

## A bardolator in spite of himself: G. B. Shaw's Shakespearian works

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### Abstract

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) had Shakespeare on the brain. He returned to his literary predecessor again and again throughout his lifetime, whether in theatre reviews, his own plays or in Shakespearian-themed works which will be the focus here. Shaw coined, of course, the term 'Bardolatry' in order to ridicule the blind worship of everything Shakespearian, feeling it impeded the evolution of a new kind of theatre of ideas embodied by the works of Henrik Ibsen and first and foremost, Shaw himself.

Shaw had a kind of love-hate relationship with his predecessor, but also an obvious chip-on-his-shoulder, which he kept returning to repeatedly. Arthur Ganz (1983, 58) in his work *George Bernard Shaw* hits the nail on the head: "Lacking a kind of 'negative capability', Shaw could not forgive Shakespeare for failing to offer a systematic, optimistic vision of human life and history, what Shaw called a religion." Shakespeare, in other words, lacked a moral purpose and message. Having said that, Shaw was instrumental in reversing the established trend of cutting Shakespeare's plays in performance, something which we should all be most grateful for.

At times, his dismissal of Shakespeare comes across as willful if not absurd, like a boxing challenger calling out the champion in order to increase the hype; this being incidentally precisely the theme of Shaw's final work *Shakes vs. Shaw*. Michael Holroyd (1988, 360) quotes the subject of his three volume biography on the issue as follows: "With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his." His bark is worse than his bite, thankfully, and the works examined herein all display an obvious pleasure in both the topic, the language and the imagined man. Charles A. Berst (1998, 64) sums up Shaw's mixed feelings about his illustrious predecessor:

Thus Shaw's ambivalence about Shakespeare: on the one hand, keen disappointment and frustration with his mediocrity as an original or deep thinker; on the other hand, enticement by the vividness of his characters and scenes, admiration for his immense power over language, and enchantment with his musical expression.

Shaw's obvious enthusiasm about Shakespeare's language, and the process in which he came up with his verse, is the primary focus of the following three Shakespearian themed works: *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, "A Dressing Room Secret" and *Shakes vs. Shaw*.

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