Chapter XII

THE UNSCRUPULOUS ARTIST

IN The Doctor’s Dilemma (1906), Shaw finally creates an artist who fits the description of the unscrupulous artist-philosopher in the Epistle Dedicatory to Man and Superman. Unlike the neophyte poets, Marchbanks and Apjohn, Dubedat is young but sure of his philosophy; unlike the iconoclastic reformers, Morell and Tanner, he is an artist, not a propagandist-preacher; and, unlike the unredeemed artists, Praed, Apollodorus, and Octavius, he is not hindered by romantic illusions about women, love, and marriage. Shaw seems to have drawn Dubedat directly from the description of the artist in Man and Superman: Dubedat is without scruples regarding money, women, or friendship; and he will lie, cheat, or steal so that he may devote himself to art, which he pursues with single-minded purpose. To the world he is a scoundrel because he disregards conventional morality; Walpole even suggests that Dubedat is a madman: “There’s something abnormal about his brain” (p. 143).

The consensus of the critical assessment of Dubedat is that he is thoroughly reprehensible. Burton says that Dubedat, “whose credo is L’Art pour L’Art” and who is an “Irresponsible Bohemian,” was a type abhorred by Shaw. Patrick Braybrooke calls him a “pleasant scoundrel,” so realistically portrayed that one might find his type “in any studio down Chelsea way.” Edmund Fuller finds no dilemma in the play, for moral men are rarer than geniuses: “The consideration given to Louis Dubedat’s case seems to me to be an aspect of turn-of-the-century romanticism about
the artist." J. I. M. Stewart maintains that the doctors treat Dubedat better than does Shaw. Judith Spink, who considers Tanner's description of an artist who "will let his wife starve" not a description of a Shavian hero but of a compulsive "semi-criminal," calls Dubedat "a plain case of the old-fashioned cad and scoundrel." C. B. Purdom pronounces him "worthless."

Shaw's own attitude toward Dubedat is explicit in at least four sources. In the preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma* (pp. 18–19) he says, "I have represented an artist who is so entirely satisfied with his artistic conscience, even to the point of dying like a saint with its support, that he is utterly selfish and unscrupulous in every other relation without feeling at the smallest disadvantage." Shaw then argues that "hardly any of us have ethical energy enough for more than one really inflexible point of honor," and Dubedat's is his art. He concludes that the artist's private vice may be in the public interest:

Not only do these talented energetic people retain their self-respect through shameful misconduct: they do not even lose the respect of others, because their talents benefit and interest everybody, whilst their vices affect only a few. An actor, a painter, a composer, an author, may be as selfish as he likes without reproach from the public if only his art is superb; and he cannot fulfil this condition without sufficient effort and sacrifice to make him feel noble and martyred in spite of his selfishness. It may even happen that the selfishness of an artist may be a benefit to the public by enabling him to concentrate himself on their gratification with a recklessness of every other consideration that makes him highly dangerous to those about him. In sacrificing others to himself he is sacrificing them to the public he gratifies; and the public is quite content with that arrangement. The public actually has an interest in the artist's vices.

In his 1907 preface to *The Sanity of Art* (Essays, pp. 288–89), Shaw maintains that Nordau might perform a service if he would try to determine "the real stigmata of genius; so that we may know whom to crucify, and whom to put above the law." Shaw notes that in *The Doctor's Dilemma* he deals with the problem of the criminal genius, but that the problem is not easily solved. He does not believe that artistic genius should excuse "reckless" dishonesty and selfishness, but he adds, "On the other hand, we cannot ask
the Superman simply to add a higher set of virtues to current respectable morals; for he is undoubtedly going to empty a good deal of respectable morality out like so much dirty water, and replace it by new and strange customs, shedding old obligations and accepting new and heavier ones." Shaw then argues that, because the genius is conventional in all matters except for the specific area of his genius ("Your genius is ever 1 part genius and 99 parts Tory"), he usually poses no great challenge to society's toleration; when he does scandalize society, he is usually in conflict not with contemporary feeling in his own class, but with some institution which is far behind the times. Dubedat's disregard for the property of others and his defiance of marriage laws are both instances of conflict with what Shaw considered outmoded institutions.

In "Biographers' Blunders Corrected" (Sketches, pp. 103-4), Shaw corrects Henry Charles Duffin's analysis of Dubedat. He first repeats his thesis from the preface to The Doctor's Dilemma: "No man is scrupulous all round. He has certain points of honor, whilst in matters that do not interest him he is careless and unscrupulous." One of Dubedat's models, Shaw says, "was morbidly scrupulous as to his religious and political convictions. But he had absolutely no conscience about money and women; he was a shameless seducer and borrower, not to say a thief." Dubedat, like his living model, has an "inflexible point of honor": "When Dubedat says on his deathbed that he has fought the good fight, he is quite serious. He means that he has not painted little girls playing with fox terriers to be exhibited and sold at the Royal Academy, instead of doing the best he could in his art. Therefore I cannot endorse your dismissal of Dubedat as a mere cad. He had his faith, and upheld it." Finally, in a conversation with Stephen Winsten, Shaw said of Dubedat: "He's a saint when it comes to art but in matters of men and women and almost everything else he's a scoundrel." As Audrey Williamson says, almost timidly, in Bernard Shaw: Man and Writer, "The suspicion lingers that Shaw liked the blackguard artist" (p. 146).

Dubedat is, admittedly, thoroughly reprehensible by conventional standards. He prostitutes his wife by referring to her affection for the man to whom he is appealing for money; he borrows a cigarette case and forgets to return it; he takes money for work
which he may not deliver; he lies to extort money or to avoid difficulties; he is willing to cheat his wife of her income; he proposes that Ridgeon blackmail his patients into buying art; and he seduces a girl who believes that he has married her, when in fact both she and Dubedat are already married to other people. In a melodrama any one of these faults would make Dubedat the unquestionable villain of the play.

But in a Shaw play, heroism and villainy is never a simple matter of obedience or disobedience to law or custom. Though Shaw considers Dubedat a scoundrel regarding money and women, Shaw also provides Dubedat with a defense. First is the implicit defense: in a socialist state Dubedat would be able to do his life’s work without worrying about an income from private patrons; and in an enlightened state, marriage laws would face the fact of polygamy instead of hypocritically ignoring it. Dubedat’s explicit defense for his actions is the simple plea that he must have money in order to live and work; he explains blandly to Ridgeon, to whom he has just proposed swindling Jennifer of her money, “Well, of course I shouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t want the money” (p. 133). He justifies his deception of Minnie Tinwell because she “has had three weeks of glorious happiness in her poor little life, which is more than most girls in her position get. Ask her whether she’d take it back if she could” (p. 137). His behavior is, like many of Shaw’s childlike protagonists’, beyond good and evil: “He is as natural as a cat” (p. 116), and natural behavior, according to Shaw, is not to be judged “moral” and “immoral.”

Even when judged in terms of conventional morality, Dubedat is not as bad as Ridgeon, who has set for himself the godlike task of deciding “not only whether the man could be saved, but whether he was worth saving” (p. 109). Though this admission is appalling to most people, Shaw, who argued that people who were hopelessly antisocial had to be killed and who later was to write an apology for political killing, might have forgiven Ridgeon this presumption. Ridgeon’s dilemma, which, contra Fuller, is a real one in the play, arises from the fact that he is enough like Shaw to say, echoing Shaw’s attacks on goodness and respectability, that good people are “infernally disagreeable and mischievous” and to wonder if “the world wouldn’t be a better world if everybody behaved as Dubedat
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does than it is now that everybody behaves as Blenkinsop does.”

In his final choice, however, Ridgeon loses sight of the moral dilemma, for his motives are confused by his love for the artist’s wife. Finally, if Jennifer’s comments in the final scene can be believed, Ridgeon’s human errors and his playing god are not his worst offenses; Jennifer accuses him of having the calloused attitude of the vivisector, i.e., of regarding men as soulless brutes.

But to say that Dubedat is no worse than his judge is no real defense. His defense is in his absolute faithfulness to his art, to which he is willing to sacrifice everything and everybody but which is his “one really inflexible point of honor.” The play reveals little about the nature of Dubedat’s art, so that we do not know whether or not the sacrifice was of public benefit. But we do know that Ridgeon, who is an art connoisseur, considers Dubedat’s work “the real thing” (p. 110) and states unequivocally that Dubedat is a genius (pp. 118, 147, 165).

Like other genuine artists in Shaw’s work, Dubedat shocks society; regards art as a profession, not as a moral obligation; and cares for nothing except his work. He has less of an erratic temperament than Owen Jack or Madame Szczympliça, but more of an unconventional nature than either, for he shocks society not because he has unusual dress, manners, or speech, but because he violates its laws and defies its morality. In all these characteristics, he is more like the fin-de-siècle aesthetes than any of Shaw’s other artist figures. However, unlike the aesthetes’ artists and Shaw’s other artists, Dubedat is married. But his is a special kind of marriage. In the first place, unlike Praed, Apollodorus, or Octavius, he does not talk about the spiritual power of women and love. He is chivalrous enough to tell the doctors that “if you’d told me that Jennifer wasn’t married, I’d have the gentlemanly feeling and artistic instinct to say that she carried her marriage certificate in her face and in her character,” but he says this mainly to shame the doctors by contrasting his “immoral” but gentlemanly character with their morality and readiness to suspect evil. He does not pay elaborate court to Jennifer, unless it is to get money or sympathy from her. On the contrary, Jennifer is his protector and support; she confesses to Ridgeon that she aspired to save a man of genius from “poverty and neglect” and to “bring some charm and happi-
ness into his life”; Dubedat was, she believes, the answer to her prayer. Like Candida, she mothers her husband by defending him from hostile opinion and financial distress; and she considers him “just like a boy” (p. 152) in all but his thoughts and his work. But Dubedat, unlike Morell, is not emotionally dependent on his wife; he is like the artist Tanner describes, a man who “pretends to spare her [his wife] the pangs of child-bearing [Jennifer is childless; so was Charlotte Shaw] so that he may have for himself the tenderness and fostering that belong of right to her children. Since marriage began, the great artist has been known as a bad husband” (M&S, p. 23). Dubedat’s marriage is, then, not the kind of marriage that Octavius would have had: Dubedat uses woman for his own purpose, which is “to guard me against living too much in the skies” (p. 130), or, in plainer words, to see to mundane affairs.

In assessing Shaw’s attitude toward Dubedat, the sources of the portrait are helpful. Shaw is said to have acknowledged Aubrey Beardsley as a model for Dubedat, but, if one is looking for artist models for Dubedat, there is more of Rossetti than of Beardsley in the portrait. Dubedat’s amours and his personal charm suggest Rossetti; and his attitude toward his patrons seems a direct allusion to Rossetti, who “rejoiced no less in unscrupulously despoiling these Philistines [his patrons] than in pocketing their gold. To him it was self-evident that the sole justification of a business man’s existence was to support artists.” One of Rossetti’s patrons, MacCracken, in the early 1850s commissioned an oil painting and advanced Rossetti a deposit on this; with this deposit and the money for some water colors alleviating his financial distress, Rossetti “did not for some time trouble even to begin it [the oil]. Nor was it, in fact, ever completed.” This detail is strikingly like that dramatized in The Doctor’s Dilemma, when Dubedat says that the drawings for Maclean (even the name of the patron is similar) “don’t matter. Ive got nearly all the money from him in advance” (p. 130). Dubedat’s attitude toward women and toward money has nothing in it of Beardsley and a great deal in it of Rossetti.

However, Shaw also acknowledged Edward Aveling as one source for Dubedat. A speech by Shaw makes clear the parallels between the character of Aveling and of Dubedat; Shaw characterizes Aveling as “a scamp” who “was a devoted Socialist, Atheist, and

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Darwinian, and an impressive orator, and would probably have died rather than deny his faith. But when money or women were concerned he had no conscience, no scruples, no self-control. His borrowings and seductions were innumerable; and his victims were often poor working folk who were dazzled by his oratory.”

This description of Aveling was made, of course, after the literary fact of Louis Dubedat, and Shaw might have been unconsciously basing this portrait of Aveling on his portrait of Dubedat. But Hesketh Pearson bears out Shaw’s description of Aveling, who “on the same day he would borrow sixpence from the poorest man within his reach on pretence of having forgotten his purse, and three hundred pounds from the richest to free himself from debts that he never paid.” When Aveling coached science students, Pearson continues, he often took money in advance and then cancelled the lessons; and, when his wife died, he did not marry Eleanor Marx, with whom he was living, but married another woman. After this, Eleanor committed suicide, and Aveling “took no steps to prevent this convenient solution of his domestic difficulties.” Pearson completes his account of Aveling with a defense: “Whatever he did, he did without concealment, without shame, with a desinvolture that almost forbade disapprobation. He at last died like an atheist saint, spouting Shelley.”

If Aveling is a source for Dubedat, he is not the only source, for Shaw also cited Richard Wagner’s story “An End in Paris” as another source. Dubedat’s attitude toward art is probably derived from his literary model, the artist protagonist of “An End in Paris,” one of Wagner’s stories of A German Musician in Paris: Tales and Articles, 1840 and 1841. Like Dubedat, Wagner’s artist dies proclaiming his faith in art.

I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven, and likewise their disciples and apostles:—I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art;—I believe that this Art proceeds from God, and lives within the hearts of all illumined men:—I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrate to Her for ever, and never can deny Her;—I believe that through this Art all men are saved, and therefore each may die for Her of hunger: . I believe in a last judgment, which will condemn to fearful pains all those who in this world have dared to play the huckster with chaste Art, have
violated and dishonoured Her through evilness of heart and ribald lust of senses;—I believe that these will be condemned through all eternity to hear their own vile music. I believe, upon the other hand, that true disciples of high Art will be transfigured in a heavenly fabric of sun-drenched fragrance of sweet sounds, and united for eternity with the divine fount of all Harmony.—May mine be a sentence of grace!—Amen!14

Dubedat’s declaration substitutes the names of painters for the names of musicians; it is considerably briefer than the musician’s; but it has essentially the same content.

The artistic character of “R,” Wagner’s dying musician, is developed in other stories in the series. In “A Happy Evening” “R” reveals his contempt for an artistically indifferent public, especially for its demand for anecdote in music and its confusion of the distinct aims of music and poetry; he denies that occasional art has any vitality except that the occasion may bring on a mood which will be worthy of artistic treatment; and he says that symphonies do not exist to cheer the heart of man: “They exist for themselves and their own sake, not to flip the circulation of a philistine’s blood.”15 Another of the series of stories and articles, “The Artist and Publicity,” which purports to be one of “R’s” papers, has a section that is peculiarly appropriate to Dubedat; “R” maintains that the genius is not prompted to create by any practical considerations: “One’s daily bread, the maintenance of a family do not operate in the genius. They prompt the journeyman, the handworker; they may even move the man of genius to handiwork, but they cannot spur him to create, nor even to bring his creations to market.” When he does bring art “to open market,” it is because he hovers between the heaven of his inner joy and the hell of public indifference and he feels strong enough “to play with even Evil.” But he is incapable of telling lies: “Truth is his very soul.” Therefore he finally finds escape from the world’s indifference in proud laughter.16 The Doctor’s Dilemma reveals no specific points of Dubedat’s aesthetic theory; but the ideas of “R,” many of which are akin to those of the English fin-de-siècle aesthetes, may have gone into the formation of Dubedat as a character. Certainly Shaw took for Dubedat the musician’s devotion to art and his indifference to working for the sake of feed-
ing himself or supporting a family; in Dubedat there is also a suggestion of the artist’s faith in the incorruptibility of his truth, no matter how much he lies, and of his arrogant laughter at an inferior world.

Shaw also borrows from Wagner Dubedat’s allegiance to another artist. Wagner’s “R . ” is a disciple of Beethoven; Dubedat is a disciple of Bernard Shaw. Dubedat’s profession of allegiance has been taken to be a warning to “spurious Shavians,” but it is best understood when compared with Wagner’s comments on “R’s” discipleship. The narrator of “An End in Paris,” a friend of “R,” says that the cult of Beethoven deifies “his name, his renown,” but is incapable of judging musical merit. For example, the name of Beethoven, prefixed to an hitherto ignored work, secures that work’s recognition; but “if your works are composed in that daring individual spirit which you so much admire in Beethoven, [the members of the Beethoven cult] will find them turgid and indigestible.” Similarly, Dubedat’s use of Shaw’s name is to summon up instant recognition of Dubedat’s values; ironically, the doctors are not sure who Bernard Shaw is. And, one might add, though Shaw may not have foreseen this irony, Dubedat’s independent application of Shaw’s tenets to his own behavior has caused many members of the cult of Shaw to dismiss Dubedat as a worthless scoundrel. Shaw does complicate matters by making Dubedat a liar, cheat, and thief as well as an artistic genius, just as he less disturbingly complicates the portrait of the poet Marchbanks by making him physically weak, almost neurotically sensitive, and foolish about a woman. Though Shaw recognized the rascal in Dubedat, I am convinced that he found him a worthy, even though a misguided, follower of Bernard Shaw. When Dubedat says, “I dont believe in morality, I’m a disciple of Bernard Shaw,” he is wrong in considering Shaw’s name justification for his blackguardism, but he is right in assuming that Shaw would not approve of the doctors’ moralizing. In the play the stupidities of some of the doctors and the cynicism of Ridgeon are worse than the infidelity and thieveries of Dubedat, who at least has a defense if not a justification for both. Dubedat does challenge the doctors’ morality; he does look on his art as justification for his life; and he is no amateur or dilettante whose real faith is in the love-panacea.
For these reasons Shaw could say of him, "He had his faith, and upheld it."

Shaw creates another "unscrupulous" artist in the character of Shakespear in *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (1910). Like Dube­dat, Shaw's Shakespear also has the characteristics of the man of genius described in *Man and Superman*. In Shaw's dramatic criticism, Shakespeare emerges as an artist who sacrificed dramatic ideas to worn-out plots and stage conventions and a man who succumbed to a romantic world view and a philosophy of despair. These and other failings Shaw attributes to Shakespeare's familial pride, for, he explains.

The man of family . . will plunge into society without a lesson in table manners, into politics without a lesson in history, into the city without a lesson in business, and into the army without a lesson in honor. . . In short, the whole range of Shakespear's foibles: the snob­bishness, the naughtiness, the contempt for tradesmen and mechanics, the assumption that witty conversation can only mean smutty conver­sation, the flunkeyism towards social superiors and insolence towards social inferiors, the easy ways with servants: all these are the characteristics of Eton and Harrow.¹⁹

But in his criticism and his play Shaw also insists on Shakespeare's artistic genius; according to Shaw, Shakespeare compensated for his philosophical deficiency by psychological depth and consum­mate mastery of style.

In *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* Shakespear is presented not only as a genuine artist but as an artist like Shaw. In the preface to the play Shaw corrects the sentimental view of Shakespeare presented by Frank Harris in his play about the dark lady: "Frank conceives Shakespear to have been a broken-hearted, melancholy, enormously sentimental person, whereas I am convinced that he was very like myself: in fact, if I had been born in 1556 instead of 1856, I should have taken to blank verse and given Shakespear a harder run for his money than all the other Elizabethans put to­gether" (p. 207). In Shaw's play Shakespear's artistic methods also describe Shaw's methods. For example, Shakespear is repre­sented as capturing the poetry of the vernacular by copying down verbatim good phrases that he hears, taking his language from liv­ing examples:
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THE BEEFEATER. You judge too much by the Court, Sir. There, indeed, you may say of frailty that its name is woman.

THE MAN [pulling out his tablets again] Prithee say that again: that about frailty: the strain of music.

THE BEEFEATER. What strain of music, sir? I’m no musician, God knows.

THE MAN. There is music in your soul: many of your degree have it very notably. [Writing] “Frailty: thy name is woman!” [Repeating it affectionately] “Thy name is woman.”

THE BEEFEATER. Well, sir, it is but four words. Are you a snapper-up of such unconsidered trifles?


The Beefeater does not appreciate Shakespeare’s plays any more than the ordinary playgoer appreciates Shaw’s; he prefers The Spanish Tragedy, with its heroics, its vengeance and blood, and its bombast, to the “new-fangled plays,” which are “all talk” (p. 231). And Shakespeare, like Shaw, laments the world’s preference for “murder, or a plot, or a pretty youth in petticoats, or some naughty tale of wantonness” (p. 242) to his plays dealing with social problems.

Like the artist described in Man and Superman—the artist that Octavius is not—Shakespeare does not idolize women but uses them unscrupulously as matter for his art. The Dark Lady’s complaint that “he will tie you down to anatomize your very soul” and then reveal it to all the world (pp. 239–40) echoes Tanner’s description of the artist as “half vivisector, half vampire. He gets into intimate relations with [women] to study them, to strip the mask of convention from them, to surprise their inmost secrets” (M&S, p. 23). Shaw’s Shakespeare is impudent, fickle, and proudly superior to the lady; he explains to the queen that he is “not cruel, madam; but you know the fable of Jupiter and Semele. I could not help my lightnings scorching her” (pp. 240–41). When charged with conceit, he asks, “Can I go about with the modest cough of a minor poet, belittling my inspiration and making the mightiest wonder of your reign a thing of nought?” He has the artistic sureness that distinguishes the great artist from the pseudo-artist in Shaw’s previous work; his humor and boldness and arrogance recall Owen
Jack's assertion that "I am in my own way—not a humble way—a man of genius myself" (LAA, p. 149).

In short, except for his foolish family pride, Shakespear has all the characteristics of Shaw's genuine artist; he is indifferent to convention and unscrupulous in his use of others for his own purposes; he is misunderstood by the public; and he is devoted to "immortal poesy," which invests the vile world "with a magical garment of words to transfigure us and uplift our souls til earth flowers into a million heavens" (p. 236).