaw himself did, by substituting work for people; Lesbia Grantham in Getting Married defines her independence by reason of her freedom from the necessity of marriage (“If I am to be a mother, I really cannot have a man bothering me to be a wife at the same time”); Eliza Doolittle establishes her independence through education in Pygmalion. But Cleopatra, at the end of Caesar and Cleopatra, is still immature. By preferring the romantic prospect of Anthony to the distant example of Shaw’s superman Caesar, she shows that she has not yet grown from a child into a woman—and maybe never will. In which case, she is better left to Shakespeare.

But there is another breed of women, of whom Candida and Ann Whitefield are fair examples, that may appear positively antifeminist.

The box office success of *Candida* depended on a sentimental misunderstanding of the play that had been invited by Shaw's failure to make his purpose clear. He was to claim that it won the hearts of women by turning Ibsen's *A Doll's House* upside down and revealing the doll in the house to be the man. To the feminist mind, the danger of this was that it provided a sympathetic case for doing nothing and gave intellectual respectability to Mrs. Humphry Ward, the most influential of those women opposing suffrage. For if, despite appearances, women organized most matters as they wanted, why weaken their power with emancipation? Shaw's failure lay in glossing over the odiousness of Candida and concealing the revulsion from domestic ideals that is the true "secret in the poet's heart" and the awareness of which provides his moment of growing up. Shaw described *Candida* as a "mystery play," and it remained mysterious to the thousands of Candidamaniacs happily filling the theatres. The theme of the play was set down some thirty years later when Shaw was making notes for *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*:

A slave state is always ruled by those who can get round the masters. The slavery of women means the tyranny of women. No fascinating woman ever wants to emancipate her sex; her object is to gather power into the hands of Man because she knows she can govern him.

A cunning and attractive woman disguises her strength as womanly timidity, her unscrupulousness as womanly innocence, her impunities as womanly defencelessness: simple men are duped by them.

Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* is another cunning and attractive woman driven by the creaking institutions of an out-of-date society to behave like "a cad": "A woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all the beasts of prey." But it was not this unscrupulousness nor the inversion of Tennyson's "Man is the hunter; woman is his game" that infuriated some women: it was Shaw's apparent assumption that the social purpose of women was the breeding of children.

*Man and Superman* was Shaw's first attempt, in reaction from Darwin's *Origin of Species*, to dramatize his creed of Creative Evolution. In the philosophical system he put together, women are not treated as objects of men's desire but as imperfect contrivances employed by the

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**Michael Holroyd** is the author of *Lytton Strachey and Augustus John* and is currently working on the authorized biography of George Bernard Shaw. The present essay will appear in *The Genius of Shaw*, edited by Holroyd, to be published this fall by Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Life Force in its trial-and-error experiments for improving the future. This had resulted in the Duel of Sex, an inevitable phase in mankind's development that Shaw hoped would soon end "in frank confession and good-humoured laughter." As a man-huntress and slave of Nature, Ann Whitefield was Everywoman: but she was not all women. Elsewhere he insisted that "motherhood is not every woman's vocation." Woman had two classes of champion to contend with: those who wished to see immediate and obligatory freedom fastened on all of them; and those who denied them every freedom they didn't already have and resented what they did have. From *Mrs. Warren's Profession* onwards, Shaw campaigned in the theatre for the economic independence of women which would give them individual choice as to the direction they wished to go. They would do best for society, he believed, what they did best for themselves. In attempting to unite individual talent with collectivist principles, he demonstrated the unwearying inclusiveness of his philosophy.

It was difficult to avoid the amiability of his impersonal embrace. Everything he seemed to say was what it was—and another thing. Women were the same as men: but different. But of the two, he calculated, women were fractionally less idiotic than men. "The only decent government is government by a body of men and women," he said in 1906; "but if only one sex must govern, then I should say, let it be women—put the men out! Such an enormous amount of work done is of the nature of national housekeeping, that obviously women should have a hand in it." Shaw favoured women over men in much the same spirit as he advertised Roman Catholics being a trifle superior to Protestants. Both preferences were the product of a Protestant gentleman who delighted in perverse exhibitions of fairness.

Certain consequences followed from the fact only women became pregnant. Had Shaw had the making of the world in the first place, and not merely the remodeling of it, things might have been ordered more sensibly. However the rules had been laid down and the worst thing you could do was to complain of them. Every grievance was an asset in the womb of time. The advantage to women came in the form of greater natural wisdom about sex. They could hardly help themselves. Shaw maintained that the instinct of women acted as a sophisticated compass in steering our course for the future. His disenchantment with the human experiment expanded during and after the First World War. In *Heartbreak House*—"my Lear" he called it—he shows us what he supposed to be a "Bloomsburgian" culture where the feminine instinct has been trivialized in such a way that it no longer gives us our true bearings, and we drift towards the rocks. We had defaulted in our contract with the Life Force and would probably be superseded by another partner.

Shaw's pessimism, which is full of vitality, lies concealed beneath the waves of brilliant Shavianism that ebb and flow with his alternating despair and expectation. Life for Shaw meant continually renewed hope;
and hope was a matter of willpower. But increasingly as he grew older hope became more distant and fantastical. *St. Joan* tells us that this world is not ready yet to receive its saints. So the Fabian patience must be extended beyond all human experience. Shaw’s blueprint for Utopia is *Back to Methuselah*, and it was this Metabiological Pentateuch that increased for some of his audience their earlier uneasiness at his attitude to women.

The standard argument against the women in Shaw’s plays—that they *weren’t* women—had been put, most appropriately, by Frank Harris. These creatures, Harris explained, “are distinctly unpleasant, practically unsexed women. Their bodies are as dry as their minds, and even when they run after their men . . . the pursuit has about as much sex appeal as a timetable.” Harris suspected that such women had been born of a union between Ibsen and Shaw in their well-publicized elopement from Victorian sentiment. Shaw, who had the rewriting of Harris’ biography after Harris died, passed this passage for publication or perhaps mischievously drafted it in the Harris style himself. He was fond of placing on the pages of other writers the theory that he had dreamed up his women characters in reaction to the romantic logic of the stage. In the ghostwritten introduction he provided for a lecture in 1911 by H. M. Walbrook on “The Women in Bernard Shaw’s Plays,” Shaw allows it to be discovered that

there are no women in Bernard Shaw’s plays. Don’t think that I mean that they are untrue to life. I mean exactly the contrary. For I will tell you another secret. There are no women in the real world. Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, woman, of whom we hear so much, is a stage invention, and . . . a very tiresome one. There is no such thing as a woman; and Bernard Shaw’s greatness consists in his having discovered that fact, whilst all the others were turning out heroines that were getting womanlier and womanlier and womanlier until they had lost all semblance of humanity, and bored everybody to distraction . . . the reason the women in his plays were so uncommonly good is that he always assumes that a woman is just like a man.

In the interests of political equality, Shaw’s insistence that “a man is a woman without petticoats” was refreshing; as a single shot against the vulgar idealization of women, his assumption that “a woman is a person exactly like myself” was at least as telling as he intended. Throughout his plays he emphasizes what men and women share. “I am a woman,” says the man in *Village Wooing* to the girl; “and you are a man, with a slight difference that doesn’t matter except on special occasions.” Or, to put it another way, GBS was as much a woman as Lady Astor was a man. His world was full of beings who, if not actually androgynous, have only the minds of women and who eventually find their natural home in *Back to*
Methuselah. The Ancients of that world are cerebral archsensualists in whom, during the course of evolution, the ecstasy of intellect has replaced sexual passion. For Shaw, the most fastidious of men, one advantage of this would be that the reproductive function was fulfilled in a less unpresentable manner. While denying that he was a misogynist, he could not but regret that Nature "in a fit of economy, has combined a merely excretory function with a creatively ejaculatory one in the same bodily part. . . ." The syringing of women by men was an indignity that had "compensations which, when experienced, overwhelm all the objections to it," he told St. John Ervine. "... I am myself only too susceptible to them; Yet I always feel obliged, as a gentleman to apologise for my disgraceful behaviour; and I would be shot rather than be guilty of it in public." Shaw's revulsion to the idea of sexual intercourse affected the tone of his writing. It was this synthetic tone against which some women revolted even when they were attracted to the moral elegance of his argument.

Shaw's dialectical genius is at its most powerful in some of his nondramatic works. His Intelligent Woman's Guide might be said to have been written to mitigate the harm done to the country and to women by forcing on them the single solution of the vote. The origin of this book was a request from his sister-in-law for "a few of your ideas of Socialism" for "the Study Circle to which I belong." The two hundred thousand words that were let loose make up Shaw's political testament. The book shows an understanding of the practice of patriarchy far ahead of its time. Shaw ignores the "femaleness" of women, but treats them as the outsiders and have-nots of a male culture, and analyses in a most practical way the limits imposed on them by that culture. He does not propose socialism as a cure-all but attempts to trace specific "evils" to inequality of income. The tone is neither militant nor patronizing: it is Shaw at his most natural.

This first full-dress political treatise to be addressed specifically to women was the climax to a volume of work enabling Shaw to claim that he had challenged John Stuart Mill's supremacy as a woman's author. It had started with Ibsen. Ibsen had changed the mind of Europe, and in The Quintessence of Ibsenism Shaw played variations on a neo-Ibsenite philosophy of which he was the solitary exponent. The result was in part a sophisticated feminist document which was proclaimed (by the author) to have broken up homes and made suffragettes of the most unlikely readers. The early chapters, culminating in "The Womanly Woman," are a beautifully planned demolition of the nineteenth-century woman-on-a-pedestal.

Now of all the idealist abominations that make society pestiferous, I doubt if there be any so mean as that of forcing self-sacrifice on a woman under pretence that she likes it; and, if she ventures to
contradict the pretence, declaring her no true woman. . .

. . . The domestic career is no more natural to all women than the military career is natural to all men; and although in a population emergency it might become necessary for every able-bodied woman to risk her life in childbed just as it might become necessary in a military emergency for every man to risk his life in the battlefield, yet even then it would by no means follow that the childbearing would endow the mother with domestic aptitudes and capacities as it would endow her with milk. It is of course quite true that the majority of women are kind to children and prefer their own to other people's. But exactly the same thing is true of the majority of men, who nevertheless do not consider that their proper sphere is the nursery. . . . If we have come to think that the nursery and the kitchen are the natural sphere of a woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot: because they have never seen one anywhere else. . . .

The sum of the matter is that unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself.

The ingenious exercise of protecting women against their protectors appealed to Shaw. If you accepted the reactionary idealism that separated women from men by insisting on the selfless purity of women, then, he argued, were you not guaranteeing the impurity of all business and politics from which, with such ruthless sentimentality, you were excluding them? He believed that society changed only when women wanted it to—though the reconnaissance work towards such change was often made by men. Men tended to be idealists; women were more practical: a combination of idealism and practicality made for reality. To substitute this reality for the artificial segregation of society was the aim of Shaw's political work.

"On the woman's suffrage question, I have never had any particular doubts," Shaw once remarked. There were Conservative, Labour, and Liberal parties in Britain, but, unfortunately for women, the country had no Shaw party. "If it had," he declared in 1907, "that party would be uncompromisingly on the side of giving suffrage to women."

He did his best to transform the Fabian Society into a Shaw party. Despite some oscillations, his political record, though not easy to appreciate and often assailed for its waywardness, was so infuriatingly consistent that all his literary skill was needed to confuse it. Fabian Tract No. 2, a manifesto drafted by Shaw in 1884, lists as one of the opinions that Fabians desired to spread (and the consequences of which they wanted to discuss) "that Men no longer need special political privileges to protect them against women: and that the sexes should henceforth enjoy equal political rights."
But in Victorian and Edwardian politics women were dynamite—especially for a Society that included such serious-minded womanizers as Hubert Bland and H. G. Wells. Shaw's first priority was keeping the Fabians united. In this he was not greatly dissimilar to the party politicians he scorned. Preventing people who were substantially in agreement on most subjects from violent assaults on one another required an enormous expenditure of Shavian paradoxes. But Shaw believed that the call of respectability was a far more powerful force for change in Britain than any appeal to revolution and that the anarchy of "free love" could set British Socialism back a hundred years. In such matters Shaw's conversion to Marxism had been no conversion at all: he merely sought to convert British Marxists into international bourgeois Shavians.

So, for the sake of the larger cause, political emancipation slipped down the Fabian scale of priorities, and it was not until 1907, when the anarchist Charlotte Wilson rejoined the Society, that the Fabians were converted ("at pistol point," Margaret Cole has written) to "the establishment of equal citizenship between men and women." In his "Draft of Propositions on which to found a revised Basis," Shaw enunciated his political beliefs:

The Fabian Society seeks to establish equality as the universal relation between citizens without distinction of sex, color, occupation, age, talent, character, heredity or what not. . . . The Fabian Society not only aims at complete political equality as between the sexes, but at their economic independence. It advocates the explicit recognition by legally secured rights or payments of the value of the domestic work of women to their immediate domestic partners and to the State as housekeepers, child bearers, nurses and matrons.

There were few more ridiculous figures, Shaw maintained, than the male suffraget. Though his opinions appear to have been as radical as those of most Edwardian feminists, he did not advertise his political work on their behalf with his usual Shavian panache. One of the reasons for this was his belief that women could achieve their ends at least as effectively without the magnanimous interference of men and that the experience of conducting their campaign themselves, with all its frustrations and indignities, would serve as an intensive course in political education.

Though he had been an early suffragist, advocating when in 1889 he was invited to consider standing as a Liberal candidate "suffrage for women in exactly the same terms as men," he was sometimes assailed in later years by ardent feminists who accused him of having contributed nothing. "Do you suppose that the walls of Jericho, which stand against Mrs. Pankhurst's devotion and suffering will fall at the wave of my pen or a clever platform speech?" he asked Maud Arncliffe Sennett. "Such credulity makes me despair of the movement." It was even possible in
1914 for the composer Dame Ethel Smyth to inquire why he did not interest himself in the suffrage question. “I can only put a similar question to you,” he replied.

Why is it that you have never thought of devoting yourself to musical composition? It is a light employment though the actual pen and ink work of scoring is tedious. You will find the transposing instruments rather puzzling at first; . . . if you suggest anything that is worth doing that I can do and that I have not already done five or six times over, by all means let me know what it is. How little effect I am likely to produce is shewn by the fact that even you, who are specially interested in the question, do not even know whether I am in favor of the vote or not.

Shaw believed himself to be “as sound a Feminist as Mary Wollstonecraft.” At heart a suffragist he was on friendly terms with Mrs. Fawcett but also remained a good ally to Mrs. Pankhurst until their opposing attitudes to the war drove them apart. After seeing Man and Superman, Mrs. Pankhurst had declared that Ann Whitefield “strengthened her purpose and fortified her courage.” It was Mrs. Pankhurst’s courage that particularly impressed Shaw. In a letter to The Times (19 June 1913) he protested strongly against her treatment under the vindictive Cat and Mouse Act and combined this protest with an attack on what he described as the Prime Minister’s rabbit theory:

In the debate on the Dickinson Bill Mr Asquith for the first time opposed the franchise for women explicitly on the ground that woman is not the female of the human species, but a distinct and inferior species, naturally disqualified from voting as a rabbit is disqualified from voting. This is a very common opinion. . . . Many men would vote for anything rather than be suspected of the rabbit theory. It makes it difficult to vote for the Liberal Party and then look the women of one’s household in the face.

Shaw’s articles and letters were often taken from The Times and New Statesman and reported in Votes for Women and other feminist papers such as Suffragette. He was a brilliant propagandist and especially good at embarrassing the government. On 12 November 1915, for example, Votes for Women carried his suggestion of how the country could pay its debt to Edith Cavell.

We cannot vapour about chivalry, because if she had come back alive to demand the political rights granted to the meanest of men, and had broken a shop-window to compel attention to her claim, she would have been mobbed, insulted, and subjected to gross physical violence, with the full approval of many of the writers who are now canonising her. What we can do is very simple. We can
enfranchise her sex in recognition of her proof of its valour. . . If this proposal is received in dead silence, I shall know that Edith Cavell's sacrifice has been rejected by her country.

Shaw came out particularly strongly against imprisonment and forcible feeding. In one of his letters to The Times (31 October 1906) he framed his opposition to the imprisonment of Mrs. Cobden-Sanderson as a civilized Shavian petition to the Home Secretary:

Two women—two petticoated, long-stockinged, corseted females have hurled themselves on the British Houses of Parliament. Desperate measures are necessary. . .

. . . To the immortal glory of our Metropolitan Police they did not blench. They carried the lady out. . . . They held on to her like grim death until they had her safe under bolt and bar, until they had stripped her to see that she had no weapons concealed, until a temperate diet of bread and cocoa should have abated her perilous forces. . . .

. . . As a taxpayer, I object to having to pay for her bread and cocoa when her husband is not only ready, but apparently even anxious to provide a more generous diet at home. After all, if Mr Cobden-Sanderson is not afraid, surely the rest of us may pluck up a little. . . . If Mrs Cobden-Sanderson must remain a prisoner whilst the Home Secretary is too paralysed with terror to make that stroke of the pen for which every sensible person in the three kingdoms is looking to him, why on earth cannot she be imprisoned in her own house? We should still look ridiculous, but at least the lady would not be a martyr. I suppose nobody in the world really wishes to see one of the nicest women in England suffering from the coarsest indignity and the most injurious form of ill-treatment that the law could inflict on a pickpocket. It gives us an air of having lost our tempers and made fools of ourselves, and of being incapable of acting generously. . . .

Will not the Home Secretary rescue us from a ridiculous, an intolerable, and incidentally a revoltingly spiteful and unmanly situation?

At a meeting in the Kingsway Hall in March 1913, Shaw set out his objections to forcible feeding. Taking special care not to patronize women, he told his audience that he was not a suffraget speaker. "I want to point out that our protest against forcible feeding is not only a protest against the forcible feeding of women . . . women were exceedingly well able to take care of themselves. . . . Therefore don't understand me as appealing for special consideration for women." He objected to this "torture" on legal as well as moral grounds.

I contend that this forcible feeding is illegal. I contend that if you are tried in a public court and sentenced to imprisonment you are
sentenced to imprisonment, and not to torture, except in so far as imprisonment may be torture. . . . I contend that if the Government wants to break people's teeth with chisels, and force food into the lungs and run the risk of killing them, to inflict what is unquestionably torture on them, their business is to bring in a bill legalising these operations. There is no reason why they should hold back. They have no shame in doing it without the law. Why should they be ashamed of doing it with the law?

Shaw ended his speech by bringing to the government's notice what he believed was the conscience of the country.

These denials of fundamental rights are really a violation of the soul and are an attack on that sacred part of life which is common to all of us, the thing of which you speak when you talk of the Life Everlasting. I say this not in a mystical sense, but the most obvious commonsense, that the denial of any fundamental rights to the person of woman is practically the denial of the Life Everlasting.

Of his many speeches and writings on this subject, the most gloriously Shavian was his response to Herbert Gladstone who had volunteered that forcible feeding was not painful. Shaw took up the challenge and, in The Times on 23 November 1909, invited him to dinner.

It may be that Mr Gladstone is right on this point. I will therefore undertake to procure the co-operation of the Fabian Society in providing for Mr Gladstone a banquet which Sardanapalus would have regarded as an exceptional treat. The rarest wines and delicacies shall be provided absolutely regardless of expense. The only condition we shall make is that Mr Herbert Gladstone shall partake through the nose; and that a cinematograph machine be at work all the time registering for the public satisfaction the waterings of his mouth, the smackings of his lips, and other unmistakable symptoms of luxurious delight with which he will finally convince us all of the truth of his repeated assurances to us that the forcibly fed Suffragette is enjoying an indulgence rather than suffering martyrdom.

In the eyes of both suffragists and suffragettes, Shaw was unreliable on the one end about which they all seemed to agree: votes for women. Though Mrs. Fawcett in June 1910 quoted a telling extract from Press Cuttings, most feminists felt that this, his single dramatic treatment of the suffrage movement which he subtitled "A Topical Sketch Compiled From the Editorial and Correspondence Columns of the Daily Papers During the Women's War of 1909," was well placed in a volume entitled Translations and Tomfooleries. It was his flippancy and waywardness that most campaigners dreaded. He paid women the compliment of assum-
ing that they had a sense of humour and that they could value laughter as a political weapon. In one interview with Maud Churton Braby in 1906, he had claimed that suffrage was nothing to him and that he had no opinion of it since, being a man, he'd already got it. It was the style of such noninterference that could damage the Cause. But then, on being pressed by his interviewer, the well-behaved Fabian exploded: “Of course, if I were a woman, I'd simply refuse to speak to any man or do anything for men until I'd got the vote. I'd make my husband's life a burden, and everybody miserable generally. Women should have a revolution—they should shoot, kill, maim, destroy—until they are given the vote.”

In fact Shaw cared very little for giving women the vote except as a means of getting them onto public bodies. Unless that happened, the enfranchisement of women would not change society: we would merely be served up with more of the same until “no sane person will cross the street to vote, though everybody will run down the street to avoid being elected.” At the end of the most disgraceful debate he had ever heard, which took place in the House of Lords, women who had sat on the London vestries were disqualified from sitting on the Borough Councils—which were the vestries under a new name. “The argument which prevailed,” Shaw wrote, “was that the Borough Council would contain an alderman and a woman could not possibly be an alderman. This joke pleased the House immensely. It stimulated the peers to an exceptional display of facetiousness... and women vanished from the London municipalities for some years.” Shaw made an effort to remedy this mischief by writing to The Times, “but The Times blushed and threw my letter into the waste paper basket...”

There was, in Shaw's view, no other way of making men behave properly and avoiding the schoolboy bad manners of the House of Lords than by appointing women to all public bodies. As an example of the indecency flourishing in exclusively masculine institutions Shaw instanced the Health Committee of which he was a member and which burst into a bray of laughter over a case that depended on a woman being pregnant. If there were no other arguments for giving women the vote, Shaw concluded, he would favour it on the grounds that it would be a step towards making them members of such committees. His support of Israel Zangwill's move to admit women to the Dramatists Club and his strong criticism of the lack of women on the managing committee of the Academy of Dramatic Art (where female students outnumbered the males) were examples of those actions he pursued on matters where he was personally involved but which never reached the newspapers and remained unknown to most feminists.

But give him publicity, and no one could be certain he would not injure the heroic tone of the movement. Revolutionaries are seldom cursed with humour. He exasperated a few women and offended more
men when, in the course of his duties as a St. Pancras Vestryman, he agitated for free public lavatories for women and went on to produce for The Englishwoman (March 1909) “The Unmentionable Case for Women’s Suffrage.” To some political sensibilities this was grossly unappealing, and the story of this battle does not appear even as a footnote in histories of the women’s movement. Shaw went so far as to arrange for a dummy lavatory to be placed in Camden Town where it was passionately assailed as an obstruction to traffic, the tradesmen of the district careering into it in such quantities as to make it clear that these were no accidents but the charges of antifeminist cavalry. The battered structure, shudderingly identified in council as “this abomination,” became a monument to victory when the municipal franchise was extended to women. A woman’s free public lavatory was then opened in Leicester Square, and Shaw vainly tried to persuade a lady to enter it. But no lady of his generation might be seen insinuating herself into such a place, and no gentleman could be conscious that such a need existed. To ascribe to the unfashionable theory that women digested their food with the usual consequences, as men did, was a blasphemy that no respectable person would tolerate.

After the Pankhursts had swept Feminism out of the Liberal Parliamentary rut and made Votes for Women into a slogan for sabo.eurs, Shaw occasionally found himself in hot water. As a collectivist, he did not centre his arguments on the rights of individuals but treated women as valuable units of governments that had not yet been fitted into the political machinery. But some leaders of the Women’s Rights Movement feared that his clever analogies, qualifications, jokes, and the philosophy of his politics would confuse a simple theme and enable opponents of enfranchisement to delay reform. First get your votes, they said, then use them to get what you want. The most likely way of converting words into political facts was to reduce them to a slogan and, reinforced by acts of militancy, repeat them loud and often. Disliking such oversimplicity, Shaw warned that a victory gained by such methods could be pyrrhic. You had only to see, he argued, how little use the vote had been to men to understand that anyone expecting Votes for Women to achieve a millennium would be disappointed. Much the same argument as was used by Mrs. Humphry Ward against the enfranchisement of women could be employed for taking away the vote from men.

He reduced his own opinion not to a slogan but a Shavian paradox that convinced no one—though it may appear to have more truth in it now. Votes for Women would keep women out of Parliament, he said, because too few women would vote for another woman. Looking back from the end of the 1920s, he wrote in The Intelligent Woman’s Guide:

Only the other day the admission of women to the electorate, for which women fought and died, was expected to raise politics to a nobler plane and purify public life. But at the election which fol-
lowed, the women voted for hanging the Kaiser; rallied hysterically round the worst male candidates; threw out all the women candidates of tried ability, integrity, and devotion; and elected just one titled lady of great wealth and singular demagogic fascination, who, though she justified their choice subsequently, was then a beginner. In short, the notion that the female voter is more politically intelligent or gentler than the male voter proved as great a delusion as the earlier delusions that the business man was any wiser politically than the country gentleman, or the manual worker than the middle class man.

Shaw’s remedy, as he explained to Lady Rhondda, was the Coupled Vote. Since we inhabit a world of men and women in approximately equal numbers, he proposed that the smallest unit of government should not be the individual but a pair. All that was needed was a law declaring single votes to be invalid: all valid votes must go to a man-and-woman. Only on this bicycle-made-for-two, ensuring that all elected bodies were bisexual, could we peddle our way to a state of real democracy instead of the cult to which we paid such unconvincing lip-service. Quarter-of-a-century later Britain had a House of Commons containing over six hundred men and a couple of dozen women; a war cabinet of eight men and no women; and an outer-ministry of eighty-one men and two women. The true battle for the emancipation of women had still not been won by the time Shaw died in 1950.

For most of his adult life, Shaw’s Dulcinea had been Equality of Income. He was accused of inconsistency for not loving her sister Equal Pay. But he identified Equal Pay as a manoeuvre designed by the masculine Trade Unions to keep women out of industry—the calculation being that if employers had to pay a woman as much as a man they would invariably choose the man. The third sister, Equality of Opportunity, he treated as a political harlot whose soft words meant nothing. Everyone, he liked to point out, had had the opportunity of writing the plays of G. Bernard Shaw—and not one of them had done so. What was the point of telling a beggar that he had the “opportunity” of becoming Astronomer Royal? It was simply thoughtless and cruel. Since there could be no equality of ability, no physical equality, or equality of parents, the only real equality must be financial. Equality of Income—the same basic wage for the butcher, Prime Minister, and chorus girl—was a biological necessity since it would lead to equality of class, to inter-marriageability, and, by enabling us to act on our instinctive sexual preferences that had been frozen for centuries into rigid class stratifications, to our full cooperation with the Life Force. “Miss Murby . . . is firmly persuaded that my views on the production of the Superman involve the forcible coercion by the State of selected women to breed with the selected men,” Shaw told Florence Farr: “and she, being a good-looking & clever person, very likely to be selected under such a scheme, fears the
worst.” But Shaw believed that equality of income would encourage individuality of choice and that we must rely for our future on the freeing of our instincts from the coil of social inhibitions rather than on any eccentric notions of the master race. There was no need for differentiation of race or class. We were all one with another and should eventually breed all but our individual differences into oblivion.

Since our system of marriage and family life had been responsible for producing people no better than ourselves, major reforms were urgently needed. Shaw advocated revisions to our marriage laws to bring them out of indecency and into line with human nature. He addressed himself to the administration, not the heartbeat, of love, to legislation rather than Bohemian private enterprise, advising people “on no account to compromise themselves without the security of an authentic wedding ring.” Otherwise, he insisted, we would go on tolerating that unwholesome morality of marriage where families were supposed to stew in love till they expired, and where children were slowly suffocated by sentimentality. There was no magic in marriage, he warned: perpetual wedlock was a punishment that helped to bring our law into disrepute. As a first condition for the maintenance of marriage, Shaw proposed divorce obtainable, as it were, from the chemist: that is, at the request of either party and with no reasons given. By the time he came to write *Too True to be Good* (1931) he felt that it might be simpler to limit the marriage contract to one year with optional vows of renewal every twelve months. But he was not doctrinaire. Though personally he looked forward to a time when it would be thought shockingly bad form for a daughter to be able to recognize her own mother in the street, he allowed that husbands and wives must be entitled to produce children if they wished. In a reasonable moral climate, however, he could scarcely think that many would do so. In his preface to *In Good King Charles’s Golden Days*, written in 1939 and subtitled “A True History that never Happened,” he explained that Charles II took his marriage very seriously, and his sex adventures as calls of nature on an entirely different footing. In this he was in the line of evolution, which leads to an increasing separation of the unique and intensely personal and permanent marriage relation from the carnal intercourse [which] . . . being a response to the biological decree that the world must be peopled, may arise irresistibly between persons who could not live together endurably for a week but can produce excellent children.

If it is true, as Hugh Kingsmill maintained, that “no man can put more virtue into his words than he practices in his life,” then the sincerity of Shaw’s words must be tested in the context of his life. “We were not a sentimental family,” he once remarked. His ideas on marriage and the family were the product of complicated methods by which he distilled
optimism from his loveless years in Ireland. In Dublin society during the mid-nineteenth century his parents had had little choice but to marry each other for love of money. The Life Force had cooperated well, producing one genius from the match, but the marriage created much disenchantment and left the son bereft of all passions except two: the passion of laughter and a passion for reform. His own marriage to Charlotte Payne-Townshend was one of his many essays in reformation. He and Charlotte seemed to hold in common one opinion above all others: their determination not to marry. Once more the Life Force interceded and Shaw, under the impression he was dying, offered Charlotte widowhood. So they were married and, having found a house they both disliked, settled comfortably into it for almost forty years. It was an unorthodox marriage. Every Shaw scholar knows how, after an hour’s lecture on the intricacies of Shavian economics, Fabianism, or alphabetical reform, his scholarship will be tested with questions as to whether Shaw slept with his wife. If he did not, this was at Charlotte’s request. Sex was never a central part of their relationship, and Shaw appears to have accepted—a little too readily perhaps—the mariage blanc that Charlotte offered. He met the accusation of behaving with unvirile correctitude by hearing the call of nature in the voice of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, his Nell Gwynne—even though, handicapped by his Fabian gradualism, he failed to permeate. “I throw my desperate hands to heaven and ask why one cannot make one beloved woman happy without sacrificing another. We are all slaves of what is best within us and worst without us.”

Money had given Charlotte independence, and it was the strength of her independence (mitigated by waves of jealousy) that Shaw relied on. She continued to eat meat, drink whisky, and to involve herself as densely as Shaw’s mother had done in the mists of mysticism. Shaw did not lust after her money, having in his middle forties just begun to make money himself. Before their marriage, Rodelle Weintraub has written, “a contract detailing the distribution of their incomes was drawn up. After the marriage, he refused to file a joint income tax return, although British law required married couples to do so, for he felt it was humiliating for wives who had their own incomes to be treated as appendages of their husbands.” While acknowledging that the principle of taxing family income was sound enough, he sought an amendment (nicknamed the Bernard Shaw Relief Act) to the Income Tax Acts to enable husband and wife to make separate returns. “I have absolutely no means of ascertaining my wife’s income except by asking her for the information,” he wrote to the clerk to the Special Commissioners of Income Tax in 1910.

Her property is a separate property. She keeps a separate banking account at a separate bank. Her solicitor is not my solicitor. I can make a guess at her means from her style of living, exactly as the
Surveyor of Income Tax does when he makes a shot at an assessment in the absence of exact information; but beyond that I have no more knowledge of her income than I have of yours. I have therefore asked her to give me a statement. She refuses, on principle. As far as I know, I have no legal means of compelling her to make any such disclosure; and if I had, it does not follow that I am bound to incur law costs to obtain information which is required not by myself but by the State. Clearly, however, it is within the power of the Commissioners to compel my wife to make a full disclosure of her income for the purposes of taxation; but equally clearly they must not communicate that disclosure to me or to any other person. It seems to me under these circumstances that all I can do for you is to tell you who my wife is and leave it to you to ascertain her income and make me pay the tax on it. Even this you cannot do without a violation of secrecy as it will be possible for me by a simple calculation to ascertain my wife’s income from your demand.

After a meeting at which Shaw pointed out that they were both “up against two obstacles—first, an oversight in the Income Tax Acts; and, second, the suffragist movement”—the government accepted separate filings, billing Shaw for any shortages.

Shaw’s sincerity, which lay in attempting to replace the vices of his family life in Ireland with the virtues of married life in England, cannot be doubted. But was sincerity enough? He would have been the first to point out that Galileo’s contemporaries sincerely believed that the sun went round the earth. Shaw’s feminism was Hegelian. He stated as fact what he desired to achieve as an end—that men and women were almost identical. He dreamed of combining their minds to form a higher synthesis of political animal. His paradoxes were the instant flash of this synthesis which, he believed, was being postponed by our old-fashioned segregation of the sexes and by unnecessary class barriers. He used Woman the Huntress as a stereotype to combat the Victorian stereotype of the Sexless Angel. But the women he promoted from angels to human beings and married to men in a political union found that Shawian independence meant a solitude relieved only by the narcotic of work. Shaw’s synthesis, with its precious bodily fluid dried up, becomes synthetic. When asked by Louis Wilkinson in 1909 what he considered to be the chief obstacle to the emancipation of women, he gave one word: “Lust.” It is an answer that, even though he may have meant the lust of women as much as of men, can help to explain his immaculate public record. The man who consistently supported the claim of women to the franchise and who campaigned in his writing and in his life for new attitude to women, could also affirm that it was “not the small things that women miss in me, but the big things.”