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Author(s): Lise Pedersen

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Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" vs. Shaw's "Pygmalion": Male Chauvinism vs. Women's Lib?

Lise Pedersen¹

Shaw's comparisons of himself to Shakespeare and his frequent, explicit, and often extravagant criticisms of Shakespeare are so prominent a part of his critical writings as to be familiar to everyone who knows anything at all about Shaw. Nevertheless, critics have for the most part failed to notice that these same criticisms are often indirectly expressed in Shaw's plays through his handling of characters and situations similar to characters and situations handled in quite different ways by Shakespeare. To be sure, implicit criticisms of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* occurring in *Caesar and Cleopatra* have been widely noted and commented upon;² indeed, they could hardly have been overlooked since Shaw himself points them out and discusses them under the heading "Better than Shakespeare?" in the preface to his play. In a number of other cases, however, Shaw deals with fictitious characters who, though bearing different names and occurring in different ages, are nevertheless in themselves or in their situations so similar to characters and situations depicted by Shakespeare that it is difficult to believe that Shaw's depiction was not, whether consciously or unconsciously so, suggested by Shakespeare's. In these cases the similarities of depiction establish the relationship between the two plays but the differences in treatment illustrate one or more of the major criticisms which Shaw has elsewhere made of Shakespeare.

Basic to all Shaw's criticisms of Shakespeare is Shaw's belief that the purpose of drama is "to force the public to reconsider its morals" and that Shakespeare, except in the three "problem" comedies and possibly in *Hamlet*, makes no attempt to fulfill this purpose but, quite the contrary, is content to dramatize a conventional, "reach-me-down," or "readymade" morality instead of working out an original morality as Shaw believed any writer of the "first order in literature" must do.³ Two plays which illustrate this fundamental difference in the approach of the two playwrights to a similar situation are *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Pygmalion*. Indeed, Shaw's working out

¹ Lise Pedersen, Department of Languages, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, Louisiana.

² See, for example, Gordon W. Couchman "Comic Catharsis in *Caesar and Cleopatra*," *Shaw Review*, 3 (Jan., 1960), 11-13; Daniel J. Leary, "The Moral Dialectic in *Caesar and Cleopatra*," *Shaw Review*, 5, No. 2 (1962), 45; and Wilhelm Rehbach, "Shaw's 'Besser als Shakespeare,'" *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 52 (1916), 125-38.

³ Preface to *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet, Complete Plays With Prefaces* (New York, 1962), V, 190; postscript to the Preface to *The Irrational Knot*, reprinted in *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw's Writings on the Plays and Production of Shakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (New York, 1961), pp. 229-30.

of the central situation of the two plays is so diametrically opposed to that of Shakespeare that *Pygmalion* seems deliberately designed to challenge and contradict Shakespeare's handling of this central situation.

The similarities in the two plays are readily apparent. In both plays a man accepts the task of transforming a woman from one kind of person to another, radically different kind. In both plays the man who undertakes this task is an overbearing bully. Petruchio consistently plays the role of a bully in his relationship with Kate, and it is, indeed, the means by which he transforms her from a quarrelsome shrew to a sweet-tempered and obedient wife. Not only does he frustrate her every wish, but he subjects her to mental anguish in the humiliation brought upon her by his attire and behavior at their wedding and to physical abuse in causing her horse to dump her into the mud, in preventing her from sleeping night after night, and in keeping food from her with the declared intention of starving her into submission.

Though Higgins does not resort to physical abuse of Eliza, except for a moment in the last act when he completely loses control of himself as a result of her taunts, he nevertheless does bully Eliza in every other way, ordering her about in a very brusque manner without the slightest concern for her feelings and uttering threats of physical violence which in the early stages of their acquaintance she takes quite seriously. In the Act II interview in his flat, when Eliza has first come to inquire about taking elocution lessons from Higgins, his treatment of her is extremely rude and abusive. He orders her "peremptorily" to sit down, and when she does not do so immediately he repeats the order, "thundering" it at her. When she interrupts his speculations about the price she has offered for the lessons, he barks out, "Hold your tongue," and when, as a consequence of those speculations and of his rudeness, she begins to cry, he threatens, "Somebody is going to touch you, with a broomstick, if you dont stop snivelling." Immediately upon deciding to undertake the challenge to transform her into a duchess, Higgins begins to issue orders to Mrs. Pearce about giving Eliza a bath, disinfecting her, and burning all her clothes, without consulting Eliza at all, just as though she had nothing to say in the matter, and as Eliza begins to protest he tells Mrs. Pearce, "If she gives you any trouble, wallop her." Pickering's objection to Higgins' rudeness — "Does it occur to you, Higgins, that the girl has some feelings?" — elicits the quite serious reply from Higgins, "Oh no, I dont think so. Not any feelings that we need bother about." Subsequently Higgins adds that Pickering ought to realize from his military experience that there is no use trying to explain matters to Eliza, who is too ignorant to under-

stand any such explanation, and that therefore the proper treatment of her is simply to "Give her her orders: that what she wants." Furthermore, in Act V Higgins calls Eliza, among other things, one of the "squashed cabbage leaves of Covent Garden" and a "damned impudent slut," and instead of inviting her to come back to Wimpole Street he orders her to do so: "Get up and come home; and don't be a fool." Thus he demonstrates that his bullying treatment of her has not changed in the course of the play, though she has in that time changed into an entirely different person from what she was at the beginning of the play.⁴

Petruchio and Higgins are alike, then, in being bullies, though they are different in that Higgins does not resort to physical abuse and in that the motivation behind their bullying tactics is different. Petruchio has deliberately adopted such tactics in order to "tame" Kate in the same way that he would tame a falcon, as he reveals in a soliloquy:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,
And till she stoop, she must not be full gorged,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come and know her keeper's call,
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites
That bate, and beat, and will not be obedient.⁵

On the other hand, Higgins' bullying treatment of Eliza is merely his natural way of behaving toward people and is not a special behavior adopted in connection with the task of transforming Eliza. On the contrary, as he insists to her, his behavior toward all people is the same:

The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manner for all human souls. . . . (Act V)

Similarities in the development of the plot include the facts that in each case a test is set up to determine the success of the transformation of the woman in question — in Shakespeare's play the test compares Kate's response to an order of her husband's with the responses of Bianca and the Widow to similar orders of their husbands, and in Shaw's play the test involves passing Eliza off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party; in each case there is a wager on the outcome of the test; and in each case the transformation of the woman succeeds beyond anyone's expectations and she passes the test with ease.

There is even a parallel in subordinate figures between Christo-

⁴ *Complete Plays With Prefaces*, Vol. I. All quotations from *Pygmalion* in my text are from this edition.

⁵ (IV. i). All quotations from *The Taming of the Shrew* in my text are from G. B. Harrison's *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York, 1968).

pher Sly and Alfred Doolittle, both of whom provide an implied commentary on the major plot developments because they undergo transformations of their own in social status and external circumstances, Sly temporarily and Doolittle permanently, but these transformations do not include any real changes in the fundamental character or personality of either. Sly's main concern in life before he comes to think he is a lord has apparently been in sensual indulgence, and this concern continues unabated. Before he becomes convinced that he is a lord, the person who most naturally comes to his mind when he feels the need of someone to substantiate his real identity is "Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot," to whom he owes fourteen pence for sheer ale. After he is convinced that he is a lord, he first calls for "a pot o' th' smallest ale"; then, upon seeing his supposed wife for the first time, he asks her to join him in bed immediately; and when he is denied that request and offered instead the entertainment of a play, he falls asleep during its presentation. Thus, he does not seem to have undergone any fundamental changes in character or personality. Doolittle, too, for all his complaints about the changes his unwelcome prosperity has forced upon him, seems unchanged in manner and speech, and according to Shaw's epilogue "his wit, his dust-manship (which he carried like a banner), and his Nietzschean transcendence of good and evil"⁶ continue unchanged. Sly and Doolittle, then, because their transformations are mainly in external circumstances and leave their fundamental characters unchanged, provide contrasting parallels to the leading women of their plays, who do undergo fundamental changes in character and personality.

In examining the differences between Shakespeare's and Shaw's handling of the basic plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Pygmalion*, it is instructive to keep in mind the principal criticisms which Shaw made of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In June, 1888, he wrote the *Pall Mall Gazette* a letter signed with a woman's name, Horatia Ribbonson, asking "all men and women who respect one another" to boycott *The Taming of the Shrew*; describing Shakespeare's Petruchio as a "coarse, thick-skinned money hunter, who sets to work to tame his wife exactly as brutal people tame animals or children — that is, by breaking their spirit by domineering cruelty"; and complaining that Katherine's "degrading speech" to Bianca and the Widow to the effect that "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign . . ." might have been acceptable to "an audience of bullies" in "an age when woman was a mere chattel," but should be intolerable to a modern audience.⁷ Nine years later Shaw said virtually the same thing in a *Saturday Review* article. Though he praised the

⁶ *Complete Plays With Prefaces*, I, 286.

⁷ June 8, 1888; issue of *Pall Mall Gazette*, reprinted in *Shaw on Shakespeare*, pp. 186-87.

realism of the early acts of the play, particularly in the depiction of Petruchio's selfishness and brutality, he complained that Shakespeare was unable to maintain this realism throughout the play and that the last scene is so "disgusting to modern sensibility" that "no man with any decency of feeling can sit it out in the company of a woman without being extremely ashamed of the lord-of-creation moral implied in the wager and the speech put into the woman's own mouth."⁸

The attitudes toward woman — and toward man, for that matter — implicit in these criticisms are reflected in the differences between Shaw's working out of the *Pygmalion* plot and Shakespeare's working out of the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*. These differences are principally in the methods by which the woman is transformed and in the final attitudes of the man and the woman toward each other.

At first glance it may seem that a comparison of the methods used to transform the women cannot be valid since the qualities requiring transformation were not of the same kind in both cases, Kate's case involving a change of such psychological qualities as temper and temperament and Eliza's involving changes in qualities which seem much more superficial — speech, dress, and awareness of the rules of etiquette. It should be noted, however, that although Eliza was not shrewish at the beginning of her play, she was completely lacking in self-control, very quick to take offense, and very bad-tempered in her reaction to offenses, real or imagined, so that a mere change in speech, dress, and superficial manners could not have transformed her into a lady. Like Kate, she too had to learn self-control and consideration for others. Once she has successfully made all the changes necessary to transform her into a woman who can pass for a duchess, Eliza herself recognizes that the acquiring of self-restraint was by far the most important of these changes. She speaks slightingly of Higgins' accomplishment in teaching her to speak correctly, maintaining that "It was just like learning to dance in the fashionable way: there was nothing more than that in it," and tells Pickering that her "real education" came from him because he provided her with the example of self-restraint and consideration for others:

You see it was so very difficult for me with the example of Professor Higgins always before me. I was brought up to be just like him, unable to control myself, and using bad language on the slightest provocation. And I should never have known that ladies and gentlemen didnt behave like that if you hadnt been there. (Act V)

This speech expresses a direct repudiation of the method by which Shakespeare allows Petruchio to "tame" Kate, because it asserts that the example of bad-tempered, uncontrolled behavior can only bring

⁸ Article dated November 6, 1897, reprinted in *Shaw on Shakespeare*, pp. 187-88.

about behavior of the same kind in the learner, not a change to sweet-tempered reasonableness such as Kate exhibits. Furthermore, as Eliza continues her indirect attack on Higgins' methods through her praise of Pickering's treatment of her, she insists to Pickering that the real beginning of her transformation came with "Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me." This statement is a criticism of Higgins, who calls her "Eliza" from the first — that is, when he is not calling her "this baggage" (Act II), "presumptuous insect" (Act IV), or the like — but it also recalls the fact that Petruchio, on first meeting Kate, calls her "Kate," though, except for her sister, her family and acquaintances all call her by the more formal "Katherina" or "Katherine." In addition, Kate herself rebukes Petruchio for calling her "Kate," asserting that "They call me Katherine that do talk of me," whereupon he replies with a speech in which he uses the name "Kate" eleven times in six lines:

You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,
 And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the Curst;
 But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
 Kate of Kate-Hall, my superdainty Kate,
 For dainties are all Kates — and therefore, Kate,
 Take this of me, Kate of my consolation: (II, i)

This perverse insistence on using the familiar, informal name which she has asked him not to use is paralleled by Higgins' reply to Eliza's request that he call her "Miss Doolittle": "I'll see you damned first" (Act V). Thus, again, Eliza's criticism of Higgins' method of dealing with her is also a criticism of Petruchio's method of dealing with Kate.

Moreover, a repudiation of physical abuse as a means of dominating a woman's spirit is implied by the fact that in *Pygmalion* physical abuse plays no part in transforming Eliza, but instead appears in the play solely as the feeble, ineffectual, and unintentional response of Higgins to Eliza's freeing of herself from his domination. When Eliza, realizing that Higgins will never treat her as she wants to be treated and therefore searching desperately for some means by which she can free herself from dependence on him, hits on the idea of becoming an assistant to a teacher of phonetics whom Higgins considers a quack, Higgins lays hands on her to strike her, and is deterred from doing so only by her triumphant non-resistance. Milton Crane construes this loss of self-control on Higgins' part as an indication that "his confusion is complete" and therefore "Galatea has subdued Pygmalion."⁹ Thus, instead of being the means to domination, as it is in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in *Pygmalion* the resort to physical abuse is an admission of defeat, a reaction of frustrated rage to the failure

⁹ "Pygmalion: Bernard Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice," *PMLA*, 66 (Dec., 1951), 884.

to dominate.

In addition to these differences in the method by which the transformation of the woman is achieved, the other major differences in the working out of the plot by the two playwrights are in the final attitudes of the teacher and the learner to one another. Kate's final attitude to Petruchio is shown not only by her instant obedience to him, but also by the speech which Shaw criticized as "degrading," a speech in which she says that in a marriage the husband is the "lord," "king," "governor," "life," "keeper," "head," and "sovereign" of the wife and that the wife owes the husband "Such duty as the subject owes the prince," and in which she consequently urges her sisters-in-law to follow her example by placing their hands below their husbands' feet as a token of their willingness to obey their husbands (V. ii). Eliza's final attitude to Higgins is the direct opposite of Kate's to Petruchio. She exults in having achieved her freedom from his domination:

Aha! That done you, Henry Higgins, it has. Now I dont care that (*snapping her fingers*) for your bullying and your big talk. . . . Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself. (Act V)

The reference to her former "crawling" under his feet and "being trampled on" even seems to be a verbal echo of Kate's reference to placing her hand below her husband's foot as a token of her submission to him. Certainly, here, at the conclusion of *Pygmalion*, there is a deliberate repudiation of the idea of male domination of the female which underlies the theme of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Furthermore, that this repudiation is not simply Eliza's view, but is the view set forth by the play, is suggested by the fact that Higgins shares it. Though he has a habit of expecting that Eliza — and everyone else, for that matter — should automatically fall in with his plans because in his view his plans naturally offer the most proper and sensible course of action open to everyone, Higgins has never consciously desired to make Eliza subservient to him, whereas Petruchio has, of course, expressly declared that the whole purpose of his strange and violent behavior is to make Kate subservient to him. Indeed, Higgins brands the conventionally expected acts of subservience on the part of women toward men as "Commercialism," attempts to buy affection. He tells Eliza:

I dont and wont trade in affection. You call me a brute because you couldnt buy a claim on me by fetching my slippers and finding my spectacles. You were a fool: I think a woman fetching a man's slippers is a disgusting sight: did I ever fetch your slippers? I think a good deal more of you for throwing them in my face. No use slaving for me and then saying you want to be cared for: who cares for a slave? If you come back, come back for the sake of good fellowship . . . and if you dare to set up your little dog's

tricks of fetching and carrying slippers against my creation of a Duchess Eliza, I'll slam the door in your silly face. (Act V)

And after Eliza has declared her independence of Higgins, he says: You damned impudent slut, you! But it's better than snivelling; better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles, isn't it? . . . By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this. (Act V)

At the conclusion of *Pygmalion*, then, both Eliza and Higgins reject the concept of male dominance over women, a concept which is not only supported but actually exalted by the conclusion of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

In supporting this concept in *The Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare was, of course, supporting the conventional morality of his own day, and in rejecting this concept in *Pygmalion* Shaw was rejecting the conventional morality of his own day and substituting for it an original view of morality. Thus Shaw clearly used his play not only to repudiate the male chauvinism of his day and Shakespeare's and to support women's liberation, a cause for which he was an early pioneer, but also to dramatize a criticism which was fundamental to all Shaw's complaints about Shakespeare and which Shaw had often expressed in very explicit terms in his critical writings — that Shakespeare failed to create and espouse an original morality in opposition to the conventional morality of his time.

FROM THE SHAVIAN PAST LXXXV

"You don't need a poet. You need George Bernard Shaw, but he's dead."

[Dr Van Loewen, Jean Anouilh's agent] said, "Shaw was not a poet. I do not think he would have been the right adapter [for *L'Alouette*], either."

After I made that note on my menu . . . I said, "Mr. Shaw wrote a fine play about Joan of Arc, without all of Mr. Anouilh's bubble glory stuff."

"Mr Anouilh is a poet," said the Doctor.

"Perhaps," I said, "but not in French. . . ."

. . . By the time I agreed to do the play I was convinced that Joan was history's first modern career girl, wise, unattractive in what she knew about the handling of men, straight out of a woman's magazine. The wonderful story lay, as Shaw had seen it, in the miraculous self confidence. . . .

Lillian Hellman, in *Pentimento* (1973)