

Arms and the Man

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Anti-Romantic Comedy

Simultaneously present with the romantic tradition in literature is a critique of the same. For this reason the absurdities of Orsino, Aguecheek and even Malvolio contrast the romantic sentiment of the pragmatic but careful Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Shaw, unlike Shakespeare disparages one tradition to celebrate the emergence of the other, the more up-to-date understanding of two important areas of life exaggerated and romanticised by people of almost every culture – love and war.

Both these motifs are intertwined in this play. The platonic love between Sergius and Raina is presented as a series of romantic poses and high-flown rhetoric which both appear tired of. Their love affair is made up of grand entries at appropriate time [which incidentally irritates even Catherine, Raina's fervent supporter], being dressed to the occasion, claiming to have been immersed in the thought of one another, quite unselfishly handing over a glory to his mistress which is actually his due, and an incessant flow of grand words which neither believe or act in a manner that is 'fatiguing to keep up for any length of time' and from which 'needs some relief'.

Contrasted to this is the more practical love of Raina for Bluntschli. It is clear that she has fallen in love with the fugitive soldier in the same night in which she gave him shelter and saved his life by hiding him behind the curtain. She even gave him her bed to sleep in and packed him off the next day camouflaged in Major Petkoff's old coat. In the words of Louka there is a lot of difference between the manner Sergius and Raina put up before one another and the real manner found in the interaction between Bluntschli and Raina. They quarrel and allow themselves to be washed by feelings of bitterness or guilt – emotions which are never there when Raina and Sergius are in conversation with one another. The essence of the artificiality in their relationship is found in Act I when after hearing about Sergius's cavalry charge Raina reveres his portrait like a priestess and does not show any emotional warmth as should have been done by a mistress.

Shaw has a good laugh at their expense and suggests certain remedies to this absurdity. The first remedy he suggests is a rupture of their relationship which was one of a social convenience since the Petkoffs and the Saranoffs were the best known families in Bulgaria therefore it was but natural that the families would like to link themselves through matrimonial alliances. Shaw shows that there are two angles in any romantic relationship – emotion and passion or love and lust. The passionate 'issue' is given to Louka and Sergius who are drawn together by a strong physical bond. Love is the binding factor between Raina and Bluntschli. We find Bluntschli admitting that after decamping he came back to Bulgaria to have another look at Raina under the ruse of returning the coat.

The relationship between Louka and Sergius unleashes every kind of deceit and pretension on both sides. From the beginning it is evident that Sergius is bitten by Louka's sexual charms and Louka too plays her cards adroitly to trap Sergius in a marriage he so heroically pledged – "If these hands ever touch you again they would touch my affianced wife". Louka tricks him to touch her and thereby wins her position in one of the best families in Bulgaria.

About war however Shaw is remarkably brief despite the fact that the play begins with it. In a war with Serbia in 1885 Bulgaria has won an improbable victory in the most preposterous manner. Sergius, the romantic officer in the Bulgarian army who does not have any idea of the way war is fought, acts without orders and leads a cavalry charge at his own responsibility against a battery of machine guns staring at his unit and sweeps through them and just decimates the enemy and wins an unlikely victory for his country. Though he is the hero of the hour he is neither rewarded nor promoted.

This military action is used by Shaw to analyse and present his views of war. Of course he allows Sergius to have his say in Act II. An appropriately embittered Sergius explains to Catharine that two major generals were losing the war in the very proper way and are promoted after the end of the war. But he, because he has won it the wrong way has remained stagnant in the post of the major. Shaw uses this incident to bring out his opinions about war.

For him, soldiering 'is a trade like any other trade' and that it is the 'duty of the soldier to remain alive as long as he can' and not throw away his life foolishly as Sergius tried to do when he forced his regiment to charge with swords with a battery of machine guns staring at him and there was a 'dead certainty that if the guns go off neither a horse nor a man would get within fifty yards of fire'. For this reason Bluntschli calls him a 'Don Quixote', a 'drum major', and 'of all the fools ever let loose on a field of battle this fellow must be the very maddest'. Sergius learns it through his bitterness that modern war is never a 'dream of the patriots' and has to be fought strategically – never fight your enemy 'at equal terms'.

However, while trying to tear of the romantic sheen from the conventional notion of war Shaw has unwittingly knitted some romantic yarn of his own about it. Of these the most striking is the difference between a young and an experienced soldier – 'the young ones carry pistols and bullets [in the holster] the older ones, grub' making the modern war some kind of a picnic where chocolates are of a higher premium than bullets. We also notice that a professional unit of soldiers carry wrong ammunition in the battle field and when attacked by a mad man finds that they do not even have ammunition for small arms to repel the attack.

Lastly, Shaw's dictum of love is based on his belief in the theory of Life Force which is designed to produce a more perfect generation. This can be achieved by a judicious selection of mating partners which would help mankind to better itself. Going by this theory we understand that Raina and Bluntschli would make a better matrimonial pair though Bluntschli's 'incurably romantic disposition' is definitely a spoiler. He also suggests that Sergius and Louka's marriage would also produce a better next generation though the scandal that would accompany a marriage between so widely separated social members is conveniently ignored by the playwright who nudges us to employ our 'willing suspension of disbelief' for the sake of his brand of social engineering.