

The Philanderer

G.B.Shaw

March 1- 4, 2017

This is vintage Shaw. Even his serious dramas are comic in nature, what about his comedies? Hilarious? Surely they are meant to be, and when staged at the right time, no doubt they can be very enjoyable, but read some hundred and twenty-five years or so after their conceptions, they are dated, and their charm, everything Shaw writes has undeniable charm, is mostly due to their characters as period pieces. This particular play is rather confusing and centers on the actions of the philanderer of the title - Leonard Charteries - who seems to be a man around the town (later his type of character would be called a playboy) out to enjoy himself. And enjoyment means of course women. Women are to be changed of course, new challenges, new thrills are desired, so this means for some frustration when it comes to the necessary transition. Charteries has been in fervent love with a certain Julia Craven but is in the process of switching his amorous attentions to the young widow Grace. But the former does not give up so readily and conveniently and shows up at the tender rendez-vous between the two lovers at the home of the latter, and there is a scene in which she professes her love for and inalienable claim on their common lover, the result of which is that Grace retreats and Julia and the philanderer is stuck together when as an added complication the apartment is visited by the two fathers of the ladies, two elderly gentlemen who have just met and realized that they have been former pals in their youth, A most sentimentally charged reunion to the two widowers.

So there is plenty of comic complications as in the chamber farces so popular at the time. Many of Shaw's obsessions find their place in the play. One is Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright who was very fashionable in liberal circles at the time, and who no doubt served Shaw as an inspiration in his own career. Ibsen stands for the emancipated woman, and one of the acts is taking place in the Ibsen Club replete with a bust of Ibsen prominently displayed according to stage directions, where most of the protagonists are members. To be a member you need to be an unmanly man or an unwomanly woman (or a manly woman or a womanly man?). Another one is vivisection, against which Shaw waged an unceasing war. This is represented by the doctor Paramore, who during the play discovers in the *British Journal of Medicine* that the disease of the liver for which he has become famous, and which has only so far been diagnosed in Craven and given him a death sentence, is all bogus as shown through further investigations involving even more sacrifices of animals, including that of a camel. The disease does in fact not exist, and Craven is thus not doomed to an early death. Incidentally his relief of finding out only marred by the realization that the sacrifices, such as no meat, no drink, have all been pointless. Paramore on the other hand is devastated, his prestige as a medical scientist means more to him than the welfare of his patients (which may not be as comically absurd as it appears in the play). In the end the philanderer manages to foist his jilted lover Julia on Paramore, who we understand is not exactly a favorite among women, but Julia for a variety of reasons consents to a union that can only induce physical revulsion and mental fatigue, as far as she is concerned. And

Grace turns down her suitor, who is then doomed to continue being a philanderer. In short a rather trivial play, intended to amuse for an evening, but hardly to be read (or staged) a century later¹.

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¹ Which in fact turns out not be true, recent performances have been given within the last few years, showing that inspired staging can cast new life into withered material. There is after all a difference between a play and a novel. In the former much of the depictions of character and the social interplay have to be done by the actors, while in the latter the novelist has to suggest and evoke it. Then the version I read did not include the appended part having to do with a divorce, and without it, much of the play loses its points, and that appendix seems to be included in modern performances.