**Voyage, Marriage, Death and Rebirth in the Shavian Epic of an Intelligent Man**

**Yulia Skalnaya**

***SLIDE 2. OLD STORIES***

*My stories are the old stories: … my stage tricks and suspenses and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy … To the young people who make their acquaintance for the first time with my plays, they may be as novel as Cyrano’s nose to those who have never seen Punch; whilst to older theatregoers the unexpectedness of my attempt to substitute natural history for conventional ethics and romantic logic may so transfigure the eternal stage puppets and their inevitable dilemmas as to make their identification impossible for the moment.*

I, personally, like this quotation because of its sincerity and at the same time elusiveness. There are dozens of paths that it opens for a researcher, and yet some of the theories might be too tempting, and in that sense, misleading. Nevertheless, you’ll never know where the road leads you unless you take it. So, my path is taken and I invite you to join me on a journey to the oldest of stories – the epic ones.

The turn of the XIX–XX centuries, as any other turbulent period in human history, evoked interest in myth, legend, lore and medieval epic. Their potential to explain the forces behind global changes, and exemplary role models taming the monsters and harmonizing the surrounding chaos seemed to be key in resolving up-to-date crises. That is why numerous *fin de siècle* writers (and later existentialists) turned to ancient plots and characters for reinterpretation in response to the demands of the new era and its challenges.

Bernard Shaw was no exception. However, for some reason, epic elements in his works were considered only within the framework of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre (like those by Karl-Heinz Schoeps, or Lisa A. Wilde). Professor Frederic Sefton Delmer, as Shaw’s contemporary, probably got the closest to the right path when in 1910 he published a textbook “English Literature from ‘Beowulf’ to Bernard Shaw”, and yet the promising connection between the two limited itself only to the title. So, in general the traditional (ancient and medieval) heroic epic structures in Shavian dramas had largely been ignored until the late 1990s. A breakthrough was made by Daniel Leary’s essay “Heartbreak House: A Dramatic Epic” where he considered the play from four angles: battle, characters, language and vision. However, epic elements in Shaviana have never been seen as a coherent system. And that is what I am aiming at today.

What is extremely important is that epic narrative does not narrow itself down to simple fixation of historic events – on the contrary: it transforms and plays around them in order to construct its own model of history. That approach to historical material is deeply in tune with the modernist era where creating a personal myth gradually became the main approach to dealing with the imposing heritage of the past, the overwhelming complexity of the present as well as the thrilling and terrifying uncertainty of the future.

***SLIDE 3. TYPICAL EPIC STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS***

Among the typical elements of the epics we can distinguish the following plotlines and twists:

* Miraculous birth of the hero and/or his initiation and new nomination
* Heroic childhood (first victories over monsters or enemies)
* Magic apprenticeship (masters could be smiths, witches, shamans etc)
* Heroic wooing (including challenges given by the potential bride and the use of magical artefacts)
* Battle with a woman warrior
* Abduction of the hero’s wife (or his brother’s – in the broad sense of the word)
* Brother and/or doppelgänger relationship
* Duel between brothers / doppelgängers / father and son
* Battles with monsters or demonized enemies
* Journey / Voyage to the Otherworld
* Siege of a city and its capturing
* Death / Petrification / Disappearance etc. of the hero

I will not go into too much detail on each position but rather focus on some of them. In Shaw’s works the use of epic elements can vary in approach from obvious parody to a more intricate philosophic application. To begin with, I am sure you will agree that it might be difficult to find such peculiar death type as petrification in the XXth century literature. Well, Mr Shaw’s is ready to offer you his mock-melodrama *Passion, Poison and Petrification*.

The miraculous birth of a hero is mocked in the *Heartbreak House* where Hector– a telling epic name – lures Ellie Dunn into an affair by telling her insufferable tales that, being a baby, “he was found in an antique chest, one summer morning in a rose garden, after a night of the most terrible thunderstorm” with a treasure of gold, and in his youth, instead of slaying a tiger he saved its life from one of “King Edward's hunting parties in India”. That is why the King refused to properly recognize his military services, but he “despises rank”, and “has been in three revolutions fighting on the barricades.” (Of course, the latter part is ridiculing Romanticism but may I remind you that Romantic writers took inspiration in the Medieval Ages.) And later we see Hector all alone daydreaming about saving a damsel in distress form an imaginary antagonist.

Another hero with a characteristic birth is Junius – a “world betterer” from Shaw’s late play *Buoyant Billions* – who is “the seventh son of a seventh son” and “ought to have second sight.” So, he goes travelling round the world to find his creed an implementation but in fact finds a future bride. His wooing, although not being apparently “heroic,” is nevertheless epic: he encounters Clementine – an armed lady living in a wooden house on posts on the marshes of Panama with alligators and rattlesnakes at her service. And instead of passing in fear, Junius insists on receiving some refreshments like milk and bread from her despite the lady’s hostile behaviour. Once he gets what he wants, Junius proceeds with another favour to ask for.

HE. I should much prefer to lie down and sleep in the friendly shadow of your house until the heat of the day has done its worst.

…

SHE. The saxophone would keep you awake.

HE. On the contrary, music always sends me fast asleep.

SHE. The only sleep that is possible here when I am playing the saxophone is the sleep of death.

Many cultures have witches living either in the woods or on a swamp and performing the role of either a mentor or a magical assistant. On condition that an epic hero passes a test, he gets military skills, vital knowledge or an artefact that will help him combat his opponents and/or win a grander challenge. In Slavic tales there is a character of Baba Yaga performing that function (a hero must make her invite him, feed him, provide him a place to sleep and when he helps her with domestic duties, she gives him a gift), whereas in Irish epic lore the most prominent figure is Scáthach – a warrior woman and martial arts teacher living in on an island surrounded by waters where snake-like creatures lurk in the shadows and an impassable swamp. She became a mentor of the legendary hero Cú Chulainn. And speaking of the circumstances for a bride encounter, it definitely reminds one of the Frog Princess plotlines. Thus, in that scene from *Buoyant Billions* heroic wooing gets mixed together with magic apprenticeship and woman warrior motifs.

***SLIDE 4. Shaw’s Women Warriors***

According to Barbara Bellow Watson’s *Shavian Guide to the Intelligent Woman*, it is not the war of sexes that we see in Shaw’s dramas but rather a duel – a very acute observation. Watson highlights the idea that female characters’ body language in Shaw’s works is drastically different from what is expected from a lady: they run, they jump, they fly, they kick, they fight with men – they *are* warriors. On the slide there are just a few honorable mentionings of Shavian heroines who either engage in physical combat – like Darling Dora Delaney from *Fanny’s First Play* (one can also remember The Patient for *Too True to Be Good* and Orinthia from *The Apple Cart*), or have a proper weapon – like Annajanska and Mrs Rosa Carmina Banger form the *Press Cuttings* who threaten military men with their pistols, Joan with her sharp sword but even more piercing mind, or Black Girl who fearlessly smashes the idols with her knobkerry. But in a broader sense all of them are warriors fighting against oppression, prejudice, injustice, conservatism and hypocrisy for their rights, freedom of thought and self-expression, their career choices, their love and vital instinct. And men find it practically impossible to resist.

It is extremely interesting that in the Irish epic of *Cú Chulainn* refusing a woman was one of the taboos. In this sense, the fact that Shavian Intelligent Man – the hero of the new era –is evading women and their insistant claims on him or demanding his action but eventually subduing to them comes in a whole new light.

***SLIDE 5. TROPHY – HUNTER – MONSTER – DEVIL.  
“She’s a Lady”.***

A Shavian Intelligent Woman embodying natural Vitality, first of all, changes her position from Trophy to Persecutor and Hunter. Led by instinct and the Life Force, she, like Ann Whitefield from Man and Superman, turns into a “boa constrictor,” a chthonic monster that Shaw’s intelligent hero has to fight as she might distract and weaken him.

As in many epic tales, the hero fears love attachment as a woman would deprive his of his power. Take the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as an example. Invincible Enkidu who used to run with the lions was tamed only because Gilgamesh sent a prostitute to him. Only, to Shaw’s hero, this fear is no longer subconscious – it is outspoken and reasoned. And the battle with the Shavian Amazon is primarily intellectual – although, as we have seen, Shaw often includes physical combating as a comic element.

Engaging in a duel Shavian Woman becomes a warrior; using both intellect and charm to win, she becomes a swamp witch charming alligators with her saxophone, the Serpent seducing people with knowledge – and, finally, the Devil. (Hence Tanner’s exclamation: “Infamous, abandoned woman! Devil!”). But at the same time, she is a Sage, and makes Shaw’s hero learn new skills and ideas, learn about himself. And in this sense, Shavian Intelligent Man *is* the Devil’s Disciple. So, Kimberley Rampersad’s decision to give the role of the Devil to a woman in the 2019 production of *Man and Superman* was beautifully insightful.

Moreover, as the epic hero’s path to such magic mentorship lies predominantly through some water passage, it is usually associated with a journey to the Otherworld. And here things get interesting, as that motif can be found in Shavian works on numerous occasions. The first thing that attracts attention is that in the new drama where the main conflict lies in the field of ideas and allows the play to be more of a chamber performance, Shaw’s character move around a lot, and find themselves – actually or metaphorically – crossing the borders: like Caesar navigating to the Lighthouse of Alexandria, or Captain Shotover’s marriage overseas with a Zanzibar witch. Or Ellie Dunn embarking on his ship-like house for a metaphysical voyage, or A from *Village Wooing* going on a round-the-world cruise, or Jack Tanner dreaming of going to Hell. It is also a classic element, in the Irish lore, that a hero should be invited to that world by a beautiful lady (e.g. Hesione with her “magnificent black hair,” and “eyes like the fishpools of Heshbon”). And that lady might offer our hero an apple – remember the extensive discussion of apples in Village Wooing?

***SLIDE 6. POWER, PASSION AND DISAPPEARANCE***

Speaking about other characteristic features of an epic tale, one can easily remember that although its hero (of either divine or mortal descent) displays superhuman strength and/or wit, he is never ideal or completely invincible – there is always a soft spot, a weakness or some fault that overshadows and threatens his existence. (Cú Chulainn’s beauty and quick temper, Thor’s gullibility, Beowulf’s decision to sacrifice his own warrior to see Grendel’s fighting strategy, or take Hercules killing his own children– of course he was poisoned and could not think clearly, but the deed was done).

Shavian hero’s superpower is his intelligence, like that of El Cid, which is rather conventional. What is not conventional, however, is that at the very same time it is the source of his weakness: being advancely developed intellectually, he is rather poorly prepared and accustomed to domestic/everyday life. And by the very nature of the new drama, he comes into full force only in debate – polemicizing and defending his beliefs or upsetting someone else’s – whereas outside intellectual battles, his life is reduced to just existence.

And here is where female guidance is indispensable. That is why Shaw combines epic elements in such a paradoxical manner: heroic wooing, in his interpretation, becomes implicitly connected with the journey to the Otherworld, where battling with the chthonic nature of the Life Force that a woman embodies, the hero learns a new aspect of his own existence – a love affair involvement turns out to be equal to death (once again – a motif as old as time), and after it the Intelligent Man is reborn in a new condition (like the participants of the experiment in *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*), or on the next level of concentration Shotover might have said.

The last weakness that threatens that modern-born Ziegfried is his own body. In a letter to St John Ervine Shaw wrote:

*“…There are things that I cannot do that I could do years ago; but there are also things that I was never clear about years ago that I am quite clear about now. I am still growing whilst I am decaying. It is the physical decay, with its reduction of my powers of endurance in every department, that is beating me and will presently kill me. When a man dies of old age he kills a lot of mental babies with which he is pregnant. … If you had to choose between celibacy with intense intellectual activity and a life of voluptuous adventure with perfect health but without intellectual exercise, you would not hesitate; you would recognize that intellect is a passion: that is, an activity of life, far more indispensable than physical ecstasy of reproduction.”*

So, having passed initiation and reached maturity, through the youth full of alluring persecutions, intellectual battles and sexual tension, his Intelligent Man, just like Beowulf, enters the next stage of heroic existence – old age. His last heroic battle is against Time. And musing on the ways to overcome one’s physical limitations becomes his new passion. Hence the preoccupation with longevity and even the concept of disembodied beings in the last of the Far-Fetched Fables. Shavian hero – just like his creator – is fascinated by the prospect of liberating himself of the bodily fetters and becoming pure spirit, the prospect of disappearing physically but mentally and spiritually continuing his existence. In a certain sense, Shaw succeeded: his plays put on stage revive his spirit and allow him to enter new epochs pretty much alive and kicking.

***SLIDE 7. SPOT THE DIFFERENCE***

And, to my mind, epic roots of his dramas explain why these texts age so well. Let us compare:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Archaic epic poems:**   * are tightly intertwined with myth and fairy tale * lack defined topographic and temperamental features * include a peculiar mix of domestic realia and fantastic elements * are aimed at explaining universal foundations and functioning principles of the world | **Shaw’s dramas:**   * are tightly intertwined with myth and fairy tale *(Arabian Nights, Irish folklore, Richard Wagner’s operas and Scandinavian legends, Egyptian mythology in C&C etc.)* * more often than not lack defined topographic features, while time – even when mentioned – depicts either a modernized version of the past or a fantastic model of the future – so, the temperamental setting is usually “not for an age but for all time” as Shaw writes in “Passion Poison and Petrification”. * contain strikingly absurd or supernatural scenes – something that D. Leary calls Shaw’s ‘magic realism’ * are aimed at explaining universal foundations and functioning principles of the world to those still having “devotion to romantic illusions” |

***SLIDE 8. MAIN THEMES & MOTIFS IN EPIC TALES***

Shavian drama treats many of the eternally significant themes of epis tales:

* Fight between Good and Evil, Light and Dark, Man and Monster
* Destiny, courage and death
* Loyalty to one’s brother in fight, family, people
* Hero’s/People’s/Kingdom’s glory and glorious deeds
* Binary oppositions of Inception/Youth and End/Death, Infinity and Finality
* Sacred status of Home (One’s home is one’s castle)
* Motif of a journey (including exile and/or quest for a [magical] artefact)
* Ambivalent nature of gold and wealth + the cursed treasure motif
* Pagan and Orthodox worldview interaction

But of course, they always come with a twist. For example, the ambivalent nature of gold and wealth is in a curious and witty way actualized by Shavian socialism and ideological fight against capitalism. And the loyal epic steed’s function is taken by the horsepower of the new era – an automobile (e.g. *Man and Superman*) or a plane (e.g. *Misalliance*).

***SLIDE 9. OLD TRICKS***

Daniel Leary did an extensive research on Shaw’s creative use of the epic language in the *Heartbreak House*, so I won’t delve into this matter here. But I would mention another small detail worth paying attention to. It is the fact that the majority of Shaw’s drama titles involve alliteration, predominantly relying on the first sounds in the word – *Caesar and Cleopatra, How He Lied to Her Husband, Passion, Poison and Petrification, The Fascinating Foundling, Doctor’s Dilemma, Devil’s Disciple, Fanny's First Play, Heartbreak House, Too True to Be Good, Captain Brassbound's Conversion, Village Wooing, Buoyant Billions, Farfetched Fables, Shakes versus Shav*. And it might be just Shaw’ fascination with phonetics but given in the broader context of my speech that peculiarity immediately reminds me of the alliterative verse – another characteristic feature of the oldest epic masterpieces such as *Beowulf*, *Edda,* or *Kalevala* – the chant and rhythmic structure of the piece charmed the listeners enhancing their concentration and made a lasting memory on them. It’s an old trick. But Shaw warned you.