

WIT AND ACID

SHARP LINES FROM THE PLAYS OF
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

VOLUME I

Wit and Acid

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the Plays of

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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selected by
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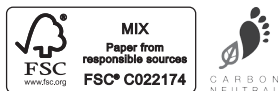
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INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was a writer who plied his trade with a volume and facility that his music-critic self would have recognised in Haydn, Handel or Saint-Saëns. He allowed his pen to carry on going with an ease that sometimes seems unstoppable. He wrote an awful lot of plays, containing an awful lot of words. He was a storyteller who loved the process of telling almost as much – perhaps more than – the story itself. There are moments in his plots where he turns a character inside out simply because the plot has to be resolved some time, even though the soliloquies arguing the opposite have been fierce enough to make such a change hard to credit.

He lived so long that he was born in the age of Dickens, shortly before his good friend

Elgar, and died in the golden age of Hollywood in the year when James Stewart appeared in *Winchester '73* and as man who imagines a rabbit in *Harvey*. Much of Shaw's writing was attached to the moment – the newspaper and magazine articles, the political pamphlets in support of the Socialist cause – and he never managed to get going as a novelist, though he tried. He was in his thirties before he turned properly from a critic into a playwright and the producers discovered him. Thereafter the plays flowed relentlessly for forty years.

He used the theatre for sharp social commentary, as a vehicle for debunking hypocrisy and as an antidote to establishment assumptions. As an Irish Protestant from a middle-class but relatively poor Dublin background who had struggled to make his way in London, he was as unimpressed by English imperial superiority as he was by Irish romantic nationalism. Most of all he was unimpressed by men – his father, schoolmasters, his mother's companions. The result was that many of his plays revolve not just around strong women, but women who actively challenge their powerless status, legal and professional, in English society.

WIT AND ACID

UNPLEASANT PLAYS I

Widowers' Houses

HARRY TRENCH: The steamboat people were
the scum of the earth: Americans and all
sorts.

ACT I

SARTORIUS: I dislike feeling at home when I'm
abroad. It is not precisely what one goes to
the expense for.

ACT I

UNPLEASANT PLAYS 2

The Philanderer

CHARTERIS: When one is young, one marries
out of mere curiosity, just to see what it's
like.

ACT I

GRACE: No woman is the property of a man. A
woman belongs to herself and nobody else.

CHARTERIS: Quite right. Ibsen forever!

ACT I

CHARTERIS: Principle's the poorest reason I
know for making yourself nasty.

ACT II

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CHARTERIS: The fickleness of the women I love
is only matched by the infernal constancy
of the women who love me.

ACT II

CHARTERIS: As a philosopher, it's my business
to tell other people the truth; but it's not
their business to tell it to me. I dont like it;
it hurts.

ACT II

CRAVEN: You dont half see how serious it is
to make a man believe that he has only
another year to live: you really dont...
I've made my will, which was altogether
unnecessary; and I've been reconciled to
a lot of people I quarelled with: people I
cant stand under ordinary circumstances.
Then I've let the girls get around me at
home to an extent I should never have
done if I had my life before me. I've done
a lot of serious thinking and reading and
extra church-going. And now it turns out a
simple waste of time. On my soul, it's too
disgusting: I'd rather die like a man when
I said I would.

ACT II