## *NOTES ON G. B. SHAW'S WOMEN CHARACTERS*

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***Abstract*:** *The present paper focuses on some the most typical stances selected out of the broad gamut of women characters that G. B. Shaw used as revealing dramatis personae in his plays – on account of their being vividly intelligent, demonstrative and resourceful dramatic characters: viz. the 'Unwomanly Woman' – a Shavian type as representative of his personal character gallery as is his 'Superman' – (e.g. Mrs. Warren), the 'Acquisitive Woman' (e.g. Blanche Sartorius in 'Widowers' Houses'), the 'Liberal Woman' (e.g. Lady Britomart in 'Major Barbara'), the 'Tough Woman' (e.g. Mrs. Dudgeon in 'The Devil's Disciple'), the 'Mother-Woman' (e.g. Gloria in 'You Never Can Tell', Lavinia in 'Androcles and the Lion'), the 'Virgin Mother' (e.g. Candida in the play of the same title), the 'Gentle Woman' (e.g. Nora in 'John Bull's Other Island', Lina Szczpanowska in 'Misalliance'), Philistine women (e.g. Judith in 'The Devil's Disciple'), and the histrionic woman (e.g. Raina in 'Arms and he Man'). The general conclusion of this modest contribution is that Shaw essentially opposed the type of the possessive woman to a more congenial principle of overall humanity, as an ad-hoc compendium-cum-demonstration of the wide compass of the feminine psychological and prototypical complexity.*

***Keywords:*** *Shavian characters, woman characters, tentative taxonomy.*

***Motto***: (including Shaw's attempted definition of the 'Unwomanly Woman) "The *roman* of chivalry has its good points; but it slowly dies of the Unwomanly Woman (….) When the woman appears and plays up to the height of their [*i.e.* the men's] folly, intoning their speeches to an accompaniment of harps and horns, distributing lilies and languors to pilgrims, and roses and raptures to troubadours, always in the character which their ravings have ascribed to her, what can one feel except that an excellent opportunity for a good comedy is being thrown away?…". (From Shaw's essay 'La Princesse Lointaine', in *G. B. Shaw. Dramatic Opinions and Essays*)

**The** '**Unwomanly Woman**': This type character can be said to be a Shavian creation as specific to his character gallery as was his 'Superman'. Mrs. Warren directly comes from Ibsen's Nora (in that play, the type of the emancipated woman is presented, in revolt against the slavery of the bourgeois, male-dominated, family; it opposed the crude economic domination to the feminine principle, corresponding to the soul's truth, *i.e.* the spiritualized principle). With Shaw, that comparatively remote Ibsenian model is rewritten as the exposure of more or less cynical and vulgar mechanisms, achieved through the concreteness of social and economic relevance – as expressed in the key question: where does the money necessary for respectability come from? (See also the first play of this kind of relevance written by Shaw, 'Widowers' Houses', which indicted the profit wrung out the misery of the slum-dwellers). In a parallel to Ibsen's outlook, the idea of guilt is implicitly driven home to the audience by the author – these may resent, in turn, part of the guilt.

Why is Mrs. Warren 'unwomanly' – apart from the above social conditioning? She is so first of all because she is a businesswoman (*cf.* the reversal of gender aiming at bitterly comic effect, very much as it was used by Shaw in changing the grammatical gender in the title of the play 'Widowers' Houses', as against the Biblical quotation). Mrs. Warren, a respectable woman belonging to a society into which she perfectly fits, had a blamable past;



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this idea of promiscuity is following her, but she has no other choice than assuming it: her past is still part of herself – and, in the scene in which she confesses the whole truth of her previous existence to Vivie, Mrs. Warren demonstrates that, since the individual material datum was imposed to her, she is unable to deny it. She is unwomanly by the matter-of-fact quality of her cynicism, deriving from the / her essential pragmatic views and ways. Then, she is unwomanly because she finds it impossible to grow out of her status of a 'doll' (*cf.* Nora); in her case, it is that her appearance of an automaton operated by adverse fate, her evolving to the character of a conscious woman is virtually blocked; paradoxically, her evolution (revealing the specifically Shavian morals, towards acquiring a certainty that she can tell the truth, although she cannot get rid of its consequences, as well) confirms her 'unwomanliness'.

The extolling of the morals of becoming an upstart, and being socially triumphant, the praise of the winner irrespective of their ways, that 'reversed Nietzscheanism' (reversed, in the sense that it is simplified) that she preaches to Vivie, adds its clayey, unwomanly *par excellence*, shade to her materially (and univocally) directed self-assurance. Unwomanly by the dehumanizing effect of the adverse fortunes of her life, Mrs. Warren only allows herself to be re-humanized (and hence re-'womanized') by her sincere grief at the recollection – and avowal – of her ill-fated past: (Compare her attitude in: "…you dont know all that that [*i.e.* being rich] means: youre too young. It means a new dress every day; it means theatres and balls every night; it means having the pick of all the gentlemen in Europe… It means everything you like, everything you want… And what are you here? A mere drudge, toiling and moiling early and late for your bare living and two cheap dresses a year. Think over it", and: "You! Youve no heart… What chance had I?… Do you think I was brought up like you? Able to pick and choose my own way of life? Do you think I did what I did because I liked it or thought it right?"

While Vivie Warren is presented more as the caricature than an illustration of the 'unwomanly woman' (into her character cool-headedness and pragmatic acquisitiveness of the executive kind were blended), Mrs. Warren is meant to represent the thorough-bred type: her possessiveness is thoroughgoing, it goes to the essentials of the matter; she likes making money and she likes the very idea of being fit to do that: it will also be true to say that she lacks the skills for doing most any other activity than the one she is doing. If she is also something of a sentimental woman, even romantic in her own way, this does not go beyond the idea she conceives of her daughter as ***the*** end and ideal of her existence.

As for Vivie's 'unwomanly' pragmatism, it could only be called so in view of the fact that it clashes with the Shavian life Force theory, in which it is the comparatively biological function / activity that is ascribed to woman – as opposed to spiritually creative work; and Vivie looks and sounds the very prototype of businesslike involvement, of work in the most earnest sense of the word; as a matter of fact, the world of the minor characters in 'Mrs. Warren's Profession' is specifically devised to illustrate and give a generalizing touch to the title premise (*v.* also the idea of indictment of filthy gain): in an environment in which practically everybody is involved in more or less shady dealings, as Crofts, Frank have a contribution to emphasizing the idea that actually we all benefit from immoral earnings; against this background, Vivie's own businesslike practices, though obviously contributing to her 'unwomanliness', are a perfect example of clean morality, they are so to say 'venial', which greatly atones for her 'unwomanliness', making it a positive element.

**Acquisitive Women**: The best illustration of this character type is Blanche Sartorius in 'Widowers' Houses'. "Blanche is a misogynist's portrait of a woman: a spoilt



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termagant, sexually attractive (hence enslaving), basically the enemy of man (whom she scorns and devours), with no moral sense or any but the most narrowly selfish interests. And the anti-romantic nature of his heroine consorts with Shaw's final choice of title for the play: the domestic situation of the widower's daughter is significantly related to the theme slumlordism". (Morgan, 1972:23)

As a matter of fact, it is for such type of women as the category represented by Blanche Sartorius and Henrietta Jansenius that Bernard Shaw felt the need to coin the term 'acquisitive women'. Henrietta, the first wife of Trefussis, makes their relation impossible; Blanche herself expresses her acquisitive, materialistic sense by marrying Trench, being thus submitted to, and submerged by, materialistic, capitalistic gain; symmetry is here, as elsewhere in Shaw's earlier works, used for the sake of composition.

This type should not be mistaken for, but rather clearly opposed to, that other type of woman, representative of a new and saner world: the self-possessed, realistic and intellectual woman (the prototype of this heroine is unmistakably embodied by Lydia Carew in the novel *Cashel Byron's Profession*). Grace Transfield in 'The Philanderer' is used by Shaw as a polarity term in order to mark the Shavian womankind clashing with the male principle – in the play, it is represented by Charteris, as 'the philanderer' is rejected by Grace.

Blanche was to be completed, and made to fully evolve to, a perfect portrait of the acquisitive woman through the character of Ann Whitefield in 'Man and Superman'. Blanche, as a first draft, is a perfectly enslaving woman, commandingly dealing in emotions ('a landlady of emotions'); her sexual allegiance makes her a man-devourer, she is a 'predatory woman' with 'a terrifying temper', which made Oscar Wilde express his admiration in most congratulatory terms: "I admire the horrible flesh and blood of your creatures". Using the filter of a sociologizing view, we can see Blanche Sartorius as the perfect embodiment of that society illustrative of the biblical quotation of the title: "Woe onto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers!", graphical of the pact between the world of the new aristocracy and financial speculation, decoratively wrapped in sanctimonious, false moral.

Unlike her continuers / 'descendants', Candida and especially Ann Whitefield, there is no good humour in Blanche. The name itseltf, Blanche (*i.e.* 'white'), suggesting the purity of ignorance, is used by Shaw as a matter of antiphrasis – in a similar way to Dickens's use of irony in *Little Dorrit*.

Her fundamental acquisitive energy – an early prefiguration of 'life force', in Shavian terms – inspires an ardent passion of possession; the woman is virtually transfigured into the maternal female presence / stance (*cf.* the type character of the 'maternal woman'); this unwomanly, acquisitively maternal passion of possession reaches its acme in the fierce emphasis Blanche lends to her final words to Harry: "How dare you touch anything belonging to me?"

In line with Shaw's concept of the Life Force and Energy, the feminine type of logic is the subjective logic of pleasure, of the aesthetic, raised, by dint of the sway of Life Force / natural Energy, to the level of 'practical morality' (as the feminine mind "accepts the congenial as true, and rejects the uncongenial as false: takes the imaginary which is desired for reality, and treats the undesirable reality which is out of sight as non-existent, building up for itself in this way, when biased by predilection and aversions, a very unreal picture of the external world").



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One of Blanche's successors is Ann Whitfield; she is identified with the idea of Woman; the Woman is the matrix of Will. Ann and Jack are opposed in this allegorical conflict between abstractions couched realistically, as personifications of Will *vs.* Intellect and, respectively, Energy *vs.* Individuality.

Ann is the image of the Life Force ("one of the vital geniuses", as she is called by the dramatist); consequently, Tanner told her – in Act I – that she is nothing but duplicity, hypocrisy, calculation in reaching her end, *i.e.* to entrap the Man: "You seem to me to have absolutely no conscience – only hypocrisy; and you can't see the difference". Curiously enough, there is not even the slightest image of the Shavian 'New Woman' in 'Man and Superman' (for the 'New Man' we have Straker).

**Liberal Women:** The most illustrative character in this Shavian group of *dramatis personae* is Lady Britomart. It is based on the real-life prototype of Gilbert Murray's mother-in-law (Murray served as the prototype for Cusins), Lady Rosalin Frances, Countess of Carlisle, a descendant of a Liberal family and herself battling for temperance, reform and emancipation of women; she led the National Women's Liberal Federation, she considered and managed her family's estate as if it were her own fief, closely taking care of the farmers' welfare and morals. Shaw placed her at the centre of the groups of characters in the play as Lady Britomart proves a real spokesperson in behalf of the liberty of speech, which she associates with democratic franchise. With Lady Britomart, 'right' is tantamount to 'propriety', and 'wrong' means 'impropriety': her morality is a rationalization of her social position (and the prejudices and privileges associated with them) – for instance, when the question occurred whether there should be a legal separation from Undershaft as a result of conflicting interests over the Undershaft heritage, which was traditionally given to a found children, her response comes in terms of 'moral disagreement'.

From a social point of view, Lady Britomart can be seen as representing "the hereditary British governing class in its most enlightened and liberal aspect, but also under its limitations. For, with all her admirable civic energy, her vision is circumscribed by two iron-clad principles – her conventional morality and belief in the divine right of the aristocracy to rule the country". (Chapelow, 1961:68)

Her reformism does not prevent her from being a moral 'tyrant', and moral indignation means nothing without critical attitude and action. She seems to be rather partial to treating her children according to a liberal principle of equality ("my children are my equals", she declares), but she finally proves to be a monster of authoritarianism, occasionally bullying Stephen; in spite of this, she is a well-intentioned mother and loves her children, even if her maternal love seems rather stifling to their personalities (maybe because her love is now single-minded, since she feels the intention of her children's father to disinherit them as a serious threat: it is the instinctual reaction of the mother who tries to defend her little ones).

Her liberal mind seems to stop short of understanding the fact that the poor, and generally the lower classes, do not respect their governors (actually, their betters); as a matter of fact, this apparently 'aristocratic' view is very representative of the Shavian opinion of the part 'the elect' have to play as leaders of the lower ranks of society; what Lady Britomart fails to understand, while having the poor's welfare at heart, is that poverty does not elevate – not even in the simplest of the principles of sound morality – but degrades you.

**Tough Women:** There are few figures of tough women in Shaw's plays, *e.g.* Mrs. Dudgeon in 'The Devil's Disciple', or the minor character of Cleopatra's nurse Ftatateeta, in 'Caesar and Cleopatra'.



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Dick's mother is a monstrous woman; she is so hardened by the residual puritanical tendency towards sternness, as to be able to declare that she hates her children, because the heart of man is irretrievably wicked. Puritan determinism drives her against her sons, as one of them is an outcast and the other an imbecile; she is the very image of the failure of Protestant doctrine, based on excessive discipline and tight, hard-and-fast morality (*v*. her bitter words addressed to Anderson): "We are told that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. My heart belonged not to Timothy, but to that poor wretched brother of his that has just ended his days with a rope round his neck – aye, to Peter Dudgeon… He warned me and strengthened me against my heart, and made me marry a God-fearing man, as he thought. What else but that discipline has made me the woman I am?" She thinks that she must be the supreme instance in judging her son's ways, and since she was his 'earthly creator', then it lies with her and no one else to hate him – and drive him away from her: "Well, I am Richard's mother. If I am against him, who has any right to be for him?"

Ftatateeta, Cleopatra's nurse – and, in some ways, her coach, too – is another embodiment of disproportionate will, which she wants to impose on her royal 'pupil'. She sees her mission as belonging to the sphere of the divine, as she is the teacher, traditionally appointed to transform her trainee into tomorrow's partaker in the Gods' will; her authoritarianism is extreme because it is unlimited. In this 'nursery play' Ftatateeta infects young Cleopatra with her 'impersonal', traditional one may say, poison, as the evil in her goes unchecked into her pupil's heart. "No power is more absolute and tyrannical than that wielded in the nursery." (Morgan, 1972, p. 50)

**Mother-Women**: **Candida** (**the** '**Virgin Mother**'): Candida is the true 'Virgin Mother', as Shaw himself admitted; this term, applying to a type character, was actually coined by the author in strict reference to Candida. 'Candida' presents a view antithetical to that of Ibsen's 'A Doll's House': instead of the woman conceived as the plaything of man in a male-dominated world, Shaw underlines the opposite view, that of woman's influence over men and her dependence on her own strength. She was apparently inspired by Shaw's mother's image; she stands for the sway of the material creative force (*cf*. Shaw's theory of natural force / Energy) – primarily biological force, which is later on opposed, in her relation with Eugene Marchbanks, to the artist's need for freedom; she may be viewed as a kind of 'seducer' using her feminine natural power. In the same way, Miss Proserpine Garnett, a secondary character, nicknamed Prossy (*cf*. the mythological name Proserpine / Proserpina / Persephone – the (Roman and Greek) goddess of natural, earthly fertility and wife of Pluto, queen of the underworld, who was allowed part of each year to leave it: her story symbolizes the return of spring, and the life and growth of corn – implying, in the play, the caricature through the diminutival name), Prossy makes a couple with Candida, symbolizing the purely material, physical aspect of the relationship between the feminine and the energetic, being thus opposed to Candida's comparative spirituality; or subservient placidity *versus* driving force.

Her affinity with Eugene Marchbanks represents the mother-and-son affection (Holroyd, vol. I, 1988, p. 315). Since she does not advance towards bodily relations with Marchbanks, the 'Virgin Mother' in her reduces Eugene to the status of a child, driving him away from the sin of 'moral incest'. The ambiguousness of her relation to him is scenically represented by the presence of the figure of the Holy Virgin when they meet. Shaw conceived Candida as transcending both morality (*i.e.* her marital relation to Morell) and art (*i.e.* her relation to Eugene); the dominant, maternal Candida finds it in her heart to stick to



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the mother-like component of her personality in remaining with the one of the two men in her life whom she really thinks the feebler: her husband, Morell.

As far as her presentation is concerned, Candida's portrait is brushed with the fine touches of the really radiant quality of candidness (*v*. the name itself), embodying the figure of Victorian domestic purity, although as a dramatic character she is less than candid and open, or the personification of honesty. Her double identity as a character is shared between idealization and realistic presentation. "The 'Woman Question' the play presents may well be interpreted as the enigma an ambivalent attitude creates. Eugene Marchbanks comes to distinguish between the actual woman and the ideal to which he still does homage at the close of the play." (Morgan, 1972:51)

From the point of view of the imagery Shaw uses in depicting Candida, there are two main groups of images worth mentioning: the former appertains to the Christian tradition, and the latter is suggestive of Dionysian irrationality (the first one conveys the signs of her social being, *v*. leitmotifs like: heaven, hell, prayer, divine. etc., as the second one is related to her Life Force image, *v*. mad, giddy, drunk, hysterics, etc.).

The last scene in 'Candida', in which the wife declares her determination to remain with the strong man because he is the weak man, can be judged as inspired by a rather Quixotic attitude; yet, human sacrifice is the attribute of the 'motherly' description of woman in the Shavian typology; Candida's clear-sightedness, though cynical by definition (the character clearly belongs to Shaw's Life Force gallery!), expels any hint of the notion of idolatry – so, finally we may assert that 'Candida' is very much closer to Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' than previously expected.

**Lavinia** in 'Androcles and the Lion' is the type of the mother-woman inspired by faith. She is made the spokeswoman for the idea in the play: the greatness of something higher than human strivings can make life bearable ("I think I'm going to die for God; nothing else is real enough to die for", Lavinia says). By the sincere quality of her faith, she is not reduced to the status of a mere 'mother-woman', but, by engaging in a struggle against the principle of evil, she comes nearer to the altitude of the Shavian 'Superman', yet fundamentally differing from the real Superman by the disinterested and all-encompassing character of her allegiance to reach higher spheres of existence – in her own case, moral existence. Lavinia is engaged in a determined pursuit of the good, denying any right of worship to anything that means cruelty, suffering or death (*v*. in the play the ominous image of the votive statue of Mars, a maleficent symbol). Lavinia has many things in common with her weaker sister, Barbara Undershaft: they are both aristocrats turning their backs on their own class and way of life in an attempt to find a new moral basis for their action, and they both discover in the end that many of the things they have pursued are not true. Yet, in spite of their apparent defeat, their maternal, congenial love of those in need redeems them and effaces their Quixotry.

'**Gentle Women**' Nora, a minor character in John Bull's Other Island', is one of the rather few examples of 'gentle' women in Shaw's plays; a fact which could be accounted for by his comparatively greater partiality, and attraction, to the 'unwomanly' type – or the New Woman, a category much more suited for his day and the needs of modern theatre, he strongly believed.

Nora is radically different from the type of woman embodied by Ann Whitfield in 'Man and Superman' or Blanche Sartorius in 'Widowers' Houses'; she is a warm character, the very image of simple integrity of woman, she has a definite 'charm' (which one of the characters, Larry, jocularly interprets through her food diet: tea and bread-and-butter); as a



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'gentle woman', she is seen with a comprehensive eye by the author himself. One of the basic devices he uses in defining Nora is the opposition he establishes between the character of Nora and that of Keegan (the religiously inflexible man), thus making up a parallel between sternness / authority (*i.e.* Keegan) and Nora's gentleness, representative of universally human love.

The feminine figure which comes closest to the authentic 'Superman-woman' for whom Dona Ana (in 'Man in Superman') has cried 'to the universe' is the dazzling heavenly 'invader' Lina Szczepanowska in 'Misalliance'. She intrudes into the stuffy atmosphere of the mansion, with a view to undertaking positive action, partly in response to Hypatia's plea for 'adventures to drop out of the sky'; she resembles a bird of good omen; she is the Life Force incarnate, a goddess whose profession 'is to be wonderful'. Lina is the Saint Joan of 'Misalliance'. "She comes into that stifling house as a religious force", as Shaw wrote in a letter. As an invader into the established social order, Lina represents salvation coming from the future, not the past, and embodying Shaw's preference for evolution – *vs*. revolution.

**Others:** Raina (the heroine in 'Arms and he Man') is the type of the histrion, of the false naïve. The coaching she receives from the matter-of-fact mercenary Bluntschli is, paradoxically, an initiation into the exercise of creative imagination, as living actually does involve acting. If she can have a light conscience about the necessity to tell lies, everything seems perfect with her. Obviously the most childish, and the most genuinely histrionic character in this play belonging to the group of the 'Tales for the Nursery' (*v*. M. Morgan, *op. cit.*), Raina makes Bluntschli's best pupil, achieving, through her show of naïvety, the transition between 'nursery' and marriage, from ignorance to wisdom (or, better, shrewdness), from spoilt infancy to maturity. Funnily, her evolution to dis-idealized reality passes through her own white lies and pretence of naïveness. As a histrionic character, Raina "can take up her mask and drop it at a signal, without discomposure, because her play-acting is deliberate, gratuitous and self-delighting, not in the least compelled by fear or desperate necessity" (Morgan, 1972:137). Raina mixes the pleasure of play-acting with the useful acquisition of expertise in Bluntschli's debunking, 'demythologised' system of truths. Is seems that the author wanted to imply the feature of angel-like, jocular shrewdness through the name of the girl (*v*. the Slavic root *rai* 'paradise').

**Conclusions**: The range of the Shavian women characters is outstandingly broad, in keeping with the attraction Shaw always felt for women as vivid, intelligent, demonstrative, resourceful characters in the drama. It is obvious that the – allegedly – naïve Raina, Mrs. Andersen, a woman having a very high opinion of herself and not yet in possession of her maternal quality at its maturest point, perceptive, yet lacking the will and the force to change the things she can perceive, the kittenish Cleopatra, etc., all belong to the type-form of the possessive woman, while Candida, Lady Cicely (in 'Captain Brassbound's Conversion') or Gloria are definitely related to a set of more genial principles of humaneness.

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