

HISTORICAL Vs SHAVIAN WOMAN: A STUDY OF CLEOPATRA AND ST. JOAN

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Abstract

Shaw is regarded as one of the great English dramatist of the modern age and his contribution to British theatre is considered second only to that of Shakespeare. By rejecting outmoded theatrical conventions and advocating realism, Shaw revolutionized British drama. He is also credited with creating the theatre of ideas.

The present paper explores Shaw's treatment of history in his two plays *Caesar & Cleopatra* and *St. Joan*. Shaw at times assumes the function of the historian and at times writes romantic drama using historical figures. With his characteristic playfulness, he suggests that attention to detail, the one serious purpose of the historian, is of little interest to him. Shaw's claim to finding a higher historical truth than that found by pedants worrying about details, draws its force from a long tradition of rivalry between historians and playwrights that characterizes a discussion of historical drama ever since Shakespeare.

Keywords: Historical Play, Cleopatra, St. Joan, Treatment Of History, Inventive, Shakespeare, Dryden

Shaw is not concerned with historical perspective, with the past as distant and radically different from the present. However ancient the costumes might be, the consciousness of the wearers is modern, they talk anachronistically, as with the foreknowledge of modern issues. In his history plays, historical facts do indeed take diverse interesting forms because Shaw is extremely inventive in his treatment of history. He can be found continually seeking new approaches but by no means is he guilty of intentional efforts to hide the truth. In the delineation of two heroines Cleopatra and Saint Joan, he has resorted to history and at the same time given his twist to historical facts. In *Caesar & Cleopatra*, Shaw has portrayed Cleopatra in her younger years, which is unlike the portrayal of Shakespeare and Dryden who have

dealt with her later life and her involvement with Mark Antony. The differences between Shaw's Cleopatra and Shakespeare's Cleopatra can easily be dismissed by the disparity in their ages: Shaw writes of a sixteen year old Cleopatra whereas Shakespeare picks up her story much later. Yet Shaw himself accepts it that the contrasting characterizations are much more than simply a function of age:

The childishness I have ascribed to Cleopatra as far as it is childishness of character and

not lack of experience; it is not a matter of years. It may be observed in our own climate at the present day in any women of fifty.(55)

In *Saint Joan* Shaw has adhered to all the facts recorded in the *Personal Recollections* by S. Louis De Comte and translated by Mark Twain.

In his depiction of historical heroines, Shaw never tried to be 'a professional historian'. Mango MacCallum pointed out:

A historical dramatist must be careful not to change the current conception of character. He must not invest or forge an entirely new story. In that case the historic label would be more of a hindrance than help. (75)

However, Shaw did not always follow rigidly the events of history or the current conceptions of historical characters. The Cleopatra of Shaw's play is not the Cleopatra of history but an origin of his own imagination. Shaw has sketched Cleopatra as barbarian and makes Caesar unable to infuse into her reason and intellect. In her first meeting with Caesar, she behaves childishly. While Caesar says his prayers to the Sphinx, the girl Cleopatra speaks from behind the statue. She asks Caesar to come up quickly as the Romans may harm him.

The event relating the meeting of Cleopatra with Caesar is not supported by history. She further informs Caesar knowing not who he is that she is afraid of the Romans and that they live on 'human flesh'. They are barbarians and that their 'chief' is called Julius Caesar whose nose is like an 'elephant's trunk'. She pleads to him that she must be saved from Caesar at any cost. Caesar informs her that Caesar never eats women; he 'eats girls and cats'. Caesar's first impression of Cleopatra is of 'a silly little girl'; she is 'descended from the black kitten' and that she must be eaten by Caesar unless 'she makes him believe that she is a woman':

Whatever dread may be in your soul- however terrible Caesar may be to you - you must confront him as a brave woman and a great queen and you must feel no fear. If your hand shakes: if your voice quivers; then- night and death! (she means) But if he thinks you worthy to rule, he will set you on the throne by his side and make you the real ruler of Egypt. (259)

In the presence of Caesar, Cleopatra behaves quite queerly. When Caesar asks her to order the servants to light the lamps, she very innocently asks: "Do you think I may?" (280) The childish and queer behaviour of Cleopatra is not a fact of history. Shaw portrays her as a barbarian while history does not treat her as such. Cleopatra pleads Ftateeta to leave the place and runs after servants to kill them. Caesar makes her learn the way to treat the servants and she is thankful to Caesar.

Caesar does not fail to notice that this girl of sixteen has been kept under the tutelage of a governess, Ftateeta all her life. He also observes that there is hidden in her heart 'the fire of an ardent desire' (261). She wants to snatch the kingdom from her brother Ptolmey Dionysus with the help of Caesar though Ptolmey 'will not suffer a foreigner to take from him the throne of our Egypt' (271).

Cleopatra becomes furious and jealous when Caesar favours Ptolemy. Cleopatra's wish for an assurance from Caesar that he will not leave her until she is confirmed as queen of Egypt is supported by history. Her behaviour at this moment as depicted by Shaw is quite puerile. Cleopatra is horrified by the menace of battle and avoids Caesar's involvement in such battle. Caesar is touched by her innocence.

Cleopatra falls in love with Mark Antony, but she will not ask Antony for love. She stands apart from Shaw's other heroines who propose themselves never waiting to be proposed to. She is neither Blanche Sartorius nor Julia Craven, the active participants in proposing. It

could be that Shaw wanted to portray 'a green girl' of sixteen, quite innocent and shy, knowing very little about sex and its demands or that he wanted to ridicule the sentimentality of the nineteenth century heroines who nursed love in their hearts but never expressed it, either due to shyness or fear of the society and who were jealous like Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere and always complained like her: "We make gods of men and they leave us" (Act III).

History reveals Cleopatra as a highly gifted woman, aspiring for queenship, power and influence. Shaw's Cleopatra is quite different from that of history. Stephen Winsten in his book *Jesting Apostle: the Private Life of Bernard Shaw* writes:

His difficulty was the minor one of having no historic sense: all he could do was to dress himself and others in fancy dress and make them say things of contemporary significance. He could only present the world in the light of his own time or as he would have it, in the light of the future for he considered himself a ghost of the future.

History tells us that in each and every moment of her life Cleopatra displayed the daring and resolution of a self-confident queen and self-reliance in judgement and action and the instinctive clarity of vision characterized all her actions. But Shaw's Cleopatra does not display these qualities except in some moments.

The entire play is replete with such childish actions and prattles of Cleopatra. Only two or three times in the play does she behave in the manner of a queen. Cleopatra sees clearly that Caesar alone could save her and that she must answer his call. And how masterly is the way in which she carries out her resolve. While sending carpets as presents to Caesar, she gets herself rolled up in them. Accompanied by a servant, Apollodorous of Sicily, she sails to Alexandria in a small boat. Her future seems as unfathomable as the sea. She stakes everything, her captivating beauty and charm on Caesar's insight and sensitiveness and finally on her luck. Cleopatra is aware of the fact that her grace and intelligence would not be able to save her if she happens to fall into the hands of Pothinus. Once her love for Caesar fills with fire and purpose, she is not ready to hold back. The particular incident has its bearing on history and the historian, Oscar Von Werthelmer writes, "Only an exceptional woman could have ventured upon such a course, a woman with a powerful soul animated by great aspiration, who expected much from life"(9).

Cleopatra carries out her adroit plan. Nobody suspects how precious is the treasure Apollodorous hold in his arms though the spies of Pothinus are far more dangerous than the Roman sentries. Shaw depicts that Apollodorous is not ready to carry the Persian carpets 'up the narrow ladder from the causeway' thinking of the 'pigeon's eggs and crystal goblets and fragile precious things in it'. History depicts that Cleopatra was light and slim and Apollodorous had been strong and powerful.

Caesar must have been moved by this unparallel feat of daring. The sudden and unexpected sight of a fascinating young woman, the appearance of the queen whom he is anxious to meet, and the thought of the successful maneuver which has enabled her to reach him must have conspired to impress his mind. Historians feel that he is carried away by Cleopatra's daring deed. Dio Cassius says in this connection: "Caesar was spellbound as soon as he set eyes on her and she opened her mouth to speak" (45).

Plutarch says, "This stratagem is said to have opened her way to Caesar's heart and through the charm of her conversation, her conquest progressed a pace" (82).

Shaw's Cleopatra utterly fails to capture Caesar's whole attention. It is very evident that while writing *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shaw could not bring himself to make much of sexual infatuation and treat Caesar as a mere hog. As Stephen Winsten remarks: "Here Shaw would give

his world an exhibition of how a great man behaved, a man who never lost his head in an emergency, the scholar ruler par excellence" (117).

Cleopatra is surprised when she finds that Caesar is also concerned for Rufio and Brittanus as they are very useful to him. For Cleopatra the life of a soldier may be sacrificed but Caesar values the life of a soldier.

History depicts that Caesar is confronted by the enthralling power of her great personality akin to that of his own. He finds it for the first time in a woman when Cleopatra springs out of the carpet. Werthelmer observes: "There can be no doubt that Caesar and Cleopatra became lovers that very night" (83).

Despite being crafty, Shaw's Cleopatra fails to seduce Caesar, "It does not matter. I will not go back. Nobody cares for me"(109).

She has her reply:

CAESAR (still more gravely) My poor child: Your life matters little to anyone but yourself. (She gives way altogether to this, casting herself down on the faggots weeping).

In the fourth act of the play, Cleopatra appears to be reveling in the lust of power. The act proves Cleopatra to be quite a Shavian woman. She demands liberty. While talking with Pothinus, she manages Chaffman and Iris flee away. When Ftateeta can't leave her alone in the presence of a man, she insists that she must be trusted as she is a grown up lady.

Like a true Shavian woman, she will adopt the way which she considers to be perfect, and which her own sense of right and wrong has judged completely. In her speech, she harps on the Shavian strings:

CLEOPATRA. When I was foolish, I did what I liked, except when Ftateeta beat me; and even then I cheated her and did it by stealth. Now that Caesar has made me wise, it is no use my liking or disliking. I do what must be done and have no time to attend to myself that is not happiness; but it is greatness. If Caesar were gone, I think I could govern the Egyptians; for what Caesar is to me, I am to the fools around me.(284)

Like huntress and career heroines of Shaw, Cleopatra does what she thinks to be right. She is mature enough to have contempt for infatuation. She very frankly accepts that one who is infatuated is made foolish."Who are those we love"; she defines, "only those whom we do not hate: all people are strangers and enemies to us except those we love." Cleopatra does not hesitate to get Pothinus murdered by her maid Ftateeta as Pothinus accuses her as being a woman with a 'Roman Heart'.

The play ends with Cleopatra's Shavian lesson to Caesar that men are babies in the hands of women:

CAESAR. What! As much a child as ever, Cleopatra! Have I not made a woman of you after all.

CLEOPATRA. Oh, it is you who are a great baby: You make me silly because you will not behave seriously. (285)

The conspicuous element in Shaw's portraiture of Cleopatra is that her seduction and voluptuousness fail to ellipse political considerations. History's pages reveal a character contrary to these dramatic precepts.

Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra* and Dryden in *All for Love* deals with the latter half of the life of Cleopatra i.e. her relationship with Mark Antony. Shakespeare's Cleopatra

baffles us with her versatility of intellect and infinite varieties of mood. Homer E Woodbridge has observed:

The relation of the two Cleopatras (Shaw's and Shakespeare's) is different; here Shaw, accepting Shakespeare's view of the mature queen was simply trying to show the same character as a green girl. His success was astonishing; it is easy to believe that his sixteen year old daughter of Ptolemy might have become Shakespeare's serpent of old Nile.(67)

Unlike Cleopatra depicted in history, Shaw's Cleopatra's is simple and innocent. Shaw has ignored the historical facts and on his stage, we find, instead, a Shavian Cleopatra.

Another historical heroine that figures in Shaw's world of dramas is Joan of Arc who was canonized in 1920. Daniel C. Gerold comments:

The humour, fantasy and anachronisms that the critics had found in St. Joan became accepted characteristics of the new genres of historical drama, which was best represented in the works of Giraudoux... Ultimately the real originality of Shaw's *Saint Joan* and the source of its influence in France lay in Shaw's application of comic irony and modern psychology to a historical subject which had previously been considered entirely serious.(33)

Shaw's Joan is a country girl of seventeen, unladylike and uncommon, 'enlightened by her vision and transformed by faith', with an inborn courageous conscience to convince all men. According to Ruth Adams, "Shaw saw her as the first protestant and the first nationalist and as a military genius and saint"(105).

Shaw's purpose is to present a heavenly spirit, conflicting and struggling with the ephemeral and worldly powers constituting religion and state. A.C. Ward says:

The conflict between Joan of Arc and the Christian Church was a conflict between private judgement and constituted authority; and this being so, the political leaders also become alarmed, for they saw that their authority too would be in danger. (199)

Sally Patters writes:

Cutting through the carapace of legend, Shaw depicts Joan as a spiritual heroine and an unwomanly woman. She is both practical and passionate by nature, a woman whose virginity stems from strength, not from mere Victorian purity. As she exercises her individual will and insists on her private vision, she becomes a conduit of evolutionary thought and behavior. Shaw captured the historical figure of St. Joan and recast her emphasizing certain writers who portrayed her in various manners.(137)

Joan's character had undergone several changes since she made her appearance in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* as a 'troll', 'witch', 'strumpet', 'foul fiend of France'(74). In the eighteenth century, she was transformed by Schiller and Southey being an agent of foreign devils into a popular liberator and nationalist heroine; yet her character was made to appear as a creature of romance and melodrama. Shaw felt that she had been exploited by Voltaire also. Mark Twain exploited her romantically and converted her into an unblemished American school teacher in *Armor*. Shaw wrote, "I love the real Joan..... but the conventional Joan of the stage makes me sick" (13).

Shaw tried to mould her as "the vehicle for a living dialogue between ancient and modern world"(75). Shaw has taken up ancient figures but infused them with modern perceptions.

Desmond Maccarthy has written that the first and foremost act Shaw undertakes, when his setting is in the past, is to:

.....rub off his period the patina of time, he will scrub and scrub till contemporary life begins to glean through surface strangeness and oddities. He is confident that he has reached historic truth when he has succeeded in scratching historic characters till he finds beneath a modern man in fancy dress.(163)

In the early dialogue of the play between Steward and Captain Robert de Baudricourt, we come to know that Joan of Arc is a 'positive girl', and that 'she really does not seem to be afraid of anything' (964). 'Fifty men at arms and a dozen lumps of able bodied servants' can't throw her out of the castle door of the captain. Robert accuses Steward of weakness and inability to face 'the girl' and in a fit of rage strikes him by the scruff of the neck.

Joan is called by the captain in his presence. She asks for a horse, armour and some soldiers to march to Dauphin as they are the orders from her lord, the king of heaven. Robert is outraged and he threatens her to keep under lock and key. She teases Robert by saying that such an act or step would be quite impossible for him since he could not stop her entrance in the court.

Joan is charged with madness by Captain Robert. He pleads with Bertrand de Poulengey not to assist her in any way. Poulengey feels that 'there is something about the girl'. He feels that the girl herself is a bit of a miracle: "She is the last card left in our hand. Better play her than throw up the game."

According to Shaw, Joan is the dramatic symbol of the widely left aspiration of the people to curb the barons and vest power in the king. Joan wants to weld the Burgundians, Gascons and Bretons into a French Nation. Her slogan 'England for the English, France for the French', frightens feudal lords. The following remarks reveal Joan's revolutionary ideas of nationalism as opposed to the feudalistic mental postures of Robert

By her fair arguments, she is able to persuade the squire to help her in what she being the true patriot sees as her divine mission: to drive the English out of France. Writing about her patriotism, Louis De Comte says:

With Joan of Arc, Love of country was more than a sentiment - it was a passion. She was the genius of patriotism - she was patriotism embodied, made flesh and palpable to the touch and visible to the eye.(435)

Saint Joan of Shaw is not exactly the St. Joan in history. The romance of her rise to power which is represented in the first three scenes of the play is intended to be anti romantic romance. Joan, Shaw stresses, was not good looking, not the beautiful maid. He describes her as:

...having an uncommon face: eyes wide apart and bulging as they often do in imaginative people, a long well shaped nose, with wide nostrils, a short upper lip, resolute but full lipped mouth and handsome fighting chin. (10)

She is dressed like a soldier and rides round the country. Throughout the play, Shaw is bent on demystifying the figure of Joan. She is to be seen as plain speaking, buoyant, unabashed, and irreverent. Shaw could never conceive a great man as a grave man and his Saint Joan as much as his Caesar was to have little time for conventional gravity. Shaw was determined to remove the glamour of the legendary Joan because by making her apparently ordinary, he could all the more effectively highlight what was truly extraordinary in her character - the energy, the resolution and the unswerving will.

Before Joan appears at the Dauphin's Court, the Archbishop discusses a plan to test Joan's supposed miraculous powers by substituting Gilles De Rais for Dauphin and requiring her to 'find the blood royal'. Buchan discusses the success of this scene:

...Gentle Prince, they call me Joan the maid. The king of Heaven has sent me to you..... The murmuring crowd began thinning and left Joan and Dauphin face to face. Some emotion from Joan seems to have touched Charles then. He seized her hands and drew her apart into his private Chapel. What they said to one another is not known. According to Joan's own testimony, the voices had promised her that when she found herself in her sovereign's presence, she would be empowered to give him some sign by which he would know, she was straight from God. (79)

Joan pleads that she has her whole faith in Charles and that he must fight. Charles, a little afraid asks her to mind her own business since he is unable to put up the fight.

Joan is able to persuade the court and the uncrowned Dauphin to accept her. She is Shaw's conception of a saint (the conventional name for a superman). With her commonsense about fighting and politics, she is merely a sensible country girl, uncorrupted by the romantic court. But the positives of her inspiration as Shaw sees them are her singleness of purpose and sexlessness. It is the latter fact which is given to account for her control over the army. There has not been a word that has anything to do with her being a woman.

Joan's faith in God and above all her firm determination enables her to get victory, drive the English back and crown Dauphin as the king of France. Louis Kossuth writes:

Consider this unique and imposing distinction. Since the writing of human history began, Joan of Arc is the only person of either sex, who has ever held supreme command of the military forces of a nation at the age of seventeen. (56)

But the power who tried to secure her own nation, the feudal barons and church conspire against her. The feudal lords are represented by the English Earl of Warwick whereas the Church is represented by the Bishop of Beauvais, a completely sincere but conventional priest. Both agree to capture her and burn her for heresy. Joan was thought to be guilty of witchcraft because she had declared that her inspiration was conveyed to her by voices and by visions. She keeps on emphasizing the fact that she will obey the church 'provided it does not command anything impossible'.

It is her impetuous and pert answers that God must be served first which defames her as 'heretic'. Her voices do not tell her to disobey the Church but God must be served first. Here lies the difference between Catholic and protestant faith. In the Middle Ages whoever went against Church was considered to be evil spirited. Thus an irresistible force met an immovable obstacle and developed the heat that consumed poor Joan. Joan was canonized as Saint and entitled as the First protestant by the literary men and historians. Joan's own religion is an allusion to Shaw's interpretation of religion. The essay *Bernard Shaw and London Heretics* highlights his religious sentiment:

Since there was no affirmative religion in the western world in which a reasonably intelligent man could believe, Shaw proceeded to devise one for him. He enjoyed using old words in fresh ways and one can find him calling himself a catholic at one point and a protestant at another. He used the word catholic to mean universal. When he called himself protestant, he thought of himself as separatist from the establishment. His aim therefore was a belief that could be at the same time individual and universal. Shaw preferred a mystical revelation to a rationalist one (133-134)

Joan is charged with being 'blinded by terrible pride and self-sufficiency' (998). The Archbishop says, 'Pride will have a fall' and that he can't bless her while she is 'proud and disobedient.'

For her, the stake is ready and she is to be put to flames. She accepts that her voices have deceived her, "Oh: it is true: It is true: my voices have deceived me. I have been mocked by devils: my faith is broken. I have dared and dared; but only a fool will walk into fire"(998). After confession, she is made to sign the recantation. But when she learns that she is to be condemned to perpetual imprisonment, she prefers to die, recants her confession and is burnt at the stake.

Twenty five years later, she returns to the king in a dream and comes to know that sentence of heresy on her has been annulled and the English have been driven out of France. In the ghost world, she meets the characters of her short period of dynamic fame on the earth. A Vatican official informs others that Joan is to be made the saint. She offers to return to life but all and sundry refuse. Her last cry is: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, How long?"(1009)

Ruth Adams has written, "Joan the maid is the noblest character in all Shaw's work"(165).Joan is a real heroine by virtue of her devotion, high mindedness, and supreme commonsense. The conspicuous thing is that Joan is a Shavian heroine by virtue of the fact that she is not at all conventional in her outlook. If Shaw's women are rebels, Joan is no exception. She explodes the myth of the Victorian ideal 'man for the field, woman for the hearth'! The *English Chaplain's Statement* proves the fact:

.....But I know as a matter of plain commonsense that the woman is a rebel; and that is enough for me. She rebels against nature by wearing man's clothes, and fighting. She rebels against the Church by usurping the divine authority of the Pope. She rebels against God by her damnable league with Satan and his evil spirits against our army and all these rebellions are only excuses for her great rebellion against England.(89)

Joan was passionate about soldiering and leading the life of a man. Shaw writes in his preface: "Had Joan not been one of those 'Unwomanly Woman', she might have been canonized much sooner." At another place Shaw writes, "She refused to accept the specified woman's lot and dressed and fought and lived as men did."(604)

Shaw has been completely justified in Joan's delineation. Her life is a tragedy of belief against belief. If the forces that bring about the catastrophe are on the grandest scale, the individual soul on which they press too is of the most indomitable force and temper. Shaw writes that her trial and sentence are quite as legal as and much fairer than most modern political trials.

Michael Holroyd writes that Shaw has made her "the heroic example of an undiscovered modern leader, the warrior saint he had sometimes thought of dramatizing as Cromwell and Mahomet, and had looked for in a play about the Unknown Soldier." (78)

John was unquestionably an exceptionally, extraordinarily able woman. She had great political and military acumen. Shaw writes in *Platform and Pulpit*:

Saint Joan found the whole power of society marshaled against her and she had to fight it. Women had to do the same in the early part of the 19th century to get the parliamentary vote.I have only spoken here because the whole value of Joan to us is how you can bring her and her circumstances into contact with our life and our circumstances. (215)

The play also supports Shaw's theory of historical heroines. The aim of historical play according to Shaw is not merely a reconstruction of the past. He reconstructs it to show the

significance in the present and treats of it in the same manner. He is very confident that he has reached historic truth when he has succeeded in 'scratching historic characters till he finds beneath a modern man in fancy dress.' Not strange, therefore the Historical Joan becomes Shavian when she discards the religious and social order. While talking to Dunois, she mocks at Maud, Emily, Six Miss Huxtables and others who had nothing to do but 'dream of lovers and money.' She is conversant with life's business and so she has no vacuum in her life. Historian Andre Maurois wrote, "The story of Joan of Arc is at once the most amazing miracle in history and the most logical sequence of political acts"(76).

Shaw has represented Joan as a woman of Genius. She has extraordinary commonsense and will power. She embodies Shaw's philosophy of creative Evolutionary will and represents the perennial struggle of the creative will for evolution. Therefore the Epilogue shows that she did not come to an end with the burning of her physical body in 1431. Shaw has made use of the historical fact of the rehabilitation in 1456, recognition as a vulnerable being in 1904 and her canonization in 1908 to depict the different stages of the success of Evolutionary will. Shaw has successfully combined history and philosophy in the figure of St. Joan. Thus *Saint Joan* gave him an opportunity to combine woman with religion for the expression of his progressive ideas at the highest level.

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