

The “Value of Knowing of Greek” in Shaw’s *Major Barbara* on Stage and Screen

Shaw’s *Major Barbara* has often been interpreted as a rejection of turn-of-the-century educational elitism and a rigorous critique of the British upper-classes whose educations at Oxford and Cambridge gave them entry into positions of power and advantage without preparing them for the practical aspects of governing. Adolphus Cusins, a main character in Shaw’s play, was modeled directly on Shaw’s friend and intellectual compatriot Gilbert Murray, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, who was known for his inspired translations of Euripides (Albert 2002). Cusins’s erudition in what was increasingly believed to be an esoteric discipline is a central theme in every scene of *Major Barbara*, especially those in which the young scholar spars with Andrew Undershaft, the uneducated but wildly successful munitions manufacturer in search of an heir. Many critics have argued that Cusins’s capitulation to Undershaft and his succession to the Undershaft empire shows that Shaw roundly dismisses the value of a Classical education—Greek scholarship gives way to industry and manufacture (Smith 1988; Turco 1988). To the contrary, this paper proposes that Shaw’s play argues for a greater infusion of Classical learning and ideals into the inevitably changing and increasingly industrialized world of turn-of-the-century Britain.

The utility of the Classical education in the British public school system was under attack from a number of sides at the end of the 19th century (Stray 1997). Long seen as the hallmark of intellect and breeding, Greek faced increasing criticism in a world of increasing professionalization of education. The rarification of Classical education led many to argue that Greek had no place in the school system because it taught a man nothing immediately applicable to contemporary British political and professional life. With increasing class struggle over positions of power, knowledge of Greek became a hallmark of a man of a certain status. However, what impression such a stamp left upon a man’s intellect was hotly contested. This view is well illustrated by the debates over “Compulsory Greek” at Cambridge that raged from 1870 to 1919, that is, whether a Greek exam should be required for entrance (Raphaely 1999). On the other side of the intellectual fence, stalwart supporters of Classical education such as Arnold and Newman defended Greek’s ability to train the mind for any task. This debate over “the value of knowing Greek,” to borrow Simon Goldhill’s phrase, is a central issue in Shaw’s *Major Barbara* (Goldhill 2002). By examining the figure of Adolphus Cusins in light of the popularity of Hellenism and the changing views of Greek education, particularly at Cambridge, we can see that Shaw’s *Major Barbara* is as much a play about the utility of Classical thought as about the triumph of pragmatism over religiosity.

That Shaw defends the validity of a Classical education in the original script of the play can be seen in the manifold ways Cusins’s knowledge of Greek, references to Euripides’ play *Bacchae* (which Murray famously translated), and references to Greek literature and culture pervade *Major Barbara*. However, because of changing intellectual and cultural concerns, this focus would diminish in importance in later incarnations of the play, such as the 1941 film version (directed by Gabriel Pascal from a screenplay written by Shaw himself). In the film

version, the thematic presence of Cusins's specialized knowledge of Greek and Euripides' plays is greatly diminished, a fact which Shaw himself enacted in response to changes in contemporary culture at the outbreak of WW II (Costello 1965; Lawrence 2003). By closing with a brief comparison of the play and film, I hope to highlight the centrality of Greek to the original production of *Major Barbara*. From early stages of its inception, Shaw's *Major Barbara* wrestles with questions of Classical education that were extremely relevant to his contemporary audience and deeply enmeshed within the culture wars of turn-of-the-century England.