

Shaw's 'Lear'

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SHAKES. Where is thy Hamlet? Couldst thou write King Lear?

SHAV. Aye, with his daughters all complete. Thou couldst have written Heartbreak House? Behold my Lear.¹

ALTHOUGH Bernard Shaw called his *Heartbreak House* (written 1916-17) a fantasia in the Russian manner upon English themes, and echoes of *The Cherry Orchard* unquestionably reverberate through it, the play might be profitably viewed as a fantasia in the Shakespearean manner upon Shavian themes. Whether or not Shaw recalled Swinburne's remark that *King Lear* was the work of Shakespeare the Socialist, *Heartbreak House* seems clearly to have been designed, at least in part, as Shaw's *Lear*. Earlier, he had tauntingly titled part of a preface to his *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) 'Better than Shakespear?' — suggesting a parallel with the Bard's *Antony and Cleopatra*; yet, by presenting a kittenish young queen and ageing Caesar, rather than an ageing but still sultry Cleopatra and a younger admirer, he had evaded any direct comparison. Like his *Cleopatra* play, Shaw's *Lear* was offered not in competition but as commentary.

G.B.S. waited until his nineties to point publicly to *Heartbreak House* as his *Lear*. Even then he did so guardedly through the disarming medium of a puppet play, perhaps to prevent the comparison from being taken as seriously as he inwardly still meant it to be, for in his lifetime the play's now very considerable reputation² had never measured up to his expectations for it. 'If the critics had the brains of a mad Tom,' he grumbled, using a suggestive association with *Lear*, 'they would realize it is my greatest play. But they don't. They all go following after the Maid of Orleans'.³ Privately, Shaw had hinted at the *Lear* con-

¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Shakes vs. Shaw*, 1949.

² '... this masterpiece ... an opera without music, or rather with its own verbal music ...' (J. W. Lambert, *Drama*, Spring, 1968, p. 21) '... one of the great plays of the century ... Shaw's best ...' (Walter Kerr, *New York Times*, 27 August 1967, p. D9). These are no longer untypical comments.

³ Paul Green in an interview with Shaw, *Dramatic Heritage*, New York, 1953, p. 127.

nection almost as soon as he had completed the play. In 1917 Lillah McCarthy, the actress, had asked him for details of the work, hoping to persuade him to let her produce it or at least acquire a starring part in it. Shaw put her off. It was wartime, he pointed out, and the play was unpleasant — unsuitable fare for war conditions. The hero was an old man of eighty-eight, and there were no young males in the cast at all (its implicit recognition of the wartime dearth of leading men). And the women were either too young or too old — an ingenue and two sisters in their middle forties. The sisters, Shaw confided — ‘I don’t find them much more popular than Goneril or Regan’ — were the old man’s daughters.¹ Disgusted with the dragged-out war, and its effect on theatre as well as much else, he confessed that his heart was not in a London production of a new play. And Miss McCarthy — creator of some of Shaw’s greatest roles, beginning with her Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* — appeared neither then nor afterward in a performance of *Heartbreak House*.

‘There is something about the play that makes me extremely reluctant to let it go out of my hands,’ he insisted on completing it; and at first he would let no one read it, nor would he offer to read it to his friends, although in his later years he had found great satisfaction in performing such dramatic readings — with all the histrionic stops pulled — scene by scene and act by act as his plays were being written. He was, as Miss McCarthy discovered, not even interested in having it produced, and when it was discussed he usually talked of it as having been inspired by Chekhov. Yet he afterwards told Hesketh Pearson that it was his favourite play, noting that old Captain Shotover was ‘a modernized King Lear’. As for its meaning, Pearson reported Shaw’s stock reply: ‘How should I know? I am only the author.’²

What was to have been his *Cherry Orchard* had been transformed, almost *in utero*, by events as much as by Shaw, although the Chekhovian atmosphere remained. (Shaw, in fact, told his

¹ Shaw to Lillah McCarthy, a.l.s. 10 August 1917. Quoted by courtesy of the Academic Center Library, University of Texas at Austin. Later, Lillah McCarthy wrote in her memoirs that *Heartbreak House* had ‘a quality which exists in no other of Shaw’s plays: a quality which only once before an English playwright has contrived to give to the drama he has written. The quality which “King Lear” has: spaciousness. In *Heartbreak House* there is no stage. It is life speaking from the stage of life, a voice crying in the wilderness.’

² *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality*, New York, 1963, pp. 362–3.

biographer, Henderson, that *Heartbreak House* 'began with an atmosphere and does not contain a word that was foreseen before it was written'. Chekhov had the charm of novelty as well as a doom-ridden nostalgia; but *King Lear* had long fascinated Shaw, although not until the years of the 1914-18 war had he been confronted with a sense of helplessness and futility such as he was convinced Shakespeare had dramatized in the play. Shaw had never had the opportunity to review a production, yet he had consistently tucked into other commentaries his insistence that it was a 'masterpiece', and that 'no man will ever write a better tragedy than Lear'. He had written of the 'blasphemous despair' revealed to him by the play,¹ thinking particularly of Gloucester's dark lines, lines he quoted afterwards in the preface to his next play, where, writing of Shakespeare's 'religionless condition . . . of despair', Shaw added, 'His towering King Lear would be only a melodrama were it not for its express admission that if there is nothing more to be said of the universe than Hamlet has to say, then 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport'''.² 'Even the fool in Lear,' he wrote, 'is tragic.'

Lear's tragicomic aspects were also bound to attract a playwright who had been writing as though he meant his line that every jest was an earnest in the womb of time. As Shaw put it,³ although Shakespeare had often juxtaposed passages of 'down-right circus buffoonery' with the 'deepest tragedy', it was only in *Lear*, his 'greatest tragedy', that 'we find the alteration of tragic and funny dropped for an actual interweaving of the two; so that we have the tragic and the comic simultaneously, each heightening the other with a poignancy otherwise unattainable'. To Shaw 'the wonderful storm trio in which the king, the fool, and the sham madman have their parts "concerted", . . . like the statue, the hero, and the comic valet in . . . *Don Giovanni*'

¹ 'That Shakespeare's soul was damned (I really know no other way of expressing it) by a barren pessimism is undeniable but even when it drove him to the blasphemous despair of *Lear* and the Nihilism of *Macbeth*, it did not break him. He was not crushed by it: he wielded it Titanically, and made it a sublime quality in his plays. He almost delighted in it: it never made him bitter: to the end there was mighty music in him, and outrageous gaity.' (G. B. Shaw, 'Frank Harris's Shakespeare', reprinted from *The Nation*, 24 December 1910, in *Pen Portraits and Reviews*, 1932.)

² Preface to *Back to Methuselah*, 1921, p. lxxxvi.

³ From Shaw's observations on his dramatic technique written at the request of Archibald Henderson and quoted in his *George Bernard Shaw*, New York, 1956, p. 741.

was 'the summit of Shakespeare's achievement as poet and playwright'.¹ Few plays from the pre-twentieth-century repertoire, as Jan Kott has shown,² insisting, like Shaw, on the play's essential pessimism and near-nihilism, lend themselves so readily to interpretation as 'black comedy'. Even the core of the play, Wilson Knight has claimed in a famous essay, 'is an absurdity, . . . an incongruity', characterized by that kind of 'grimmiest humour' which warns against 'sentimentalizing' its 'cosmic mockery'.³ *Heartbreak House* suggests that Shaw's reading of *Lear* is that if Shakespeare had not meant it that way, he should have.

Sir Cedric Hardwicke (who was in one of the first English casts of *Heartbreak House*) was probably echoing Shaw when he observed that Captain Shotover was meant to be 'an up-to-date King Lear', yet although Shaw intended recognizable similarities — his remark to Lillah McCarthy makes this clear — he seems to have intended as well some significant differences. In both lie a measure of *Heartbreak House's* significance, in what might be identified as its *Lear*-dimension. Without offering any explanations for them, critics have long pointed to tantalizing hints of *Lear* in Shaw's play.

It is apocalyptic. Captain Shotover is eighty-eight and mad. His two daughters have an aspect in which they are fiends. Boss Mangan, the business man driven to a frenzy by *Heartbreak House*, proposes [like *Lear*] to strip himself naked. 'Poor wretch!' Hector Hushabye exclaims at the end of the second act — and adds, as 'he lifts his fists in invocation to heaven': 'Fall. Fall and crush.'⁴

(A parallel, perhaps to Albany's similar gesture and invocation, 'Fall and cease!' near the close of *Lear*.)⁵ Even the air raid which brings the play to a violent conclusion seems a modern embodiment of the great storm in *Lear*. As J. I. M. Stewart observes:

These reverberations are not insignificant. For *Heartbreak House* is the play in which Shaw confronts, for the first time in his imaginative writing, the small extent of his faith in man. What lies just beneath the play's surface is despair. It is thus in intention, or impulsion, radically different from almost all the rest of his work . . .⁶

¹ *Heartbreak House* has several 'storm trios' involving fools and sham madmen.

² *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, New York, 1966.

³ *The Wheel of Fire*, 1949.

⁴ J. I. M. Stewart, *Eight Modern Writers*, 1963, p. 171.

⁵ Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 316-17.

⁶ Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

Albany's words in *Lear* sound the note of *Heartbreak House*:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

Hector — Shaw's Albany — in words as reminiscent of Don Juan (*in Hell*) as of *Lear* — provides a twentieth-century echo:

[*Fiercely*] I tell you, one of two things must happen. Either out of that darkness some new creation will come to supplant us as we have supplanted the animals, or the heavens will fall in thunder and destroy us.

G.B.S.'s play, basically the characteristic later-Shavian juxtaposition of theatrical and intellectual elements one can label *serious farce*, was intended, indeed, as apocalyptic farce. Contrary to the fate of most prophecy, the thunder from heaven came even before the play had been completed, and in fact offered Shaw — via a Zeppelin raid he observed from his country house — an appropriate ending at a time when an ending was eluding him. Although the bursting bombs have their counterpart in the last-act thudding of axes upon Chekhov's cherry trees, and the ominous and premonitory breaking string is paralleled by the Beethoven-like drumming of distant aircraft engines, that the major characters in *Heartbreak House* are as much at home in a *Lear*-framework as in Chekhov's overheated drawing rooms suggests that the blending of concepts occurred early in the play's development, perhaps even before the first words were written. Europe, a newly pessimistic Shaw realized in 1913-14, was in its self-destructive selfishness (the only sense of purpose which European nations seemed to evidence) heading for catastrophe.

Heartbreak House's outlook, nevertheless, is also radically different from *Lear*, and in some ways almost its inversion. 'There is nothing real in the world,' says Ellie, 'but my father and Shakespeare,' and her favourite reading is *Othello*, whose recital of his exploits to Desdemona seems to have its parallel in Ellie Dunn's naive acceptance of Hector Hushabye's tall tales of heroism. But the unconscious irony of her pointing to Shakespeare's epitome of Nature's Nobleman, as well as to that impractical, naive anachronism of an idealist, Mazzini Dunn, as all that are real in

the world, may mean something more. To Shaw in the midst of a brutal, wasteful war there was no longer room or reason for impractical nobility of Lear's (or Othello's) stamp; and the element of weary hope and faith which concludes *Lear* is twisted sardonically in *Heartbreak House* to hope by Hesione Hushabye and Ellie Dunn that the air raid which had put such excitement into their aimless lives will be repeated. 'I hope they'll come again tomorrow night,' says Hesione; and Ellie eagerly adds (*radiant at the prospect*, Shaw notes), 'Oh, I hope so.'

This savouring of the violence which has brought new interest into jaded lives is grotesque, and indicative not only of Shaw's war-bred despair but, through contrast with Lear's daughters, especially the scorned Cordelia, his reaction to it. To recall her, and her relationship with Lear, Shaw had earlier portrayed Shotover dozing on the shoulder of Ellie, to whom he had declared himself mystically joined. (In the 1949 *Shakes vs. Shaw*, after Shakes asks, 'Where is thy Hamlet? Couldst thou write King Lear?' and Shaw replies, 'Aye, with his daughters all complete. Couldst thou have written *Heartbreak House*? Behold my Lear,' the dramatist's stage directions read, '*A transparency is suddenly lit up, shewing Captain Shotover seated, as in Millais' picture called North-West Passage, with a young woman of virginal beauty*'.¹ And Shotover and Ellie speak, aria-like, several passages from Shaw's play. Ellie suggests Cordelia in other ways as well, for she is also 'fresh, loving, dowerless, heartbroken, and strong-minded'; while Shaw's 'old daughter-troubled man has his Goneril and Regan [in] Hesione and Ariadne [who] are modern embodiments of the wicked sisters' sexuality and worldliness'.² At play's end the three daughters (for Ellie is 'adopted') are defeated or dead in *Lear*, but in *Heartbreak House* live and thrive in their open cynicism and their absorption in self-interest. At the same point in each play, mad old Shotover is strangely satisfied (as war apparently begins) that all is temporarily well, while Lear finds, contrastingly, his personal world crumbling still further as tranquility is apparently restored.

¹ Shaw might also have been remembering, although at ninety-two he did not recognize the fact, a painting he had written about some sixty years before, the Pre-Raphaelite Ford Madox Brown's *Lear and Cordelia* (see *Music in London*, II, 15).

² Meisl, op. cit., p. 317 n.

The paradox and the horror are, by comparison with *Lear*, 'civilized' reactions. But Lear recovers his sanity long enough to cry out, when Cordelia dies (largely the result of his own irresponsibility),

Why should a dog, a horse, or rat have life,
And thou no breath at all?

while no one finds it necessary to ask why a bomb should drop without warning on to the grounds of Heartbreak House, killing two people. (Only a few lines earlier an unexplained order to black out the lights had been the only clue that there is a war — or that one is imminent.) On the grounds of their opportunistic morals the two who die might be denied pity, but Shaw rejects conventional poetic justice as he rejects questioning destiny's selectivity. Meaning lies less in who has died and more in the fact of death, as Hector emphasizes in scolding the incurably idealist Mazzini Dunn for his concern about one of the victims: 'Are you immortal that you need pity him? Our turn next.' The words recall us to the problem of finding meaning for existence in an irrational world, the dilemmas of both *Lear* and *Heartbreak House*.

As absurd and irrational as are some of the rambling lines of the octogenarian Shotover, he shares with the quixotic Hector the words of wisdom Shaw has written into his play. Lear, on the other hand, although he reaches a condition of understanding, is given little wisdom of thought or act. The aged Lear early in the play becomes a king more in memory than in fact, while Shaw's half-mad Shotover — at Eighty-eight — is a sea captain only in memory. But he is nevertheless, a critic notes, 'a King Lear without the tragedy (though certainly with hints of pathos) and still, in spite of his calculated senile absentmindedness, in full command of his kingdom and his daughters. He is a prophet thundering in navigational terms'.¹ A 'very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward', Lear is what Shotover describes as the 'drifting skipper' — the irresponsible captain who runs his ship on to the rocks because he has trusted his navigation to Providence, rather than to himself. In search of a life free at last from responsibility, his mind weakened by his years, Lear relinquishes his

¹ Audrey Williamson, *Bernard Shaw, Man and Writer*, New York, 1963, p. 172.

kingdom and his power to his two selfish daughters, who have flattered him with love they do not feel and promised him the ease and the continued glory they do not intend to furnish. Shaw's old man steadfastly remains the intellectual force and financial mainstay in the house of his daughter — legally still his own house. Though his mind sometimes drifts and wanders, his sense of purpose is too sharply focused to permit him to abdicate any of his failing (but formidable) powers.

Shotover understands his daughters, too, where Lear does not. The old skipper's heart is not easily broken. Six years, he insists, is the normal span of filial affection; thus he has learned not to 'make distinctions between one fellow creature and another'. Yet his children, although as sharp-tongued and cynical as Lear's, reverse Goneril's and Regan's unkindness, and are indulgent to a fault. Lear expects total and permanent affection, and is disillusioned when hypocrisy and deceit are what he receives instead. In short, while one realizes that heartbreak is 'the end of happiness and the beginning of peace', the other, having raged helplessly against the storm, hopes, at best, to conclude his days in a state of happiness that is only freedom from anxiety. 'Come, let's away to prison,' he comforts the fellow-captive Cordelia:

We two alone will sing like birds i'th' cage.
 . . . So we'll live,
 And pray and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too —
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out —
 Take upon's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies . . .

(v, iii, 8-17)

Happiness, which Lear craves as the fulfilment of his old age, is the very thing Shotover most fears — the 'accursed happiness . . . that comes as life goes, the happiness of yielding and dreaming instead of resisting and doing, the sweetness of the fruit that is going rotten'. A sense of purpose — of using one's self up in finding and fulfilling that purpose — is the Shotover antidote to happiness. Thus he longs in his old age for the tests and trials of youth, and is given by Shaw a grateful apostrophe to the sea-storms that compelled him to savour his vigour. 'I was ten times

happier on the bridge in the typhoon, or frozen into Arctic ice for months in darkness, than you or they have ever been,' he tells Ellie. '... At your age I looked for hardship, danger, horror, and death, that I might feel the life in me more intensely. I did not let the fear of death govern my life; and my reward was, I had my life.' (It is an ironic commentary upon the times that to do the same, Ellie and Hesionie must summon back the bombs. It is all they have.) Shotover's nostalgic savouring of the typhoon is in obvious contrast to Lear's noble, yet pathetic, defiance of the storm:

Blow, winds and crack your cheeks!
 ... Rumble thy bellyful? Spit, fire; spout, rain!
 ... I tax you not, elements, with unkindness;
 ... You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
 Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave ...

Weary, helpless and insignificant, Lear no more wants to be a slave to the elements than he had wanted to be a slave to responsibility. He had divided his kingdom only in order 'to shake all cares and business' and enable him to 'Unburthened crawl toward death'. Shotover is aware of the hazards of so yielding to one's years. 'Old men are dangerous,' he warns; 'It doesn't matter to them what is going to happen to the world.'

'Age ... has its blindness and decay,' writes a modern director of a highly regarded *Lear*. 'However true sight comes from an acuteness of living that can transform the world.'¹ The insight can be used to contrast Lear and Shotover. But the larger meaning of such a contrast must be Shaw's commentary upon those bleak lines of Gloucester so equally applicable to Lear: 'The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair.' That Lear's weakness is the strength of Shotover, G.B.S. knew from his own transient wartime bout with Giant Despair; and the heart of his indictment of Shakespeare is the Bard's 'putative despair ... Lacking hope, and knowledge, Shakespeare and his characters lack will.'² As opposed to Lear's 'despair made stage-sublime', Shotover is a Bunyanesque hero.

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, New York, 1968, p. 93.

² Arthur M. Eastman, *A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism*, New York, 1968, pp. 172-3. 'Between the vision of Shakespeare's characters and the vision of Shakespeare himself', says Eastman, 'Shaw fails to discriminate.' But Eastman fails to indicate the practical possibilities of such discrimination.

It is easy to recognize his ancestry — and his antithesis to Lear — in Shaw's insistence that

All that you miss in Shakespeare you find in Bunyan, to whom the true heroic came quite obviously and naturally. The world was to him a more terrible place than it was to Shakespeare; but he saw through it a path at the end of which a man might look not only forward to the Celestial City, back on his life and say: 'Tho' with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get them.'¹

It would not be too much to suggest that, his encomiums for the play's music and poetry notwithstanding, Shaw privately thought of *Lear* what he had written of *Othello*: 'Tested by the brain, it is ridiculous: tested by the ear, it is sublime.'²

Other themes may be organic to both plays — the increasing inhumanity that increasing civilization seems paradoxically to bring (our cruelties merely becoming more sophisticated); the dominating drive of the female of the species; the inevitable humiliation and defeat of the idealist and the dreamer; the misleading appearances we mistake for reality dramatized through symbolic unclothing in both plays). It is also possible — but not very fruitful — to find thematic reasons for seeing equivalents not only to Lear and his daughters but to the Fool, to Cornwall, Edmund, Gloucester and others in Shaw's play;³ yet the crucial fact is the fact of clear and intended reverberation. Shaw's *Lear* is less despairing, although 'the rack of this tough world' on which Lear is stretched is only technologically different from the world of *Heartbreak House*. Most of the inhabitants of *Heartbreak House* will endure. Learn navigation, and live, Shotover exhorts them. Leave it, and be damned. Until they begin learning, Shotover intends to remain on the bridge.

¹ *Saturday Review*, 29 May 1897.

² *Saturday Review*, 2 January 1897.

³ Meisel sees 'the wife-dominated Hector, the bamboo-wielding Utterword' as reminiscent of Albany and Cornwall, and it is true, as he notes, that Hector even echoes Albany (p. 317). Richard Hornby sees 'Reminiscent of the extensive animal imagery in *Lear* . . . references in Act III [of *Heartbreak House*] to *animals, horses, dogs, cat and mouse, jellyfish, flying fish, birds, rats* (twice) and *moths*' ('The Symbolic Action of *Heartbreak House*', *Drama Survey*, 7, Winter, 1968-9, p. 19).