

# Plotting Early Modern London

New Essays on Jacobean City Comedy

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## Chapter 2

# Doolittle's Father(s): Master Merrythought in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*

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Brian Gibbons's study of Jacobean city comedy appropriately begins with a quotation from *The Alchemist* in which Ben Jonson has the Prologue point out that 'Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known, / No country's mirth is better than our own'.<sup>1</sup> In Jonson's Prologue, this patriotic statement is immediately explained by a list of characters or types 'Whose manners, now called humours, feed the stage' and thus serve to prove his point: 'whore, / Bawd, squire, imposter' and 'many persons more' provide the subject matter for 'comic writers'. Mirth, as it is understood here, arises from satire; it serves to sugar the pill whose main ingredient is the author's 'keen analysis in moral terms'.<sup>2</sup> Not for nothing does Gibbons compare Ben Jonson with Brecht.<sup>3</sup> Jonson's view of mirth, however, is by no means the only one to be held with regard to possible subject matter for the comic writer. 'Mirth' and 'matter' are linked quite differently, for example, by Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*, who, when asked about his son, exclaims: 'He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter' (1.2.166). This non-satirical kind of mirth does not preclude a keen analysis in moral terms, but is shown to be a quality connected with or even emanating from a person such as young Florizel rather than the reaction to examples of folly or vice. This form of mirth as a kind of power may even be personified, as in Chaucer's Myrthe, whose face is as round as an apple, who is handsome and young and 'mery of thought'.<sup>4</sup> It is in this tradition that a link between the twentieth-century stage and the seventeenth-century one may be found which is perhaps less obvious than that between Brecht and Jonson but, in its very own way, quite as telling, providing a comment on city comedy's prevalent themes

<sup>1</sup> Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy. A Study of Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton* (London, 1968), 15. See Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, The New Mermaids, ed. Elizabeth Cook, 2nd ed. (London, 1991), Prologue.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 19-21.

<sup>4</sup> *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 835; quoted from *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1979).

of disrupted family relationships as well as social climbing and the emerging middle-class work ethic.

### Whose fathers?

The example of literary genealogy which will be presented here should be regarded as a critical hypothesis. I am trying to point out a strong family likeness without being able to draw a complete family tree. But I think the connection is a striking one and has not been pointed out before.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it may serve to show that the energy or impact of a literary work, or in this case a musical drama, is heightened by our awareness of its family ties.

'Musical drama' has given away the identity of the person in whose ancestry I am interested. It is Alfred P. Doolittle in Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's musical *My Fair Lady*, first performed on Broadway in 1956 and filmed in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Doolittle, we remember, is the father of the cockney flower girl, Eliza, who becomes the object of a wager made by Henry Higgins, professor of phonetics, and his friend Colonel Pickering, that he will be able, within six months, to pass her off as a duchess by teaching her to speak properly. This is of course the story of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, first performed in 1913, but – apart from a number of other differences, notably with regard to the ending – the character of Doolittle is by no means the same. Shaw's Doolittle may therefore be regarded only as one of the fathers of Lerner and Loewe's. Accordingly, the Alfred Doolittle of *My Fair Lady* failed to please those who prefer the play and regard the cockney dustman as a spokesman of Shaw's social criticism. Thus as recently as 7 August 2002, an anonymous critic maintained that '*My Fair Lady* is a travesty of Shaw's great play. The treatment of Alfred Doolittle in particular [...] shows how little the producers knew or cared about Shaw's ideas or views'.<sup>7</sup> This statement more or less coincides with an earlier German critic's complaint, who calls *My Fair Lady* a Shaw plagiarism. Being 'restricted to hilarious funniness and harmony-creating harmlessness' it is 'a paradigmatic product of the industry of consciousness, brought into line with a surface thinking that conforms to the system'.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the meaning of 'surface thinking' may be, I think these critics fail to do justice to

<sup>5</sup> This statement implies a note of thanks to Inge Leimberg.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Jay Lerner, *My Fair Lady* (Harmondsworth, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cpa.org.au/garchive5/1103worth.html>, the organ of the Australian Communist Party; accessed 6 December 2002. Similar views on *My Fair Lady* are to be found in more widespread publications as well; see Nicholas Greene's introduction to *Bernard Shaw: Pygmalion*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London, 2000), in which he refers to the ending of *My Fair Lady* as 'a vulgar travesty of the play's design' (xii).

<sup>8</sup> My translation. *My Fair Lady* is 'in seiner Beschränkung auf fröhliche Spaßigkeit und harmoniestiftende Harmlosigkeit [...] beispielhaft für ein von der ursprünglichen Intention losgelöstes Produkt der Bewußtseinsindustrie, ausgerichtet auf systemkonformes Oberflächendenken.' The original German quotation is from Ernst H. Andrecht, *Sprachsoziologische Aspekte in der dramatischen Sprachgestaltung Bernard Shaws* (Frankfurt, 1976), 54.

*My Fair Lady* in general, and to Alfred P. Doolittle in particular. For one thing, they do not seem to take into account the possibility, discussed at least from Horace onwards, that there might be such a thing as instructive delight. For another, the Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* is not as two-dimensional or fatuous as he is made out to be. For he has a forefather in English literature who will help us see that these dismissals are quite unjust – not because Doolittle should be considered as an instrument of trenchant social criticism but because *My Fair Lady* makes visible (or audible) what lies dormant in Shaw's Doolittle by acknowledging his descent from a much older type.

Alan Lerner actually leaves unaltered most of Shaw's dialogue as far as Alfred Doolittle is concerned.<sup>9</sup> But he puts him in a more prominent position by introducing him even before he comes to Professor Higgins's house in Wimpole Street to claim back his daughter, or rather to claim recompense for his loss. In the Broadway musical (which in this point is slightly different from the filmed version of *My Fair Lady*) we first meet him in scene 2, when he is evicted from a pub together with his pals, Henry and Jamie, and meditates on his own prowess as a father, who has given his daughter

Hyde Park to walk through on a fine spring night; the whole ruddy city of London to roam about in sellin' her bloomin' flowers. I give her all that, and then I disappears and leaves her on her own to enjoy it. Now if that ain't worth half a crown now and again, I'll take off my belt and give her what for.<sup>10</sup>

Doolittle's generosity is rewarded by Eliza, who says, 'Well, I had a bit of luck meself tonight' and gives him a coin from the unexpected shower of money that had been thrown into her flower-basket by the godlike Higgins in scene 1. The 'luck' is then taken up by Doolittle and his companions, the three merry men, in the song 'With a little bit of luck', which explains Doolittle's very name.

DOOLITTLE *The Lord above gave man an arm of iron  
So he could do his job and never shirk.  
The Lord above gave man an arm of iron – but  
With a little bit of luck,  
With a little bit of luck,  
Someone else 'll do the blinkin' work!*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lerner's own statement on *My Fair Lady*: 'The major factor that influenced us was – whether we were aware of it or not – the changing style of musicals. It now seemed feasible to preserve the text as much as possible without the addition of a secondary love story or choreographic integration. What was essential was that every song and every addition to the play not violate the wit and intelligence of Shaw's work.' Alan Jay Lerner, *The Musical Theatre: A Celebration* (New York, 1986; repr. New York, n.d.), 186. Cf. also Alan Jay Lerner, *The Street Where I Live* (New York, 1978), 43-4.

<sup>10</sup> Lerner, *My Fair Lady*, 1.2; p. 25. Further references to the text of *My Fair Lady* are inserted in brackets.

THE THREE *With a little bit ... with a little bit ...*  
*With a little bit of luck*  
*You'll never work.* (1.2, p. 26)

Moreover, it adds, ingeniously, a whole new context to Higgins's reaction when, in the next scene, a young woman is announced who wants to see him: 'This is rather a bit of luck', he exclaims (30). Higgins's exclamation is taken unaltered from Shaw but Lerner, by adding the earlier Doolittle scene turns Shaw's line into a kind of *leitmotif* which connects the two figures and illuminates both Higgins and Doolittle. Thus, when Higgins a little later (in *Pygmalion*, Act 2, and *My Fair Lady*, 1.3) threatens to touch her 'with a broomstick' if she does not 'stop snivelling', and she responds, 'Aooooow! One would think you was my father!' (32), the audience knows far better what she means, for it still remembers Doolittle's words from the previous scene. Accordingly, *My Fair Lady*, in spite of its (apparent) final reunion of Higgins and Eliza, links Higgins more closely with Doolittle as two somewhat questionable father figures. And this brings me to my second point, for after these first impressions we might ask ourselves:

### What are the Family Traits?

We have seen that Doolittle, whose literary father I am tracking down, is himself a father figure, and a rather special one at that. He neglects his daughter to the extent that only a few moments after the exchange just quoted Eliza can say, 'I ain't got no parents' (1.3, p. 34). Doolittle even seems willing, as Higgins puts it, to sell his daughter to the gentlemen in Wimpole street for fifty pounds (1.5, p. 46). But I doubt that either in Shaw or in Lerner social satire in an all too straightforward sense is the gist of this matter. Doolittle is not presented as the victim of a cruel capitalist system that forces him to sell his daughter because he is too poor to treat her humanely. We know he *says* something along those lines. 'Have you no morals, man?' Higgins asks. 'No! I can' afford 'em, Governor' (1.5, p. 46). But this is of course part of his rhetorical gift which is instantly recognized by Higgins ('You know, Pickering, if we were to take this man in hand for three months, he could choose between a seat in the Cabinet and a popular pulpit in Wales'; 1.5, p. 47). Doolittle even lacks the mock-seriousness of Brecht and Weill's Macheath, whose famous dictum, in the English version by Ralph Mannheim and John Willet, goes 'Food is the first thing. Morals follow on.' This is because both in Shaw and Lerner Doolittle does not want to be able to afford middle-class morality. When Higgins wants to give him ten pounds instead of the five he asked for his whole merry, easy-going mode of life is suddenly put at risk: 'ten pounds is a lot of money: it makes a man feel prudent-like; and then goodbye to happiness' (1.5, p. 47).

Shaw's word, 'happiness', provides the cue for Lerner to add another dimension to the Doolittle of *Pygmalion*: his love of mirth, expressed by his love of song. Shaw's Doolittle gives evidence to his author's wit, but Lerner's Doolittle turns the witty character with his natural gift of rhetoric into a witty *and* a merry

one. His three scenes, two songs and the exchange with Professor Higgins in the library, prove him, as Wayne Robinson put it in 1956, to be 'the real show-stopper'.<sup>11</sup> The two musical numbers of course considerably contribute to this effect, partly because they sound, as Keith Garebian says, 'strongly like something out of old English variety'.<sup>12</sup>

[...]

*The Lord above made liquor for temptation,  
To see if any man could turn away from sin.  
The Lord above made liquor for temptation – but  
With a little bit of luck,  
With a little bit of luck,  
When temptation comes you'll give right in.*

[...]

*Oh, you can walk the straight and narrow;  
But with a little bit of luck  
You'll run amuck!  
The gentle sex was made for man to marry,  
To share his nest and see his food is cooked.  
The gentle sex was made for man to marry – but  
With a little bit of luck,  
With a little bit of luck,  
You can have it all and not get hooked. (1.2, p. 26-7)*

The song is Alfred P. Doolittle in a nutshell. His creed is 'Faith, hope, and a little bit of luck'; he does not believe in work but loves to eat and especially to drink and to go philandering without getting hooked. But even more interestingly, in Doolittle the roles of parent and child actually seem reversed. He regards it as the acme of one's luck to be relieved by one's children of the parental role and to be looked after by them:

*A man was made to help support his children,  
Which is the right and proper thing to do.  
A man was made to help support his children – but  
With a little bit of luck,  
With a little bit of luck,  
They'll go out and start supporting you! (1.4, p. 42)*

His very insistence, in his conversation with Higgins, on needing at least as much as others in spite of his being 'undeserving' points to a childlike form of self-centredness. The egotism is, by the way, another parallel to Professor Higgins (and Colonel Pickering), who are called by Higgins's mother 'a pretty pair of babies playing with your live doll' (1.7, p. 65). This is confirmed by the fact that Eliza

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Robinson, 'Alfred Doolittle Still Stops the Show', *Theatre Arts* (June 1956), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Garebian, *The Making of 'My Fair Lady'* (Oakville, ON, 1998), 50. See also 101-2. Abe LaFé, *Broadway's Greatest Musicals*, rev. ed. (New York, 1977), 202, calls them 'two English music hall numbers'.

teaches Higgins at least as much as he teaches her.<sup>13</sup> George Cukor and his team make Doolittle's childlikeness strikingly visible in the film version of *My Fair Lady* by showing a group of children on a swing or merry-go-round whose places are then taken by Alfred Doolittle and his companions.

### Who is the Ancestor?

This is where, at last, the literary (or rather theatrical) ancestor we have been looking for comes in. He has a similarly telling (or allegorical) name as Doolittle, a name which epitomizes the feature added to Shaw's Doolittle by Alan Lerner. He is simply called Merrythought or Old Master Merrythought and belongs to Francis Beaumont's play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, first performed by the Children of the Queen's Revels at the Blackfriars Theatre in 1607.<sup>14</sup> *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* remains unequalled in English dramatic history for its hilarious, abysmal uncovering of dramatic illusion.<sup>15</sup> The play is about the performance of another play, *The London Merchant*, which centres on the romantic love story of the apprentice Jasper who runs away from his master, Venturewell, to marry Venturewell's daughter Luce. But the audience, represented by Citizen and his wife, constantly interrupt the action, naively regard it as real life and send their own young man, Rafe, onto the stage to perform, Quixote-like, a number of valiant deeds.

Merrythought is Jasper's father, who is left by his wife and younger son because he does not provide for them. The prodigal son motif, so fashionable on the early seventeenth-century stage,<sup>16</sup> is taken up and, to a certain degree, parodied in the figure of this merry old man, for the son is here turned into a prodigal father who would not hesitate to deprive his children of what is their due, as his wife bitterly complains: 'You shall not think, when all your own is gone, to spend that I have been scraping up for Michael' (1.420-21). When it comes to giving Jasper his

<sup>13</sup> See Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and a Musical Survey* (Oxford, 1990), 200, with further references concerning the role reversal between Eliza and Higgins, including Lerner himself.

<sup>14</sup> Sheldon P. Zitner, 'Introduction', Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester, 1984), 11; Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, New Mermaids (1969; repr. London, 1991), xi. The play is quoted from Hattaway's edition.

<sup>15</sup> See Inge Leimberg, 'Das Spiel mit der dramatischen Illusion in Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Anglia* 81 (1962), 142-74; Ronald F. Miller, 'Dramatic Form and Dramatic Imagination in Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *English Literary Renaissance* 8 (1978), 67-84; Lee Bliss, "'Plot me no plots": The Life of Drama and the Drama of Life in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 45 (1984), 3-21.

<sup>16</sup> See Zitner, 'Introduction', 16-19; examples are *The Contention between Liberality and Prodigality* (1601, a moral interlude), Barry's *Ram Alley* (1608) or *The London Prodigal* (1604); cf. also John Doeblér, 'Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and the Prodigal Son Plays', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 5 (1965), 333-44.

portion, there are but ten shillings left (1.395). Old Master Merrythought never minds spending other people's money, as his wife says: 'when I tell him of it, he laughs and dances, and sings and cries, "A merry heart lives long-a"' (1.312-13). Merrythought is as unconcerned as a child about the future: 'I have money and meat and drink beforehand till tomorrow at noon; why should I be sad?' (2.431-2). He is exactly as distrustful as Doolittle is of the amount of money that would make him feel 'prudent-like; and then goodbye happiness'. Merrythought is, as one critic put it, 'implicitly compared to the birds and the flowers of the field, who do not hoard – like City merchants – and yet are provided for'.<sup>17</sup> In Merrythought's case, the childlike lack of prudence is ironically underscored by the fact that he was played by an actor like Salomon Pavy, 'celebrated in Jonson's epitaph for his acting of old men, "who died at 'scarce thirteen"''.<sup>18</sup>

Other similarities abound. Merrythought is as little averse to drink as Doolittle, which becomes obvious at their first entrance. Merrythought is heard singing a drinking song even before he appears on stage – 'Nose, nose, jolly red nose, / And who gave the jolly red nose? Nutmegs and ginger, cinnamon and cloves / And they gave me this jolly red nose' (1.345-6; 350-51). He is married but cares little for his thrifty wife; in Act 3, when his wife quotes the marriage service to him ('Am I not your fellow-feeler, as we may say, in all our miseries, your comforter in health and sickness?', 3.511-13) he has, to put it mildly, doubts about this and answers with another song, 'Begone, begone, my Juggy, my puggy, / Begone, my love, my dear' (3.516-17). A little earlier, in the same spirit of not wishing to get 'hooked', as Doolittle puts it, he sang 'Go from my window, love, go' (3.498).<sup>19</sup> That he is, at the same time, not exactly a woman-hater may be inferred from a number of other snatches of song, such as 'I would thou hadst kissed me under the breech' (3.545). He cares as little about the fate of his children as Doolittle cares about Eliza's. When he hears that Luce is gone he sings 'Why, an if she be, what care I' (2.475) and when a coffin is brought to his house and he must think Jasper is dead, he merely sings 'Why farewell he, / Thou wast a bonny boy, / And I did love thee' (5.182-5). But most of all, like the Doolittle of *My Fair Lady*, who hopes that 'Someone else'll do the blinkin' work' he is deeply averse to the new work ethic<sup>20</sup> embodied by successful businessmen such as the London merchant Venturewell.

MERRYTHOUGHT I do wonder yet, as old as I am, that any man will follow a trade, or serve, that may sing and laugh, and walk the streets. [...] [*Sings*]  
*I would not be a serving man*

<sup>17</sup> Danielle Bonneau, 'On Merrythought's Singing, With a Glance at Sir Toby', *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 41 (1995), 7-26, here 26. Cf. Mt 6:26.

<sup>18</sup> Zitner, 'Introduction', 14; cf. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* 5.163 ('I break not a wrinkle more than I had') and 5.340-41 (the song 'Learn of us to keep his brow').

<sup>19</sup> According to Zitner, 'Introduction', 181, this was an extremely popular tune in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Louis B. Wright's chapter 'Lessons in Diligence and Thrift', *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (1935; repr. London, 1958), 170-200.



*To carry the cloak-bag still,  
Nor would I be a falconer  
The greedy hawks to fill;  
But I would be in a good house,  
And have a good master too  
But I would eat and drink of the best,  
And no work would I do.*

This is it that keeps life and soul together: mirth. This is the philosopher's stone that they write so much on, that keeps a man ever young.

(4.321-2, 328-33)

Here we see that 'Merrythought' is just another name for 'Doolittle' or vice versa ('and no work would I do'). Still we may ask,

### Why Claim Paternity?

It is not merely the long list of similarities, of common traits and motifs in spite of very different surroundings, that connects these two characters; it is also their relation to music and song. If they both advocate an ethic of mirth they live this ethic by singing. They may have allegorical names but they are more than allegorical characters; one might even consider them, in the context of their respective plays, to be symbolical in that they are what they represent. Merrythought has 36 out of 40-odd songs or bits of songs in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*,<sup>21</sup> and when he ends the play with a song, he brings home to us that his life on the stage has been identical with his singing and that this is meant as an image of life itself; for life is mirth:

Sing, though before the hour of dying;  
He shall rise, and then by crying,  
'Hey, ho 'tis nought but mirth,  
That keeps the body from the earth'. *Exeunt OMNES* (5.336-45)

Even though Doolittle combines song with rhetoric this is a musical kind of speech-making – the 'rhythm of his native woodnotes wild' as Higgins puts it, classing him with the best. And his life, like Merrythought's, is song, as we are impressively shown by his final exit when he is carried away as in a funeral procession, singing 'Get me to the church on time' (2.3, p. 102-4).

This complete identity of role and song in Merrythought and Doolittle corresponds to a quality characteristically recognized by critics of both plays though, as far as I can see, their observations have never been linked. All the major reviews of *My Fair Lady*, as Keith Garebian points out, 'referred to the perfect fusion of script and libretto',<sup>22</sup> *i.e.* the lyrics complement or are part and parcel of

<sup>21</sup> Bonneau, 'On Merrythought's Singing', 8.

<sup>22</sup> Garebian, *The Making of 'My Fair Lady'*, 99-100.

the dialogue and thus are 'an integrated element' of the action.<sup>23</sup> Concerning *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Zitner reminds us that it is 'one of a small number of dramatic works in which the text is not a pretext for the music nor the music only grace notes to the text', and more than even the interlude music 'Merrythought's snatches of song are [...] thoroughly integrated with the text, most obviously through changes in personal pronouns from the original lyrics'<sup>24</sup> but also, one may add, by the apt selection of particular lines from existing songs. An example is Merrythought's answer to Citizen's wife's wish (who seems, in spite of her middle-class morality, quite attracted by Merrythought), 'Let's hear some of thy songs' (4.317-18), to which he responds with a couple of lines from a catch printed in full in Ravenscroft's *Pammelia* (1609),<sup>25</sup> 'Who can sing a merrier note / than he that cannot change a groat?' The fact that Merrythought is Doolittle's ancestor is thus underscored by the fact that *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is one of the ancestors of *My Fair Lady* as a particular kind of musical comedy.

The characteristic function of song in both Merrythought and Doolittle brings us back to the earlier question of *My Fair Lady* being a mere travesty of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. On the contrary, we may now say, for by linking Doolittle up with an earlier dramatic character, who is an embodiment of song, Lerner adds to Shaw's wit. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, a play that exposes dramatic illusion and role-playing, the character of Merrythought seems to live in a world of his own;<sup>26</sup> it is remarkable that he who sings rather than speaks and who is most clearly detached from any form of 'real life' is not shown to play a role but is shown to be himself throughout the play. Those who wish to enter his world must sing. *My Fair Lady* and *Pygmalion* are also very much concerned with role-playing, albeit in a different manner. Just as Merrythought remains true to his merry self in a world in which truth and illusion get more and more mixed up, Doolittle stays outside the world in which one may, it seems, become a different being by playing a different linguistic part. Both characters, in apparent paradox, by not playing a role embody the spirit of play, of theatrical, musical entertainment itself as a counter-world to the sphere of urban money-making or middle-class pretence. Thus, as essentially non-satirical<sup>27</sup> characters, they contribute to the moral analysis provided by the plays to which they belong. They personify mirth;<sup>28</sup> and

<sup>23</sup> Robert Coleman in *The Daily Mirror*, quoted from Garebian, *The Making of 'My Fair Lady'*, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Zitner, 'Introduction', 173.

<sup>25</sup> According to Linda Phyllis Austern, 'Thomas Ravenscroft: Musical Chronicler of an Elizabethan Theatre Company', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 2 (1985), 238-63, the songs from *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (and *Twelfth Night*) included in Ravenscroft's collection 'were widely known in London, did not originate as theater music and were undoubtedly gathered independently by Ravenscroft, Beaumont, Shakespeare, and the other collectors' (240).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Leimberg, 'Das Spiel mit der dramatischen Illusion', 171.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Miller, 'Dramatic Form and Dramatic Imagination', 81: Merrythought 'epitomizes this extra-satirical aspect of the play'.

<sup>28</sup> See Doebler, 'Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', 341, cf. Bliss, "'Plot me no plots'", 16-17.

even though they are no longer as young and handsome as Chaucer's Myrthe, they are both as 'mery of thought' as their common literary ancestor.

The distance from the real world of social aspirations which is a shared feature of Merrythought and Doolittle is also quite strongly characteristic of Merrythought in *Nutmeg and Ginger*, Julian Slade's musical version of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which was first performed in 1963, only a few years after *My Fair Lady*, and had an acclaimed revival at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, Surrey, in 1991.<sup>29</sup> This attitude of remaining aloof comes to the fore in a number of songs whose roisterous nature gives evidence to the music-hall tradition in which Slade's Merrythought participates like Lerner and Loewe's Doolittle. The best example is, perhaps, 'What a foolish world', sung immediately before Venturewell comes to Merrythought's house to accuse his son of having stolen Venturewell's daughter:

*What a foolish world!*  
*I will make another of my own*  
*Where no care will trouble me*  
*I will be*  
*Merrily singing*  
*Tra-la-la*  
*Singing life away*  
 [...]  
*What a world it is!*  
*What a foolish world!*  
*Let it go. Let it die.*  
*What care I?*<sup>30</sup>

### What about the Family Tree?

Of course Doolittle and the two Merrythoughts (of Beaumont's play and Slade's musical) are not alone, and that is why we should ask this final question, in spite of the qualification made above. To pursue briefly only one line which then branches off in different directions: *Pygmalion* has frequently been compared to Dickens, mainly because of Shaw's known admiration for him.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Noddy Boffin (or, even worse, Rogue Riderhood) in *Our Mutual Friend* have been suggested as

<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to the director of the Richmond production, Gary Carpenter, and to Julian Slade for making a copy of the book and a recording of the songs accessible to me. I should also like to thank Angelika Zirker for her efforts in this and other bibliographic matters.

<sup>30</sup> Julian Slade, *Nutmeg and Ginger*, Act 1, Scene 7 (unpublished MS, p. 34).

<sup>31</sup> Edgar Rosenberg has identified 538 references to Dickens in Shaw's published writings and correspondence; see Martin Quinn, 'The Informing Presence of Charles Dickens in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*', *Dickensian* 80 (1984), 144-50, n. 1.

Doolittle's literary forebears.<sup>32</sup> The example shows that the similarity of a few external motifs (both Doolittle and Boffin are dustmen, and both come into money) may be misleading. Shaw may well have used those motifs familiar to him from Dickens's novel, but the characters and what they represent are by no means comparable. The dissolute Dick Swiveller in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a more likely candidate for Doolittle's ancestry; but he marries the Marchioness and joins the ranks of middle-class morality after all. I think the roots of our family lie elsewhere. When we think in terms of the old dramatic types handed down from Greek New Comedy and the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence, the parasite comes into view, a character who lives at the expense of others; Ben Jonson draws a scathing portrait of the type, for example, in the Mosca ('fly') of *Volpone*, and one of the most odious characters in Dickens is a parasite, too: Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*.

But again objections will be raised as soon as the connection is made. Neither Doolittle nor Merrythought is one of those 'smiling, smooth, detested Parasites' by whom Shakespeare's Timon is disgusted (3.6.104).<sup>33</sup> They do not believe in work and morality, and hope that others will provide for them, but they never earn their living by self-abasing flattery. They are childlike rather than trading on their alleged childlikeness as Skimpole does. They are, if anything, sympathetic parodies of the parasite, providing an amoral foil to the ideals of thriftiness and social climbing ridiculed in the plays to which they belong. And this brings me to the last of Doolittle's fathers to be mentioned in this sketch, a character who is not called 'Old Merrythought' but – at least nine times – the 'merry old gentleman'. He is an evil character indeed, who works hard only in the ironical sense expressed by his name, and who has a whole bunch of children, or step-children, to support him. Musical comedy, however, rescued him from the evil he embodies in Dickens and turned him into a quite likeable character who, for a moment, thinks about reforming but stays outside middle-class morality and the laws of property when he is reviewing the situation. Thus he happily dances off with one of his most talented boys, the Artful Dodger. Even though Lionel Bart's *Oliver* was only produced a few years after *My Fair Lady*, in 1960, the film version of *My Fair Lady* in 1964 already seems to acknowledge the family ties, which can be seen when it is read closely. In the scene in which Doolittle sings 'With a little bit of luck' he walks around a building site where road work is being done and stops next to a bakery to embrace a woman and dance around the hard-working navvies. The name of the bakery, clearly to be noticed behind the singing Doolittle, is 'Fagin'. Apart from the allusion to the Dickensian character, 'Fagin' is a pun on

<sup>32</sup> See Quinn, 'The Informing Presence', 146, with reference to earlier comments by Harold F. and Jean R. Brooks, as well as Stanley Weintraub; for Riderhood see Michael Grosvenor Myer, 'Dickensian Echoes in Shaw: *Our Mutual Friend* and *Pygmalion*', *Notes and Queries* 229 (1984), 508.

<sup>33</sup> Doebler, 'Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', 341, compares him to Matthew Flowerdale in *The London Prodigal* and to Quicksilver in *Eastward Ho*, but also points out the difference ('he is hardly a villain').

'fagging', the action of working hard<sup>34</sup> and thus provides an aptly ironical comment on Doolittle, on his name and philosophy, which is essentially an heirloom handed down to him from Old Master Merrythought.

<sup>34</sup> Or the system under which a junior boy acts as a fag to a senior; see *OED* 'fagging' *vbl. n.*<sup>1</sup>.