

G. Bernard Shaw/ The use of Preface in *Arms and the Man*:

Why did Bernard Shaw write plays? Shaw said “I am no ordinary playwright. I am a specialist in immoral and unorthodox plays. My reputation was gained by my constant struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals.” His object was to present his ideas to the general public, who were not likely to read his philosophic works, in such a way as to shock them into remembering his views. His doctrines are explained in the prefaces to the plays. In writing prefaces to his plays, Shaw is distinguished from other playwrights of his time. In his preface to *Plays Pleasant*, Shaw tells his readers that a further reason for writing plays was his desire to prove that there was a real movement for new drama in England.

It must be remembered when reading the Preface that Shaw was writing it at a time when English drama was in a state of revolt against the conventional, well-made play, which was performed, not to educate an audience or even to make it think, but to entertain it only. Many of Shaw’s ideas have been adopted by now, and may even seem old-fashioned; but to his readers they were new and surprising.

The theatre, Shaw went on, was increasing in its social importance. But theatres could do as much harm as bad schools or churches, of which in some causes it has taken the place. He felt that the national importance of the theatre would be someday recognized as equal to that of army, the fleet, the church, the law, and the schools.

Shaw’s view of romance was that it was a great heresy to be swept off from art and life, because it was the food of pessimism and the bane of self-respect. It was difficult for an actor, who in earlier plays made it a point to be a perfect gentleman, to sympathize with an author who looked upon gentility as a dishonest folly, and upon bravery and chivalry as treasonable to women, and stultify to men.

However, there was a preface to the original volume of plays which contains this play and three others: *The Pleasant Plays*, 1898, revised in 1921. As Shaw noted elsewhere, a preface seldom or never concerns the play which is to follow the preface, and this preface is no exception. Instead, Shaw used this preface to comment upon the new style of drama (or simply what he calls New Drama), a name applied to dramas such as his or Ibsen’s, plays which were not written to be commercial successes, but to be intellectual vehicles which would make the audience consider their life — to be intellectually aware of their historical place in civilization. Shaw refuses to pander himself to popular demands for

romantic situations. Ultimately, according to Shaw, the theatre should become a place for the airing of ideas and a place where deception and pretence can be exposed in a way that is delightful to the audience.

Arms and The Man depicts the military conflict between Serbia and Bulgaria, which demonstrated the instability of Balkan Peace. Raina, a romantic Bulgarian girl, dreaming of her lover Sergius as he fights in the war with Serbia. She is surprised in her room by Captain Bluntchli, a Swiss soldier on the Serbian side, as he flees from the victorious Bulgarians. She shelters him, although his romantic views of heroism displeases her, and he reveals himself as being afraid, hungry, unwilling to die. He carries chocolates instead of cartridges, she gives him the remains of her box. She deceives his pursuers, while Louka, the servant girl, notices his pistol and realizes what is going.

The play opens at night in a lady's bedchamber in a small Bulgarian town in 1885, the year of the Serbo-Bulgarian war. The room is decorated in the worst possible taste, a taste reflected in the mistress' (Catherine Petkoff's) desire to seem as cultured and as Viennese as possible. But the room is furnished with only cheap bits of Viennese things; the other pieces of furniture come from the Turkish Ottoman Empire, reflecting the long occupation by the Turks of the Balkan peninsula. On the balcony, standing and staring at the romantic beauty of the night, "intensely conscious that her own youth and beauty are a part of it," is young Raina Petkoff. Just inside, conspicuously visible, is a box of chocolate creams, which will play an important part later in this act and which will ultimately become a symbol of the type of war which Shaw will satirize.

Raina's mother, Catherine Petkoff, is a woman who could easily pass for a splendid example of the wife, but is determined to be a Viennese lady. As the play begins, Catherine is excited over the news that the Bulgarian forces have just won a splendid battle and the "hero of the hour, the idol of the regiment" who led them to victory is Raina's fiancé, Sergius Saranoff. She describes how Sergius boldly led a cavalry charge into the midst of the Serbs, scattering them in all directions. Raina wonders if such a popular hero will care any longer for her little affections, but she is on the other hand delighted about the news. She wonders if heroes such as Sergius esteem such heroic ideas because they have read too much Byron and Pushkin.

They are interrupted by the entry of Louka, a handsome and proud peasant girl, who announces that the Serbs have been routed and have

scattered throughout the town and that some of the fugitives have been chased into the neighbourhood. Thus, the doors must be secured since there might be fighting and shooting in the street below. Raina is annoyed that the fugitives must be killed. Catherine goes below to fasten up the doors, and Louka shows Raina how to fasten the shutters if there is any shooting and then leaves to help fasten the rest of the house.