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Review

Saint Joan (1923) and Shaw's Feminist 'Vision(s)'

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Abstract: This paper examines the literary contribution of the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) to the contemporary discourse on gender by analysing the female protagonist *Saint Joan* (1923). The researcher analyses the debates during First Wave Feminism and Second-wave Feminism on one hand and Shaw's literary output on the other hand to argue that Shaw not only remained a strong advocate of First Wave concerns but anticipated the Second Wave concerns ahead of their emergence in the second half of the twentieth century. The paper engages in critical discourse analysis and examination of Saint Joan's character in the context of key theories and arguments of Second-wave Feminism. Through such a critical examination, the paper seeks to argue that Shaw may be viewed as one of the precursors to the complex development of feminist theories that constituted Second-wave Feminism.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw; Saint Joan; Gender; Feminism; Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

One of the leading critics of Shaw, H.L. Mencken-viewed Shaw as "an embodiment of the *welt-geist*, which is a word…to designate world-spirit or tendency of the times" (p. xii) [1]. For Mencken, who studied Shaw's nineteenth-century literary output, Shaw was a playwright of the post-Darwinian world-a world that questioned orthodoxy and embraced iconoclasm (p. x-xvi) [1]. Gender was a crucial domain where such orthodoxy was questioned and embattled in nineteenth-century Britain where Shaw grew up to become a writer.

The Victorian Age in Britain lasted roughly from the 1820s to the beginning of the twentieth century. The post-Darwinian world had dethroned God in the Victorian imagination, and the resulting vacuum was filled by positioning women as pious domestic angels (p. 2) [2]. The social sphere was reorganised into a binary with "public and economic spheres" ascribed to men, and women restricted to "an idealized private or domestic sphere"-a division that became "more rigid across the period 1780 to 1850" (pp.1-2) [3]. Although the execution of this rigid division in reality has been debated, the popular imaginary remained dominated by this idea(l) as women's interventions in civic and public life had to "adapt the language of domesticity" (p. 3) [3]. Margaret Walters observes how "[t]he 19th century saw an increasingly widespread and articulate statement of women's claims" in reaction to the rigid idea of femininity (p. 41) [4].

This idea was dominated by the ethos of the urban middle classes whose dominance in public culture increased with the franchise granted by the 1832 Reform Act. The Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, made economy the central axis along which debates on gender pivoted in Britain. Beginning with William Thompson's Appeal of *One Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Restrain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* (1825) to John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women (1869)*,

advocates of women's rights highlighted the severely circumscribed property and legal rights of women within marriage; and the need for better education for women to improve their employment prospects.

However, even key advocates of this cause showed latent conservatism in refraining from a complete rejection of the domesticated ideal of femininity (pp. 41-55) [4]. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, once defended suffrage, conceding: "Let no one imagine for a moment that we want women to cease to be womanly; we want rather to raise the ideal type of womanhood" (p.423) [5]. By the mid-nineteenth century, the debate on the Woman Question converged distinctly on suffrage— a right that would in turn enable women's rights and representation in other domains. By the turn of the century, the movement developed a more radical form until the end of the First World War in 1918 when suffrage was granted to women over the age of 30 (pp. 75-85) [4].

2. Materials and Methods: Feminist Debates and the Shavian Lens

Shaw championed women's rights since the late 1870s when he arrived in England (p. 170) [6]. He directly attacked the Victorian ideal of 'The Womanly Woman' a year later in an essay of the same title published in the collection *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. While Ibsen was a strong influence on Shaw's vision, Shaw's political vision was significantly altered by his contact in 1883 with the English socialist Henry George. Shaw's biographer Archibald Henderson cites his "confession" following this contact: "It flashed on me then for the first time that the conflict between religion and science, …the higher education of women, …and all the rest of the storm that raged around Darwin, Tyndall, Huxley, Spencer and the rest, on which I had brought up myself intellectually, was a mere middle class business…After hearing Henry George, the importance of the economic basis dawned upon me" (p. 184) [7]. Consequently, he extricated the debate on women's rights from the grounds of the Victorian ideal of womanhood morality and represented it through the lens of economy and class, thus reflecting the dominant concerns of the feminist movement from the mid to late nineteenth century.

First-wave feminism focused on the material and political rights of women and the Victorian ideal of the Womanly Woman was replaced with the New Woman. This New Woman, in her financial independence, mannerisms, and independent outlook towards life, captured the imagination of writers and social commentators during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Shaw demonstrated an explicit championing of this New Woman in an early work such as *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893). In fact, Shaw's writings in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* are believed to have influenced many contemporary feminist debates, possibly also including the coinage of the term 'New Woman' often credited to the novelist and essayist Sarah Grand (p. 171) [6].

Shaw was an early suffragist who promoted not only political equality between the sexes, but also economic independence—an issue that forms the central theme of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. In the Preface to the play, Shaw clearly states that "prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together…No normal woman would be a professional prostitute if she could better herself by being respectable [by being exploited to death trying to

survive on the meagre wages offered by employment in the industries or other domestic jobs], nor marry for money if she could afford to marry for love" (p. 229) [8].

Mrs. Warren's Profession explores the relationship, choices, and outlooks of Mrs. Warren, born to an unmarried mother with three other daughters and choosing prostitution to fend for herself, and her daughter Vivie Warren who is an educated young woman going into business. The play's protagonist—Vivie Warren—introduced as "highly-educated young middle-class Englishwoman. Age 22. Prompt, strong, confident, self-possessed. Plain business-like dress...", (p.160) [9], distinctly eschews all the markers of the 'Womanly Woman' [10]. While Peterson describes the stereotypical Victorian lady as "[l]eisured, superficially accomplished, busy with the management of servants and the family's social life…" (p. 677) [11], Vivie directly attacks this expectation when she says, "If I thought that I was like that – that I was going to be a waster, shifting along from one meal to another with no purpose, and no character, and no grit in me, I'd open an artery and bleed to death without one moment's hesitation" (p.184) [9]. The actions and body language of this character, too, are decidedly hardy and expressive of physical strength.

Peter Graham has re-examined Shaw's neglected contribution to British Feminism arguing for the key role played by Shaw in the growth of feminism from 1880 to 1914. However, I argue that Shaw's contribution extends much further, anticipating the concerns of the radical Second-wave feminism that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan claimed that "feminism was dead" (p. 25) [12]. Friedan's assertion, perhaps, was less about the end of feminism, and more about the complete revision of feminist concerns in the Second Wave. Second-wave feminism in the west was largely believed to have emerged out of various protest movements of the 1960s; albeit, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is considered the foundation of the later theorising, as it constructed the woman as the 'Other' within existing biological, psychological, and economic frameworks of (p. 29) [12].

Second-wave feminists in the United States, primarily, argued for "consciousness-raising" as the key goal of feminism, that would allow women to realise that the personal domain is also structured through patriarchal power; thus, what may be experienced as personal is inherently political (p. 26) [12]. Liberal arguments like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, criticised the establishment of a mystical 'femininity' as the goal for women, contrasted with the radical voices of Kate Millett who viewed patriarchy as a political institution, and sex a 'status category with political implications'" in *Sexual Politics* (1970) (p. 31) [12], and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) which argued from a Marxist perspective that the growth of "reproductive technology" would lead to "collapse of those social and cultural structures" that provide "ideological support" for the biological division of labour (p. 32) [12].

Second-wave feminists in Britain viewed gender from a historical materialist lens. Juliet Mitchell criticised both Marxist, and generalised accounts of patriarchy offered by Millett and Firestone, arguing that transformation of gender relations could only be achieved through change in the four structures of "production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialisation of children" (p. 33) [12]. A similar historical emphasis was placed by Sheila Rowbotham in *Woman's Consciousness*, Man's World (1973). The balanced consideration of material and psychological-cultural factors led Mitchell to a deeper theorising of gender from a psychoanalytic lens.

Beginning with de Beauvoir, psychoanalysis remained the foundation of French Second Wave theories. Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva "explore[d] the ways in which language and culture construct sexual difference" primarily drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan (p. 34) [12]. They unpacked the patriarchal structure of the Symbolic Order, the origin of the cultural-psychological Law, that governs the construction of meaning and identity through language.

Thus, Second-wave feminism involved a range of complex concerns that shifted the debate on rights from the material to the symbolic realm interrogating the power hierarchies marring the private spaces of marriage, sexuality, and what being a woman signified in the prevalent socio-cultural mythology. The next section reads the figure of Saint Joan as seen through the Shavian lens (constituted in 1924), within the theoretical framework(s) of Second-wave feminism (that emerged in the 1960s).

3. *Saint Joan* and a 'Vision' for the Feminist Future

Walters has drawn a contrast between the women's magazines appearing in the 1920s that defined the expected roles of women. She points out that while magazines such as *Woman and Home and Good Housekeeping* "clearly signal[ed] the limited expectations of their audience," the magazine Time and Tide, launched in 1920, represented "dissenting voices, with a more radical take on women's position" (p. 88-89) [4]. Interestingly, Shaw became the subject of a series of articles titled 'Shaw's Women' by Lady Rhondda published in 1930 in the same magazine identified with radical feminist voices (p.170) [6]. Shaw's progressive ideas culminated in one of his last plays to have a female protagonist—*Saint Joan.*

Joan of Arc, also known as The Maid of Orléans, was a young girl from fifteenth-century rural France who saw saintly visions bidding her to save France from England. During 1429 and 1430, she conducted various successful campaigns in the name of Charles II, led him to be crowned as King of France, and was captured in battle by the Burgundians at Compiègne. She was turned over to the Church who declared her a witch and heretic and burned her at the stake in Rouen in 1431, when she was nineteen years old. Five hundred years later, her trial and execution were deemed invalid, she was canonised by the Roman Catholic Church, and is now the patron saint of France.

On reviewing the numerous English and American treatments of the Joan of Arc figure in literature, C. M. Newman found Shaw's stage characterization to be "startlingly modern" (p. 438) [13]. Shaw's constitution of Joan was self-consciously feminist. In the Preface to the play, Shaw states, "[i]f a historian is an Anti-Feminist, and does not believe women to be capable of genius in the traditional masculine departments, he will never make anything of Joan, whose genius was turned to practical account mainly in soldiering and politics" (8-9) [14].

Influenced by the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1949, as well as the theoretical tools of structuralism, Second-wave Feminism questioned the binaries developed around the ideas of 'man' and 'woman'. In her influential work *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir argued how men mystified and stereotyped women, so that "man was the ideal, the norm and the woman the deviant or the Other" (p. 125) [15]. Investigating this entailed the historicisation of gender oppression—one of the key objectives of the Second Wave. Shaw adopts the same approach in *Saint Joan.*

In the Preface, Shaw writes that earlier treatments of this historical figure have often used fables and legends surrounding her as sources. However, he wishes to present to his

audience the 'real' Joan of Arc (p.28) [14]. Shaw presents Joan as an "unwomanly woman" through her androgynous, or rather, masculine attire (p. 23) [14], yet goes a step ahead by blurring the binary; while her attire places Joan on the 'manly' end of the gender binary, the voices and visions also retain her within the non-rational domain reserved for women.

The slogan of Second-wave feminism—'the personal is political'— is brought into focus in the political-theological debate between soldiers and churchmen over whether Joan's alleged personal connection with God was legitimate. As Thornham observes, Second-wave feminism connected the twin concerns of voicing "women's immediate and subjective experience" and "formulat[ing] a political agenda and vision" by developing "a new **language** of *theory* that would encompass both" (p. 27) [12].

Joan's agentive and authoritative voice underlines her inhabitation of the Symbolic Order —of the Law and Language—the speaking 'I'. Firstly, in her opening lines, Joan enters and immediately commands the lord of the castle Robert de Baudricourt. Further, as Shaw observes, "[s]he claimed to be the ambassador and plenipotentiary of God, and to be, in effect, a member of the Church Triumphant whilst still in the flesh on earth. She patronized her own king, and summoned the English king to repentance and obedience to her commands. She lectured, talked down, and overruled statesmen and prelates. She poohpoohed the plans of generals, leading their troops to victory on plans of her own" (p. 3-4) [14]. Within the structure of binaries established for the social construction of gender, Joan's inhabitation of the Logos is an impossible act, incoherent with the binary power structure. In other words, it is as Joan says, "[t]hey all say I am mad"; while also adding, "until I talk to them, squire. But you see that it is the will of God that you are to do what He has put into my mind" (p. 71) [14].

Through what are often perceived as Joan's 'irrational' claims, she escapes the rational framework of the Logos. This escape is demonstrated by Joan's complete inability to rationally understand why the truth she speaks is unacceptable or offensive to the powerful men around her. Joan, thus, vacillates between being perceived as mad or miraculous. The strength of Joan as one of the most powerful Shavian female characters comes from her authoritative hold over language, her incisive logic and arguments, and her skill in debate that belie her origins as an illiterate peasant woman. However, as the society would be unwilling to accept such a woman, Joan has to attribute her courage and sense of judgement to 'the voices'.

In her seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous argues that the body (through which the voices come to Joan) is the woman's way of reclaiming her authentic self: "[s]he doesn't "speak,"…; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, … she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body…because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking…she draws her story into history" (p. 881) [16]. Cixous' idea that women are always outside the ambit of language and are therefore "impossible subject[s]" (p. 879) [16] is foreshadowed in Bluebeard's comment on the Maid when she refuses to recant as the last resort to save herself: she "is quite impossible" (p. 135) [14].

Joan acts in defiance of the Dauphin – later the king – thereby representing of the Law, and the Archbishop – the representative of the Logos or the Word of God. It is also here that gender and class struggles combine as represented in the concerns of American Second-wave feminism. By positioning herself against the two, Joan seeks to establish the relationship of a peasant, and that of a woman, with the king and God without the arbitration of any mediating authorities—an act that deems Joan Protestant, for Shaw (p.3) [14]. However, from a feminist

perspective, through this move, Joan seeks to destroy both the patriarchal as well as feudal authority. Warwick's and Cauchon's motives in burning Joan as a heretic, may thereby be located in their fear of castration (of their authority).

The play challenges the definition of womanhood through the Freudian stereotypes of 'lack' or 'penis envy', not only in Joan's characterization, but also through Joan's mystical ability to convince France's soldiers to fight in the face of obvious defeat, when the Steward remarks: "She is so *positive*, sir" (p. 69; emphasis added) [14]. Joan's positively defined womanhood seems to spill out of the 'rational' frameworks of defining or comprehending gender.

Cixous underlines the inability of phallogocentric frameworks to accommodate the idea of woman by using paralinguistic gestures as a conduit for women's expression, such as laughing—located in the space between language and non-language; while also constituting an irreverent gesture questioning feminine ideals of propriety and passivity. For Cixous, such a defiant woman is presented by the archetype of Medusa—a feared monstrous figure, much like Joan who places the fear of being stripped of their authority—essentially cuckolded—in the hearts of soldiers, feudal lords, and churchmen alike.

Shaw's use of avian imagery to parallel Joan's figure cannot be overlooked while reading Cixous' statement: "[f]lying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly" (p. 887) [16]. In Scene I, Joan's presence is associated with the hens miraculously beginning to lay eggs again. In Scene II, a kingfisher appears right before Joan's arrival. Right ahead of her trial in Scene VI, however, the act of flying is identified with Joan herself—in her attempt to jump from the tower where she is imprisoned. It is also used as grounds to deem her a "witch", that is, transgressing the position available to a woman in society (p. 149) [14].

For Cixous, the realm that is neither inside nor outside language and rationality bears the distinctive stamp of a woman's voice, her expression, her meanings, and her writing. From this perspective, Joan's thesis driving her campaign against the English might very well have been the speaking voice of Medusa in Cixous' essay: "[t]hey are only men. God made them just like us; but He gave them their own country and their own language; and it is not His will that they should come into our country and try to speak our language" (p. 78) [14]. Joan seems to be viewing her own language and territory through a historical lens like the British feminists suggest. That is, she does not view men's control of the Logos as immanent and primordial, but as bestowed at a point in time. Further, Joan seems to be overcoming ideology-driven perception like the American feminists emphasise, to reclaim the Logos as a strictly patriarchal domain that the French feminists contest.

The radicality of Joan's position is brought into relief by her isolation. In the play, Joan remains the only female character, except for a brief appearance of the Duchess who only appears only as a consort to La Trémouille, representing the domesticated figure of a married woman. Further, the silence and snobbery in the Duchess' brief exchange with Joan allow the Duchess to be viewed as the representative of privileged White feminist hegemony that often remained 'silent' on issues of race and class. Joan establishes herself as a courageous soldier followed by troops spoiling for a victory, but continues to fight alone in the court set up by the same men she helps restore to power. Joan, thus, being an exception is homo *sacer*—an isolated figure who can be burned at the stake without consequence.

Although Shaw titles the play 'Saint' Joan, he systematically deconstructs the attitude of placing a woman on a pedestal, by depicting Joan as only human. Joan's burning at the stake

comes about not because her voices are suspected to be diabolical from the outset, but after Joan ceases to identify her abilities with supernatural voices, and threatens to prove her military acumen to be better than that of the men in her project to take Paris back from the English. As Cixous puts it, "…they [read: men] need femininity to be associated with death" (p. 885) [16]

A poignant moment in the play with significant ramifications for the feminist debate is when Joan prefers to die rather than be 'saved' by the men who would confine her in the chains of their conventions and definitions, and away from her 'nature' that Cixous too refers to as "the voice" (p. 881) [16]. In other words, a life of confinement, for Joan, is equivalent to death itself. The complete absence of a subject position or a speaking 'I' that allows the woman to express her voice is dramatized in the play's Epilogue.

The scene opens twenty-five years later when Charles VII learns that Joan burning at the stake was declared corrupt. In a few moments, Joan's spirit appears alongside those of all the men who were present at her trial. Each man retrospectively defends his action or inaction leading to Joan's conviction. Very soon, a clergyman seeming to be from the 1920s appears and announces that the Catholic Church had declared Joan a saint. Ironically, all kneel before Joan and tell her how she had done good to the part of society they represent. However, the moment Joan asks if she should come back to life, each one makes an excuse and disappears.

Joan's sainthood can thus be interpreted as an attempt to confine her again, not to a physical prison; but to the Symbolic realm of Law and Language governed by patriarchal authority, where she can only exist as a myth. Thus, Joan's cryptic response to the prosecutor D'Estivet asking her why she attempted to escape, may indicate that Joan chose the stake as a medium of freedom and that the prison is a metaphor for the only space society allows a woman: "If you leave the door of the cage open the bird will fly out" (p. 149) [18].

The change in Shaw's feminist orientation from *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is visible. Vivie Warren is a very strong and educated but individualist character. It does not take her more than a second to sever all her ties with Mrs. Warren when she learns that the latter continued to be in the business of prostitution in spite of being financially secure. Vivie's appeal lies in the force of her rationale and in her character as a 'woman-of-action'. The suffrage movement, too, was to have effects on all women, yet the right to vote was an individual right. Moreover, the movement echoes Vivie's manner of engaging in action with immediate and concrete political consequences.

On the other hand, with Second-wave feminism, the focus turned to problematizing gender in the symbolic realm involving a change in what was to be signified by the term 'woman' or 'female', and her socio-cultural standing, that emerged out of other movements for rights and liberties (p. 8-9) [17]. Joan's purpose aligns with the shift towards aligning gender interests with the interests of other collectivities. Joan's mission is not governed by fulfilment of individual goals, but by protecting the future of the nation and its people at the cost of herself.

While Cixous and other radical Second-Wave feminists were criticised for essentialising gender, albeit through positive, empowering stereotypes, Shaw seems to critique this approach some decades prior: "it is not necessary to wear trousers and smoke big cigars to live a man's life any more than it is necessary to wear petticoats to live a woman's… The exemption of women from military /service is founded, not on any natural inaptitude that men do not share," (p. 23-24) [14].

In other aspects, however, Shaw seems unable to break out of the ideological limits set by his own times. In explaining the advantages of Joan's subsequent canonization, Shaw

observes that it successfully proved that Joan was "not ill conducted in any sense apart from her soldiering, her wearing of men's clothes, and her audacity, but on the contrary good-humored, an *intact virgin, very pious, very temperate*…and, though a brave and hardy soldier, unable to *endure loose language or licentious conduct*" (p. 7; emphasis added) [18]. In defending Joan, thus, Shaw seems to reduce her to the figure of a virginal pious angel and undermine her radical, resolute, and vocal character.

4. Conclusions

While *Mrs. Warren's Profession* partakes in the ongoing struggle for women's rights, it confines itself to a critique of the quintessential Victorian woman, thereby still remaining closely connected to the age. However, in Saint Joan, one observes Shaw's conception of what a woman is capable of – an ideal prospect to replace "the Victorian stereotype of the Sexless Angel" (p.183) [18]. Shaw defies existing feminist stereotypes when he undercuts the New Woman highlighting Vivie Warren's flaws, and allows Joan to be taken down from the prison-like pedestal exploring her human side.

Through the figure of Joan, Shaw presents crucial gestures that were to become the chief arguments of Second-wave feminism which was considered a radical revision of First Wave Feminism. By choosing a prevalent myth of a well-known saint, Shaw anticipates the question of how language and culture must be reinvested with new meanings for a patriarchal language to also become the medium for a woman's voice. The play on a personal bodily experience of hearing voices as a conduit for the political and military strategies arguably devised by a teenage girl, brings together the personal and political. Language, as the mediating mechanism, straddling the two realms is problematised to question the limits and violence of a rule-governed rationality pre-empted by phallogocentrism. The depths of the Symbolic realm are plumbed in the imagery and tropes used in the play, presenting it as a formidable cross-section of feminist concerns that were to emerge some decades later.

Michael Holroyd has critiqued Shaw arguing that "the women he [Shaw] promoted from angels to human beings and married to men in a political union, found that Shavian independence meant a solitude relieved only by the narcotic of work. Shaw's synthesis, with its precious bodily fluid dried up, becomes synthetic" (p.183) [18]. Such a conspicuous absence of sexuality marks Shaw's feminist leanings as antithetical to Second-wave feminism and indicative of Victorian fastidiousness. Maurice Colbourne supports this claim thus: "a man is no less a child of his age who sets himself against its current than one who swims with it…And poor indeed would be an age without dissenters" (p. 27) [19]. The same defence holds against Adams' argument that Shaw's female characters are not original or radical but merely represent types in literature [20]. While certain structures may persist, Shaw's treatment of these structures within the contemporary political environment and the evident parallels between them offer evidence of Shaw's intentions, albeit the output of which may have been circumscribed by the same Age(s) that Shaw set out to dissent against.

To conclude, in Shaw's oeuvre, we find a reflection of ideas and arguments that would dominate the future of feminism. This anticipation, moreover, consisted not in a break from earlier styles but in a constant revision upon and extension of the nineteenth-century feminist ethos. Thereby, George Bernard Shaw, in his treatment of the question of gender in his dramatic work and social propaganda, not only anticipates important concerns of Second-wave

feminism, but also offers fresh perspectives on their dominant archetypes, thus establishing himself as a key figure in the growth of English Feminism.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration on AI Usage

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