

Review: *The Ambiguities of Pygmalion*

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The Wilsons, however, also identify almost all of Lawrence's encyclopedic reading and recollection, including quotations from memory that are amazingly close to accuracy. The well of T.E.'s mind boggles our own, and we realize once more in these revealing two years of letters what was lost when his deadly addiction to speed abbreviated his life.

Stanley Weintraub

*The Ambiguities of Pygmalion*

Bernard Shaw. *Pygmalion*. Edited by L. W. Conolly. London: Methuen Drama, 2008. liv + 154 pp. \$14.95. No index. Paperback.

In a 1939 newspaper article entitled "Bernard Shaw Flays Filmdom's 'Illiterates,'" Shaw, responding to interviewer Dennison Thornton's question about why he allowed a "ready-made happy ending" for the 1938 film version of *Pygmalion*, wrote:

I did not. . . . Nothing of the kind was emphasised in my scenario, where I emphasised the escape of Eliza from the tyranny of Higgins by a quite natural love affair with Freddy. But I cannot at my age undertake studio work: and about twenty directors turned up there and spent their time trying to sidetrack me and Mr. Gabriel Pascal . . . They devised a scene to give a lovelorn complexion at the end to Mr. Leslie Howard; but it is too inconclusive to be worth making a fuss about.<sup>1</sup>

Shaw's irritation and weariness are palpable, and it's easy to understand both reactions. Ever since the play's initial production in 1914, he had been engaged in a tug of war with the public and with directors and actors over the interpretation of his most popular play. Shaw insisted that Eliza should strike out on her own as an independent person at the play's end, but in that 1914 production Sir Beerbohm Tree, the first Higgins, ignored Shaw's explicit directions and threw flowers at the departing Mrs. Pat Campbell, the first Eliza, before the final curtain. That was a foretaste of the play's future, in which directors and actors regularly found ways to bow to the popular demand that Eliza and Henry should end up together, never mind what the author wanted.

In the New Mermaids edition of *Pygmalion*, editor Leonard Conolly chronicles this long conflict and its causes in a lucid introduction, which also includes a perceptive tour through the life and career of the author,

the sources and cultural contexts of the play, as well as its themes and characters, recent criticism, production history, and the evolution of the text. Throughout this compact but comprehensive discussion, Conolly uncovers the play's multiple ambiguities and traces the origin of some of them to Shaw's sources and creative choices.

He points out, for example, that Shaw's reliance on the Pygmalion myth and his decision to give that name to the play foreshadow the disputes about the relationship between Higgins and Eliza. After all, in Ovid's rendering of the myth, after Pygmalion creates Galatea, his statue of a perfect woman, he falls in love with it; and when she comes to life, they do become lovers. Of course, Shaw then set out to do what he usually did with popular myths and familiar theatrical genres: subvert tradition for his own purposes. In this case, Conolly continues, Shaw wanted to reshape the Pygmalion story to reflect what he considered a more important influence, Ibsen and his play, *A Doll's House*. Eliza Doolittle was to be Shaw's Nora Helmer, a woman finally able to make her own choices about her life and future after escaping not only from the trap of poverty and ignorance but also from the manipulative, doll-like treatment she was receiving from Higgins and Pickering.

One can argue that the Eliza we see at the end of the play does embody Shaw's intention: when she snaps her fingers and tells Higgins she doesn't care about "your bullying and your big talk," and then a few moments later sweeps out of the room, confident that she can take care of herself, and leaving Higgins to his own devices, she does seem like a "fine and independent Galatea," in the words of Errol Durbach (as quoted by Conolly), one of a number of critics who compare *Pygmalion* to *A Doll's House*.<sup>2</sup> Others, including a number of feminist scholars, are not so sure. Conolly cites as an example the declaration by J. Ellen Gainor that Shaw's sequel to the play—in which Eliza and Freddy (now married) open a flower shop and, having a rough time making a go of it, are dependent for some years on financial and other help from Higgins and Pickering—shows that Shaw actually wants to deprive Eliza of "the power she seems to gain in her fight for independence."<sup>3</sup>

The post-transformation life that Shaw foresees for Eliza in that sequel does seem somewhat diminished, or at least anticlimactic, in view of what Higgins and Pickering tell Mrs. Higgins in Act III about Eliza's learning capacity and the surprising range of her abilities: a very quick ear for dialects and mimicry, a remarkable albeit untaught talent for playing the piano, and the makings of an alert private secretary. Even if we accept Shaw's explanation that she would not, after all, carry through on her threat to work for "that hairyfaced Hungarian" as a speech teacher, because she eventually saw the special knowledge Higgins and Pickering had acquired as their property, would the Eliza who found her courage and

her confidence in Act V have to settle for the flower-shop option? Even if she did, would she really be so slow to develop the know-how needed to make her business successful?

Indeed, one could argue that Shaw's sequel, with its limited view of Eliza's prospects and abilities, and its prophecy that she would still be a frequent visitor and participant in the Higgins/Pickering household, reminds us of the ambiguity evident in Shaw's first version of *Pygmalion's* ending. In that scene, Eliza "sweeps out" after refusing disdainfully to order a ham and buy gloves and a tie for Higgins; his mother then offers to buy the clothes for him, but he tells her, "Oh don't bother. She'll buy em all right enough." As does Conolly, we must wonder if Higgins's confidence is delusional or insightful. Has he misread Eliza's new state of mind, or has he read her better than she has read herself?

The ambiguities in the play extend to Higgins, too. Readers and playgoers cannot help but be impressed by his linguistic skills, his eloquence, and (occasionally) his incisive mind. They cannot help but be amused by his democratically distributed bluntness of speech. Nevertheless, as the introduction notes, there is no gainsaying his arrogance, his bullying ways, and his insensitivity. Especially his insensitivity. When he says in Act II, for instance, that Eliza, who is standing right in front of him, "doesn't have any feelings that we need bother about," he crosses the line, as he does many times, from the intellectual astringency he speaks of in Act V to intellectual cruelty.

The same mixture of appealing and appalling traits can be found, Conolly observes, in Alfred Doolittle. His cheerfully "undeserving" charm is evident from the moment we meet him for the first time in Higgins's home, and audiences quickly become as taken with him as are Higgins and Pickering. However, Shaw also takes care to inform us that he is willing, in effect, to sell his daughter for five pounds, that he turned her out of his home as soon as he judged she was old enough to fend for herself, and that he has cohabited with seven women, counting Eliza's mother, and hasn't married one of them! Indeed, his straightforward selfishness and his refusal to bother with rules or niceties give him much in common with Higgins. In Edwardian England, the upper and lower classes often felt free to ignore what Doolittle calls "middle class morality" and good manners. Those who were middle class, or who (like Eliza) wanted to join them, truly revered both.

This pattern of ambiguity demonstrates the richness of the play, the range and depth of the text, and the variety of opportunities it offers directors and actors. In some respects, *Pygmalion* is therefore a typical Shaw play: it charms us with its comedy and surprises us with its reversals of expectations, and then, while we are smiling and intrigued, it challenges our conventional ideas—in this case about the class system, man-

ners and morality, and the advantages and dangers attached to social reforms and reformers. *Pygmalion* is also a special case, however, because of the way Shaw himself contributed to the evolution of the play.

In the final version of the text Shaw approved in late 1939 for publication in 1941, the argument between Higgins and Eliza in Act V has her declaring, "I'll marry Freddy, I will, as soon as I'm able to support him." However, in earlier editions, also approved by Shaw, the line reads, "as soon as hes able to support me," and the next lines have Higgins declaring that Eliza, his "masterpiece," will make a much more distinguished marriage. The change is small but significant. Taken together with Eliza's next speech in the later version—in which she says, "I don't want him to work. He wasn't brought up to it as I was"—it confirms for us that Eliza has already thought past her disillusionment with Higgins and her flimsy new status, and is considering her real prospects, including the need to be the breadwinner and decision-maker if she marries Freddy. As late as 1939, then, twenty-five years after the play premiered, Shaw was still working on *Pygmalion* and still changing his mind about it.

Leonard Conolly accepts Shaw's decision to make this 1941 version, which includes the screenplay scenes Shaw had prepared for the 1938 film, the definitive text. He thereby contradicts a number of Shaw scholars who believe that the 1916 text is superior, but defends his choice by pointing out how much the film-influenced text adds to thematic and character development. He points specifically to the way the scene in Eliza's Angel Court room shows the depth of her poverty, and to the added plausibility Eliza's scene with Freddy in Act IV gives to their romance. He then blunts potential criticism by including the alternate endings in an appendix, by signaling the scenes added from the film with a line of asterisks, and by noting other textual variations in plentiful, helpful notes.

Indeed, the New Mermaids edition is admirably complete, since it also includes Shaw's preface, the prose sequel, and the censor's initial report, as well as the editor's introduction, a Shaw chronology, and a well-organized list of sources for further reading. Students and general readers will find it both accessible and enlightening, Shaw scholars will regard it as an excellent resource, and directors of future productions of *Pygmalion* will wish they could hire Leonard Conolly as their dramaturg.

John M. McNerney

## Notes

1. Bernard Shaw, "Bernard Shaw Flays Filmdom's 'Illiterates,'" *Reynolds News*, London (22 January 1939), qtd. in *Pygmalion And My Fair Lady* (New York: Signet Classics, 1980), p. 108.

2. Errol Durbach, "Pygmalion: Myth and Anti-Myth in the Plays of Ibsen and Shaw," in *George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 95–98.

3. J. Ellen Gainor, *Shaw's Daughters: Dramatic and Narrative Construction of Gender* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 239.

### *Better Than Chocolate*

Bernard Shaw. *Arms and the Man*. Edited by J. P. Wearing. London: Methuen Drama, 2008. lii + 117 pages. \$14.95. No index. Paperback.

By 1894, Shaw was little known to the theatergoing public: his one performed play, *Widowers' Houses*, had had but a two-night run. In the spring of that year, though, Florence Farr was about to risk further fiasco to her season at the Avenue Theatre in reprising the play after the failure of John Todhunter's *A Comedy of Sighs*. Shaw, sensing imminent disaster, withdrew it and quickly made revisions to a new play he had been working on for some time. Within a few days, *Arms and the Man* was in rehearsal. Less than a month later, on opening night, faced with an overwhelmingly appreciative audience, Shaw famously responded to the lone boomer: "My dear fellow, I quite agree with you, but what are we two against so many?" W. B. Yeats later recalled that "from that moment Bernard Shaw became the most formidable man in modern letters."

As J. P. Wearing acknowledges, *Arms and the Man* pales when compared to Shaw's bigger works. However, given the play's importance for having launched Shaw's career in a way his earlier efforts at novels and plays had not, the decision by Methuen Drama to publish a new edition is indeed warranted. Yet the value of this particular edition goes far beyond the play's interest as a cultural artifact. Wearing skillfully provides the contextual scaffolding necessary to lead newcomers through the work to see it beyond its appeal as a witty well-made play. The issues it touches upon—challenges to idealism, clashes between cultures, warfare, class structure, relationships between the genders, social prejudices—are among those toward which undergraduate students gravitate most. And Wearing assembles much here for advanced researchers to delight in, too. The informative introduction, the appendices (including excerpts from the Preface to *Plays Unpleasant*), and the abundance of annotations throughout the text attest to his passion for detail and intimate knowledge of his subject.

Most welcome among these annotations are those that supply the revisions that Shaw made to the text over the years. Shaw sharpened some of his dialogue, fleshed it out in other places, and, perhaps most significantly, developed his novelistic stage directions toward the end. It is sur-