

12 The End of *Pygmalion*

Quas quia Pygmalion aevum per crimen agentis viderat, offensus
vitiis, quae plurima menti femineae natura dedit, sine coniuge,
caelebs vivebat thalamique diu consorte carebat.¹

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk x)

Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too
godlike to be altogether agreeable.

(*Pygmalion*, Epilogue)

The original version of *Pygmalion*—as distinct from the film
version, the revised text of 1941 and the musical comedy based on
the play²—ends in the following way:

MRS

HIGGINS: I'm afraid youve spoilt that girl, Henry. But
never mind, dear: I'll buy you the tie and
gloves.

HIGGINS: [*sunnily*] Oh, dont bother. She'll buy em all
right enough. Goodbye.

*They kiss, Mrs Higgins runs out. Higgins, left alone,
rattles his cash in his pocket; chuckles; and disports
himself in a highly self-satisfied manner.*

Higgins has a persistent habit of rattling the contents of his
pockets as he does in this final moment of the play. Shaw employs
this piece of stage business on two other occasions in the play, and
draws audience attention to it on the first occasion in the
surrounding dialogue. The first two occasions have in common
the fact that they are each associated with revelations about
certain failings in Higgins's relations with women. On each
occasion he is shown to be avoiding close engagement with
subjects or questions which threaten his own emotional tranquility.
He uses his nonchalance as a means of insulating himself

from emotional demands. The cash rattling is a small but significant indicator of Shaw's conception of Higgins's character, and the closing use of the device, it can be argued, helps to establish the meaning of the end of the play.

Shaw's first explicit use of the device occurs near the beginning of Act III during Higgins's dialogue with his mother, before Eliza's first launching in society. The more obvious reason for Higgins's 'fidgeting' in this scene is his apprehension about the first test of his experiment. But his speech to his mother, on the subject of young women, suggests a more deep-seated reason for unease:

HIGGINS: Oh, I can't be bothered with young women. My idea of a lovable woman is something as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women; some habits lie too deep to be changed.

[Rising abruptly and walking about, jingling his money and his keys in his trouser pockets] Besides, they're all idiots.

With an appropriately classical term ('idiots') Higgins recalls his Ovidian prototype's contempt for the female mind, a contempt which is expressed in various ways in the play. To this, Shaw adds the notion that the female ideal for Pygmalion/Higgins is his mother, a sexually unchallenging figure who looks after him and buys him his ties and gloves, and for whom he has found a counterpart in Mrs Pearce, his housekeeper.

The most searching challenges in the play to Higgins's responses as a man and to his responsibility as a creator come at the beginning of Act IV, when he returns with Pickering and Eliza after the success of the experiment. Infuriated by Higgins's failure to express any sympathy with her ordeal or congratulations on her success, Eliza demands to know from her creator what is to become of her. Higgins's blankness in response to this plea is the most striking instance in the play of his failure to recognize the humanity of his creation:

LIZA: . . . What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?

HIGGINS: [*enlightened, but not at all impressed*] Oh, that's what's worrying you is it? [*He thrusts his hands into his pockets, and walks about in his usual manner, rattling the contents of his pockets, as if condescending to a trivial subject out of pure kindness*]. I shouldn't bother about it if I were you. I should imagine you won't have much difficulty in settling yourself somewhere or other, though I hadn't quite realized that you were going away.

The dialogue in the final scene turns not only on the question of Eliza's need for friendly concern, but also on her new economic plight as a 'lady'. In the Pygmalion story as recounted by Ovid, Pygmalion is described as having a profound aversion to the female sex, and it is explained that this arises from his disgust at the behaviour of the *propoetides*, women of Amathus who were, so the myth has it, the first women to become prostitutes. The implication of Ovid's tale is that it is his desire for a woman beyond the imperfection of those around him which inspires Pygmalion to create Galatea. Shaw subtly reverses this theme in *Pygmalion*. As a flower girl in Tottenham Court Road Eliza sold flowers. As a 'lady' she is threatened with the prospect of having nothing to sell but herself ('Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else'). The analogy between Eliza's situation and that of a prostitute has been lightly insinuated from very near the beginning of her progress towards becoming a lady, when Higgins 'buys' her from her father, Doolittle, for five pounds. Until the last scene of the play Eliza is in a position of economic, as well as emotional and intellectual, dependence on Higgins. She is a kept woman; and Higgins's rattling of the money and keys in his pocket may thus be seen to have a further dimension of meaning, in addition to its significance as one of the signals of failure in his understanding of, and response to, 'young women'.

On the whole, Higgins is presented in the play as a likeable and entertaining eccentric. But the critical notes in Shaw's portrayal of his character are clear. He has certain qualities in common with a later Pygmalion in Shawian drama, who appears in the final play of the *Back to Methuselah* cycle. The Pygmalion of *As Far As Thought Can Reach* is a scientist enthusiastically and intensely

absorbed in his creations, but failing to take account of the consequences. As the irresponsible creator of living beings, he is very similar to Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's story. By the time he came to write *As Far As Thought Can Reach*, the Pygmalion and Frankenstein legends had clearly become very closely identified with one another in Shaw's mind.³ The Pygmalion of *As Far As Thought Can Reach* plays dangerous games with the creation of live 'dolls' (the term is also used of Eliza in *Pygmalion*) who turn upon their creator in revengeful, destructive spirit. His first creation is an abortion, 'a dreadful mixture of horror and absurdity' (a type of Yahoo or primitive man) who threatens to kill Pygmalion and perishes 'in torments, howling' after indiscriminately devouring a variety of chemicals in the laboratory. The Female Figure and the Male Figure (later identified as Cleopatra and Ozymandias respectively) who appear on stage are successful as physical creations, but equally dangerous. In the scene which follows their appearance, Pygmalion dies as the result of a bite given to him in a struggle with the Female Figure. His death is a judgement. The He-Ancient and She-Ancient who arrive on the scene after Pygmalion's death express severe disapproval of his game of making live dolls: 'Let it be a lesson to you all to be content with lifeless toys, and not attempt to make living ones.' The limits of legitimate experimentations with the moulding of life are suggested in the He-Ancient's advice to the young man, Acis, that 'you can create nothing but yourself'.

Suggestions of a Frankenstein-like relation between creator and creature are also present in *Pygmalion*. In one of their meetings in *Frankenstein*, the monster passionately complains to his creator about his callous lack of concern for the consequences of his experiment: 'Unfeeling, heartless creator! you had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind.'⁴ Like Victor Frankenstein, Higgins is a scientist absorbed in the process of his creativity. But he is equally unconcerned about its end, about what Mrs Higgins calls 'the problem of what is to be done with [Eliza] afterwards'.

A gloss on Shaw's thinking about the subject of experimentation with human life as its material is provided by some remarks in the Preface to *Misalliance* published in 1914, a year after the

first production of *Pygmalion*. In that Preface, under the heading, 'What is a child?', Shaw wrote in answer:

An experiment. A fresh attempt to produce the just man made perfect: that is, to make humanity divine. And you will vitiate the experiment if you make the slightest attempt to abort it into some fancy figure of your own: for example, your notion of a good man or a womanly woman.⁵

Elsewhere in the same Preface he counsels 'schoolmaster abortionists'⁶ to leave experiments with life to the Life Force. A similarly critical attitude towards such experimentation is hinted at in *Pygmalion*. In the first scene in Higgins's studio-laboratory, Pickering twice uses the term 'experiment' in reference to the project of transforming Eliza, without qualm. But in Act v the word becomes a source of embarrassment to him:

LIZA: . . . Will you drop me altogether now that the experiment is over, Colonel Pickering?

PICKERING: Oh dont. You mustnt think of it as an experiment. It shocks me somehow.

But Higgins's project clearly is an experiment, and one which is carried out without regard to its human implications and consequences.

Understandably, because of its generic connections with Cinderella romance, *Pygmalion* has always held out strong temptations to producers and authors of musical comedy to make the work conform to conventional sentimental moulds. We know from Shaw's Epilogue and from his correspondence about the play that he himself did not intend the ending of the play to imply a future marriage between Higgins and Eliza. But in writing the last act he was working against the grain of a powerful tradition of romantic fiction in which love overcomes the barriers of class. The trouble began with the very first production of the play in which Sir Herbert Tree played Higgins to Stella Campbell's Eliza. Shaw had the utmost difficulty in converting these two to his own views about the play, and complained especially of the 'raving absurdity'⁷ of Tree's acting of Higgins. His exasperation is understandable when we learn that, during the run, Tree

introduced a piece of theatrical business, whereby between his speech and the curtain, Higgins casts a rose to the departing Eliza, thus leaving no doubt in the audience's mind as to the likely outcome of their relations.

Since the meanings of a play have effective existence only in the occasional transactions which occur between readers and the signs of verbal and non-verbal expression in the text, or between performers and audiences, it is inevitable that several suppositional endings to the plot of *Pygmalion* will always exist in potential. Some passages in the play's dialogue undeniably tend to encourage the presumption of an eventual marriage between Higgins and Eliza. We learn that Higgins bought Eliza a ring on a visit to Brighton. He has grown 'accustomed' to her voice and face. She performs little services for him around the house. But there are compelling reasons for saying that the ingredients of Cinderella romance are a foil to a tougher and more interesting line of narrative in the play which concludes decisively with Eliza's final words to Higgins: 'Buy them yourself'. In this view, *Pygmalion* is a play not about the growth of love between master and pupil, but about the pupil's regaining, through struggle, of her identity and independence. Her movement upwards in the social scale has involved not an increase but a diminution of freedom. In that respect her career is like that of Doolittle, whose social ascent leads to unwelcome imprisonment: 'Who asked him to make a gentleman of me? I was happy, I was free', he complains. In Eliza's case it is not so much the imprisonment of class, but imprisonment by her 'creator' from which she needs to escape. But her words closely echo Doolittle's: 'Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I'm a slave now, for all my fine clothes.'

Despite Higgins's expressions of fondness for Eliza in the final scene between the two, what emerges most clearly is the fundamental incompatibility of their views of life. In saying to Eliza that he wastes the 'treasures of [his] Miltonic mind' on her, Higgins reminds us of the poet who made slaves of his daughters whilst producing a poem which distinguishes between an Adam who pursues 'thoughts abstruse' and an Eve who has a more immediate knowledge of feelings and things ('Not Words alone pleas'd her').⁸ As a codifier of language and manners, Higgins is interested in generalities and principles. Eliza's complaint is not

only that he neglects her feelings but also that he fails to individuate her as a person from the human species ('I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way'). Eliza's attitude is, of course, seen sympathetically in the play; but its less appealing aspects are also discernible. She is presented as an intensely subjective person, whose outlook is inimical to thought because she tends to reduce all general issues to a personal level: 'I dont notice things like that. I notice that you dont notice me.'

Shaw allows Higgins the recognition that 'making life means making trouble'. But it is also clear that there are strict limits on the extent to which Higgins is prepared to engage with the 'trouble' of life. In one of his Act v speeches, after being confronted with the question of Eliza's future prospects, he callously tells her that she should 'go back to the gutter', where life is 'real', 'warm' and 'violent'. For the newly-educated Eliza this is hardly a feasible plan; but at least the warmth and vitality of the life of the gutter may be preferable to the coldness of Higgins. In the same speech in Act v, Higgins presents the prospect of a future marriage for Eliza in terms which, whilst presenting another impossible choice for her, also suggest a squeamishness in his attitude to sexual relations which sorts ill with the idea of his marrying Eliza himself: 'Marry some sentimental hog or other with lots of money, and a thick pair of lips to kiss you with and a thick pair of boots to kick you with.' Higgins does not lose his will to possess Eliza. He reacts sharply to challenges to his ownership of her from Freddy and Doolittle, and shows at the end of the play that his confidence in his ownership of her is still intact. But the relationship which he offers her is that of forming part of a sexless alliance, with himself and Pickering, as one of 'three old bachelors'.

As the richly funny, but intensely hostile, final clash between Higgins and Eliza draws to its conclusion, the exasperated creator (momentarily descending to the behaviour of 'the gutter' himself) lays violent hands on his creation. As his next speech makes clear this laying on of hands is Pygmalion/Higgins's final and decisive creative act in the play, an act which simultaneously brings his work of art to life and secures for both the artist himself and his creation their complete freedom from one another. The Pygmalion legend comes brilliantly to the surface at this point in

the play, charged with meanings which give a new direction to the Ovidian tale. Shaw's *Pygmalion* does indeed create (or re-create) a woman. But the essential sign of her coming to life is that she is no longer a doll-like projection of her creator's will. She has gained self-ownership and freedom of choice ('I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you'). Her defiance of Higgins elicits from him the wondering comments: 'By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. . . . Five minutes ago you were like a millstone round my neck. Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship.'

Shaw provides Higgins with at least these insights into what making 'a woman' of Eliza means. But he withholds from his character a full understanding of the completeness of the success of his experiment. Left alone on the stage at the end of the play, chuckling to himself and rattling his cash in his pockets in expectation of Eliza's compliance with his wishes, Higgins reaches the zenith of his capacity for imperceptiveness and misplaced confidence, and stands before us as a figure of engaging but doomed comic hubris.

NOTES

1. 'Pygmalion had seen these women spending their lives in shame, and, disgusted with the faults which in such full measure nature had given the female mind, he lived unmarried and long was without a partner of his couch' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. F. J. Miller, Loeb Classics, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1916; New York: G. T. Putnam's Sons, 1916) vol. II, pp. 81-3).
2. The discussion in this chapter is concerned with the original stage version of *Pygmalion*, as represented in the text included in Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion, Overruled, Pygmalion* (London: Constable, 1916) and in the various editions of *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*, of which that published by Constable in 1931 was the first. The Standard Edition (London: Constable, 1931) incorporates revised sequences from the film scenario. As Eric Bentley observes, the film version of *Pygmalion* is structurally inferior to the original stage version, an objection which also applies to the revised text of 1941. In particular, the inclusion of the Ambassador's reception scene weakens the impact of the true climax of the play, which is contained in the final encounter between Eliza and Higgins - see Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, 2nd British edn (London: Methuen, 1967) p. 85. In the Standard Edition, Shaw evidently attempted to clear up the ambiguity of the original ending by altering Higgins's last speech as follows:

HIGGINS: Pickering! Nonsense: shes going to marry Freddy. Ha ha!
Freddy! Freddy! Ha ha ha ha ha!!!!

[*He roars with laughter as the play ends*].

Alan J. Lerner and Fritz Loewe's *My Fair Lady* has an obviously romantic close, suggesting clearly that Higgins and Eliza will marry. In the final scene of *My Fair Lady*, Eliza softly enters Higgins's study as he is listening to a recording of her voice. After watching him for a moment, she turns off the machine, and the following dialogue ensues:

ELIZA: [*Gently*] I washed my face and hands before I come, I did.
Higgins straightens up. If he could but let himself, his face would radiate unmistakable relief and joy. If he could but let himself, he would run to her. Instead, he leans back with a contented sigh pushing his hat forward till it almost covers his face.

HIGGINS: [*Softly*] Eliza? Where the devil are my slippers?
[*There are tears in Eliza's eyes. She understands*]
The curtain falls slowly

(Alan J. Lerner, *My Fair Lady: A Musical Play in Two Acts, Based on 'Pygmalion' by Bernard Shaw* (London: Max Reinhardt & Constable, 1956) pp. 155-6)

3. This connection is also observed by Margery M. Morgan in her article 'Edwardian Feminism and the Drama: Shaw and Granville Barker', *Cahiers Victoriens & Edouardiens: Studies in Edwardian and Anglo-Irish Drama (Montpellier)* no. 9/10 (Oct. 1979) p. 78. Miss Morgan's discussion of *Pygmalion* in that article came to my notice too late to be taken into account in this chapter.
4. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. M. K. Joseph (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 139.
5. *Collected Plays*, vol. iv, p. 20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
7. See Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1963; Oxford University Press, 1963) p. 177.
8. *Paradise Lost*, viii, 39-57.