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A Myth of Transformation, Transformed Again

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A myth of transformation, transformed again

When the happy crowds finally left the theatre after the thunderously successful London premiere of *Pygmalion*, on 12 April 1914, thoroughly worn out from excesses of laughter and clapping, none of them suspected what the experience had cost the exhausted, bitterly frustrated author, who had already left the theatre in disgust hours earlier. Certainly hints of strife between three of the grandest egos in the business — the playwright Bernard Shaw, the actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and the reigning diva of the London stage, Mrs Patrick Campbell (prophetically named ‘Stella’) — had already trickled out to the press, but these rumours had been blandly waved away or deftly spun by Sir Herbert, who was starring as Professor Henry Higgins. Shaw’s wife, Charlotte, who had more intimate information about the underlying tensions of the production than Sir Herbert, had already left the country to avoid the opening night histrionics. But only Shaw and the diva knew the whole story.

Less than a year before the play opened in London, Shaw had lost his head completely over the leading lady for whom he wrote *Pygmalion*, finally deciding to risk ruining both of their lives (and his wife’s) by running away with the enchantress he addressed in a love letter as ‘Stella, Stellata, Stelatissima’. The voluminous love-letters — by turns coy, witty, playful and heart-felt — passed between the two for over a year until finally the elopement had been arranged. At the last possible moment, though, Stella changed her mind and ran away from the seaside resort where Shaw had gone to meet her, her sense of honour, perhaps, reasserting itself. She wrote to him pleadingly, ‘I had to behave like a man — and a gentleman — hadn’t I?’ Furthermore, her affections had already turned towards someone younger: a handsome, dashing man-about-town named George Cornwallis-West.

At first Shaw tried to maintain a pose of hardy independence, even nonchalance, in the face of this reversal. To the woman who had abandoned him, he wrote, ‘Very well, go. The loss of a woman is not the end of the world... My soul can stand alone... You are an owl, sickened by two days of my sunshine... Go then: the Shavian oxygen burns up your little lungs: seek some stuffiness that suits you... Farewell, wretch that I loved’. By the second letter, though, his usual urbane wit and air of detachment deserted him entirely. ‘Infamous, vile, heartless, frivolous, wicked woman! Liar! Lying lips, lying eyes, lying hands, promise breaker, cheat, confidence-trickster!’, he fumed. ‘How could a human heart deal another such a — such a kick?... Stella: why did you do it?’ The following day he wrote to her again, but concluded ‘Useless, these letters: the wound will not heal’.



But of course, it is only in romantic tragedies that such wounds never heal. Shaw pulled himself together and returned contritely to his wife and his extremely busy public and artistic life. He was eventually even reconciled with Stella, who would — more than a year after the failed elopement — still shine as the brilliant star of the play he had written for her. That did not mean that the rehearsals would go smoothly, though, or that Shaw would be indifferent to the fact that Stella suddenly disappeared from rehearsals of *Pygmalion* the week before the play opened in London to marry George Cornwallis-West.

The conflicts that made the rehearsals of *Pygmalion* so difficult were not just emotional but also political and philosophical. Even though Shaw always claimed that he had written *Pygmalion* as a mere 'potboiler', a crowd-pleasing bit of fluff to bring in healthy box-office returns that would support his more serious, challenging, socially useful works, Shaw wrestled stubbornly with both Sir Herbert and Stella to keep them from turning the play into a conventional romantic comedy that pandered to the audience's expectation of a 'happy ending': that is, a marriage of the Cinderella figure to the professor who had transformed her from an impoverished guttersnipe selling flowers on the street to an elegant lady fit to marry a duke.

Shaw occasionally wrote plays that ended with happy engagements, but in this case he felt strongly that if Eliza, the elevated flower-girl, were to remain under the control of the man who had transformed her, she would never really establish herself as an independent being. Those expecting the standard husband-hunting plot tend to overlook this, but while Professor Higgins's triumph (and the play's plot) might have seemed complete when he managed to pass Eliza off as a duchess at an ambassador's reception, winning his bet, Shaw intended us to see this feat as just a superficial trick, a linguistic sleight of hand. As the Shaw critic Eric Bentley has argued, Higgins's other boast to Eliza, that he would 'make a woman of her', was the more important accomplishment, and this more fundamental transformation required Eliza to free herself from her role as Higgins's puppet and mouthpiece.

It is Eliza herself who finally demonstrates that this emancipation has occurred, not only by denouncing Higgins and leaving his home, but by offering her own analysis of Higgins's limited role in her transformation. She actually gives the primary credit to Colonel Pickering, Higgins's much kinder colleague and the one who first conceives of the project of transforming Eliza. She explains that 'really and truly... the difference between a lady and a flower-girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated. I shall always be a flower-girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower-girl and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will'. This insight has been confirmed by a famous psychological study of the effect of teachers' expectations on schoolchildren (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968) and dubbed 'the Pygmalion Effect' in Higgins's (or perhaps Pickering's) honour.



So while Tree and Stella continually urged Shaw to reduce or even omit the two acts that followed the triumph of the ambassador's reception (which in the original version of the play happens off stage) and to provide a strong hint, at least, that Eliza and Higgins would marry, Shaw continued to insist that this would ruin the play. In his exasperation, Shaw even wrote an afterword, added to the published text of the play, wherein he carefully explains the psychological reasons why Higgins would never marry anyone (he had a mother fixation) and why Eliza would never marry Higgins (she would rather be adored by her husband than bullied). Furthermore, Shaw adds a detailed narrative in which he explains what happens next: Eliza emancipates herself from Higgins, marries Freddy — the penniless but charming young toff who truly adores her — and sets herself up as the owner-manager of a flower shop with the initial financial backing of Pickering.

However, since Shaw had stormed out of the theatre halfway through the play that first night, Sir Herbert and Stella were free to change his ending subtly to suggest the romantic conclusion Shaw had expressly forbidden, with Sir Herbert tossing a bouquet and a kiss out of the window to Eliza in the final scene. Many directors of the play and its many adaptations for stage and screen have followed Sir Herbert's lead, not Shaw's. The BBC director Cedric Messina is one of the few exceptions. In his 1973 filmed version, starring Lynn Redgrave and James Villiers, Messina follows the ending of the play proper with two still photographs: the first of Eliza and Freddy's wedding party, with a scowling Higgins, the second of Eliza and Freddy posing in front of their flower shop. Shaw had tried to get a similar scene included at the ending of the screenplay he wrote in 1938 but the producer Gabriel Pascal substituted a different ending without Shaw's approval, so the play ends with Eliza



back at Higgins's house, just on the point of fetching his slippers. Well, what can one say? The film was a huge success — delighting crowds in Canada, South Africa, Australia and Europe — and the screenplay won an Oscar for Shaw, making him the first writer to win both the Oscar and the Nobel Prize for Literature (1925).

Of course, for those who know Shaw only through the Broadway hit (1956) and then Hollywood musical *My Fair Lady* (1964), the ideas Shaw laid out in his afterword and 'sequel' might seem rather perverse, especially as Shaw adds to Eliza's 'sequel' several pages explaining what happens to Freddy's sister, Clara, when she is startled out of her conventional devotion to the British caste system by Eliza's transformation and by the radical novels of H.G. Wells, who, like Shaw and Charlotte, worked actively to promote gradual socialist reform in late Victorian London as founding members of the Fabian Society.

However, those more familiar with Shaw's life and works will find, throughout this 'potboiler', traces of Shaw's political ideas that find fuller expression in his more overtly didactic plays, essays, treatises and speeches, and in the five novels he wrote in his 20s: satiric commentary on the tragic uselessness of the 'idle-rich class' (a problem explored in his weightier plays *Man and Superman*, 1903, and *Heartbreak House*, 1917), criticism of society's 'crime' of poverty and of traditional charity's inadequate response (key themes of *Major Barbara*, 1905), strong hints that middle-class marriage amounts to genteel prostitution (a theme most fully developed in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, 1894) and a denunciation of the educational system of his time, which Shaw declared to be generally useless, simply reinforcing artificial

class distinctions without imparting any useful knowledge — much less wisdom. And although feminist scholars have argued about whether *Pygmalion* challenges or subtly reinforces sexist stereotypes, most agree that Eliza may also be seen as one in a long line of strong women characters that Shaw contributed to the Victorian and 20th-century portrait gallery of feminist heroines, including Vivie Warren, Major Barbara and St Joan.

The theme that is central to *Pygmalion*, though, is the role of language in defining not only social class but also an individual's sense of identity and self-worth. It is this theme, not the Cinderella story, that gives Shaw's play a nearly universal, timeless appeal — as can be seen by the wide variety of translations and adaptations it has undergone in the century since it was first written. The original play was performed to great acclaim in Vienna, Berlin and New York (in a German translation for all three venues) before it opened in London; other international performances achieved success in France, Poland and Russia, among many others; and film versions have been made in German (the first one), Dutch, English, Swedish, Hungarian, Georgian and three Indian languages.

After the most famous adaptation of all — *My Fair Lady* — was performed, the floodgates of revision and adaptation opened fully, encouraging playwrights, screenwriters for film and television and even novelists to set the famous transformative experiment to work on 'Elizas' as various as an American high-school art student (*She's All That*), a Cockney hairdresser (*Educating Rita*) and a computer program schooled to pass as a graduate student in an American university's English department (*Galatea 2.2*). In settings where social upheaval is particularly dramatic, versions of *Pygmalion* proliferate: Hong Kong, for instance, produced no fewer than three film adaptations of the story between 1988 and 2003, which, according to the Shaw scholar Kay Li, 'trace the plight of the former British colony, the handover, and its aftermath'. Li says more broadly of Shaw adaptations in modern China that in addition to using Shaw's works to explore the tensions and complexities of their rapidly changing society, the Chinese have also both 'introduce[d] Shaw's works to China' and 'introduce[d] themselves to the world through Shaw's works'.

So while Shaw's 'potboiler' has grown in significance far beyond the personal drama of its London debut to strike an answering chord in writers and directors round the world, a hundred years after it was first written one can only wonder what Shaw would say about its latest adaptation, *Meine faire Dame — ein Sprachlabor*. If Shaw's angry ghost did not stalk the Hollywood soundstage back in 1964 when Rex Harrison, as Henry Higgins, spiced the penultimate scene in *My Fair Lady* with lines straight from that first angry letter Shaw wrote to Stella after their failed elopement, it seems fair to assume he will tolerantly smile at whatever modern transformation this latest version of *Pygmalion* contains.

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