

The Court Jester to King Bourgeois

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In the ancient days when kings ruled and lackeys bowed without any apologies to man or God, it was the custom for the King to have in his train a professional fool, who under the outward covering of jocose comedy concealed and revealed the most profound wisdom. Under the cover of his professional robe he was privileged to say many sharp and pointed things at which no one, however, was permitted to take offense. Here as in most ancient institutions, the office of court jester grew out of a necessity of life. The ancient king with all his pomposity, his divine rights and his unholy privileges has passed, taking with him much of the romance, and poetic symbolism. In his place there now rules King Bourgeois, who is described in the standard dictionary as being a member of the commercial, middle, or industrial class as distinguished from the nobility and the workingman. Unfortunately said king is not a single person who stoutly maintains sway over all, but the office of ruler is passed from person to person. Under this modern rule of King Bourgeois the old function of jester to the court expresses itself in various forms. In this country the court jester is a magazine called "Life." In other countries similar channels wear their way through the arid land of conventionalism, and water it with the milk of human laughter, and the honey of human wisdom. But over and above all the streams and oases that offer havens of refuge from the juice absorbing wind of business prosperity, and the vegetation-killing sun of condescending piety, there is one man at the present moment who stands out preeminently as court jester to this King Lear of Modern times, King Bourgeois. On the other hand this very same man might be with even deeper appreciation regarded as the puritan of this age. Of the moral excellence of man which we talk

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about and pray for, of the deep and profound insight into human personality which we speak of as "the understanding of human nature," and by which we really mean the results of our peeping Tom explorations among the degenerates, the outward symbol of our lack of moral courage to be honest sinners, of a true spirituality of which we know nothing except as we use the word to describe a morbid sentimental vacuum in us, of a masterful personal integrity which we believe we have secured when we have a receipt for our tax bill--this man of whom I speak is the real embodiment in our times. Psychologically this combination of jester and Puritan is human nature at its best. Not so much of a fool that one sees not the deeper and more profound meanings of life, and not so desperately serious as to prevent appreciation of the delicious mixture of comedy with which life is diluted. King Bourgeois becomes piously conscious of his wealth, and the goodness which God has shown him, and the responsibility which God has placed on him in the administration of the wealth of the race. Just as King Bourgeois is about to explode with his piety, out pops the jester from his retreat and pricks the bauble of conceit with the rapier of intellect in the form of a drama, called "Widowers' Houses." Everybody laughs, because they have to, but a whole lot of them were hot under the collar. King Bourgeois begins to brag about his solicitous and unceasing protection of women, but the curtain up on "Mrs. Warren's Profession." Everybody laughs, but the arrow is driven home with unerring aim, and we stand exposed as the direct hypocrites. But we must have some virtues so we begin to proclaim with gusto wonderfully impregnable wall of protection which we have built about our homes, and the mother of our children. Then comes "Getting Married," one of the cleverest most pointed and pungent bits of wisdom and truth that has been put into print. To be sure it jolts us, but it is good to be jolted from our smug complacency. The King Bourgeois begins to put on airs about morals and such things, and along comes "Fanny's First Play" with its delightful jabs at conventional conduct which we call morality. Finally forced back to the last extremity we stick our heads into the sand and talk about being Christians, and behold from the treasure trove comes "Androcles and the Lion" which makes our ecclesiastical shop-worn goods look like a marked down sale of dirty linen. Such are the antics of the Court Jester to King

Bourgeois, the ruler of the world in the year of our Lord 1913. We may not like him, [but] we have to laugh at the sharp and pointed gibes that prick the baubles of the pretensions by which we try to feed our famished souls. Of course you have long since guessed the name of the creature, who with full apologies, to Kipling might be described in the following lines:

H's a ripper, h's a snorter, not a lamb,  
H's a blasted blooming critic on a spree,  
H's the only thing that doesn't give a damn  
For the platitudes of British Piety.

George Bernard Shaw is a fact, a serious fact in this generation. You may try to brush him aside as being clever, but irreverent, but he will not brush aside. Some few years ago "Man and Superman" was played here, and one of the local papers passed comments upon it showing about the same insight and point of view that the Paraisees have always manifested. In the eyes of many he is the greatest art critic, the greatest musical critic, the greatest dramatic critic, the greatest dramatist, the clearest thinking on politics and economics today, not only in all England, but in the entire Modern World. If you ask them to prove it, they will reply that it is not necessary to prove it for Shaw admits it himself. On the other hand one finds people who hold him to be simply witty, brilliant, wicked, and terrible, having no respect for God or man and any institution created by either. To some Shaw is simply some foul degenerate who lives in the underworld of London and once in a while comes forth from his haunts to ridicule and blaspheme what they are pleased to call the sacred things of life. To the rest of the world he is but a name. They don't count much anyhow. But whatever may be the attitude of people towards him, he commands some kind of an attitude and is not to be brushed from modern life by the contempt of silence. Shaw was perfectly impersonal and true to fact when he expressed the results of his ten years of work as critic in the following words,

For ten years past, with an unprecedented pertinacity and obstination, I have been dinning into the public head that I am an extraordinarily witty, brilliant, and clever man. That is now part of the public opinion of England and no power in heaven or on earth will ever change it. I may

dodder and dote, I may pot-boil and platitudinize. I may become the butt-end the chopping block of all the bright and original spirits of the rising generation, but my reputation shall not suffer. It is built up fast and solid, like Shakespeare's, on an impregnable basis of dogmatic reiteratiion.<sup>2</sup>

If Shaw is to our time what Shakespeare was to his it is very satisfactory to know and to have the pleasure of appreciating him while he is here.

I am not much of a worshipper of superlatives either in things or personalities. In this matter of ecstatic worship of Shaw or any other man, I feel pretty much as Shaw himself writes,

Our conception of heroism has changed of late years. The stage hero of the palmy days is a pricked bubble. The gentlemanly hero, of whom Tennyson's King Arthur was the type ... suddenly found himself out ... and died of the shock. ... The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superhuman, which was supplied by bombast, inflation, and the piling of crimes on catastrophes and factitious raptures on artificial agonies has fallen off; and the demand now is for heroes in whom we can recognize our own humanity, and who, instead of walking, talking, eating, drinking, making love and fighting single combats in a monotonous ecstasy of continuous heroism, are heroic in the true human fashion: that is, touching the summits only at rare moments, and finding the proper level of all occasions, condescending with humor and good sense to the prosaic ones as well as rising to the noble ones, instead of ridiculously persisting in rising to them all on the principle that a hero must always soar, in season or out of season. (Hend. 338).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This quote of G. B. Shaw is from the 1911 book *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works, A Critical Biography (Authorized)* by Archibald Henderson, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> Here Earl Davis provides the reference, and to the same book previously cited, confirming that source.

This suggests the point of view in approaching a fact like Shaw. No man is always and under all conditions superlative, and even if he were we have not the necessary data for passing judgement. At least Shaw is an exceedingly interesting and important figure in the world of ethics, politics, and fine arts besides being interesting in his own rights.

We may know a whole lot about G.B.S. dramatic critic of his own making, or even have some idea of the caricatures that have been made of him. The real man is known only to a few and we shall have to content ourselves with such glimpses of him as our imagination will permit us to make. Even if his personality is not public property, the knowledge of his age is, it being recorded that he was born July 26, 1856. His grandfather was a Dublin Notary public and stock broker. His father was an Irish Protestant gentleman: "his rank—a very damnable one in his son's eyes—was that of a poor relation ... which makes strenuous social pretensions." His mother was the daughter of a country gentleman. While her marriage was evidently a disappointment to her, she was not made of the stuff that gets cold feet. She was a woman of ability and energy and later as a musician in London she became a well-known personality. Shaw describes his early environment in the following language,

I believe Ireland, as far as the Protestant gentry are concerned, to be the most irreligious country in the world. I was christened by my uncle, and as my God father was intoxicated and did not turn up, the sexton was ordered to promise and vow in his place, precisely as my uncle might have ordered him to put more coals on the fire. I was never confirmed and I believe my parents never were either. The seriousness with which English families take this rite, and the deep impression which it makes on many children, was a thing of which I had no conception. Protestantism in Ireland is not a religion; it is a side in political faction, a class prejudice, a conviction that Roman Catholics are socially inferior persons, who will go to hell when they die, and leave Heaven in the exclusive possession of ladies and gentlemen. In my childhood I was

sent every Sunday to a Sunday school where genteel children repeated texts, and were rewarded with little cards inscribed with other texts. ... I suffered this not for my salvation, but because my father's respectability demanded it. When we went to live in the country, remote from social criticism, I broke with the observance and never resumed it. P 8.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it must be said that while the whole of Shaw's life is a revolt against his dead atmosphere of a lifeless Puritanism, his spirit was akin to the spirit that has produced the earlier revolt in Ireland. There must have been an appreciation of this fact in "Fanny's First Play" which was produced in New York last winter, in which the Mystic mother confesses that in spite of the fact that she had lived all her life in the midst of conventional religion, she never had found any spiritual companionship until she had come to understand her daughter who had broken traditional standards and landed in jail much to the chagrin of her conventional respectable pious father. But the mother understood and found a spiritual companion in the land of respectable dry rot. As we know, education, Shaw never had any. He says, "As a school boy I was incorrigibly idle and worthless. And I am proud of the fact." He learned music in these younger days, and formed the groundwork of his deep appreciation of the art, but even in this he was not taught. Then he tried a term as a clerk in a land agency office, and performed his duties with punctilious accuracy, but his interest was always ten thousand miles distant from the pages of his account books. "I never made a payment without a hope or a half resolve that I should never have to do it again." This early life left its deep impression on him. He hated and loathed the repressive respectability of his class, the meaningless ritualism of the religion, and yet the puritan "intensity in condemnation of self-indulgence, the ascetic revolt from alcoholism, speaks forth unmistakably in the humanitarian, the teetotaler, the vegetarian of a later epoch." His first protest against all this was a letter written in the local paper protesting against the Moody and Sankey revivals, much to the displeasure of his family and relatives.

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<sup>4</sup> Evidently from the same, previously cited biography of Shaw.

But circumstances and inclination took the raw youth to London. "My destiny was to educate London, but I had neither studied my pupil nor related my ideas properly to the common stock of human knowledge."

The first nine years of his life in London earned him nine pounds. Besides his difficulty of getting a living he was not well-adapted to the environment into which he was plunged. "I was a foreigner, an Irishman, the most foreign of all foreigners when he has not gone through a University Mill. I was not ... educated, but unfortunately, what I knew was exactly what an educated Englishman did not know, and what I knew—I didn't know or didn't believe." But by means of music, reading and novel writing came into this period. Membership in debating societies etc. in which questions interesting to him brought him in contact with people who have since become international figures, a deliberate and labored part in the debates and discussions gave him a training and insight that served him well in later years.

But the Life Force that in him which he afterward expounded in the philosophical treatise in the form of a play, "Man and Superman," was working in him and developing the forces for the education of England. I will quote at some length from his own narrative of the critical moment when he plunged into his new world.

One evening in the early eighties I found myself—I forget how and cannot imagine why—in the Memorial Hall Farringdon Street, London, listening to an American finishing a speech on the land question. I knew he was an American because he pronounced 'necessarily' with the accent on the third syllable, because he was deliberately oratorical, which is not customary among people like the English, because he spoke of Liberty, Justice, Truth, Natural Law and other strange eighteenth century superstitions, because he explained with great simplicity and sincerity the views of the Creator, who had gone completely out of fashion in London in the previous decade and had not been heard of there since. I noticed also that he was a born orator and that he had small plump, pretty hands.

Now at that time I was a young man not much past twenty-five, of a very revolutionary and contradictory temperament, full of Darwin, Tyndall, of Shelly and DeQuincey, of Michael Angelo and Beethoven, and never having in my life studied questions from the economic point of view, except that I had once, in my boyhood, read a pamphlet by John Stuart Mill on the Irish Land Question. The result of hearing that speech and buying from one of the stewards of the meeting a copy of "Progress and Poverty" was that I plunged into a course of economic study, and at a very early stage of it became a Socialist... When I was swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883, I found that five sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry George. This fact would have been far more widely acknowledged had it not been for the fact that it was not possible for us to stop where Henry George stopped. ... He saw only the monstrous absurdity of the private appropriation of rent, and he believed that if you took that burden off the poor man's back, he could help himself out as easily as a pioneer on pre-empted clearings. But the moment he took an Englishman to the point, the Englishman saw at once that the remedy was not so simple as that, and that the argument carried us further even to the point of total industrial re-construction.

Into the development of his career as a socialist propagandist, and working in the Fabian society, it is not my purpose to go, but this last development of which I have spoken is the cue to a proper appreciation of Shaw's dramatic work and his point of view as a dramatist. "In all my plays," he writes "my economic studies have played as important a part as the knowledge of anatomy does in the works of Michael Angelo<sup>5</sup>." Back of all of Shaw's plays is the clear-cut conception of which he has of the social order, of its bearing upon individual conduct, and its relation to his fundamental conception of the purpose and function of human life. Life is not the pursuit of

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<sup>5</sup> That is to say, "Michelangelo."

happiness but the expression of and contribution of personality.

The final ideal for civic life is that every man and every woman should set before themselves this goal—that by the labor of their lifetime they shall pay the debt of their rearing and their education, and also shall contribute sufficient for a handsome maintenance during their old age... I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is not [a] 'brief candle' for me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

Out of this background of economics, and this conception of life, by the aid of a keen wit, sense of humor and satire, we have the productions of those plays which have been the delight and the despair of our modern industrial order.

I have not had the privilege of seeing many of these plays, but I count it one of the rarest delights, and one of the illuminating experiences to have seen a few. Besides the delightful and daring thrusts at conventional standards of measure, and the equally daring sallies of wit in the play itself, backed by a profound intellectual conception, the whole thing is made doubly delightful by watching the audience. It is a play in itself to watch the effect on the average audience of such a play as "Fanny's First Play," "Mrs. Warren's Profession," etc. Some [of] them hardly know whether to laugh or be disgusted and look as if something terrible and sacrilegious had happened. The delicacy with which Shaw can decapitate a conventionality is one of the remarkable things about his work. The sword that he wields is so sharp and thin-edged that the head cut clean off without disturbing the circulation of the blood or interfering with the proper nerve reactions at the time, but suddenly, after a few hours or days, the head will quietly roll off into the scrap basket of broken idols, and the boy will drop in its tracks and refuse to work ever after.

Many people are shocked by the bold thrusts of Shaw, and fear that he is undermining the very foundations of

society. Especially have his plays in which the marriage problem has been the theme, been denounced because they make light of sacred institutions. In reply to that one must affirm that his attitude reaches about as high an ethical plain as that of any man who has ever written on the subject. Without mercy or fear he probes the inflamed and poisoned spots of the institution, spots which we are all too much inclined to regard as sacred, just as the people of an earlier day regarded the fool remarks of the insane as of supernatural significance. When people pass along the general line of stuff that we hear repeated so often now days to the effect that we need more stringent divorce laws, and more stringent marriage laws, it makes one shudder at utter inability to appreciate the nature and function of marriage and the home. To be sure Shaw says things that seem on the surface very startling and dangerous. He may do that deliberately for the sake of puncturing the thick skin of unintelligent respectability. But discounting Shaw's manner of saying things at times to attract attention I believe that the soundest, the most moral, the most religious document on the question of marriage that has been produced is the play, "Getting Married," and the preface to it. Now I am willing to confess that lots of people would be shocked beyond all recovery by the reading of it. But if a person can reduce himself to sack-cloth and ashes, and think the problem out as purely and unflinchingly as Shaw has done in this remarkable document, he will be a much wiser man than he is now. In the "Widower Houses" and in "Mrs. Warrens Profession" the commercial character, and the influence of economic necessity in determining marriages is presented with a pungency that is irresistible. In "Getting Married" the idea is [so] well developed that all our marriage laws and customs are based upon a sex conception that is entirely immoral and perverse. The reason why so many misunderstand Shaw in this matter is that they do not see that he hates the immorality of our respectable standards and that he speaks out of a deep puritan conception of the function of marriage and sex relations. Most people under the influence of their own sensuality, jump to the conclusion that any letting down of bars means simply a reign of promiscuity. Such people are shocked by Shaw's point of view because they cannot understand that his whole point of view is dominated by a moral passion so high that

mere animal sexuality is but an incident in it. In "Man and Superman" Tanner, in speaking to Ann on this very topic says: They are speaking of a boy and girl companionship that had existed and been interrupted, because the boy, Tanner, was beginning to be a man. Of this experience he says,

(TANNER) What does the beginning of manhood and womanhood mean in most peoples' mouths? You know: it means the beginning of love. But love began long before that for me. Love played its part in the earliest dreams and follies and romances that I can remember—may I say the earliest follies and romances that we can remember?—though we did not understand it at the time. No, the change that came to me was in the birth of moral passion; and I declare that according to my experience moral passion is the only real passion.

(ANN) All passions ought to be moral, Jack.

(TANNER) Ought! Do you think that anything is strong enough to impose oughts on a passion except a stronger passion still?

(ANN) in her conventionable and respectable speak you will vote, "Our moral sense controls passion, Jack. Don't be stupid."

(TANNER) Our Moral sense. And is that a passion? Is the devil to have all the passions as well as all the good tunes? If it were not a passion—if it were not the mightiest of passions, all the other passions would sweep it away like a leaf before a hurricane. It is the birth of that passion that tuns the child into a man.

(ANN) There are other passions, Jack. Very strong ones.

(TANNER) All the other passions were in me before; but they were idle and aimless—mere childish greediness and cruelties, and curiosities and fancies, habits and superstitions, grotesque and ridiculous to the mature intelligence when they began to shine like newly lit flames it was by no light of their own, but by the radiance of the dawning moral passion. That passion dignified them, gave them conscience

and meaning, found them a mob of appetites and organized them into an army of purposes and principles. My soul was born of that passion.

This is Shaw. The same Shaw that laughs like a schoolboy at jokes, plays like a child when at play, and works like a tiger when at work. But it is this Shaw that pricks the bubbles of our respectable bourgeois life. Yet is it the same Shaw who sees hope in the revolt of the Bourgeois. All his characters of a revolutionary type are revolting Bourgeois. They are not self-seeking animals, but men in the Grip of the Life Force. This Life Force says to him,

I have done a thousand wonderful things unconsciously by merely willing to live and following the line of least resistance: Now I want to know myself and my destination, and choose my path; so I have made a special brain—a philosopher's brain—to grasp this knowledge for me as the husbandman's hand grasps the plough for me. And this, says the Life Force to the philosopher, must thou strive to do for me until thou diest, when I will make another brain and another philosopher to carry on the work.

Here read passage from Man and Superman, pages 128 etc.

The jest of Shaw, the rapier like thrusts, the pounding at the rocks of ages is after-all the work of a man in whom there appears the great mystic touch that has marked the milestones of the ages. Behind the Court Jester to King Bourgeois, is a wisdom greater than the wisdom of the King, and in no light sense may it be said that the jester is the real king for thought ever leads the way, and while King Bourgeois still wears the royal robes, his honor is but an empty honor, and his dynasty has come to its end. Already the temples which he built are crumbling, and the moral passion of a new age is clearing away the chaff, and making designs for a new civilization.