

# BERNARD SHAW *and* HARRODS

“For such an author to accept payment from a commercial enterprise . . . would be to sin against the Holy Ghost”

*Recently Harrods ventured to invite three of our greatest Masters of the Written Word to lend the influence of their pens in the cause of Business. By permission and without comment Harrods publish their replies. The third—that of Mr. Bernard Shaw—appears below:*

**T**here is nothing new in what you call the linking of forces between the commercial and literary world. Callisthenes is one of the best known authors of the day; and the catalogues of Fortnum and Mason are treasured by collectors and are read by me with delight, and with just that watering of the mouth that they are intended to provoke.

But long before these two triumphs of commercial literature were thought of, there was a secret alliance between the two forces. When I was a beginner those members of my profession who were journalists as well as writers of books were, I regret to say, unashamed and inveterate cadgers. They flourished their connection with the press not only in the theatre box offices as an excuse for demanding free admissions (orders, they used to be called) but in hotels and shops as a reason for allowing them substantial discounts or even not charging them anything.

I do not know which was the more amazing: the effrontery with which this blackmail was levied or the credulity with which it was submitted to. The consideration was called a puff; and editors were always on the watch to defeat the efforts of their contributors to slip them into the paper, though these same editors would pay their own hotel bills with puffs.

When what was called “the new journalism” began with interviews, then considered a startling and highly questionable innovation, the gentleman or lady who interviewed you admired the ornaments on your mantelpiece and remarked that the Countess of So-and-So, on being interviewed the week before, had very kindly presented the interviewer with some trifle or other (worth five pounds or so) and didn't you think that was very nice of her? As to the lunches at the press views at the picture galleries, and the suppers on the stage at the Lyceum Theatre on first nights, they were so completely a matter of course that I doubt if they counted for as much in the subsequent press notices as they cost.

All this puffery and cadging went on underground; and though my elders not only had no scruples about it, but actually insisted on it as an appanage of their literary dignity, I could not bring myself to practise it or to regard it otherwise than as corrupt and personally dishonourable.

It was not through literature that it suddenly came to the surface and became a legitimate department of art. When Millais was at the height of his fame as a painter a very popular picture of his, representing a nice little boy blowing bubbles, was bought by the firm of Pears, and used and reproduced as an advertisement. The Academy was shocked; but Millais took no notice; the advertisement had an enormous vogue; and advertising entered on its present phase, in which it is a matter of course for commercial firms to employ the best available artistic and literary talent to advertise their wares and services. There is no reason on earth why they should not, and every reason why they should, now that the art of selling has so much more importance than the routine of production.

But there are obvious limitations. Suppose for the sake of illustration that litigation arises between Harrods and Selfridges. Nobody would question the right of both litigants to engage the strongest bar they could get to plead their case. Nobody would question the propriety of the conduct of the most eminent barristers in accepting the briefs.

But if the two great firms were to bid against one another for the favourable consideration of the judge, or to inform the jury that a certain verdict would be suitably rewarded, the fat would be in the fire at once, and the two litigants in gaol.

Similarly, if I, having had my first publicly performed play advertised by a poster designed by Aubrey Beardsley (now much sought after by collectors), were to offer the President of the Royal Academy two thousand guineas for a poster to advertise my next play, there would be nothing whatever questionable either in the offer or its acceptance.



But if I were to intimate to, say, Mr. St. John Ervine and Mr. Harris Deans that in the event of their notices of my play being sufficiently flattering to be usefully quoted as advertisements I should be prepared to buy the copyright from them for £500 apiece, then Heaven knows what would happen. Probably both gentlemen would refuse to notice my play at all, and would say why.

Both gentlemen write in a judicial capacity. But so do all authors whose work is of sufficient weight and depth to have a formative effect on the public mind. For such an author to accept payment from a commercial enterprise for using his influence to induce the public to buy its wares would be to sin against the Holy Ghost.

To propose such a transaction to Mr. H. G. Wells is like offering the Archbishop of Canterbury a handsome cheque for dropping a recommendation of somebody's soap or shoes into his next sermon, or sounding the Astronomer Royal as to the possibility of keeping the clock back for half an hour during a big sale, or on polling day at an election. Its acceptance would be the last depravity of corruption in literature.

By all means let our commercial houses engage skilled but nameless scribes like Callisthenes to write their advertisements as such. But a writer who has been consecrated by Fame to the service of the public, and has thus become prophet as well as author, must take wages in no other service.

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