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2016

A Modest Monograph on Shaw

Julie A. Sparks, *San Jose State University*



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<RT>A Modest Monograph on Shaw

<RST>Gautam Sengupta. *Myriad-Minded Shaw: Perspectives on Shavian Drama (Politics, War and History)*. Delhi: PHI Learning (Prentice Hall of India), 2016. 144 pages.</RST>

Shavians will be charmed by the tone of this new Shaw monograph, whose purpose is described in modest terms: “It is hoped that the attempt to peep briefly into Shaw’s treatments of war, politics and history in his major plays will serve Shaw scholars as points to begin with, or to ponder about, which they can definitely improve upon.” In the book’s preface, Gautam Sengupta—former head of English at Gurudas College, University of Calcutta—adds that he hopes his discussion of Shaw’s views on these problematic and ever-timely subjects will “arouse public conscience,” a goal Shaw would certainly endorse.

Unfortunately, the reader’s confidence is soon undermined by the book’s shortcomings. These include problems with coherence among sections, clarity and consistency in citation of sources, and numerous and various sentence-level errors that should have been caught by any copyeditor, some of which can cause confusion—for instance, using “vindicate” for “indicate,” “apply” for “aptly.” There are also serious omissions in the author’s research that make some of [the](#) judgments extremely questionable. For example, he asserts that “[a]ny critic who seeks to trace and analyze the nature of Shaw’s responses to political issues of his time as embodied in his drama should begin with an analysis of *The Apple Cart* (1928)” because “Shaw never did choose to write directly on political themes, or, on, forms of government as such, till *The Apple Cart*.” [{Au: please provide a page number for the quotes.}\(Kindle locations 80-83\).](#) Even if one were to examine only Shaw’s fiction and dramatic writings, this leaves several important

works that focus directly on political systems and figures, from his most blatantly political novel, *The Unsocial Socialist* (1883)—not mentioned in this book—to plays featuring prime ministers, real and fictional (including segments of his “world classic” *Back to Methuselah* 1918-1920)—which the author dismisses with one sentence—and *Great Catherine* (1913), a play (again, not mentioned) about the Empress of Russia.

Obviously, a short monograph cannot fully discuss all of Shaw’s works, but as the author’s stated audience is “interested scholars,” he could have easily included a comprehensive list of works—large and small, famous or obscure—that relate to the book’s three themes. For example, though *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *The Man of Destiny*, and *Geneva* are discussed at some length, no mention is made of other works depicting the key rulers discussed, especially Napoleon and Hitler. Granted, *The Emperor of Perusalem*, a spoof on Hitler written in 1913, is a relative trifle, but the playlet, written before Hitler’s rise, and its preface, written after his death, do help us understand how Shaw’s view of Hitler evolved over the decades. Similarly, *Back to Methuselah*, absent from this study, offers valuable insights into Shaw’s ideas on leadership, war, imperialism, and specific historical figures (including Napoleon and Hitler), as do lesser-known works such as *Farfetched Fables* and “The Emperor and the Little Girl.”

A wider reading of Shaw’s relevant works might have provided a more balanced view of Shaw’s complex ideas about dictators and authoritarianism as they evolved over his long life. “Even Shaw’s later-day opinions,” writes the author, “confirm his definite leaning towards autocracy. Despite torture and tyranny ruthlessly imposed by Hitler and Mussolini, both the dictators were held in reverence by Shaw.” [{Au: please provide a page number.}\(Kindle location 262-263\)](#). Such statements (and many others) require nuancing. Similarly, in his analysis of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, the author writes that “[t]he adoration shown for the Roman

conqueror perhaps parallels, in terms of historical past, an implicit admiration for the world-conquering motivation of an imperialist nation.” [{Au: please provide a page number.}\(Kindle Location 2042-2044\)](#). And elsewhere we read that Shaw supported England’s imperial project, especially in Africa. The author ignores Shaw’s caustic denunciation of British imperial violence, “The Denshawai Horror,” in his preface to *John Bull’s Other Island*—another play with much to say about the politics of empire but absent from this study. Similarly, the text of and preface to *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* make it clear that Shaw denounced the racism and imperialist exploitation that he witnessed in South Africa.

These disappointing omissions extend to the monograph’s secondary works, which include only a single twenty-first-century [eentury](#) study, Michael Holroyd’s one-volume version of his Shaw biography. Most of the sources are from the [1960s and 70ssixties and seventies](#), with a few from the [1980s and 90seighties and nineties](#); missing are some important recent works about Shaw’s ideas on the book’s key topics, including J. P. Wearing’s *Bernard Shaw: On War* (2009), James Alexander’s *Shaw’s Controversial Socialism* (2009), Matthew Yde’s *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism* (2013), and Stanley Weintraub’s “GBS and the Despots” (2011). Moreover, a book with a lengthy section on Shaw’s response to the Great War ought to at least mention Weintraub’s *Journey to Heartbreak* (1971).

The author’s interpretation of the major plays is also problematic and might seriously mislead someone new to Shaw. For example, the analysis of *Major Barbara* greatly overemphasizes Undershaft’s dominance, asserting that he is the clearest spokesman for Shaw’s views, that Cusins is utterly converted to Undershaft’s position, and that Barbara is permanently defeated: “Finally, Barbara leaves the army, having lost all faith in preaching gospels of peace, when all the world remains practically sold out to the capitalists. . . . Significantly, Shaw chooses

to oppose the ludicrous ideology of the Salvation Army with the strong ethos of capitalism and individualism.” [{Au: please provide a page number.}\(Kindle locations 2071-2072\)](#). These comments require more than mere nuancing. Granted, the play is complex and difficult, but numerous studies show how hard Shaw worked to tame Undershaft’s dominance, including Bernard Dukore’s excellent analysis of Shaw’s revisions to the screenplay in *The Collected Screenplays of Bernard Shaw* (1980).

To be fair, it should be noted that the list of Shaw writings in the bibliographic section is impressive, as it suggests the author’s familiarity with the major political treatises, including *Everybody’s Political What’s What?*, *Essays in Fabian Socialism*, *What I Really Wrote [About](#) [about](#) the War*, and *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. In addition, the author draws attention to some of Shaw’s lesser-known works, in particular his Fabian writings. Furthermore, the sections on some of Shaw’s influences—Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, and Lenin—seem more commanding than the rest, but once again the citations are somewhat irregular.

Although there are some interesting insights in this short study, it is spoiled by myriad errors and misstatements that undermine the author’s research and credibility. One can only hope that this well-intentioned but deeply flawed book will be revised, rewritten, and republished.

JULIE A. SPARKS earned her doctorate in English from Penn State University and now teaches at San Jose State University. She has published articles on Shaw and his contemporaries in the *SHAW [Journal \(The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies\)](#)* and elsewhere, and contributed a chapter to *George Bernard Shaw in Context* (2015). She is a founding member of the International Shaw Society.