

Letters and Reviews

Review of *Bernard Shaw's Marriages and Misalliances*, edited by Robert A. Gaines (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 229 pages, \$99.99.

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As Robert A. Gaines notes in his book's preamble, a good many articles have been written to explain Bernard Shaw's views on marriage as set forth in this or that play; yet few have attempted a big-picture view of the ways in which his understanding of the subject evolved throughout his nearly seventy-year writing career. For this project, Gaines has recruited twelve Shavian scholars to discuss Shaw's treatment of marriage in his plays, novels, and personal life. Shaw stated in his preface to *Getting Married*: "[W]e use the word [marriage] with reckless looseness, meaning a dozen different things by it, and yet always assuming that to a respectable man it can have only one meaning" (*Complete Plays with Prefaces* III: 454-455). Gaines takes this quotation, along with two others from the same preface, as an unofficial motto to open the book. One need not read far into the collection to suspect that in this recklessly loose "we," Shaw included himself, for his writings on marriage defy any concise definition of the term.

Leonard Conolly, in a chapter on Shaw's three early *Plays Unpleasant*, seems to offer such a definition. Alluding to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, he concludes that in Shaw's first three plays, "the piousness about 'the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church' [is] shown to be a sham" (25). In *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, marriage, Conolly notes, is simply a business agreement, one that abets other equally shabby business agreements and also supplies a socially accepted pretext for gratifying animal sex instincts; any talk of marital love, virtue, holiness, or honor is merely a screen to mask these ugly facts. The definition is as unambiguous as it is bleak.

Yet this cynical simplicity was far from being Shaw's last word on the subject, as other contributors show. After exposing the hypocrisies of the marriage institution in his *Plays Unpleasant*, he turned his critique in a more constructive direction. His subsequent plays experimented with potential improvements on marriage itself, through changes either in the laws governing it or in individuals' understandings of their own partnerships; they also presented marriage as both a metaphor and a practical catalyst for broader, more collective changes needed to improve the world—radical changes in the economic, political, scientific, and philosophical assumptions and practices underpinning society.

Jennifer Buckley, for example, in the chapter following Conolly's, describes the marriages depicted in *Plays Pleasant* as "pragmatic partnerships" into which women and men enter, not necessarily discarding affection or desire, but rejecting the religious and sentimental idealism that the earlier "unpleasant" plays had deflated, and frankly acknowledging the financial, social, and ideological compromises their partnerships will require. These marital compromises, Buckley reminds readers, were not unlike those Shaw found himself obliged to make as he began, with *Arms and the Man* and the other "pleasant" plays, to launch himself as a dramatist in

the realm of commercial theater. Lawrence Switzky, regarding *Three Plays for Puritans*, argues that these dramas turn on “decoy marriages”—that is, relationships between characters not legally united, but perform some pretense or approximation of marriage. Such “simulated marriages,” he concludes, can potentially offer lessons in social responsibility and rational citizenship that traditional legal marriages cannot: they “allow otherwise aloof, self-interested, or excessively passionate characters to establish personal obligations, while also assuring that any virtuous actions [the partners] perform on each other’s behalf are not based on the ‘interests’ of love, legal contracts, or sexual desire” (59). Michel Pharand and Peter Gahan, focusing the first decade of the twentieth century, argue that in the plays of this period, Shaw characterized marriage as a process contributing to humanity’s “salvation”—whether this be defined in terms of evolution, business, or political ambition (90, 108-109).

The book’s early chapters suggest, then, that while Shaw early discarded the traditional Christian doctrine of marriage as “the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church,” he came over time to ascribe to it numerous other social and symbolic meanings, in keeping with his developing convictions on science, ethics, and political organization. Shaw unabashedly claimed socialism and creative evolution as his religions—and these religions, it turns out, present their own forms of “mystical union,” vesting the marriage tie (or a much modified version of it) with new significance.

While issues of gender equality and women’s rights receive attention throughout the book, they come especially to the forefront in the chapters by Ellen Dolgin, Audrey McNamara, and Dorothy Hadfield, who examine plays written during World War I and in the years immediately before and after. As first the women’s suffrage campaign and then the war and its aftermath disrupted assumptions about women’s legal, political, and occupational status, Shaw depicted women such as Eliza Doolittle, Ellie Dunn, and Joan of Arc searching for a wider range of choices—be it a choice of marriage conditions and partners or choices for life outside marriage and domesticity.

The book naturally contains considerable comment on Shaw’s personal experience of marriage, both from his early observations of his parents’ unhappy misalliance and his four-decades-long marriage, companionable but famously sexless, with Charlotte Payne-Townshend. Rodelle Weintraub contributes a brief sketch of Shaw’s various romantic and sexual relationships, identifying likely real-life prototypes for several dramatic characters and concluding that unlike some of his characters, the author himself was never a “philanderer” (84). Several contributors speculate on the ways in which Shaw’s experience of marriage (his own and other people’s) might have been reflected in his writing, in particular Richard Dietrich, examining Shaw’s early novels and short stories, and Matthew Yde, discussing his last handful of plays.

The contributors, in outlining the gradually widening scope of Shaw’s vision of marriage—from interpersonal contract to citizenship training to salvific strategy—present a narrative cohesion unusual in edited collections, especially collections with more than a dozen participants. Reading, one envisions Shaw not as literary monolith, but as writer and human being under development, always outspoken yet often ambivalent. Moreover, the book tells not only a story of Shaw but a story of marriage and the ways in which it has evolved over the past two centuries—a story which, in the age of online dating and LGBTQ marriage equality, is still very

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much in the making. As Jean Reynolds reminds readers, “Marriage . . . is still going strong, despite Shaw’s warning in 1908 that ‘if marriage cannot be made to produce something better than we are, marriage will have to go, or else the nation will have to go’ (*CPP* III:418). More than a century later, hopeful couples continue to think that *their* version of marriage will ‘produce something better than we are.’” (189). As in Shaw’s time, this hope not infrequently ends in disappointment—and yet, as Shaw did, we continue to look to marriage with hope, both for individual companionship and for a more just, effective society—an engine for “salvation” and for “world-betterment,” to use Shaw’s phrases.

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