

Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*: The War in 'Neverland'

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One of the achievements of recent Shaw studies has been to present *Heartbreak House* as a play of apocalyptic and eschatological vision in which the first world war is seen as a crisis in European civilization.¹ This essay is concerned with the meaning of 'heartbreak' in relation to Shaw's vision of the war in *Heartbreak House*, and, in particular, with connections between *Heartbreak House* and the fashionable 'heartbreak' of Barrie's Peter Pan and Shaw's correspondence with Mrs Patrick Campbell. It seems to me that this approach might be useful in order to oppose a drift in recent criticism towards depoliticization of *Heartbreak House* and a view that in this play Shaw's usual concern with socialist reformism and revolution is replaced by despair and questions about whether it is possible for mankind and civilization to survive the war. So, for example, A. M. Gibbs concludes that 'the ambivalence of *Heartbreak House* is one essential part of its strength' and says that Shaw's refusal 'to be unfaithful to the human materials of the play' makes it 'a great work of dramatic art, and not a diatribe'.² In contrast, it seems to me that, while *Heartbreak House* achieves a complicated kind of inclusiveness, it is not less political than Shaw's other major plays, and that it includes the effect of a diatribe from the twentieth-century holocaust/abyss as well as the ambiguity, contradictory impulses and contradictory dramatic progressions which are characteristic of so many of the great works of early modernism.³ Shaw's plays involve special relations between political comment and his understanding and use of cultural and dramatic tradition. *Heartbreak House* is an attempt to respond to his sense of crisis in civilization with social and cultural analysis which might explain the pathological conditions of the old order

- 1 Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918: Journey to Heartbreak* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) remains the main contribution to recent criticism; see also Stanley Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw: Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work* (New York, Frederick Ungar, 1982), Chapter 14, 'Shaw's Lear', pp. 173-80.
- 2 A. M. Gibbs, *The Art and Mind of Shaw: Essays in Criticism* (London, Macmillan, 1983), p. 189.
- 3 In contrast, see Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910-22* (London, Macmillan, 1984) p. 66.

which have led to the crisis; the terms and style of his comedy are a commentary on social and cultural codes which have contributed to the possibility of an end of the old order of civilization. One of the distinctive features of *Heartbreak House* is that it approaches a twentieth-century vision of the holocaust/abyss and revolution via analysis which reflects the cultural codes and conventions of fashionable London before the first world war.

Shaw's letter to Mrs Patrick Campbell on 14 May 1916 associates *Heartbreak House* with a personal experience of heartbreak, although Shaw says he does not know what he is writing about:

I, who once wrote whole plays *d'un seul trait*, am creeping through a new one (to prevent myself crying) at odd moments, two or three speeches at a time. I don't know what it's about.⁴

The experience Shaw describes is in part heartbreak in the traditional sense of some overwhelming distress, romantic or otherwise. As in *Heartbreak House* and its preface, the experience Shaw presents is the result of a long tradition of tragic feeling, and the nineteenth-century tradition of heartbreak, as well as his sense of his own condition and the condition of England at that point in the first world war. In literature the great nineteenth-century tradition of heartbreak includes such diversely exemplary works as Hans Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl', Douglas Jerrold's *Black Ey'd Susan*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. The nineteenth-century tradition includes intense and ecstatic sadness, and a sense of enormous oppression and despair, and, as the examples illustrate, it is associated with the suffering of virtuous poverty, and romantic anguish, although it is also a general existential feeling of distress and oppression for which a flood of tears might seem the only proper expression. But Shaw's version of heartbreak in *Heartbreak House* is such that what needs to be established in this essay is not so much the nineteenth-century tradition (which is fortunate, as criticism is less intrepid than Alice about striking out into the nineteenth-century pool of tears).⁵ Rather the issue is Shaw's version of heartbreak in *Heartbreak House* and its significance in relation to some of the background of his career in the same period.

- 4 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, edited by Alan Dent (London, Victor Gollancz, 1952). Unless noted otherwise, references to the correspondence of Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell are to this edition.
- 5 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter 2, 'The Pool of Tears', in *The Annotated Alice*, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 35-44.

Heartbreak House was written between 4 March 1916 and 26 May 1917, and revised in the second half of 1917.⁶ Shaw's preface was written in June 1919. The preface provides an introductory account of heartbreak and the play in which the main challenge is that heartbreak has become a focus for analysis of the causes of the first world war and the condition of England. Shaw explains that *Heartbreak House* is an indictment of the ruling classes of Europe in 'this half century of the drift to the abyss'.⁷ The emphasis is on the condition of England and a state of decadence and degeneration in the class which has been responsible for directions in civilization. Where the reader might expect an approach through direct use of the standard meaning of heartbreak, the preface proceeds in a manner of high Shavian wit to assume that the condition of Europe is a state of overwhelming distress, and to make heartbreak the term for the wider condition of cultural and class decadence which Shaw defines: '*Heartbreak House* is not merely the name of the play which follows this preface. It is cultured, leisured Europe before the war' (p. 7). The allegorical method associates the notions of overwhelming distress, the war, romance, and a method of historical, social analysis in an account of heartbreak which presents it as pathological (like heart disease or heart failure). *Heartbreak House*, therefore, is where Europe is 'stifling its soul', and the members of the house are 'patients' (p. 7). In this special sense heartbreak is a condition of cultured, leisured Europe which includes 'utter enervation and futilization', 'utter futility', and a pursuit of 'sex and . . . all sorts of refined pleasures' which could make this condition seem not only 'nice' but also 'very delightful' (pp. 7-8). The class view is stated in the precise terms that *Heartbreak House* is the 'cultured, leisured' class of the intelligentsia and the nobility and gentry, the 'repositories of culture' in the old order (p. 8). Shaw's concern is with class and culture, and, in particular, with analysis of the dominant culture. One important connection which has not received sufficient critical attention is that the preface and *Heartbreak House* are further stages of the argument Shaw advanced in November 1914, in his pamphlet *Common Sense About the War*.

Shaw begins *Common Sense About the War* with a reflection on

- 6 Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House: A Facsimile of The Revised Typescript*, introduction by Stanley Weintraub and Anne Wright (New York, Garland Publishing, 1981), pp. xiv-xx.
- 7 Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1964), p. 14. Unless noted otherwise, references are to this edition.

the war as 'heartbreaking wreckage', and argues that it is a result of the militarism of an international class, the Junkers of Europe.⁸ Significantly, he borrows a phrase from H. G. Wells and denounces militarism as a failure in the heart of Europe, 'this drilling, trampling foolery in the heart of Europe'.⁹ The argument is explicitly socialist. Furthermore, it moves increasingly towards consideration of the relation between the war and culture, in the sense of the arts and educated civilization.¹⁰ Shaw reminds the reader that socialism 'never forgets' that 'higher education, culture, foreign travel, knowledge of the world' is 'confined to one small class'. In addition, he jokes that good Germans must be asking how the England of 'Bernard Shaw and Cunninghame Graham' could be over-run by militarism, and he comments that 'the Germans are just as cultured as we are (to say the least) and . . . war has nevertheless driven them to do these things'.¹¹ That is, *Common Sense About the War* is a political commentary on the causes of the war, and it foreshadows his concern in *Heartbreak House* with the wider failure in culture which has been responsible for the war. In this case, the evidence seems to be clearly that, as well as being a response which is like *King Lear*, *Heartbreak House* is an expression of a well established and continued commitment to a socialist understanding of history and civilization, including even the horror of the first world war.

There is also considerable evidence that Shaw's commitment to socialism continued throughout the war, and throughout the period of the writing of *Heartbreak House*. The first stage of the Russian revolution came as a result of the war at the end of the writing of the first draft of *Heartbreak House*, and the development of the revolution accompanied Shaw's revision of the typescript in the second half of 1917. In a letter of 24 May 1917, Shaw wrote to Gorki, 'I regard the revolution as such a gain to humanity that it not only at last justifies the Franco-Anglo-Russian alliance (which in the days of the Tsardom was a disgrace to western democracy), but justifies the whole war'.¹² A month before, he had written to Frank Harris celebrating the abdication of the Tsar.¹³ It is also relevant

- 8 Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War* (London, Constable, 1931), pp. 22-5.
 9 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 58, 99-100.
 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2, 102.
 12 Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 1911-1925*, edited by Dan H. Laurence, (London, Max Reinhardt, 1985), p. 474.
 13 *Ibid.*, p. 463. See also *What I Really Wrote About the War*, p. 278.

that in the later stages of the writing of *Heartbreak House* Shaw's journalism repeats the theme that the war is heartbreaking, but in a way that distances his own view from heartbreak. In his newspaper reports from the front published 5-8 March 1917, Shaw says that while some journalists convey 'a heartbreaking sense' of the war, the troops experience the war differently, and encourage something more than despair about the 'waste' which is its law.¹⁴

In the preface to *Heartbreak House* the direct focus on the war and culture includes the important initial emphasis that the people of *Heartbreak House* 'wished to realize their favourite fictions and poems in their own lives' (p. 8). The corresponding passage in the play is Mrs Hushabye's reaction to Ellie Dunn's romance with Marcus Darnley: 'How much better than the happiest dream! . . . No more wishing one had an interesting book to read, because life is so much happier than any book!' (p. 70). The development of the argument in the preface conflates the idea of a catastrophic failure of European culture with the war in the trenches and the condition of England. Heartbreak becomes an apocalypse in which people are mad, the world is struck by pestilence (p. 19), obscene (p. 22), and given over to 'diabolical things' (p. 24), and England is at a point where the whole country seems 'mad, futile, silly, incompetent, with no hope of victory except the hope that the enemy might be just as mad' (p. 31). In this situation 'the accredited custodians of culture' (p. 21), the 'talkers' of *Heartbreak House*, become active propagandists of the war (pp. 30-31). Nevertheless, the preface ends with a series of reversals in which Shaw's socialist 'philosophy of history' (p. 28) moves from despair to visions of a new age rising out of the abyss. The war is seen as an occasion of social and cultural change, 'a tremendous jolt', which will lead to the rise of socialist civilization, the 'next phase' in which the proletariat become custodians of culture, and revolution is an agent for further rapid social change: 'Revolution . . . is now a possibility so imminent that hardly by trying to suppress it in other countries . . . can our Government stave it off at home' (pp. 44-5). The preface introduces the play itself in terms of an opposition between 'the terrible castigation of comedy' proper to Shaw's understanding and the 'fools paradise' (p. 44) of the pre-war, pre-revolutionary theatre.

The 'terrible castigation' of *Heartbreak House* is much closer to the methods of Renaissance satiric comedy than might be expected. As the allegorical design might suggest, *Heartbreak House* gains from comparison with Jonson's great comedies such as *Volpone* and

14 Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, pp. 259, 267.

The Alchemist. Reading *Heartbreak House* as satiric castigation involves recognition of dramatic irony where recent criticism tends to take *Heartbreak House* on its own most flattering terms. One such key point is Mazzini Dunn's tribute to *Heartbreak House* as 'what is best in English culture . . . very charming people, most advanced, unprejudiced, frank, humane, unconventional, democratic, free-thinking, and everything that is delightful to thoughtful people' (p. 152-3). As the preface warns, *Heartbreak House* can be all this — advanced, liberal, cultured, and even with a sophisticated taste for revolutionary theory and Shavian drama — and remain futile, violent, self-destructive, and, as Hector says harshly, a place of 'heartbroken imbeciles' (p. 152). Ellie Dunn is a more crucial point where recent criticism underestimates Shaw's ironic view of heartbreak.

The beginning of Ellie's visit in Act One is presented as an initiation into heartbreak, although the wider view is that she is already an initiate. The conversation which follows the revelation that Hector Hushabye is Marcus Darnley is one of the most frequently quoted passages in the play. Significantly, it is Mrs Hushabye who first says, 'I thought you were going to be broken hearted', which is followed after some time by Ellie's choric comment, 'I have a horrible fear that my heart is broken, but that heartbreak is not like what I thought it must be' (pp. 71-2). The obvious comic irony is that, whereas Mrs Hushabye encourages her to cry, Ellie does not, and it seems that heartbreak makes her heartless or hard-hearted, which is why she says that heartbreak is not what she expected. The obvious joke is that this contemporary condition of heartbreak seems so different from the old romantic order of experience that includes 'The Little Match Girl', *Black Ey'd Susan*, Tennyson, and Alice in the pool of tears. Mrs Hushabye replies that the new order of heartbreak is 'only life educating you, pettikins' (p. 72).

Recent criticism has presented this as the beginning of adventures in which Ellie journeys into maturity and reality. For example, Anne Wright describes Ellie's heartbreak as dis-illusionment, 'a painful but educative process'; and Ellie herself is described as 'a visionary figure, and the suffering and articulating centre of heartbreak in the play'.¹⁵ But that kind of reading overturns the essential agreement between the play and the preface. It distorts the basic dramatic design in which the comic charm of *Heartbreak House* is stripped

15 Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910-22*, pp. 94-8. See also A. M. Gibbs, *The Art and Mind of Shaw*, p. 182.

away (and maintained) to show that heartbreak is absurd and horrific. In the process Ellie's heartlessness is shown to be part of a fashionable modern version of heartbreak which is both a mixture of disillusion and dreams and a sophisticated continuation of the romantic, nineteenth-century tradition of heartbreak. In the completed design of *Heartbreak House* these ironies are in place from the beginning, and exploited in episodes which are elaborately repetitive and both increasingly obvious and more complicated. Lady Utterword helps to establish the view at the beginning: for example, she explains that she is 'really very much hurt and annoyed and disillusioned . . . [*she is on the point of weeping*]' (p. 55). The beginning of the design also involves establishing similarities between Lady Utterword and Ellie, so that both seem to have come home. Act One then progresses via the irony that Ellie has come to Heartbreak House in a state of heartbreak, and the questions about whether her disillusionment shocks her out of heartbreak or initiates her further into it. Another main irony is that Mrs Hushabye says she wants to help, but embroils Ellie (and everyone else) in further heartbreak; and the end of Act One includes the revelation that Hector and Hesione Hushabye are locked in a state of heartbreak which is a more extreme version of Ellie's. The Hushabys share a vision of life as heartbreak in which love and desire are seen as 'heaven' and, in disillusionment, as an 'enchanted dream', 'confounded madness', and 'diabolical . . . fascination' (p. 84).

Heartbreak House becomes an allegorical place belonging to a tradition of evil houses which descends through the nineteenth century (and Dickens's novels) from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Faerie Queene*. Heartbreak House is revealed as a place of foolish disorder, perverse practices, spiritual disease, and demonic suffering. The view involves continuing tension between fashionable comedy and the satiric and allegorical dimension.¹⁶ The charm of the beginning is accompanied by the threat that Captain Shotover is an old clown who might be senile, 'His mind wanders from one thing to another' (p. 54). Lady Utterword picks up this theme and says that disorder is one of the basic conditions of the house, 'the same disorder in ideas, in talk, in feeling' (p. 55). In addition, heartbreak is associated with childhood and childish

16 The account of *Heartbreak House* in this paragraph is supported by Bernard F. Dukore, *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw and Brecht* (Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1980), Chapter 4, 'Society's Crumbling Foundations', pp. 82-90.

fantasy. Lady Utterword says Heartbreak House is where she was a child, and she describes its disorder as childish, as if it is a place of adult childhood, like an adult version of the absurd disorder of the houses in *Alice in Wonderland* (p. 55). She provides an explicit guide to the fact that Heartbreak House is an allegorical place where people are like adult children and absurdly childish; and this is basic to the repetitive and cumulative dramatic irony that Heartbreak House represents 'what is best in English culture' (p. 152) as being in a state of futile confusion and ruin.

The view in terms of childhood and childishness is repeated throughout the play. For example, at the end of Act Two Lady Utterword reduces Randall to tears and explains at length that his heartbreak is a condition in which he needs to be treated like a child who has been 'naughty', and is suffering from 'nerves', and needs to be given 'a good cry and a healthy nervous shock'; and she says, 'If you were a mother, you'd understand' (p. 137). There is a similar elaborate episode earlier in Act Two, when Mangan is woken out of his trance and '*begins to cry like a child*', so that Mrs Hushabye asks, 'Have I broken your heart? I didn't know you had one. How could I?' (p. 112). In Act One the initial view of *Heartbreak House* is in part via Nurse Guinness, the nurse-maid, then Shotover and Ellie as an archetypal father and child, followed by Lady Utterword and Mrs Hushabye as siren/daughter/mother figures. The development of the design is extreme. Nurse Guinness addresses people as children — as 'Miss Hussy' (p. 51), 'ducky' and 'doty' (p. 52), 'Miss Addie' (p. 54), and so on. Mrs Hushabye is at times like Nurse Guinness, but she is a mother-figure who is like a middle-aged child, with a manner of speech (which she has picked up from her children — p. 64), and a view of life, which make her seem like a girl playing a game. 'What a lark! . . . you do look a swell', she says to Lady Utterword (p. 59), and later she sees heartbreak as 'quite a lark' (p. 67). Throughout the play one implication is that heartbreak is childish egoism and fantasy, and a condition which alternates between claims to romantic passion and disillusion, as in a game. Shaw develops these themes through extremes of fantasy and correspondences to children's games and children's literature.

The allegorical house like a ship is like a childhood game, or fantasy, and the effect is increased by such complications as that the characters include an old sea captain, an ex-pirate, and a hero who fights imaginary duels and dresses up in an Arab costume. The parallels to children's literature include the comic allegorical names and, in particular, 'Mrs Hushabye', which helps to signal that in her

darker aspect Mrs Hushabye is like the horrific mothers and witches in children's literature, and that the baby in the tree-top in the nursery rhyme is similar to the image of the ship adrift and heading towards the breakers. The similarities to *Alice in Wonderland* include a possible allusion when Mrs Hushabye says that Captain Shotover is 'mad as a hatter, you know, but quite harmless' and recommends his conversation (p. 61). In addition, there are considerable connections between *Heartbreak House* and J. M. Barrie, and especially between *Heartbreak House* and the world of *Peter Pan* and *Wendy*. There are similarities between Shaw's play and *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), in that Shaw's house like a ship is similar to the set for the third act of *The Admirable Crichton*; and *Heartbreak House* can seem like a much later reply (as Barrie's play raises the question whether 'there is something wrong with England' and implies that it is unthinkable that the established order should change).¹⁷

More importantly, there are extensive connections between *Heartbreak House* and *Peter Pan*, and between the Shaw of *Heartbreak House* and Barrie. *Peter Pan* was one of the most widely successful fictions of English fashionable society between the turn of the century and the first world war, and Shaw was very much aware of *Peter Pan* as one of the 'favourite fictions' of fashionable society. Shaw's comment in the preface to *Heartbreak House* that the 'nice people' wished 'to realize their favourite fictions and poems in their own lives' is relevant. In one sense *Peter Pan* is one of the favourite fictions of the characters of *Heartbreak House*, and one of the models for their behaviour. The most obvious correspondence is that Hector Hushabye and most of the other men of *Heartbreak House* are like *Peter Pan*, to the extent that they seem like adults who are boys 'who would not grow up' (as in the *Peter Pan* sub-title). Hector's adventures as Marcus Darnley and his strange combination of dream, boasting and lies make him very similar to the *Peter Pan* model (pp. 66-72).

Barrie's *Peter Pan* appeared in a number of different versions and forms between 1902 and the first world war, notably as a play in 1904, as the story illustrated by Arthur Rackham in 1906, and as the novel *Peter and Wendy* in 1911, the year in which the statue of *Peter Pan* was erected in Kensington Gardens. Furthermore, from the turn of the century to the period of *Heartbreak House*, Shaw and

17 In the grand exchange at the end of *The Admirable Crichton* Lady Mary protests, 'Then there is something wrong with England' to which Crichton replies, 'My lady, not even from you can I listen to a word against England'.

Barrie were something like twin stars of the London theatre, although Barrie was the antithesis of Shaw, as the dramatist who created fictions for the establishment on its own terms. They were also neighbours in Adelphi Terrace, and they maintained extensive 'friendly relations' (in Shaw's phrase).¹⁸ On the other hand, the further record of Shaw's reactions to Barrie and his work is a mixture of polite and at times equivocal praise, and flashes of opposition. In 1906, in his memorial tribute to Ibsen, Shaw pays Barrie the equivocal compliment that (in contrast to Ibsen) he has 'an extraordinary amenity of touch which prevents anything he does from distressing his audience'.¹⁹ Shaw also told Hesketh Pearson that he wrote *Androcles and the Lion* in reaction to Peter Pan:

When *Peter Pan* was in its first great vogue Max Beerbohm caricatured Barrie reading it to a circle of elderly people and children. The elderlies were beaming with enjoyment: the children were all asleep. I agreed, and wrote *Androcles* to show what a play for children should be like. It should never be childish.²⁰

As *Androcles and the Lion* was written in February 1912, the version of Peter Pan which is Shaw's most likely point of reference for this play and in the period up to *Heartbreak House* is the novel *Peter and Wendy* which was published in October 1911 (and accordingly *Peter and Wendy* has been used as the reference in this essay). Shaw published *Androcles* (and sent Barrie a copy) in 1915, the year before he began writing *Heartbreak House*. There is further evidence of his interest in Peter Pan in the same period in his letters to Mrs Patrick Campbell, and, in particular, in his letter written on 22 April 1913. This letter includes a set of sonnets which were censored in the original published version of the correspondence. The second sonnet develops a complicated Peter Pan image which proves to be about heartbreak and sex. The sonnet is evidence of the unusual extremes to which Shaw was driven by his infatuation for Stella Campbell. He presents himself as a child who has tried to be a man with a man's hard heart, but proves to be 'not a bit like Peter Pan / For Peter had no heart', and Shaw, 'this poor waif', trembles 'with love and music'.²¹ In addition, he claims that Stella recognizes him as her child-lover and says, 'rejoice / And bite

18 Hesketh Pearson, *G.B.S. A Postscript* (London, Collins, 1951), p. 25.

19 Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), p. 397.

20 Hesketh Pearson, *G.B.S. A Postscript*, p. 75.

21 Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1911-1925*, edited by Dan H. Laurence, pp. 168-9.

my breasts and ravish all my store / For men I love, but babies I adore'. The allusion appears in a context of other references and other boy-lover/mother siren fictions which suggest that Peter Pan was a continuing reference point in the romance. For example, in March 1913 Stella writes Shaw a prose-poem about a boy to whom she gives her heart and who turns on his heel and whistles a gay tune; and the next day Shaw writes that Barrie's new play 'is announced to follow the next Peter Pan revival'.²² Barrie himself is a continuing presence in the correspondence, as 'the great genius who lives opposite you', as Stella describes him, and as Shaw's friend, rival dramatist, and rival for Stella's interest.²³ There are other connections between Shaw's correspondence with Stella and *Heartbreak House*, and between Peter Pan and his view of the war, but even at this point it seems probable that Shaw himself was aware of the correspondences between Peter Pan and *Heartbreak House*. Certainly the effect of this material is to underline that *Heartbreak House* is at once charming and childish, and that its fashionable modern heartbreak is a mixture of dream and disillusion, heartlessness and tears.

Shaw's use of the Peter Pan image in his sonnet to Stella is an outrageously proper response to the Peter Pan story as it appears in *Peter and Wendy*. One of the surprises of reading *Peter and Wendy* as an adult is finding that it is, in fact, written for adults as well as for children, and in a manner of extreme and ambiguous sophistication. The fairies seem to live in a state of sexual licence, and Tinkerbell is a *demi-monde* vamp.²⁴ The love-bites of Shaw's letter to Stella imitate Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, but they are also reminiscent of Tinkerbell, who gives Peter 'a loving bite' when it seems that she might die (p. 196). More importantly *Peter and Wendy* is a major parallel to *Heartbreak House* for the reason that *Peter and Wendy* itself is an analysis of fashionable society and culture, and an analysis which focuses on heartbreak. That is, *Peter and Wendy* is an earlier analysis of society and culture which foreshadows Shaw's analysis in *Heartbreak House*, but with the difference that Barrie is concerned with analysis, acceptance and celebration of the established order. *Peter and Wendy* is a view of heartbreak from

22 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, pp. 24, 28, 43, 49, 153.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 100; see also Shaw's letter, p. 96.

24 J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, October 1911), pp. 35, 108-9. Further page references are to this edition. For recent discussion of Peter Pan see Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London, Macmillan, 1984).

within Heartbreak House. For example, Barrie draws extensive correspondences between Neverland and the fashionable social world of Mr and Mrs Darling. As Shaw does, he presents an analysis of similarities and exchanges between childhood and fashionable society. Mr Darling is like a spoiled child, and Peter and Wendy play make-believe games of mother and father. While the Neverland is an island of childhood make-believe come true (p. 73), Peter's credo, 'I don't want ever to be a man . . . I want always to be a little boy and to have fun' (p. 42), is presented as one of the dreams of fashionable society; and Peter's achievement of eternal childhood and pleasure is presented as at once a triumph over heartbreak and a study in heartbreak. The theme which is repeated at the end and which provides the last sentence is that Neverland is a study in the careless heartlessness and happiness of children and their games: 'and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless' (p. 267). But the innocent heartlessness of Neverland is a condition of heartbreak, and childhood is conflated with adulthood. So the narrator says that adults are 'like the most heartless things in the world, which is what children are, but so attractive; and we have an entirely selfish time; and then when we have need of especial attention we nobly return for it, confident that we should be embraced instead of smacked' (p. 166).

The idea that heartbreak is a paradox of tears and heartlessness is developed throughout the novel. One of the main structural devices of *Peter and Wendy* is that, while Peter is heartless, the first time Wendy sees him he is in tears, and she asks, 'Boy . . . why are you crying?' (p. 36); and that question is repeated at the end (p. 265). There are a number of parallels to Peter's tears in Neverland. For example, Captain Hook, Peter's *doppelgänger*, has eyes of 'a profound melancholy' (p. 80), and Smee more than once 'had touched the fount of Hook's tears and made it flow' (p. 202); and Peter cries when Tinker Bell seems to be dying, and the narrator says that Tinker Bell 'liked his tears so much that she put out her beautiful finger and let them run over it' (p. 197). *Peter and Wendy* is a virtuoso performance of the heartbreak of tears. The children's flight to Neverland leads to a view of the Darlings and Nana as a stylish study in sentimental heartbreak (which is the view presented in Bedford's illustration — p. 56). Hook's defeat becomes an occasion for a precise definition of the experience of heartbreak. When Hook realizes that he is facing Peter, the narrator comments, 'In that frightful moment I think his fierce heart broke' (p. 224). The children's return to the nursery becomes heartbreak triumphant.

Peter sees that Mrs Darling has tears in her eyes and feels that she is inside him (p. 234), and the celebration of the 'bliss' of a mother's love includes sadness and tears and the image of Peter Pan 'looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred' (p. 247). Within this sustained and complicated account of heartbreak, the causes Barrie implies range through sexual knowledge, the anguish caused by the 'unfairness' of people and the world (p. 139), and, in a way that foreshadows *Heartbreak House*, the issue associated with Captain Hook, the problem of the 'degeneration' of even the best people, and their confusion about 'good form' (pp. 203, 209). In retrospect *Peter and Wendy* can even seem prophetic, in that it involves a situation where one of the main themes seems to be 'we . . . have to go on, for we don't know how to stop' (p. 61), and where a sense of impending doom leads to a climax which seems to be the great fight to end all fights.

Shaw's other main reference to Peter Pan from this period reveals that Shaw himself saw correspondences between the war and the Peter Pan story. In *Common Sense About the War*, Shaw's concern with the war and culture includes an implicit consideration of culture which closely foreshadows *Heartbreak House*. If Germany and England are the countries of Goethe and Bernard Shaw (both writers of true culture), then, beyond militarism and commercialism, what is the condition of literary and other culture which has led to the war?

And when we fight for the Tsar we are not fighting for Tolstoy or Gorki, but for the forces that Tolstoy thundered against all his life and that would have destroyed him had he not been himself a highly connected Junker as well as a revolutionary Christian.²⁵

In that case, what are the literary and other cultural forces which are for the Tsar, and the Kaiser, and against Gorki, Shaw and the future of civilization? At the end of *Common Sense About the War* there is a strong implication that Barrie and Peter Pan might be among these dark forces. The argument builds to denunciation of Germany as an exponent of militarist commercialism which claims that war is 'the method by which the nation of the highest culture can impose that culture on its neighbours'. From that claim, with its irony about 'the highest culture', Shaw turns to Napoleon and, finally, to a stinging denunciation of the Kaiser and a call for an English victory. What might have been less expected is that, in order to damn the

25 Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, p. 82.

Kaiser as a representative of 'the false ideals of his class', Shaw describes him as Peter Pan:

He had a hereditary craze for playing at soldiers; and he was and is a naive suburban snob . . . his stage walk, familiar through the cinematograph, is the delight of romantic boys, and betrays his own boyish love of the *Paradeschritt*. It is frightful to think of the powers which Europe, in its own snobbery, left in the hands of this Peter Pan; and appalling as the results of that criminal levity have been, yet, being by no means free from his romantic follies myself, I do not feel harshly towards Peter, who, after all, kept the peace for over twenty-six years. In the end his talk and his games of soldiers in preparation for a toy conquest of the world frightened his neighbours into a league against him . . .²⁶

In these circumstances it seems even more likely that Shaw was aware of Peter Pan as part of the background to *Heartbreak House*, and that Peter Pan was one of Shaw's many literary reference points for *Heartbreak House*, along with *King Lear* and *The Cherry Orchard*. In any case, beyond such speculation, a reading of *Heartbreak House* in the light of *Peter and Wendy* is evidence that, at the time Shaw wrote *Heartbreak House*, heartbreak as a pattern of romantic dream, disillusion and cultural introspection was not Shaw's invention, but rather, as he claimed, a current field of experience which was already well defined in fashionable literature. The clear differences between Shaw and Barrie are further evidence of Shaw's opposition to the Peter Pan/*Heartbreak House* world as ruinously charming and childish. Barrie's view of the *soi-disant* best people of good form as 'so attractive' (even as Captain Hook) is like a comforting bed-time story, or sweet dream. *Heartbreak House* is a different order of fiction in which charm and charming grotesqueness become absurd and demonic.

There is a significant point of comparison in Act Two when Ellie proves that she is becoming Mrs Hushabye's equal as a heartbreak siren, and Mrs Hushabye confides that her hair is a wig. Mrs Hushabye plays with the nursery rhyme allusion in her name and underlines Shaw's satiric use of children's literature: 'Pull it and try. Other women can snare men in their hair; but I can swing a baby on mine. Aha! you can't do that, Goldylocks' (p. 110). In contrast to the charm of Barrie's characters, Mrs Hushabye is a figure of self-defining satiric travesty. Barrie's fiction includes a significant recognition of doubt and problems associated with heartbreak, but at each point of comparison *Heartbreak House* is clearly much more critical. For example, the curious similarities between Captain Hook and Captain Shotover underline the way Shotover functions

26 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

as an absurd satiric representative of ruin and profound melancholy at the heart of the dominant cultural élite of England.

Shaw's comment that he was not free of 'romantic follies' himself is a useful reminder that in the wider view heartbreak was one of the essential conditions of his understanding of himself, and one of the main themes of his career. According to his own analysis, if heartbreak was one of the conditions of his society, Shaw could hardly be immune, and some involvement with it would seem to be essential to his precarious success as a fashionable socialist dramatist. *Heartbreak House* is a culmination of Shaw's involvement with heartbreak as a major point of reference in understanding himself, and as a theme of his work, through the nineties and after the turn of the century.²⁷ Within this context, the other directly relevant background to *Heartbreak House* is Shaw's correspondence with Mrs Patrick Campbell, a study in romantic heartbreak which is similar to the Peter Pan story and which seems to be closely related to it: furthermore, Shaw himself said that Stella Campbell was one of his sources for *Heartbreak House*.

Shaw's romance and correspondence with Mrs Patrick Campbell followed from his reading *Pygmalion* to her in June 1912, in order to interest her in Eliza. The main period of the romance was between June 1912 and the end of 1913. As one of the most famous actresses of the period, Stella Campbell was a de facto member of fashionable society, and from the beginning Shaw's correspondence with her is a virtuoso performance of fashionable romantic heartbreak. In turn, Shaw's virtuosity in the correspondence with Stella Campbell is based in part on the pattern of romance he explored in 1896-8 in his correspondence with Ellen Terry.²⁸ In that earlier correspondence, romance is a relationship between a boy-lover and a mother-siren ('the woman's lot of perpetual motherhood, and the man's of perpetual boyhood'); and the lover is both a heartless heartbreaker and himself doomed to heartbreak, a philanderer (like a romantic version of the Little Match Girl) doomed to 'starving on imaginary feasts', and to dreams in which

27 For a useful survey of these themes see Elsie B. Adams, 'Heartless, Heartbroken and Heartfelt: A Recurrent Theme in the Plays of Bernard Shaw', *English Literature in Transition*, 25 (1982), 4-9.

28 Shaw's relations with Ellen Terry and Mrs Patrick Campbell have previously attracted interest of a biographical kind (for example, about what happened at Sandwich) rather than interest in the letters as definitions of romance and heartbreak. There are two major recent biographical studies by Margot Peters: *Bernard Shaw and the Actresses* (New York, Doubleday, 1980); and *Mrs Pat: The Life of Mrs Patrick Campbell* (London, the Bodley Head, 1984).

heartbreak is ruin and bliss, 'that most blessed of all things — unsatisfied desire'.²⁹

Shaw confirmed his literary debt to Stella Campbell in the later stage of their lives. In a letter to her in 1929 he writes, 'Of course we are a pair of mountebanks; but why, oh why do you get nothing out of me, though I get everything out of you? Mrs Hesione Hushabye in *Heartbreak House*, the Serpent in Methuselah . . . and Orinthia: all you, to say nothing of Eliza . . . You are the vamp and I the victim; yet it is I who suck your blood and fatten on it whilst you lose everything!'³⁰ His later letters also define the romance as an affair of the heart and heartbreak. In 1937, at the age of 81, sending her letters back so that she can use them as an investment, Shaw says that he has packed them 'with infinite labour and a little heartbreak' (p. 313). A few days earlier he used the notion of heartbreak being a physical condition, saying that he had not made copies, 'as I should certainly die of angina pectoris during the operation' (p. 312). In turn that heart attack/heartbreak image echoes a passage in a letter from May 1913 at the peak of their romance: 'I am all torn to bits . . . It gives me a sort of angina pectoris' (p. 117). The letters of 1912-13 include other explicit variations of the term 'heartbreak'. At the beginning of the correspondence, Shaw reminds her of his origins in 'the indescribable heartbreak of Ireland' (p. 38); on 12 December 1912 she writes that he is 'bent on breaking my heart' (p. 69); on 4 February 1913 he writes that if Charlotte knew she would 'be heartbroken' (p. 79); on 26 February 1913 he says that if she changes 'my unbreakable (or perhaps broken) heart would harden' (p. 89); on 11 August 1913, at the absurd climax of the romance in Sandwich, he laments that she has torn out his 'very heart strings' (p. 140); and in July 1914, at the end of the romance, Stella uses the formula, 'No you don't wound me. I saw into your heart a long time ago' (p. 165).

The details of the account of heartbreak foreshadow *Heartbreak House*. Shaw introduces himself to Stella as the boy-lover-dreamer and disillusioned philanderer: he is both a timid little soul who 'hides and cowers and dreams' and 'down on earth again . . . blaring vulgarities in full blast' (p. 20). As heartbreak virtuoso he provides grand and elaborate versions of the pattern. His letter of 5 July 1912 is a grand performance as the boy-lover in a childish tantrum,

29 *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, edited by Christopher St John (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), pp. 33, 86, 93.

30 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, p. 291.

including tears, 'And I shall cry, cry, cry all the time' (p. 26). As Stella proves to be another virtuoso, their letters of late 1912 and early 1913 include a series of exchanges about being like sophisticated children, and the romance being like a game in which she is 'such a jolly playfellow . . . such a child!' (p. 75). The Peter Pan sonnet belongs to this period. Even more clearly and elaborately than in the letters to Ellen Terry, romantic heartbreak is a series of paradoxes: the hard heart and the broken heart; a disillusioned philanderer's lies and a heavenly dream; bliss and unsatisfied desire; triumph and ruin. Before the weekend at Sandwich, the parallels to Peter Pan include passages which make the romance like an adventure in Neverland:

It is impossible that I should not tire soon: nothing so wonderful could last. You cannot really be what you are to me: you are a figure from the dreams of my boyhood — all romance . . . I promise to tire as soon as I can so as to leave you free.³¹

The definition of romance makes ruin seem a logical culmination, and the events and Shaw's reaction follow the definition. Shaw's letters present the absurd catastrophe at Sandwich (when Stella refused his advances) as their greatest adventure (as Peter Pan's greatest adventure is the fight with Hook which brings the end of the romance with Wendy). Even on the Monday of the weekend at Sandwich, Shaw claims that he is greater in heartbreak, at once Satanic and god-like:

It is I who cared, you who didn't. That is as becomes me. I no longer look up to the queen of heaven: I tower mountainous to the skies and see pretty little things wondering at me.³²

His letter for New Year's Eve 1913 is a further apotheosis, claiming that she must 'sit in the heavens' with him in heartbreak. The view is also that the culmination of the romance is a state of overwhelming distress which leaves him in despair, 'tragic despair' which has woken 'the latent tragedy' in him. Heartbreak becomes tragic and apocalyptic, and his much-quoted description of the view from Sandwich echoes Milton's Satan and Bunyan in a way that foreshadows the apocalyptic allegory of *Heartbreak House*: 'that desolate strand, and the lights of Ramsgate which might have been the camp fires of the heavenly hosts on the Celestial mountains' (p. 139).

31 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

Shaw's correspondence with Mrs Patrick Campbell clearly parallels much of the account of heartbreak in *Heartbreak House*. Shaw and Stella parallel Hector and Hesione Hushabye, and the apocalyptic triumph and despair of the romance parallel the Götterdämmerung aspect of *Heartbreak House*. The incidental critical insights include *The Studio at the Clouds* and *The House in the Clouds*, Shaw's working titles for *Heartbreak House*.³³ Mrs Patrick Campbell offers relevant idioms in her later letters, when she claims that she alone found it easy 'to come down from the clouds' and that the romance was 'respectably "in the clouds"'.³⁴ From the beginning Shaw and Stella also consistently use as one set of images for romance the notions of walking 'on air', being up 'in the air', and in the heavens, as well as being in dreams.³⁵ It might also be relevant that the way to Neverland is to fly 'Second to the right, and straight till morning', and that the children bump into clouds on the way.³⁶ A further connection is that Barrie told Stella, who told Shaw, that the relationship between himself, Shaw and Stella might be described as that Shaw and he lived 'in the weather house with two doors', or, as Stella said, 'the Weather House'.³⁷

The more important general similarities suggest that *Heartbreak House* to some extent conflates the heartbreak of the romance with Stella and Shaw's reaction to the war. That conflation of the war and the romance with Stella might seem to be further evidence in support of the view that *Heartbreak House* is a work of personal despair removed from the 'inhuman' world of politics. But the wider critical view is different. Shaw's letter to Stella in May 1916 which mentions the beginning of *Heartbreak House* is relevant. Read in the context of the rest of the correspondence it is clearly an evocation of the heartbreak of the romance in 1912-13 as well as being about the war. But it was written more than two years after the main events of the romance, to welcome Stella and her husband on their return to England after more than a year on tour in America, and Shaw's comment about his new play is set in the context of bantering black humour as well as profound despair. That everything 'has gone to the devil' and 'this is a rotten world' is

33 Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House: A Facsimile of the Revised Typescript*, introduction by Stanley Weintraub and Anne Wright, pp. xix-xxi.

34 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*: pp. 232-3, 297.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 20. See also *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, pp. 326-7.

36 *Peter and Wendy*, pp. 326-7.

37 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, pp. 43, 78.

set off against the fact that he has had influenza, jokes about getting old, and even a bleak, comic echo of his grand letter on his mother's death.³⁸ Shaw had said on New Year's Eve 1913, that the tragedy of the romance had broken his joy in life and his sense of tomfoolery, 'broken . . . my proud overbearing gaiety that carried all the tragedies of the world like feathers and stuck them in my cap and laughed' (p. 155). In retrospect, the New Year's Eve letter might seem too much like Peter Pan, but the later letter is a guarantee that he has at least retained his sense of tomfoolery. The *Heartbreak House* letter is closer to the completed play to the extent that it is about the heartbreak of the war and romance in the light of comedy which is at once harsh and grandly absurd. The letter is also in accordance with the fact that after all the war and Stella were far from being the sum total of Shaw's interests.

Shaw's letters to other people about his romance with Stella are reminders that heartbreak was not his only way of understanding the world. For example, his letters to Stella's confidant 'DD' (Edith [the Hon. Mrs Alfred] Lyttleton) include presumably calculated rejection of the possibility that he could be any final use to Stella, on the grounds that they belong to different worlds and that he is committed to his work and socialism.³⁹ There is a similar view within his letters to Stella. His early letters to Stella include the qualification that he is a writer who 'cares for nothing really but his mission, as he calls it, and his work'.⁴⁰ More to the point, his abuse of Stella after the debacle at Sandwich combines maintenance of the heartbreak pattern (in part with the help of the Renaissance convention of the lover's abuse, as in *Astrophil and Stella*) with criticism which foreshadows *Heartbreak House*. Stella and romantic heartbreak become representative of the cultural failure of the *ancien régime* (pp. 138-40). Shaw dismisses romantic heartbreak as a traditional fraud: 'I courted the oldest illusions, knowing well what I was doing'. Stella is identified as a caricature of Hedda Gabler, a character Shaw understood as an exemplary satiric portrait of the failure of the *ancien régime*: 'you are . . . a Hedda Gabler titivated with odds and ends from Burne Jones ragbag'. The abuse in his crucial letter of 11 August 1913 becomes an exercise in Ibsenite social and cultural pathology:

38 *Ibid.*, p. 186, and compare pp. 85-8.

39 *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1911-1925*, p. 142.

40 *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, p. 54.

this precociously forced erotic sentimentality, this narrow mind, this ignorance, this helplessness that longs to be forced because it can imitate nothing, will nothing, change nothing, that has no power except the power of endearment and no appeal except the appeal of beauty.⁴¹

Shaw's diatribe here corresponds to much of the account of heartbreak in *Heartbreak House*. Furthermore, as this exercise in social and cultural analysis is some three years earlier than *Heartbreak House*, it is further evidence that Shaw's reaction to the war was in part in the light of established ways of understanding himself and contemporary culture and society. The correspondences raise the critical issue that Hesione Hushabye and the other women of *Heartbreak House* might be related to Hedda Gabler as well as to Stella Campbell. Shaw adds as Stella's distinctive failure the criticism that she is a 'light creature' marked by 'shallowness' (p. 140). It seems significant in the present context that his next letter draws a connection between this kind of cultural failure and Barrie. In the next letter, his literary camaraderie is replaced by the comment that Barrie writes Stella's kind of literature, 'there is Barrie, and *The Woman With the Fan* that tempts and does not frighten you' (p. 141). A month later Shaw plays with the idea of re-writing Barrie's *The Adored One* as Shavian drama, and in another phrase which corresponds to his view in *Heartbreak House*, he condemns Barrie's kind of people on the grounds of their 'tragic futility' (p. 150). The evidence here is further support for a reading of *Heartbreak House* as an expression of a well established and continuing political view of contemporary culture, and *Heartbreak House* is not less impressive when it is read in this way and in relation to Mrs Patrick Campbell and Peter Pan.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 140.