

The Septuagenarian versus the Siren: Shaw and Molly Tompkins

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SOMETHING OF A BOMBSHELL was released by Peter Tompkins's claim in the *London Times* last June, and reprinted soon after in *The Independent Shavian*, that his mother, the actress Molly Tompkins, had an affair with Shaw that resulted in a pregnancy and an abortion.¹ Surprisingly, no one has publicly questioned this allegation. Certainly Shaw adored the beautiful, high-spirited American actress who first sought him out in London with her sculptor husband, Laurence, in 1921, but he also was often exasperated by her impulsiveness and lack of discretion, accusing her of being a siren, a witch, and a coquette. Did the septuagenarian Shaw impregnate the young married woman some forty years his junior and stand by while she aborted the fetus? And if he did, does that change how we view Shaw?

Peter Tompkins's claim resides in a passage excised from a 1944 letter from Shaw to Molly that purportedly contains a confession of an affair in the late '20s when the Shaws and the Tompkins summered in Italy. Tompkins, who edited the letters, says he censored the passage to protect his father who was alive in 1960 at the time of publication.

That Molly took lovers is a matter of record, and an account of the abortion is included in the memoir that Tompkins published in 1961. If concern for his father (not to mention his mother) was paramount, one wonders why he included that piece of very personal information in the first place. Having done so, it is perhaps understandable that he now would like to amend the record to show that Shaw was responsible—which I do not doubt that he believes—thereby removing the onus from his father as well as eliminating Molly's several lovers from consideration.

In the Prologue to *Shaw and Molly Tompkins*, Peter Tompkins tells us that he had Shaw's letters and his mother's memories to work with, but no letters from Molly to Shaw. Although she had kept notebooks, she had burned them. Tompkins wanted to recreate and preserve the relationship, the resulting book a recreation of a recreation as he admits. "The story starts in '21. Shaw's letters are the armature, Molly's the clay with which I moulded. How much of life transpires from the figure is for the reader to determine." Tompkins includes an account of Laurence taking Molly to Milan in the summer of 1927 for an abortion and Shaw pleading that she not go. "It will be my spiritual child, at least."² When she returned, Shaw is said to have vis-

ited every day. One wonders, would Laurence have been so obliging if he suspected Shaw to be the father?

Shaw's letters to Molly are replete with the advice and counsel you might expect from an older to a younger person. They also show affection and susceptibility to her charms. However in a 1928 letter, an angry Shaw accuses Molly of flagrantly seducing men—but failing with him: “you are a predestinate damned soul, a Vamp fiend....You will prowl round that lake, making men's wives miserable, tormenting yourself whenever their glances wander from you for a moment....You thought that when you had secured your Ogygia and lured me to its shores you could play Calypso to me [sic] Odysseus and make a hog of me. Aren't you glad you didn't succeed?”³ Likening himself to Odysseus, the faithful husband, Shaw portrays himself as having withstood the advances of the siren. His response is identical to those earlier in life when women tried, successfully or unsuccessfully, to seduce him—disgust and revulsion.

Such disgust helps us understand the ambiguity of a letter to Molly written not long after the Odysseus letter, and in response to her question whether he was through with her. No longer in the full fury of his anger, he writes that “[A]t my age one is thru with everybody, and can only beg a little charitable tolerance from young persons.” Cryptically he mentions hoarded “bodily possessions...stolen from me on the road to Baveno”(2 Feb. 1929, *To A Young Actress*, 131). Suggested is some kind of passion, but exactly what? The “stolen” underscores his resistance.

The only surviving letter from Molly was written in 1945 after Charlotte's death. Molly had offered to come for a long stay, and Shaw brusquely rebuffed her on the grounds that it would scandalize. An angry Molly retorts that she would not have done anything to hurt Charlotte. Molly admits that “[I]t is exciting to know the Great Man, and bray about it, “ but insists that she is far more interested in “the B. Shaw that gave my body and my mind and my heart peace when I lay by the side of a river or lake, with him in Italy, or walked the Baveno road with him.” She continues, “With the solid background of that love behind you (and me) there would be no awkward snags because one or the other of us wanted something the other didn't have to give.”⁴ Retaliation to Shaw's stinging response would be one reason to invoke, and embroider on, the past, but even here, admittedly, one of the pair was reluctant.

Now here is the passage Peter Tompkins presents, written 4 December, 1944: “Did any of your numerous Sunday husbands, of whom I was certainly the most eminent, really fail to respect Lawrence's [sic] conjugal

rights as we did? I hope he never suspected me of ‘betraying’ him.” Shaw adds by hand, “Yet no consummated love affair ever gave me greater pleasure.”

Let’s look closely at Shaw’s meaning. First, the term “Sunday husbands” is a red flag. Shaw used the term to describe his place in the omnipresent, flirtatious, often annoying—but strictly platonic—triangles of his bachelorhood. That such Sunday husbands were “numerous” emphasizes that many were vying for Molly’s affection. Shaw was not the only candidate for possible DNA collection.

The passage also contains unwritten—but understood—phrases that makes Shaw’s shortened comments more syntactically fluid, phrases I have added in italics: “Did any of your numerous Sunday husbands, of whom I was certainly the most eminent, really fail to respect Lawrence’s [sic] conjugal rights as we did *indeed respect them?*” With the addition of the italicized phrase, the sentence is no longer left hanging. Shaw continues: “I hope he never suspected me of ‘betraying’ him *because I did not.*” Shaw realizes his public pleasure in Molly’s company was apparent and fears it might have been misconstrued. Then added in his hand, “Yet no consummated love affair ever gave me greater pleasure” *than our unconsummated one.*⁵

Shaw denigrated his consummated love affairs. It was at this time that he used almost identical language in the often-quoted letters to Frank Harris of 1930, and while still writing long letters to Molly. Rather clinically, Shaw asserts that “the relation between the parties in copulation is not a personal relation,” and, looking back, “I had scruples, and effectively inhibitive ones too, about getting women in trouble (or letting them get themselves in trouble with me) or cuckolding my friends.” He states “[i]n permanence and seriousness my consummated love affairs count for nothing besides the ones that were either unconsummated or ended by discarding that relation.” In another letter, he continues. The women who conquered him physically could be counted “on less than the fingers of one hand.” To these “occasions,” he attached little importance: “it is the others which endure.” It was during the same period that he called his correspondence with Ellen Terry “a wholly satisfactory love-affair,” affirming that “a paper courtship . . . is perhaps the pleasantest, as it is the most enduring, of all courtships.”⁶ So without even casting a lingering romantic glow on safely distant relationships, Shaw offers a series of affirmations touting the platonic romance over physical consummation, such affirmations coinciding with the period when Shaw supposedly succumbed to sex with Molly.

Whatever Molly may have said to her son about her friendship with Shaw, and whatever actually transpired, the

passage that Peter Tompkins cites is not an admission by Shaw of a sexual relationship with her, much less that he stood by as she aborted his child. Moreover, even if physical consummation did occur, it changes nothing about how Shaw viewed himself, or how we should view him. Shaw always admired beauty and vitality in women, fuel for his ethereal visions. His emphatic denials of the physical, its swinish aspects, affirm his essential asceticism and romanticism, which refused the intrusion of the body. If he did indeed succumb to the seductions of a young siren, his protestations point to a fall from which he sought to recover. For Shaw, the self-designated heir of those accidental supermen and scalers of the heights with whom he found common cause—Shakespeare, Goethe, Shelley—believed that his artist nature was inextricably linked to a homoerotic identity—that of the saintly, ascetic “noble invert.”⁷

Notes

1 Richard Owen, “Shaw’s Own Eliza Doolittle and Secret Mistress,” *The Independent Shavian*, vol. 42, nos.1-2, 2004, 15-18.

2 *Peter Tompkins, Shaw and Molly Tompkins* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1961). 8, 16.

3 31 May, 1928, *To a Young Actress: The Letters of Bernard Shaw to Molly Tompkins*, ed. Peter Tompkins, (London: Constable, 1960), 127-28 (hereafter *To a Young Actress*).

4 The ambiguity of these passages has been examined by Margot Peters, who seems unconvinced that there was a physical consummation, as well as by Charles A. Berst, who seems inclined to think that more than the platonic was involved in the relationship. Molly’s letter is quoted in Peters, *Bernard Shaw and the Actresses*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1980), 408-9. See also 379-84 for an account of the relationship. The most detailed study of the Molly/ Shaw relationship is by Berst, “Passion at Lake Maggiore: Shaw, Molly Tompkins, and Italy, 1921-1950,” *SHAW: The Annual of Shaw Studies*, vol. 5, ed Rodelle Weintraub (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), 81-114.

5 Al Turco, Jr. agrees that the passage has been misread, and that it contains unwritten phrases (virtually identical to mine) which exonerate Shaw. Email to me of June 2004.

6 To Frank Harris, 24 June 1930, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters 1926-1950*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking, 1988), 190-93; 18 September 1930; *The Playwright and the Pirate: Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris: A Correspondence*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 239; see also Frank Harris, *Bernard Shaw* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1931), 224; Hesketh Pearson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 110; 26 June 1929, Preface to *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, ed. Christopher St. John (New York: Theatre Arts, 1931), xxxiv.

7 For the complexities of Shaw’s relations with women see my biography *Bernard Shaw: The Ascent of the Superman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996 (cloth) 1998 (paper), 107-159. For the complexities of his relations with men, see *Ascent*, 161-259.

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