

CAESAR, SHAW, AND MR. NASH

Written for "The Listener"
by ANTON VOGT

IT has become fashionable since Pascal made a screen version which out-de-Milled de Mille to say that *Caesar and Cleopatra* is second-rate Shaw. For a while I succumbed to this, but on maturer reflection I am prepared to believe that the spectacle of the film has overshadowed the message of the play, and that there is more to it than most people think.

What is Shaw driving at? The general idea seems to be that he is debunking Caesar, but as usual the general idea is wrong. All the bunk comes from people so wrapped up in the romantic tradition even when they are picking holes in it, that they can't recognise a real hero when he appears without romantic trappings.

The Doer as Artist

Shaw's interest in Caesar is no paradox. From his point of view Caesar was not merely a great man, but a great artist; which he would regard as the indispensable corollary. That he practised the arts of peace and war placed him head and shoulders above the painters of pictures and the makers of poems and trinkets. Like Shaw, Caesar

considered good government the greatest of the arts and civilisation as the synthesis of all art, and like Shaw he was guided by his head rather than his heart. Even his ruthlessness was devoid of venom: it was moral and intellectual, and became increasingly so as he entered what Shaw would call his third phase. He planned conquests in the way engineers build bridges, with ends and means equally within his reach. With fewer and weaker legions he would have made an admirable Fabius. As it was, their strength and number were the product of draughtsmanship rather than inspiration, for Caesar crossed his Rubicons on home-made bridges.

This Caesar is said to be debunked by Shaw because the dramatist makes him human rather than divine. Shakespeare's Caesar is a demi-god living in the mouths of romantics who feared him. Shaw's Caesar is a demi-god only in a half-line spoken wryly by himself, and even then he loses interest in the Sphinx as soon as Cleopatra comes. He had both eyes for a woman and two ears tuned to the music of taxes. He was, if you will, more like you and me and Mr. Nash than Nietzsche.

I bring in Mr. Nash to point a moral. Most people can see merit in a balanced

budget without recognising it as a work of art; but it does not follow that one can expect Caesar, Shaw, or Mr. Nash to share their point of view. To carry the argument a step further, Michaelangelo and da Vinci put together didn't produce anything half so beautiful as 30,000 State houses with electric fittings and modern plumbing. Mozart didn't produce sounds half so pleasing as children's padded foot-falls on a decent stretch of lawn, and the pedestrian creator of the Venus de Milo was a poor hack compared to the man who made Cleopatra a queen. That most people haven't got around to recognising this isn't Shaw's fault, let alone Mr. Nash's or mine. It is simply that people's instinctive reactions have been clouded over by a lot of hocus-pocus about art bearing no relation to life. In a word, they have been corrupted by the romantic tradition.

Exit the Hero

This tradition dies hard, and it is only because it dies hard that heroes in the accepted sense can continue to live. The romantics celebrate history's saints and desperadoes, surrounding them with an aura, while dismissing with a shrug that much rarer bird, the efficient and practical man. The administrator, the

scientist, and the engineer are ignored while flamboyant little men on white horses ride into the popular imagination on badly written textbooks.

Even for their planned success is no substitute for spectacular failure. The soldier has to die to live for ever. Leonidas living would be Leonidas forgotten. The saint must burn to win his flaming halo. Even the explorer must get lost to be saved. And it doesn't matter how they do it, as long as they are single minded, obstinate, gallant, and absurd. Consider Scott and Amundsen. Scott didn't know enough about the Antarctic to get out of it alive. Amundsen knew so much about it that his journey to the Pole was like a conducted tour. Scott, the failure, emerged a heroic legend. Amundsen, the success, remains a difficult name to pronounce. As always, people are only interested in conducted tours when a bus strikes the headlines by way of the kerb.

Shaw, for whom thought means nothing without action, naturally admires Caesar, the man of thought and action. He recognises that only the doer can

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