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Julie A. Sparks

AN OVERLOOKED SOURCE
FOR ELIZA?
W. E. HENLEY'S *LONDON TYPES*

Ever since 1914, when the glamorous Mrs. Patrick Campbell shocked London theater-goers by appearing as Eliza, the Covent Garden gutter-snipe with the appalling Cockney accent, critics and scholars have made an intellectual parlor game out of their search for Shaw's inspiration for the role. Shaw provided the first clue himself in a letter to Ellen Terry on 8 September 1897, soon after he saw Mrs. Campbell play Ophelia to Forbes-Robertson's *Hamlet*: "'Caesar & Cleopatra' has been driven clean out of my head by a play I want to write for them in which he shall be a west end gentleman and she an east end dona in an apron and three orange and red ostrich feathers."¹ We cannot know how Shaw conceived his idea of a Galatea-flower girl from Mrs. Patrick Campbell's Ophelia (although it seems reasonable to assume that it had something to do with the "mad scene" when Ophelia passes out flowers to the assembled members of the court, who stand by shocked at her disheveled appearance and wild manner). Nevertheless, there has been much speculation about the literary and artistic precedents that may have influenced Shaw once his initial concept was formed, influences as various as Ovid and Plautus, Smollett and Burne-Jones. However, one late Victorian source that may have shaped the characterization of the "east end dona" has been overlooked, the sonnet "'Liza'" by the versatile Victorian man of letters William Ernest Henley (1849–1903).

Early in 1898 (only months after Shaw's letter to Ellen Terry) Henley

published a collection of thirteen sonnets called *London Types* that includes this portrait of a flower girl (or, more probably, a vegetable seller) who sounds startlingly familiar to Shavians:

'Liza's old man's perhaps a little *shady*,
'Liza's old woman's prone to *booze* and cringe;
But 'Liza deems herself a *perfect lady*,
And proves it in her feathers and her fringe.

.....
Withal, outside the gay and giddy whirl,
'Liza's a stupid, straight, hard-working girl.²

Although the initial idea for the “rapscallionly flower girl” appears to be Shaw's own, Henley's portrayal of a flower girl named “Liza,” who “deems herself a perfect lady” despite her “shady” father, suggests itself as an early influence that, appearing while Shaw's idea was still fresh, may have helped reinforce and sharpen his characterization.

Although “'Liza” stands out as the most suggestive of Henley's sonnets, two others in the same volume may also have been important to Shaw's imaginative processes: “Lady” and “Flower Girl.” The first of these immediately follows “'Liza” and describes the growing disorder in the social classes. It begins with a metaphor of neighborhoods invading each other:

Time, the old humourist, has a trick today
Of moving landmarks and of levelling down,
Till into Town the Suburbs edge their way,
And in the Suburbs you may scent the Town.

The “Lady” of the title is a house, personified as a

. . . fair creature, pictured in The Row,
As one of that “gay adulterous world,” whose round
Is by the Serpentine, as well would show,
And might, I deem, as readily be found
On Streatham's Hill or Wimbledon's, or where
Brixtonian kitchens lard the late-dining air.³

Although now only a social historian would understand the nuances of status associated with these neighborhoods in Henley's day, Shaw had been living in London for more than twenty years by this time and would have been almost as familiar with the caste system implied here as is his own Professor Higgins who, in the first scene of *Pygmalion*, jauntily claims

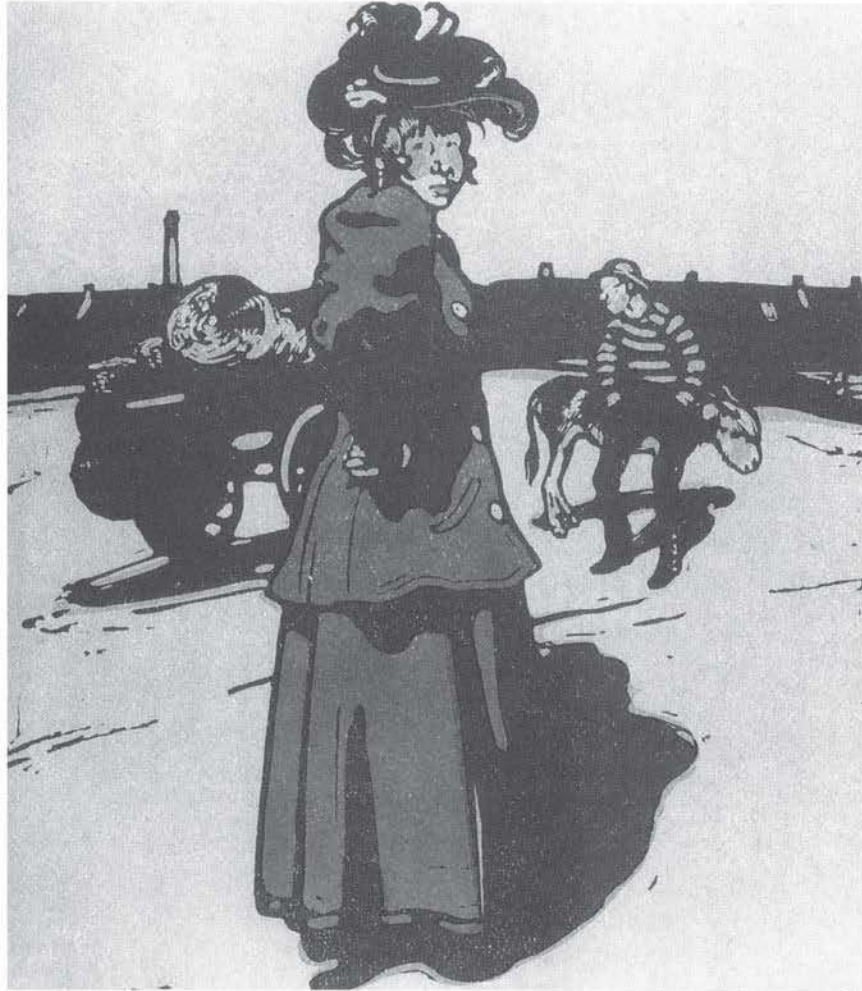


Fig.7. Liza “trapesing.” From W. E. Henley, *London Types* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1898), courtesy of Rare Books Room, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries. I am grateful to Charles Mann and Sandra Stelts of Pattee Library for making this illustration available.

the ability to “place any man within six miles. . . . within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets” simply by listening carefully to the person’s particular dialect.⁴ Like Henley, Higgins is aware that this caste system is not quite as iron-clad as it used to be. He explains to Pickering that “This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with £80 a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred thousand. They want

to drop Kentish Town; but they give themselves away every time they open their mouths. Now I can teach them—" (4:679). The method whereby Higgins is able to defeat this "verbal class distinction" so that ambitious Londoners could cross social classes as easily as they could cross neighborhoods functions as the crux of the play.

So far Henley has presented a 'Liza who "deems herself a perfect lady," despite her "shady" class origins, and a "Lady" of a house that seems to suffer a similar class dislocation. The third poem that suggests itself as a possible influence on Shaw is the penultimate sonnet in Henley's series, "Flowergirl," which personifies London as a gentlewoman with dainty tastes who delights in every "delicate nurseling of the year. . . / Her days to colour and make sweet her nights." Catering to this taste for posies is London's cheerfully shabby band of flower girls who venture

. . . forth from *DRURY LANE*,
 Trapesing in any of her whirl of weathers,
 . . . foot it, honest and hoarse and vain,
 All boot and little shawl and wilted feathers:
 Of populous corners right advantage taking,
 And, where they squat, endlessly posy-making.⁵

Henley presents a far rosier picture of the flower girls' life than does Shaw since Henley has them "trapesing" rather than, say, "trudging" through London's "whirl of weathers," which Shaw presents in the first scene of *Pygmalion* as fairly miserable for the shabbily clad. But Shaw always delighted in lifting useful images from incongruous sources and exploiting them for his own artistic ends.

This sonnet may have set Shaw to thinking, not only by the rather stark contrast it presents between fashionable London with its delight in dainty flowers ("Her gaudies these!") and the poor wilted girls who minister to that taste, but also by the reference to Drury Lane and its associations with a certain famous orange girl. In the Epilogue to *Pygmalion*, Shaw refers to this mythic figure as a sort of Galatea: "Now, the history of Eliza Doolittle, though called a romance because the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable, is common enough. Such transfigurations have been achieved by hundreds of resolutely ambitious young women since Nell Gwynne set them the example by playing queens and fascinating kings in the theatre in which she began by selling oranges" (4:782). Shaw uses a similar image of an actress learning to play a role that transcends her own class in the Preface to *Pygmalion*:

Finally, and for the encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment, I may add that



Fig. 8. Liza “endlessly posy making.” From W. E. Henley, *London types* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1898), courtesy of Rare Books Room, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries. I am grateful to Charles Mann and Sandra Stelts of Pattee Library for making this illustration available.

the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower-girl is neither impossible nor uncommon. The modern concierge’s daughter who fulfils her ambition by playing the Queen of Spain in *Ruy Blas* at the Théâtre Français is only one of many thousands who have sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue. Our West End shop assistants and domestic servants are bi-lingual. (4:664)

This brings us back to Shaw's initial ambition of seeing the elegant Mrs. Patrick Campbell learn a new language, the Cockney dialect, to prove her virtuosity in Nell Gwyn's line of work. If the orange-seller could play a queen, why not have this queen play a flower girl in a story that comments dramatically on the transformational process it makes necessary while exposing the hypocrisy and injustice of the social and economic caste systems that make that transformation seem so miraculous?

Suggestive as Henley's material is as a possible source of inspiration, it is only probable that Shaw read *London Types* when it came out in 1898. However, we do know that Shaw was aware of Henley's work. In 1888 he reviewed Henley's *Book of Verses* for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Although he describes Henley as "a gentleman of respectable literary standing," the review is rather dismissive: "the book does not contain a scrap of evidence that the author could write prose if he tried."⁶ Later in the review Shaw does cite some lines of poetry that are "finely struck," but his final line declares the book "horrible, fascinating, and wrong, yet rightly done . . . which no one should be advised to read, and which no one would be content to have missed."⁷ This is more brutal than most scholars of Victorian verse would allow as reasonable. Shaw complains about Henley's "In Hospital" series, which is considered an admirable example of realism, and deprecates even "Invictus," the poem that has earned Henley immortality in anthologies of Victorian verse. Yet even Henley's biographer classes him as "admittedly a minor poet."⁸ Despite the several collections of verses Henley published, including *The Song of the Sword* (1892), *London Voluntaries* (1893), *London Types* (1898), *For England's Sake* (1900), and *Hawthorn and Lavender* (1901), his importance to Victorian literature derives principally from his other literary activities—collaborating with R. L. Stevenson on plays, serving as editor for literary magazines (*London*, *The Magazine of Art*, and the *Scots Observer*, later called the *National Observer*), and writing essays on criticism, collected as *Views and Reviews* (1890). This wider influence allows one of his modern admirers to assert that "Henley's place in late-Victorian letters is certainly an important one: he crossed paths with almost all of the key literary figures of the era and . . . [t]he sphere of his influence will always be greater than his fame."⁹

Shaw was one of the "key literary figures" Henley "crossed paths with," personally as well as professionally, but the relationship was discordant. Shaw recorded in his diary entry for 24 April 1886 that William Archer introduced him to Henley that night after an evening at the theater, but the two had little contact until Shaw began contributing pieces to a magazine that Henley was editing. At that point the acquaintance was encouraged further by another mutual friend, James Runciman, the uncle of John F. Runciman, a music critic. In a letter to his biographer Archibald

Henderson dated 3 January 1905, Shaw explained that the elder Runciman “was a Cashel Byronite, and used to write me letters about Henley (among other subjects). He had known Henley and quarrelled with him; and what between Runciman & Cashel Byron, I got into correspondence with Henley.” Soon Henley enlisted Shaw’s musical expertise for his *Scots Observer* because, as Shaw explained to Henderson,

among the various literary and artistic Dulcineas whose championship Henley mistook for criticism was Mozart. As I also knew Mozart’s value, Henley induced me to write articles on music for his paper . . . and I did write some—not more than half a dozen—perhaps not so many. Henley was an impossible editor. He had no idea of criticism except to glorify the masters he liked, and pursue their rivals with spiteful jealousy. To appreciate Mozart without reviling Wagner was to Henley a black injustice to Mozart. Now he knew that I was what he called a Wagnerite, and that I thought his objections to Wagner *vieux jeu*, stupid, ignorant & common. Therefore he amused himself by interpolating abuse of Wagner into my articles over my signature. Naturally he lost his contributor; and it was highly characteristic of him that he did not understand why he could not get any more articles from me.¹⁰

The letter to which Shaw refers, dated 1 July 1890, was much more charming and diplomatic than this later account of it, even including an assurance that Shaw was “a great admirer” of Henley (“in a way”), so it is not very surprising that Henley did not feel rebuffed. However, Shaw did tell Henley plainly that “I had better not do the other articles for you. It is only trifling with the subject to get me to write for you if you are an anti-Wagnerite, or, for the matter of that, a Wagnerite either.” Explaining his exasperation further, Shaw employed the same Quixote metaphor that he repeated in the letter to Henderson fifteen years later. He urged Henley to

Let the Wagnerite get on his Rozinante (the critical essay) and make Wagner his Dulcinea to be tilted for with the old literary lances in the good old slashing style. Then you can get on your steed and tilt for Dulcinea Berlioz against him. You might as well tilt for Dulcinea Poe against Dulcinea Ibsen, as far as I am concerned; for the whole Dulcinea system only makes me laugh. . . . I have as much musical writing as I can stomach on the World; what I should like to do in my spare time is political writing.¹¹

Since Shaw delivered the paper that would become *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* only seventeen days after he scoffed at this hypothetical match between Dulcinea Poe and Dulcinea Ibsen, the scorn seems unfair. Eight years later Shaw entered the lists for Wagner, presenting *The Perfect Wagnerite* in 1898. But perhaps Shaw's championship would be more justly compared with Ivanhoe's than with Quixote's since the writers he defends were genuinely worthy. In any case, Shaw decided to stop working under Henley's editing, which was conservative and procrustean enough to justify Shaw's sense that he was being stifled and ill-used.

Although the professional tie was severed, Shaw kept a balanced view of Henley. In his retrospective letter to Henderson after Henley's death, Shaw modulated his earlier exasperation with touches of respect: "Henley interested me as being what I call an Elizabethan, by which I mean a man with an extraordinary and imposing power of saying things, and with nothing whatever to say. . . . Give him the thing to be expressed, and he could find its expression wonderfully either in prose or verse. But beyond that he could not go."¹² He concludes his assessment of the man with ambiguous praise: "Henley, though a barren critic & poet, had enough talent and character to command plenty of consideration. A man cannot be everything."¹³

Despite this rather patronizing dismissal of Henley as a poet, Shaw retained an interest in the man even in Henley's later years, when he produced *London Types*. Shaw noted in the letter to Henderson that "[f]or a year before his death [in 1903] I had country quarters in Woking within three minutes walk of his house there; and I was slowly making up my mind to make his acquaintance seriously when he escaped me by dying."¹⁴ We have no record that Shaw read *London Types* when it was published in 1898, but it seems likely that he would have. One of Henley's biographers describes the collection as "an ironic last commentary on life in the City" and reports that a contemporary critic judged them "capital photographs, which may be interesting a hundred years hence; but they are not pretty, and we are loth to call them art."¹⁵ This mixed commendation sounds very much like the dubious compliment with which Shaw concluded his review of *A Book of Verses* in 1888. This later collection of Henley's verses may have struck Shaw as another book that he "would not be content to have missed."

In any case, the image of the "rapscallionly flower girl" would not leave Shaw alone. In 1901, four years after the reference in his letter to Ellen Terry and three years after Henley's "'Liza" appeared in print, Shaw provided another glimpse of the flower-girl character that was taking shape in his imagination. The image reappears in an unlikely place, a passage of stage directions in *Man and Superman* introducing Ann Whitefield. Ann is a very different heroine from Eliza, but the resonance be-

tween the two stage directions that introduce them is unmistakable. In Ann's case, after describing the devastating effect that she produced on Octavius (a prototype for Freddy perhaps?), Shaw adds that such admiration was not "*ridiculous or discreditable, as Ann is a well formed creature as far as that goes; and she is perfectly ladylike, graceful, and comely, with ensnaring eyes and hair. . . . But all this is beside the point as an explanation of Ann's charm. Turn up her nose, give a cast to her eye, replace her black and violet confection by the apron and feathers of a flower girl, strike all the aitches out of her speech, and Ann would still make men dream*" (2:549). The stage direction introducing Eliza repeats not only the flower-girl image but the suggestion that her essence, her vitality—her genius, if you will—is totally unrelated to her place in the social order, and the apparent contrast between the elegant ladies in evening dress and her own bedraggled self is only superficial. Significantly, Eliza is introduced sitting physically at the feet of the ladies:

She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers, on the lady's right. She is not at all a romantic figure. . . . She wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly. . . . She is no doubt as clean as she can afford to be; but compared to the ladies she is very dirty. Her features are no worse than theirs; but their condition leaves something to be desired; and she needs the services of a dentist. (4:671)

In this condition, she is practically invisible to Freddy (the Octavius figure), but he is immediately and irremediably smitten by her when she is presented to him washed, dressed genteely, and trained to speak elegantly. It is not these lady-like refinements, however, that strike Freddy, but her vitality, the quality that makes her different from the other young ladies of his acquaintance who are all equally well-scrubbed, well-dressed, and well-schooled in the usages of polite society, but not equally fascinating. Clearly Shaw had not backed down from his assertion about Ann: that essential magnetism would operate at any social level.

This may not have been the theme that Shaw meant to develop when he first conceived of his "east end dona" having an adventure of some kind with a "west end gentleman," but the image of the enchanting flower girl seems to have been associated in Shaw's mind rather early with the very insights about the illusions (and self-delusions) of social caste suggested in Henley's sonnets. We see the idea being worked out as early as 1901, when he created Ann, and we see another variation on the theme in *Major Barbara*, written in 1905. As it had in *Man and Superman*, the image appears here as a metaphor that suggests the essential irrelevance of social class in determining a person's real value. Again, the infatuation

of a young man for the vital heroine is a truer indication of that value than what is suggested by her appearance. "She bought my soul like a flower at a street corner," Cusins sighs, but he hastens to explain that the Salvation Army rhetoric was lost on him: "[S]he bought it for herself. . . . Dionysus and all the others are in herself. I adored what was divine in her, and was therefore a true worshipper." Then came the ironic turn: "But I was romantic about her too. I thought she was a woman of the people, and that a marriage with a professor of Greek would be beyond the wildest social ambitions of her rank. . . . When I learnt the horrible truth—. . . . That she was enormously rich; that her grandfather was an earl; that her father was the Prince of Darkness—. . .—and that I was only an adventurer trying to catch a rich wife, then I stooped to deceive her about my birth" (3:164). Describing how he first meets Barbara, Cusins sounds here like a more learned, intelligent version of Freddy, for he is just as smitten by this earl's granddaughter disguised as a "salvation lass" as Freddy had been with the flower girl disguised as a duchess. In either case, it was the heroine's vital force that mattered.

Major Barbara also prefigures a variation of the Galatea transformation that Shaw develops from the idea of a "shady" father for the heroine, as suggested by Henley's sonnet and fleshed out, finally, in Alfred Doolittle, the dustman turned gentleman. Both "shady" fathers, Doolittle and Andrew Undershaft (alias the Prince of Darkness), are male Galateas who undergo a similar miraculous change that vaults them from the slums into a social class more appropriate to their natural gifts, and they become *better* (although certainly not saintly) as they grow richer. Undershaft asserts this himself when trying to explain to Barbara how such transformations can be accomplished: "I was an east ender. I moralized and starved until one day I swore that I would be a full-fed man at all costs. . . . I was a dangerous man until I had my will: now I am a useful, beneficent, kindly person. That is the history of most self-made millionaires, I fancy" (3:173). Doolittle does not see his transformation as positive, nor does he admit that it makes him a better person, but Shaw clearly expected us to see him as such: Doolittle is transformed from a charming parasite, with nothing to expect in his future but the workhouse and a pauper's grave, into an equally charming rich eccentric who is forced by his social position, as he dolefully explains, to "live for others and not for myself: that's middle class morality" (4:762). Certainly the Pygmalion in his case—Ezra D. Wannafeller, founder of the international Moral Reform Societies—would be pleased with his work, for his religious doctrine made the Christian philanthropist see Shaw's truth: that the artificial socio-economic caste system disguises more than it reveals about the individual human souls that it classifies.

We will never know whether this is the theme that Shaw meant to de-

velop when he first conceived of his flower-girl role for Mrs. Patrick Campbell, nor can we know for certain that Henley's sonnets pointed Shaw's mind in that direction. However, considering the suggestive evidence, it seems only fair to recognize Henley for his possible influence on Shaw's Eliza Doolittle, even as we recognize Shaw's greater achievement in giving Henley's 'Liza a larger role, building a play around her that provides a profounder insight into the human condition than Henley's sonnets ever did.

Notes

1. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 1874-1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), p. 803.
2. William Ernest Henley, *Poems* (London: David Nutt, 1908), 2:109.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.
4. Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, in *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Reinhardt, 1970-74), 4:679. Subsequent references to Shaw's plays are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.
5. Henley, *Poems*, 2:117-18.
6. Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews*, ed. Brian Tyson (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991), p. 416.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
8. Joseph M. Flora, *William Ernest Henley* (New York: Twayne, 1970), n.p.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 1898-1910*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 481.
11. *Collected Letters 1874-1897*, p. 252.
12. *Collected Letters 1898-1910*, p. 482.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 484.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 481.
15. Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *William Ernest Henley: A Study in the "Counter-Decadence" of the 'Nineties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 200.