Shaw, Plato, and Euripides: Classical Currents in "Major Barbara." (review)

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Sidney P. Albert. *Shaw, Plato, and Euripides: Classical Currents in "Major Barbara."* The Florida Bernard Shaw Series. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. Pp. xvii + 304. $74.95.

Perhaps no prior work of criticism has pursued George Bernard Shaw's debt to classical philosophy and tragedy in such great depth as Sidney P. Albert's meticulous and comprehensive *Shaw, Plato, and Euripides: Classical Currents in "Major Barbara."* Albert's monograph is that rare specimen in scholarship on twentieth-century drama: a book-length study of a single play. Yet for a volume that is so tightly focused on one work, its perspective is surprisingly—and satisfyingly—expansive. Albert does not so much offer an extended close reading of Shaw's masterwork as he posits a series of overlapping interpretations. The book is purposefully designed as a palimpsest: it returns multiple times to key sections of the play, in each instance bringing new aspects of Shaw's classical sources to light and generating readings that are uniformly rich but not always entirely in concord. At no point does Albert present a unified theory of the play; rather, he demonstrates a mode of reading Shaw's drama, a perspective on the depth of the playwright's achievement measured by the breadth of its various resonances.

In a sense, this is both a continuation and a culmination of work that Albert has been pursuing throughout his career. Aged ninety-seven at the time of this book's publication, Albert has been one of the foremost interpreters of Shaw's philosophical influences for more than half a century. His article "Bernard Shaw: The Artist as Philosopher," first published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1950 and included as an appendix, is still one of the most cogent accounts of the various philosophical lineages from which Shaw drew throughout his career. Plato received special attention in that essay, and Albert returns to and expands on the connection. Yet at the same time he also moves beyond stories of straightforward philosophical transmission. The connection to *The Bacchae* sets Shaw's work in a context more theological than philosophical: Albert's Shaw is an artist grappling with elemental forces that go far beyond the kinds of political and economic issues with which he is most associated.

The book is divided into two sections devoted to Plato and Euripides respectively, both grounded in an introduction that sets out the merits of a classical perspective on Shaw and a history of previous attempts to draw linkages between Shaw and the Greeks. Part 1 of the book comprises an extended chapter on the play's connection to *The Republic*, which Shaw parodically references near the climax of the play: "Plato says, my friend, that society cannot be saved until either the Professors of Greek take to making gun-powder, or else the makers of

gunpowder become Professors of Greek" (38). Albert's concerns in this chapter are as much formal as thematic. He takes Plato's philosophical dialogue as a model for Shaw's dramatic form, even explicitly reading Andrew Undershaft as Socratic interlocutor during several key exchanges. But Albert also observes that the conclusions to which Shaw's characters are drawn over the course of the drama bear a significant debt of origin to Plato's theory of the philosopher king. He offers a tripartite reading of Shaw's main characters drawn from Plato's vision of the tripartite soul divided among reason, will, and emotion, with the rationalist Adolphus Cusins ultimately emerging as the first among equals. Albert offers reasonable ground to support Shaw's frustrated claims that the outsized Undershaft was not in fact his model of the superman ideal as so many critics took him to be. If Undershaft's model factory town of Perivale St. Andrews is in any sense a version of Shaw's Republic, as Albert terms it, it is so only when it comes under the control of Cusins, the philosopher king.

Yet if Undershaft is dethroned by Cusins in the book's first section, he reemerges in the second half as something far greater than a king—perhaps even greater than a philosopher king. "Greatness is the secular name for Divinity," Shaw declared in *The Revolutionist's Handbook* appended to *Man and Superman* (57); Albert takes the sentiment quite literally in his explorations of the connections between *Major Barbara* and *The Bacchae*, reading Undershaft as a secularized Dionysian figure. Comprising nearly three quarters of the book, this exploration covers four chapters each of which concerns a particular thematic parallel between the plays. The first chapter goes the furthest in establishing the Undershaft–Dionysus connection, which is also made directly by Cusins in the play. Albert's analysis is remarkably painstaking at times: he offers, for instance, a detailed account of the genealogy of the name Undershaft and its connections to Dionysus via the fifteenth-century English maypole celebration during which poles were erected outside church entrances in London, and even provides a reading of the particular instruments in Shaw's Salvation Army band and their relationship to the instrumentation of Euripides' maenad chorus. Yet for all the detail amassed, Albert's argument is most compelling in its broadest strokes. Undershaft the employer and munitions magnate is both bringer of sustenance and bringer of destruction, a figure beyond the reach of any human or moral law whose very motto is "Unashamed"—*anaides* in the Greek, a stance befitting to a god. *Major Barbara* becomes in this reading the story of his revelation and acceptance.

The second chapter of this section examines the forms of opposition encountered by Dionysus–Undershaft. In Albert's view the play lacks a clear Pentheus figure; rather, resistance to the divine is a register in which multiple

characters engage, all eventually overcome by Undershaft through the force of either his pocketbook or his rhetoric—Cusins and Barbara most centrally, but also comic figures like Undershaft's painfully conservative son Stephen or his uncomprehending wife, Lady Britomart. The third chapter of this section directly confronts Undershaft's dual nature as nourisher and destroyer, charmer and combatant—like Euripides' description of Dionysus he is a figure "most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind" (147). It is here that Albert comes nearest to aligning his philosophic and tragic readings of the play, acknowledging the degree to which Cusins's (and Barbara's) seeming acquiescence to Undershaft's power is also, in a departure from the Euripidean source material, a co-option and repurposing of that power.

In the final chapter, Albert considers the theme of transfiguration, both in individual instances—Barbara's spiritual reconstitution most especially, which appears in counterpoint to Pentheus's physical dismemberment—and also in the broader ways in which Euripides' drama itself is transfigured in Shaw's hands. Mythic tragedy is turned into social comedy, catastrophe replaced by compromise. Albert sees these formal inversions as part of the key to understanding the thematic inversions of Shaw's play. If in *The Bacchae*, as John Ferguson has said, "the power of salvation has become the power of destruction," Albert argues that in *Major Barbara* "the power of destruction becomes the power of salvation" (207).

It is a message at once metaphysical and political, and it is specifically in the conjoining of these two discursive modes that Albert's approach to Shaw takes on its greatest power. Albert's Shaw is far more than a writer of pointed philosophical and political comedies. He is a playwright of mythic scope, his signature work a drama of epic dimensions. His deepest concerns, according to Albert, are not so much societal, as we might assume; they are, in his words, ultimately "cosmic" (220).

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