EXAMINING LIFE WITH SHAW

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In 399 BCE in the democratic Greek city state of Athens, the elderly Socrates was on trial for his life, accused of disrespecting the gods and of corrupting the local youth. The story is told by Plato, one of Socrates's followers, in the *Apology* (2002). Socrates claimed to be the wisest man alive but did not seem to have any positive doctrine to impart. Instead, he showed his interlocutors that everything that they thought they knew was wrong, which did not sound like wisdom at all. Socrates defended himself by saying that he was wisest precisely because he was the only person who *knew* that he knew nothing (*Apology* 23b) and that he was driven to practise his method because the unexamined life was not worth living (38a), a contention that is foundational for western philosophy. He described himself as a 'gadfly' who stung people out of their complacency into the hard work of thinking for themselves (38e). To be stung by a gadfly is painful but not fatal, and yet the citizens of Athens condemned Socrates to death.

The metaphor of the gadfly can be fittingly applied to George Bernard Shaw. In both his life and his work, he stung and refused to leave well alone, making his audiences re-examine everything they thought they knew. This gadfly got away with his life, but Shaw's works can still have a disconcerting effect, because they create within the theatre a world where everything is open to question. His 1912 drama *Pygmalion* (2021), for example, introduces the Covent Garden flower girl Eliza Doolittle to the expert linguist Henry Higgins, who takes her on as a pupil, wagering that he can pass her off as a duchess. Important questions about class are raised by the play. When Higgins is successful, does it mean that social status can be deconstructed as a matter of how we speak, the vocabulary we use, the tone of voice we adopt?

What does Higgins's success tell us about the way that society is organised? Is Eliza the same person at the end of the play? *Pygmalion* is a dramatic thought experiment that tests the dictum of Shaw's contemporary, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

> The *limits of my language* mean the limits of my world. (*TL-P* 5.6).

Is this proposition true? Engaging with *Pygmalion* is one way of finding out. The play performs philosophy.

Shaw's role as a gadfly is illustrated by a line in J.B. Priestley's 1946 drama *An Inspector Calls*, which opens with the Birling family at dinner on a beautiful spring evening in 1912. Life is going very well for the Birlings. The head of the family, a prosperous man of business, dismisses concerns about any coming European conflict and insists on the three members of the younger generation hearing what he has to say, because 'these Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wellses' should not be allowed to dominate (2003: 166). By the end of the play, however, the Birlings stand condemned in the eyes of the audience. The relentless Socratic questioning of the mysterious Inspector Goole has broken down all pretence at middle-class virtue, and each member of the family is forced to accept that the horrific suicide of a young woman can be directly traced to what they have done or failed to do. The spectral visitor stings like a gadfly in a play that confirms the theatre as a vehicle of moral instruction and allows the 'Bernard Shaws and the H.G. Wellses' (and now, by implication, also the J.B. Priestleys) to speak, despite society's attempts to impose silence on them. The gadflies are vindicated.

In the Preface to his 1923 play *Saint Joan*, Shaw pairs his heroine Joan of Arc with Socrates, and by doing so sheds new light on both figures. To relate the father of western philosophy to a military saint of fifteen-century France is a radical move, because at first sight they could not be more different, as Shaw himself notes (2003: 5). Socrates was an old man when he was

condemned, who only got away with his intellectual methods for so long was because he was a ‘man of argument’ who operated ‘slowly and peacefully’ on the minds of his listeners. He wanted to change opinions, not society, and used non-violent methods. It was his misfortune that society took against way that his scepticism served to undermine the status quo: there is only so much stinging that some people can take. Joan, by contrast, was a ‘woman of action’, who operated swiftly through overt military violence in her campaign to drive the English from France, a mission that she claimed was warranted by the heavenly voices that had spoken to her. Unlike Socrates, her career was brief, and she was consigned to the flames for heresy at the age of seventeen. But there are parallels between the two. Both, for example, were loyal to the institutions that eventually destroyed them. Socrates the law-abiding citizen refused to escape after his condemnation when the opportunity was given to him, while Joan professed her orthodox Catholic faith to the end. Both have become inspirational figures because they refused to betray the truth as they found it, even though it cost them their lives. Today, Socrates’s words are read and studied in schools and universities across the world. Joan’s statue is found in the public squares of France as an object of secular veneration, as well as in the Catholic churches of France as an object of religious devotion. For Shaw, what unites them is their innocence:

> If Socrates was innocent … at the age of seventy, it may be imagined how innocent Joan was at the age of seventeen. (2003: 5)

Whereas the protagonist of a tragedy will typically have a fatal flaw – Oedipus is too committed to doing his duty, Othello is too trusting of what Iago tells him – both Socrates and Joan have done nothing wrong from a Shavian point of view. The problem is that they are both ‘Protestants’, to use a term that Shaw anachronistically applies to Joan, the devout Catholic who for him was ‘the first of the Protestant martyrs’ (2003: 3). The word ‘Protestant’ is used

in the play when the Earl of Warwick describes Joan's insistence on following her own path as:

> Protestantism if I had to find a name for it. (2003: 107)

The term could also and equally anachronistically be applied to Socrates, who followed his conscience against Athenian demands for him to conform, and thus became a Protestant martyr. The aged sage and the young revolutionary look to each other across the centuries through the prism that is Shaw's play.

Another factor that connects Socrates and Joan is that they wrote nothing themselves. I mentioned above that the primary source for information about Socrates is Plato, a great philosopher in his own right who went on to depict his teacher in over thirty dialogues, which may have been acted out by students in his Academy. The situation is complex, however, because in Plato's later dialogues Socrates seems to be more of a vehicle for what Plato himself wishes to say, a persona rather than a person. There are facts about Socrates that are accepted by historians – he was married with three children, he went barefoot, he was a soldier before becoming a teacher, and so on – but interpretation now plays a major role in any encounter with the sage of Athens: what are we to make of Plato's dramatic representations of his mentor? Socrates also appears in several dialogues by Xenophon, and in the comedy *Clouds* by Aristophanes, who turns him into a figure of fun, who is there to be mocked. There is more than one Socrates to choose from, and the same is true of Joan, whose biography can be constructed from contemporary records (cf. Pernoud 1962), but who exists in many artistic representations. To give three examples:

(1) Friedrich von Schiller's 1801 'romantic tragedy' *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* [The Maid of Orleans] (2022) plays fast and loose with historical facts. Joan falls in love with an English knight, and her subsequent capture is configured as fitting punishment for

failure in her mission to liberate France. However, when she realises that the French are in danger of defeat, she breaks out of her prison and dies on the battlefield under the flag, after leading her army to victory in a Kantian triumph of duty over inclination.

(2) Luc Besson's 1999 film *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* complicates Joan's motivations by showing how as a child she witnessed the violent death of her sister at the hands of English troops, thus implying that her later career is driven by revenge. Besson gives her a supernatural mentor who is a blend of confessor and accuser, while Joan herself seems to have wandered into mediaeval France out of a computer game.

(3) The electronic band Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark foregrounds Joan in two songs on their 1980 album *Architecture and Morality*: 'Joan of Arc' relocates her as a character in a contemporary love story; 'Maid of Orleans' celebrates the heroic warrior who is willing to embrace death. The tracks complement each other, and form two musical takes on a legend whose power reaches beyond biography to those alive today.

And then there is Shaw's Joan, another gadfly who disturbs those around her, like Socrates teaching by the Adriatic. For example, when the Dauphin tells her that he wants to be left alone to lead a life of pleasant inactivity rather than fight for his throne, her reply is:

> Blethers! We are all like that to begin with. I shall put courage into thee. (2003: 84)

Poor Charles just wants peace and quiet, and that is precisely what Joan refuses to give him. The first word of her reply – the Shavian coinage 'Blethers!' – sums her up and indicates the stubbornness that will enable her to get Charles crowned but that will also take her to the stake. As the stage direction puts it, she is 'trenchant and masterful' (ibid.). She refuses to cooperate with the received view of the world, just like Socrates cannot resist putting questions to the curious young men of Athens. And, like Socrates, she will pay dearly for it.

Shaw investigates the minds of Socrates and Joan and postulates a further link:

> both of them combined terrifying ability with a frankness, personal modesty, and benevolence which made the furious dislike to which they fell victims absolutely unreasonable, and therefore inapprehensible by themselves. (2003: 5)

The *Apology* and *Saint Joan* show two characters who function differently from the rest of us, because they see beyond. When Socrates was found guilty, he was asked to name his punishment. He replied that he should be kept for the rest of his days at the state's expense and, when that was refused, that he should be fined a derisory sum. He was saying 'Blethers!' to his Athenian judges (*Apology* 36e, 38b). At last, however, he bowed to the inevitable and drank the poisoned chalice, just as Joan tore up her recantation and accepted burning rather than face a life of dishonourable captivity. It remained a puzzle to both Socrates and Joan why they should have inspired such hatred: it is because they would not leave people alone. They still will not. Socrates continues to sting through the writings of Plato, and a powerful interpretation of Joan lives for our time and for all time in the play that bears her name by Shaw, a play that is not about a philosopher, but that like *Pygmalion* does philosophy, because it works out what it means to be a Protestant before your time and makes us see the world differently. It is a paradigm case of a very special sort of attention (cf. Diamond 1982: 32), and the singularity of its performance can trigger visceral responses that bypass rational enquiry. Stanley Cavell argues that the arts can prompt 'mysterious thoughts and feelings in us, amorphous, latent thoughts and feelings' in a way that analysis cannot (2005: 193).

An example of how Shaw makes drama do philosophy is found in the interaction between Robert de Baudricourt and Joan in Scene I. Joan has just set out on her journey and finds Robert in a bad mood because his hens are not laying. She presents him with an account of her visions, to which he replies that she only sees them in her imagination. Joan has the final word:

> Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us. (2003: 68)

Shaw performs here a dramatic trick that will stay with the audience. He suggests and maintains two possibilities: either Joan really is inspired by God, or she is hopelessly deluded (cf. Wilson 2022: 104). Literature can hold such contradictions open in a way that is alien to the methods of philosophers, who typically strive to eliminate contradictions from their work in the interests of consistency. Literature is more at home with ambiguity. Imogen Stubbs, one of many actors who have taken on the role of Shaw's Joan, argues that Joan can be considered either miraculous or unbearable (2003: xvi). Perhaps we can go further: Joan is *both* miraculous *and* unbearable. I am reminded of how Simone Weil insists that philosophers should change their ways and attempt to maintain contradictions in their work, citing the passage in the *Upanishads* in which there are two birds on a branch, one looking at the fruit and the other eating it (1973: 166). By the end of the scene, Robert's hens are laying eggs. He is convinced that a sign has been given to him that Joan's mission has divine support, although it could just as easily be a coincidence. If an essential part of a miracle is how it is received, then we can argue that the laying of the eggs is *both* a miracle *and* a coincidence. Shaw leaves it up to the audience either to decide or to keep both possibilities in mind. The dramatist's ability to hold ambiguity in play makes the play more relevant than ever to our own age, which is characterised by ambiguity: as Stubbs says, Shaw's Joan is 'the right one to be received by the twenty-first century' (ibid.).

We also live in times that are sensitive to appropriation, and Shaw's Joan resolutely remains a figure that cannot be co-opted into other causes. Marina Warner (1981) has shown how different parties have adopted Joan to promote their view of the world, as in the secular and sacred iconography to which I referred above with respect to statues of Joan in her homeland. In the Epilogue of *Saint Joan*, a 'Gentleman' arrives from the Vatican to announce that Joan has been officially canonised by the Catholic Church. It is the year 1920, some 500 years after the same organisation ordered her to be burned alive. Joan's attitude is one of amusement: the

stage direction indicates that she ‘chuckles’ at the news (2003: 160). That is not the attitude of a Catholic saint, but it may very well be the attitude of a Protestant saint. As with the use of the term ‘Blethers!’, Shaw’s genius comes out in the small details of the play. Joan is elevated to the same rank of the saints who inspired her, and she finds it amusing, though there is an immediate shift in her attitude when she realises that the world still will not accept her as she really is. The play ends with her on her knees, asking when the earth will be ready to receive God’s saints (2003: 164). Her question remains unanswered. Shaw’s Joan is beyond this world. She is a saint beyond sanctity and a hero beyond heroism. She persists in her innocence.

I have examined Shaw’s own Protestant portrayal of Saint Joan in the light of his linking of her to the founder of western philosophy, Socrates. Both these historical figures need interpreters to bring them to the world. Socrates immediately found his student Plato; and Joan, in time, found Shaw, whose genius it was to realise how ‘mental giants’ who do not intend harm are destroyed by those who are both envious and fearful (2003: 5). Socrates thought that the unexamined life was not worth living, and Joan chose a painful death than lead a life examined only by others. Such heroism is frightening, but also liberating, and *Saint Joan* keeps this contradiction in play. Through his dramatic work, Shaw the gadfly continues to examine life, so that others may find it worth living.

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