

Arms and the Man

The title refers to the English Restoration satirist John Dryden's¹ translation of the Roman poet Virgil's Latin epic, the *Aeneid*². Shaw's title is Dryden's first translated line³: "Arms, and the man I sing". The *Aeneid*'s literal translation is important too: *This is a story of a man and his struggles*⁴. Shaw's Irish and English audience would be aware of the importance of this reference. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, warfare is praised. In Shaw's play, the uselessness of war is shown. This is the difference between Virgil and Shaw. In Virgil's epic, the hero Aeneas becomes a hero by exercising military power whereas Shaw's portrayal of military might, as will be apparent in the later part of his play, is regressive. Military might in *Arms and the Man* is shown as unheroic and mercenary⁵.

¹ The Restoration period of English history begins when King Charles II was restored or reinstated as a king to the British throne in 1660 AD. The young Charles was exiled to France before this. John Dryden (1631-1700 AD) was one of the foremost satirists of the Restoration Period. Shaw admired Dryden since the latter like Byron later, wrote in rhyming couplets. Virgil, Dryden and Byron are connected by their rejection of Longinus's understanding of poetry and imagination. All three share a Horatian view of literature.

² Virgil's Latin name is Publius Vergilius Maro. By convention this is shortened to the more aurally soothing Virgil. His *Aeneid* was probably written within 29 to 19 BC.

³ **Arms, and the man I sing**, who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.
Long labors, both by sea and land, he bore,
And in the doubtful war, before he won
The Latian realm, and built the destin'd town --- John Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*.

Virgil's epic begins with the line "Arma virumque cano" or, as Dryden puts it "Arms, and the man I sing". Another pertinent difference is that while Virgil is a poet, Shaw is a master of prose. Poetry is gently mocked by Shaw through his plays including this one. Shaw's choice of title for his *prosaic* play is anti-Virgil in that it is neither epic, nor is there any song in it which valorises military heroism. The concept of the Greco-Roman hero is displaced by Shaw with his *Everyman*, over-man Bluntschli. Yet Bluntschli is neither the Johannine *ecce homo*, nor is he Nietzsche's *übermensch*, rather his characterisation anticipates John Tanner's character in Shaw's play *Man and Superman*.

⁴ Not my translation but taken from an online forum. *Google Translate*, dated 20th June, 2017 11:48 am returns a very sensible "I sing of arms and a man". The stress is on 'a man'. The importance of this translation will be elucidated in both the essay on the title and as we study the text beyond this point.

⁵ In a sense Shaw's pacifist stance anticipates the (anti-) war poets' pacifist stance during the First World War (1914-18). The greatest of this group of poets was Wilfred Owen (1893-1918 AD) and his poem, *Strange Meeting* (1918 AD) come to mind in this context. Shaw's portrayal of war and its effect is

To put it differently, Shaw's Bluntschli is anti-heroic; his Sergius is a parody of military discipline; Sergius is apparently a military genius but in truth, he is a pretentious hypocrite. But as will be seen later in this play Sergius's character is more nuanced than being just Byronic. Shaw's meditation on the trope of the Byronic hero is worth more than a summary rejection. Further, the title of the play is an ironic comment on the word 'man'. The genealogy of man is long; we find the concept of 'the man' in Jesus Christ being 'ecce homo'; we find more importantly the concept of 'the man' in Friedrich Nietzsche's⁶ *übermensch* or overman, roughly equal to a philosophical understanding of an overman or a superman. We have to be careful in not confusing this superman with the superman of fantasies. In this latter sense, Bluntschli is counterposed against the concept of Jesus as *ecce homo*. We find Jesus as *ecce homo* in John's *Gospel* in the *New Testament* of the Bible. Nietzsche's concept of *übermensch* is found in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Shaw was probably aware of the Biblical sense of 'man' as well as the heroic man in Aeneas; and here in his own play *the man* is also counterpoised against powerful⁷ women like Raina and Louka. Both Raina and Louka play important roles in this play and both Bluntschli and Sergius could be defined as plausible dramatic characters only because of these two women. This is in contrast to Virgil's idea of masculine virility --- the Trojan Aeneas is guided by reason, temperance and discipline throughout his life; except for his brief relationship with the queen of Carthage, Dido. While Virgil saw love as a cause for political and personal

recidivist; that is, regression into a more chaotic primal state which is marked by bloodthirstiness and disregard for law. Civilisation is seen by Shaw to move backwards two steps everytime it moves one step forward.

⁶ 1844-1900 AD

⁷ Powerful in the sense of being self-actualised. *Self-actualisation* is a process first illustrated by the American psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1908-70 AD) in his 1943 paper entitled *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

instability, Shaw sees love as an instinctual drive which is a humanising force throughout history.

In the accompanying essay on the significance of the title, we discuss all these and more.

Book	Name of Author	Significance
<i>Aenied</i>	Virgil	Aeneus was a military hero
<i>Gospel of John</i>	Probably John of Patmos also known as John the Divine, Jesus calls John his <i>beloved disciple</i> .	Jesus was expected by the Jews to be a military messiah, instead he turned out a man abject.
<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>	Friedrich Nietzsche	Zarathustra is above all common human beings; he is an overman or <i>übermensch</i> .
<i>Arms and the Man</i>	Bernard Shaw	Bluntschli and Sergius are men who along with the women in this play question both war and love. Through these two men and Raina-Louka, Shaw shows the importance of emotion in human life. Aeneus represents military discipline; Jesus stands for non-violence. But Shaw's man stands for the importance of human emotions over either war or self-sacrifice. Bluntschli is different than all other men, like Nietzsche's <i>übermensch</i> but here the similarity ends. Bluntschli is human and humane, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a god.

The title and theme of this play points to us Shaw's *Man and Superman*⁸ which similarly makes our understanding of the stereotypical roles of men and women problematic and in that play, Shavian philosophy is more Nietzschean in *Man and Superman* than in *Arms and the Man*.

⁸ This play was written in 1903 about ten years after *Arms and the Man* was written in 1894.

Also, often overlooked, is Shaw's indebtedness to Shakespeare's history-plays which are to be found in this play. Shaw studied Shakespeare thoroughly and yet satirised Shakespeare. This shows that he felt what the American literary critic, Harold Bloom⁹, calls the *anxiety of influence*.

The more a living author speaks of an earlier author, we know because of Bloom's reading of the works of Sigmund Freud¹⁰, the living author is worrying too much about the dead author. Shaw worries too much with Shakespeare and thus invites us to read and interpret his plays through the network of meanings created by Shakespeare in his plays. In other words; *Arms and the Man* is intertextual. Intertextuality as a literary term can be found at the end of this book. For instance, Leo Tolstoy who dabbled like Shaw with socialism is to be found both in the title and throughout the play. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*¹¹ echoes along with Shakespeare in *Arms and the Man*.

To sum up, the title is more of a critique of Virgil than an explication of Virgil's epic.

⁹ Harold Bloom (1930-)

¹⁰ 1856-1939 AD

¹¹ 1865-67 AD

Essay on the title of *Arms and the Man*

Simple point form:

Shaw's choice of title says more of his use of irony and puns than it speaks of the genius of Virgil or Virgil's translator, John Dryden. It is Dryden's translation's first line that Shaw quotes. 'Arms and the Man', is John Dryden's rendering of Virgil's Latin, "Arma virumque cano ..". It means 'Arms and the Man I [Virgil or the epic's Muse, it can be both] sing'. Shaw will satirise the heroism of both war and love in his play. Bluntschli, unlike Aeneas, fought for earning money. Bluntschli's aim was to become and remain rich. This is unlike any Graeco-Roman heroic ideals. 'Arms' mean warfare here and 'Man' represents at one level only the Shavian superman here; Bluntschli. At a deeper level 'Man' is a metaphor for all mankind. Further, 'Man' might offset the female characters in this play. Raina's romantic stylisation is to be contrasted with Bluntschli's prosaic nature. Louka's self-dignity is to be contrasted with Sergius's profligacy.