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WILDE AND SHAKESPEARE IN SHAW'S *YOU NEVER CAN TELL*

The friendly rivalry between Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde began when the two exchanged gift volumes of *Widowers' Houses* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* and continued until Shaw reviewed *The Importance of Being Earnest*.¹ Wilde took exception to Shaw's theory that *Earnest* must have been an old play dusted off by Wilde. As evidence to support his guess, Shaw suggested the Gilbertian heartlessness of the play combined with its triple-decker title. Clearly Shaw was disturbed by the play's exemplification of a perfect "art for art's sake" aesthetic, divorced from social, political, or philosophical concerns. The play's perfection of form, in which not a scintilla of sentiment disturbs the immaculately trivial surface of the play, presented Shaw with an alternative to Ibsen that was strong enough a temptation to provoke from Shaw a formidable line of defense, first in his potentially insulting review and then later, after Wilde was away in prison, in *You Never Can Tell*, a play meant to displace *Earnest* from Shaw's path.

As Ellmann and others have explained, Wilde's *Salome* allegorizes Wilde's own internal division between the paths laid out by two of his mentors in aesthetics, Ruskin and Pater, in the eponymous heroine's trap between Jokanaan's attractiveness and Herod's power over her.² Just as Ruskin asserted a moralized aesthetic in which beauty of form serves meaning, Pater asserted an aesthetic free of all contingencies but a fidelity to its own harmony. Wilde fought against Pater's dominance but succumbed to it at least in his public stances: "An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style," Wilde announces in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In other words, Wilde espoused an aestheticization of morality. Shaw had detected just this tendency, for in his review of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, Shaw suggests that Wilde played "with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama."³ But Shaw believed Wilde to be playing with them to an end. In *Earnest* the playing had become an end in itself.

Just as importantly, through Salome's capacity to use language as imagination to alter reality in her mind, Wilde asserted his own propensity toward radical subjectivity. When Salome's desires clash with Jokanaan's self-circumscription, she asserts an alternative reality that exists in her own mind and nowhere else. Not since Shakespeare's Richard II conjured England's earth to impede Bolingbroke's rebellious progress with stinging nettles has a character in British drama believed so in the power of words over reality. In between *Salome* and *Earnest*, Wilde had written three social comedies (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*) that are essentially the same play rewritten, a verbal ballet for a puritanical young woman, a dandy (who can be either a hero or villain, older or younger), a leading man (who is idealized, or flawed, or both), and an older woman (who is either a villain or a flawed saint). Each of the three plays also provides a witty critique of the shallow values of contemporary society. But with *Earnest*, Wilde reasserts the radical subjectivity of *Salome*, this time through a new form of his social comedies in which all ties to the logic and solidity of the real world are loosened so thoroughly that the play seems to take place in its own world.

Shaw had seen Wilde doing exactly what he himself was drawn to do with his own plays. Wilde had asserted in *De Profundis*: "I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet."⁴ Indeed that is exactly what he did. He asserted a radical subjectivity for art, the rendition of a subjective point of view—the artist's personality, individual style, and idiosyncratic view of the world—through the medium of drama in which the writer himself does not speak in his own voice except insofar as form, dialogue, action, and character express the author's individuality.

The Unpleasant Plays had expressed Shaw's individuality as an admirer of Ibsen. The Pleasant Plays that followed between 1894 and 1896 show a Shaw trying to define himself in the shadow of Wilde's successes. Hence two of the Pleasant Plays, *Arms and the Man* and *The Man of Destiny*, mark territory antithetical to Wilde's: the realm of military heroism and military leadership, as far away from Wilde's usual subject matter as possible. Yet both plays are full of genial humor, comedy, and optimism. The other two Pleasant Plays, *Candida* and *You Never Can Tell*, rework Wilde's comedies of domestic crisis: in *An Ideal Husband* a wife loses her idealized view of her husband, and in *Candida* a wife shows that she never had an idealized view of her husband; in *A Woman of No Importance* a father comes back into the lives of his illegitimate son and his mother and is rejected, and in *You Never Can Tell* a father reenters the lives of his wife and children and is reintegrated, after a fashion, into his family. Of course, in *Candida*, Shaw also continues to respond to Ibsen by showing that the family is as much of a doll's house for the husband as for the wife. And the play ends not

with the wife's closing the door on her family life but with the young artist's rejection of the warmth of the hearth in favor of the night of the imagination.

The last of the Pleasant Plays, *You Never Can Tell* (1896; produced 1899), does many things in terms of Shaw's development as an individual dramatist using dramatic form to express his personality and view of life. Among them, it responds to *The Importance of Being Earnest*; it competes with Shakespearean comedy; and it does both in ways to mark itself as a Shavian play. It mostly conforms to the argument of comedy, as identified by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* and exemplified by all the classic comedies from Plautus to Shakespeare and Molière. It depicts a young dentist, Valentine, in pursuit of an attractive young woman, Gloria, daughter of a famous feminist mother and an estranged and irascible wealthy father. The young couple encounters various obstacles to their union, including trifles such as the father's objections as well as serious barriers such as Gloria's lack of self-knowledge and her inexperience with genuine sexual attraction. The end of the play occurs in the middle of a fancy ball with most of the major characters in costume, dancing with one another; just as in Shakespeare's comedies, the ending is marked by a celebration and dance. Likewise, the play ends with the dissipation of the father's anger and its replacement with "glee" and him "chuckling at the fun" (1: 794).⁵ In this way the play conforms to the comic pattern: the older generation reconciles itself to the younger generation replacing it; but it also embodies Shaw's individual molding of this pattern through what I have called elsewhere the myth of Shavian laughter, whereby the powerful are induced through laughter to relent in the exercise of their power by renouncing the threat of violence. For what caused Gloria's mother, Mrs. Clandon, to separate from her husband and take custody of their children was the father's obtaining a whip (shades of Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew* here) to intimidate his children into proper behavior (an action based on his own upbringing, which he views as proper).

Shaw competed with Shakespeare all his life. Indeed, as Tom Stoppard suggests in *The Real Thing*, all playwrights writing in English feel as if they are in a race against one another, with Shakespeare out in front by a mile, and *You Never Can Tell* particularly embodies this competition, beginning with its title, which clearly echoes *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *What You Will* (or *Twelfth Night*). Shaw creates his own version of Shakespeare's Green World, where people disguise their persons and transform their personalities magically, by setting the play in a seaside resort and having the action culminate in a fancy ball, complete with Chinese lanterns, masks, and costumes from the commedia dell'arte. The tragic emotions of anger, aggression, resentment, and bitterness are overcome in favor of amical relations, tolerance, and laughter at human foi-

bles. Fergus Crampton renounces both his legal claims to custody of his children and his anger, after his children show even a modicum of affection and regard for him as their father. Crampton's previous intransigence had been symbolized in comic fashion by his need of the services of a dentist to have a tooth pulled that he had broken while trying to crack a Brazil nut. Likewise, the dentist's tricking Crampton into taking laughing gas is a metaphor for the psychic process by which Crampton is reconciled to his family. Shaw's use of such metaphoric stage action points not only to his making of a "poetry of the theatre" (in Cocteau's phrase) but to his consciousness of doing so in order to compete with Shakespeare, which Shaw signals by means of allusion. When Crampton's daughter Dolly notices that her father seems to be in pain, and he explains that the twinge comes from a memory, not from his wounded tooth, she reacts by alluding to *Macbeth*, "Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow" (1: 694; *Macbeth*, V, 3, l. 43). When Macbeth asks the physician if he can cure Lady Macbeth's illness by removing a sorrowful memory from her mind, Shaw would answer with *You Never Can Tell*, that is to say, the genre of comedy as embodied in *You Never Can Tell* enacts the human endeavor to transcend sorrow and pain. Throughout the play, Crampton often passes moments of psychological torment. When his son and daughter treat him no differently after they learn he is their father than they did when he was just a casual acquaintance, "[t]he consciousness of it goes through the father with so keen a pang that he trembles all over" (1: 716). At a later point in the play, as he contemplates how his daughter has spoken to him, he "breaks off and buries his face in his hands" (1: 768).

When Crampton is about to make his last challenge to his family over his rights as a father, Shaw describes him as "cowed and anxious" (1: 767). Shakespeare uses precisely the same word, *cowed* (his only use of the word, as a former colleague once pointed out), for Macbeth to describe how he is affected by the knowledge that Macduff was untimely ripped from his mother's womb: "For it hath cowed my better part of man" (V, 10, l. 18). In almost the last text in play form Shaw wrote, the puppet play *Shakespeare versus Shaw* (1949), Shaw has Shakespeare bring out Macbeth to be confronted by Rob Roy in place of Macduff. The allusion to Macbeth, like many such allusions in Shaw, has several subterranean connections, all of which make the play an intensely individual expression of Shaw's mind, his ideas and literary competitiveness.

One other such allusion, to John Home's (1722–1808) *Douglas* (1756), connects to Shaw, and Shakespeare, and Wilde via a circuitous route. Although Shaw was an Irishman, he seems to have identified almost as strongly with the Scots, as against the English and in competition with Shakespeare. (Indeed, he claimed to trace his Irish Protestant ancestry, for example, through the Scots brought in to colonize Ireland, all the way

back to Macduff—the Unborn, as Shaw referred to him.) When the Clendon children, Phil and Dolly, are being presented to the family solicitor, Finch McComas, they fall into quoting alternate lines of the famous speech from Home's play (Act II), wherein Norval unwittingly reveals himself to his unknown mother, Lady Randolph, as her son, that is, they enact a scene of discovery: "My name is—Norval. On the Grampian hills—'My father feeds his flock, a frugal swain'" (1: 706). Shaw's quoting from a Scottish author, whose play sparked nationalist feelings among the author's compatriots, does not merely add humor, it does two other things: it invokes Shaw's competition with Shakespeare; and it alludes to Wilde's spoofing of discovery scenes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. And in terms of Shakespearean competition, at the Edinburgh premiere of *Douglas*, the audience's emotional reception of the play was capped by a triumphant outcry, "Whaur's yer Wully Shaksperer noo!"⁶ That Shaw identified with Home's competition with Shakespeare can be seen from Shaw's giving his own version of this very line to Rob Roy ("Whaur's your Wully Shaxper the noo?") in the confrontation with Macbeth from *Shakes versus Shaw* (7: 474). Moreover, prior to the success of *Douglas*, Home seems to have felt keenly the burden of competing with Shakespeare in drama, as is witnessed by the following lines from "Verses Written by Mr. Home, with a Pencil, on Shakespeare's Monument in Westminster Abbey" (1747):

Image of Shakespeare! To this place I come
 To ease my bursting bosom at thy tomb;
 For neither Greek nor Roman poet fired
 My fancy first, thee chiefly I admired;
 And day and night revolving still my page
 I hoped, like thee, to shake the British stage;
 But cold neglect is now my only mead,
 And heavy falls it on so proud a head.
 If powers above now listen to my lyre,
 Charm them to grant indulgent my desire.
 Let petrification stop this falling tear,
 And fix my form for [ever] marble here.⁷

Shaw may have remembered these verses when in 1905 he wrote his most fantastical and artificial farce, *Passion, Poison, and Petrification*, in which "petrification" does indeed "fix for ever marble" one of the major characters. It constitutes an exercise in pure comic style, free of any social satire or criticism, which Shaw would only have permitted himself in the one-act play form. In *You Never Can Tell* itself, Shaw manages to refer to a bust of Shakespeare like the monument to which Home penciled his verses.⁸ The waiter's real name is Walter, but Dolly renames him "William"

because “[s]he thought me like the bust of Shakespear in Stratford Church” (1: 702), and Phil has told the Waiter that he reminds him strongly of his father. In a play about a father who seeks reunion with his children, and in which Shaw continues to define himself as a playwright in the shadow of a literary father, Shakespeare, it is not surprising that Shaw would have a double of Shakespeare in his play; nor is it surprising that Phil, upon learning that his father may still be alive, declares, “No man alive shall father me” (1: 679). Shaw’s anxiety about his own originality with regard to Shakespeare, about being considered an inferior son to Shakespeare, also appears in the relationship between Walter (the Waiter called William by Dolly) and his son, the successful and impressive barrister Mr. Bohun, who only enters the play in the last act to resolve all the plot difficulties. The son has risen through education above his father in class, wealth, and status, and is the only character capable of flapping his otherwise unflappable father.

Besides the allusion to Shaw’s rivalry with Shakespeare indirectly represented by the lines from Home’s tragedy, they also point to *You Never Can Tell*’s rivalry with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for the latter play’s fun turns on the discovery of John Worthing’s true identity as the son of General Earnest John Moncrieff, with that discovery authenticating the hero’s real name as Earnest and thus his eligibility to marry Gwendolyn. Wilde here wonderfully lampoons the entire history of drama’s reliance on climactic discovery scenes and their ability to thrill and engage an audience’s emotions. But he had been preceded in this endeavor by Sheridan in *The Critic*, the self-consciousness of which Peter Gahan believes may have inspired Shaw’s popular success of 1911, *Fanny’s First Play*.⁹ Sheridan, however, lampoons not just the tradition of discovery scenes generally, as Wilde does, but *Douglas* specifically:

My name’s Tom Jenkins—alias have I none—
Tho’ orphaned, and without a friend!

...

My father dwelt in Rochester—and was,
As I have heard—a fishmonger—no more. (III, I, ll. 28–29, 31–32)¹⁰

Sheridan’s hilarious parody of Norval’s speech provided the specific model for Shaw to use the quotation to enact his own literary self-consciousness. Jane Austen, who with her siblings performed Sheridan’s plays at home, may have been inspired by this parody to have Tom Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (chap. 13) refer to how often he and his brother recited Norval’s speech during home performances for their father and so, like Sheridan, may have served Shaw as a model for literary self-consciousness in the use of this speech. The thread that sews all these instances of parod-

ies and allusions to Norval's speech is self-consciousness about the artificiality of literary tradition, its distance from authentic emotion. Once that unraveled thread is taken up, Shaw's strategy becomes clear, to knit up the artificial with the real. Shaw knew well what he was doing, for in a letter to Ellen Terry (6 April 1896), Shaw wrote that *You Never Can Tell* "brings life and art together and strikes showers of sparks from them as if they were a knife and grindstone."¹¹ The discovery of Crampton's identity as the father of Gloria, Dolly, and Phil, while taking place in a comic context, nevertheless seeks to convey the intense emotion of that discovery, an emotion felt and created in spite of the artificiality of its literary tradition and context. And that combination of artificiality conveyed by the allusion and authentic emotion conveyed by the real pain Crampton the father feels is what distinguishes Shaw's comedy as distinctively Shavian. Where Wilde strives for a perfection of artificiality, Shaw keeps insisting that authentic emotion shall break through the artificiality. Thus does Shaw seek to compete with his rival Shakespeare and to defeat his rival Wilde.

A potentially sentimental scene of attempted reunion between father and daughter in *You Never Can Tell* will illustrate Shaw's idiosyncratic way of combining comedy and complex emotions, or art and life:

CRAMPTON. You see I only want to shew you that I am your father my—my dear child. (*The endearment is so plaintively inept that she smiles in spite of herself, and resigns herself to indulge him a little.*) Listen now. What I want to ask you is this. Dont you remember me at all? You were only a tiny child when you were taken away from me; but you took plenty of notice of things. Cant you remember someone whom you loved, or (*shyly*) at least liked in a childish way? Come! Someone who let you stay in his study and look at his toy boats, as you thought them? (*He looks anxiously into her face for some response, and continues less hopefully and more urgently.*) Someone who let you do as you liked there and never said a word to you except to tell you that you must sit still and not speak? Someone who was something that no one else was to you—who was your father.

GLORIA (*unmoved*). If you describe things to me, no doubt I shall presently imagine that I remember them. But I really remember nothing. (1: 732–33)

Underneath this exchange lies the blueprint for an extremely emotional recognition scene between father and daughter, such as that between Pericles and Marina, say: the evocation of a long-lost memory, the fumbling attempts by the father at communicating his love for his daughter, her groping for the memory, even down to the father's climactically but indi-

rectly and tentatively laying claim to the relationship—"Someone . . . who was your father." But Shaw transforms that blueprint into an entirely different structure, one that eschews either the pure comedy of Wilde or the pure emotion of melodrama (or of Shakespearean romance) and instead intertwines them so tightly together as to produce the complex mixture of feeling and comedy that is recognizable as particularly the Shaw style. One may note that the stage directions constantly provide clues to the subtext Shaw wants to be sure pertains, so integral is it to the unique kind of dramatic writing he is doing.

When Crampton begins his speech to his daughter, he searches for the right term of address for the circumstance and produces "my—my dear child," as if he were writing the salutation of a letter. He mistakes Gloria's involuntary smile, recognizing his ineptness, for encouragement and proceeds. But instead of telling her what he remembers about her, blind to his own egotism, he solicits her to remember him. Gloria, for her part, merely indulges him, although her indulgence has the form of warmth and kindness. The refrain of the self-reference, "someone," in his speech bears the hallmark of sentimental rhetoric because it seems designed to culminate in her response, "Then, that was you—father!" Yet that sentimental rhetoric works its magic and makes the father a moving figure in spite of himself, until the penultimate sentence of the speech—and Gloria's deflationary response. Crampton's next to last sentence leads Gloria by the hand to a memory of him as a benevolent and indulgent father, one "who let you do as you liked there," but then allows the audience to watch him trip over himself when he reveals that he "never said a word" to her "except to tell" her that she "must sit still and not speak." Manifestly contradicting the image he has—and wants to impose on Gloria—of himself as an indulgent father, Crampton reveals that he understands nothing of what can be expected of a small child's behavior. When the fallible father suddenly comes into view underneath the pity-seeking father through the discovery not of his identity as a father (as it would in melodrama) but of his blindness to his own rigidity, he provokes simultaneously laughter at his blindness and pity at his vulnerability: what the comical metaphor of his cracked tooth means, the rooted sorrow of his heart.

The lack of affect Gloria displays in her response similarly provokes laughter at her mechanical heartlessness, which she drives home shortly thereafter by taunting him with her knowledge that he bought a whip "to beat [her] with." In response, Crampton curses Gloria's mother for using that knowledge to make Gloria hate him, "[u]nder a grinding, agonized breath." Gloria turns their quarrel into an epic struggle between Father and Mother by telling him she hates the name of father and loves the name of mother, to which Crampton sputters: "I—I'm choking. You want to kill me.—Some—I—(*His voice stifles; he is almost in a fit.*)" Underneath

Crampton's experience of emotion as physical strangulation lies the father's experience of alienation from his family as his own mortality. Gloria does not have to hate him to produce the effect; she only has to exist to prove to him he must die. Here Shaw accurately represents the intensity of feeling between parent and child, not in spite of the comic exaggeration of Crampton's reaction but by means of it. The play only resolves itself—after a fashion—when Crampton feels integrated once more into his family and therefore not cut off from the future. Only then can he chuckle at the prospect of his children's getting married. As to the argument Shaw conducted with the Wilde part of himself over whether plays should deal with ideas and offer their audiences some hope or should withdraw gracefully from the apparently meaningless chaos of life by creating autonomous fictional realms and emphasizing human character and behavior above social and political contexts, the argument remains unresolved, as Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* and *The Real Thing* demonstrate.

Notes

1. Bernard F. Dukore, ed., *The Drama Observed*, vol. 1 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 267–69.
2. For Jokanaan as figuring Ruskin, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 51–52.
3. Dukore, *The Drama Observed*, p. 240.
4. In Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 194.
5. All quotations from Shaw's plays are from Bernard Shaw, *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces*, ed. Dan H. Laurence, 7 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975), and are cited parenthetically in the text.
6. See Macdonald Emslie, "Home's *Douglas* and Wully Shakspeare," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 2 (1964): 128–29.
7. Terence Tobin, *Plays by Scots: 1660–1800* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), p. 163. See also "John Home, Patriot, Minister, Dramatist," History of Leith, Edinburgh, website, available at <http://www.leithhistory.co.uk/2005/02/11/john-home-patriot-minister-dramatist/>.
8. Frederick S. Boas makes a Wildean observation about Home's verses to Shakespeare by interpreting literally the "on" in Home's title "Verses Written by Mr. Home, with a Pencil, on Shakespeare's Monument" when he questions parenthetically, "[W]hat were the custodians doing?" See Frederick S. Boas, *An Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Drama 1700–1780* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 263.
9. Peter Gahan, *Shaw Shadows: Rereading the Texts of Bernard Shaw* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 167.
10. Cecil Price, ed., *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 539.
11. Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Collected Letters, 1874–1897* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1965), p. 623.