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# Shaw's Transformations of Ibsen in *The Devil's Disciple*

Elsie M. Wiedner<sup>1</sup>

Shaw's criticism of Ibsen has been amply studied, but little extended analysis has hitherto been given his use of Ibsenist elements in his own plays. Specific examination of Shaw's references to *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* in *The Devil's Disciple* affords new insights into Shaw's thought and attitudes, revealing thematic affinities with Ibsen but profound temperamental differences. *The Devil's Disciple* is akin to Ibsen in three major themes: the deadening effect of duty as against the liberating effect of natural impulse (*Ghosts*), the perception of reality distorted by romantic preconceptions (*A Doll's House*), and the foundation of individual identity in self-realization (both Ibsen plays). In illustrating these concepts that he shared with Ibsen, Shaw demonstrated technical mastery in reworking Ibsen's language, characterization, and form; but he did so in variations stemming from his own essentially optimistic temperament. Sometimes echoing speeches from Ibsen and frequently realigning facets of character, *The Devil's Disciple* is most revealing of Shaw's mind in its inversion of key plot devices to produce a positive outcome not present in Ibsen. This last technique,<sup>2</sup> in contrast to Ibsen's, demonstrates the irony of Shaw's method and the hopefulness of his assumptions at this point in his development. Study of Shaw's references to Ibsen in this play thus becomes an entrée into Shaw himself.

In terms of situation, the opening of *The Devil's Disciple* echoes *Ghosts*.<sup>3</sup> A widow reveals to her minister that in following clerical advice to marry for duty she violated her natural inclination and lived a lie.

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<sup>2</sup>Shaw's technique of inversion is discussed in general by Stanley Weintraub, "The Embryo Playwright in Shaw's Early Novels," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (1959-60), pp. 333-335, and with emphasis on the devices of melodrama by Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* (Norfolk, Conn., 1947), pp. 108, 109.

<sup>3</sup>The parallel of situation is mentioned in passing by Lewis Crompton, *Shaw the Dramatist* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1969), p. 49. Margery M. Morgan notes Shaw's "discipleship to Ibsen" in the character of Mrs. Dudgeon in *The Shawian Playground* (London, 1972), p. 51. Shaw himself referred her to Dickens. See Preface, *Three Plays for Puritans*, in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Plays with their Prefaces* II (New York, 1975), p. 33. Shaw's "Ibsenist variants" on *Ghosts*, with specific reference to Mrs. Alving, are cited with regard to *You Never Can Tell* by R. J. Kaufmann, "Shaw's Elitist Vision: A Serial Criticism of the Plays of the First Decade," *Komos* 1 (1968), p. 102. Daniel Charles Gerould sees parallels between *Ghosts* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* in "George Bernard Shaw's Criticism of Ibsen," *Comparative Literature* 15 (1963), p. 145.

She raised a son whose mode of life contradicts the convention of duty to which she had succumbed, and she took into her home an illegitimate girl with whom she had a family connection (in *Ghosts*, the daughter of her husband; in *The Devil's Disciple*, of her husband's brother, the man she had loved). Both plays emphasize the instrumentality of duty in narrowing the widow's life.

In developing the situation, however, Shaw simplified Ibsen's psychological complexity. Whereas Ibsen's Mrs. Alving suffered from the dynamic tension between the dictates of duty and the demands of the self, Shaw's Mrs. Dudgeon simply internalized duty and now uses it against the natural impulses in others. Her speech to Reverend Anderson, "What else but that discipline [of going against the heart] made me the woman I am?"<sup>4</sup> reveals her as an ironic diminution of Mrs. Alving. Mrs. Dudgeon is not only the wife who did not leave home, the comparison often made of Mrs. Alving to Nora of *A Doll's House*; Mrs. Dudgeon is also the wife who did not become a person. It was not to Shaw's purpose that she should. Mrs. Dudgeon renounced a true emotional attachment for a conventional marriage, as did Mrs. Alving; but, uninterested in romantic love as such, or in Mrs. Dudgeon's character, Shaw introduced this detail only for its dramatic function. Contrasting her treatment of love and the minister's, Mrs. Dudgeon shouts at him, "You, you who followed your heart in your marriage . . ." (62). This speech, to which Anderson refers in the play's denouement, establishes at the outset his capacity for behavior by natural impulse. In contrast to Mrs. Alving's, Mrs. Dudgeon's aborted love is in itself of little concern to the play.

Equally irrelevant to Shaw would be Ibsen's study of hypocrisy, Pastor Manders, who unites in one character the three functions of present clergyman, past counselor and past loved one. Reverend Anderson has no relation to Mrs. Dudgeon but that of her current minister, all that is required for Shaw's exposition. In similar simplifications, Essie, the illegitimate orphan in Shaw, is merely downtrodden, while Ibsen's Regina is self-seeking; and Mrs. Dudgeon single-mindedly suppresses Essie, whereas Mrs. Alving is poignantly aware of Regina's rights. Oswald, Mrs. Alving's rebellious son, exhibits weaknesses of character and health. Mrs. Dudgeon's son Dick, "the devil's disciple," is unequivocally strong, with all the weakness (environmental here, not, as in Ibsen, hereditary) relegated to a second son. Shaw consistently pared the psychological complexity of *Ghosts* to suit his own emphasis on action.

If Shaw's references to *Ghosts* in *The Devil's Disciple* tended to be in terms of simplification, those to *A Doll's House* combined simplification of theme with complication of technique. Shaw played ironically with *A*

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<sup>4</sup>George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*, in *Collected Plays with their Prefaces* II (New York 1975), p. 62. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of *The Devil's Disciple* in my text are to this edition.

*Doll's House*, echoing speeches, transposing characters, and multiplying plot devices. Emerging from this surface complexity, however, were clear statements on themes of self-definition and realism. In *The Devil's Disciple*, as in *A Doll's House*, the plot turns on the concealed identity of a person who has unwittingly run afoul of the law. The heroine cherishes romantic expectations that masculine gallantry will assume that identity, and raises a broader issue when the expectation is disappointed. Both plays include major dialogues contrasting self-definition and self-centered imperception of it, and both plays present scenes of self-recognition.

The inadvertent criminal in *A Doll's House* is Nora, who forged her father's name for funds to save her husband's health. She both hopes and fears that, her benevolent crime once exposed, her husband will offer to assume the guilt, demonstrating the "miracle" of his love. Torvald's failure to conform to this romantic expectation leads Nora to new perceptions, among which is the exploitative nature of the masculine value system dominating society. Confronting her husband with her intention to define her own identity, Nora surpasses his comprehension, which is limited to sentimentality. For herself, however, her new understanding represents self-recognition.

In *The Devil's Disciple*, the unwitting Reverend Anderson is sought by the British for arrest as a "respectable rebel" during the American Revolution. When the British mistake the title character, Richard Dudgeon, for the minister, Judith Anderson expects her husband to deceive them. He does not. Dudgeon too disappoints her romantic assumptions by insisting that love of her is not his motive in maintaining the deception. Her disillusionment prompts her rejection of masculine abstract values as meaningless. Dudgeon's statement of personal identity is beyond her comprehension, as is her husband's self-definition, which he demonstrates in the second act and articulates, with a speech of recognition, in the third.

Simple plot summary reveals that Shaw transposed character elements from *A Doll's House*. Judith combines Nora's romanticism with Torvald's egocentrism, while Anderson and Dudgeon demonstrate Nora's conception of the self. With regard to plot, *The Devil's Disciple* dashes a dream of heroism in two instances, and twice demonstrates egocentric incapacity to perceive another's identity. These variations of Ibsen are complemented by details of echo and inversion, revealed by closer examination of the texts. At the center of all the ramifications is the contrast between Judith's limited perception and the nature of reality, both personal and societal.

The first disillusionment of romantic expectation is the failure of Reverend Anderson to rectify the British error, to assume the identity of the hunted man. There are several Shavian ironies here. Were he to declare himself for arrest, Anderson would, of course, be telling the truth, whereas Torvald, if he took on the guilt of the forgery, would be lying; and Torvald's refusal, which he represents as based on "honor,"

stems from cowardice, whereas Anderson's, though cowardly in appearance, stems from courage. Shaw here seemed to be playfully ringing the changes on life's capacity for ambiguity. Nevertheless, he presented a thematic statement of less complexity than Ibsen's. The disappointment of Nora's romantic dream leads beyond itself to the unmasking of Torvald's (and, by implication, society's) hypocrisy. The disappointment of Judith's romanticism leads only to a pointed contrast between it and reality. Anderson's rejection of heroics in favor of practicality is later shown to be right, although whether Judith ever penetrates the issue is doubtful. "You don't know the man you're married to," says Anderson (107), echoing Nora's line, "You have never understood me . . ." <sup>5</sup> Throughout this incident, Judith exhibits Nora's unrealistic assumptions; Anderson, Nora's ultimate recognition of the gulf between one mate's nature and the other's comprehension.

Thwarted by her husband's realism, Judith's romanticism fastens upon Richard. She assumes that he is maintaining the British error for her sake, a linkage of hoped-for lie, love, and heroism that closely resembles Nora's. Richard supplies the second contradiction of her preconceptions. Instead of responding romantically to her question, "Was it for my sake?" he digresses into politics.

RICHARD . . . They are determined to cow us by making an example of somebody on that gallows today. Well, let us cow them by showing that we can stand by one another to the death. That is the only force that can send Burgoyne back across the Atlantic and make America a nation.

JUDITH (*impatiently*) Oh, what does all that matter?

RICHARD (*laughing*) True: what does it matter? what does anything matter? You see, men have these strange notions, Mrs. Anderson; and women see the folly of them. (111)

This is an inversion of Ibsen in that the challenge to the masculine value system derives from obtuseness rather than insight. Nora criticizes masculine procedures because she perceives the clash between abstract law and human nature; Judith, because she perceives nothing beyond her own emotion.

In her subjectivity, Judith resembles Torvald, and once again, as she did with her husband, she duplicates Torvald's egocentric insensitivity by failing to understand a self-directed person. "I have been brought up standing by the law of my own nature," declares Richard (113), enunciating a position close to Nora's declaration: "I must stand quite alone if I am ever to know myself and my surroundings . . . [I have to realize] my duties towards myself" (146, 147). Nora's long, intricate revelation is reduced to one meaning by Torvald, "You no longer love me" (149). Similarly Judith bypasses Richard's point.

RICHARD . . . I may not go against [the law of my own nature], gallows or no gallows . . . I should have done the same for any other man in the town, or any other man's wife . . . Do you understand that?

JUDITH Yes: you mean that you do not love me. (113)

<sup>5</sup>Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, in William Archer, tr., *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen* VII (New York, 1914), p. 143. All citations of Ibsen in my text are to this edition.

The sexes are reversed, but the narrowness of the emotionalist is the same.

That there is hope for Torvald's maturation is a textual implication understood by Shaw<sup>6</sup> but not duplicated in *The Devil's Disciple*. Shaw's emphasis was on the fact of the definition, not on its genesis or continuing impact. When Anderson says, ". . . it is in the hour of trial that a man finds his true profession . . ." (139), he states a fact. Nora, in contrast, reveals a process. Ibsen explored the acquisition of self-knowledge and the painful conflicts between the realities within and those without, but such exploration would not serve Shaw's activism. Once his inner reality becomes clear to him, Anderson proceeds to subordinate outer reality to it, as Dudgeon has done all along. Whether Judith understands either of them was irrelevant to Shaw, as was whether she understands herself. At the core of *The Devil's Disciple* is not self-understanding in itself but its effect when translated into action.

This emphasis on effect, ultimately on efficacy as such, informed Shaw's adaptations of a crucial plot element from Ibsen, the disposition of the legacy in *Ghosts*. Mrs. Alving attempts to cancel her son's connection to his father by channeling the paternal inheritance into the building of an orphanage. The sum in question was her "purchase money," that is, her family's motive for arranging her loveless marriage. The orphanage represents a cleansing for her, an exorcism for her son.

MRS. ALVING . . . I was determined that Oswald, my own boy, should inherit nothing whatever from his father.

MANDERS. Then it is Alving's fortune that — ?

MRS. ALVING. Yes. The sums I have spent upon the Orphanage, year by year, make up the amount — I have reckoned it up precisely — the amount which made Lieutenant Alving "a good match" in his day. . . . It was my purchase money. I do not choose that the money should pass into Oswald's hands. My son shall have everything from me — everything. (211)

But events contradict her, literally and symbolically. The son shows that he has much indeed from his father, and the orphanage burns down. The conflagration belies Mrs. Alving's control as her husband's drive for "the joy of life" mocked her sense of duty. While Mrs. Alving fails, however, no one and nothing succeeds. In Oswald's degenerating illness, as in the symbolic fire, the thrust of "the joy of life" is to destruction. What might be called the inheritance ploy ends, as does the whole play, in an insupportable balance of tensions.

*The Devil's Disciple* rearranges Ibsen's plot device. Here the money is not the "purchase price," belonging to the husband, but the dowry, belonging to the wife. Under the law, a woman loses control of her money to her husband; and Mr. Dudgeon, in a death bed change of will, diverted the funds from his wife to their son Dick. The reading of

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<sup>6</sup>In reviewing a performance of *A Doll's House* in 1897, Shaw remarked, ". . . it is clear that Helmer is brought to his senses . . ." See *Our Theatres in the Nineties* III (London, 1932), pp. 130, 131.

the will itself is among the play's many parodies of melodrama.<sup>7</sup> The echo of Ibsen is the irony of the bequest's direct opposition to Mrs. Dudgeon's wishes.

MRS. DUDGEON. . . . The new will? Did Timothy — ?

ANDERSON. Yes. In his last hours he changed his mind.

MRS. DUDGEON. . . . And you let him rob me?

ANDERSON. I had no power to prevent him giving what was his to his own son.

MRS. DUDGEON. He had nothing of his own. His money was the money I brought him as my marriage portion . . . (61)

Like Mrs. Alving, Mr. Dudgeon was aware of the provenance of the money. He provided accordingly.

(The LAWYER). "I give and bequeath to my wife . . . an annuity of fifty-two pounds a year for life . . . to be paid out of the interest of her own money" — there's a way to put it, Mr. Dudgeon! Her own money!

MRS. DUDGEON. A very good way to put God's truth. It was every penny my own. Fifty-two pounds a year!

(THE LAWYER). "And I recommend her for her goodness and piety to the forgiving care of her children, having stood between them and her as far as I could to the best of my ability." (75)

The token bequest and the rejection of Mrs. Dudgeon and all her works emphasize the triumph of natural impulse over duty. By willing Mrs. Dudgeon's dowry to "the devil's disciple," Mr. Dudgeon counteracted his wife and liberated the inheritance from conventional, duty-bound control. Dick's succession to the estate represents an unequivocal victory for the positive elements of what Ibsen would call "the joy of life." A plot device that contributed to negativity or ambiguity in Ibsen was turned by Shaw to a positive effect.

Meliorism is Shaw's basic distinguishing characteristic as thrown into relief by the comparison to Ibsen. As John Gassner has noted, "If ever a playwright before Shaw contrived events for effects of rather diabolical irony . . . it was Ibsen."<sup>8</sup> But Ibsen structured his ironies, as he did those of *Ghosts*' inheritance episode, to convey tragedy, human contingency. Shaw structured his for comedy, not simply in the sense of stimulating laughter, but far more profoundly. In Shaw the irony, the arrangement towards the unexpected, conveys continuing human possibility. Recognition of the Ibsenist elements in *The Devil's Disciple*, and of Shaw's transformation of them, lays open a detailed illustration not only of Shaw's mastery of the dramatic craft but also of the essential optimism of his thought at this period.

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<sup>7</sup>See Shaw, Preface, p. 31. For detailed correspondences between *The Devil's Disciple* and specific melodramas of the period, see Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 197-204.

<sup>8</sup>John Gassner, "Shaw on Ibsen," in John Gassner, ed., *Ideas in the Drama* (New York and London, 1964), p. 98.