



Pygmalion: Shaw's Spin on Myth and Cinderella (Twayne's Masterwork Studies)

Charles A. Berst

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The immensely popular and durable Pygmalion has long been familiar to readers and audiences as a unique combination and reworking of two well-known stories, Ovid's telling of the Pygmalion myth and Charles Perrault's "Cinderella." According to Berst, Shaw's heartily derivative play is well on its way to assuming a "major place in the mythic tradition" alongside these two classics. As he accompanies the reader through each of the play's five acts, Berst illuminates not only Shaw's understanding of the mythic power of the Pygmalion and Cinderella stories but also the striking departures he took from them. What results is new insight into the theatrical skill that has made Shaw, in the eyes of many, the greatest English playwright after Shakespeare. Just as "Perrault makes Cinderella's growth from a girl to a woman more important than the hocus-pocus of her transformation," Berst views the spiritual themes in Pygmalion, played out in Eliza's evolution, as the richest, most enduring locus of Shaw's thematic intentions. In comparing the different versions of the play - Shaw's original script, his later revisions, his script for the film version, and the My Fair Lady script - Berst gives us an unprecedented and detailed overview of those intentions. Maddeningly, Shaw saw his "romance" transformed by many directors into a simplistic love story coupling Higgins and Eliza at the end. Berst's account of Shaw's exasperated efforts to thwart such stagings of Pygmalion - he tried, often unsuccessfully, to forbid "any suggestion that the middle-aged bully and the girl of eighteen are lovers" - is highly entertaining and bemusing.



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