

The Doctor's Dilemma

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I remember the play from my teens as I must have seen an TV adaptation of it. I recall it is a serious play presenting a doctor with a moral dilemma over which he anguishes. The actual play is nothing of that sort, as I to my shock realize as I actually read the text almost fifty years later. The tone is flippant and the whole thing reads like a farce, not unlike a work of Oscar Wilde, from which it differs mainly in that it lacks the intermittent 'bon mots' for which the latter acquired some notoriety surviving into posterity. Maybe the comparison is rather apt after all, as both were not only contemporaries but also compatriots, as they were both of Irish stock and born in the mid-fifties. While Wilde died early and tragically, Shaw went on to live more than twice as long, and was still alive when I was born.

The Penguin edition I found in my library contains in the addition to the play a lengthy pamphlete by the author in which he attacks the medical profession in a rather rambling way and gets passionate about the practice of vivisection of which he strongly disapproves. His critic of medicine is aimed not so much at individual practitioners, after all they are but human beings, but at the institution as such which has been formed as a response to the unreasonable demands of the public. He engages in some fairly intelligent discussion of the scientific method and the fallacies of statistics and makes some sarcastic comments on the diversity of opinions in the medical profession, disagreements they are very careful to hide from the public, because of after all, all professions are, in the words of Adam Smith, in conspiracy against the public they ostensibly are set to serve. His real concern is, as noted vivisection, here his arguments are more forceful and structured, more polemical in spirit, with no qualifications nor any second thoughts, the whole practice is simply wrong. It is cruel and it is useless, and his main point is that even if a desire for cruelty may have initially inspired it, it is not maintained through any conscious cruelty at all, only by habit and unquestioned tradition, and that such seemingly innocent reasons constitute the cause for much what is fatally flawed in human conduct. He concludes by some common sense advice to the public. One of them sticking in my mind: Do not try to live for ever. You will not succeed.

In the play itself you find many of his arguments in the pamphlet reused (or rather, as the pamphlet seems to have been written after the play, anticipated) but now for purely comical relief. The irony is laid on thick to be sure that none will be missed, and there is no real conflict, or as the title indicates, any dilemma. The gifted artist whose life should be worth more to save than most others, which, to be honest, can be easily dispensed with, turns out to be a scoundrel, not only shamelessly borrowing money (with no intention of repaying) and not being above blackmail if convenient, but is also a bigamist shamelessly leading women on, marrying them if need be. One of the doctors, supposedly the doctor of the title, has been approached by the wife of the artist desperately pleading that he help her mate. And as he is a bachelor, not immune to the charms of young beautiful

women, he apparently hatches a plan, namely to hand over the patient to a colleague, using his medicaments but sure to botch it up. In this way he can marry the widow, and of course he will have done nothing legally untoward. The plan works, at least initially, the esteemed colleague botches it up as expected and the poor artist, who otherwise may have reasonably expected another three months to live at least, is now put through a crisis that reduces that expectancy to mere hours. So he dies triumphantly not only in the bosom of his devoted wife, but also in the theatrical presence of a group of doctors and, incidentally, that of an inept young journalist in the role of a paparazzo, whose antics are easy to satirize. Some time afterwards, at the eve of a posthumous one-man-show, the doctor visits and makes a full confession to the widow, only to learn that she is already remarried (following the death-bed instructions of her dying husband), and thus he remarks ruefully that he has performed a totally disinterested murder. And then the curtains goes down on what may be a charming period piece, but hardly a work that matters.

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