**Visions and Revisions of the End of *Pygmalion***

**By Shmuel Ross**

At the end of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion,* Eliza has come into her own, emerging as a real woman. The question is what, exactly, that means. To the author, I contend, the intention was that she has become an independent being, free of Higgins's influence, ready to find her own destiny. To many actors, critics, and audiences since the play was first performed, it's meant that she has become a worthy partner for Higgins; finally his equal, the two are now able to marry. The play's history, from this beginning, is one of failed attempts by Shaw to get people to accept his intended theme, or at least some version of it. In my opinion, it may be possible for this aim to be achieved now, and the result would be an empowering play, unlike the film versions (and many stage versions) produced until now.

In writing *Pygmalion,* George Bernard Shaw drew upon at least two myths: that of Pygmalion and Galatea, and that of Cinderella. In the original Pygmalion myth, the eponymous sculptor creates Galatea as a statue, which then comes to life and they live happily ever after. In "Cinderella," the girl's appearance is magically transformed; she goes to the ball and dances with a prince; the prince later tracks her down, and they live happily ever after (Berst, 6–8).

For the first four acts or so of Shaw's *Pygmalion,* he follows these patterns. We have a flower girl who is transformed into a lady. She gains a new way of speaking, new things to speak about, new clothes, and so on. And we are presented with a male lead who seems to fit the roles of Pygmalion and the prince. According to all the rules, we would expect them to get married and live happily ever after. As Maurice Valency put it in 1973:

A myth is ordinarily an organism of very precise form. . . . Once the fairy godmother has waved her wand and the girl's magical transformation has been effected, it is absolutely indispensable that the Prince should seek out the resulting Princess, marry her, and live happily with her forever after. (316)

While Shaw follows this traditional track at first, he completely derails it in the final act. This is clearly deliberate; starting out in a conventional manner heightens the effect of Eliza's triumph. "The play goes as far as it can to frustrate the conventional expectations of an audience," Wisenthal observed in 1983. "It provides 'a robust, vital, appetizing sort of man' as the eligible bachelor for Eliza, and throws out various suggestions of romantic or sexual involvement. . . . All of this serves to remind the audience of the sort of play they are being denied—the play that is being subverted by *Pygmalion*" (163). If audiences weren't being set up to expect Eliza to remain under the thumb of Higgins in the future, it wouldn't matter much that she's freed herself.

Shaw had some precedent for this sort of last-act derailment in Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* about which he wrote extensively as a critic. In his 1973 book, *Bernard Shaw, Playwright,* Dukore explains it like this, quoting Shaw himself:

Until Ibsen's watershed drama *A Doll's House,* "you had in what was called a well made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and unraveling in the third." Until the final scene of its third act, *A Doll's House* might in fact be turned into such a play simply by removing a few lines and substituting a sentimental, happy ending for the famous last scene. In that scene, Nora, instead of allowing herself to be reconciled with her husband, "stops her emotional acting and says: 'We must sit down and discuss all that has been happening between us.' And it was by this new technical feature that. . . *A Doll's House* conquered Europe and founded a new school of dramatic art." (36)

The same holds true for the ending of *Pygmalion*. With minor alterations to the final scene, it can be turned into a straightforward romance. (And, as will be seen shortly, it was.) But that's not what happens in Shaw's script. In Shaw's script, Eliza stops everything and talks to Higgins. After which, like Nora, she walks out the door. We don't know what happens afterward, but that's largely the point. As Meisel wrote in 1963:

In a number of ways the original ambiguity is preferable to the alternative resolutions provided for readers and spectators. The point of the ending is not Eliza's marriage, but her casting loose, the achievement of independence. Almost to the very end Higgins always speaks of having made a duchess of a flower girl; but after her assertion of independence and equality he cries "By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have" [(V)]. The deliberately unresolved ending tells much about the art of a play whose social and intellectual heterodoxies flourish in a traditional setting of orthodox popular appeal. (177)

If the theme is that Eliza is now independent, *any* definite choice of future would only limit her at the end of the play. She's just realized that she can make it on her own, and has the whole world open to her. The actual decision she makes can wait until later, but doesn't really matter for our purposes. It doesn't even matter if Higgins is right, and Eliza will buy him the list of items he requests at the end. As Bentley put it in 1957, "Eliza wins her freedom. . . . After this, it does not matter whether Eliza does the shopping or not. The situation is clear. . . . The story of the experiment is over" (124).

This point was lost on those who performed the play. Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who originated the role of Higgins in 1914, "was a romantic and an incurable sentimentalist: it seemed to him natural and inevitable that if a play had a hero, he should love and eventually marry the heroine of it" (qtd. in Dukore, "Director" 138–9). And so he "[had] his romantic way by inflecting lines sentimentally, throwing flowers to Eliza just before the curtain dropped, and, in later performances, having her return prior to the end to ask Higgins about the size of gloves he has ordered" (Berst 18).

Shaw was unhappy with such alterations, to put it mildly. When Tree wrote him shortly afterwards saying "My ending makes money: You ought to be grateful," he responded with "Your ending is damnable: You ought to be shot" (Berst 18). He insisted that performances of the play were not to carry "any suggestion that the middleaged bully and the girl of eighteen are lovers" (Berst 22). Such an ending, backsliding into traditional roles and expectations, completely spoiled the story of Eliza's independence. As he wrote to his wife after the first performance:

For the last two acts I writhed in hell. The raving absurdity of Tree's acting was quite beyond description. . . . I had particularly coached him at the last rehearsal in the concluding lines, making him occupy himself affectionately with his mother, & throw Eliza the commission to buy the ham &c. over his shoulder. The last thing I saw as I left the house was Higgins shoving his mother rudely out of his way and wooing Eliza with appeals to buy a ham for his lonely home like a bereaved Romeo. (*Letters* 227–8)

Tree may have been the first to alter the ending, but he was to have plenty of company. Later productions followed his example, in spite of Shaw's complaints on the matter. (So did the 1938 film version of *Pygmalion,* which ends with Eliza's return, despite Shaw's best efforts. Ditto *My Fair Lady,* which was made after Shaw was safely in his grave.) In virtually all performances, Shaw's more subtle, empowering ending was replaced with a conventional romance between Eliza and Higgins.

This alteration hasn't been confined to performers and their audiences, either. Critics, too, have insisted that Tree got it right, and that romance was in the air. "For all the passing unconventionalities in his rehandling of the Cinderella-Pygmalion motif," says Meisel, "Shaw relies so heavily on its fundamental appeal throughout *Pygmalion* that his refusal to end with a match between Higgins and Eliza was considered mere perversity" (176–7).

Indeed, it's amazing what some have read into the final scene. It almost functions like a Rorschach test; the interpretations of various critics reveal more about them than about the play. Take, for example, the case of St. John Ervine. In his 1956 book, he has this to say about the play's ending:

But the facts of the play cry out against its author. The end of the fourth act as well as the end of the fifth act deny the laboured account of the flower girl's future, and assure all sensible people that she married Henry Higgins and bore him many vigorous and intelligent children. (460)

Not only must Eliza marry Higgins, in his view, but he finds it to be clear that she bears him many children! If this is implied anywhere in the play, I'm afraid I've missed it, and I looked pretty closely. This could only have come from his own expectations. Eliza's quickness of ear, her musical ability, her independence, and so on are irrelevant; she has become a woman, and a woman's role is to raise children, period. That he can confidently ascribe this attitude to "all sensible people" suggests that this attitude was widespread in his social group, and it was part of the prevailing ideology to the extent that he took it for granted.[[0]](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "fn0" \o "2016 addendum: In fairness to Ervine, I recently learned that French fairy tales typically end with a phrase that translates as \"and they lived happily and had many children,\" and I assume that he was playing on that. My overall point stands, though.)

Maurice Valency, for his part, sees Shaw's ending as verging on parody of the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* and an unsuccessful one. He insists that *Pygmalion* can only be seen as a fairy tale, and refuses the notion that a fairy tale can be altered in the same way as a conventional drama (315):

In fact, Shaw was too canny a writer to spoil his play by tampering with the vital elements of the fairy tale. It is reasonably clear in the third act that Higgins, for all his protestations. . . would rather die than part with Eliza, and that she is destined to live with him, more or less happily, all the rest of her life in the flat in Wimpole Street. (316)

What could Shaw do in response to such reactions[[1]](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "fn1" \o "Some of the specific reactions I've cited above were written after the current point in the narrative, of course, but they illustrate attitudes that existed in Shaw's time, too.  Some critics caught on to what Shaw intended in his own time; some modern critics still see the play as a fairy-tale romance.  Shaw's problem was with the latter group, and examples from any time period can help show what he was up against.), and the failure of anybody to present *Pygmalion* the way he'd intended? For starters, he complained about the damage done to his play whenever he was given half a chance. As he did in a 1919 letter to William Archer:

Ibsen was compelled to acquiesce in a happy ending for A Doll's House in Berlin, because he could not help himself, just as I have never been able to stop the silly and vulgar gag with which Eliza in Pygmalion, both here and abroad, gets the last word and implies that she is going to marry Pygmalion. But would you therefore play A Doll's House in Jones's Breaking a Butterfly version, or allow Eliza to gag in a production of Pygmalion for which you were responsible? (*Letters* 604)

But Shaw tried to salvage what he could. When it became clear that the actors weren't going to perform the play his way, and faced with a public bent on misconstruing his play as a romance (in what must have been a bittersweet turn of events, the altered version of the play was a smashing success), he apparently decided to cut his losses. If he couldn't get the actors to end it properly, he'd write his own ending. And if people were determined to marry Eliza off, he'd give them a wedding. . . but not to Higgins. To quote Meisel's 1968 work:

Actually Shaw took care to make the ending perfectly ambiguous on the stage, and was provoked into writing the long final note for the reader which now ends the play only by the ingenuity of the actors in finding ways to resolve the ambiguity. (177)

It was for this reason, I believe, that when the play was published in 1916, Shaw was driven to write the Sequel, in which Eliza marries Freddy. Not because he felt that it was necessary that Eliza marry Freddy; I think he'd have been at least as happy if Eliza had gone off on her own. But the real danger, the interpretation he railed against at every opportunity, was that people would think she married Higgins. If people *must* have a romance, he might have reasoned, better it be with someone else.

I'm inclined to agree with Morgan, who, in her 1972 book, shrugs off the Sequel with "As for the prognostication, in Shaw's Afterword, that Eliza will marry Freddy, it can be accepted as a device to avoid the suggestion that she. . . is destined for a sterile existence, after all. In fact, the possibilities of life are open to the New Woman at the end of the play" (175). Freddy, then, is merely the only available foil to show that Eliza can be an emancipated woman *and* still get married, if she likes.

The new ending was a compromise; an attempt to counteract the interpretation already out there. As he wrote to Mrs. Patrick Campbell—who originated the role of Eliza—in 1915:

Besides, I have passed Pygmalion for press among the sheets of my new volume of plays; and it now has a sequel, not in dialogue, but in prose, which you will never be able to live up to. . . . The publication of that sequel will be the end of the romance of Sir Herbert Tree; and you will have to play Eliza properly and seriously for ever after, which is impossible. (*Letters* 335)

It didn't quite work. Those who saw a romantic fairy tale in the first few acts didn't buy the new ending ("It convinces nobody who reads it," says Ervine) (460). Those who appreciated the original ending found Shaw's retreat unsatisfying. And neither group was made any happier by the fact that Freddy was a minor, two-dimensional character, hardly worth the consideration of either the audience or Eliza.

Carr, writing in 1976, suggests that Shaw wasn't *really* devoted to his version of the ending, as he didn't try very hard to sell it: "When the critics and the audiences happily received *Pygmalion* as a love story, he simply wrote a preface and added an epilogue, but didn't tamper with the play itself" (67). This is not entirely true.

With the catalyst of the 1938 film version, Shaw did revise the play one more time, and many of the changes made for the film were incorporated into the play itself in its 1941 "definitive text." These changes included an additional scene at the end of Act IV in which, "hungry for comfort," Eliza embraces Freddy, and then rides around with him in a taxi all night.[[2]](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "fn2" \o "Shaw also wrote an alternative ending in which Eliza and Freddy actually do get married at the end, but it wasn't used, and it may be fair to assume that he never really expected it to be.  As he didn't take the opportunity to add it to the 1941 text of the play, I feel that it can be safely ignored.  Alternately, one might suggest that he didn't add it precisely in order to preserve the more liberating possibilities of his original, ambiguous ending; a concern that wouldn't exist if he really were bound and determined to marry the two.  This is admittedly similar to Carr's argument, except that Carr sees the only options as Eliza marrying either Henry or Freddy.  From that perspective, there's no advantage to ambiguity; thus Carr concludes—in the face of all evidence to the contrary—that Shaw secretly didn't really mind the idea that Eliza married Henry.  This refusal to consider any non-romantic possibilities does illustrate, once again, why Shaw may have been driven to suggest an Eliza-Freddy match in the first place.) But it doesn't really help. Eliza's behavior in the added scene could easily be interpreted as displaced emotions: either romantic feelings that she really has towards Higgins, or other emotions from the garden party and its consequences.

Similarly, Shaw tried to downplay suggestions that Eliza and Higgins were attracted to one another. At the end of Act IV, for instance, Eliza retrieves the ring Higgins has thrown into the fireplace, which suggests that she's not without sentimental feelings for him. In the 1916 version, she "goes down on her knees on the hearthrug to look for the ring," at which point the scene ends. However, in the 1941 "definitive text," this continues with "When she finds it she considers for a moment what to do with it. Finally she flings it down on the dessert stand and goes upstairs in a tearing rage" (Berst 107). Berst suggests that Shaw changed this specifically to remove this evidence from those looking for a romance between Eliza and Higgins (107). If so, I agree with him that the attempt doesn't work, as "[the ring] obviously means something to her whether or not she flings it on the dessert stand" (107–8).

In my opinion, Shaw's problem was that he could *not* remove all suggestions that Eliza and Henry were attracted to each other—or make Freddy too strong a character in his own right—without significantly weakening his own conception of the play. As explained earlier, the power of *Pygmalion*'s ending specifically comes from its reversal of the expectations set up by the rest of the play. For Eliza's liberation to have any real force, she had to be resisting a strong paradigm in which she *would* marry the Pygmalion character, and had to have a strong character to break free of. Similarly, if she were to run to another strong male character, it wouldn't show very much; she'd simply leave one man's orbit to immediately enter that of another man. But for her to leave Higgins's orbit and remain the stronger person in her next relationship. . . that is progress, of a sort.

Still, the new ending has problems of its own. A compromise at best, the Sequel is not necessarily a *good* compromise. Shaw's claim that "The man or woman who feels strong enough for two, seeks for every other quality in a partner than strength," might be true. . . but doesn't make for a happy ending, nor a very empowering one (285). As Morgan points out, "marriage to Freddy. . . implies taking over the role of the stronger, or the teacher, that was Higgins's with [Eliza]. There is, of course, something less than satisfactory in the prospect of a marriage on these terms, especially as Freddy has shown little sign of equaling Eliza's natural genius and ability to learn" (175n). While this is better than Eliza going back to fetch Higgins's slippers, I'd much rather believe the strong, self-confident Eliza of the final scene would seek a more equal partner, if she were looking to marry at all.[[3]](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "fn3" \o "Which, again, might only be desirable to pacify the romantics in the audience.  After all, Higgins and Pickering seem to get on pretty well as—apparently—asexual beings.  Indeed, says Edward Wagenknecht, \"for Shaw the higher reaches in life are sexless\" (64).  In any event, the point is that with or without sex, Eliza could be stronger without Freddy.)

There are other problems with the specifics Shaw sets out in the Sequel, especially as it goes on to show that Eliza remains dependent on the residents of Wimpole Street for some time afterwards. In 1991, Gainor interpreted the entire play as one in which Eliza is controlled by the patriarchy—represented by Higgins, Pickering, and Doolittle—and pointed out that:

Eliza's announcement "I'll marry Freddy, I will, as soon as I'm able to support him" [(V)], seems a refreshingly feminist twist on the usual pattern of young female pupils' marrying men inferior in some way to their paternal teacher. But Shaw's "sequel" undermines this assertiveness, by showing Eliza's financial dependence on Pickering and emotional involvement with Higgins for years to come. Thus in the narrative resolving the conflicts of the play, Shaw reasserts literary control over the more balanced voices of the drama and removes the power Eliza seems to gain in her fight for independence. (239)

I don't argue with Gainor's interpretation of *Pygmalion*; however, it seems clear that she'd agree that having Eliza marry Higgins would be an even worse conclusion. And while she takes the Sequel as being part of the play itself, I prefer to separate it as a stopgap compromise to avoid that worse ending. On the other hand, by removing it entirely, one is left with an ending in which Eliza breaks free of the patriarchal forces that control her throughout the play. I think Shaw would have preferred it that way.

And, indeed, the world may now be ready for Shaw's intended ending. In reviewing a 1974 production of the play, Jeremy Kingston of *Punch* wrote:

Dexter. . . adds to Shaw's original unsentimental ending a firmly slammed door for Eliza to emphasize her independence. Versions in which she creeps back to Higgins's flapping slippers achieve this fatuous happy ending only by turning the characters into barley sugar. Independence is the theme. (qtd. in Carr 71-2)

Yes. Exactly.

Similarly, it's heartening to find, on a Web page designed for parents who want to use videos for educational purposes, the following "possible problem" noted for the 1938 film of *Pygmalion* (and for *My Fair Lady*):

The ending in which Eliza returns to Henry Higgins despite his insistence on treating her like a servant is problematic and may disappoint if not infuriate children who have been raised at a time when gender equality is assumed. George Bernard Shaw also had a problem with this ending and wrote a sequel to the play in which Eliza marries Freddie [sic]. (Frieden)

Perhaps now, thanks to the progress made by the feminist movement, Eliza's going off on her own would be seen by the public at large as the action of a strong individual, rather than an indication that she would be destined for a sterile existence. Perhaps, too, the public is now better able to appreciate plays with unconventional endings. It would be interesting to see what would happen if another film version were made, but this time the way Shaw intended, with Eliza leaving for good. Admittedly, it wouldn't be much of a date movie, but my feeling is that, if performed and produced properly, it could be received very well indeed. It could be an empowering film, shattering the conventions of the romantic comedy. And then perhaps—just perhaps—Shaw could stop spinning in his grave.

**Footnote 0:** 2016 addendum: In fairness to Ervine, I recently learned that French fairy tales typically end with a phrase that translates as "and they lived happily and had many children," and I assume that he was playing on that. My overall point stands, though. [(Return to main text)](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "0fn)

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**Footnote 2:** Shaw also wrote an alternative ending in which Eliza and Freddy actually do get married at the end, but it wasn't used, and it may be fair to assume that he never really expected it to be. As he didn't take the opportunity to add it to the 1941 text of the play, I feel that it can be safely ignored. Alternately, one might suggest that he didn't add it precisely in order to preserve the more liberating possibilities of his original, ambiguous ending; a concern that wouldn't exist if he really were bound and determined to marry the two. This is admittedly similar to Carr's argument, except that Carr sees the only options as Eliza marrying either Henry or Freddy. From that perspective, there's no advantage to ambiguity; thus Carr concludes—in the face of all evidence to the contrary—that Shaw secretly didn't really mind the idea that Eliza married Henry. This refusal to consider any non-romantic possibilities does illustrate, once again, why Shaw may have been driven to suggest an Eliza-Freddy match in the first place. [(Return to main text)](http://www.syaross.org/writings/nonfiction/pygmalion.html" \l "2fn)

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