PRE-RAPHAELITE DRAMA: CANDIDA

PRE-RAPHAELITE PLAY may be defined as a drama which, like medieval art, arises out of a genuine religious impulse. It is in this sense, then, that all of Shaw’s drama devoted to suggesting the infinite possibilities of the ever-changing and progressing Life Force—especially *Man and Superman, Major Barbara, The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet, Back to Methuselah, and Saint Joan*—can be considered Pre-Raphaelite drama. But *Candida* is uniquely “a modern pre-Raphaelite play”: not only does it return, as does all of Shaw’s drama, to the nature of “if not everyday, at least every-life” situations;¹ but also it demands a reevaluation of the nature and function of the artist, as the P.R.B. itself had done, and it offers a modern analogue to medieval religious art. The subtitle, “A Mystery,” suggests at once the play’s religious import and its medieval analogues.

*Candida* is specifically a Shavian mystery play about Madonna and Child, with Candida as Shaw’s portrait of the Holy Mother. In a letter to Ellen Terry, Shaw says that Candida “is the Virgin Mother and nobody else,”² a confidence borne out in the stage direction describing Candida: “A wise-hearted observer, looking at her, would at once guess that whoever had placed the Virgin of the Assumption over her hearth did so because he fancied some spiritual resemblance between them” (*Plays Pleasant*, p. 89). Marchbanks, we are told, has perceived the resemblance and given the Morells the picture, just as Shaw perceives a resemblance...
between his heroine and the Holy Mother. In understanding his intention to create in *Candida* "THE Mother Play," Shaw's reference to the Holy Mother in his letters to the Abbess of Stanbrook are helpful. Just as he believes in a catholic religion, he believes in a universal Madonna, whom he calls "Our Lady of Everywhere." He writes to the Abbess that he is "always saying Hail, Mary! on my travels" as he encounters Her in many forms. "Our Lady of Everywhere," significantly, is not the Madonna captured by Raphael, whose Dresden Madonna Shaw calls "the ideal wet nurse, healthy, comely, and completely brainless." In fact, he says, most Christian representations of Mary tend to be failures.\(^4\)

If a division of critical opinion is evidence of artistic failure, Candida may be another failure to represent Mary. Pronouncements on Candida vary from Beatrice Webb's view of her as a "sentimental prostitute" to Shaw's assertion that she is the Holy Virgin. The critics who agree with Shaw's analysis of Candida emphasize her instinctive, direct, self-sufficient nature, her combination of the Philistine-realist temperament, and her embodiment of the Life Force. In a much-quoted letter to James Huneker, Shaw calls her "that very immoral female," "as unscrupulous as Siegfried," "without 'character' in the conventional sense," yet free "from emotional slop," with "unerring wisdom on the domestic plane."\(^5\) Notably, he compares her to Siegfried, whom he considered "a type of the healthy man raised to perfect confidence in his own impulses," representative of "the unfettered action of Humanity doing exactly what it likes."\(^6\) Because Candida, like Siegfried, is above conventional notions of good and evil, she appears from the conventional point of view immoral, insensitive to others' feelings, harsh, intimidating. She issues commands to the two men without reference to their wishes; she is not aware, as Marchbanks is, of the pain her frankness causes Morell. However, she is not cruel but genuinely unconscious of the more conventional, less "natural," reactions of others. To Morell's hurt and shocked reaction when she says that her love and not his morality bind her to him, she answers, "How conventional all you unconventional people are!" (p. 118) To Shaw, her "immoral" and "unscrupulous" nature is simply evidence of her indifference to
convention, a quality Shaw found worthy of reverence rather than censure.

If Candida is "THE Mother," her children are, of course, Morell and Marchbanks. The play furnishes ample evidence that she looks on both as her children, to be protected and guided by her loving care. Of Eugene she says, "Oh, he's a dear boy! We are very fond of him"; "Do you know, you are a very nice boy, Eugene"; "You great baby, you!" (p. 90, 93). She also orders him about and pets him as a mother would her child. She likewise calls Morell her "boy": "My boy is not looking well. Has he been overworking?" "You silly boy" (p. 114, 115). Finally, though Marchbanks is closer to actual childhood, Morell is the "boy" who acknowledges dependence on Candida as "my wife, my mother, my sisters: the sum of all loving care to me" (p. 140).

The fact that Morell proves the weaker of the two suitors and thus in greater need of Candida's love does not imply that Shaw meant him to be contemptible. Morell, a preacher and lecturer, a socialist with "the gift of the gab," is the sort of man Shaw liked and, in many ways, the sort of man Shaw was. If Shaw's own socialist activities did not suggest his regard for Morell, his adjectives describing Christian socialism would: "clear, bold, sure, sensible, benevolent, salutarily shortsighted" (Preface, Plays Pleasant, p. viii). Moreover, Morell, symbolically named, exemplifies the kind of morality which Shaw claims changed Ruskin, Morris, and Shaw himself from mere artists to prophets; Morell's Christian socialism makes him a part of the "one religion" with which the modern Pre-Raphaelite artist deals, the religion "coming back even upon clergymen." On the realistic level, Candida's care frees Morell for his work of lecturing and preaching, just as Charlotte Shaw was later to free Shaw for his work by protecting him from the cares of mundane domestic affairs. A generally ignored section of Shaw's letter to the Rugby boys about the "secret" of Candida is his closing admission that, though the poet has no business "with the small beer of domestic comfort and cuddling and petting at the apron-string of some dear nice woman," Eugene probably eventually discovered that "he had to keep his feet on the ground as much as Morell, and that some enterprising woman married him and made him dress himself properly and take regular meals." Any
reader of *Man and Superman* knows that Shaw did not find female domination of the male contemptible but rather the natural state of affairs, necessary for the propagation of the race. Morell is merely a domesticated John Tanner, except that what Tanner knows all along about the nature of woman Morell has to learn; and, instead of rebelling against her domination, Morell acquiesces in it, as Tanner does in the final scene of *Man and Superman*.

Another dramatic representation of the mother-child relationship is Shaw’s portrayal of Henry Higgins and his mother in *Pygmalion*. The fact that Mrs. Higgins was in her youth a Pre-Raphaelite lady and that she still lives in the atmosphere of Morris and Burne-Jones is no doubt Shaw’s rather esoteric allusion to his earlier treatment of a similar mother-child relationship in his “pre-Raphaelite play.” Higgins is a combination of both Morell and Marchbanks. He is babied and accepts the babying, as Morell does. But, whereas Morell finds a mother-substitute in his wife, Higgins finds a substitute for a wife in his mother. Shaw explains in his epilogue to *Pygmalion* that Higgin’s aesthetic education changed his sexual to intellectual passion: “When Higgins excused his indifference to young women on the ground that they had an irresistible rival in his mother, he gave the clue to his inveterate old-bachelordom. If an imaginative boy has a sufficiently rich mother who has intelligence, personal grace, dignity of character without harshness, and a cultivated sense of the best art of her time to enable her to make her house beautiful, she sets a standard for him against which very few women can struggle” (p. 296). As a wifeless artist, the Pygmalion of the title, Higgins is most like Marchbanks; notably, both achieve their independence from female involvement through the mother-woman’s influence.

Candida will baby Morell all his life; Marchbanks she leads to independence. She first protects him from learning “what love really is” from another woman, possibly a wicked woman. When he becomes a gallant worshipper of love, who proposes that Morell and he “go on a pilgrimage . . . in search of a worthy lover for her” (p. 129) and who sentimentally volunteers to “die ten times over sooner than give [Candida] a moment’s pain” (p. 131), Candida, with her “divine insight” (Marchbanks’s term, p. 127), allows Eugene “to stay and learn” why Morell is master of his home. Thus
she frees Eugene for his development as an artist by allowing him to see that woman's purpose and the artist's are irreconcilable.

However, Shaw is not primarily concerned in *Candida* with depicting the struggle between the artist-man and the mother-woman, though that is a part of the conflict. His major aim is "to distil the quintessential drama from pre-Raphaelitism" (Preface, *Plays Pleasant*, p. vii). According to Shaw, the central struggle in *Candida* is Pre-Raphaelitism "at its best in conflict with the first broken, nervous, stumbling attempts to formulate its own revolt against itself as it develops into something higher" (p. vii). This statement is, to say the least, obscure; and the first question to be answered in dealing with it is, What is Pre-Raphaelitism "at its best"? It might be the idealizing of woman and love, the worship of the "stunner" peculiar to the Rossettian branch of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. If so, Eugene's idealizing of Candida and his horror at her subjection to everyday chores and Morell's sermons are aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite reverence for female beauty and the love it inspires; and the development "into something higher" is his recognition that Candida is not a woman to sail away in "a tiny shallop far from the world, where the marble floors are washed by the rain and dried by the sun" (p. 111), but a woman who fills the lamps, scrubs the floors, peels onions, and mothers children—in short, a Shavian woman, not at all like a Rossetti or a Burne-Jones. Another possibility is that Pre-Raphaelitism "at its best" is the desire of the artist to base his art on his own observations and his own vision of truth—a desire which requires freedom from the "greasy fool's paradise" of domestic life, freedom to explore "Tristan's holy night." It is likely that Shaw had in mind both the idealizing of woman and sincerity of artistic purpose as elements of Pre-Raphaelitism "at its best"; certainly Marchbanks's glimpse of the Shavian Life Force woman and his realization that he must be free from her is part of the lesson ("secret") he learns from Candida. And in the sense that Candida guides him to both recognitions she is truly the Mother of Genius, which to Shaw is another way of saying Mother of God.

An additional interpretation of "the secret in the poet's heart," one not acknowledged by Shaw in any of his numerous letters on the subject, is the secret alluded to by Thomas Carlyle in "The
Hero as Poet" in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Carlyle says that the poet and prophet are fundamentally alike and in some ages synonymous because both are “Hero-souls” sent by nature to penetrate “into the sacred mystery of the Universe; what Goethe calls ‘the open secret.’ ‘Which is the great secret?’ asks one.—‘The open secret,’—open to all, seen by almost none! That divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings, ‘the Divine Idea of the World,’ that which lies at ‘the bottom of Appearance,’ as Fichte styles it.”

According to Carlyle, the poet or prophet makes “this divine mystery more impressively known to us”—the prophet revealing the moral, and the poet, the aesthetic side of it. This concept of the poet-prophet is very similar to Shaw’s description of the artist-genius, who sees “the distant light of the new age” and “keeps on building up his masterpieces until their pinnacles catch the glint of the unrisen sun” (Preface, *Plays Pleasant*, p. vii).

Though Carlyle’s hero-poet looks inward and Shaw’s looks forward, both have a unique mystical purpose; and it is highly probable that Marchbanks’s secret, especially in a play subtitled “A Mystery,” owes something to this passage from Carlyle. This interpretation of the secret would explain why Morell and Candida do not know it and why the poet goes out into the mysterious night, “the true realm of the poet.”

If the poet’s secret is “that divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings,” a third explanation of what Shaw means by Pre-Raphaelitism “at its best” suggests itself—an explanation based on Shaw’s analysis of medieval art in “On Going to Church.” The “best” of Pre-Raphaelitism may be the genuinely religious impulse which dictates the creation of all great art, and the development “into something higher” the evolutionary development of art in order to express the constantly evolving religion of creative evolution. In the preface Shaw is careful to point out that a prosaic explanation of the dialectical process of thesis (Pre-Raphaelitism “at its best”), antithesis (“its own revolt against itself”), and synthesis (development “into something higher”) is possible only after the synthesis; the artist cannot explain the “divine mystery” until it is “a story of yesterday” and life has become again something higher, something not yet perceptible even to the man of genius:
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Let Ibsen explain, if he can, why the building of churches and happy homes is not the ultimate destiny of Man, and why, to thrill the unsatisfied younger generations, he must mount beyond it to heights that now seem unspeakably giddy and dreadful to him, and from which the first climbers must fall and dash themselves to pieces. He cannot explain it: he can only shew it to you as a vision in the magic glass of his artwork; so that you may catch his presentiment and make what you can of it. (Pp. vii–viii)

This is, Shaw continues, "the higher but vaguer and timider vision which offered me a dramatic antagonist for Christian Socialist idealism" (p. viii). In Candida this vision (the "secret") is caught by Marchbanks at the end of the play. According to Shaw, when Eugene says, "I no longer desire happiness; life is nobler than that," he is speaking "the language of the man recreated by a flash of religion." This religious vision also controls the theme of the play itself. Marchbanks is only a youth; he is just starting out into the night, and his poetry is yet to be written. Shaw, however, has caught the vision of the future and wishes to express it in "a modern pre-Raphaelite play," a drama which returns to the religious impulse controlling the art of the Middle Ages.

Candida is not primarily an expression of Shaw's religion; he was yet to write a "parable of Creative Evolution" (Man and Superman) and a "Metabiological Pentateuch" (Back to Methuselah). Candida defines the nature and purpose of the artist who, after his sojourn in the night, may be able to create "an iconography of a live religion." In suggesting the religious nature of the art of the future, Shaw employs in Candida an elaborate analogy to medieval art. The subtitle of the play, "A Mystery," too often taken by critics to refer to the play's troublesome and elusive theme, states its genre. It is a modern mystery play of the Madonna and Child, which will be performed in the modern equivalent to the medieval cathedral, the theater, where the catholic religion of creative evolution lives.