

# ELIZA'S CHOICE: TRANSFORMATION MYTH AND THE ENDING OF PYGMALION

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In writing *Pygmalion*, Shaw borrowed and adapted many myths which led, rather inevitably, to confusion over the last moments of the play. Unable to identify the controlling mythic pattern, actors as well as audiences were unprepared for and unsatisfied with the feminist thrust of Eliza's decision to leave Higgins. The first as well as the most influential of the misled was Beerbohm Tree, the Henry Higgins of the play's London premiere. Tree ignored Shaw's instructions and at the end of every performance threw flowers to Mrs. Patrick Campbell (Eliza Doolittle), suggesting a romantic attachment that would end in marriage. When Shaw complained, the actor wrote to him: "My ending makes money: you ought to be grateful." Shaw countered: "Your ending is damnable: you ought to be shot."<sup>1</sup>

Generally, audiences preferred the more romantic ending of Tree's interpretation; and Shaw could not convert them from this error even with his prose epilogue, which he published in 1915 to prove that Eliza married Freddy and remained only a friend to Higgins. In 1938, ignoring both the epilogue and Shaw's film script, Gabriel Pascal gave movie audiences an ending similar to Tree's, in that a seemingly docile Eliza returned to Higgins.<sup>2</sup> Shaw had died before the production of the musical adaptation of the play, *My Fair Lady*, but even had he been alive, it is unlikely that he could have changed the then familiar romantic finale. Actors, audiences and producers were joined by many critics who also favored the revised

ending. In a recent book on Shaw's work, Maurice Valency even argued that Eliza and Higgins would make an ideal couple, and that the Shaw ending is dramatically unsatisfying and unacceptable.<sup>3</sup>

Rarely has an author's intention been so ignored or a classic work so mistreated. However unfortunate, the misinterpretations of *Pygmalion* are understandable when we recognize that the confusion comes largely from the conflicting myths which Shaw used in the play. The most obvious mythic source is underlined by the title. Henry Higgins's re-creation of Eliza Doolittle parallels many details of the Greek myth in which an artist, Pygmalion, disenchanted with the women around him, sculpts a statue of his ideal woman. The artist falls in love with his creation and prays to Aphrodite to give his ivory maiden life. When the lover's plea is answered, Pygmalion marries his creation. Along with the Greek myth, Shaw's *Pygmalion* also contains many elements of the Cinderella folk tale. Just as the poor and mistreated Cinderella becomes a princess through the intervention of her fairy godmother, Shaw's flower girl is elevated briefly into the aristocracy and permanently into the middle class.

A crucial difference between these stories and Shaw's play is that Eliza does not marry Henry Higgins at the end of the play, nor does she continue to live with him as servant, secretary, and protégée, the roles Higgins wants her to play. In the last scene, Eliza announces that she wants more out of life than the companionship Higgins offers her, and she threatens to marry Freddy Hill. Remembering, at least subconsciously, that the Pygmalion myth and the Cinderella folk tale end in the marriage of the principal characters, audiences expect Shaw to end his play similarly.

Despite the expectations of its audiences, Shaw's intention for the ending of *Pygmalion* is quite clear. Historically, Shaw's argument with Tree, his epilogue and his movie script solidly confirm his original ending. Textually, no line or stage direction even remotely suggests that Eliza will choose Higgins over Freddy. Realistically, as Shaw explains in the epilogue, Eliza cannot marry Higgins. True, they are both very charming, very bright and very strong characters who engage our affection and admiration; and the matchmaking part in all of us wants to see these two likeable personalities joined in lasting connubial bliss. But common sense should tell us otherwise. Higgins, after all, is a confirmed bachelor who can love only one woman, his mother; but even mother and son find life under the same roof—if for only a few hours at a time—intolerable. Higgins wants his independence and his work; Eliza wants her independence and affection. A compromise between these strong characters is as unlikely as it is undesirable.

Dramatically, *Pygmalion* repeats patterns and techniques that Shaw used consistently in his earlier plays. He delighted in irony, especially in denying audience expectations by inverting material. A *Pygmalion* who does not marry his creation is a rather mild departure from the expected, compared to many previous Shavian ironies, such as a hero who retreats, a minister who turns revolutionary, a world conqueror who abhors violence, a Don Juan who is pursued by a woman, and a doctor who kills. Eliza also is typical of many of Shaw's female characters. By leaving Higgins, she joins a long line of Shaw women who reject marriage to likely candidates. As early as 1893 in *The Philanderer*, Grace Cuthbertson refused to marry Leonard Charteris simply because she would not marry a man she loved. In other plays, Candida rejects Marchbanks for the more prosaic Morell, Jennifer Dubedat scorns Dr. Ridgeon, and in perhaps the closest parallel to the Eliza-Freddy-Higgins triangle, Cleopatra chooses a younger Antony to the more heroic Caesar. An audience that remembers these independent women will not be surprised when Eliza leaves Higgins for Freddy. Moreover, the many Shavian women who avoid marriage altogether help to explain Higgins's bachelorhood. Women such as Vivie Warren, Cicely Waynflete, Lina Szczepanowska, Lavinia and the later Joan, like Higgins, have important work that does not permit the luxury of marriage. These dynamic characters could well support their anti-marital stands in the words of Lavinia, who says: "Marriage is the sacrifice of the adventurous attitude towards life: the being settled. Those who are born tired may crave for settlement: but to fresher and stronger spirits it is a form of suicide."

Despite the strength of these arguments, many still wishfully push Higgins and Eliza toward marriage, and in so doing they are imposing the conventions of archetypal comedy on the structure of *Pygmalion*. In the archetypal comic plot, blocking characters and obstacles are overcome by the lovers, whose marriage at the end of the play signals the reconciliation and renewal of their society.<sup>4</sup> Although this comic convention enjoys great popular appeal, it is wrong to apply it to a Shaw play which does not show a man and a woman hurdling obstacle after obstacle to land finally in each other's arms. Such is the case in *Arms and the Man* and *You Never Can Tell*, but in *Pygmalion* the two marriages that do figure in the closing scene are incidental and not important in themselves.

To find the mythic model for *Pygmalion* we must look beyond the conventions of comedy with its devices of trickery, deceit and coincidence to the conventions of archetypal romance. The structure of this archetype is built around the hero, the possessor of great power

which he attains from his semidivine birth or from divine favor. With this great power the hero performs wondrous deeds, defeats evil forces and thereby insures the well-being of his society.

Even a superficial examination of *Pygmalion* will show that the main focus of the play is not erotic involvement but the power of language and that Henry Higgins is much more the hero than the lover. Shaw's story, simply stated, portrays an expert linguist who accepts a challenge to re-create a poor, uneducated young woman by teaching her how to speak properly. Linguistic knowledge and skills are the great weapons which Higgins uses to defeat evil and improve society. When he first meets Eliza, he notes that her kerbstone English will keep her in the gutter. She is in the clutches of the monster of poverty, which was to Shaw the greatest modern demon. Higgins cannot kill this monster, but he can use his powers to free Eliza from its grip. Just as the classical hero received help from gods, friends and benevolent spirits, the Shavian hero receives necessary assistance from his mother and from Colonel Pickering. Higgins supplies the technical skill and the discipline, but his assistants give Eliza the necessary qualities of common sense and humanity.

Even if we see *Pygmalion* in the pattern of archetypal romance, the problem with the ending remains, for the hero often receives a woman as the reward of his labors at the culmination of his quest.<sup>5</sup> Just as Perseus has his Andromeda and Sigurd his Brynhild, it is mythically consistent that Higgins should have his Eliza. Their marriage, however, is not a necessity, for in myth celibacy also has its models in many gods, the forerunners of the heroes, who do not take mates. Often those divinities most involved in the lives of men, such as Athena, Artemis, Apollo and Dionysus, avoid marriage to devote themselves to their missions. Recalling the stories of Theseus and Ariadne and of Aeneas and Dido, we can see that even heroes do not always leap into marriage with the first likely candidate.

Apart from these mythic precedents, we can understand and defend the changes Shaw makes in the archetypal romance if we acknowledge the theory of displacement, which holds that a writer will make changes in a myth to make his story more realistic, more credible to his audience.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Higgins does not go on a long and perilous journey looking for monsters to kill; nor does he have a magic sword or shield or a protecting deity hovering over him. As a displaced hero, Higgins is devoted to science, which is a modern quest to improve life, to rid the world of weakness and evil. His powerful weapon is his linguistic expertise, which he uses in his quest to make earth a little more like heaven, "where there are no

third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another," where all men are treated equally. In his quest the modern hero does not always want or need the fulfillment of marriage, and the modern maiden, more independent than her classical counterparts, may ignore the savior whose ideals she does not share. In the mythic retelling, then, Eliza may leave Higgins and marry Freddy, and Higgins, having freed his Andromeda from a living death, can move on to further adventures.

The most satisfying mythic understanding of the Shaw ending does not come from an examination of Higgins as hero or of *Pygmalion* as romance. Although the play is the story of a modern hero with modern powers, it is likewise the story of the effect of these powers, a story not only of liberation but also of transformation.

Eliza begins the play as a poor flower girl who is ignored by Freddy Hill and family and is easily intimidated by Higgins. With much work and the help of Higgins and company she begins to change. Her success at the Embassy Ball marks one stage in her growth, but it is hardly the climax or the great victory that the film-makers would have us believe. It is after the ball that Eliza shows her new powers: she has charm enough to keep a man, who in Act I never noticed her, at a constant vigil near her doorstep, and she has money enough to secure a cab to drive about in all night, an experience that was impossible for the flower girl. Most importantly, Eliza shows her new strength and independence when she walks out on Higgins, a decision that she confirms in the final scene. Here Eliza explains to Higgins that she doesn't want to live in his house and be treated as a maid or a personal secretary. She doesn't want to be treated as an equal, as "one of the boys," the way Higgins treats everyone he respects. She has no interest in the "higher life." Eliza does want "a little kindness," the simple love and affection that a Freddy Hill can supply. This revelation upsets Higgins, who tries to bully Eliza into submission. At this point, the real climax of the play, Eliza shows that she is no longer the flower girl who was tempted by chocolates or intimidated by threats. Announcing that she is as good as he is, that she has her own dreams and ideals, Eliza firmly establishes her independence. Higgins himself is forced to admit that she can make it without him and that he will miss her. He is forced to admit that she is finally a total person—her transformation is complete.

That the last act of *Pygmalion* does not emphasize marriage is reinforced by the reappearance of Alfred Doolittle. The dustman too has been transformed with the help of Higgins. The poor worker with few obligations has become the middle-class lecturer with many

responsibilities. His impending marriage, unimportant in itself, is another indication of the drastic change in his life style. Doolittle himself is basically the same character: his change is largely economic. In contrast, Eliza's change is largely spiritual: she is a new person inside and out.

The transformations we see in the last act of *Pygmalion* are a basic mythic motif. An obvious and predominant pattern in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformations occur so often in myths and in folk tales that they seem to be a basic exercise of man's imaginative powers. In trying to explain this common theme, Northrop Frye suggests that man, by virtue of his imagination, can gain some control over a world which is alien and often hostile.<sup>7</sup> In his imagination man can re-create the world or at least understand its mysteries, which is another form of control. He can change the sun into a god, a god into a man, or a man into a constellation. He can change a statue into a living woman, a poor girl into a princess, and a flower girl into a "consort battleship." The core of the Pygmalion myth and of the Cinderella folk tale is the transformation, not the marriage: while Shaw does not use his sources as a prescription for his plot, he does preserve the fundamental pattern common to both stories. In this sense, he does not invert the myths so much as he retells them.

From this perspective we can understand why Shaw would be so concerned by the productions which hinted at a deeper attachment between Eliza and Higgins. If Eliza remains with Higgins, in mythic terms, the hero would receive his reward, and Eliza would have to submit herself to her savior. This, in fact, was probably the ideal that animated many of those who wanted Eliza to remain with Higgins: the submissive woman, fetching slippers and managing the household, while the eccentric hero tends to higher affairs. What these revisionists failed to see is that in their ending Eliza only would trade masters—poverty and vulgarity for Higgins—and her own transformation would not be as deep or as dramatic.

In effect, the popular interpretation changes the focus of the ending: it elevates Higgins and reduces Eliza; it emphasizes the hero over his work, the transformer over the transformation, one myth over another. On the other hand, when we recognize the play as a retelling of an archetypal transformation, we can see that Shaw gave the first part of the play to Higgins but reserved the last for Eliza. She was not to be a reward for the hero, slipper-fetcher and house manager. The flower girl was changed into a strong and independent woman—a woman equal to the hero. Joining the ranks of the other strong female characters such as Vivie Warren, Candida Morell, Ann

Whitefield, Barbara Undershaft and Lina Szczepanowska, Eliza Doolittle stands up to Higgins and thus takes an active role in deciding her own destiny. Although we may respect and applaud Higgins's powers, in the end the triumph is Eliza's, and the greatest applause should be reserved for the new woman, Shaw's modern Galatea and twentieth-century Cinderella.

## Notes

1. Hesketh Pearson, *Beerbohm Tree: His Life and Laughter* (1956), p. 182.
2. Cf. Bernard F. Dukore, "'The Middleaged Bully and the Girl of Eighteen': The Ending They Didn't Film," *Shaw Review* 14 (1971), 102-6.
3. Maurice Valency, *The Cart and the Trumpet: The Plays of George Bernard Shaw* (1973), pp. 316-22. For a brief review of criticism on both sides of the debate over the ending, cf. Charles A. Berst, *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama* (1973), pp. 196-97, fn. 1.
4. For a more detailed treatment of archetypal comedy, cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), pp. 163-86.
5. Cf. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 193.
6. Cf. Northrop Frye, "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," *Daedalus* (Summer 1961), reprinted in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (1963), pp. 21-38.
7. Cf. Northrop Frye, "The Motive For Metaphor," *The Educated Imagination* (1964), pp. 13-33.