
Shaw's Own Colony

Nicholas Williams*

ABSTRACT

This essay will discuss a play written by George Bernard Shaw during the period of British colonialism.

The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles was first performed in New York by the Theatre Guild at the Guild Theatre on 18 February, 1935, and in July of the same year at the Malvern Festival in England. The opening stage direction speaks of "a tropical port in the British Empire" and later we learn that The Unexpected Isles have come up out of the ocean, conveniently without history and cultural precedent. In this "dramatic fable" (as he refers to it in his Preface) Shaw returns to much older European fascinations with a New World where the religious repression of Europe and the often near-feudalism of its societies could be set aside; an independent America, and not France of the 1789 Revolution, would always be the practical possibility. Shaw's interest in postulating a new order based, even if only very selectively, on the newly emerged Soviet Union has resulted, unsurprisingly, in *The Simpleton* being taken as totalitarian in its implications.¹ However the play stands just as much with Samuel Butler's futurist novel *Erewhon* (1872) in confronting the scientific faith of the nineteenth century by recording the fate of a eugenics experiment as part of his colony's brief history.

Not always well identified in his play is the antithetical role played by Shaw's hybrid of religious ideology, as personified by the two indigenous priests and the later enactment of a very Shavian version of an Apocalypse. In his Preface to *The Simpleton*, the comparison with religion is essential to Shaw's warning that science is beyond the reach of dialectical argument. "Religion is the mother of skepticism: Science is the mother of credulity", and later in the same paragraph, "For the shift of credulity from religious divination to scientific invention is very often a relapse from comparatively harmless romance to mischievous and even murderous quackery." The six adult members of Shaw's idiosyncratic community will at last come to understand the philosophical truth that nothing in this world is fixed and determined.

The Simpleton is divided into a Prologue with three scenes, followed by two Acts. In the first scene of the Prologue Shaw recreates an historical colony in the British Empire in an Emigration Office. The scene looks back to Joseph Conrad's short story, *Outpost of Empire* (1897) with its final act of suicide. Wilks, the Emigration Officer's assistant, is Shaw's urban English lower-middle class consciousness with the shabby imperialism of Cecil Rhodes in its back pocket. Wilks is speaking:

* Former Professor, Saitama Institute of Technology, Faculty of Human and Social Studies.

"Look at me! What am I? An empire builder: that's what I am by nature. Cecil Rhodes: that's me. Why am I a clerk with only two shirts to my back, with that young waster wiping his dirty boots on me for doing the work he cant [sic] do himself, though he gets all the praise and all the pudding?" Class envy, anti-Semitism and self-hatred are the hallmarks of this character's alienation: "any Jew boy could do all I do here and better". His suicide indicates the other side of colonial rule. A routine event, as the Station Master comments: "What a climate! The fifth this month." Compare this character's fate with the Emigration Officer to understand Shaw's near religious classification of his characters: Hyering will be chosen, despite his whining about suicide, because he is redeemable and will become a part of the new colony.

Shaw has to establish in his Prologue what the essential problem with a colonial culture actually is. The four British characters are very typical colonial figures of the period and they are seen from the point of view of the two native priests. Shaw skates over the essential differences between the native religious tradition and Christianity. But here is one example of how Pra, the male priest, will deal with a question posed by an "English lady tourist": "I get confused among all these different gods; it is so difficult to know which is which." Pra reacts to this English Anglican with the sharp retort of a highly literate Pagan that Christians have the "Father, the Son, the Spirit" and (to add provocation) "the Immaculate Mother". At her insistence that "We are not Catholics", he gets to the punchline: "Are your temples then labelled 'For men only'?"

The Stage Direction at the beginning of Act 1 reads like notes for a Cecil B. De Mille cinematic production—that will include "a raised garden" as the "center of interest; for in it are four shrines marking the corners of a square. In the two foremost shrines two girl-goddesses sit crosslegged [sic]. In the two further ones [...] two youthful gods are sitting in the same fashion. The ages of the four appear to be between 17 and 20." Shaw was later dismissive of his play as "openly oriental, hieratic, and insane."²

The four offspring described above as minor deities are the results of a eugenics experiment. The second experiment involves an Anglican clergyman who arrives suddenly on the island. The Anglican clergyman, who becomes "the simpleton" of Shaw's play, is used to create a near farcical situation. Later known by his nursery name of Iddy or idiot, he has been kidnapped and then dropped off on the colony by pirates in some suggestion of the plot of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* (1879). In the zany counter-intuitive logic of the farce, he is selected for fathering the new generation. The mothers are to be the two "girl-goddesses" already seen in their shrines. Iddy's suitability resides in two absurdly conceived assets: he was brought up on a nitrogen-enriched diet (Shaw's jibe at scientific rearing) and as a cleric, his professionally required guilt feelings are thought useful in compensating for the moral deficit of the four adolescents initially stylized as "deities".³ In other words, genetic engineering can produce the physical specimen, but obviously behavior is to a large extent learned in society. The actual education of the younger generation is barely touched upon in the play, but what we learn about the colony and its sense of unreality and its obsession with

perfecting itself makes of it a very strange environment to grow up in.

Shaw's use of Iddy distracts from the scientific project and weakens his commentary on how it affects his colony. The clergyman's polygamy (a subject of European prejudice and therefore of low comedy) is more emphasized in Act II because it creates the opportunity for Shaw's off-stage invasion of naval warships from all over the British Empire. He nonetheless is asking his audience to take these two controversial alternatives quite seriously. The rationale of this new society asks that eugenics, polygamy, along with racial intermarriage be at least defensible and not outlandish.⁴ In Act I, the common objection that polygamy is a Pagan practice has been anticipated by a British colonial official, himself a polygamist. Sir Charles Farwaters refers to the Mormons and the Oneida Community in nineteenth century America, who had both sanctioned it.⁵ Sir Charles' speech will also uphold eugenics and, crucially for this new society, demystifies the racial taboos of the British Empire: "There will be a struggle with public opinion in the empire. We shall not shirk it; it is part of our plan to open people's minds on the subject of eugenics and the need for mixing not only western but eastern culture but eastern and western blood."

The Clergyman's polygamous marriage to two native women would have caused a scandal in 1930s England. As an offense to religious and social norms, it is Shaw's moment to put forward a non-Christian, non-European political alignment as a new political reality. Having the majority of British colonial territories in support of Iddy has the additional advantage of releasing the play from its limited geographical perspective and establishing a more universal reference point. References to the "Cultural Minister at Delhi" and the "Caliph of British Islam" emphasize the very much altered character of the British Empire in Shaw's imagination. He establishes three important changes by including in this empire-wide demonstration an Indian naval contingent: India now constitutes the new center of this empire, numerically displacing Christianity as the major religion at one stroke, and England will withdraw from this newly-constituted commonwealth.

Shaw reinforces this shift of power by having the two non-European characters, Pra and Prola in absolute charge of the colony-as-project. Here Pra speaks: "Our dream of founding a millennial world culture; the dream which...united us all six, has ended in a single little household with four children, wonderful and beautiful, but sterile. ... only one man was found capable of merging himself in the unity of the family: a man fed on air from his childhood [a reference to Iddy's nitrogen-enriched diet] from his childhood. And how has this paragon turned out? An impotent simpleton."

Pra's speech marks the end of the first phase of the colony's history and the scientific phase of the colony's history is now over. The younger generation with their Indian-sounding names (one of Iddy's two wives is called Maya), oriental costume and pseudo-mystical presentation come to symbolize the flawed nature and unreality of the experiment. Their contributions verge on the bizarre, are very often monosyllabic and entirely different from the discourse of the play's adult characters. These late adolescents show some affinity with the ancient Greek Furies; such is the capriciousness and the violent emotions of this juvenile chorus. In the surgical logic of Shaw's dealing with his characters in

The Simpleton, they will "disappear" (Shaw's euphemism for human obliteration in the play) as the one instance of the divine judgment on the colony which is taking place throughout the English-speaking world.

Time has now been called on Iddy, the unhappy 'simpleton' who departs the stage in the direction of his idealized England. His valedictory speech ties up the play's theme of fantasy and unreality as the emotional condition of colonialism. "This is a beautiful climate; and you are beautiful people; but you are not real to me; and the sun is not what it was in the valley of the Severn. I am glad I am an English clergyman. A village and a cottage; a garden and a church; these things will not turn to nothing." Things turning to "nothing" of course refers to the four adolescents who have disappeared. An exorcism of false ideas has taken place, and the colony moves towards a very different state of mind.

There is an apparent paradox in Shaw's decision to use a religiously inspired event to transform the consciousness of this island-colony and all other parts of the English-speaking world. For, as he insists in his Preface, conventional religion even in the 1930s had lost its power to put the fear of God into the average citizen. Only an outside event or force could awaken human beings out of the thralldom of wrong or destructive thinking. Shaw's Puritan delight is the World Turned Upside Down as the precursor of a spiritual transformation. Evidence for this view can be seen in his insistence on the centrality of the Apocalypse of Judeo-Christian eschatology by sub-titling his play *A Vision of Judgment* and invoking William Blake's lost painting (c.1808) of the same name.⁶ One possible key to *The Simpleton* is to remember his outright opposition to the First World War and how the nightmare of the Flanders' battlefields was transmuted into his major post-war plays, *Heartbreak House* (1919) and *Back to Methuselah* (1922). The disastrous decision to go to war in August 1914 was, after all, the responsibility of a relatively small number of government and establishment figures in Europe. Shaw is (perhaps) asking in *The Simpleton*: What would happen if that elite and all its subaltern elements were simply erased?

The arrival of the Angel as the messenger of a judgment on the world presages an elimination of large parts of the English political establishment and professional classes. From a strategic point of view, it creates a mental space for potential ideas of change and renewal to come forward. Yet on another level the play becomes dogged by controversy: not so much because of Shaw's off-staged euthanasia but because of his notorious Preface to *The Simpleton* that seems to justify it.⁷ He will admit that his inspiration was the mass murder of alleged counter-revolutionaries carried out in Stalin's Soviet Union. The play can never be cut loose from this admission. Without that Preface, the off-stage Apocalypse would seem not much more than a bloodless pantomime-like gesture of getting rid of all its witches and hobgoblins.

To see *The Simpleton* as a religious drama for a moment, the play's crisis point arrives when there is no other way forward but to allow for an awareness of a metaphysical dimension; ancient Greek drama and the Japanese Noh theatre derive their strange power from playing human folly in the

presence of that otherness. Shaw fashions a distinctly down-to-earth, very human Angel who explains that the Apocalypse of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is the prerogative of all human beings, and the technology of modern warfare is their own noxious creation: "My good people, if you want these things you must provide them for yourselves. If you want a great noise, you have your cannons. If you want a fervent heat to burn you have your high explosives. If you want vials of wrath to rain down on you, they are already in your arsenal, full of poisonous gases. Some years ago you had them all in full play, burning up the earth and spreading death, famine and pestilence. But the spring came and created life faster than you could destroy it. ... The sun that shone undisturbed on your pitiful Day of Wrath shines today over Heaven's Day of Judgment."

The Angel's speech is the one piece of textual evidence that supports the interpretation that the First World War was an underlying factor in Shaw's writing this play. For otherwise: What was his motivation in creating such a huge off-stage disappearance? The politicians, the business community, the scientific establishment, the professions and the opinion-makers are almost entirely eliminated. (Shaw adds to the colony's (and his play's) remoteness from this mass euthanasia by having Pra informed about it by telephone from London.)

Yet Shaw's 'hit list' is apparently inconsistent. Having clergymen and lawyers survive, but not members of the medical profession, is puzzling until one remembers the Preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) that makes very clear Shaw's repudiation of the mercenary character of his wealthy London medical specialists. As for the clergymen, Shaw discusses in his Preface to *The Simpleton* how the function of religion was to warn the unwary individual of the consequences of wrong-doing and, after this judgment on the world, they would be restored to their proper role. What is not discussed by Shaw is the role of lawyers, so we have to devise our own interpretation. A society such as Shaw seems to be proposing would require a complete re-writing of the feudal basis of English law. Since Pra's outline of the future implies a rejection of a justice based in land and property, the substitution of a new legal code would be needed to enshrine the very highest ideals of any given society: "Civilizations live by their valuations. If the valuations are false, the civilization perishes as all the ancient ones we know of did. We are not being punished today: we are being valued. That is the Newest Dispensation."

To understand the colony is to look at its leadership. The two priests can be personally ruthless in achieving the regeneration of this colony. As parents, they show almost no grief at all for their four children who have perished in the Apocalypse. When Pra and Prola stand alone on the stage in the play's final movement, they talk of how their marriage has evolved in a very naturalistic-like manner; but their children are dismissed as simple evidence of the failure of the colony's experiment. Pra refers to them as "wonderful and beautiful" and then quite chillingly will say "but sterile." Prola makes just one small reference to the children "pretending that their fairyland was real", and Shaw leaves the line in mid-air. One disturbing explanation for what could have produced these sociopathic adolescents can be found in Act 1. The minor English character Lady Farwaters tells Iddy, with an

old-fashioned dismay, how Prola had taught them a game "called the heavenly parliament in which all of them told tales and added them to the general stock until a fairyland was built up, with laws and religious rituals, and finally a great institution which they called the Superfamily [sic]". If this was the upbringing of these children in this science-fiction-quasi-religious community, what else could they imagine but some kind of utopian perfectibility?

In the aftermath of the judgment, Shaw has to bifurcate the reactions within the colony. He uses the now quietly intelligent character, Hyering (first seen as the suicidal Emigration Officer) to explain how the colony has been galvanized towards a self-understanding. "I feel pretty sure that we shant [sic] disappear as long as we're doing something useful ... What we have learnt is that the day of judgment is not the end of the world but the beginning of real human responsibility." Low key, practical, and more convincing for that reason, the speech is delivered in the manner of the drawing room conversation of cliché English naturalism of the period.

On the other hand, the finale of the play is delivered in the formal architectural style of rhetoric of the pre-First War theatre. Until his triumphalist final curtain, Shaw will present three stages of a semi-dialectical argument, outlining the future of the colony as if it were on the brink of a revolutionary future beyond all certainty and predictability.

At first, Prola insists on the need for the community to take responsibility for itself and repeats the need for constant vigilance in the absence of any higher authority: "We shall have to justify our existences or perish. We shall live under a constant state of that responsibility. If the angels fail us we shall set up tribunals of our own from which worthless people will not come out alive. When men no longer fear for the judgment of God, they must learn to judge themselves." After Pra has said to her, "we two have made a precious mess of our job of producing a mixture of east and west", Prola will turn the colony back to its revolutionary starting point.

The second stage of the argument is dismissive of all utopian ideas as unworkable. Prola will say: "(P)lans are only jigsaw puzzles... there are still a million lives beyond all the Utopias and the Milleniums and the rest of the jigsaw puzzles: I am a woman and I know it." Men are dismissed as becoming "cynics and pessimists because in the Unexpected Isles all their little plans fail." The feminist rhetoric marks up the colony's release from its roots in a traditional patriarchal society.

Pra's prescription for the new society is based upon knowledge, power, and violence. "I, Pra, must continue to strive for more knowledge and more power, though the new knowledge always contradicts the old, and the new power is the destruction of the fools who misuse it." A Marxist-influenced dialectical formulation can be heard in "contradicts" and the means of maintaining this revolutionary society in "destruction". It also recalls Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917) on the need for repression in the first phase of establishing a revolutionary government.

In the third stage, Prola emphasizes the human tendency to repeat every mistake it ever made over and over again. Chaos is therefore its natural condition. The speech takes civilization back to the level of a pre-modern society, for its only possibility is a heroic confrontation with an irreversible

reality: "We shall make wars because only under the strain of war are we capable of changing the world; but the changes our wars will make will never be the changes we intended them to make. We shall clamor for security like frightened children; but in the Unexpected Isles there is no security; and the future is to those who prefer surprise and wonder to security." A sound from the wings has Prola declare: "Be silent: you cannot frighten Prola with stage thunder." Fear is what holds any society back from renewing itself in the face of a world of absolute uncertainty. The play closes with a formulaic heroic gesture by Pra: "All hail, then the life to come ! " The colony is launched into an unknowable future.

Shaw's Preface, completed in April following the play's first performance in February 1935, creates its own illusion that the world can be changed by a logically conceived progression of events. Pure reason as proof unto itself is manifest in this example from the Preface. "A new social creed involves a new heresy. A new heresy involves an Inquisition. The precedents established by the Inquisition furnish the material for a new legal code. Codification enables the work of the Inquisition to be done by an ordinary court of law. Thereupon, the Inquisition, as such, disappears, precisely as the [Soviet] Tcheka has disappeared." The mechanical progress of his syllogisms is constructed as an historical determinism which leads to a neat, logical and utterly spurious conclusion. The preface-writing Shaw was usually at odds with his alter ego, the dramatic artist, and here even the philosophical conclusion of the play seems in great contention. The final intellectual position of *The Simpleton* shows the influence of Nietzsche rather than Marxist-Leninism in its existential ethos. Even Hobbes can be felt in Shaw's characters' submission to an absolutist governing principle in defense of the colony's existence.

Shaw's portentous, rather dull rhetoric, as spoken by the two priests, lacks in his usual facility for theatricality. *The Simpleton* works better when Shaw is deploying comedy and satire. By these means he concentrates on specific targets. His cleverly skewed social encounters expose the prejudices of his English colonial characters towards the native priests and their culture. The farcical coup of having an armada of ships arriving in the colony's harbor provides the perfect opportunity for Shaw to create a direct provocation to the historical British Empire and its mono-cultural standard. Even if it is historically inaccurate to suggest that polygamy was widely practiced in India, the farcical tone of Shaw's approach allows for a comic improvisation on reality (though making free with cultural stereotypes is pretty much what Edward Said's thesis on orientalism had in mind)⁸. Innovative in its own way, Shaw's representation of eugenics is still too tied to its use of farce and his colony's alienated offspring too fantastic to work as an effective critique—and any colony-as-project has a very limited relevance, fictional or historical.

We are left with the Preface (see Endnote 7) advocating a form of state murder. Since Shaw's Preface is morally indefensible, the only way is to re-state the play as a kind of theatrical experiment. It is just plausible to argue that the mass disappearances are to be understood as an exercise in creative thinking about what the world would be like without the egregious demands of greed and self-interest. The problem with this scenario is that it allows Shaw too much omnipotence. If this play

is a "dramatic fable", there is no lesson to be learned other than what a better society is like from his point of view. And what is this new society other than a latter-day puritanical vision? The judgment has done away with the possibility of free will, and its state of consciousness has become one of constant fear of this unnamed metaphysical arbiter. Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno* serve as a terrifying warning to humanity.⁹ Contrastingly, Shaw's colony is left in an anxious state of grey limbo.

ENDNOTES

1. Shaw's biographer, Michael Holroyd ("Belligerent Romantic" (Guardian, 16 December, 2000) writes that a production of *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* was given a hostile reception by London newspaper critics on the basis of its Preface and not because of the play itself. (He is probably referring to the 1995 production of the play by the director Sam Walters at the Orange Tree theatre in Richmond-on-Thames.)
2. Bernard Shaw, Letter to Leonora Ervine, 1934, ed. Dan H. Lawrence, Collected Letters, Vol. 4, p.222
3. *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* is included in the Penguin edition of *Plays Extravagant*. (Penguin, 1981, ps. 127-212). This in part explains Shaw's mode of writing the play by making a controversial social issue like eugenics into the subject of farce.
4. Eugenics was held in some respect in the early twentieth century. One establishment figure of the period who advocated eugenics, Dean Inge, theologian and chaplain of St Paul's Cathedral in London, is actually mentioned in the play by the Angel although in a different context. (Ibid. Penguin edition, p.197)
5. The Mormons and the Oneida Community should not be confused. The Mormons followed a strict patriarchal code. Whereas the radical Christian Oneida Community was sexually egalitarian and allowed men or women to choose to have more than one partner. [Wikipedia entries on Mormonism and the Oneida Community]
6. William Blake's painting "A Vision of the Last Judgment" was [according to the Wikipedia entry on this subject] "designed in 1808 before becoming a lost artwork." The original design can still be seen in Blake's earlier painting "The Day of Judgment" (1805).
7. In *On the Rocks* (1933) Shaw's Chief Commissioner of Police (who had been in service in Ireland during the bloody repression after the 1916 uprising) refuses the idea of "extermination" (Penguin edition, p.278). Despite the fact that Shaw's Preface to *On the Rocks* (1933) also speaks about the elimination of social undesirables, this refusal by the Chief Commissioner has meant that this play has never been surrounded by the same controversy. See Note 1. (Penguin edition of *Plays Political* (1986): 139 -304 (including Preface)
8. Edward W. Said *Orientalism* Vintage Books (New York), 1994
9. Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Divina Commedia* (early 14th century) were executed between 1825 and 1827 [Wikipedia Entry].