Shaw’s Lady Cicely
and the Remarkable Mary Kingsley

When Bernard Shaw in 1912 tried to account for the inability of his Captain Brassbound’s Conversion (1899) to achieve a popular success, he took the strange position that its subject matter was too familiar to the theatergoing public. As an appendix to the first printing of the play he had attached notes which identified his confessed sources, notably the memoirs of his adventurer friend Robert Cunninghame Graham as related in Mogreb-el-Acksa (Morocco the Most Holy), which Shaw suggested had been “lifted into the second act.” That had explained Captain Brassbound, but not the indefatigable Lady Cicely, a role he had written for Ellen Terry when she had complained after the birth of her son Gordon Craig’s first child: “Now that I am a grandmother, nobody will ever write a play for me.”¹

The explanation for Shaw’s reticence in the matter of Lady Cicely’s prototype may have been that she was then still very much alive. (So was Cunninghame Graham, but he was a friend whom one thus had license to spoof.) Mary Kingsley’s adventures had been in the newspapers in the middle 1890s, but only in 1897 had come the publication of her Travels in West Africa. Her West African Studies appeared in the year Shaw wrote Captain Brassbound’s Conversion, which at first he had intended to title, after the female lead, The Witch of Atlas—a Shelleyan suggestion as well as a reference to the Atlas range in northwest Africa.²

No witch, Mary Kingsley nevertheless prevailed in her African travels as if she were one, and Shaw pointed out in his 1912 program note that “the material” of his play had been spread before the public for some years by the sharply contrasted travels of explorers like Stanley and Mary Kingsley, which shewed us, first, little troops of physically strong, violent, dangerous, domineering armed men shooting and bullying their way through risks and savage enmities partly conjured up by their fear-saturated imaginations, and partly promoted by their own terrified aggressions, and then, before we had recovered the breath their escapes had made us hold, a jolly, fearless, good tempered, sympathetic woman walk-
ing safely through all those terrors without a weapon or a threat, and finding more safety and civility than among the Apaches of Paris or the Hoolligans of London.

The saving grace of the Lady Cicelys and the Miss Kingsleys—and here the term can be applied quite literally—is their respect for the best qualities in human nature and their ability to discover such qualities in every individual they encounter. “I am quite sure,” Kingsley observed with her typical demure irony, “that the majority of Anglo-Saxons are good men and I am equally sure that the majority of Negroes are good men—possibly the percentage of perfect angels and calm, scientific minds in both races is less than might be desired but that we cannot help.”

Lady Cicely confidently sees kind faces symbolizing kind hearts so often that she is—vainly—cautioned to “restrain your confidence in people’s eyes and faces.” But seeing the best in each man and announcing it publicly became a subtle form of coercion in encouraging even the unlikeliest to behave better than might otherwise have been expected.

Only privately had Shaw earlier indicated the depth of his indebtedness to a real-life prototype, and in the process his admiration for her achievement. The resourceful Mary Kingsley was a “born boss” of the type Shaw would dramatize in later plays—an instinctive manageress who prevailed in a man’s world through wile, wit and will. In July 1899 Shaw had finished *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* and sent a copy to Ellen Terry. Her reaction was disappointing. “I believe it would never do for the stage,” she wrote Shaw, dismissing the idea of her acting the Lady Cicely role. “I don’t like the play one bit. Only one woman in it? How ugly it will look, and there will not be a penny in it.”

Shaw responded on August 8 with a letter that was more a verbal lashing than his usual cajoling:

Send to your library for two books of travel in Africa: one Miss Kingsley’s (have you met her?) and the other H. M. Stanley’s. Compare the brave woman, with her commonsense and good will, with the wild beast man, with his elephant-rifle, and his atmosphere of dread and murder…. Have you found in your own life and your own small affairs no better way, no more instructive heart wisdom, no warrant for trusting to the good side of people instead of terrorizing the bad side of them. I—poor idiot!—thought the distinction of Ellen Terry was that she had this heart wisdom, and managed her own little world.

I accordingly give you a play in which you stand in the very place where Imperialism is most believed to be necessary, on the border line where the European meets the fanatical African…. I try to shew these men gaining a sense of their own courage and resolution from continual contact with & defiance of their own fears. I try to shew you fearing nobody and managing them all as Daniel managed the lions, not by cunning—above all, not by even a momentary appeal to Cleopatra’s stand-by, their passions, but by simple moral superiority.
Like Shaw’s heroine, Mary Kingsley was the exception to the Victorian rule, a lady brought up in the usual secluded fashion to manifest the diffidence and modesty, the tender-heartedness and self-abnegation of her sex and era, yet who confounded expectation by exploring fearlessly where few white men trod, and doing so as a lady in voluminous Victorian dress. According to Sir George Goldie, then Director of the Royal Niger Company, Kingsley “had the brain of a man and the heart of a woman,” a summation that would fit Shaw’s Lady Cicely Waynflete.

Of Mary’s five Kingsley uncles, Charles best represented her Victorian opposite—chaplain to the Queen, Canon of Westminster, Professor of History at Cambridge (where he was tutor to the Prince of Wales), and author of the popular novel of Christian uplift, *Alton Locke*, even a quintessential Victorian children’s story, *The Water Babies*. Only one uncle was a traveler. Henry voyaged to Australia, drifted from job to job, and died early, at forty-six, yet wrote forgotten novels there that may have first stirred the lust for travel on the part of his young and sheltered niece.

When the death of her parents freed her at thirty from the conventional restraints of her sex and time, Mary Kingsley indulged the curiosity whetted by her reading books of science and travel in her father’s library by embarking on a voyage to West Africa. An untrained amateur zoologist, she embarked with the aim of collecting fish and insect specimens for the British Museum, whose curator in the field was a family friend. Other friends expressed horror that she was going, and when she remained determined, showered on her advice, equipment and medicines. Shaw may have seen a kindred spirit in her published reaction to some of the advice. She had been referred to the missionaries for firsthand information:

> So to missionary literature I addressed myself with great ardour; alas! only to find that these good people wrote their reports not to tell you how the country they resided in was,… but how necessary it was that their readers should subscribe more freely and not get any foolishness into their heads about obtaining an inadequate supply of souls for their money.

Shaw opens his play with a specimen missionary in his well-kept garden on the west coast of Morocco, a hearty Scot who has been at work in Africa for twenty-five years and for his pains has only one unlapsed convert, a delinquent, alcoholic Englishman. But his lack of success among the natives fails to disturb him. “I hope I have done some good,” he explains. “They come to me for medicine when they are ill; and they call me the Christian who is not a thief. That is something.” It is to his door that Lady Cicely comes on her travels, dressed (in Shaw’s stage directions) “with cunning simplicity not as a businesslike, tailor made, gaitered tourist, but as if she lived at the next cottage and had dropped in for tea in blouse and flowered straw hat.” Mary Kingsley
Mary Kingsley 1896
had gone on her African travels almost the way she later went on her widely popular lecturing tours in England, in sweeping skirts and a curious, old-fashioned hat. In her African kit she had made only one concession to the terrain, taking along an old pair of her brother’s trousers, which she wore, when necessary, unseen under her “good thick skirt.”

Like Lady Cicely, Miss Kingsley by choice traveled without another valuable article of masculine equipment—a husband. On her second voyage she had some difficulties with the colonial authorities, who had discovered that she was planning to explore the rapids of the Ogowe River, in the French Congo, in a native canoe. Uneasy about her crew of Igalwas, they observed that the only other woman who had visited the rapids, a French lady, had been accompanied by her husband. Kingsley replied—she reported—that neither the Royal Geographical Society’s checklist in its Hints to Travellers nor Messrs. Silver in their elaborate lists of articles necessary for a traveler in tropical climates “made mention of husbands.” Nevertheless, she invented one when circumstances made it practical, for explanations to natives were fruitless. “I have tried it,” she recalled, “and it only leads to more questions still.” The best reaction, she noted, was to say that she was searching for her husband, and to “locate him away in the direction in which you wish to travel; this elicits help and sympathy.” “The important thing,” Lady Cicely observes when planning an expedition, “is … that we should have as few men as possible, because men give such a lot of trouble traveling. And then, they must have good lungs and not be always catching cold. Above all, their clothes must be of good wearing material. Otherwise I shall be nursing and stitching and mending all the way; and it will be trouble enough, I assure you, to keep them washed and fed without that.” On the subject of husbands in particular she insists, practically: “I have never been in love with any real person; and I never shall. How could I manage people if I had that mad little bit of self left in me? That’s my secret.”

Shaw’s understanding (it may have been instinctive in Kingsley) was that selflessness could exist in advanced humans in the form of complete selfishness. It is a concept that he explored in three successive plays—with Dick Dudgeon in The Devil’s Disciple, Caesar in Caesar and Cleopatra, and Lady Cicely in Captain Brassbound’s Conversion: his Three Plays for Puritans. Shaw described the quality as “originality” in his notes to Caesar:

Originality gives a man an air of frankness, generosity and magnanimity by enabling him to estimate the value of truth, money, or success in any particular instance quite independently of convention and moral generalization.... Hence, in order to produce an impression of complete disinterestedness and magnanimity, he has only to act with entire selfishness.... Having virtue, he has no need of goodness.... The really interesting question is whether I am right in assuming that the way to produce an impression of greatness is by exhibiting a
man, not as mortifying his nature by doing his duty … but as simply doing what he naturally wants to do.

Mary Kingsley has such “originality,” which Shaw, it seems clear from a reading of *Travels in West Africa*, admired more than Miss Kingsley’s “commonsense and good will.” The very first sentence of her book even quotes his favorite author: “It was in 1893 that, for the first time in my life, I found myself in possession of five or six months which were not heavily forestalled, and feeling like a boy with a new half-crown, I lay about in my mind, as Mr. Bunyan would say, as to what to do with them.” Thereafter her wit never falters. She reads a French book of phrases in common use in Dahomey which begins with “Help, I am drowning” and includes—exemplifying the white man’s attitude toward the African—“Get up, you lazy scamps!” She “fully expected to be killed by the local nobility and gentry; they thought I was connected with the World Women’s Temperance Association, and collecting shocking details for subsequent magic-lantern lectures on the liquor traffic.” And as a collector of “beetles and fetishes” she blithely brought into the houses of horrified settlers “abominations full of ants … or things emitting at unexpectedly short notice vivid and awful stenches.” Lady Cicely, according to her brother-in-law, “from travelling in Africa, has acquired a habit of walking into other people’s houses and behaving as if she were in her own.” As she explains: “I always go everywhere. I know the people here wont touch me. They have such nice faces and such pretty scenery.” But the seeming naiveté masks a modern and methodical mind. Like Mary Kingsley, who was befriended by old chiefs and young cannibals alike, because she was uninhibitedly tolerant of their behavior among themselves, whether it be eating, marrying or praying, Lady Cicely claims to be “only talking commonsense” when suggesting that customs are relative and that respect works better than a revolver. “Why do people get killed by savages? Because instead of being polite to them, and saying How dye do? like me, people aim pistols at them. Ive been among savages—cannibals and all sorts. Everybody said theyd kill me. But when I met them I said Howdyedo? and they were quite nice. The kings always wanted to marry me.” Later, when Brassbound warns her about a particularly dangerous trip into the interior: “You dont know what youre doing,” she answers with confidence. “Oh, dont I? Ive not crossed Africa and stayed with six cannibal tribes for nothing…. I’ve heard all that before about the blacks; and I found them very nice people when they were properly treated.”

Lady Cicely’s breezy indifference to Western shibboleths in Africa could be taken as having only coincidental resemblance to Kingsley’s memoir if we did not know that Shaw not only read it and admired it and even offered her as exemplar to the prospective stage Lady Cicely, but also that Miss Kingsley’s prose reads as if she were a lady G.B.S. In places she sounds as
if she had read Shaw’s *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) in the years just before she had escaped her domestic cage. “One by one,” she writes, summing up the lessons of her African experience, “I took my old ideas derived from books and thoughts based on imperfect knowledge and weighed them against the real life around me, and found them either worthless or wanting.” Supporting her point by an anecdote, she told a story which would have been appropriate for *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*:

The difficulty of the [primitive] language is … far less than the whole set of difficulties with your own mind. Unless you can make it pliant enough to follow the African idea..., you will not bag your game. I heard an account the other day—I have forgotten where—of a representative of her Majesty in Africa who went out for a day’s antelope shooting. There were plenty of antelope about, and he stalked them with great care; but always, just before he got within shot of the game, they saw something and bolted. Knowing he and the boy behind him had been making no sound and could not have been seen, he stalked on, but always with the same result; until happening to look round, he saw the boy behind him was supporting the dignity of the Empire at large, and this representative of it in particular, by steadfastly holding aloft the consular flag. Well, if you go hunting the African idea with the flag of your own religion or opinions floating ostentatiously over you, you will similarly get a very poor bag.

Shaw’s Lady Cicely, a compulsive nurse, gets her way in the play in part by managing to use her healing resources in pursuit of her larger goals. She emerges as unscathed as she does unmarried. Miss Kingsley in Africa protects herself as well as bargains to get her way by poulticing ulcers and disinfecting wounds; but after Shaw had written his play Kingsley’s nursing propensities were called upon in the Boer War. Although she sympathized with the plight of the Boers, her work was with her own people in a hospital in South Africa. Even there she was moved by the suffering of the enemy wounded as they paid the price for defending their land. “They want their own country, their very own,” she wrote a friend in May 1900. “It works out in all their delirium—‘ons Land, ons Land!’ One of them held forth to me today, a sane one, how he knew every hill’s name, every bend of the river’s name, every twist in the road—his hills, roads, rivers, not England’s, or Germany’s, but ‘ons Land.’ It is a rocky problem for the future.”

A few weeks later she was sick herself—with enteric fever. Soon she realized that she was dying. She asked the other nurses to leave her alone, explaining that she wanted no one to see her in her weakness. Animals, she said, went away to die alone, and she felt like them. “It was hard for us to do this,” a colleague recalled, “but we left the door ajar, and when we saw she was beyond knowledge [we] went to her.”

On 6 June 1900 she died, and at her own request was buried at sea. Six years later, when a too-elderly Ellen Terry, at the Royal Court Theatre, finally played the role written for her, she could not remember her
lines and worked instead at being charming. No one by then remembered Mary Kingsley well enough to connect anything in Miss Terry’s mangled Lady Cicely with the indomitable authoress of *Travels in West Africa*. Yet Lady Cicely may be her monument.