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EURIPIDES & MR BERNARD SHAW

BY GILBERT NORWOOD · M.A.

Professor of Greek in the University College of South
Wales and Monmouthshire

An Address to the Newport (Mon). Literary Society,
December 17th, 1912

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A Comparison

OUR subject can best be understood if viewed, in the first instance, historically. Both Euripides and Mr Bernard Shaw have been the voice of an age of reaction, of an age which stood in marked and recognized contrast to the era which had immediately preceded it. Let me begin then with the briefest historical survey and endeavour to compare these two reactions.

It is notoriously hard or impossible for any man to describe, perhaps even to understand, the history and spirit of his own generation. To observe a landscape one must ascend a hill; to comprehend a historical period one must be withdrawn from it in time. A man in a forest cannot see the wood for the trees; the principle and conditions which govern our contemporaries and ourselves are apt to be hidden from us by their very pervasiveness and proximity. But the present epoch fortunately can be understood by those who live in it better than many with the help of a strong contrast, precisely the contrast which it is my present business to indicate. Our history for the last hundred years hardly presents that continuity, that gradual harmonious progress, for which we have been taught to look in the march of human affairs. There is a real gulf between us and the middle of the nineteenth century. In England, at any rate, the march of affairs broke into a kind of hand-gallop, ending with a leap over a chasm which can hardly be defined into a morass from which we have not yet found our way.

This jerk in our progress, this turning-point (to use a more decorous metaphor), is to be found in the Education Act of 1870, a piece of legislation which has already given

I

results of gigantic importance, generating and letting loose energies, the history of which has hardly more than begun and of which no man can with confidence prophesy the end. But their activity has already shaken society. On many momentous subjects it is impossible for us to think or act as we thought and acted fifty years ago. The present age is severed from what is called the Victorian era with a completeness which is truly amazing when we consider the fewness of the years; but not more amazing than the extent to which analogous conditions enable us to enter into the spirit of an epoch so far sundered from us in time as the age of Euripides. We can understand Pericles better than we understand Palmerston; our war in South Africa (which, though in date it falls mostly into the reign of Victoria, does not belong to "the Victorian age") recalls the campaigns of Athens in Melos or Sicily far more vividly than our own struggle with Napoleon; our working-class is very like the "demos" which Cleon led, but it is emphatically much less like the class with which Peel or Russell had to deal.

It will be enough for my purpose if I confine myself to pointing out the difference in spirit between the present time and the Victorian age. That difference, as I have said, is unusually easy to seize. Consider the legislation of two generations ago, the tone and the implied assumptions of statesmen, of orators, of political and social theorists; the formulæ, sometimes not expressed but often definitely proclaimed, which ruled the different classes of society in their inward life and their outward contacts. Above all, consider the literature of those days—the writers who were not only great but also popular, and who therefore voice the opinions and emotions of their less articulate fellows—Dickens, Macaulay, Wordsworth, Tennyson. Add to these that invaluable chronicle of manners and customs, the back numbers of *Punch*. Are we not already far enough removed from them to observe, in spite of their manifold differences, an unity of spirit, a definite tone? What is this spirit? If we are to describe it as it appears to an original-minded man of to-day, to Mr Shaw and to many others, we shall speak of it thus. Above all we are conscious of a robust faith in everything English and of the nineteenth century, a cer-

tainty that all the men of the past have been but so many coral insects building up that perfect structure which has at last emerged above the waters of humiliation and experiment into the sunshine of the Great Exhibition. England is the heir of all the ages and the centre of space. From London there is a slight fall to the provinces, and then again to Scotland and Wales, with a deep but isolated depression to mark Ireland. The level falls rapidly as we come to "foreigners," among whom the French have a bad pre-eminence. Further down the slope are Germans, Americans, and then the rest of Europe. Thus at length we reach the dim collections of humanity known as "natives," whose territory provides the Englishman with a species of drill-hall in which to exercise his celebrated bull-dog virtues and enjoy to the full the luxury of patronizing people who can never annoy him by rivalry.

To support this transcendental geography an equally spurious ethnology was invented. In order to secure a more unquestioned superiority over his fellow-creatures than the malignity of fact allowed, the Briton called into being a new Frenchman, a novel German, a fancy Irishman, all of them unknown to earth but great favourites on the stage and in popular fiction. The Englishmen could see at a glance that he was superior to these grotesques; it only remained for him to believe that the grotesques were reality.

Even the greatest of the popular writers were not untainted by this childishness. The more free an author was from it, the harder was it for him to gain a high reputation in his own day; Carlyle is an example, and Shelley above all. In the work of all those who really struck the imagination of their contemporaries, in writers like Macaulay and Tennyson, there is a tone of gentlemanly arrogance, of urbane self-satisfaction, which resulted in "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world" and a thousand other platitudinous half-truths. You remember Sidney Smith's wistful remark: "I wish I were as sure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything."

Since those days we have passed through a profound reaction which is too closely present to all open minds for me to dilate upon it. The nation which seemed to believe

that Queen Victoria was immortal has seen her fade into a name to which there clings already the faintest strange tinge of unfamiliarity. With that great figure has departed all the crude but not ignoble certainty, all the superficial worship of progress. The heir of all the ages has cut the entail. Where most we were self-confident, we question most. We who thought we knew all about far Cathay have begun to realize how little we know of our own country. Filled with perplexity about the past and dismay at the present, we look timidly towards the future, sown thick with problems which attack the foundations of commerce, social relations, education, and religion. The people that saw a great light now sits in darkness, half-lit by gleams of which it knows not whether they are the radiance of a new dawn or the marsh-fires of diseased yearning and perverted energy.

It would be an almost warrantable conciseness to remark at this point that, as for the reaction in which Euripides was a leading figure, it has been already described; that the contrast between the period of his greatest activity—or, to put it more accurately, of his extant dramas—and the earlier part of the fifth century B.C. is roughly the same as the contrast in England. The magnificent exploits of Athens in the struggle against Persia, the political power and the undying glory which she had won by her victories over the barbarian invaders, had indeed given an enormous impulse to Athenian patriotism and so to the national art in its varied forms of the drama, painting, sculpture, and architecture, an impulse reminding us of the flood of pride and energy which filled the English nation during and after its contest with Napoleon. But by the time at which the Peloponnesian war broke out (the year 431 B.C.), which is also, roughly, the time of Euripides' earliest surviving work, this impulse had already passed away. Things moved quickly in ancient Greece. In less than fifty years from the day of Salamis, Athens had already begun to descend from the pinnacle of political and artistic achievement. She was, indeed, destined again to be important in politics, and her literature was to retrieve its splendours in the hands of Plato and Demosthenes, but for the time decadence seemed to have set its mark everywhere. The Delian League had become

an empire and then a tyranny; philosophy was for a while, to all appearance, undermined by the shallow accomplishments of the Sophists; democracy was becoming ochlocracy. The spectacle of the rapid fading of so much glory had tainted men with that cynicism of which Euripides often speaks. Like Shaw, he was compelled by the urgency of his environment and by the law of his own nature to express the prevalent sense of moral and intellectual bankruptcy, but at the same moment to seek for, and to follow, the road towards a new, more humble, hope.

Let so much suffice as an outline of the historical conditions which have brought these two great dramatists into a kinship of ideas and method. It is now time that we should study this similarity in a more detailed manner. The comparison between Euripides and Mr Shaw has often been made and is, indeed, somewhat quaintly suggested to us by the delightful passage in *Major Barbara* where Shaw himself alludes to Euripides, and almost brings him upon his stage in the person of the professor of Greek. There are, I think, four main features which are to be found in both dramatists, characteristics of fundamental importance in the workmanship and mental outlook of both.

First should be placed a spirit of challenge to all accepted beliefs. The dramatist sees around him a whole world of assumptions, a whole gallery of revered portraits of human greatness. He is the very voice of an age of questions, and by the law of his nature he insists on revising all notions however fundamental, all conventions however universal, all religious systems however august. This by no means implies that he thinks the whole world mistaken. He may, perhaps, endorse the verdict of ages when he has completed his examination—but not before. He feels that the world spurns all truth while it is fresh and stimulating, embracing it only when, by the force of obsolescence, it is already becoming error. Once in every generation at least, a nation must take stock of its creed and its conduct. The whole history of human sorrow and waste is nothing but the admission that such revisions have been often and terribly overdue. “But not always,” you will say; “men and nations sometimes, at any rate, learn by experience and

reform their belief and conduct in the light of it." No doubt; and here we light upon the specially interesting point. Frightful as the extent is to which nearly all of us spend our lives thinking other people's thoughts and doing other people's work, yet the most stupid and custom-bound of us does occasionally think for himself, does at times revolt against convention, even if he only gets as far as the poor fellow in Mr Wells's story, and asks, "What is it all *for*?" But how feeble is this independence of soul! What a tiny corner of our life is cleared of these strange growths, which, though flowers in another's garden, are too often weeds in our own! Of all the opinions we hold, of all the customary actions we perform, is there one in ten, one in fifty, which we hold or act because we have looked at them squarely and seen that they are good?

Now it is the deep glory of these two writers that their self-examination, their sturdy singularity, their almost fierce determination to sound and test everything, is as complete as it can be in a human creature. This merciless sincerity can endure the last trial of all. They both are capable of ridiculing their own reasoned position as if it were the most superficial pose. Take this passage from *The Doctor's Dilemma*. It occurs in the scene where Louis Dubedat, artistically a genius but morally a complete scoundrel, is confronted by a sort of committee of doctors, who are trying to bring his baseness home to him:

Louis: You're on the wrong tack altogether. I'm not a criminal. All your moralizings have no value for me. I don't believe in morality. I'm a disciple of Bernard Shaw.

Sir Patrick: Bernard Shaw? I never heard of him. He's a Methodist preacher, I suppose?

Louis (scandalized): No, no. He's the most advanced man now living: he isn't anything.

What could be more clear than that Mr Shaw, under all the flippancy of this, is quite aware how his own position about morality—a position he has elsewhere succinctly defined in the words "morality may go to its father the Devil"—may become a mere pose and a justification for any clever blackguard? He is always turning on his own would-

be followers. The whole of that slight amusing piece called *How He Lied to her Husband* is an example—a demonstration of what cheap folly even such a profoundly touching and indeed terrible situation as that of *Candida* may become when transplanted to an atmosphere of cheap second-hand characters and shoddy thinking.

Turn for a moment to Euripides, and we find a surprisingly similar case in the *Bacchæ*, his last and perhaps his greatest drama; similar, I mean, in its significance, for the passage is not witty, its subject being religion. Throughout his life Euripides has been attacking the traditional beliefs about the orthodox Olympian gods with every resource of his splendid moral earnestness, his intellectual penetration, and his technical skill. And yet, at the end of his life what does he say?

I do not rationalize about the gods. Those ancestral traditions, coeval with time, which are our possession, no reason can overthrow, not even if subtle brains have discovered what they call wisdom.

This passage, which I have translated clumsily but as fairly as I can, is one of the most celebrated in Euripides, and has often been regarded as the poet's recantation of the convictions and the teaching of a lifetime. I, for one, cannot think so. It is unsafe to affirm anything more definite than this, that the poet is setting himself against dilettantism in matters where dilettantism is fatal. A restless spirit of inquiry into the credentials of traditional ideas, on whatever subject, had long been general in the more cultivated communities of Greece. Nothing, however venerable, could escape a close and often hostile scrutiny. In this movement Euripides had taken a leading part, and he was just as ready in his latest years—this the *Bacchæ*, as a whole, abundantly proves—to fight for the same cause as he had been when young. But he was at odds with those who made a potent medicine their daily beverage—those young wits of whom Aristophanes says that "the give-me-a-definition look is coming out on you for all the world like a rash." Euripides had found that it was as important to restrain, even to disown, disciples who made his principles an excuse for their own folly and misbehaviour, as to insist on the principles themselves.

But this is only a special case, striking though it may be as the final proof of spiritual clearness and candour. What I wish above all to emphasize is that both these writers know practically no limits to their range of scrutiny. Think of the number of typical heroes whom Mr Shaw turns inside out—the different kinds of men and women who have been and are revered as pillars of society and stalwart witnesses to the greatness of humanity. Sergius Saranoff, the splendid warrior who turns defeat into victory by a heroic cavalry-charge, and comes home to the humble plaudits of his friends and the rapturous homage of his future bride—how he wilts in the cold dry air of Shavian criticism! His cavalry-charge is an insane act of suicide which succeeds by miracle because the enemy run short of ammunition; his love-affair is an elaborate pose of courtly adoration on both sides; his melodramatic affectations are punctured at every turn by the irony of circumstances or by the contrast of the real humdrum value of the Swiss officer whom he despises.

Candida—an even finer play than *Arms and the Man*—contains a similar example of this method. There the character to be vivisected like Sergius is Morell the clergyman. The searchlight is turned pitilessly upon his weakness and self-indulgence, but—this is a point of vast importance—he is not the ordinary clergyman of the stage. He is neither the inept fool of *The Private Secretary* nor the farcical sham-ecclesiastic of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He is a good Christian, hardworking and sympathetic, a fine speaker, an intelligent thorough man, a man even with some sense of humour. We see through him in the end, but it is assuredly not because we find his goodness to be a fraud, his sympathy a piece of professional technique. Morell is no hypocrite grinding his teeth in the last act; he will preach just as well and sincerely to-morrow—nay, with greater sincerity and effect. He is found out simply because Mr Shaw is keen-sighted enough to disregard conventional reverence for the popular clergyman and to see and show us the human being underneath. Morell is as good as most people, but he is not so much better than they as we thought and as he thought. He has mistaken bustle for life, applause for conversion; we all do this. The dramatist has turned aside from

such easy quarry as the forger, the child-stealer, the betrayer of political secrets, and all the rest of popular villains; he has studied ordinary people.

If his work at any point impinges upon melodrama, it is only that he may the more startlingly convince us of the truth by its contrast with theatrical absurdity. One may say that Shaw begins where melodrama leaves off. Most of us have, in the presence of a child, told some laughable anecdote which ends abruptly with a repartee, and the child has asked, "And what did the other man say?" Shaw is forever telling us what the other man says and does; often it is the best part of the story. General Burgoyne, in *The Devil's Disciple*, is describing to his colleague the plight of his forces when face to face with the American insurgents:

Do you at all realize, sir, that we have nothing standing between us and destruction but our own bluff and the sheepishness of these colonists? They are men of the same English stock as ourselves: six to one of us, six to one, sir; and nearly half our troops are Hessians, Brunswickers, German dragoons, and Indians with scalping-knives. These are the countrymen on whose devotion you rely! Suppose the colonists find a leader! Suppose the news from Springtown should turn out to mean that they have already found a leader! What shall we do then, eh?

Now comes the crushing answer of the footlights:

Our duty, sir, I presume.

Loud cheers and a Union Jack in the background, with quick curtain? No. Burgoyne is allowed to reply:

Quite so, quite so. Thank you, Major Swindon, thank you. Now you've settled the question, sir—thrown a flood of light on the situation. What a comfort to me to feel that I have at my side so devoted and able an officer to support me in this emergency! I think, sir, it will probably relieve both our feelings if we proceed to hang this dissenter without further delay, especially as I am debarred by my principles from the customary military vent for my feelings.

Or take a simpler case from *The Man of Destiny*. Napoleon is addressing a woman who has robbed one of his officers of some papers:

Napoleon: I am waiting for the despatches. I shall take them, if necessary, with as little ceremony as the handkerchief.

The Lady: General, do you threaten women?

Napoleon: Yes.

Is this merely a theatrical trick, simply a dexterous knowledge when, and when not, to drop the curtain? Assuredly no. One of Mr Shaw's constant aims is to free himself and his hearers from the dominion of mere phrases. The power of these catchwords consists in this, that they impress the surface of the mind with a sense of dignity, above all of finality. Therefore the surest way to break the spell is to refuse to regard them as final, to consider them open to question; and, in the drama, to allow an opportunity of reply. At the same time as he clears away this verbal lumber, Mr Shaw throws off allegiance to the conventional hero, the pillar of society, the demigod of the stage. His plays are full of these discredited pundits: Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonnington, the great physician; Mrs Dudgeon, the disagreeable godly mater-familias; Napoleon, the Man of Destiny; Broadbent, the liberal-minded Englishman; Sir Howard Hallam, the upright judge; Morell once more, and Major Saranoff.

Now, as to Euripides, it would be an easy task to give a list equally long and significant. First let us look at Achilles in the *Iphigenia at Aulis*. He is a character not unlike Sergius Saranoff. This dazzling Homeric hero, perhaps the most glorious figure in Greek story, finds himself here in a somewhat awkward and ludicrous situation. The Greek host has assembled at Aulis, about to cross the sea to Troy under the leadership of Agamemnon. But contrary winds have been sent by the goddess Artemis; the leaders are in despair, the army on the verge of mutiny. At this point the prophet Calchas informs Agamemnon that the wrath of Artemis can only be averted if Agamemnon will sacrifice Iphigenia, his own daughter, on the altar of the goddess. After much wretched hesitation the King consents and summons her from her home in Argos. The hideous purpose of her coming is concealed; Agamemnon sends a message that he wishes to marry her to Achilles, the son of the goddess Thetis. But he tells Achilles nothing of this plot. In due time the maiden

arrives, but her father learns with horror that her mother, his wife, has shared her journey. Not only is his heart breaking at the coming slaughter; he knows that he will have to face his wife's desperate opposition hereafter if not at once. For the moment he contrives to beat a retreat, but in his absence Clytæmnestra and her daughter learn from an old slave the true meaning of the summons. They decide to appeal to Achilles, and when he comes upon the scene Clytæmnestra makes a desperate yet dignified appeal. What is his reply? He is represented by all tradition as the son of a goddess, by far the bravest and strongest of the Greek warriors; in Homer the very sound of his battle-cry is enough to make the Trojans flee. How does he act now? Does he bestow three or four lines of hurried consolation on the distressed ladies and then, brandishing his spear, bound away to hew Agamemnon and his followers into a more reasonable frame of mind, after which, no doubt, he returns to marry Iphigenia in sober earnest? No. He makes a speech which it is worth while to quote at length, for its length is important. And we must remember that all the while a royal lady is hanging upon his words in unspeakable anguish. Thus then Achilles:

Magnanimously my heart is lifted on high; it knows how to be vexed at evil and to rejoice, not immoderately, in lofty station. Such men as I are led by deliberate reason to live their lives correctly by the help of discretion. Now there are occasions when it is pleasant not to be too wise, and other occasions when it is good to have useful wits. I was reared in the abode of Chiron, a most righteous man, and so learned simplicity of character. And as for the sons of Atreus, if they show themselves good leaders, I will obey them; if not, I won't. Both here and at Troy I shall show my freedom of spirit, while so far as in me lies I do deeds of knightly daring. And as for thee, who hast been shamefully entreated by thy dearest, in so far as a young man may, so far will I enfold thee in my pity, and never shall thy daughter be slain by her father, when she hath been called mine; for I will not give my person to thy husband to weave his plots withal. For it is my name, even if it did not draw the sword, that will slaughter this thy child. The cause, to be sure, is thy husband; but myself will be no longer guiltless, if through me and marriage with me she must perish—she the damsel that hath suffered shamefully and intolerably, and hath in wondrous unworthy wise been dishonoured. I am the

basest Greek alive; I, even I, am naught, and Menelaus is a true man; I am not the son of Peleus but of a fiend; if my name in thy husband's cause shall slaughter her! By Nereus I swear, Nereus reared amid the billows of the sea, the sire of Thetis my mother, that King Agamemnon shall not touch thy daughter, not even with his finger, not even touch her garment. Or Sipylus, on the frontiers of Heathen-esse, the place from which these generals trace their descent, shall be a city, while Phthia, my own home, shall be forgotten on the earth. Calchas, the soothsayer, shall rue his sacrificial barley-meal and his holy water. Nay, what soothsayer is a man? Few truths he speaks, and many lies—and all by chance; then, when chance fails him, he is lost. Not because I wish for this marriage do I speak thus; thousands of girls pursue me for my hand. No; King Agamemnon has insulted me. He ought to have asked my permission that my name should be used to ensnare his child; it was the thought that I should be the bridegroom that tempted Clytæmnestra most. I would have granted this use of my name to the Greeks, if here lay the hitch in their voyage to Troy; I would not have refused to aid the common weal of my companions in arms. But now I am a cipher in the eyes of our generals—to treat me honourably or no is a light matter. Soon shall this sword make question, this sword which even before I come to Troy I will stain with slaughterous drops of gore, whether any man shall tear thy daughter from me. Keep quiet. I have appeared to thee a mighty god. I am not one. But I will be one.

“Was there ever such a fool?” you say. What a gloriously inept oration! Rodomontade and conceit, not even selfishness—it is nothing more. One is not surprised to hear that when Achilles appeals to the Greeks (probably in a similar harangue) they throw stones at him and he comes rushing back to Clytæmnestra to report progress, or rather the lack of it. He again talks of fighting, but at this point Iphigenia, whose delicate nerves must have been hideously tried by all this beating of tom-toms, interferes and proclaims her readiness to die for the hopes of Greece. Achilles, after an awkward attempt at expressing his admiration, declares that he will none the less fight to save her. At the end of the play we learn that so far from doing this the loquacious champion has actually taken part in the ceremony of sacrifice: “the son of Peleus, with the basket and the holy water, ran round the altar of the goddess.”

Both Achilles and Sergius Saranoff are made ridiculous, not necessarily by any fault of character, but by their attempt

at critical moments, not to say what they feel, but to say what they think they ought to feel. Each has an impossible pose to keep up. Sergius, a thoroughly commonplace vulgar person, thinks he must talk like the mediæval knight and lover, merely because he is a military officer and has recently been in danger of his life. Achilles is a superficial empty-headed spoiled young fellow, who has been taught that his mother is a goddess and tries to live up to this impossible standard. He is too good a soldier not to know that any five (at most) of the Greeks are quite a match for him; but he has to make himself think that he can rout the whole host single-handed. Both these sawdust heroes deceive the audience for a long time, simply because of tradition. There is nothing in which a modern theatre believes so implicitly as the gallant officer, no human being whom a Greek audience revered so devotedly as Achilles. All the greater is the shock in both cases when the hero is found out; and it is not only the hero, but the cult of such people which quivers under the shock. And that is precisely the aim both of Euripides and of Mr Shaw.

Let me point to another parallel case. These two dramatists both handle the subject of revenge—the alleged unwritten law that those who are bitterly wronged but are prevented by the accident of law from seeking redress at the hands of the State, may, with perfect right, redress themselves. *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* is Shaw's study of this theory. Brassbound's mother has been cruelly neglected and cheated by her brother-in-law, an English judge. But nothing has been done against which the law can be reasonably invoked. The judge is respected as a model of respectability and uprightness; his nephew can do nothing save by stratagem and the help of luck. But luck does favour him. It so happens that Brassbound has the opportunity of taking Sir Howard into the North African desert and there handing him over as a slave to an Arab chief. He proclaims his intention of doing so, hurling bitter reproaches and taunts at the judge, who thinks he has a right to rob his relatives and then to put on a robe of ermine and sentence his fellow-creatures to vindictive revenge under the name of legal punishment.

But Sir^rHoward's sister-in-law, Lady Cecily, is with the party. She talks to Brassbound as only a woman can who is a miracle of common sense and tact. Brassbound bit by bit is made to see that his mission of vengeance is prompted far less by love for his mother than by hatred for his uncle, and that even if it were not, as his mother is dead, he can do nothing to help her now; moreover, that his whole life has been uselessly hardened and withered by brooding over his wrongs. But his quiver contains one more shaft: "It will teach other scoundrels to respect widows and orphans. Do you forget that there is such a thing as justice?" To which Lady Cecily replies: "Oh, if you are going to dress yourself up in ermine and call yourself Justice, I give you up. You are just your uncle over again; only he gets £5,000 a year for it, and you do it for nothing." The whole matter leads to this conclusion, that revenge is a waste of energy and time, and worse. Bloodshed and oppression may be more intelligible if performed by way of reprisal; they are none the less offences against the true economy of society.

Such seems to be the moral of Euripides' *Electra* also, which deals with the most famous vendetta in Greek story. It is a part of the tale of Troy. Agamemnon, after sacking the city of Priam, returned to his home at Mycenæ in triumph, only to be murdered on the day of his return by his wife, Clytæmnestra, and her lover, Ægisthus. At the time of his death the King had two children, a daughter, Electra, and a son, Orestes, who was still a young boy. Electra, fearing for the heir to the throne, at once sent her brother across the border, herself remaining at home. Clytæmnestra and Ægisthus became joint rulers of the country. At length, when Orestes had grown to manhood, he was ordered by the Delphic oracle to go home and slay his mother and Ægisthus in requital for his father's murder. This he did, but avenging fiends, the Furies, pursued him for his matricide, until he was freed from them by the intervention of Apollo.

Such is the story in bald outline—a magnificent subject for a playwright. But clearly also the dramatist's point of view will make a world of difference. A poet penetrated by belief in the orthodox Olympian religion will lay tremendous stress on the fact that Orestes was impelled to his frightful

deed by the direct and inevitable decree of Heaven; he will not admit the kinship between the victim and the slayer to be anything more than an important detail. This is the method which Æschylus has followed. Euripides' outlook was very different, even the opposite. In effect he says: "the kinship between the avenger and his victim is—must be—the cardinal point. If the oracle commanded Orestes to do this thing, so much the worse for the oracle. It is a scandal to civilized men." And so he insists on studying the grim old tale from the human standpoint. He depicts for us, as does Shaw, the evil effects of a plan of vengeance cherished for many years, the hardening and withering effect on the soul. Orestes, having lived abroad, has something (but not very much) of the breadth and many-sidedness which mark a well-developed man. But Electra all these years has lived on the thought of her murdered father and on the passionate thirst for more blood, even that of her mother. If Agamemnon has been murdered, that is no reason, the poet thinks, why his daughter should commit a slow moral suicide. She and her brother ruin their lives, as well as destroy their mother and Ægisthus, by their rigid servility to a barren creed.

There is more than this. Both Shaw and Euripides have felt that, even granting the justice and wisdom of revenge, its pursuers can only hold to their purpose by keeping their eyes closed to some of the facts. It may be exaggeration to exclaim *tout savoir c'est tout pardonner*, but every villain has some redeeming feature; nay, many villains are not villains at all. Quite legitimately, both writers have made their black sheep as white as possible. For Sir Howard Hallam there are real excuses enough to show us that he is at the worst as good as the average man. Brassbound himself at length declares: "My uncle is no worse a man than myself—better, most likely, for he has a better head and a higher place. Well, I took him for a villain out of a story-book."

What of Euripides? He remembers that the murder of Agamemnon happened many years before. Why should not the murderers have become better instead of worse? And is not an act of revenge, like that of Orestes, carried out (as it had to be) by craft, necessarily repulsive? So it comes about

that our sympathies are with Ægisthus and Clytæmnestra, not with their foes. Ægisthus is accosted by Orestes while on his farm celebrating a rustic sacrifice. He genially invites the strangers to join in the festival, and is struck dead from behind while engaged in an act of religion. Clytæmnestra is lured to her daughter's house by the most dastardly excuse which can be imagined. A message is sent to her that Electra has given birth to a child. It is Electra's own invention, which she thus expounds:

Announce that I have been delivered of a male child, ten days ago, and that the time of my purification is thus at hand. She will come when she hears that I have been through the pains of childbirth; aye, and she will weep over the low estate of my babe. Then when once she has come, of course, it is her death.

Could any speech, any situation, show more vividly the master-hand? In a few chill words it portrays the hideous poisoning of all natural love, sympathy, decency, which I noted a moment ago; it reminds us further that it is precisely because Electra has *not* had children that she can thus, in the course of years, be narrowed and blighted into a fiend; and it makes sure, not only that Clytæmnestra will come, but that she will come with just those emotions stirring her which make a woman most sincere and loving—at the moment when she is to be put to death, and that too by the help of one who should have been reminded, if not by her heart, yet by her own lie, how near and precious the victim should seem to her own children. The act of blood is performed, and the two awake to a tardy repentance, even then not reflecting that perhaps years ago their mother had her tardy repentance too.

One might, if time allowed, offer many other such examples from Euripides of traditional heroes on whom the light of common day is poured with woeful results for the tinsel and sham jewellery—Jason, for instance; Jason whom so many generations have admired as the embodiment of chivalry, journeying to a far country in quest of the Fleece, that very symbol of romance, and from the edge of the world bringing with him Medea, who left all for love. So have we all regarded Jason. But Euripides, whose interest

in and sympathy for women surpassed that of any feminist of antiquity, prefers to ask himself what happened next. What of Jason as a married man, settled down to "getting on," with no definite profession and few assets beside the golden fleece? Could his wife prove a social success? Would she aid her husband's ambition by showing herself a tactful hostess and a *grande dame* in general? "Absurd," you say, "positively vulgar." Perhaps. And there is very real tragedy hovering round a haughty, noble, simple nature forced to live in a vulgar atmosphere. If Euripides chooses to interest himself in life as it is rather than in magnificent episodes of the world's youth, you may call him Philistine if you will, but you cannot argue with a point of view. His treatment of this situation in the *Medea* is, perhaps, his greatest and most poignantly real work. The barbarian princess appears in the quiet aristocratic little courts of Greece like a destroying flame. At Iolchos, the home of Jason, she destroys the old king Pelias, his enemy, by her savage cunning—the famous trick of the rejuvenating cauldron. Her husband and she, with their children, are forced to go into exile and find a home at Corinth. There Jason, still with no resources but his ancestry and his sword, determines to mend his fortunes by—marriage! His view, apparently, is that Medea is not exactly his wife—he is, indeed, very hazy about this—and that she ought not to object if, by a brilliant marriage, he secures his own prospects (for he intends to ally himself to the royal family) and incidentally hers and those of her children. Anyhow, Medea is only "a native." Learning his purpose by accident, Medea breaks forth into passionate reproach and recital of all she has done for him. Without her magical aid he would never have won the Fleece, nay, he could not have escaped from Colchis with his life. By thus assisting him she has been forced to leave her home and country, to entrust all her future to him. Jason is but little ruffled by this terrible appeal. He feels that the benefits she has wrought are indeed great—"You have not done badly," as he says—but that the return he has already made is a full quittance; as thus:

First of all, you live in Greece, instead of a barbarous land. You now understand justice and obedience to law, in place of arbitrary

violence. Then, all the Greeks know of your wisdom and you have become a celebrity, whereas, if you had still been living at the end of the world, you would never have been heard of.

So might an impresario address a wonderful soprano whom he had "discovered" in Queensland or Dakota. We have travelled far indeed from the mediæval knight and his distressed damsel. The sequel, the frightful overthrow of all Jason's happiness and hopes, does not here concern us.

But little time remains for the other parts of my topic. First of these must come social questions. On their treatment of this subject alone a volume could be written, but I shall pass over it lightly, as it is necessary to touch on the definite political propaganda of Mr Shaw, and though I have strong opinions about his doctrines I should be very sorry to abuse my present opportunity in order to thrust my own beliefs upon you. You have come to hear a lecture on literature, not to fall into a political ambush. Now, the two great social questions which attract Mr Shaw beyond any other are the relations of the sexes and economic inequality: he is a feminist and a socialist. Euripides also is deeply concerned about these matters, but far more in the position of women than that of the poor, for the sufficient reason that economic inequality seemed to him, and, indeed, was, less dangerous than the legal and social inequality of the sexes. I need not remind you of the industry and the wit which Mr Shaw has expended upon the problems of poverty. Two whole plays are devoted to them—*Major Barbara* and *Widowers' Houses*. *John Bull's Other Island* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* deal with the same theme, though there it is interwoven with other matters, in the first by imperial politics and in the second by the sex-question. Whatever one thinks of Mr Shaw's conclusions, no one save a partisan journalist can deny the sincerity and the public spirit of his method and aims.

That which in Euripides corresponds to this feature of Shaw's work is his indignation, not against financial inequality particularly, much more against political inequality and bureaucracy. He loves to inveigh against officials, whether they are rulers and generals, or whether they are mere Bumbles, and he is never weary of praising the middle class.

The poet seems to have been a very moderate democrat. He distrusts the rich and nobly-born, but he also fears the masses. Probably he would have liked to see a return to the Solonian *régime*, to give prima facie political equality to all citizens with the important reservation that the archonship and the board of generals should be filled from certain classes only. Against the oligarchy of the rich and the anarchy of the mob the middle class, according to him, formed an effective, and the only, safeguard.

More startling than this, to an Athenian at any rate, was his championship of slaves. The statement of Aristotle, a man almost as broad-minded as profound, that a slave is a living tool, expresses the popular opinion and the legal view. Euripides is apparently the only man of his day who showed any sort of real sympathy for slaves; his nameless messengers, attendants, old men, and the like, form a noble company of obscure and faithful ones.

But by far the strongest claim of Euripides to renown as a social theorist is his study of women—their character, their actual position in contemporary society, and their possibilities. Here again is a topic to which by itself one might devote several lectures; it is a feature in the work of this dramatist which has, before any other attribute, arrested attention in his own day and in every other age in which he has been intelligently studied; it accounts, probably, for several anecdotes about his life. There is hardly a single extant tragedy of his which does not contain some wonderfully penetrating and illuminating study of female character. But far more than this: several of his finest works are devoted primarily, almost exclusively, to this theme—the *Medea*, the *Hippolytus*, the *Alcestis*, and the *Andromache*. In all these cases Euripides' opinions and emotions are plain and expressed with admirable incisiveness; and in all he is observing, not the heroine of legend, but the contemporary Athenian woman. In all, too, he is striving to create a more healthy public opinion. It has been said that "of all ancient moralists, he is alone, or alone with Plato, in showing an *adequate* notion of that radical disease, an imperfect ideal of woman, of which, more than of anything else, ancient civilization perished." Against this disease no man except

Plato struggled so bravely as Euripides, and not even Plato with equal discernment.

It is not so much that he admires women, still less that he regards them as superior to men; his subtle and true delineations bring out as many faults as virtues. He is impressed by two things: first, the sorrows of women, whether they arise from the indifference of individuals and of the state, or whether they are the special pains and hardships which no social scheme can take from their shoulders; second, the danger to the community which lies in allowing a great mass of persons to pass their lives and spend their energies within its borders without attempting to understand them, without forming some sort of working hypothesis, good or bad, about their function as a part of the community, without in short *digesting* them. He thinks of women, then, as a man of human sympathies, and as a citizen of political foresight.

In describing the sorrows of women, then, Euripides shows a knowledge of the female heart and emotions which excite the liveliest interest and wonder. We are told that he was twice married, and unhappily. Unhappy his married life may have been according to the gossips, but there is good evidence that the poet talked to his wife, and more, that he let her talk to him; still more, that while she talked he listened. No man unaided could have written that marvellous first speech of Medea. I will venture to read you a version of part of it, as it is extremely important from several points of view. You will remember the position of Medea, a foreigner at Corinth, seeing herself and her young children on the point of being deserted by Jason. She is addressing the company of Corinthian ladies who have come to condole with her.

Now, as for me, this unlooked-for happening hath broken my heart. Friends, I am lost. The joy of life hath left me, and I fain would die. For, as ye know well, he, my husband, in whom were all my hopes, hath shown himself an utter villain. Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most unhappy. For, first, by payment of much wealth we must needs purchase a husband, a master of our persons. . . . And herein lies a fearful peril: will he be base or good? For the wife is disgraced by divorce, yet to refuse marriage is im-

possible. Then, when a woman has come to live with a strange character and strange ways of life, she must needs have second-sight (for her past experience tells her nothing) if she is to know how to deal with her husband. If, then, we solve this riddle, and the spouse who dwells with us proves not a brutal yoke-fellow, our life is to be envied; otherwise, death were best. When a man is wearied of his home, he walks abroad and relieves his spirit of its distaste in the society of some friend or companion; but we are forced to look to one person only. And they say of us that we pass within the house a life unthreatened by any peril, whereas they engage in the toil of war. Fools! I had rather fight three pitched battles than face the pains of childbirth once. But no more. What is true of me cannot be said of thee. Thou hast this city and thy father's house, a happy life, and the company of friends; while I, deserted and homeless, am outraged by my husband, I that have been reft from a foreign land and have no mother, no brother, no kinsman, to whom, as to a haven, I may flee from this calamity. This, then, will I ask of thee, this only. If I discover some means, some plot, whereby to win revenge for these my wrongs from my husband, from him that gave his daughter, and from herself, be silent. In all things else a woman is full of dread and dares not look upon battles and the sword; but if she is wronged in her affections, there is no other soul so murderous.

Nothing need, or can by me, be added to the earlier part of this. It is only one example among many that could be cited of the poet's subtle sympathy and understanding of women, an understanding, no doubt, helped by his love for children. The yearning of a parent over his child has never been expressed more poignantly than by a few verses in this very play of *Medea*, lines too unspeakably tender and painful to quote casually. But I invite your attention particularly to the last few words in which Medea hints to the Corinthian ladies that she has a plan of vengeance. It is in this way that the great speech which I have tried to render brings us to the second part of this subject, Euripides' feeling that the contemporary attitude towards women was a menace to society. He understood well the frightful explosive force of a mature adult in its passions, its will, its audacity, but in intellectual weakness and unbalanced impulsiveness a child. At all costs, he felt, we must recast our social system; we must open to women activities which can give their natures space to develop healthily. I suspect that he would have

assented to the epigram which declares that "the last thing man will civilize is woman"; but the longer Athens put off the attempt the greater the danger. This belief that the harem-system which prevailed at Athens was a real peril appears repeatedly. In the *Andromache* he is principally concerned to show us the evil which may be wrought by an impulsive untrained woman, denied all interest in outside things but allowed despotic power in her own house. The curse of the Athenian system was, according to him, that it stunted all a woman's good qualities, while it left her free to indulge her cruel or thoughtless whims. To quote the *Medea* once more, the female sex is called "helpless for good, but of all mischief plotters most cunning." As in that play he has painted a woman of pride and courage goaded by her wrongs into crime, so in the *Andromache* he presents us with a weaker, more febrile, girl led by her own unguided impulses—still into crime.

Already I have said that I have no wish to draw the moral for our own time. But there are two remarks which should be offered. The first is that Euripides' lesson applies, at the utmost, only partly to us. On any view, the condition of women is not now so spiritually and intellectually debased as it was in Athens during the fifth century B.C. The second remark is still more germane to the subject of this lecture. Allowing for differences in circumstances, it can be said that Mr Shaw takes up much the same position as Euripides. Those of you who have read—very few of you, for excellent reasons, will have seen—that powerful and terrible drama *Mrs Warren's Profession*, will remember that Mrs Warren devotes herself to the basest and most anti-social of all trades just because she is forced into it by the social and economic conditions which make everything else but starvation impossible. *Man and Superman*, magnificent as it is, need not detain us now. No comparison with the work of Euripides is here possible, as the play is based on a conception of woman which was a sheer impossibility to any Greek of classical days.

It is high time that we turned to a very obvious feature of both these writers—a feature which is observed by the most casual reader, and which is, indeed, sometimes held

to be Mr Shaw's only literary virtue. I mean the directness, wit, and athletic brilliance of their style. Here we are plainly under a grave disability, for while you can all judge of the modern playwright from his own words, for the ancient the majority among you must, I suppose, be contented with the poor substitute of my translation. From Euripides one may select a fine piece of invective uttered by the captive Andromache, the widow of Hector, when she has been shamefully lured to her death by the King of Sparta :

Ye hated wretches, spurned of all mankind,
Tenants of Sparta, souls of crawling craft,
Plotters of villainy and lords of lies,
Whose souls are rotten, yea, a labyrinth
Of cheating, this your glory 'mid the Greeks
On sin is founded and by sin has thriven!
What foulness know ye not? Love ye not blood
And shameful gains? Are ye not ever found
With lips confirming what your hearts deny?
Curses upon you! But, for me, my death
Hath lost its sting—thou'rt cheated. *Then* I died
When hapless Troy was taken, and my lord
Fell like a chieftain, he whose spear full oft
Chased thee from land to quake upon thy ship.
Now, lo! thou'rt come in panoply of war
To fright a woman, and to slay me. Aye,
Slay on! These lips shall never beg my life
From child of thine or fawn on such as thou!
At Sparta art thou mighty? So was I
Erstwhile at Troy. And if I fall to-day,
Forbear thy joy. Soon may'st thou fall as low.

Or take this passage from the *Iphigenia at Aulis* in which the young princess makes her magnificent avowal that she is ready to die that she may give the Greek fleet a fair wind for Troy:

Hellas, mightiest of nations, now on me bends all her gaze;
I can ope the broad Ægean, I can Ilion's towers raze!
I can drown in blood of Trojans Helen's flight and Paris' crime;
I can school each lewd barbarian, through the years of after-time,
Ne'er again to steer his pinnacle to the happy shores of Greece.
Dying, I shall save a nation, and my fame shall aye increase,

Raising me in death to greatness, Hellas' saviour, blest indeed.
Nay, 'twere ill my life to cherish, shunning thus for her to bleed.
I was born the child of Hellas, not, O mother, only thine.
See, ten thousand armèd heroes! See their linkèd bucklers' line!
See ten thousand straining oarsmen, every heart with courage high,
Ready in their country's quarrel to avenge her wrongs or die!
Shall the life of one weak woman baffle all this fair emprise?
Nay, 'twere sin! What guiltless answer to our falt'ring lips could rise?
Think once more! Achilles yonder, would'st thou see him strive—
and fall—

Battling with the host of Argos single-handed at my call?
'Twere a gain one man should live, were e'en ten thousand maids the
price.

Yea, and Artemis demands my body to her sacrifice.
When the hand divine hath beckoned, shall a mortal shun her fate?
Never! To the hopes of Hellas I my being consecrate.
Slay me! Vanquish Troy! I die not childless, since through ages down
Lives, in place of home and children, this my never-dimmed renown!

From Mr Shaw's work let me read you this fine piece of declamation from *Cæsar and Cleopatra*. Julius Cæsar, walking alone by night across the Egyptian desert, comes upon the sphinx:

Hail, Sphinx: salutation from Julius Cæsar! I have wandered in many lands, seeking the lost regions from which my birth into this world exiled me, and the company of creatures such as I myself. I have found flocks and pastures, men and cities, but no other Cæsar, no air native to me, no man kindred to me, none who can do my day's deed, and think my night's thought. In the little world yonder, Sphinx, my place is as high as yours in this great desert; only I wander, and you sit still; I conquer, and you endure; I work and wonder, you watch and wait; I look up and am dazzled, look down and am darkened, look round and am puzzled, whilst your eyes never turn from looking out—out of the world—to the lost region—the home from which we have strayed. Sphinx, you and I, strangers to the race of men, are no strangers to one another: have I not been conscious of you and of this place since I was born? Rome is a mad-man's dream: this is my reality. These starry lamps of yours I have seen from afar in Gaul, in Britain, in Spain, in Thessaly, signalling great secrets to some eternal sentinel below, whose post I never could find. And here at last is their sentinel—an image of the constant and immortal part of my life, silent, full of thought, alone in the silver desert.

Lastly, here is a trenchant passage from *Major Barbara*, more in his usual style. The self-made millionaire is discussing with his aristocratic son the profession which the latter should choose. After several of his suggestions have been declined the father goes to the point:

Undershaft: Well, come! Is there *anything* you know or care for?

Stephen: I know the difference between right and wrong.

Undershaft: You don't say so! What! No capacity for business, no knowledge of law, no sympathy with art, no pretension to philosophy; only a simple knowledge of the secret that has puzzled all the philosophers, baffled all the lawyers, muddled all the men of business, and ruined most of the artists: the secret of right and wrong. Why, man, you're a genius, a master of masters, a god! At twenty-four, too!

Stephen: You are pleased to be facetious. I pretend to nothing more than any honourable English gentleman claims as his birthright.

Undershaft: Oh, that's everybody's birthright. Look at poor little Jenny Hill, the Salvation lassie! She would think you were laughing at her if you asked her to stand up in the street and teach grammar or geography or mathematics or even drawing-room dancing; but it never occurs to her to doubt that she can teach morals and religion. You are all alike, you respectable people. You can't tell me the bursting strain of a ten-inch gun, which is a very simple matter; but you all think you can tell me the bursting strain of a man under temptation. You daren't handle high explosives; but you're all ready to handle honesty and truth and justice and the whole duty of man, and kill one another at that game. What a country! What a world!

And now, finally, there is a likeness between these two men in the treatment they have received from their contemporaries. That both have attracted great attention is a point on which I need not insist; but combined with this we notice a strong reaction in certain quarters. Euripides produced plays at Athens for about fifty years; only five times was he awarded the first prize in the dramatic contest, and one of these victories was obtained after his death. The official leaders of public opinion scouted him; men in their position could not support a writer who habitually ridiculed the claims of the Delphic oracle, who showed scant respect even for Athena, the guardian-goddess of the state, who hated officialism, who discussed at large the rights and the feelings of mere slaves, who appeared to think that women had souls, perhaps even a social value, who was for ever

examining and condemning the most revered traditions, who was, in short, "queer." We have just learned, from a manuscript published this very year, that he was indicted by the statesman Cleon for impiety. The chief voice of this hostility was the comic dramatist Aristophanes, as great a genius as Euripides himself, whose magnificent comedy of the *Frogs* is in the main an elaborate attack upon Euripides' teaching, and who is never weary of directing laughable and trenchant gibes against the great apostle of rationalism.

Much the same is the case of Mr Shaw. No statesman brings him to trial for impiety, perhaps because we do not agree as to what piety is; but the rôle of Aristophanes is filled with painstaking emulation by the Press. It must be allowed that the onslaughts of our journalists are not so brilliant or so searching as those of the Athenian dramatist, but they do their best. Failing the genius of Aristophanes, they fall back on his unfairness and his sneers. To judge from the *Frogs* one would suppose Euripides, not a great but misguided and misleading poet; rather a mere scribbling, pernicious fool. In a weekly review of the highest standing I read some time ago an article on Mr Shaw's latest volume, in which the word "jester" was employed a dozen times. It is a significant word. The English publicist knows well that the shortest way to rob a man of influence is to call him amusing, the rooted belief of the British public being that if a man is funny he cannot be in earnest. Accordingly Mr Shaw is dubbed "the licensed jester," that is to say: "this is a funny man; therefore you may read and enjoy him without feeling bound to pay any attention to what he says." And in spite of their necessary inferiority, the newspapers have one vast advantage over Aristophanes. Few men in Athens took him seriously, while to-day most people are positively hypnotized by whatever they see in print if only it is repeated often enough. And it is repeated, very often. The deliberate and unending misrepresentation of Mr Shaw by hosts of journalists who know better is a public scandal.

Still, there is another side to the picture. That Euripides should be hated by Cleon, and Shaw despised by Broadbent, is natural enough. They both have found a recompense in the delighted respect of their younger contemporaries.

What especially annoyed Aristophanes was the unbounded influence which Euripides wielded over educated young men. The future was with him, and during the centuries which have passed since his death few Greek writers have enjoyed so continuous and discriminating a popularity. When the contest in the world of the dead, the contest between Æschylus and Euripides portrayed in the *Frogs*, is about to begin, Æschylus complains that he is at a disadvantage because he has left his works on earth alive, while his rival's plays have died with him. Never was a prophecy more utterly refuted by time. And such, we cannot doubt, will be the fate of Mr Shaw's plays. No work will die which is so instinct with wit, with breadth of mind and lively interest, with such a passionate zeal for the common health. Already, as did his Athenian counterpart, he is coming into his kingdom; no name stands higher with educated people of the new generation than his. And this assures his popularity and his influence for future time; as years go by he will be more respectfully studied and more highly valued. He can repeat, as Euripides might have done, the words of the German poet: "The century is not ripe for my ideal. I live a citizen of a future commonwealth."



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