

A “HYMN TO HIM”: HENRY HIGGINS’S MASCULINITY IN *MY FAIR LADY*

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To revive an old-fashioned Broadway musical in 2019 demands a great deal of reimagination. The director must present a novel, somehow revolutionary vision that warrants a retelling of the story. The revival must also address and resolve the outdated gender stereotypes inherent to a play or musical written decades ago—perhaps most glaringly obvious in the archetypal ingénue character. An icon of the Golden Age of American musical theater, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s *My Fair Lady* (1956) is no exception. It tells the story of Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl who takes speech lessons from professor Henry Higgins, a phonetician who promises to pass her off as a proper English lady. Throughout their lessons, Eliza learns and transforms, while Higgins, despite his reluctance, finds that he’s “grown accustomed to her face.”

It has traditionally seemed that Eliza is merely Higgins’s project, a victim of the patriarchal and stratified society that shapes her. Such misogynistic characterizations, however, would not be tolerated as easily in 2019. Bartlett Sher, director of the 2018 Broadway revival, must do right by Eliza—and, according to *New York Times* theater critic Jesse Green, he succeeds. In his review, Green applauds Sher for reintegrating the original “feminist argument” from George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914), the source material for *My Fair Lady*.

Though Sher problematizes and, according to Green, resolves Eliza’s past depiction as “a puppet” rather than “hero,” neither Sher nor Green gives the same attention to Henry Higgins. Revived in the era of the #MeToo movement, which Green calls “the current climate of re-examination,” *My Fair Lady* seems to offer a prime opportunity to reexamine not only women’s roles, but men’s. After all, the #MeToo movement wouldn’t accomplish much if we only considered women’s behaviors. Furthermore, the very premise of *My Fair Lady* depends on a masculine contest: Eliza is the subject of a bet between two men. Higgins makes a wager with his friend Colonel Pickering that he can pass Eliza off as a duchess after six months of his tutelage. Higgins’s ambition to flex his phonetic muscles is more than a trial of his abilities; it is an attempt to prove his competence to another man—an example of a “homosocial enactment” between men, a concept that sociologist Michael Kimmel describes in his essay “Masculinity as Homophobia” (27). As men interact with one another in the marketplace, Kimmel explains, their homosocial competition gives rise to a masculine identity that requires “tangible goods as evidence of success” (27-29).

Fittingly, *My Fair Lady* begins in a literal marketplace. The spare scene of Covent Garden at night, spotted with bundles of flowers and the women who sell them, springs to life as well-heeled Londoners emerge from the opera house. The men banter

with each other, and one knocks over a basket of Eliza's flowers, prompting her exclamation of a Cockney, decidedly downmarket "Aaaooowww!" It is here, among the commotion of the marketplace, that Higgins first meets Eliza and strikes up his bet with Pickering. Eliza is the connecting piece of their homosocial exchange. She is the "tangible goods" that will prove Higgins's success to Pickering—and more broadly, to his professional peers, ie., other men. Thus, Higgins's intentions regarding Eliza fit Kimmel's observation that "[w]omen become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale" (33).

In this sense, Higgins seems perfectly congruent with Kimmel's understanding of marketplace manhood. However, if Higgins's character is a clear example of old-school masculinity at work, why does Sher not regard him as a character who needs revision just as Eliza does? Perhaps it is because other aspects of the show obfuscate Higgins's masculinity. Green points out that "for all of the wrangling over abuse and objectification in *Carousel*, *Kiss Me Kate*, and other midcentury titles, *My Fair Lady* is a totally different beast, a satire of class and gender privilege rather than a harrowing drama or lightweight romp about them." While a drama might make the audience interrogate masculinity, a satire supposedly does the job for us.

This interpretation helps explain Green's observation that "*My Fair Lady* always seemed egalitarian enough, but perhaps too cool and refined for its own good." Already self-aware, the show has not demanded or invited close examination. As the focal point of the show's satire of gender and class privilege, Higgins himself is too refined for his (and perhaps our) own good. The genteel Englishman abstains from pursuing women and passes his days studying in the serenity of his ornate home. Higgins's proper mannerisms embody his class and gender privilege, concealing deeper truths about his character's masculinity.

Sociologist Melanie Heath labels practices like Higgins's abstention from women as "soft-boiled masculinity," a term that Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe use in their essay "Masculinities and Post-Homophobias?" to address how "new masculine practices can sometimes work to conceal existing forms of inequality, but perhaps in new ways" (412). This language makes explicit an implication of Green's commentary. Relative to the brazen prototypical masculinity of characters in other musicals (for instance, the abusive husbands and overeager young bachelors common in Golden Age musicals), some of Higgins's more insidious masculine practices go unnoticed under the guise of satire. Perhaps, as Bridges and Pascoe put it, "[w]hat we are seeing is not necessarily a kinder, gentler form of masculinity, but a 'soft-boiled' masculinity, discursively repackaged in light of feminist critique and challenge" (413). That is, the satiric frame of *My Fair Lady* makes Higgins's masculinity more tolerable, but not any gentler.

This soft-boiled masculinity is perhaps most prominent in Higgins's ambiguous sexuality, called into question by his mannerisms, dismissive treatment of Eliza, and homosocial exchanges with Pickering. Considering Higgins through the framework of

Kimmel's and Bridges and Pascoe's scholarship reveals a gap in his masculinity, a characteristic he is missing that sets him apart from the male leads of other musicals. Kimmel highlights the "relentless test" of masculinity (41) and the simultaneity with which a "boy becomes gendered (masculine) and heterosexual" (31). Linking these two ideas, Bridges and Pascoe argue that "masculinity entail[s] repeatedly signaling power, competence, emotional stoicism, heterosexuality, and dominance" (415). Henry Higgins possesses and relentlessly tests all but one of these qualities: his heterosexuality.

Higgins's sexuality is unclear and scarcely acknowledged even in earlier incarnations of the show (including the popular 1964 film) that were more suggestive of a love story between Higgins and Eliza. To make sense of Higgins's ambiguous sexuality, we turn to what Bridges and Pascoe call "sexual aesthetics:" the "interests, material objects, styles of bodily comportment, language, opinions, clothing, behaviors, and more . . . [that] allow us to put our sexual identities on display—even when we are not being 'sexual'" (418-419). It is notable that Higgins practices certain gay aesthetics. His self-imposed status as a lifelong bachelor is a quality typical of contemporary closeted gay men. In the song "An Ordinary Man," his serenely spoken, measured phrases of quiet, solitary life are interrupted with chaotic orchestrations as he exclaims over the horrors that come when you "let a woman in your life!" Perhaps his exclamations express a dismay not only at the nature of women but at the social expectation that he should be in a heterosexual relationship with one.

This potential gay aesthetic is often overshadowed by a musical theater audience's expectation for a romantic or sexual connection between Higgins and Eliza. After Eliza leaves him, Higgins airs his grievances about women (read: Eliza) to Pickering in "A Hymn to Him"—a song also titled "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man?" His absurd question prompts chuckles and eyerolls from the audience. It seems so typical of a straight man's failure to understand women, but it is just as indicative of another sexual aesthetic. The immaturity that Higgins expresses in the song is a key sexual aesthetic. Here, and in other instances of his frustration, boasts, and mansplaining, Higgins is incredibly childish; as Green concisely puts it, "[h]e is a baby." These childish behaviors paint him as a pre-sexual being, thus rescuing him from being read as a homosexual one.

One particular sexual aesthetic further contributes to the difficulty of deciphering Higgins's sexuality. Soon after they make their bet, Pickering seeks assurance that Higgins will not take advantage of Eliza while she is under his care. Green summarizes their exchange:

It was [Shaw] who had Pickering ask whether Higgins is a "man of good character where women are concerned"—to which Higgins in essence responds: There's no such thing. Higgins, for all his brutishness, understands that relations between the sexes have been hopelessly muddled by social

constructs of gender and class; as a wealthy intellectual he can try, as Shaw did, to abstain from the mess entirely.

Here, a “man of good character” is a double entendre, implying a question not only about the quality of Higgins’s sexual interactions with women but also, perhaps, their very existence. To these questions, Higgins responds evasively and inconclusively. To borrow a phrase from Bridges and Pascoe, the exchange paints Higgins as “sexually illegible” (419), especially when combined with the other sexual aesthetics that mark Higgins as not conclusively heterosexual.

Considering this perspective, it becomes evident that Higgins is an example of a specific discursive behavior: “anti-fag discourse.” Bridges and Pascoe use this term to describe the gendered performances of “feminist-identifying men” who “[perform] gay masculinity, but strategically [frame] that performance as ‘straight’” (419, 418). These men “wear being read as sexually illegible as a badge of honor rather than an insult” (419). For all of the gay aesthetics that Higgins possesses, the gentlemen who craft and interpret his character manage to frame him as straight. Shaw and Sher (as well as Lerner and Loewe) seem to purposefully paint Higgins as sexually illegible and craft him in this mold, distancing him from the abusive and objectifying behaviors typical of the leading men in musicals of that period.

Bridges and Pascoe make the crucial point that in anti-fag discourse, “men are attempting to authenticate their masculinities” (419). Since Kimmel’s work tells us that such discourse often occurs homosocially—a point that Bridges and Pascoe suggest but do not explicitly make—it is true of all of their examples. It is certainly true of Henry Higgins, whose own sexual aesthetics become most evident in his exchanges with Pickering about his intentions with Eliza. Nevertheless, it is also from these attempts to authenticate a seemingly feminist masculinity that the danger of anti-fag discourse arises. Bridges and Pascoe recognize that “these young men claim identities as ‘allies’ or ‘feminists’ that render any discussion of how their behavior might entail a gendered form of sexual inequality as impossible, or at the very least, unfair” (419). Higgins’s apparent dedication to improving Eliza’s standing in life while professing no sexual interest in her serves to “discursively distance [himself] from masculinities that have earned a bad reputation among feminists”—a tell-tale sign of anti-fag discourse (419).

The danger of missing Higgins’s possible anti-fag discourse is, as Bridges and Pascoe point out, that Higgins may seem to “transgress gender and sexual boundaries,” but he does so “in ways that do not only leave those boundaries intact, but also simultaneously symbolically reinforce them” (419). Higgins’s academic interest in Eliza may change her place in society as a certain class of woman, but the motivation behind his mentorship only reinforces his standing as a heterosexual man. The very thing that makes us ignore Higgins’s sexual illegibility and gives him a pass is precisely what demands that we critique him. His motivations not only warrant but demand critical

discussion. But *My Fair Lady* leaves no room for such discussion, and instead, it enables Green to ignore anti-fag behavior.

Green writes that “history—even if it took 100 years—would eventually start to outgrow its brutes.” Praising Sher’s revival, Green seems to think that we can right the historical wrongs of gender by selectively correcting female-gendered performances without devoting the same attention to male performances. However, our close examination of Higgins’s masculinity reveals a different take. If we pay attention only to female performances, history does not truly “outgrow its brutes,” and nor do we. Instead, those brutes remain tolerable, even likeable, despite their dependence on the same gendered structures that held them up a hundred years ago.

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