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The Social Value of the Privileged Class: 
A Comparison 
of Shaw's Heartbreak House 
and Friel's Aristocrats 

by MARILYN THRONE

In Heartbreak House (1916), George Bernard Shaw portrays the English aristocracy at the beginning of its collapse; in Aristocrats (1979), Brian Friel portrays a fallen Irish aristocracy. In both plays the characters indulge in mad and cruel games which ultimately expose their own foibles and delusions; in both plays there are powerful fathers, Captain Shotover and Father Judge O'Donnell, whose characters, as well as the playwrights' themes, are illustrated through the actual setting of their houses, one shipshape and the other in ruins. These striking similarities insist on a comparison of the two plays.

But in the sixty years between the writing of these plays, vast social changes have occurred that are also illustrated by a comparison. The aristocracy has ceased to rule throughout the British Isles. The English upper class has given way to socialist and democratic political forces; in Ireland, the Catholic upper class, which never had the power of the English, was ultimately displaced as leaders by the Revolution begun in 1916. A few figures, like Lady Augusta Gregory, may have retained influence and even expanded it through patronage of the national movement and the young artists, but we need go no further than Yeats to learn that the power of the Irish Republic went into the hands of the middle class. The differences of those sixty years are clear in the shift in theme between the plays, for while Shaw can still urge the aristocracy to return to govern and lead, Friel realistically recognizes that the aristocracy have no special social function; they are a relict. His theme turns to their private lives.

In both plays, the characters indulge in mad games which serve to expose the ineffectuality and failure of the aristocracy. In Heartbreak House the game, as Hector Hushabye tells us, exists to strip away all pretensions and illusions: "In this house we know all the poses: our game is to find out the man under the pose" (133). And indeed, we find no character who is not posing.

Under Randall Utterword's pose of the gay Lothario is Randall the Rotter, a petulant child who must be railed at by his sister-in-law Ariadne until he weeps and will sleep. But Ariadne herself, the mistress of Horseback Hall, the wife of "Sir Hastings Utterword, who has been governor of all the crown colonies in succession" (55), a woman who is imperious,
haughty, and captivating—to Hector as well as Randall—is really the daughter come home to see her father, a child who must be comforted because she is afraid that perhaps her heart has never been broken because she has no heart to break (123).

Her brother-in-law, Hector, falls in love with her, as previously he has fallen in love with his wife Hesione and with Ellie Dunn. Hector is a daring adventurer, a teller of grandiose tales, and the possessor of a magnificent mustache. But his love for Hesione has emasculated him. Shotover tells him: “She has used you up, and left you nothing but dreams, as some women do” (88); and Ariadne characterizes him as “...a very fascinating gentleman whose chief occupation is to be married to my sister” (152).

Hesione is a spellbinder, a “demon woman” (88); Hector explains: “Old Shotover sold himself to the devil in Zanzibar. The devil gave him a black witch for a wife; and these two demon daughters are their mystical progeny” (137). But Hesione’s own words reveal her as a woman enthralled by the spell of romance, “a sluttish female” (152), who panders for her husband:

We were frightfully in love with one another, Hector. It was such an enchanting dream that I have never been able to grudge it to you or anyone else since. I have invited all sorts of pretty women to the house on the chance of giving you another turn. (84)

Other characters, guests at Heartbreak House, are given familial status and involved in the game of stripping away pretensions and masks, and are revealed as no more honorable than the direct descendants of Captain Shotover. Boss Mangan, introduced as “a perfect hog of a millionaire” (59) who is going to marry Ellie out of some magnanimous impulse, confesses finally that he has no wealth at all:

I get money from such people [lazy capitalists] to start factories. I find people like Miss Dunn’s father to work them, and keep a tight hand so as to make them pay. Of course I make them keep me going pretty well; but it’s a dog’s life; and I dont own anything. (143)

Although he is in the government, he can claim no achievements there either; in fact, he boasts that his principle activity is keeping other members of the government from any worthwhile achievement: “I may not know anything about my own machinery; but I know how to stick a ramrod into the other fellow’s” (145). In short, Boss Mangan is little more than a burglar.

The other burglar in the play, Billie Dunn, caught in a clumsy robbery attempt, passes himself off as a reforming man: “I must work my sin off my conscience” (117), but he does so only to extort money from the people whose houses he burges:

I break into the house; put a few spoons or diamonds in my pocket; make a noise; get caught; and take up a collection. And you wouldn’t believe how hard it is to get caught when you’re actually trying to. (121)

He is a pirate, Nurse Guinness’s husband, and a coward who runs for cover in the gravel pit when the bombs begin to fall.
The other Dunn, Mazzini, Ellie's father, was named for the freedom fighter and has been supposedly fighting for freedom all his life: "That's why he is so poor" (60); his improvidence makes Ellie determine to marry for money. But though he cannot run a business at a profit to himself and though his family makes jokes about their poverty, Mazzini is so in love with his wife that he alone, of all the men, is safe from the spell of Shotover's demon daughters, even Hesione who sets her cap for him. "You see, I have been in love really: the sort of love that only happens once. . . That's why Ellie is such a lovely girl" (104).

Ellie too wears masks. At first she appears to be the romantic innocent child, taken in by Hector's impossible stories and determined to marry Mangan out of gratitude for his saving her father from bankruptcy. To Hesione and to us she seems vulnerable and in need of protection. But Shaw reveals that she is far more practical than Hesione, and drives a harder bargain than even Mangan can: "Come, Mr. Mangan! You made a business convenience of my father. Well, a woman's business is marriage. Why shouldn't I make a domestic convenience of you?" (97). And she tells the captain, "It is just because I want to save my soul that I am marrying for money" (126).

In Brian Friel's Aristocrats, the climactic second act is punctuated by a croquet game played with imaginary mallets, balls, and hoops. Casimir has prepared a picnic lunch, and afterwards, while the others are half-asleep from the wine, he searches the lawn for the holes left by the croquet hoops and marks them with napkins. Then he challenges his youngest sister, Claire, to a game. When Casimir goes to the phone for a call to his family, Claire gives the imaginary mallet to Willie Diver, a man from the village and a successful owner of slot machines. At first Willie protests to Eamon, who has married into Ballybeg Hall, the seat of the judicial O'Donnells, but who is also originally from the village: "They have me playing croquet now, Eamon! Without balls or nothin'! Jaysus!" (297), but once in the game, Willie is so captivated that he crows when he wins:

Bet to the ropes! Your tongue's hanging out! Throw in the towel! Aul' Slooghter won hands down! Up the back shore boys! (300)

When he asks for wine for a toast in celebration, Eamon gives Willie an empty bottle and says: "Imagine it's full. Use your peasant talent for fantasy, man" (301).

But the croquet game was not begun in peasant fantasy. It was an aristocratic fantasy, no different than the game of delusion the O'Donnells conceal their failures with and use, ironically, to reveal those failures. For instance, the study is crowded with memories of a once-proud family that hobnobbed with the great. The Chopin waltzes Claire plays are involved in the fantasy. The G Flat Major is known as "The John McCormack Waltz," and Casimir reminisces about that great tenor waltzing Mother up and down the hall and out to the tennis court, until the two
collapsed laughing in the gazebo (262); the A Flat Major is known as “The Bedtime Waltz.” Casimir and Alice say that their mother played it when it was time for the children to go to bed:

... we’d have to dash upstairs—remember?—dash upstairs and wash ourselves and say our nightly prayers and be in bed before she’d finished. (268)

But Judith, the oldest sister and the one most determined to face reality, has told the visiting American scholar Tom Hoffnung that their mother did not play the piano.

Casimir has given Tom a tour of the study’s relics: the Gerard Manley Hopkins tea stain on an armchair; the footstool G. K. Chesterton fell over when he was imitating Lloyd George; the chaise longue Daniel O'Connell marked with his riding boots; the George Moore candlestick; the Tom Moore book; the Bible Hilaire Belloc gave Father and Mother as a wedding present. Casimir recalls Yeats sitting on the chaise longue: “...those cold, cold eyes of his. Oh, yes, I remember Yeats vividly” (267); and he tells Hoffnung an elaborate story of Grandfather attending Balzac's birthday party in Vienna with Liszt, George Sand, Turgenev, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Delacroix, and Verdi also in attendance. Hoffnung pricks the fantasies: Grandfather wasn’t a contemporary of Balzac, Liszt, and the rest; and Yeats died two months before Casimir was born (309).

Hoffnung is researching the Catholic aristocracy to discover its influence, politically, culturally, and economically, on the ascendancy and on the “native peasant tradition” (281). Alone of the family, Eamon is not polite to him. Eamon began a career in the government in Dublin which he was forced to leave because he took part in the political movement in Belfast; he is now a probation officer in London. He has married into the O'Donnell clan; specifically he married Alice, the middle sister, but he has pledged love first to Judith, and during the course of the play he courts Claire. But his attachment to Ballybeg Hall arises most immediately from his peasant grandmother, who raised him, who worked for fifty-seven years as a maid in the Hall, and who brought home stories of the glamor of the inhabitants of the Hall. When Eamon told her he was going to marry Alice O'Donnell of the Hall, she was silent a long moment and then said: “‘May God and his holy mother forgive you, you dirty-mouthed upstart!’ ” (277). To explain his despair that Ballybeg Hall will be sold from the family after Father’s death, he tells the others:

Don’t you know that all that is fawning and forelock-touching and Paddy and shabby and greasy peasant in the Irish character finds a house like this irresistible? That’s why we’re ideal for colonizing. Something in us needs this... aspiration. (318-19)

And he explains to Hoffnung that his rudeness is because he knows the professor is seeing through the stories and he is afraid that all the professor will see are the fantasies:

In case—you’ll forgive me—in case you’re not equal to your task. In case you’ll bolt and run. Nervous that all you’ll see is—(Indicates the croquet game)—the make-believe. (298)
There is genuine cause for Eamon's concern because as we get to know the O'Donnells, we discover they are none of them successful and they all hold some illusion or delusion between reality and themselves. For instance, Eamon's wife, Alice, is an alcoholic, who spends her days alone in their basement flat in London while her husband is at work. She knows that Eamon is more in love with Ballybeg House than with her, and childless, she has no purpose in life.

Casimir, the only son, is the most heart-breakingly vulnerable and transparent. He was just a boy of nine when, through his father's bluntness, he learned that he was odd, that people laughed at him, and that he would never succeed in life. His father bluntly told him that had he been born in the village instead of the Hall, he would have "become the village idiot" (310). He is a failed solicitor, married to a German woman named Helga, who is the family breadwinner; they have a family of three sons and a dachshund. Casimir works part time in a food-processing factory (272), but his principle occupation is taking care of his sons; he is their nanny. And even within his own family, Casimir fails; his sons know little English; Casimir knows little German:

No problem, no problem at all when we're together—I mean we can smile and make signs and stagger on; but it's so difficult on the phone. And of course Helga's right—I mean they've got to be a little German family, haven't they? (301)

Claire, the youngest of the children, was once a promising pianist, kept from a career because Father didn't want her to become "an itinerant musician" (259). She is planning to marry Jerry McLaughlin, a greengrocer, thirty years older than she is, a widower with four young children and a live-in sister. He is plump, bald, pasty-looking, and bespectacled. Claire knows she is not in love with Jerry; she says to Eamon: "But if you really loved someone the way you're supposed to love someone you're about to marry, you shouldn't be confused, should you? Everything should be absorbed in that love" (291). But Claire is not marrying for love; she is a manic depressive, on medication, and desperate to get out of Ballybeg Hall where Judith is trapped taking care of Father, who has suffered several strokes, and Uncle George, who has not spoken a word since Alice's marriage to Eamon.

Judith, the oldest sister, is in the Irish tradition of strong women characters; in her will and in her acceptance of the hard hand life has dealt her, she reminds us of Synge's Maurya and of O'Casey's Juno. Judith has run away from her apolitical family home to take part in the Battle of the Bogside; she has had an illegitimate child by a Dutch reporter; and after Father's death, she is determined to bring the child home from its fosterage and raise it herself, somehow earning a living. Her illusion is a pragmatic one. She describes her typical day to Eamon: a round of cooking, cleaning, washing, and dealing with the difficult characters of stricken Father, silent Uncle George, and manic Claire. She says: "And I
know I can carry on—happily almost, yes almost happily—I know I can keep going as long as I’m not diverted from that routine, as long as there are no intrusions on it” (299). Judith keeps reality at bay through the exhaustion of her daily routine.

The final sister, Anna, is Sister John Henry, a nun in St. Joseph’s mission in Kuala, Zambia. At first it would seem that Anna has escaped Father’s tyranny and the influence of Ballybeg Hall, but when Casimir plays a tape she has sent, we hear a child speaking. Anna’s is a case of arrested development. She, too, has her illusions; she pictures a happy family gathered for a holiday celebration, with none of them older; she believes all that Judith tells her about Father’s good health and naively assumes Father has not written her because he is too busy. Her mission children sing songs from Anna’s own childhood, and she plays “The Gar­tan Mother’s Lullaby” on her violin—“...the playing of a child” (304).

By the ends of the two plays, then, we are confronted with households in which the characters are incapable of ruling themselves, much less a nation or an empire. And since both of these households are aristocratic, we are confronted by social classes which are incapable of ruling. However, there is an enormous contrast between the fathers of the two families, Father Judge O’Donnell and Captain Shotover. Indeed, the greatest contrast between these plays is this of the characters of the fathers and the actual structures of their houses. And, of course, the houses function symbolically.

The fathers are the sires, the begetters, the greatest influence on their offspring. In them we see greatness and failure.

Captain Shotover is an incomparable character. He is mad, he is manic, he is an inventor of deadly weaponry, he has sold his soul to the devil in Zanzibar and married a black woman in the West Indies who saved his soul, and he dashes off to drink rum to keep from slipping into dreams.

Shotover is the character chosen by the simultaneously clear-eyed and idealistic Ellie as her soul’s “natural captain, my spiritual husband and second father” (149). Shaw has created an octogenarian of vigor, youth, and sagacity. An engaging character.

In great contrast, Brian Friel’s father character is the stricken Judge O’Donnell, whose voice we hear, imperious and inane, over the “baby tender” for the first two acts, and who then appears—“An emaciated man; eyes distraught; one arm limp; his mouth pulled down at the corner” (304), and dies of a final stroke. O’Donnell comes from a judicial family, which has consistently lost prominence; the great-grandfather was Lord Chief Justice; Grandfather was a Circuit Court Judge; and Father is a
simple District Judge. Yet once this man had romance in his soul, for he married a beautiful young actress from the Charles Doran company, after a courtship of only five days. But he is also a petty tyrant. His wife has committed suicide. His children are kept distant from him. Although Judith tends him in his illness, he plagues her by telling her that “Judith betrayed the family”; Claire fears that staying in Ballybeg Hall will drive her mad; Casimir is afraid of just the sound of his father's voice; Alice remembers sadly that until she visited the sickroom, she had never held her father's face in her hands. Nor does the town love him; the shutters are closed only for the brief passage of the hearse through the street, and Alice says: “The multitude in the church was a little empty, too” (313).

O'Donnell's alter ego is his silent brother, Uncle George, who drank hard in his youth, then suddenly simultaneously stopped drinking and speaking altogether. Since that time, he has uttered only the seven words at Alice's wedding to Eamon—“There's going to be a great revolution” (254), and when he breaks his silence upon Alice's invitation that he come to London to live with her, he says: “Haven't been to London since the year nineteen and ten; to be precise the week Edward the Seventh died. Saw it all. That's what I call a funeral” (322) and “Another visit's about due, I suppose” (322), after all the years of silence revealing a pedestrian mind.

What the fathers teach is thematically significant. Captain Shotover flees from dreams and drinks rum to stay alert. He tells Ellie:

I was ten times happier on the bridge in the typhoon, or frozen into Arctic ice for months in darkness, than you or they have ever been.... At your age I looked for hardship, danger, horror, and death, that I might feel the life in me more intensely. I did not let the fear of death govern my life; and my reward was, I had my life. (128-29)

He tells Hector: “Navigation. Learn it and live; or leave it and be damned” (156).

Father O'Donnell, on the other hand, has taught his children to be afraid. He has thwarted them. He tells Judith that Anna is praying for her; he kept Claire from accepting a scholarship that would have allowed her to study music in Paris; he told Casimir that except for the protection of Ballybeg Hall where eccentricity could be absorbed, the boy would be the village idiot.

The contrast is almost overwhelming. Whereas Shotover challenges Hector and Ellie and the others, O'Donnell emasculates his son and so tyrannizes his daughters that the eldest is a drudge, the middle two an alcoholic and a perpetual child, and the youngest is half mad. Instead of saving his soul as did Shotover's black wife, O'Donnell's wife has escaped him by committing suicide. Casimir remembers Mother's funeral:

...all that furtiveness, all that whispering, all those half-truths. We didn't know until the very last minute would they allow her a Christian burial at all because of the circumstances—remember? (309)
Insofar as the word "house" may refer to both a structure and a family, Shaw and Friel give us additional evidence through their settings of what the fathers have produced.

The House of Shotover is shipshape, both literally and figuratively:

...a room which has been built so as to resemble the after part of an old-fashioned high-pooped ship with a stern gallery; for the windows are ship built with heavy timbering, and run right across the room... (49)

It is an untidy house where invited guests are not greeted and meals are not properly prepared. Nurse Guinness tells Ellie: "...this house is full of surprises for them that don't know our ways" (51). And Shotover rants: "This is our hospitality. These are our manners. No room ready. No hot water. No welcoming hostess. Our visitor is to sleep in the toolshed, and to wash in the duckpond" (51), and after dinner Boss Mangan complains: "What a dinner! I don't call it a dinner: I call it a meal" (92). Nevertheless, it is a house that can respond to attack. At the end of the play, with enemy aircraft dropping bombs through the countryside, Hector rushes in to light every possible light and tear down the curtains, challenging the dirigible and confronting the danger. When Ellie suggests that he set fire to the house as well, Hector says he thought of it, but the fire would not blaze up soon enough. Shotover approves of this son-in-law's action; he cries: "The judgment has come. Courage will not save you; but it will show that your souls are still alive" (159). And when the attack is over, having done no more than level the village rectory and kill the two burglars hiding in the gravel pit, the old captain says: "Turn in, all hands. The ship is safe" (160). And so it is for the moment, and so it might be in the future if the captain's lesson has been learned. The house has rallied; the children of Shotover—actual, in-law, and adopted—have fronted the danger and thrilled to the life they felt within themselves, even as the old man has said they would.

But at the end of Aristocrats, the O'Donnell house, both literally and figuratively, is in ruins. After Father's funeral, Judith tells the others the sad facts about the house:

...Willie and I put up polythene sheets and nailed them to the rafters [after a storm lifted off the back roof]. And the floor in the morning-room has collapsed with dry-rot... and every time there's a heavy rain, we have to distribute... seventeen buckets in the upstairs rooms to catch the water. (317)

The children are willing to abandon the house; none of them can afford to save it, and for none of them does it represent anything more than the house of their parents and their own repressed childhoods. Even Judith, who has patiently tended her father, sees the old house as finished and done with. Eamon alone, the peasant married into Ballybeg Hall, whose grandmother was maid there, is upset: "... you're going to turn the key in the door and abandon Ballybeg Hall?" (318).

It is in this dramatic contrast between the houses, symbolic representa-
tions of the families, that we understand the astounding differences in the playwrights' social philosophies.

Bernard Shaw is actually affirming the need for an effective aristocracy in *Heartbreak House*. In place of the crippling bureaucracy of Boss Mangan's government and instead of an aristocracy that either governs as Hastings Utterword does, with cruelty and haughtiness, or turns apathetically away from governing, as does Hector, Shotover and Shaw are calling for imaginative, adventuresome leaders who will learn to sail the ship of state, who will learn navigation, how to chart a course and read the heavens, and who will face danger and exult in it, drinking deeply of life. Shotover and Shaw are insistent that the aristocracy has no right to turn away from the task of governing, that if the ship of state crashes, it is the fault of a captain drunk on complacency or apathy. And if the play does not end on an optimistic note—for Hector and Ellie have a long way to go before their lives are truly purposeful—at least it ends on a hopeful note: the burglars have been destroyed by their own cowardice, and the children have tasted danger and found it exhilarating.

In contrast, Brian Friel can find no purpose for his characters as aristocracy. Tom Hoffnung, the American professor studying the impact of the Catholic aristocracy on Irish life, will find, so Eamon predicts, that there is no impact. Nor is there hope for exhilaration in the lives of these characters; at best there will be only a kind of quiet coping. There may be some small successes: Judith, we assume, will make a home for her child, and with Uncle George as a companion, Alice might be able to control her drinking. Away from the influence of Ballybeg Hall, Eamon will cease believing that he is still in love with Judith and may come to love Alice instead. But Anna, Claire, and Casimir have been too crippled by their father to make good their own lives. Anna will stay a half-child in the mission; Claire will make her loveless, secure marriage to the middle-aged greengrocer; and Casimir will return to the Teutonic Helga and her German sons. Early in the play, Casimir defines the only kind of happiness he and his siblings can have:

And I discovered that if I conduct myself with some circumspection, I find that I can live within these smaller, perhaps very confined territories without exposure to too much hurt. Indeed I find that I can experience some happiness and perhaps give a measure of happiness, too. (310–11)

As all writers are, but especially as they address social definitions, George Bernard Shaw and Brian Friel are the captives of their times. In the years of the First World War, the English aristocracy still nominally ruled the vastest empire in the world, and Shaw could believe in their revitalization even as he saw and exposed their decadence. In relicts of the nineteenth-century adventurers, he saw the vitality that had conquered an empire and that was needed to save it, and so he created the incomparable Captain Shotover as lesson and memory of a part of the English heritage that need not be lost unless the English chose to think it mad or senile or
to take away its rum and let it doze beneath the false moon of the garden lamp and ignore its pronouncements.

But Friel wrote Aristocrats in the 1970s, when there remained nowhere in the British Isles, and especially not in Ireland, an aristocracy that was anything more than a relict. Their power was gone, and their wealth. Their usefulness was gone, subsumed by a middle-class society that provided social services through taxes and socialism and leadership by the ballot box and democratic choice. All that was left for the aristocrats were the same dreams, the same triumphs, and the same failures that the rest of us deal with. They had become private citizens with private lives, without influence over anyone but themselves.

In both plays, the setting-presence of the house and of the father who rules that house and effectively creates his own offspring and thereby determines the shape of the future illustrates through the cruel games of the privileged class both the delusions of their heritage and the truth of their decadence. The greater dramatic power of Heartbreak House, largely attributable to the success of the character of Captain Shotover, may be caused by that play’s proximity in time to one of the great ages of the English aristocracy, the nineteenth century. Shotover is more than nostalgia; he is a living memory, tantalizing us by his very presence, making us revere his vitality and independence. But Father O’Donnell has fallen from life even as he lives; he is impotent and cruel; he cannot speak for himself; he cannot explain the diminishing generations of aristocratic power in his family; he can do nothing to show his children how to face the truths he has told them; he is not even a good subject for their anger. There is nothing left for him to do but to die and thereby to relieve them of the burden of their heritage.

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