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BERNARD SHAW

Saint Joan

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SAINT JOAN

'He did his best in redressing the fateful unbalance between truth and reality, in lifting mankind to a higher rung of social maturity. He often pointed a scornful finger at human frailty, but his jests were never at the expense of humanity' Thomas Mann

'Shaw will not allow complacency; he hates second-hand opinions; he attacks fashion; he continually challenges and unsettles, questioning and provoking us even when he is making us laugh. And he is still at it. No cliché or truism of contemporary life is safe from him' Michael Holroyd

'In his works Shaw left us his mind . . . Today we have no Shavian wizard to awaken us with clarity and paradox, and the loss to our national intelligence is immense' John Carey, *Sunday Times*

'An important writer and an interesting socialist and critic . . . Thank God he lived' Peter Levi, *Independent*

'He was a Tolstoy with jokes, a modern Dr Johnson, a universal genius who on his own modest reckoning put even Shakespeare in the shade' John Campbell, *Independent*

'His plays were superb exercises in high-level argument on every issue under the sun, from feminism and God, to war and eternity, but they were also hits – and still are' Paul Johnson, *Daily Mail*

BERNARD SHAW was born in Dublin in 1856. Although essentially shy, he created the persona of G.B.S., the showman, satirist, controversialist, critic, pundit, wit, intellectual buffoon and dramatist. Commentators brought a new adjective into English: Shavian, a term used to embody all his brilliant qualities.

After his arrival in London in 1876 he became an active Socialist and a brilliant platform speaker. He wrote on many social aspects of the day: on *Common Sense about the War* (1914), *How to Settle the Irish Question* (1917) and *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928) published by Penguin. He undertook his own education at the British Museum and consequently became keenly interested in cultural subjects. Thus his prolific output included music, art and theatre reviews, which were collected into several volumes, such as *Music In London 1890–1894* (3 vols., 1931); *Pen Portraits and Reviews* (1931); and *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (3 vols., 1931). He also wrote five novels, including *Cashel Byron's Profession*, and a collection of shorter works issued as *The Black Girl in Search of God and Some Lesser Tales* (also in Penguin).

Shaw conducted a strong attack on the London Theatre and was closely associated with the intellectual revival of British Theatre. His many plays (the full canon runs to 52) fall into several categories: 'Plays Pleasant'; 'Plays Unpleasant'; 'Plays for Puritans'; political plays; chronicle plays; 'metabiological Pentateuch' (*Back to Methuselah*) in five plays; extravaganzas; romances; and fables. He died in 1950.

IMOGEN STUBBS was educated at Oxford and RADA among other places. She has contributed numerous articles to many newspapers and magazines – often in the form of book reviews for *The Times* and travel articles for *Harpers and Queen* and *Conde Naste Traveller*. Her story 'The Undiscovered Road' was recently published in *Amazonians: The Penguin Book of New Women's Travel Writing*. She also acts, swing dances, has a family and is learning the saxophone.

JOLEY WOOD was educated at the University of Wisconsin and received his M.Phil. in Anglo-Irish Literature from Trinity College, Dublin. He now works as a teacher, and freelance writer and editor. He has written on many twentieth-century Irish writers, particularly James Joyce and *Ulysses*, and has edited a number of other works. He is currently writing entries on Irish literature for the *Encyclopaedia of Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan Press).

DAN H. LAURENCE, editor of Shaw's *Collected Letters*, his *Collected Plays with their Prefaces*, *Shaw's Music* and (with Daniel Leary) *The Complete Prefaces*, was Literary Adviser to the Shaw Estate until his retirement in 1990. He is Series Editor for the works of Shaw in Penguin.

BERNARD SHAW

Saint Joan

A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue

Definitive text under the editorial supervision of
DAN H. LAURENCE
with 'On Playing Joan' by IMOGEN STUBBS
and an Introduction by JOLEY WOOD

PENGUIN BOOKS

Contents

Chronology of the Life and Times of Bernard Shaw

LIFE

1856 Born in Dublin on 26 July

1871 After only short periods of schooling, started work as an office boy in a Dublin firm of land agents

1873 Mother and sisters moved to London

1876 Joined mother in London; she taught singing and his sister Lucy sang professionally in musical plays

1879 While working for the Edison Telephone Company, began to meet the earliest British socialists, including, in 1880, Sidney Webb and Beatrice Potter (later Mrs Webb) who became lifelong friends

1879–81 Wrote five novels, four published serially in magazines

1884 Joined the Fabian Society, which advocated gradual progress towards socialism, and began giving lectures both to the Fabians and on their behalf. At about the same time, met the hugely influential theatre critic William Archer, who helped Shaw to find work as a critic. First meeting with William Morris whose disciple he became

1885 Appointed as a book reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and music critic for the new *Dramatic Review*

1886–9 Art critic for *The World*

1888–90 Music critic for *The Star* (under the pseudonym 'Corno di Bassetto')

1889 Attended English première of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

1890–4 Music critic for *The World* (writing as GBS)

1891 Published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*

1867 Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' published

1870 Education Act made primary schooling compulsory in England and Wales

1871 Year of political change in Europe: Italy and Germany both unified

1883 Death of Marx. The left-wing Fabian Society founded

1886 Home Rule for Ireland first proposed by Gladstone's Liberal government; the Conservative Lord Salisbury became Prime Minister

1887 Queen Victoria celebrated her Golden Jubilee

1892 Keir Hardie elected as first Independent Socialist Member of Parliament

1895 Oscar Wilde imprisoned for homosexual offences. Lumière brothers patented cinematograph

1897 Irish Literary Theatre founded by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn

1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War in South Africa

1901 Death of Queen Victoria, accession of Edward VII

1907 Rudyard Kipling the first British winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

1911 Members of Parliament paid a salary for the first time. Women's Freedom League founded

1914–18 First World War

1916 Easter Rising by Irish Nationalists in Dublin

1920 League of Nations created. Government of Ireland Act, partitioning Ireland

1922 Continuing civil war in Ireland

1924 First Labour government in Britain, under Ramsay Macdonald; replaced by the Conservative Unionists, under Stanley Baldwin. Death of Lenin

1928 Women over twenty-one in the United Kingdom given the vote

1929 New York Stock Exchange crash led to world economic depression. Election of second Labour minority government in Britain (which became a multi-party National government in 1931)

1933 Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany

1939–45 Second World War
1945 Labour Party, under Clement Attlee, won the election, replacing the wartime leader Winston Churchill.
1946 First meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations
1948 British National Health Service founded

'On Playing Joan'

by Imogen Stubbs

A leading actress shares her personal memories of the challenges to be found in playing Joan, mirroring the sense of fun in Joan herself and in much of Shaw's play.

When the part of Shaw's Joan was first proposed to me, it set me thinking about the audience expectations of a play called *Saint Joan*, written by an Anglo-Irishman in the 1920s about a dead French girl who had just been canonized for her efforts to get the English out of France several hundred years previously.

It sounded like a dead tree on a lonely road. I'd 'done' *Saint Joan* at school – I'd seen the statue, so to speak. The words 'not relevant' kept singing in my head (along with 'Didn't the 47-year-old Sybil Thorndike, to whom I bear no resemblance, play her "definitively?"'). Having toured the play around Britain and into the West End, I think – I hope – I was quite wrong about the relevance of the play (though probably not about Sybil Thorndike).

One is wary of being an apologist for Shaw when he is such a great apologist for himself, but by placing himself as an amused observer of human endeavour, his arguments are as provocative now – in a society which, for instance, still struggles with the notion of the ordination of women priests – as they were when he wrote the play.

But (rather obviously) what greatly fascinates me is the story of Joan – the Cinderella with a 'Ready-Brek' glow, yes, but also the intractable teenager with the intolerance of youth and the naiveté and dogged determination of a child; a woman

who was burned to death at an age when most people's lives have hardly begun.

Shaw presents a girl who has an anarchic sense of humour, who is sometimes hard, violent, hysterical, proud, serene, vulnerable, always courageous. He is accountable to her, and he requires the same loyalty from the actress who plays Joan, to whom he also entrusts the difficult task of playing 'Faith' as a quality of life.

The play presents two other practical challenges to an actress. One is coping with the fact that your fellow actors cannot resist hiding speakers on stage, so in the middle of a big speech you might suddenly hear a muddled: 'Hey, Joanie – it's me Saint Catherine. Can you hear me?' The other is, miracle of miracles, the wind changing. This requires a banner, a wind machine, and a sense of humour. We had nightmares with that moment. The poor boy whose only line was to leap up and down and shout 'The wind! The wind! – It's CHANGED!' would either have to scream above the sound of a Boeing 707 taking off, or stare at the limp banner and say 'The wind! The wind! I'm sure it's about to change', rush into the wings screaming 'Point the machine higher you idiots' and then rush back on stage and say 'God has spoken'.

I once played a character called Anna Lee in a television series which attracted a certain following of young teenage girls who, in their much-appreciated devotion, came to see *Saint Joan* with no prior knowledge of the play and much trepidation that their hard-saved pennies were about to be squandered.

What I found so rewarding (and a relief) was that these girls generally seemed to respond to the character of Joan. Variously – and rather surprisingly – they said that they saw something in Joan of Anne Frank, of the boy in *ET*, of Kenneth Branagh's Henry V. But, overwhelmingly, they saw a heroine who was killed for many of the choices that they took for granted.

They saw a teenager whose combustible combination of naïvety and raw presumption led her to fight passive acceptance of chauvinism and the status quo; someone who believed in spiritual forces greater than the self-appointed ones on earth; a loner, whose journey seems to be one suffered by many teenage

icons – defiant, proud, alone, sad, disillusioned, dead and then celebrated. They saw someone who saved her country, only to be burned at the stake because any girl with cropped short hair wearing trousers and clompy boots, any girl only interested in platonic relationships, any girl having a sense of vocation or a quality of leadership must automatically be a witch. 'I might almost . . . have been a man,' laments Joan towards the end of the play. 'Pity I wasn't; I should not have bothered you all so much then.'

For teenage girls it is perhaps hard to measure the success of the sexual revolution, but I like to hope that, standing unchaperoned at the stage door in Levi's and Doctor Marten boots, with their cropped hair-dos and their wonderful bubbling confidence as they poured forth their opinions and their aspirations, they got some measure of it.

As to Joan's relevance to me or mine to her – I'm not an intractable teenager, but I most certainly was once. I'm not a country girl, but I can see my Northumbrian origins as a source of reference. I'm not a lone girl amongst soldiers, but I was one of very few girls at a boys' school. I have not been drawn into conflict with every male authority figure I have encountered, but I have been in the first-year intake of women into a male college (Oxford's Exeter College) and I have witnessed the terror some men have of female intrusion into a male domain. I should also add that with our production, with male producers, a predominately male cast, and a female director, the opposite was true. Finally, like Joan, I think I am aware of the difference between 'Life' and 'Existence', and the potential destruction of all that seems to define 'Life' by cant and cynicism and misperception of reality. I have not heard voices – but I live in hope.

Whether she is considered miraculous or unbearable, the inspiration of women like Joan will always be relevant: 'O God, that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?'

All Joans are relevant but some Joans are more relevant than others – I think Shaw's Saint Joan is the right one to be received by the twenty-first century.

Introduction

by Joley Wood

In 1913, after already creating a significant body of work, George Bernard Shaw conceived of a drama about Joan of Arc in a letter to a friend. Shaw completed *Saint Joan* in 1923, and for the next two years the play encountered mixed reception (often in the same review), with criticisms of length and the epilogue often mitigated by acknowledgements of an underlying genius. In 1925 *Saint Joan* earned Shaw both his first success on the French stage and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Saint Joan is Shaw's most acclaimed historically based play, what Thomas Mann called 'the most fervent thing Shaw ever wrote'. Luigi Pirandello felt that Shaw respected the 'considerations of art' and sustained a poetic emotion throughout the play. Shaw found in Joan's heresy a fitting emblem of the human spirit. In 1920 Joan of Arc was canonized a saint by the Catholic Church. Joan's brash yet accurate critique of authority resonated with Shaw, and he realized that her canonization risked whitewashing this most Shavian quality of hers. Shaw hoped that his play would restore this quality she had to the public eye, and modelled his Joan on friends of his who also challenged the social status quo: these included the physically vigorous, well-disciplined and seemingly sexless hostess of the Fabian Summer Schools, Mary Hankinson; and T. E. Lawrence, or Lawrence of Arabia, who had recently taken part in a Middle Eastern national unification movement similar to Joan's French endeavour. This kind of antagonistic character can be an enticing challenge for an actor to play, and since Sybil Thorndike many, including Joan Plowright, Frances de la Tour and, recently, Imogen Stubbs, have attempted to embody this spirit –

when a film version that was to be financed by General Charles de Gaulle was discussed, de Gaulle even suggested that he should play St Joan in preference to the casted Greta Garbo.

Shaw calls *Saint Joan* 'a Chronicle play', but it can be argued that he has written his own kind of tragedy, embodying a Shavian challenge to prevailing artistic and social norms. Artistically, Shaw challenges previously accepted models of stage tragedy by offering an alternative to the classical form. Aristotelian tragedy depends upon some flaw or error by the protagonist that sets the tragic machinery into motion. Shaw's notion of tragedy, however, functions on a different register. We are not invited to take part in someone's error, but in the distress one encounters when the right thing *was* done, yet failure was always imminent. Hence it is Joan's strengths, not her faults, that bring about her downfall. One critic has noted the similarity of Shaw's approach to tragedy and G. W. F. Hegel's outlook in his *Philosophy of Fine Art*: 'two opposed Rights come forth: the one breaks itself to pieces against the other: in this way, both alike suffer loss; while both alike are justified the one towards the other: not as if this were right, that other wrong'. Shaw's intentions seem like-minded. In his original Preface he notes 'It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us'; and Joan is burned 'by normally innocent people in the energy of their righteousness'. In other words, neither Joan nor her executioners are in error; both act with 'good' yet mutually contradictory intentions, the strain of which leads to the destruction of one or the other. Indeed, this may be a more poignant form of tragedy than one dealing in error. The audience of classical Aristotelian tragedy always has the consolation that the error leads to the downfall. Shaw removes this possibility by eliminating the error, sealing off those mental doors that offer some sense of relief, and thus brings his audience closer to a desperate tragic sense.

Aristotle was not the only Greek influence upon Shaw's tragedy. The narrative of Prometheus represented the 'staple of tragedy' for Shaw. The Titan gave fire to humanity against the wishes of the gods and was severely punished through eternal

physical torture, yet remained defiant and thus became a martyr for his actions. Similarly, Joan gave nationhood to a people and was then burned at the stake for being a heretical threat to the authorities, yet still prayed while she burned – 'What more do you want for a tragedy as great as that of Prometheus?' said Shaw. In his original Preface to *Saint Joan*, Shaw also compared Joan to Socrates: both had a similar ability to infuriate authorities because their actions had the side effect of revealing where those authorities were wrong, or even foolish.

Shaw felt that this challenge of fresh principles to held ideals was necessary for human evolution. Hence objections like Joan's, pointing out where improvement is needed, may in many cases be silenced, but history shows that such reactions only prove the validity of the objection. Thus Prometheus' liver becomes a scavenger's eternal lunch while he shows no remorse; Socrates drinks his last tea while he continues teaching; and Joan goes up in a blaze to her angels while she persists in praying – all becoming martyrs for the cause of reason in the face of the irrational. As Shaw wrote, 'the angels may weep at the murder, but the gods laugh at the murderers'.

Shaw saw the irony of how Joan, after four long centuries, was being brought into the fold of a suppressive authority she stood against. Thus when she is canonized a saint in the Epilogue, Shaw has Joan state 'But I never made any such claim.' Joan's situation is ironically reflected in Shaw's winning the Nobel Prize for the play. In its own way the Prize is a canonization of his spirit, yet it is hardly in keeping with the anti-establishment tone of his drama: 'The Nobel Prize was a hideous calamity for me,' he wrote to a friend; '. . . It was really almost as bad as my 70th birthday.' Shaw had the final say by using the award money to establish an Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation.

It is true that Shaw altered the historical facts somewhat in his characterizations: this was not because his grasp on the facts was loose, but rather to create the social tensions needed to drive the play. He attempted to distil the facts of a historical event in order to locate its sense and re-recreate that sense on stage through an artistic means, a form that falls somewhere

between historiography and histrionics. Therefore, despite what history may show, no character in his play need be entirely good or bad – 'There are no villains in the piece,' Shaw wrote in his Preface, 'It is, I repeat, what normally innocent people do that concerns us.'

In effect Shaw creates a kind of absurdist social critique through his drama: the protagonist is sent into an irrational situation believed to be perfectly sound to everyone except her, and this situation is then logically followed to its irrational conclusion. Shaw shares this approach with other writers from his native Ireland, from Swift's social commentaries and Wilde's satires to Joyce's cultural observations and Beckett's existential critiques. 'English literature must be saved (by an Irishman, as usual),' wrote Shaw, 'from the disgrace of having nothing to show concerning Joan . . .'

The outsider who has found a way in often brings an unknown perspective to a culture, and this critique of the irrational is part of a tradition of analysis that does not simply turn things on its head, but shows how an ignored fault can eventually undo a greater structure. In this case Joan is the outsider to the established French Catholic Church and State. French Nationalism makes sense to Shaw's Joan, because it is she and other French-speaking peasants who require the attention of their king, not people who do not even live in France. Joan's desire to commune directly with her god without an overly bureaucratic clergy intervening reveals a Church that has unknowingly placed itself above the deity. And Joan's battle savvy and instincts were that of a soldier, so it was perfectly logical to her to be dressing and acting as such. This is a person achieving her potential, not a destiny determined by gender – and how would a 'womanly' woman be treated in a camp of soldiers? Not as a soldier. Joan did the commonsensical thing, and was persecuted for it. In a final Shavian twist, the Epilogue proves to the audience that, despite four centuries of hindsight, our mortal eyes would not be able to distinguish a saint from a heretic; were Joan alive today, she would still be persecuted.

SAINT JOAN