

# DESTROYING OLD DOGMAS AND REDEFINING THE CONCEPT OF THE HERO

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## Abstract

This paper examines George Bernard Shaw's interpretation of true heroism in love and war. Destroying the old idealistic dogmas and beliefs on account of their emphasis on mindless bungling, needless gallantry and romantic chivalry that border on sheer foolhardiness, Shaw shows us the portrait of the true hero: the man or woman whose courage is tempered with realistic humanity. Beyond this redefinition of the true hero however, lies Shaw's big idea which is the beginning of wisdom lies not only in being wary about inherited dogmas and beliefs with their characteristic certitude but in probing into them before accepting them as the truth or otherwise.

## Introduction

The old demand for the incredible, the impossible, the superman which was supplied by bombast, inflation and the piling of crimes on catastrophes and factitious raptures on artificial agonies, has fallen off, and the demand now is for heroes in whom we recognize our own humanity and who, instead of walking, talking, eating, drinking, sleeping, making love and fighting single combats in a monotonous ecstasy of continuous heroism, are heroic in the true human fashion George Bernard Shaw (1971:307).

In the classical period the hero was the man of superhuman strength, courage and ability. He was a being believed to be an intermediate between his fellow men and the capricious gods. Dressed in a garb larger than life, he was a demigod of a noble character and unbelievable deeds or exploits whose fall affected the lesser mortals of humanity. Tragedy then, in the prevailing Aristotelian fashion, was mainly preoccupied with the rise and eventual fall of the hero.

The hero's bane was often his tragic error or "hamartia" which often came from his hubris, "that pride or overweening self-confidence which leads a man to disregard a divine warning or to violate an important moral law". (Abrams, 1981: 202). This tragic reversal (or peripetia) in the hero's fortune from the Olympian heights of fame to exceptional misery or destruction frequently depended on a sudden discovery which Aristotle called "anagnorisis". King Oedipus' anagnorisis, for example, was the sudden revelation by the blind seer, Tiresias, that he had actually killed his own father and married his own mother. It is this catastrophic reversal in the hero's fortune from happiness to disaster that evokes pity and fear in us.

Medieval tragedies were more or less in the same Aristotelian mould. The medieval romance celebrated the exploits and adventures in love and war of the fabled hero. To be a hero was to be chivalric, gallant and adventurous enough as to possess the rare ability to perform hair raising wonders that bordered on the supernatural. Little wonder the setting of the tales of the period whether prose or verse was often in a world where knights fought giants, goblins and monsters of various kinds often for the love of a lady.

To some writers like George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), the above idea about the hero was simply a romantic one. It was an idea that had nothing to do with the realities of human existence. Using Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1955), this paper examines his interpretation of true heroism.

The play *Arms and the Man* is a biting satire on the false ideal of heroism. Here we are invited by the playwright to examine the pre-shavian idea of war and marriage, both of which had unfortunately become wrapped up in romantic illusions. These illusions themselves had led to disastrous wars in terms of loss of human lives and property and also to unhappy marriages. The play opens with Raina the daughter of the Bulgarian Major Petkoff and her mother Catherine enthusiastically entranced with the quizzical ideals of gallantry both amorous and military. Both mother and daughter are typical symbols of the pre-shavian romantic view of war which is based on the false idealistic notion that men fight because they are heroes and that the soldier who takes the biggest risks wins the greatest glory and therefore the greatest hero.

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Raina is caught up in the excitement of the invasion of the Serbs by the Bulgarians. News has come to her and her mother that Sergius, her fiance, had led courageously, a victorious cavalry charge. She rejoices because she can now believe that her future husband is

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Just as splendid and noble as he looks; that the world's really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance.

**What unspeakable fulfillment; (Act 1,17).**

Still suffused in her make - belief world of heroism, she, after adoring Sergius' portrait her perfect hero, goes to bed with the exclamation: "My hero! My hero!" (Act 1:19). Raina's reaction is very important here, for before the victory news she had lived with doubts in her subconscious that Sergius after all might not be the ideal hero of her dream. Indeed, that he might not be the swash - buckling gallant officer with a disdain for commonness but just an actor like herself whose pretensions to honour and bravery are more or less a sham. She says:

Well, it came into my head just as lie was holding me in his arms and looking into my eyes that perhaps we only had our heroic ideas because we are so fond of reading Byron and Pushkin and because we were so delighted with the opera that Season at Bucharest. (Act 1,17)

However, despite her idealistic view of heroism, she, unlike her mother Catherine the incurable romantic, is genuinely horrified at the senseless and vindictive slaughter she fears will come in the wake of the Serbian rout. Shaw deflates her idealism by the entrance at this point, of realism, in the shape of the fleeing Serbian soldier Captain Bluntshli who had climbed into her room to escape from the pursuing Bulgarian soldiers. He is afraid to die at their hands. Raina offers to save his life by hiding him behind her curtains.

To Raina, the Serbian soldier is the very opposite of her expectation of a soldier. He is chicken - hearted and ungentlemanly. It seems he is not even a soldier for his revolver is not even loaded. He devours the chocolate she has given him like a wolf. He is frightened to the verge of breaking down. Raina's conclusion is that he is just a chocolate cream soldier. Captain Bluntshli's tiredness is Shaw's style of purifying Raina of her rather girlish romantic notion of war and what it takes. This indirectly prepares the stage for the revelation of the captain. Bluntshli reveals that far from being heroic, the famous calvary charge was nothing but a piece of unprofessional bungling which should have got the whole regiment killed and its commander court-martialed and shot. He says:

Of all the fools ever let loose on a field of battle, (that man must be the very maddest. He and his regiment simply committed suicide, only the pistol missed fire; that's all. (Act 1,28).

According to Crompton, (1969), "since this is a comedy; Shaw's irony permits this unprofessional conduct to succeed since the Serbian machine gunners had made the equally unprofessional mistake of having wrong ammunition for their guns" (9). The vital information given by the man to the audience is pertinent because everything he says completely gives a different interpretation to the earlier information given by Raina's mother to the effect that Sergius simply defied the Russian commander and acted on his own by leading the charge on his own responsibility.

To Catherine, the flashing eyes with which Sergius descended on the Serbians constitute the very acme of gallantry. To the man who is a professional soldier however, Sergius's misguided act is akin to a Don Quixote attacking the windmills - a downright insensible act. As a professional soldier, Sergius' leading the charge is nothing but a piece of incredible stupidity rather than gallantry. The man's account, no doubt lends credence to Raina's earlier suspicion that her heroic ideals might have been merely a product of the opera season at Bucharest.

Having returned from the war, Sergius holds the world in contempt for failing to appreciate his quixotic ideal of military valour.' He grudges:

I won the battle the wrong way when our worthy Russians were losing it the right way. In short, I upset their plans and wounded their self-esteem ...  
Two major generals got killed strictly to military etiquette. The two colonels are now major generals; and I am still a simple major (Act II, 41)

Sergius gives up his commission to send three calvary regiments to Phillipopolis, for he simply does not know how to proceed in the business. By contrast his contempt for himself arises from his own inability to live up to his ideals of romantic love.

Sergius is not only a romantic heroin war but also one in love. In his false sense of romantic heroism he had made Raina, his fiancée, the Queen of an imaginary idealistic empire in which all lovers are always perfect, truthful, noble in their sentiments and constant in their affection without any iota of infidelity. Contrary to his own heroic illusion, he finds out that Raina's maid, Louka appeals to his taste than Raina herself. It is surely a puzzling piece of irony that he becomes horrified at Louka's revelation that Raina, his goddess, after all, tells lies, play-acts and that she has even fallen in love with another man who unfortunately is his rival. He cannot hide from the fact that his asking Louka who his rival is, is a violation, albeit indirectly, of his chivalric code. Having discovered the truth of Louka's assertion, he challenges Bluntschli to a duel which he later turns down, for it suddenly dawns on him that he cannot fight a machine. In the end, Bluntschli marries Raina who is happy to have been purified of romanticism, play-acting and a warped sense of heroism and value. Sergius marries Louka who actually matches him, for both have among other qualities, the same temperament and therefore compatible.

Shaw's idea of heroism lies not in the mindless bungling and heedless win-by-all means method of Sergius but in the realistic humanity and commonsense of Bluntschli. Shaw avers that heroism is not just gallantry or romantic chivalry. Sergius at first looks nobly brave and Bluntschli's desperate bid for survival in Raina's room unheroic in the extreme. Yet on careful consideration, Bluntschli's act becomes more human, realistic and intelligible for, according to him "it is our duty to live as long as we can". (Act I, 26). The more we know of Sergius the more his charge takes on the air of suicidal gesture. In the typical shavian point of view, Bluntschli is the very prototype of his blunt realistic professional soldier, the true hero who sees war from the human point of view. He lays no claim to high romantic motives for fighting like Sergius. He boasts moderately:

I am only a Swiss fighting as a professional soldier. I joined service because it was nearest to me. (Act I, 24).

Bluntschli carries chocolate instead of cartridges, possibly because he realizes, like every realistic human being, that chocolate which one can safely regard as a metaphor for food in general is as important if not more important for survival in war. We may laugh at him running for safety in Raina's room but a careful reflection on this issue reveals that it is better to be a live mouse than to be a dead lion. The time-worn, thread-bare cliché says it all loud and clear: He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. Indeed, if self preservation is the first law of nature then surely Bluntschli is only being human and natural.

Captain Bluntschli's penchant for safety is no act of cowardice at all for, when the time comes for him to prove his heroism as seen from his acceptance of the challenge thrown by Sergius, he stands up boldly for it without fear. The false hero-Sergius, withdraws for it suddenly dawns on him that this time there will be no mistake on the part of the Serbians to make him "victorious". The way Bluntschli handles the issue of sending the regiments of calvary to Phillipopolis is a demonstration of his ability which again is a taste of his heroism. Little wonder that Chesterton (1961) observes:

Shaw resolves to build a play not on pathos but on bathos. The official should be heroic, first, ... everyone should laugh at him, the curtain should go up on a man remembering his youth, and he should reveal himself as a violent pork-butcher when someone interrupted him with an order for pork. (147)

While Captain Bluntschli is Shaw's hero, the new Raina, shorn off her earlier romanticism is his heroine. Shaw (1958) perhaps tells us why:

If you admit that she does good; that she generously saves a man's life and wisely extricates herself from a false position with another man, then you may classify her as you please brave, generous and affectionate. (22)

Raina is both sensible and sympathetic. When Bluntschli staggers into her room, she protects him in spite of the risks involved. It is this humanness to save a life rather than hide in her hitherto pseudo-world of romance that makes her a heroine. When she comes to know herself and Sergius better, she finds it possible and even a relief to step down from her false olympian heights. Sergius is not as lucky as he still sees himself as a true romantic obsessed with senseless fighting and love. He cannot see that although calvary charges may thrill naive spectators who are perhaps blindfolded by the romantic ideal of heroism like himself and Catherine, that modern battles are in the long run won by efficient

planning and organization and not by deeds of high chivalry or the senseless throwing of a whole regiment against machines. That Captain Bluntschli; a man bourgeois to his boots should be a successful soldier than Sergius only proves to the same Sergius that soldiering is a coward's act fit only for hotel keepers' sons. He cannot come to terms with reality that is badly needed for true heroism because his ambition is not to "succeed as a tradesman" (Act. 11, 43). In his false heroic fight, he has forgotten that discretion is the better part of valour.

Shaw here satirizes the entire European tradition with its aristocratic code of "death or honour" in dwelling and careless daring that bordered on foolhardiness on the battlefield. The title of the play actually comes from a translation of the opening words "Anna virumque cano" of Virgil's epic poem about heroism, love and duty. The play takes a swipe at the hysterical military temperament then being held by people like Thomas Wolsey (1475-1530), the statesman who had spoken the minds of most people in his famous essay "Courage". Here, he had stated that courage is high virtue and cowardice a dastardly vice and "that any officer even suspected of the least failure of nerve had better end his days at once by his own hand". (1964:24)

However, to realists like Horace Porter then, courage was just like any other thing in life that is capable of wearing out. Thus, it is no gain saying that while Wolsey's false notion of bravery is close to that of Sergius, Porter's is unbeatably Bluntschlian. For while the heroism represented by Sergius is magnificent in appearance and gesture as well as swash-buckling on the battlefield where it heedlessly throws itself into action regardless of the danger, Bluntschli represents true heroism "that is no less brave but is firmly tempered by commonsense". (xxvii)

Shaw's position is not that of a glorification of cowardice but arises from the fact that even the professional soldier is first and foremost a human being whose courage is not limitless. Life to him should be preferred to death which could arise from blind patriotism or heroism. That this false sense of heroism held sway in Shaw's day is an understatement. Crompton (1969) observes further: Twenty years after this play appeared, the generals of the European countries had still not learnt the simple professional lesson that neither human nor horse flesh was any match for machine gun bullet; they persisted in throwing infantry supported only by artillery fire on to batteries of machine guns entrenched behind formidable barbed wire entanglements.

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Thus for George Bernard Shaw, war is an art which should be characterized by calculated risks, professional training for battle, ability to make swift judgments and commonsense when circumstances call for it. War is bad in the first place but its inevitability calls for skill and efficiency of the true hero to save life rather than the characteristic sergian wholesale murder of soldiers in the name of warped heroism. Arms should be for man's protection rather than for his destruction.

There is no doubt that Shaw the realist succeeds once again as in many of his plays like *Widow's Houses* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* in presenting the essence behind the illusory sensible world by tearing the mask, and the thing masked asunder. The mask, to Shaw here, is idealism while the masked thing is heroism. Thus Bernard Shaw not only shows us the profile of his true hero but also invites us to break free from our long inherited straight-jacket dogmas and take a critical look at orthodox and accepted standards of beliefs in order to reorder society to be relevant to the realities of human existence. Like Achebe says "all certitude must now be suspect" (1987-99) indeed.

Any popular idea (in the sense of being continually accepted as the best thing possible) should be looked upon with suspicion - whether it be vaccination or educational system, the family or a religion.

- George Bernard Shaw, 1994:99)

While it is true that only very "few people now believe in the romantic notion of war indicated in *Arms and the Man*" (priestly, 1983:59), the play certainly challenges us to probe into so called accepted conventions, norms, beliefs and dogmas before accepted them as the truth. This practice according to Shaw is not only the beginning of goodness but actually the beginning of wisdom. This, ultimately, is the play's timelessness.

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