



What
Women
Might
Be

SHAW TAPPED INTO THE FANTASY of transformation when he conceived Eliza Doolittle. His source was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the myth of a Cypriot sculptor, Pygmalion, who has no interest in women until he carves an ivory figure, later called Galatea, with whom he falls in love. She comes to life when he kisses her, and they marry. In Shaw's most famous play, *Pygmalion* (1912, staged 1914), and in the musical based on it, *My Fair Lady* (1956), a professor of phonetics undertakes to change "a common girl" into a Queen of Sheba.

To all appearances, Professor Higgins succeeds in his experiment. He takes in a Cockney flower seller, a "guttersnipe," whose prospects will be limited by her raucous vowels and routine bleats ("I'm a good girl, I am"). She comes to Henry Higgins for speech lessons with a view to opening a flower shop. He takes a bet with his professional colleague, Colonel Pickering, that if Eliza is taught received pronunciation he can change her class within six months. Higgins is vindicated when Eliza passes for a lady at an embassy reception.

Metamorphosis can be cruel in Ovid—Pluto's abduction of Proserpina to the darkness of his underworld, or a girl hardening into a tree to avoid rape—but there's scope, too, for comedy. Eliza's first ordeal is a bath; the grimy clothes she regards as finery are burned. In fact, this humor has become dated. Nowadays, the joke is turned on those who are "too posh to wash."

The enduring comedy is verbal: Higgins deploys insult to strip Eliza of her old self. She is a squashed cabbage leaf, an insect, "so deliciously low." His scorn and his determined teaching test her resilience. In 1938, Shaw was brought in when a Hungarian, Gabriel Pascal, made his classic movie with Leslie Howard and the wonderfully convincing Wendy Hiller, and it was then that the humorous exercises were introduced about "the rain in Spain" and the line that retrieves the "h" lost to the Cockney dialect: "In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen." Eliza has to muster breath after breath to conquer such words.

As she tunes her ear to the professor's intonations, she will pick up the mannered conformity as well as the irony in polished English: language as performance, so much so that with a self-mocking speaker like Higgins you can't know him. His inner life is guarded, inaccessible even to himself.

It's tempting, especially for directors of musicals, to present a variation on Cinderella with marriage as a reward for a performance of irreproachable ladyhood. But Shaw was a thinker, a serious socialist, and a supporter of women's suffrage. "My conscience is the genuine pulpit article," he said. Shaw proclaimed all great art to be didactic and used Eliza Doolittle—who starts out as dirty as Cinderella, though more promisingly barbed—to confront the audience of his day with social issues. One such issue is voiced by Eliza after the embassy performance: What next? She has shown an extraordinary

aptitude for learning and now has the know-how to teach others. Is this to be channelled into the traditional role of a helpmeet who fetches a man's slippers when he comes home? In fact, this was the question Henry James had raised in *The Portrait of a Lady*: What is an emergent woman to do?

Since Eliza is not alone among Shaw's thinking women—Major Barbara, Vivie Warren, Candida, Saint Joan—how to act in the larger sense is in question. And this matter of women's possibilities raises more difficult issues: the question of buried and perhaps deviant elements in woman's nature; the question of mentors who, like Professor Higgins, cannot see a woman beyond the way she appears; and the legitimacy presented by judges of female action, like those well-intentioned men (as Shaw considered them) who in 1431 condemn Joan to the stake for heresy because she claims to have been led to military victories not by feudal lords playing at tournaments but by inner "voices"—higher voices, Joan claims—who speak common sense.

Where did Shaw find such revolutionary models of womanhood? He was born to an indifferent mother who parted with her drinking husband. In his twenties, gaunt, pale, red-bearded, Shaw followed his mother and her music teacher from Dublin to England, and there he hung on at home whilst he tried his hand (with no success) at fiction. The young Shaw responded to the solitary Lyndall in the 1883 best seller *The Story of an African Farm*, by Olive Schreiner. Lyndall becomes a fearless speaker, refusing to marry an unworthy man even though he'd fathered her child. This novel of an outsider, determined to find and to live by what she is, shook up social norms at the same time that Nora shut the door on her play-acting marriage in *A Doll's House*. Schreiner, who read the Norwegian drama in translation, praised Ibsen for showing "some sides of women's nature that are not often spoken of, and that some people do not believe exist—but they do."

That year, 1883, Shaw spent his days in the reading room of the British Museum, inventing an outspoken heroine named Agatha Wylie in a novel, *An Unsocial Socialist*. Sidney Trefusis (the son of a millionaire, posing as a laborer in order to promote socialism) meets his match in Agatha, who doesn't love him.

Shaw did not find his voice as a dramatist until he reached his mid-thirties, when he woke up to Ibsen. The dangerous reputation of Nora postponed a full London staging of *A Doll's House* until 1889. Shaw saw the play five times, and then published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. At the same time, Schreiner published her *Dreams of rising women*, which, to Shaw, was "a treasure."

Starting in 1892, he devised roles for the "New Woman," a phrase that entered the language in 1894. Strong, outspoken women were replacing the Victorian

model of ladies as helpless and quiet. So when Professor Higgins trains Eliza to be a lady, is he stifling her with the propriety of “silence”? Is the price of transformation that she surrender the freedom of the gutter for the constraints of gentility?

Eliza’s narrative and that of Higgins turn out to be at odds, and whether they can converge remains in doubt—less so in *My Fair Lady*, given the happy-ending convention of musicals. Where Eliza’s absurdly silly suitor, Freddy Eynsford-Hill, is blinded by infatuation, Higgins is blinded by his triumph. He ignores what Eliza herself has achieved. For him, the experiment is over. For Eliza, it should open up a new life, but that’s not under discussion. Wendy Hiller, as Eliza, stiffens in protest. The suppressed emotion is palpable before she explodes, lunging at Higgins, who throws her down. His anger is curiously sexless—his undeniable charm deflected into his verbal darts. Is this “confirmed bachelor” open to change?

The enigma of this character is close to that of Shaw himself, who admitted, “I have over and over again taken [G.B.S.] to pieces before the audience to show the trick of him.” He stayed with his mother until he married, at the age of forty-two. His wife, Charlotte Payne-Townshend—part nurse, part substitute mother—did not wish the marriage to be consummated, and to this Shaw agreed. Instead, he had platonic affairs, largely epistolary, with actresses he admired. In a preface to his correspondence with Ellen Terry, he wrote, “Only on paper has humanity yet achieved glory, beauty, truth, knowledge, virtue and abiding love.” A possible exception was his proposal to take on with Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the first to play Eliza. At the last moment, Mrs. Campbell broke away; Shaw penned an indignant protest, not unlike Higgins’s outrage when Eliza leaves.

Higgins sees Eliza as his creation. But Eliza carries her own spirit of independence through her transformation. To her, the professor is a bully. To his mother, he’s a baby. She rebukes Higgins and Pickering for being two babies playing with a doll, dressing her up—shades of a doll’s house. Shaw did not believe that Eliza would marry Higgins. In one note—it didn’t enter the text—he wanted the curtain to fall on Higgins saying “Galatea” when Eliza returns. That would have emphasized the drama of metamorphosis: a statue that has come to life.

What Higgins had really created was a façade. Eliza’s inner development continues apart from her mentor, and to convey this as suggestively as

Wendy Hiller does, largely through the language of her body, is the challenge of this role. In the movie of *My Fair Lady* (1964), the spectacular costumes by Cecil Beaton—Audrey Hepburn's cartwheel hat at Ascot; the glitter of bling at a fairy-tale ball; the eye-catching orange number, complete with perky hat, when the star sets out to drown herself; and the rose pink in which she's swathed when she returns to Higgins—steal the show. Style thins the drama of metamorphosis to Hollywood makeover. In contrast, when Wendy Hiller makes her *début* in society, her inner absence speaks as her body glides silent, silver-gray, arms straight at her sides, moving as in a dream through the paces assigned to her.

Shaw was not one for fairy tales. His particular heaven is reserved for "the masters of reality." He wanted to inject reality into the theater, dismissing Victorian melodrama and romance. The pun-cturing language of Professor Higgins is from this point of view bracing, and he's passionate at least about speech. But there are better mentors—Percy Bysshe Shelley, for one, who shared his privileged education with his wife, a teenage Mary Shelley. He encouraged her to study Greek, and edited *Frankenstein* with a light touch, sensitive to Mary's words. And then there is the critic George Henry Lewes, who pushed Marian Evans to attempt fiction and acted as her agent. George Eliot was their joint creation; she felt as joined to him as a Siamese twin. Shaw was too astute, in a way too self-knowing, not to be aware that Higgins is un t to marry Eliza. "Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion," Shaw said. "His relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable."

There is another, more serious critique of unseeing men in Shaw's one tragedy, *Saint Joan* (1924). Joan is a prodigy at nineteen, eminently realistic in her military plans, as well as forthright and true. After she wins back French lands from the English and crowns the dauphin as Louis VII in the cathedral at Reims, no one thanks her; the king is as oblivious as Higgins after Eliza's feat. When Joan offers to return to her father's farm, he answers, "heedlessly," how "nice" that will be. Joan speaks "bitterly" to the men she'd led: "I know well that none of you will be sorry to see me go." None are prepared

to stand by her when she's captured and tried. She is forced to accept that she is alone on earth and that in her loneliness she must find her strength.

Twenty-five years after her execution, the Church cleared Joan of

heresy, and five centuries later, in 1920, she was sanctified. In the play's dream epilogue, she returns to life in the present day, as do her long-ago fellows and judges. Shaw demonstrates to his own age how uneasy men still feel about a woman who moves ahead, however unshowy she may be. All, including Shaw's contemporaries, find excuses to back off. To Eliot in the audience, it seemed nothing less than a "sacrilege" to present a saint as a reformer in the vein of Mrs. Pankhurst, the militant leader of the British suffragettes.

Shaw's women are an evolving breed. He jolts his audience with their ordinariness—an upstart from a French farmyard or a London market. He spotlights natural intelligence, observes it unfold, and sees it blocked. Here, before our eyes, is a gender undergoing transformation, and here, too, is the darker side: resistance to unwomanly presumption, compounded by something Shaw himself felt: fear of the "Life Force" in women hunting men as prey, like Ann Whitefield, a "boa constrictor" in *Man and Superman*. His biographer, Michael Holroyd, discerns that the "only way Shaw could overcome his vulnerability to women who interested him was to envelop their bodies with his words, and then fall in love with his own verbal clothing."

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