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Blurring Boundaries: Issues of Gender, Madness, and Identity in Libby Larsen’s Opera Mrs. Dalloway

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Blurring Boundaries: Issues of Gender, Madness, and Identity in Libby Larsen’s Opera Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf permeates our culture. Her name and image are claimed and sometimes disclaimed by feminists, modernists, realists, intellectuals, and popular culture. Composer Libby Larsen, however, is the first to set Woolf’s works operatically with *Mrs. Dalloway* (1992). Larsen has been hailed as one of the most successful and important American composers of our time. Many of her works contain feminist themes, are based on works by female authors, and depict strong female characters.

Although *Mrs. Dalloway* is not Larsen’s most frequently performed opera, its subject matter and musical content offer a wealth of cross-disciplinary avenues for scholars to explore. Literature by such scholars as Mezei, Bowlby, Blanchard, and Ferrer focus on issues such as Woolf’s challenging a traditional male literary discourse, coherence through “free indirect discourse,” social issues as gender and madness, and Woolf’s personal life experiences paralleling her characters and ideas in her novels. In this thesis, I address these issues to further investigate Woolf’s portrayals of gender, madness, and identity within *Mrs. Dalloway*. Larsen exquisitely parallels Woolf’s difficult and unique literary style in a musical manner, by such techniques as recurring musical gestures and the repetition of phrases to reflect Woolf’s literary style.

Much of feminist literary criticism influenced the nascence of feminist musicology, particularly Clément’s *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Feminist musicological criticism by scholars such as McClary, Smart, and Abbate often analyze gender and sexuality in opera because these issues are explicit and forthright in the text and on stage. Many of these analyses of gender and sexuality often center on the dichotomy of a powerful, yet highly unstable, possibly mad female or male character set against a dominant norm. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however,
Woolf challenges traditional analyses of madwomen and gender, and Larsen corroborates these ideas musically. Larsen’s compositional tools, for example, confirm Woolf’s notion that there is not a clear division between sanity and insanity, and that gender is ambiguous. Larsen creates a work which not only expands the American operatic orchestral palette and brilliantly communicates through the vernacular, but also presents numerous possibilities for a cross-disciplinary approach to music and literature.
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INTRODUCTION

In July of 1992, the Lyric Opera in Cleveland, Ohio premiered *Mrs. Dalloway*, an opera composed by Libby Larsen, with a libretto adapted by Bonnie Grice from Virginia Woolf’s novel of the same name. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* is not Larsen’s most frequently performed opera, its subject matter and musical composition offer a wealth of cross-disciplinary avenues for scholars—particularly feminist scholars—to explore. *Mrs. Dalloway* challenges the traditional linear pattern of operatic plot, blurs boundaries of gender and sanity/insanity, and emphasizes characterization above all else, therefore presenting numerous possibilities for gendered interpretations. In order to explore musical and literary interpretations of gender/sexuality, madness, and identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this thesis will analyze these issues with respect to the interaction of literary and operatic criticism.

The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* tells the story of a day in the life of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares to give a party. She is the wife of Richard Dalloway, who is a Parliament member and well-respected in London’s social circles. The story takes place after the First World War. The “plot” revolves around Mrs. Dalloway’s seemingly mundane daily events, such as the purchase of flowers, but surrounding her routine is a series of events in other character’s lives which are somehow related to Mrs. Dalloway’s life. All of these supposedly separate events examine issues of madness, fidelity, gender, marriage, suicide, lost love, lost dreams, and personal identity.

In the beginning of Act I in Larsen’s opera, Mrs. Dalloway buys flowers for her party and mends her dress. As she goes through her day, she recalls a time in her youth when she was torn between her affection for Peter Walsh, the social expectations of her family, and her lust for a revolutionary woman, Sally Seaton. There is a flashback scene between Mrs. Dalloway and Sally
Seaton, which is interrupted by the arrival of Peter, who had been serving in India. Although they engage in small talk, their inner dialogue reveals their complicated feelings toward each other. During this time, we see the parallel story of Septimus Smith and his wife Rezia. Septimus is having a breakdown, muttering irrationally and calling out for the dead as a result of shell shock during the war. Rezia contacts the doctor, Sir William Bradshaw. Septimus's and Mrs. Dalloway’s lives intertwine as they express conflicted feelings regarding their emotional states and their life choices. The act ends with the arrival of Mrs. Dalloway’s daughter Elizabeth, and Mrs. Dalloway calls out to Peter, telling him not to forget her party tonight.

At the beginning of Act II, Peter strolls through the park recalling his encounter with Mrs. Dalloway. He sees the Old Woman, who sings a song which is unintelligible to Peter. Septimus and Rezia are also in the park and Septimus continues his rants about the death of his friend Evans. Rezia takes him to see Dr. Bradshaw, but he behaves more erratically. After Dr. Bradshaw leaves, Rezia attempts to recall happy memories to Septimus of their time together in Italy and for a moment Septimus begins to calm down. The return of Dr. Bradshaw, however, is too much for Septimus and he jumps out the window to his death. Concurrently, we see Peter arrive at Mrs. Dalloway’s party and hear the sound of an ambulance. Dr. Bradshaw arrives at the party and apologizes for his tardiness due to Septimus’s suicide. Mrs. Dalloway is disturbed that there is talk of death at her party and leaves her guests to retreat to her room. As she gazes out the window, she sees the Old Woman and reflects on the probable reasons for Septimus’s death, as well as the nature of life and death itself. She returns to her party and resumes her role as hostess, stating that she would have liked to have dancing.

Woolf is a contested icon whose name and image have been claimed and sometimes disclaimed by feminists, modernists, realists, intellectuals, and popular culture. Even people who
have never read her works recognize her name from Barnes and Noble’s tote bags or from the title of Edward Albee’s play, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf.” More recently, her name has been revived by the popularity of the motion picture “The Hours.” Woolf has been deeply integrated into our culture, even if she has been not always liked or understood. Literary scholarship on Woolf abounds and her popular posthumous reception continues to grow. However, Woolf’s works have not previously been set operatically or analyzed musically.

In this thesis, I examine the life of Woolf because many of her experiences and personality traits are closely bound to the characters in her novel, specifically Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus. Her ideas about sanity/insanity and gender/sexuality in Mrs. Dalloway also reflect her own life experiences and the views of the culture and time period in which she lived. Mrs. Dalloway is an iconic novel for many feminist scholars. I concentrate on the analyses of feminist literary scholars to demonstrate how Woolf’s writing in Mrs. Dalloway challenges the traditional male literary discourse by examining issues such as “free indirect discourse” and non-linear plot lines. I further investigate how Woolf portrays such issues as gender, madness, and identity within the novel, and how Grice adapts the libretto to expose these themes.

Although feminist criticism in musicology is a relatively recent field, literature has a long tradition of feminist criticism and has subsequently influenced musicology. Much of feminist musicological criticism began as analyses of gender and sexuality in opera. According to scholars such as Mary Ann Smart, Catherine Clément, and Susan McClary, opera is the obvious medium from which to base feminist criticism because issues such as gender/sexuality are explicit and forthright. Many musicologists have employed theoretical analyses to understand formal compositional choices in association with both female and male operatic characters.

These analyses of gender/sexuality often center on the dichotomy of a powerful, yet highly unstable, possibly mad female or male character. Scholars have analyzed gender/sexuality and madness in such well-known operas as Georges Bizet’s Carmen, Arnold Schoenberg’s Erwartung, Richard Strauss’s Salome and Elektra, Alban Berg’s Lulu, Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor, and Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. The portrayals of gender/sexuality and madness in these operas are also fundamentally related to the characterizations in Larsen’s Mrs. Dalloway. An overview of pertinent issues in operatic criticism will establish a basic approach to an analysis of Mrs. Dalloway.

Larsen’s opera is a fascinating site for analysis not only because of her prominent role as one of the most important and successful twentieth- and twenty-first century American opera composers, but also because Larsen exquisitely parallels Woolf’s difficult and unique literary style in a musical manner. Most people would agree that it is challenging enough to digest one of Woolf’s novels. Larsen and Grice not only understood the meaning of the novel and delivered it as such, but also captured Woolf’s literary ideals such as the non-linear plot line that connects character’s lives, with such techniques as recurring gestures.

While many of Larsen’s works contain feminist themes and depict strong female characters, Mrs. Dalloway stands unique among them. When we combine one of feminism’s

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3 Some of Larsen’s well-known compositions, such as Songs from Letters (after Calamity Jane) (1989), have been subjects of feminist criticism, and use texts by women relating to women’s experiences. Writings include
most hailed icons, Woolf, with one of America’s most brilliant compositional minds, Larsen, we are offered a work that is immersed in multi-layered complexities, waiting to be discovered. However, we can only truly understand and analyze this opera by relying on interdisciplinary approaches, specifically the intersection of literary and operatic feminist criticism. In addition, the opera succeeds and is worthy of recognition among twentieth-century operas because of Larsen’s skilled ability to speak the American vernacular and communicate through musical mediums which are common in our culture, such as the synthesizer and digitally-mixed sound.

Larsen, Grice, and Woolf have created a work which deserves a permanent place on the scope of American opera stage. I hope this analysis will yield a deeper appreciation and understanding of a complex work, and emphasize the importance of approaching feminist musicology in a cross-disciplinary fashion.

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Rosemary Killam’s “Calamity Jane: Strength, Uncertainty, and Affirmation,” which analyzes the way music interprets text within the historical context of the writings. Two other examples of musical analysis deal with Sonnets from the Portuguese, a 1988 song cycle with text by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mary Cassatt, a multimedia work “celebrat[ing] female creativity in the visual arts.” See Sophie Fuller, The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States 1629–Present (London and San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 176.
CHAPTER I

COMMUNICATING THROUGH SOUND: LIBBY LARSEN’S IMPORTANCE WITHIN THE REALM OF TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN OPERA

“[Libby Larsen is] the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.”¹

Not only is Libby Larsen one of the few contemporary composers to earn her living by composing, she is also one of the most articulate advocates of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music and musicians. Her profound love for the creative process and her active role in the musical community have made her one of the most personable and beloved figures in American music today. Her musical output spans almost every genre, but her exuberant energy in every aspect of American musical life extends even further. Larsen is perhaps the “most successful American woman opera composer of the 1990s” and early twenty-first century.²

Larsen, born in Wilmington, Delaware on December 24, 1950, knew that music was her calling by the time she was two years old. Her first memory is of standing beside her family’s upright piano. Larsen recalls, “I can smell the varnish of the piano, and I can feel my teeth gnawing at the side of the piano, and I can see down the side of it, watching my sister practice and wanting so much to do that.”³ Larsen began composing at the age of five and chose to devote her life to music because of a “long and deep-seated desire to communicate through sound.”⁴ Larsen originally wished to become a coloratura soprano, but found herself much more interested in


in theory and recomposed all of the art songs that she studied in college. She then pursued her music education at the University of Minnesota, where she studied with Dominick Argento, Paul Fetler, and Eric Stokes and received her doctorate in 1978.

Her desire to communicate through sound has exceeded the confines of the concert hall to help form some of the most important music advocacy groups in the United States. In 1973, Larsen co-founded with Stephen Paulus the Minnesota Composers Forum (now known as the American Composers Forum) to aid composers and musicians with business matters and to organize concerts and recordings. She has served on the panel of the National Endowment for the Arts and the managing board for the American Symphony Orchestra League, and was Vice President of the American Music Center. She was the first woman to serve as resident composer with a major orchestra (the Minnesota Orchestra), and has held residencies at various educational institutions, including the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, the California Institute of the Arts, the Philadelphia School of the Arts, the Charlotte Symphony, and the Colorado Symphony. Most recently, in April 2003, Larsen was named to the Harissios Papamarkou Chair in Education and Technology in the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress.

Larsen has also received numerous awards, including a 1994 Grammy as producer of the compact disc The Art of Arleen Augér, which includes Larsen’s song cycle Sonnets from the Portuguese (1991). Her opera Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus was selected as one of the eight best classical music events of the 1990s. Her numerous commissions include those from the United States Air Force Band, Neville Marriner, Eugenia Zukerman, the Choir of King’s College (Cambridge, England), the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Soviet Youth Symphony, and the Ohio Ballet. She is one of the most sought-after of living composers, writing

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approximately six or seven pieces a year (two or three of them major works), composing at least four hours a day—sometimes up to fourteen hours around deadlines—and constantly presenting at various residencies in and out of the country.\(^6\)

Despite the fact that Larsen is one of the best-known American composers, she still faces biases because of her gender. In graduate school, for example, she was told that she could not write a symphony or an opera because women could not think in large, abstract concepts.\(^7\) Although today she does not encounter such explicit biases, she resents being labeled as a “woman composer.” Larsen states that she would “be insulted—and [has] been insulted—to have my music dealt with in a minority light.”\(^8\) She believes that gender issues in music have more to do with the politics of performance than with composition and she wishes to separate herself from such politics.\(^9\) She is, however, a composer of many works bearing strong female-centered themes and texts, some of which will be discussed below.

One of Larsen’s most characteristic qualities is her ability to speak through the vernacular. Her music is influenced by a variety of American musical and cultural styles, including rock, stride boogie piano, jazz, hymns, radio, and television. However, her music is not nationalistic in a patriotic or folklorish sense. She frequently calls on American authors, literary themes, and culture, and her music derives some of its rhythmic character from the rhythms of the American language. The American authors whose texts she chooses to set are often women and present strong female characters. She claims these choices are not consciously a “feminist

\(^6\) Personal information provided by Libby Larsen.

\(^7\) Personal comment from Libby Larsen.


thing,” but are the texts that resonate most deeply with her own life. One of her most famous pieces by and about an American woman is Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to her Daughter Janey. Another example is her 1998 opera Eric Hermannson’s Soul, based on a short story by Willa Cather about dichotomous worlds of music and religious fervor among Norwegian settlers in a late nineteenth-century village on the Nebraska plains. Ghost of an Old Ceremony (1991) for orchestra with dance, choreographed by Brenda Way, is based on the stories of American pioneer women migrating westward from the 1880s until the late twentieth century.

Larsen believes that “the music that grows over time in a culture grows out of the language those people speak.” In order to understand the rhythms and inflections of the American language, Larsen analyzed Jesse Jackson’s recorded speeches, concluding that, “If you were to analyze the interval of his pitch range, the tempo variations, and rhythms, you would find an extraordinary musicality, uniquely American. I strive to understand how these characteristics represent our American lives and emotions, and to use these elements in my music.”

Larsen has been praised for her vocal settings of the American language, and for the way in which even her instrumental music reflects the vernacular language. For instance, in her String Symphony, Larsen explores the role of strings in American contemporary culture and finds a unique way for them to “speak” the American language—to seize the rhythms of American life. Larsen explains, “I’m searching for the music in American English. I’m searching for the elegance of blue jeans. I’m searching for the peace of mind in the incredible pressure and drive

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in our machinery and our freeway systems and our information superhighway.”\(^{13}\) In addition, she argues that strings usually “speak” French, German, or Italian naturally, but not American English.\(^{14}\) She therefore strives to find a language for strings which is percussive, full of body language, and usually spoken within a narrow pitch range. In the first two movements of the String Symphony, for instance, she composes her main motives around groups of notes within the range of a perfect fourth to reflect the narrow fluctuations in American English.

Larsen, like many other contemporary composers, fears for the future of the opera house and symphony hall as core audiences gets older. Our culture and the way we experience sound constantly evolves, while the atmosphere in classical music halls seems stagnant. Larsen believes the concert halls have been hostile to include the sounds that speak to the younger American generation.\(^{15}\) She states, “There’s a problem with orchestras and opera companies and concert halls, which are Eurocentric in their repertory. I don’t think they afford their own culture the self-esteem that is accepted in all other venues, from bars to metrodomes.”\(^{16}\) Like her mentor, Dominick Argento, Larsen’s remedy for translating the modern American vernacular is to incorporate elements of media and technology, specifically influences from film, television, and electronic sounds.

\(^{13}\) Susan M. Barbieri, “The Language of Strings,” 71.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Tuttle, “Composer Libby Larsen,” 22.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 46.
Larsen continually seeks new ways to incorporate technology into her compositions.17 Larsen and her contemporaries, who include Dominick Argento, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, and Vivian Fine,18 use media in their operatic works, not only to modernize presentation, but to enlarge symbolism and emotion in the opera and provide a unique visual element in addition to music. Larsen’s most famous opera to incorporate media into its integral structure is *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, which premiered at the Minnesota Opera in 1990. In preparation for writing this opera, Larsen studied screenplay writing and television commercial structure. *Frankenstein* employs two large television screens at the side and above the stage, showing close-up views of the action or visually commenting on the scene. Her inspiration for the large screens came from her experiences at rock concerts, which frequently use giant screens in order to “convey an image the size of the sound of the music.”19 She also uses multiple hanging scrims, and a videotape represents the monster’s point of view. Because of exposure to television and film, modern audiences now digest music both visually and aurally. This use of technology provides “visual music.”20 Larsen states that “movies have changed our perception

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17 She is not the first to understand the importance of media in twentieth-century music. The early twentieth-century composer George Antheil, for instance, stated that he wrote a new kind of opera, one “influenced by the pacing which the public has wanted since its taste has been . . . corrupted by . . . the movies, and now television. In short, opera which is less static on stage.” Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 255.


of how emotion unfolds in a human being,” hence the use of film projection enlarges the subliminal messages and emotions of the performers.21

Frankenstein’s instrumentation also demonstrates Larsen’s expansion of the orchestral palette to include the sounds most recognizable, and therefore most comprehensible, to today’s opera audiences. Larsen states, “For most people under fifty today, electronically manipulated sound is a needed part of the emotional experience in their listening. If an electronic mix isn’t part of the sound, then the music will seem less accessible, less connected, less valid. I use amplified acoustics, electric bass and synthesizers purely to address this issue.”22 Frankenstein uses a woodwind quartet, two brass players, three percussionists, a string quartet, multiple keyboards, a Yamaha DX-7, a Macintosh computer, an Emax II sixteen-bit digital sound system, and an acoustic piano. All of the sounds are mixed electronically, so there are no harsh distinctions between the acoustic music and the electronic music projected through the speakers.

Charles Hamm claims that if American opera is to prevail, composers should turn their attention toward smaller opera companies and different types of media communication.23 Many American opera composers who find it difficult to stage new works at the major opera houses turn to smaller opera companies, university workshops, radio opera, and children’s opera. The Columbia University Opera Workshop, for example, staged at least fifteen new American operas between 1941 and 1958.24 Some of America’s most renowned composers, such as Amy Beach and Aaron Copland, wrote operatic works for such workshops. Beach’s Cabildo (1945) was first

21 Malitz, “Song of the Monster,” 44.
22 Ibid., 46.
24 Ibid., 271.
performed by students and faculty at the University of Georgia in Athens, Copland’s one-act
*Second Hurricane* (1937) was originally for a school’s music organization, and Argento’s *The
Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* (1976) was commissioned by the University of Minnesota.\(^{25}\)

Mass media, especially television operas, also influenced opera workshops on university
campuses.\(^{26}\) The simple staging and alluring stories of operas made for television—such as
Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951)—inspired chamber operas. These operas
appealed to university opera workshops and small theaters, which did not depend as much on
box office receipts as did larger opera companies; such venues were therefore more willing to
produce new works. It is not just performances in small opera companies or opera workshops
that make American opera more visible and accessible. In the 1980s, opera companies began
reaching out to wider audiences by bringing performances to schools, hospitals and office
buildings. San Francisco’s “Brown Bag Opera,” for example, brought operas to parks and
shopping malls, Dallas Opera’s “Frito-Lay Night” enabled 700 employees of the Frito-Lay
corporation to attend dress rehearsals, and the Metropolitan Opera produces summer
productions in Central Park.\(^{27}\)

Most of Larsen’s operas have been performed at small opera companies around the
country, including the Arkansas Opera Theatre, the Minnesota Opera, Opera Delaware, the
World Theater in Saint Paul, Lyric Opera Cleveland, Opera Omaha, and the Landmark Center in
Saint Paul, Minnesota. To celebrate its fortieth season, Opera Omaha commissioned Larsen to
write *Eric Hermannson’s Soul*. The opportunity for collaboration with a similar companies has

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 245, 324. Such workshops, summer festivals, and smaller companies are still active in promoting
new works today, such as Tanglewood and Aspen Summer Musical Festival for the Arts.


\(^{27}\) Elise K. Kirk, “United States of America,” *Grove Music Online*,
always been one of the most attractive elements for Larsen. Opera Omaha was involved in the opera’s evolution, as Larsen worked closely with the company and music director, Hal France. Critic Wes Blomster says, “[Eric Hermannson’s Soul] is an approach to the creative process well worthy of emulation elsewhere, for the well-structured solidity of the score owes much to the give and take between France, Larsen, and Chas Rader-Shieber, both librettist and stage director for the work.”28

While Larsen’s operas are also performed at universities, and other educational institutions, she believes the most significant part of these experiences is that people understand the creative process of music-making, not just the end product. In order to get audiences more involved and committed to supporting new works, composers and musicians must be more open in talking about the process of music-making, and amenable to collaboration. This is one of the reasons Larsen co-founded the American Composers Forum. She also makes every effort to discuss her music with “music lovers who had no formal musical training, at pre-concert lectures, from the stage during performances, on radio and television, [and] in the print media.”29

Mrs. Dalloway is an example of Larsen’s successful collaborative efforts with a small opera company. It was premiered on July 22, 1993 by Lyric Opera Cleveland, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary season. The long-distance collaboration between Larsen and librettist Bonnie Grice spanned more than three years, with final adjustments to the score occurring right up to the final rehearsal. Grice, a radio announcer at WKSU, was a novice librettist and had contacted Larsen with ideas for adapting Mrs. Dalloway into an opera. Many people doubted their ability to transform such a complex novel into a staged work, as very few opera composers have ever attempted to engage themselves with Woolf’s novels. Michael McConnell, executive  

director of Lyric Opera Cleveland, told Larsen that he thought the novel could be made into a film, but was not stageworthy. Larsen, however, thought otherwise, and in turn, began the long collaboration with Grice and Lyric Opera Cleveland. Larsen and Grice chose to approach this company because of its commitment to performing new works from outside the standard musical theater/opera repertoire. It premiered Larry Baker’s one-act opera *Haydn’s Head* in 1987, and has promoted new works by American composers ever since.\(^{30}\) The production was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Reinberger Foundation, Society National Bank, and the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Opera for a New American Program.

From the opera’s naissance, Larsen and Grice confronted several challenges unique to Woolf’s subject matter and style and common to a long line of “plotless operas.” Critic Robert Finn mentions that “more than one composer-colleague frankly told Larsen: ‘I wouldn’t touch [*Mrs. Dalloway*] with a ten-foot pole.’”\(^{31}\) Larsen and Grice, however, believed that “the story was inherently operatic . . . . It reorders an audience member’s sense of how they think of themselves in time.”\(^{32}\) Despite much cynicism about the story’s ability to speak operatically, Larsen’s perceptive analysis of the novel parallel’s what scholars believe Woolf intended her readerships audience to do—that is, to reject a central, authoritative narrator and make connections themselves.\(^{33}\) Indeed, the opera is not “one for whistlers,”\(^{34}\) nor a simple boy-meets-girl story. It forces audience members to analyze the characters’ relationships, the underlying

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\(^{30}\) Libby Larsen’s notes, “Mrs. Dalloway—A History of the Project.” Provided to me by Larsen.


\(^{33}\) For a more comprehensive discussion on literary criticism, please refer to Chapter III.

meaning, and ultimately their own relationships. It challenges not only the degree to which one can adapt such a dense novel into a compact two-act opera, but it also challenges the way the audience members relate to opera. The premiere provoked heated audience reaction, as people “started standing up in the audience and debating the show right there.”

While some critics argue that the adaptation is unoperatic because of its lack of a typical operatic storyline, *Mrs. Dalloway* actually follows a line of twentieth-century American operas (as well as European operas), which are plotless. Elise Kirk argues that “there are many instances in opera, especially American works, where symbolism, parody, ritual, spectacle, movement, and pageantry are not only part of the opera, but also the entire point.” Plotless operas include Dominick Argento’s *Postcard from Morocco* (1971), which sets each scene as an individual memory. Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) lacks a coherent plot, and the audience can leave and return to this aural and visual montage whenever they please. Laurie Anderson’s *US Parts I-IV* (1983) is a six-hour operatic epic of music, narration, film, and slides, and Vivian Fine’s *The Women in the Garden* (1978) and Janika Vandervelde’s *Seven Sevens* (1993) are both considered plotless operas.

Even though Larsen sometimes tackles subject matters that are not inherently operatic, or are not huge crowd-pleasers, she has been extremely successful in American opera. Larsen’s succeeds partially because of her ability to convey the English language clearly within an eclectic style. Donald Rosenberg writes about *Mrs. Dalloway*: “Libby Larsen writes naturally for voices, attaining poetic heights and revealing character in writing that is meticulously crafted . . . . The spirit of Britten occasionally hovers over Larsen’s setting of English text, which mostly


comes through with crisp clarity.” Most reviews of Mrs. Dalloway as well as Larsen’s other operas praise her accessibility in both text setting and modernist music. Her compositional style, while anchored in the classical tradition, cannot be defined or limited into any specific academic genre. In Mrs. Dalloway, for instance, Larsen blends neoclassic writing (influenced by her love for Bach) and musical “indistinct language” such as bowed cymbals, electronic-acoustic sounds, and improvisation (influenced by her love of jazz), all while maintaining thoroughly lyrical vocal writing. Frankenstein mixes nineteenth-century lyricism with an “old rock and roll synthesizer” and a digital sound system. Her desire to “energize contemporary opera with contemporary energy” finds expression in her ability to synthesize musical styles with which modern American audiences are familiar.

Larsen is also successful because she always writes with the belief that any music should grow out of and reflect its culture. When discussing how new sounds—such as the synthesizer and mixer—are incorporated into our modern palette, Larsen refers to the success of Stomp, a piece for found percussion instruments. She states, “[Stomp] creat[es] what we consider to be music because we as a culture are ready to accept it as such. . . . Music is . . . the perception of a culture that is able to accept that order as a meaningful experience.” Much of what American culture consumes centers around technology and the media. Larsen embraces this aspect of American culture in her works. She uses twentieth-century media dissemination to reach wider

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37 Donald Rosenberg, “Odyssey,” 1–H.

38 Kirk, American Opera, 366.


audiences than would pay to attend an opera, as in *Daytime Moon* (1986), a video opera, and in her adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (2001), a radio opera.

Larsen also structures some of her works around aspects of modern American culture. In *Frankenstein*, for example, the way in which the plot is structured and the characters unfold is closely connected to the timing of commercial breaks on television. Larsen’s operas usually strive to explore a multidimensional relationship between time and space, as seen in *Frankenstein*’s bi-level stage and fusion of multimedia and live singing. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* is more like a traditional number opera in structure and context, it is nonetheless multidimensional. The successful articulation of the parallel lives between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus “must be seen as existing simultaneously in a kind of cinematic relationship,” although their stories develop independently. The stage is comprised of two levels to portray the difference between real-time action and flashbacks. Though not as explicitly as *Frankenstein*, *Mrs. Dalloway* still reflects our media-reliant modern culture and our familiarity with mixed sound, and imparts narrative themes which still resonate deeply within our culture. Something I will discuss at length in Chapter Two.

Larsen’s outreach efforts, coupled with her incorporation of modern American sound, clarity of text-setting, and ability to collaborate and produce in many situations, makes *Mrs. Dalloway*, along with her other operatic contributions, among the most representative of American twentieth- and twenty-first-century operas. Larsen’s ultimate goal is to communicate through sound what contemporary audiences understand and what they desire to hear. After all,

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42 Ibid.
Larsen states, “If the music works, it communicates. And if it communicates, it reaches people. And if it reaches people, it becomes part of the community.”

Chapter II
Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Virginia Woolf is dead, a grey, highly-strung woman of dignity and charm; but she was unstable and often had periods of madness. She led the Bloomsbury movement, did much indirectly to make England so Left – yet she always remained a lady, and was never violent. She could not stand human contacts, and people fatigued her. ¹
– Henry (Chips) Channon

Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness. She was often a patient, but she was not a victim. She was not weak, or hysterical, or self deluding, or guilty, or oppressed. On the contrary, she was a person of exceptional courage, intelligence, and stoicism who made the best use she could, and came to the deepest understanding possible to her, of her own condition. She endured, periodically, great agony of mind and severe physical pain, with remarkably little self-pity.²
– Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*

If one accepted Henry (Chips) Channon’s description of Virginia Woolf at face value, none of Woolf’s multifaceted personality traits, literary brilliance, and posthumous popularity would be evident. As medicine and understanding of mental illnesses advanced, views of Virginia Woolf also progressed, as Hermione Lee’s description of Woolf demonstrates. Although famed for her difficult writing style, association with madness and fear, and suicide in 1941, Woolf’s life and works reveal a complicated woman; a woman whom social and literary feminists and modernists, among others, have hailed as an icon.

Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on January 25, 1882 to parents Julia and Leslie Stephen. Leslie Stephen was a journalist for the Federal Cause of America, a literary critic, a historian, an editor for *The Cornhill Magazine*, contributor to the *English Men of Letters Series*, author of *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, and the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹ Henry (Chips) Channon, “Diary Entry 5 April 1941”[database online]; available from http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jwoolf.htm.

He surrounded himself with respected writers such as Henry James, George Meredith, and John Morley. Despite Leslie Stephen’s intellectual pretensions, his latent emotional insecurities proved damaging to his family. He prided himself on his literary skills and open-mindedness to challenge traditional institutions of Victorian life. He attacked religion as the “breeding ground of intolerance and hypocrisy,” and supported parliamentary and university reform. Outwardly he appeared confident and haughty, but inside the household, he relied heavily upon the female members of his family for reassurance of his brilliance, which often led him to be overbearing and demeaning.

Growing up in an upper-middle-class family at the end of the Victorian Age, Virginia received a well-rounded education. Her brothers attended public school and university and the girls were educated by private tutors. Virginia was more interested in writing than other activities such as drawing, dancing, or music. She was the family story teller and read aloud to her sister, Vanessa, from many of the Victorian novelists, including George Eliot and Charlotte M. Young. Her family also produced a family newspaper, Hyde Park Gate News, to which Virginia contributed her recollections of family events as well as some of her first short stories. Virginia’s life-long sensitivity to criticism may have resulted from her desire for her parents’ (mostly her mother’s) approval.

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4 Ibid., 70.
5 Ibid., 73.
7 Rose, Woman of Letters, 11.
When Virginia was thirteen her mother died, which brought on the first of several emotional breakdowns. Leslie came to depend greatly upon Julia for emotional support. After his wife’s death, his female relations—specifically, his daughter Stella—replaced Julia as caregiver within the household. Virginia’s half-brother George Duckworth also helped around the household after Julia’s death. In her diary, Virginia recalled George making sexual advances toward her. This incident followed a previous sexual assault by her other half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, when she was only six:

Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this [slab outside dining room] . . . began to explore my body . . . I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop . . . I remember resenting, disliking it.9

These sexual encounters with men during her childhood left scars, and perhaps influenced her views of men and sex in her novels. Because of her childhood experiences, Woolf usually wrote about sex in terms of aggressive male attention and exploitation. She acknowledged that these experiences of sexual assault were the “chief distortion[s] and diminishment[s] of her life.”10 Her experiences with her father’s inability to express himself emotionally also shaped her understanding of men. Author Phyllis Rose stated, “The powerful example of her father planted in her mind the notion that men were emotional cripples, having sacrificed feeling to thought.”11

Leslie died on February 22, 1904, which prompted Virginia’s second serious breakdown, and she attempted suicide. Virginia left her family’s house in Hyde Park Gate for 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury; a move that increased her social and intellectual freedom. She was not

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8 Bell does not specifically state the cause of Julia’s death, but the doctor referred to rheumatic fever (39). Rose mentions the possibility that Julia’s death was caused by the stresses and demands placed upon her by Leslie Stephen. Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography, 12.

9 Lee, Virginia Woolf, 123.

10 Rose, Woman of Letters, 8.

11 Ibid., 20.
required to dress for high tea or attend social events she considered insignificant. Virginia became acquainted with her brother Toby’s Cambridge friends at Bloomsbury. The group included Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, Maynard Keynes, Bertrand Russel, Gerald Brenan, Lytton Strachey, Vita Sackville-West, Duncan Grant, and Dora Carrington. They were all from the upper-class intellectual elite, but objected to the artistic, social, and sexual restrictions established during the Victorian age. Many of the men were conscientious objectors during World War I and considered themselves liberals or socialists. Leonard Woolf, for example, was an advocate of British socialism and even involved himself in the suffrage movement with the Women’s Co-Operative Guild, after previously arguing with John Stuart Mill about women’s rights. Leonard was also involved in the political aspects of World War I. He was on the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Society, was a member of the Labour party, and was involved in the movement for Sihnalese independence.12

The informal gatherings with the Bloomsbury group at Gordon Square challenged Woolf’s intellectual and literary ideals. Instead of conforming to the styles and values of the Cambridge men, however, Virginia defined herself as distinctly feminine.13 Her writing was influenced by her opposition to them and their competitive nature. Virginia expresses sentiments about women and men’s writing styles later in life. When writing A Room of One’s Own, she stated, “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men or lived like men, or looked like men . . . for the two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only?”14 It was in these beginning years at Bloomsbury that

12 Woolf claimed, “I don’t think it really matters a damn whether [women] have votes or not . . . More women are fools, I believe, than men.” Rose, Women of Letters, 342.

13 Ibid., 36.

Virginia proved her professional worth as a writer by first publishing an unsigned review for *The Guardian* in 1904. She also began teaching once a week at Morley College in London, an evening institute for both men and women.\(^{15}\)

Even though Virginia valued the conversations with the men at Bloomsbury, she became frustrated with the exclusive secret societies of the Cambridge men. Although she felt at ease with them (perhaps because of their homosexual tendencies), “something [was] always suppressed, held down.”\(^{16}\) She much desired the company of women.

Virginia married Leonard Woolf in 1912. Many biographers speculate about the couple’s sexual incompatibility and Leonard’s role as a guardian of Virginia’s health more than her lover and partner. Their marriage was not, however, always defined by a distance toward each other. Leonard Woolf recalled:

> There was a side of her which was completely like ordinary people. She liked eating and talking and going for walks, and she was fond of playing bowls and listening to music . . . she loved society, she loved parties . . . and would have liked to go out to parties or to theatres or to concerts every day of her life.\(^{17}\)

The affection between Virginia and Leonard was strong. Before Virginia drowned herself in the Ouse, she wrote to Leonard, “I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. No one could have done more than you have done. . . No one could have been so good as you have been.”\(^{18}\) One can only speculate on her true feelings at the point of complete breakdown in her life, but their marriage was more than simply a relationship of guardian and patient.

Another important aspect of their marriage was their encouragement of each other’s intellectual and literary development. Leonard acknowledged Virginia’s talent, considering her

\(^{15}\) [http://www.mantex.co.uk/ou/a319/bloom-00.htm].

\(^{16}\) Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 239.


\(^{18}\) Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 746.
one of the true geniuses of her time.\textsuperscript{19} She was influenced by his anti-imperialistic stance and belief in the improvement of education and democracy. She later became involved in socialist movements with him. In 1917, the couple established the Hogarth Press together, which later published Virginia’s own books.

Woolf’s first published book was \textit{The Voyage Out} (1915), followed by \textit{Night and Day} (1919), \textit{Jacob’s Room} (1922), \textit{The Common Reader: First Series} (1925), \textit{Mrs. Dalloway} (1925), \textit{The Common Reader: Second Series} (1925), \textit{To the Lighthouse} (1927), \textit{Orlando: A Biography} (1928), \textit{A Room of One’s Own} (1929), \textit{The Waves} (1931), \textit{Flush: A Biography} (1933), \textit{The Years} (1937), \textit{Three Guineas} (1938), \textit{Roger Fry: A Biography} (1940), and \textit{Between the Acts} (1941).

Besides novels, she wrote several essays, and kept diaries and letters which have provided insight not only into her life, but her reworkings and sketches of many of her novels. Many of her fictional writings relate closely to her life events and her evolving views on the world. One can trace her shifting thoughts on feminism, insanity, and the political and social systems of Great Britain. For example, after developing a friendship with composer Ethel Smyth, a strong-willed suffragette, Woolf’s feminism became more overt, as seen in \textit{Three Guineas}. Many people have read \textit{Orlando: A Biography} as a character description of friend, and possible lover, Vita Sackville-West. Woolf never explicitly identified herself in her novels, as she refused to be pigeonholed into a certain characteristic or identity. One must therefore be careful not to judge Woolf’s character solely on her diary entries because, as Vita argued, her diaries only record one particular mood of many that Virginia expressed, and some of them are also fictional.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Noble, \textit{Recollections of Virginia Woolf}, 147.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 68.
Virginia Woolf’s Feminism

Modern feminism in Great Britain began with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), but was largely dismissed until later in the nineteenth century, when the term feminism became standardized. The first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century was an effort by middle-class women to raise the intellectual statures of women, but was not an appeal that they leave the domestic sphere completely. Victorian feminism worked within society’s values, but began to blur the strict division between the public and private spheres. Phillippa Levine states that “women’s demands for a space in public life without sacrificing motherhood . . . represent an implicit challenge to separate sphere ideology.”

The nineteenth-century debate over women’s roles is highlighted by the debate between John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin. Mill (1806-73) wrote *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which concentrated on society’s oppression of women. Mill’s acknowledgment of sexual politics illustrates the close connection between a woman’s sexuality and her moral and political position in Victorian society. Martha Vicinus argues that “our social and psychological structure of sex is congruent with and influenced by the rise of industrial capitalism.” In other words, with the rise of industrial capitalism in the Victorian era, the distinction between women’s role as guardian of moral/sexual integrity and men’s urge for dominance and power were viewed as biological givens. Mill argued against these supposed biological givens and condemned the patriarchal foundation of culture as “wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human

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improvement . . . [which] ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect unity."²³ Ruskin, on the other hand held firm to the traditional Victorian beliefs about sexuality and gender roles.²⁴

Activists in the Victorian period were thus the first in history to address the issues of patriarchy and the condition of women. They identified the inequalities of working class women, and fought for education and marriage rights. In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a general upsurge of active feminism. In 1856, 25,000 women signed a petition in favor of married women’s property rights. In 1869, the first college for women, Hitchin, opened, followed by several more. In 1870 an act was passed to enable married women to keep their earnings and inherit personal property. By the end of the century there was an uprising of suffragettes who participated in the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (1894) and the Women’s Social and Political Union (1903).²⁵

Woolf’s ideas about feminism were not strongly attached to the suffrage movements, although she participated in 1910 and worked for the Adult Suffrage League. She recognized that suffragettes usually fought patriarchy with its own weapons, and therefore would not ultimately change social consciousness or revolutionize ideas so embedded in the traditional Victorian values.²⁶ Clive Bell recollected, “It was not in political action that [Woolf’s] feminism expressed itself: indeed she made merciless fun of the flag-wagging fanaticism of her old friend Ethel Smyth. What she minded the most, perhaps, was what she considered male advantages, and


²⁶ Woolf was the first woman to openly identify the “enemy” as patriarchy. Lee, Virginia Woolf, 270.
especially advantages in education.” She acknowledged that even though women finally obtained the right to vote, society was not ready to give women power because it was still structured around patriarchal values and restrictive gender-role divisions: men still had the advantages in public arenas of society, especially in education.

Woolf’s perceptions of feminism stemmed from her own experiences with her father, the treatment of her illness, her class position, and her husband’s politics. Even though Woolf stands as one of the leading figures of British literature, she felt ill-educated because of her sex. She resented her father’s double standards of criticism and education as applied to his male and female children. Her father’s authoritative masculine standards affected her for the rest of her life. She wrote, “Father’s birthday. He would have been 96 . . . but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine . . . No writing, no books.” The imposing masculine voice had devastating psychological consequences. She resented being confined to a role that did not conform to her own aspirations, and her self-criticism collided with Victorian society’s paternalistic attitude toward women writers. The figure of the “Angel in the House” represents her struggles with the fulfillment of a womanly position.

You may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed daily . . . she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure . . . It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing my reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.

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After her early struggles to find her voice, Woolf’s feminism manifested itself in the form of her writings. She was perhaps most clearly feminist in her drafts, diaries, notebooks, and letters, but her later novels explicitly attack patriarchal ideology. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* was her first novel to express feminist insights, her feminism was even more apparent during her fifties (perhaps because of Smyth’s influence) in novels such as *Three Guineas* and *The Years*. In *Three Guineas* Woolf argues that a woman’s economic dependence on her father and husband makes her dependent on male ideology, values, and ideas. Although she was concerned with economic equality, she advocated that women must consciously understand how they have been conditioned to understand their oppression. This raising of consciousness reveals how society divides men “into their competitive hierarchies” while women become “Angels in the House.” Since work is valued more, men too retain positions of power. It was in Woolf’s writings, especially in her fictions such as *Mrs. Dalloway* that she was able to augment the importance of these ideals and magnify the social patterns of sexism and classism that she recognized. It was in her writings that she foreshadowed the ideologies of the second wave of feminism.

**Woolf’s Reception and Iconic Status**

Woolf is a vigorously contested icon whose name and image have been claimed or sometimes disclaimed by feminists, modernists, realists, intellectuals, and popular culture. Her name and face appear frequently in numerous areas of society. Her face is on Barnes and Noble tote bags and on the t-shirts of Historical Products, Incorporated. Her portrait on a postcard at London’s National Portrait Gallery has sold more than any that for other historical figure. Her

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face and name have been used for clothing lines, Bass Ale, Sesame Street, Beverly Hills 90210, and even rock groups “Virginia Wolf,” and “Virginia and the Wolves.” Her name is satirized in the title of Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* although the play has nothing to do with Woolf. Her books have been adapted for stage—for example, Patrick Garland’s *A Room of One’s Own*. She has even been the subject of many movies, most recently in “The Hours,” and some novels have been adapted for film, as in Sally Porter’s *Orlando*. Dominick Argento won the Pulitzer Prize for his song cycle *From the Diaries of Virginia Woolf*. *New York Review of Books* portrayed her as a canonic figure, on a par with Shakespeare; yet in the 1990s, Shakespeare was gone from their advertisements and Virginia Woolf remained. As Rachel Bowlby points out, “Virginia Woolf is the only twentieth-century British woman writer to be taken seriously by critics of all casts.”

Both high-art culture and popular culture have declared her to be a symbol of their own. Woolf’s disputed identity straddles the divisions of many binary oppositions in Western culture—high art/popular, arts/politics, masculinity/femininity, intellectuality/sexuality, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and beauty/horror, therefore defying categorization. The way in which Woolf is viewed and used by different groups can often be attributed to the changing status of women in society.

Since the 1960s the market value of her name and image has increased. Perhaps this is in part due to Albee’s play (1962), and the film version with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor

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32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 10.


35 Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 11.
(1964), and the resurgence of interest in the Bloomsbury group, but my purpose here is to focus on the changes of women’s liberation and the impact it had on shaping Woolf’s iconic popularity.

The second wave of feminism in the United States arose from the Women’s Liberation Movement. Betty Friedan founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. The early 1970s witnessed many institutionalized changes for women, including more equitable admission to higher education (Congress passed Title IX of Educational Amendment prohibiting sexual discrimination in educational institutions in 1972, and by 1973 there were over 5000 women’s studies courses offered in the United States), Roe versus Wade (1973), Journal of Feminist Studies (1972), Ms. Magazine (1972). 1972 also marked the publication of Woolf’s first biography, written by her nephew Quentin Bell. Although this biography portrays her as mad, asexual, and frail, she became an icon for the women’s movement. Woolf’s face came to be displayed on t-shirts along with the political slogan, “A Room of One’s Own.” This iconic position adds to Woolf’s importance as an intellectual literary genius, a figurehead for popular culture and social change. A portrait of her reads, “Virginia Woolf: ‘An Extreme Sensibility . . . A Pride More Imposing than Suffragettes with Banners.’” Woolf’s face is therefore associated with a feminist power that rejects what she considered militant feminism. Perhaps she would be pleased to know her feminism, which manifested itself so strongly without defining itself by the

36 Ibid., 118.

37 The first t-shirt was developed in 1973 and mass marketing of t-shirts became associated with freedom of expression. Political logos in the late sixties, for example, were used to protest the Vietnam War. Silver, Virginia Woolf Icon, 145.

38 Silver, Virginia Woolf Icon, 9.

39 Ibid., 139.

40 Blanchard, “Socialization in Mrs. Dalloway,” 289.
traditional patriarchal ideologies of activism, is now acknowledged. Brenda R. Silver considers these sorts of visual representation of her as an intellectual and powerful leader to be a threat to those social and political divisions that have excluded women from the public realm.41 More than any other historical figure, Woolf has become the semiotic symbol of feminist social activism.

However, Woolf’s face is also associated with fear—a fear which is feminine and powerful. Her image is often linked to that of the Medusa or the Sphinx, figures that straddle both terror and beauty. In Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears’ 1987 play, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the image of Woolf’s face grows “‘more horrible,’ the script tells us, the more she stares, Medusa-like, at the characters and us.”42 Reviews of Libby Larsen’s opera, *Mrs. Dalloway*, headline, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Not Libby Larsen and Bonnie Grice.”43 Why are we afraid of Virginia Woolf? It is not simply because her writing is difficult to understand. The answer likely lies in her continual disruption of categorical norms, and perhaps her power is even more frightening because she is a woman. Silver asks, “Why is it so easy to separate images of [Woolf] in these struggles, and why is it that her being a woman may ultimately be the most significant factor in her conflicting iconic representation, including their inscription of fear?”44

Even today, our depiction of intellectual and powerful women is often one eliciting fear; Hillary Clinton, for example, has been portrayed as a sado-maschist.45 But feminism’s use of Woolf’s portrait on t-shirts and other propaganda may have foreshadowed Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh

41 Ibid., 85.


44 Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 10.

45 Ibid., 266.
of the Medusa” (1976), where women began writing themselves into the text and not hiding from it. The images of Woolf, along with those of powerful women like Clinton, have challenged people to look at “the Medusa” and realize that she is not deadly; she is beautiful and she is powerful.

Whether people are afraid of Woolf or not, Woolf’s iconic popularity has proved that her posthumous reception will continue. With the recent popularity of the movie, “The Hours” (which romanticized the truth about Woolf), Mrs. Dalloway was number three on the San Francisco’s Chronicle’s best-seller list, and To the Lighthouse was number ten. Mrs. Dalloway was also on the best-seller list in the New York Times, and on Amazon.com.46 Obviously, Virginia Woolf has not frightened away her twenty-first century audience, but continues to be the icon for which numerous groups of people identify themselves by their views of her.

46 Brenda Silver, “Who Dares Turn their Nose Up at Mrs. Dalloway,” 20.
CHAPTER III

FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM OF WOOLF’S WRITING STYLE

ISSUES OF GENDER, MADNESS, AND IDENTITY IN MRS. DALLOWAY AND IN BONNIE GRICE’S LIBRETTO

Do women write differently from men? Does a woman’s writing style reflect her sexuality? Do her unique experiences as a woman manifest themselves in her writing? Feminist literary critics have struggled with these questions, and while not all agree on theoretical issues, all accept two notions: there is a distinct feminist literary discourse, and Virginia Woolf’s writing challenges the traditional literary discourse. In this chapter, I will examine significant trends in feminist literary criticism, which provide tools with which to explore issues of gender/sexuality, madness, and identity in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Bonnie Grice’s adaptation for Libby Larsen’s opera.

Harold Bloom, one of the foremost voices in literary psychohistory, coined the term “anxiety of influence,” an idea that suggests the fear of one’s work being viewed as merely a follower of works already created. Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar challenge this concept’s relevance for women, especially for nineteenth-century female writers. Gilbert and Gubar submit that women have an “anxiety of authorship”: women fear displaying their work publicly in a field created and reserved by men. In addition, women are expected to consider their literary works trivial in the context of their domestic duties: “Women who did not apologize for their literary efforts were considered freakish,” often felt alienated and became sick (or “mad”).

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2 Ibid., 63.
Gilbert and Gubar posit that because of an “anxiety of authorship” within a male literary discourse, women have created their own literary subculture. This subculture “has its own distinctive literary traditions, even though it defines itself in relation to the ‘main,’ male-dominated, literary culture—a distinctive history.”

French feminist literary critics interpret the subculture of women’s literary traditions in several ways. Lacanian feminists hypothesize that culture and meaning are organized as a “symbolic system of difference.” Children are taught this difference by the presence of the dominant masculine standard of the phallus in society. However, there is no definite masculine or feminine meaning before the construction of the subject in language. Language, therefore, perpetuates this norm.

The concept of *l’écriture féminine* is an outgrowth of Lacan’s theory that language is constructed on masculine terms, but questions the assumption that femininity can be viewed only from a masculine viewpoint. French feminist Hélène Cixous asserts that “writing has been

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4 Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig all envision a separate language based on “women’s physical experience of sexuality,” while Julia Kristeva argues that women should challenge the male discourse that stands, providing an opposing viewpoint, but not create a new one. Teresa de Lauretis, “Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 344.


6 Ibid., 71

7 Suzanne Cusick’s studies of the *padrona-serva* and *armonia/oratione* relationship in the Monteverdi-Artusi controversy illustrate how the masculine norm is personified in language. Monteverdi used these terms to explain his musical hierarchy in the *seconda prattica*. When Artusi criticized modern music (*seconda pratica*), he referred to its traits with words typically associated with the feminine, such as *partorire* (to give birth), “sick” and “unnatural.” While Monteverdi’s new techniques in the *seconda prattica* may have been associated with feminine terminology, scholars today have reversed the meaning of Monteverdi’s terms to fit current power hierarchies. Scholars have taken the relationship between *armonia* and *oratione* in Monteverdi’s time and “re-gendered” these terms in order to masculinize them. Suzanne Cusick, “Gendering Modern Music: Thoughts on the Monteverdi-Artusi Controversy,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46 (1993): 25.
governed by a phallogocentric culture which has silenced women’s voices. By writing herself, the woman returns to the body.”


11 Ibid., 381.
women’s writing is not linear or progressive, and must be understood not only by what she writes, but how she writes.\textsuperscript{12}

Elaine Showalter also challenges and expands upon the idea of l’écriture féminine. Gynocentrics (Showalter’s term) offers a pluralistic view of women’s positions as both writers and readers. Showalter asks how women’s writings are different from men’s, how biology is defined differently in terms of women’s writing, what other values besides anatomy are involved when considering women’s bodies, and how we interpret these factors within a sociological context. While Showalter denies the possibility of an alternate language for women, she believes we need to deconstruct women’s language within the male discourse; language is a product of many other sociological factors, including tradition, culture, and memory.\textsuperscript{13} The Lacanian theorists also realize that language is embedded in social and cultural practices, but Showalter aims to construct a female framework for analyzing women’s literature that is based on the study of women’s experience rather than on male models and theories.

Virginia Woolf’s writing is an abundantly rich source for literary criticism from many vantage points. While several scholars analyze Woolf’s writing style from both modernist and postmodernist perspectives, I will concentrate on the analyses of feminist literary scholars and demonstrate how Woolf’s writing challenges the traditional male literary discourse.

As shown in the quotation that begins this chapter, Woolf recognized that writing differed between the genders, not just in plot, but also in style. When I began this thesis, many people questioned my interest, commenting, “Why would you want to read Mrs. Dalloway? It is impossibly difficult, and nothing really happens.” Not many people would disagree, but the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 344.

difficulty inherent in the writing style of *Mrs. Dalloway* can be viewed as Woolf’s attempt to establish a “subculture” of women’s writing. As Showalter suggests, it is one based on women’s experiences rather than male models and theories. The themes of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as Woolf’s writing style, do not conform to the norms of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels. Kathy Mezei states that “the authority of patriarchal value systems are challenged at every turn . . . throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*.”

Woolf’s writing style challenges the male literary discourse by departing from the traditional linear and progressive structure of plot, narration, and syntax. When Woolf began writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, she corresponded with painter Jacques Raverati and discussed problems with linear writing. He “proposed an anti-linear account of the effect of a word, which is like casting a pebble into a pond.” Woolf strove to realize this concept in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She accomplished this goal through a type of narratology literary scholars have labeled “free indirect discourse.” Mezei defines free indirect discourse as:

> . . . a struggle between narrator and character-focalizers for control of the word, the texts . . . conflict between conventional gender roles and resistance to traditional narrator authority in which a masterly male subject speaks for and over the female object of his gaze. . . . The hierarchy in which a narrator “controls” the discourse of the character-focalizer is disrupted.

In other words, there is no single narrator to judge or interpret the character’s actions, and no dominant position or identity. The reader does not have a direct understanding of the text through a single narrator, but must make her/his own connections between characters and multiple

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narrators. The readers must “speak rather than . . . be spoken [to]. . . participate in the production not only of meaning but of subjectivity and the larger symbolic order.”17

In Mrs. Dalloway there are multiple internalized voices that eradicate the narrator’s traditional function, but Woolf still relies on narration to weave the plot. The narrator’s viewpoint, however, is often ambiguous. Woolf frequently shifts focus without interruption. In the following paragraph, the difference between narration and Clarissa’s direct thoughts is difficult to distinguish. This passage also illustrates free indirect discourse’s ability to move smoothly between a character’s interior and exterior thoughts. The narrator’s language is in Roman type, and Clarissa’s language is in italics:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy has her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh; how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning.18

The only paragraph in the novel in which there is a single “obtrusive narratorial voice” is in what Mezei calls the “Proportion Passage” (Mrs. Dalloway, 110–13).19 This passage breaks from free indirect discourse and mimics the masculine voice, which Woolf associates with a sense of proportion in Mrs. Dalloway.20 The “Proportion Passage” seems discordant to readers because Woolf shifts back into a single narration without interruption. Free indirect discourse,

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18 Makiko, Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject, 82–83.

19 Mezei, Ambiguous Discourse, 84.

20 Ibid.
however, denies a unified subject, questions identities which support binary oppositions, and refuses any single essential meaning, thus “diffus[ing] the patriarchal voice.”

Even characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* respond differently to traditional male discourse versus verbal expression by means of nontraditional language. When Mrs. Dalloway sees the skywriting airplane, for instance, she cannot understand what it spells as the letters evaporate into smoke. Gilbert and Gubar note that “for many of Woolf’s heroines, and sometimes even her heroes . . . language often becomes a patriarchal puddle over which they cannot step.” On the other hand, Rezia, Septimus’s wife, seems to comprehend the old woman singing nonsense syllables in the park, but Peter ignores and misunderstands her. The importance of the old lady in the park shows Woolf’s apprehension of the inadequacy of language to express emotions. The old lady’s language is not “understood, [or] imprisoned in a case of specific time, place, or subject.” Librettist Bonnie Grice’s stage notes describe the old lady’s voice as one “without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning.” Yet despite the apparent absence of meaning, some characters, such as Mrs. Dalloway and Rezia, identify more closely with the old woman than those characters who identify with the sound of Big Ben.

Woolf’s writing style does not create a female language. Instead, it conceives a new way to relate to language. Woolf did not form new sentences, but redefined the “sentence-as-

21 Makiko claims that the unified subject supports the masculine discourse “since symbolic order is established by the phallus.” Makiko, “Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject,” 58.

22 Mezei, *Ambiguous Discourse*, 81.


25 Grice, libretto, 16. All quotations from Grice’s libretto are extracts from Woolf’s novel.
definitive-judgment.” Makiko further affirms this idea by arguing that Woolf “loosens the relations of subject and object by present-participles of intrusive phrases between subject and predicate, or by breaking up noun-verb or subject-object relations into a mere listing of nouns, and thus disrupting the logical relations which language produces for a human subject by its syntactic order.” Johanna Garvey explains this best when she states, “Indeed, what we are witnessing in Woolf’s language is a sea of voices, waves of words that continually pass between what Julia Kristeva has identified as the semiotic and the symbolic in such a way as to erase hierarchies and to emphasize multiplicity and transformation.”

For Grice, one challenge was to retain the flow of the novel without the novel’s constantly fluctuating narration. Some reviewers doubted the success of the novel’s translation onto the stage. One reviewer stated, “The Virginia Woolf novel is too complex and richly textured for any spoken medium, much less one in which the words are sung.” This criticism is harsh, but some aspects of Grice’s adaptation were not always conveyed successfully to the audience. For instance, it is often difficult in Woolf’s writing to distinguish narrator from character and Grice sometimes found no need to differentiate between the two. For example, the opera begins with Mrs. Dalloway saying out loud to herself, “I will buy the flowers myself.” She continues, “What a morning! Fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge.” Mezei interprets “What a morning! Fresh as if issued to children on a beach” as the voice of the

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26 Ibid., 230.
27 Makiko, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, 59.
narrator in the aforementioned passage: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy has her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” Grice’s adaptation of the novel supports Mezei’s claim that the multitude of internalized voices often obscures narration from the character’s thought.

In Larsen’s interpretation of the libretto, she attempts to convey the fluctuation between the internal and external lives of the characters. In Act One, for example, Peter Walsh’s and Mrs. Dalloway’s internal thoughts are represented through spoken dialogue recorded on tape and their external words are sung live. In other scenes, however, whether the staged action is happening in “real time,” a flashback, or internal dialogue is more ambiguous. The love duet between Mrs. Dalloway and Peter at the end of Act One represents the characters’ inner thoughts, but there is no clear distinction between sung and spoken words as there was in the previous example. The only explicit indication is in the stage directions. The application of free indirect discourse, so crucial to the flow of the novel, is not easily transferred into spoken dialogue, but Grice’s solutions are creative, if not always successful.

Phyllis Rose calls Mrs. Dalloway “the most schizophrenic of English novels” because of the amount of fragmented phrase repetition passed between characters in dialogue. The repetitive phrases not only weave together the characters’ lives and emphasize major themes, but also challenge the dominant linear progressive writing

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30 Makiko, Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject, 82–83.

style. Makiko argues that Woolf often breaks up her sentences, defying syntactic order. Grice successfully exploits the sentence fragmentations and repetition in her libretto.

While the repetition will be explored later in this chapter with regard to madness, the most frequent lines that connect the characters’ lives include “Fear no more,” “Oh the horror,” “Death of the soul,” and “That is all.” These lines are repeated one after another, spoken or sung simultaneously, or interspersed throughout the opera. The constant repetition of phrases passed between characters’ thoughts makes it nearly impossible for the audience to follow any one idea or conversation or master any single narrative. Grice and Woolf “expose the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning,” and in the process blur and undo any either/or binaries.

Grice’s ability to extract connective transitions between the characters’ lives through repetition effectively retains the style of free indirect discourse in the novel.

### Issues of Sexuality/Gender in the Novel, and the Opera

When the film *Mrs. Dalloway* opened in 1997, film critics identified a “problem” with Mrs. Dalloway’s sexual ambiguity. Judith Butler responded that “people identify this ambiguity as a problem because Mrs. Dalloway’s practices do not follow from either her sex or her gender.” Mrs. Dalloway is a wife, a mother, and a hostess, but she does not fulfill any of these roles in a traditional nineteenth- or early twentieth-century

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32 Makiko, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, 59.
35 Ibid.
manner. She rebels against gender norms by having had an intimate relationship with Sally Seaton and by expressing great interest in such academic fields as literature.

Instead, “Woolf’s project in *Mrs. Dalloway* is to achieve a male/female connection which transcends the divisions imposed by gender while sustaining separateness and integrity of the self.”36

Traditionally, man and woman have been viewed as dichotomous opposites,37 but feminist theorists have demonstrated that a woman’s identity is determined by her experience as an interaction of her outer and inner world (her emotional and social world), not as a biological given.38 Woolf believed that in order to become successful in society, one must act differently around different groups of people.39 A woman’s identity—including her sexuality—is therefore constituted by her position in ephemeral situations, as is true for Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf seemed to understand these concepts before they were given a voice many years later by feminist scholar Linda Alcoff, and others.

For *Mrs. Dalloway*, marriage enables a transcendence of the normal gender divisions of the Victorian era, as well as the retaining of a sense of identity. She married Richard Dalloway, but describes marriage as nun-like, and views marriage as “always . . .

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Marriage conjures feelings of isolation, sexual coldness, and loneliness, partially because she believes men and women cannot understand each other. Woolf writes, “Could any man understand what she meant . . . she [Mrs. Dalloway] could not imagine Peter or Richard taking the trouble to give a party for no reason whatever.” Despite these negative feelings, however, marriage is essential for the retaining of self-identity. Rachman quotes Woolf, saying, “There is a dignity in people; a solitude, even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching [Richard] open the door; for one would not part with it oneself, or take it against his will, from one’s husband, without losing one’s independence, one’s self-respect—something after all, priceless.” Mrs. Dalloway’s marriage, and the distance she discerns between husband and wife, safely secures her respectability within Victorian society, but also enables her to live another life, which is not confined by the Victorian gender role of “The Angel in the House.” She “instinctively feels that she will be safe as long as she lives by the tenets of her society, and this is why she adheres to them so tenaciously, holds herself upright, loves success, [and] cares for rank and society.” Mrs. Dalloway’s maiden name, “Parry,” is a pun on the verb meaning to deflect a blow or evade a question. This is how Mrs. Dalloway succeeds at self-preservation. It was safer to

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41 Ibid., 122.


43 Ibid., 11.

44 Mezei, *Ambiguous Discourse*, 103.
marry the more stable and calm Richard Dalloway than to give in to the passions and romance of Peter Walsh, with whom she would have had to share herself more openly.

Bonnie Grice describes Mrs. Dalloway’s marriage in Act One, when we view Mrs. Dalloway in her attic bedroom. There are “white linen[s] tightly fitted to a small, single bed . . . almost prison-like.” Mrs. Dalloway looks in the mirror and says, “Lovely in girlhood. I am not old yet! Months and months untouched.” Both the stage directions and her speech imply her virginal status. When she sees Peter, for example, “she automatically tries to hide herself with her dress, ‘like a virgin protecting chastity.’” However, when she begins to daydream about Sally Seaton, Mrs. Dalloway takes off the dress. The dress functions in both the novel and the opera as a barrier between her sexual and emotional identities, both protecting and freeing her.

Virginia Woolf’s depiction of married life in Mrs. Dalloway reflects her own upbringing and marriage to Leonard Woolf. In a Victorian household the roles of men and women were clearly defined as producers and reproducers, respectively. “The Angel in the House,” the ideal woman, reveres women’s values and morals that men themselves desire to possess, such as purity. In Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House,” the poet praises Woman for her sexual coldness: “Woman’s frigidity assures man’s continual striving for a higher morality as well as a conviction of his lack of it.”

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45 It is only in the attic that we see Mrs. Dalloway’s true feelings. The attic is a symbol of her own personal space, which she does not have to share with anyone else. Rose, Women of Letters, 28.

46 Grice, libretto, 4–5.


48 Ibid., 147.
Biographer Hermione Lee describes Woolf as a “virginal icemaiden.” Phyllis Rose presents Mrs. Dalloway in similar terms, such as “frigid, cold, wooden, impenetrable, cloistered, [and] exempt.” If a woman was expected to have a certain amount of coldness in her sexuality, it would not seem abnormal for her biographer-nephew Quentin Bell to describe Woolf as a “sexless Sappho,” except that Woolf was not sexless, nor did she define herself as a Sapphist.

There is, of course, much speculation about the homosexual content in *Mrs. Dalloway* and in Woolf’s life. Clarissa and Sally Seaton’s relationship is not the only homosexual relationship that occurs in the novel. Scholars identify homosexual tendencies between Septimus and Evans, and between Ms. Kilman and Mrs. Dalloway’s daughter, Elizabeth. I will focus, however, on how the relationship between Clarissa and Sally is depicted in the novel and the opera. Before I can discuss the homosexual implications of the scene between Clarissa and Sally, one must realize that Woolf herself would not have applied such definitive terms as “lesbian” or “homosexual” to herself or to her fictional characters because she rejected the concept of a fixed identity. However, neither Woolf nor her characters have escaped that which she abhorred—labels.

When Woolf is not labeled asexual, she is usually identified as a lesbian or “Sapphist.” Many critics, scholars, and writers have been forthright in their claims regulating her sexuality. Jill Johnson, writer for *The Village Voice*, adds “Virginia Woolf

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to her ever-burgeoning list of tragic lesbians.”

Indeed, Woolf often described women, such as Vita Sackville-West, with such sensual terms as “full-breasted” and “voluptuous.” While recounting her feelings for Sackville-West, she also wrote, “I am altogether so queer in some ways.” While the word “queer” was used synonymously with “homosexual” by the 1930s, she wrote this statement in 1925. One therefore can only speculate what Woolf meant by “queer.” Even if she was homosexual, she accepted the term only ambivalently. Her writing always skirts the edges of definitive meaning, as it does in Mrs. Dalloway. Thus, I will not claim that Mrs. Dalloway or Virginia Woolf were either heterosexual or homosexual, but rather that Woolf’s and her characters’ sexuality and gender were as fluid as their personalities. The mutability of their identities could also be viewed as androgynous because of Woolf’s inability to come to terms with her own sexuality. In this case, I do not define androgyny as sameness, but rather agree with Makiko, who argues that Woolf’s ideas of androgyny are closer to Hélène Cixous’s definition. Woman is “neither outside nor in,” an idea that privileges bisexuality. Woolf did not believe that one was purely man or purely woman; nor could man or woman write from such a stance. In fact, one of the most interesting characters in Mrs. Dalloway, the old woman in the park, is described as “the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth.” Nevertheless, I will focus on the depiction of this most stereotyped and controversial issue surrounding both Virginia Woolf and Mrs.

52 Brenda Silver, Virginia Woolf Icon (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 121.
53 Lee, Virginia Woolf, 487.
54 Makiko, Virginia Woolf and The Problem of the Subject, 10.
55 Kern, “Author or Authoress?” 11.
56 Grice, libretto, 16.
Dalloway—homosexual implications—and show how homosexuality is not the central issue, but is used as an outlet to transcend gender norms and identity.

Like Virginia Woolf’s, Mrs. Dalloway’s relationships with women were the most important relationships in her life, and are essential to understanding Mrs. Dalloway’s self-identity. In the opera, the flashback scene between Sally and Mrs. Dalloway is the only scene in which the conversation is not constantly interrupted by others’ thoughts. Mrs. Dalloway recalls her time with Sally Seaton and proclaims, “I remember . . . dreams. Wild flowers. Laughter in the gardens. Long before the choices were made [i.e., marriage]. Mrs. Richard Dalloway. That is all. Not Clarissa anymore.”

The audience understands not only Mrs. Dalloway’s helplessness and unhappiness in marriage, but also that she identifies herself differently (as Clarissa), depending on whom she is near. Indeed, Grice’s libretto calls her either “Mrs. Dalloway” or “Clarissa” depending on the situation. Mrs. Dalloway is her social name, and Clarissa is reserved for those who know her true self. Grice uses “Clarissa” for the flashback scene between her and Sally Seaton, and changes back to “Mrs. Dalloway” when the scene is interrupted by Peter’s visit. In addition, Mrs. Dalloway is identified as Mrs. Dalloway at the beginning of the novel, and Clarissa at the end. Perhaps this indicates a change in the way she views and accepts herself.

Grice adopts two images which represent Clarissa and Sally’s relationship. The first is the white rose. The initial mention of the white rose occurs when Mrs. Dalloway buys one in the flower shop. In the flashback scene, Sally gives Clarissa a white rose and kisses her on the lips. Clarissa refers to the rose as a “wild rose,” perhaps signifying her

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57 Ibid., 4.
rebellion from heterosexual and Victorian restrictions. She also exclaims to Sally Seaton, “The gods of silence love white roses,” as if to imply the secrecy of their relationship. After this flashback scene, Mrs. Dalloway places the white rose she bought from the flower shop in her hair. The rose adopts further significance in the scene in which Mrs. Dalloway and Peter remember their lost love for each other. As Big Ben strikes, Mrs. Dalloway and Peter depart and the white rose falls out of her hair. She notices the rose on the floor and “is horrified. . . . As she bends to pick it up Peter grabs it first. We hear Septimus scream ‘No!’” At the beginning of Act Two, Peter takes the “withered rose” out of his pocket. Grice specifies that “the rose is dead, the petals fall to the ground as we hear the final toll of the bell. At the same time we see Mrs. Dalloway collapse,” and Peter screams, “Clarissa!”

The second theme exploited by Grice is Sally and Clarissa’s common love of literature, particularly Shakespeare. The Shakespeare quote “Fear no more” is used like a leitmotif throughout the opera and the novel. This quote will be discussed further in the section about madness. However, in the flashback scene between Clarissa and Sally, Clarissa refers twice to Shakespeare’s Othello: “If it were now to die, twere now to be most happy.” Mrs. Dalloway also uses this quote at the very end of the opera when she commends Septimus for killing himself—an act that ends the rigid reality in which he is forced to live. Grice extracts the Shakespeare lines and other literary references from the novel for two purposes. “Fear no more” suggests defiance of traditional nineteenth-
century world order, and is one of the many things which connects Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus’s rebellion against traditional Victorian roles. Also, Rachman argues that Mrs. Dalloway had great interest in literature, particularly Shakespeare, Shelley, Morris, Huxley, and Tyndall, but gave it all up when she got married.\footnote{Rachman, “Clarissa’s Attic,” 14.} Clarissa and Sally, however, share their love of literature only with each other. Clarissa tells Sally, “I’ve [also] been reading Plato! And Morris! Papa would die if he knew!”\footnote{Grice, libretto, 8.} Clarissa knows that the male figures in her life would disapprove of her literary interest because nineteenth-century women were not supposed to show intellectual curiosity. In addition, Richard Dalloway disapproved of Shakespeare’s sonnets because of their “homosexual implications.”\footnote{Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 113; quoted in Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 174.} Like many statements in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is no single interpretation of what Woolf writes. Her love of literature, particularly Shakespeare, illustrates her rebellion against the rigid gender rules of society, and perhaps offers another glimpse into her sexuality.

### Madness

The Shakespeare quote “Fear no more” is also the main literary motive used throughout the novel and opera. It connects the lives of Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus and reveals Virginia Woolf’s beliefs about madness and society. “Fear no more” is from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* and is sung to one who is thought to be dead. It calls for an end to one’s fear of life and whatever it brings.\footnote{Jane Marcus, ed. *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 171.} Woolf did not label *Mrs. Dalloway* a
feminist novel, but she did exploit the themes of insanity and sanity. She states in a diary entry from October 14, 1922, that “Mrs. Dalloway has branched into a book; and I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side.”66 In another diary entry, she writes, “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity. I want to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense.”67

In Mrs. Dalloway, the world of sanity is represented by characters who live with a “sense of proportion,” such as Dr. William Bradshaw and Richard Dalloway, who also identify with Big Ben. Even inanimate objects, such as Big Ben, symbolize the world of proportion: one that follows strict and rigid procedure, associated with the authority of the national. The sound of Big Ben denotes the artificial construct of time, which divides the patriarchal world of London.68 In the opera, Grice specifies that Peter Walsh walks “in time with the flow of the sound of Big Ben.”69 Similarly, the characters who follow the system of a patriarchal world also walk in time with martial music. Peter “walks in time to the beat of the drum, as the martial music has grown steadily louder. We begin to see shadows of boys marching with their guns.”70 Martial music represents London’s social atmosphere. At the beginning of the novel and the opera, Mrs. Dalloway observes London life from the flower shop and hears a “kind of military procession, marking

68 Originally the novel was supposed to be titled The Hours. The recent film The Hours, based on Virginia Woolf’s life, adopted this title.
69 Grice, libretto, 16.
70 Ibid., 18.
As the military procession becomes louder, Mrs. Dalloway’s mood becomes darker; she does not identify with the world of Big Ben. Instead, she identifies with the clock, St. Margaret, which strikes two minutes after Big Ben. She places herself, symbolically, somewhere between difference and conformity.72

Characters defined as mad and those associated with “the Other”73 are set against the strikes of Big Ben and against the beliefs of Dr. William Bradshaw. Bradshaw never uses the term “madness” in the novel. Instead, he defines madness as “not having a sense of proportion.”74 Throughout the novel and the opera, Woolf creates a juxtaposition of two worlds—patriarchy and “the Other,” sanity and insanity—by showing otherness and madness side by side with the sound of Big Ben. When Sally kisses Clarissa, Big Ben suddenly strikes. The scene is interrupted by the arrival of Peter, and simultaneously, Septimus screams. When the white rose falls out of Clarissa’s hair, Big Ben strikes, and Septimus screams again. When Peter takes the withered white rose out of his pocket, Big Ben strikes louder than normal, and Mrs. Dalloway collapses. When Septimus’s wife, Rezia, finds him reading Shakespeare, Septimus quotes, “Fear no more the frown o’ the great/Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke!”75 The “tyrant’s stroke” may refer to the stroke of Big Ben. Finally, at the end of the novel and the opera, Big Ben strikes continuously as

71 Ibid., 2.
73 Madness and “the Other” are not synonymous. “The Other” is frequently used in reference to women, but is also associated with anybody or anything outside of the social norms. In this case those who are considered mad are also “the Other,” but those who are “the Other” are not necessarily mad.
74 Cheng, *Heralds of the Postmodern*, 57.
75 Grice, libretto, 26.
Mrs. Dalloway realizes joy at Septimus’s suicide. Woolf depicts the world of proportion in multiple ways—through the single jarring “Proportion Passage” that does not fit with the rest of the novel, through actual characterization and dialogue, and through symbolic interaction between characters and Big Ben.

To understand how madness is portrayed in Mrs. Dalloway, one must understand how madness was defined in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Female illness was considered a biological given in Victorian society. Upper-class women were often referred to as “sick” or “frail.” The word “hysteria” is derived from the Latin word *uterus*, thus defining madness as a primarily female disease. One of the leading neurologists during Woolf’s lifetime, George Savage (also Woolf’s doctor), believed that mental illness was genetic. His *Insanity and Allied Neuroses: Practical and Clinical* (1884) became a standard medical text on the treatment of mental illnesses in Great Britain. Savage believed in treating his “hysterical” female patients by confining them to traditional gender roles. He ordered a “combination of entire rest and . . . excessive feeding,” a cure pioneered by neurologist Silas Weir Mitchel in the 1870s. The patient was therefore taken from her home and deprived of all communication from her family in order to provide an “absolute rest of intellect.” Savage also did not believe in educating women for fear that their stress of intellect would turn into insanity. He stated, “If a promising girl is allowed to educate herself at home, the danger of solitary work and want

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77 Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 100. This is similar to Richard Dalloway’s fear of Clarissa reading Shakespeare.

78 Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 179.

79 Ibid.
of social friction may be seen in conceit developing into insanity.” Savage treated Woolf’s “mental illness” with these beliefs. He told Leonard Woolf that she should not read and write, but rather “replace her pen with a spade” to make a garden.

It is because of these experiences in Woolf’s life and her knowledge of the Victorian attitude toward madness that I believe Woolf satirizes traditional views of madness and defines madness slightly differently in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf presents the traditional view of madness through Dr. Bradshaw’s reaction to Septimus’s “illness.” Of course, Septimus is not a woman, but as Mezei posits, he represents the part of Mrs. Dalloway, and perhaps Woolf herself, which threatens stability and acts out Mrs. Dalloway’s impulses. In an earlier version of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus’s character did not exist and Mrs. Dalloway was to commit suicide at the end of the novel. Woolf may have included the character of Septimus to represent experiences in her own life, to balance the impulses of life and death between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, and to show the fate of someone who feels too much, and is thus ignored and cast out from society.

Septimus is a war hero who rambles “madly” about his lost friend/lover Evans. His wife, Rezia, cares for his health by following Dr. Bradshaw’s medical orders. In the libretto, Grice extracts a scene in which Septimus is being treated in Dr. Bradshaw’s office. Septimus unemotionally mutters the words he has been taught to say by Dr. Bradshaw, “Communication is health. Communication is happiness.” In addition, Septimus’s stutter is juxtaposed with Dr. Bradshaw’s authoritative tone. As Big Ben

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80 Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 102.

81 Harper, “Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway,” 221.


83 Grice, libretto, 22.
chimes, Dr. Bradshaw notes that Septimus has had a complete breakdown and orders him to rest. Simultaneously, Richard orders Mrs. Dalloway to rest. Dr. Bradshaw tells Rezia that Septimus is not mad; he only lacks a sense of proportion. He states, “Proportion is health. We’ll take him to a home . . . for rest and solitude.”84 In this scene, we see how Dr. Bradshaw’s world of proportion understands madness; anybody acting outside polite social restraints is considered unwell. Dr. Bradshaw represents everything that both Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf herself detest—scientific thinking, devotion of a religious nature, and “the accepted sense of proportion and almost all the ills that afflict human nature and society at large.”85

Woolf connects society’s view of madness with people who think and feel too much and therefore cannot fulfill the role society expects of them. The characters who exhibit traits of madness and “otherness” are both male and female, including Septimus, the old lady singing in the park, and Mrs. Dalloway. As Susan McClary argues, “The ‘Other’ is not always interpreted as a woman. It can be anything that stands as an obstacle or threat to identity and that must, consequently, be purged or brought under submission for the sake of narrative closure.”86 However, the novel and Grice’s libretto do not bring the characters which exhibit “otherness” to closure, and many critics expressed aggravation with the end of Grice’s adaptation. She chose not to include the party scene at the end of the opera. In response to criticism, Larsen responded, “Why [should we have the party scene]? Is it because American theater tends to demand release; is that it?

84 Ibid., 23–24.
85 Rachman, “Clarissa’s Attic,” 7.
Or is this a gender problem (which I suspect it may be)? . . . If we had shown a gala party scene, then we would have redeemed Mrs. Dalloway in a way that she did not want to be redeemed. “In addition, Septimus does not give in to Dr. Bradshaw’s orders, but rather commits suicide to escape society’s expectations.

Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus do not view suicide as an act of madness. Neither do many scholars who interpret the end of the novel. Margaret Blanchard argues that Septimus’s suicide was a choice against tyranny because he cannot fulfill the typical male role. Shalom Rachman posits that Mrs. Dalloway lauds Septimus’s suicide because he saves himself from the lies and corruption of the “world of proportion.” At the end of the opera and the novel, Mrs. Dalloway contemplates Septimus’s suicide and returns to her party. We then see the old lady close her blinds as Big Ben chimes, and Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus repeat (from afar), “Fear no more.” Septimus’s life is over, and Mrs. Dalloway returns to the party to reaffirm life and creativity’s triumph over death and disintegration. In the last line, however, we see Mrs. Dalloway return to her societal role as hostess as Big Ben strikes. She says, “I had hoped to have dancing.”

I have shown that Woolf does not define madness in Mrs. Dalloway in nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Victorian terms. She disrupts categorical norms and blurs the division between sanity and insanity, creativity and rationality. Her writing style heightens her portrayal of madness not by producing a linear thought line, but rather by

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87 Interview with Dr. Karin Pendle.
88 Margaret Blanchard, “Socialization in Mrs. Dalloway,” 302.
89 Rachman, “Clarissa’s Attic,” 17.
90 Rose, Women of Letters, 131.
91 Grice, libretto, 29.
fragmenting sentences and literary motives throughout the novel and opera. The most
cfrequently occurring fragmented lines include “Fear no more,” “Oh the horror,” “Death
of the soul,” “I am not old/dead yet,” and “That is all.” These literary motives connect the
characters’ lives and feelings of fear and doom through the use of repetition and
variation. The most obvious repetition is Shakespeare’s line, “Fear no more,” which
occurs nineteen times in twenty-nine pages in Grice’s libretto. This line is most powerful
toward the end of the libretto when Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus, and Rezia simultaneously
proclaim, “Fear no more.” Mrs. Dalloway is dressing for her party, Rezia is trying to
comfort Septimus by reminding him of their happy days, and Septimus is reading
Shakespeare. Right after this simultaneous declamation, Septimus says, “Septimus.
Posthumous,” providing a dramatic hint of what is to come.92

Woolf and Grice weave numerous statements in and out of characters’ lives
throughout the novel and opera. Many of these lines create parallels between the lives of
Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway. For instance, Septimus says, “Beauty is behind a pane of
glass.” Mrs. Dalloway then states, “Clarissa. Behind the glass. Lovely, long ago.”93 Both
recognize their true identities by facing themselves in a reflective surface. Furthermore,
when Septimus is yelling for Evans and screams, “Death is on me,” Clarissa says to
Sally, “Let us not talk of death.”94

Woolf’s use of fragmentary literary motives and parallelisms not only creates a
writing style that is free from what literary critics would consider the patriarchal

92 Ibid., 26.
93 Grice, libretto, 5.
94 Ibid., 7.
constraints of the written tradition, but also establishes a deeper connection between characters’ identities that defies real time. If Rose is correct in considering Mrs. Dalloway “Woolf’s fullest self-portrait as an artist,” then we can assume that the close connection between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus illustrates the struggles Woolf faced with her own identity (sexual and otherwise) and presumed mental illness. Woolf did not believe there were grounds for genuine unions between people that did not violate their authentic selves. She believed that patriarchal society objectifies and splits people into separate objects. Through the interconnectedness of characters who never meet (such as Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus), Woolf defies this patriarchal order. Yet in the novel one cannot understand any character’s authentic self through his or her own thoughts. Woolf said that a human being’s distinctiveness only reveals itself through contact with other people, and is only fully perceived by other people. We only fully comprehend Mrs. Dalloway’s and Septimus’s characters by their interconnectedness with each other. Perhaps behind the overt issues of madness and sexuality, which usually separate people, the novel is truly a desire for connectedness.

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95 Rose, Women of Letters, 126.


97 Hawthorn, Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway: A Study in Alienation, 12.
CHAPTER IV

FEMINIST CRITICISM OF OPERA

“Why [do] we in Western culture wish, on the one hand, to deny that music has social meaning and, on the other, to ascribe to it transcendental significance?”1

-Susan McClary

Some of the most renowned music theorists and critics have neglected one of the essential attributes of music—the ability to reflect the society in which it was created, and therefore teach social reality. For example, Eduard Hanslick’s emphasis on formalism and Heinrich Schenker’s structural hierarchies are important in many ways, but their approaches fail to explain how and why people react to music culturally, socially, and individually.2 As musicology has become more interdisciplinary, it has also become more difficult to separate music from culture and society. As Susan McClary states, “[Music] serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated.”3 But to analyze society through a medium that we often deem transcendental is frightening because the structures and values a society upholds emerges. McClary states that music is alluring but:

it also threatens a world of rational order and control. It can be enjoyed and even adored in private, but in the public realm it must be knocked down and pinned to the Schenkerian graph so as to show who’s boss. And once pinned to the graph, it yields up the radiant image of transcendent significance.4

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1 Susan McClary, Foreword to Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xv.

2 Theodor Adorno was one of the first musicologists to link music with social reality. Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 28.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 McClary, Foreword to Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, xv.
In this way music often represents the “Angel in the House” in our culture: not only is it frequently associated with the feminine, it is often upheld for its purity.

Meaning in music is not a matter of absolute versus programmatic music. Music always creates some meaning in a society, but a sound or structure will not evoke the same reaction for each individual within the same culture or cross-culturally. An analysis of a musical score or recording will therefore not “provide sufficient grounds for interpretation or analysis. . . . What you hear and experience is largely dependent upon the presuppositions with which you approach it.” A feminist approach to music criticism must uncover how a culture’s values and ideas of gender, race, class, and politics are apparent in what many scholars have considered pure, meaning-free music. Why does the introduction to the Habañera in Carmen, for example, establish elements of Carmen’s character even before she sings? Why have scholars debated the nature of Chopin’s “feminine” cadences? An analysis of music, be it with or without text (i.e., Susan McClary’s analysis of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony), can reveal “the structures, rhythms, and textures of the inner life of the individual; the structures, rhythms, and textures of the external social world; and the order of relations between them.” Instrumental music therefore cannot stand outside such analysis.

It is easier, however, to uncover cultural meaning in a texted or visual art. This is the reason that feminist music criticism has its roots in opera and was influenced by literary

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6 McClary, Foreword to Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, xiv.


criticism. Gender issues are explicit on the stage and cannot be avoided. The first wave of feminist operatic criticism arose as a response to Catherine Clément’s *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Clément’s writings continue to be a source of discussion, giving rise to new debates over such issues as undoing versus envoicing, disembodied versus embodied voices, and reception of the deaths of operatic heroines. Although Clément focuses mainly on the texts of opera, she does not avoid the music entirely. For instance, she frequently connects the use of chromaticism with female characters. Clément refers to Isolde’s chromaticism as “impure” and states, “Women and rainbows . . . are chromatic beings, that is to say, ambivalent intermediaries between the order of nature and that of culture.” Responses to Clément’s book were formative in the development of feminist musicology: How do scholars draw music into operatic interpretation to uncover its social meaning? What does a feminist criticism of opera and music in general look like?

There is no single way to define such an interdisciplinary field, nor shall I try. I will not advocate that women compose differently from men, but will regard the differences in possible discourses (as I did in Chapter III concerning Virginia Woolf’s literary criticism) as a result of alternate experiences and approaches. Nor does feminist criticism of music focus exclusively on issues of gender. McClary argues, “A feminist criticism of any music . . . must also be alert to the politics of race, of class, of subjectivity, of popular culture.” In order to analyze the ideas of gender, madness, and identity in *Mrs. Dalloway* in the last chapter, I must first discuss the main issues of a feminist criticism as they relate to opera. These include musical narrativity, gender

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9 McClary, Foreword to Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, xiii.

10 Ibid., 56.

constructions in music, the portrayal of madness in opera, the undoing, envoicing, disembodiment, and embodiment of operatic women and men, and the role of performativity.

**NARRATIVITY**

Musical narrativity is a common feminist approach in the discussion of operas encoding narratives about gender and sexuality, but can also reveal important aspects of the work beyond what words can express. Carolyn Abbate posits that music in general is not narrative, but instead possesses moments of narration that are “identified by their bizarre and disruptive effects,”\(^\text{12}\) which emerge as “a voice with a characteristic way of speaking,” set off from the musical discourse.\(^\text{13}\) Narrativity in music is therefore not a simple sequence of events, nor can there be only one correct reading. In some cases narrativity will manipulate time in music, as seen in Wagner’s leitmotifs in Der Ring des Nibelungen, or in Larsen’s use recurring gestures in Mrs. Dalloway (as will be shown in the next chapter). Motivic repetition defies elements of time and place in music. Abbate argues that when words are repeated in different circumstances, they may “seem impotent,” but “their sonorous aspect[s,] . . . their duplication of earlier phonemes and sonorities, leaps to the ear,”\(^\text{14}\) and thus provides a type of narrativity.

Musical narrativity may occur as a disruptive element within a tonal discourse. In the second song (E-flat major) of Schumann’s Frauenliebe und Leben, for example, the woman questions whether she is a bride worthy of the man. Her frantic energy begins to control the harmonic movement of the song, which moves from D-flat major to C major, and then from B-

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 52.

flat major to A major. Her ending key is a tritone away (E-flat to A) from the tonic, thus introducing a disruptive tonal element (a narrative moment). The tonal disruption in this case is like a narrative musical commentator. Abbate claims that in narrative moments the events of music are not simply there, but “we occasionally sense within . . . the voice of the commentators that enunciate them.”\(^{15}\) In order for music to be narrative, music must be able to express ideas of our culture and society.

**GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN MUSIC**

“To the very large extent that music is informed by issues directly or indirectly bound up with gender and sexuality, the investigation of how compositions and repertories articulate gender difference and the erotic contributes enormously to our understanding of music as a social discourse.”\(^{16}\)

- Susan McClary

Although feminist criticism is a relatively recent specialization within musicology, gendering musical language has occurred throughout music history. Gender construction in music is not a universal essentialism, nor does it necessarily depend on the gender of the composer. Gender construction is culturally and often historically specific. Yet many gendered elements of music have crossed over the boundaries of historical periods. The gendering of music throughout the history of Western music is evident in all genres, from opera, songs, and “absolute” music to popular music. For example, in accordance with stereotypical Western dichotomies of male/female, therefore reason/nature, Rousseau thought that the minor mode lacked “fundamental resonance with the *corps sonore* of nature,” and Joseph Rhepel proposed a hierarchy of chord relations, associating major harmonies with the male gender, minor harmonies

\(^{15}\) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, xii.

\(^{16}\) Susan McClary, “Toward a Feminist Criticism of Music,” 15.
with the female gender, and parallel minors with androgyny. In addition, “writers as far removed from each other as Georg Andreas Sorge in Germany and William Billings in colonial America judged major keys to be masculine (because of their natural strength) and minor keys to be feminine (because of their frailty, their dependence, their subordination to major.”

Binary oppositions such as major/minor extend to musical structures and forms. A. B. Marx, for example, labeled the key scheme of sonata form as having masculine and feminine areas—primary and secondary, respectively. Marx describes the themes as follows: “The main theme [is] . . . the one constructed more energetically, more vigorously, more completely—the dominant one and the decisive one. The subsidiary theme . . . serves as contrast, constructed and determined by the preceding, thus by nature necessarily the gentler . . . the feminine, as it were, to that preceding masculine.” The “feminine” theme, which disrupts the principal tonality of the “masculine” theme, is usually forced back into the masculine theme’s tonality in the recapitulation. Marx thus viewed the feminine theme as the “other,” which must be subdued and returned to the masculine norm.

The theoretical dichotomy of masculine/feminine themes and form is still highly prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although many texts have eliminated such phraseology as feminine and masculine cadences, or feminine and masculine themes, many listeners’ musical reactions still carry loaded meanings. They may suggest that Stamitz’s Mannheim rockets sound powerful and masculine, or that Beethoven’s music arouses masculine

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fury, or that Chopin’s music has a somewhat feminine quality. Feminist scholars have attempted to uncover these presuppositions to understand how we as a society have internalized gender in our music, as in sonata-allegro form. Marcia Citron, for example, posits that Cécile Chaminade’s Sonata, Opus 21, challenges the dominant sonata model in its first movement by undermining the distinction between masculine and feminine themes. Chaminade never establishes the “other” key for the secondary theme. Instead, she passes through contrasting keys, but never definitively settles in any “other” key.20

As Clément observes, chromaticism and tonal instability have long been associated with women, the “other,” the dangerous, and the seductive. A century earlier Rousseau, in his Dictionnaire de Musique, already saw “the chromatic genre [as] wonderful for expressing pain and affliction . . . its imperceptible sliding are profoundly seductive.”21 In the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, much operatic music associated with a powerful or sensual woman was tonally instable. The music for the powerful Queen of the Night in Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, for example, is mostly in minor mode and highly melismatic (which is in major). In fact, out of the twenty-four minor-mode arias in Mozart’s operas, seventeen are sung by women.22 In Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, “chromaticism is associated with a seductive, deadly feminine sexuality.”23 Many times in opera, feminist scholars argue that there is an innate need to resolve the unstable music of these women, which may lead to a subconscious desire to

20 Ibid., 154. Citron never suggests that Chaminade undermined the distinction of the feminine tonal area because she was a woman. I will also not suggest that composers’ techniques of upholding or challenging traditional forms are based on their sex.

21 Ibid., 57.

22 Ibid., 210.

defeat the women, or to kill them.\textsuperscript{24} While not always true, this is certainly the case in Bizet’s \textit{Carmen}.

\textit{Carmen} is one of the greatest \textit{femmes fatales} in opera’s history. Her slinky chromaticism and rhythmic syncopations engage audiences who ultimately weep at her demise. Carmen’s character is a prime example of how musical association of “otherness” revolves not only around sexuality, but also race and class.\textsuperscript{25} Many of Carmen’s songs, such as the \textit{Habañera}, were considered to be of a lower, popular style of music, and were vulgar compared to the refined music of Don José and Micaëla, who in general sing more diatonically. One of Carmen’s main musical motifs is the augmented second, which has long been connected with the musical signs for racial “others” such as the Arab and the Jew.\textsuperscript{26} It is this augmented second interval which eventually is associated with Don José’s fatal attraction to Carmen.

The association of the feminine and the “other” in music is not defined solely by chromaticism and unstable harmonies. Many vocal stereotypes\textsuperscript{27} and techniques are used to portray instability, irrationality, or extreme power. The Queen of the Night’s coloratura arias from Mozart’s \textit{Die Zauberflöte}, for example, can be read as an “absence of rationality, an excess of passion, and thus as essentially female speech.”\textsuperscript{28} As Michel Poizat argues, anything above a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{25} They may be foreigners because of their profession, their age, or “by some means or other, they cross over a rigorous, invisible line, the line that makes them unbearable.”\textsuperscript{25} Catherine Clément, \textit{Opera, or the Undoing of Women}, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{26} McClary, \textit{Feminine Endings}, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{27} The vocal stereotypes include those of men. Tenors, for instance, are more frequently associated with the male operatic characters who possess elements of weakness, such as Septimus.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Abbate, \textit{In Search of Opera}, 86.
\end{itemize}
high E (660 Hertz) loses its articulation and therefore becomes irrational, yet powerful.\(^{29}\)

Although the Queen of the Night is not considered irrational or mad, her highly embellished arias in minor mode are “powerful in [their] association with the inner world of passion, fear, and desire”\(^{30}\) within the context of Mozart’s arias.

Many of the characteristics that we think of as feminine have been cast in a negative light and used to silence and oppress women. Many contemporary composers have borrowed techniques traditionally associated with the feminine, but compose in a way that questions or redefines their meaning. In “Langue d’amour,” for example, Laurie Anderson reverses the idea that Woman was responsible for the Fall and instead has a female protagonist who “combines thought, emotion, and desire and delights in them, refusing to accept shame or guilt.”\(^{31}\)

Diamanda Galás uses women’s shrieks and guttural sounds in *Plague Mass* (1989) to depict anger surrounding the AIDS epidemic. Edwards states, “Galás appropriates almost earsplitting screams—high, sustained, and raw—to condemn the treatment of people with HIV and AIDS and to denounce U.S. policy and the response to the AIDS crisis.”\(^{32}\) McClary compares Galás’s compositional techniques in this piece to those used to represent Lucia in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lamermoor* as well as such figures as the Queen of the Night.\(^{33}\) She posits that Galás confronts and rejects the stereotypes of women’s voice and irrationality and instead gives a powerful voice to the “other.”


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 15.


\(^{33}\) Susan McClary “Towards a Feminist Criticism of Music,” 17.
Many female contemporary composers parody traditional musical constructions of the feminine, or compose in a way that transcends gender norms (such as Chaminade’s sonata). The way a contemporary audience might approach Galás’s work, as opposed to the Queen of the Night’s arias, depends on the context of culture and time. Although scholars often create broad generalizations of techniques associated with the feminine (such as chromaticism), we must understand how the depiction of the feminine is approached in particular historical and cultural/social contexts. We must critique such generalizations, especially with regard to twentieth- and twenty-first century music. Even though we may always associate Carmen’s chromaticism with her sexuality and ultimate demise, we cannot assume that all chromatic female operatic characters are femmes fatales. Mrs. Dalloway, for example, is not.

MADNESS

Opera’s history teems with madwomen and sometimes madmen. In fact, operatic madness in women is sometimes thought of as the norm and their “moments of excess are also their very raison d’être.”34 Audiences are lured toward their stories and weep at their demises. Yet musically, their madness is exalted and privileged. To understand techniques representative of madness, one must always consider the genre and the time in which the composition was written. However, certain musical characteristics common across time and place have marked madness in characters, both in women and men.

Theoretically, the musical portrayal of madness is often characterized by exaggerated, repetitive, chromatic, and ornamented vocalism. This music is excessive in its procedure, and is sometimes surrounded by normative procedures to control the “mad music.” In Monteverdi’s

34 Ibid., 80–81.
dramatic *Lamento della Ninfa* (published in the Eighth *Book of Madrigals*, 1638), for example, the obsessive, mad quality of the nymph’s character is represented by the four-note obbligato set against the lament. The listener never hears the ostinato the same way twice, for it is “constantly being reinflected by the nymph’s dramatic moments of resistance (her dissonant refusals of cadences implied in the bass . . .) or sudden collapse.” The nymph, however, does not control the events of the piece. There is a trio of men who create a frame (an introduction and a coda) around her lament and remain present until the end. The trio interjects its own words into the lament itself, completing “syntactical units in the music when the nymph falters,” then returning the lament to normality by completing cadences on C major. Their presence shows that the nymph is a male construct controlled by men, and ensures that the audience keeps a safe distance between the rational and irrational world. Likewise, in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the physical presence of the chorus during Lucia’s mad scene creates a frame around her. As Mary Ann Smart states, “The formation of the chorus thus creates a literal frame around Lucia, submitting her not only to their gaze, but by extension to that of the audience.”

In the nineteenth century, attitudes toward madness are also shown by irregularities within a traditional formal structure. Lucia’s madness in Donizetti’s *Lucia de Lammermoor*, is characterized by her move into ornate virtuosity in the mad scene. Although the structure of the scene is in the traditional cavatina-cabaletta, many of the irregularities lie in the preceding scena and the shift between the scena and the slow movement. Lucia’s music changes freely from recitative to parlante to short melodic segments. In the cavatina, the melody begins in the

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35 This is not the only example of a vocal solo set against a stabilizing bass, and not all represent madness.

36 McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 87.

37 Ibid., 89.

orchestra while Lucia’s lines are in parlante. Smart argues that “the orchestral accompaniment appears to move on one plane, Lucia and her words on another, disturbingly out of step with the opera’s formal process.”

Her dismissal of the change in orchestral accompaniment could be read as a symptom of madness. She does not pick up the melody until a few bars later, and ends in a highly embellished cadenza. Lucia “spills out in the only direction available: upward coloratura delirium.” Composers used coloratura frequently in the nineteenth century without any association to extreme emotions or madness. The coloratura in Lucia’s mad scene, however, is unusual because its melismas are more frequent and complicated compared to the rest of the coloratura throughout the opera. Although the form is traditional, the coloratura, the frequent shifts in mood, and the cadenza can be read as madness. The traditional structure provides a framework from which the madness emerges.

On the other hand, Schoenberg’s twentieth-century Erwartung presents no male frame with which to control the “madwoman.” In Erwartung, the woman’s madness is characterized by extreme chromaticism and discontinuity, but Schoenberg abandoned any tonal goal, thus providing no framework with which to denounce the woman’s music as mad. Throughout history, however, audiences have musically recognized mad characters as those who defy convention. Although there is no “male” framework within the opera guarding the madness, the techniques used in the twentieth century still conjure similar reactions to those used previously.

Another traditional sign of madness occurs when characters actually sing from their worlds rather than as a product of an art form. In Hamlet, for example, Ophelia is famed for her

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 92.
singing. The fact that she sings is just as important as what she sings.\textsuperscript{42} Her songs are not coherent and she juxtaposes arbitrary images. In song, the “normative functionality of language is transcended” and “signification gives way to significance.”\textsuperscript{43} Ophelia’s songs disrupt the norms of the society in which she lives, and other characters react with caution to her singing. In \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}, the old lady sitting on the park bench also sings within the context of the plot and her words are also incomprehensible. She is dismissed by Peter as mad and irrational, but understood emotionally by Mrs. Dalloway and Rezia. The representation of madness in both Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus involves “mapping [their] . . . psychological differences onto the discursive ‘difference’ of music.”\textsuperscript{44} They are set against binary oppositions of men/women, madness/rationality, and speech/music.

Our views of madness in operatic characters stem from the ideas of sexual difference that arose in the nineteenth century. Madness in women and men was based on sexual politics, specifically a sexual excess in women who transcended gender norms. As Virginia Woolf noted in her writings, the “Angel in the House” figure confined women to their expected gender and social roles. As stated in Chapter III, because of Woolf’s departure from the traditional gender role (coupled with her breakdowns), she was labeled “mad.” Unlike Salome, whose madness is directly linked to an excess of sexuality, Woolf’s sexual desire was portrayed as almost nonexistent (in the heterosexual sense). I would argue then that any deviation from the norms of sexuality as described by the “Angel in the House” figure might be labeled abnormal and frequently mad. Lucia, for example, defies social convention by refusing an arranged marriage.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{43} Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, \textit{Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 53.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 50.
A **femme fatale**—Salome, Lulu, Carmen—may die because of men’s view of her sexuality. A music critic considering Berg’s *Lulu* stated the following: “The female protagonist is brutally murdered by a man whose homicidal urge toward her arises at one level out of his very specific sexual rage at her, and another out of this hatred for some generalized idea of woman which she symbolizes in his mind.”⁴⁵ The femme fatale activates men’s fears of women in society, and when she does not conform, he risks losing control.

Men who lose self-control and are considered mad embody female characteristics and are given similar musical signals to delineate their madness. These men are often fraught with grief and guilt and their masculine egos become associated with the feminine. As Clément states, “these men die like heroines; down on the ground they cry and moan, they lament . . . and like heroines they are surrounded by real men, veritable Adams who have cast them down.”⁴⁶ Examples of feminized men include Parsifal, Tristan, Otello, Rigoletto, Falstaff, and Septimus. Each has a distinguishing feature that makes him vulnerable. Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, feels too much emotion following the war and grieves over his friend Evan’s death and Rigoletto’s hump and ugliness alienate him from the world of the courtiers. Many of the men who die in opera do so because they possess some characteristic that does not permit them to function “normally” within their society. Because the world they live in cannot deal with social transgression, these characters are all doomed, like the female characters who do not fit their prescribed gender roles.⁴⁷ They are often endowed with stereotypically feminine characteristics. Many of them like Septimus or Siegfried, have high voices. They are also the “weak sons, the

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⁴⁶ Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 118.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 120.
lame, the hunchbacks, the blacks, the foreigners, and the old men.” They transgress the gender boundaries and expected roles of society and are cast, like the women who die, as “others.”

**OPERATIC DEATH**

Death is inescapable in opera. Death’s meaning and audiences’ reactions to death, however, change historically and culturally. In classical drama, for example, death scenes mostly took place off stage. In early nineteenth-century opera, many deaths occurred on stage. Beginning in the nineteenth century, there were also an increasing number of scientific studies on mental illnesses and suicide. Modern Western audiences still often link suicide (even stage-suicide) with mental illness, irrationality, and condemnation, but feminist opera criticism has helped unravel the meanings behind these “undoings,” or deaths of women. Many of these operatic fatalities may actually be an “awakening from the dream of life” and teach powerful lessons about the relationships of the individual, gender, class, identity, and sexuality to society.

Although these characters are victims, most operatic deaths serve as a kind of vocal and social empowerment. Whether women die by suicide or by murder, their deaths may not actually be the undoings as Clément suggests, but rather their rebellions and their envoicings. Musically, Cio-Cio-San’s death in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* supports her undoing. Whereas Pinkerton’s melodies are lyrical and sweet, Cio-Cio-San’s music is often breathless and full of silences when she is distressed. However, her suicide returns her to her heritage and is a form of

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48 Ibid., 22.

49 “Undoings” taken from Catherine Clément’s book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*.


51 In a survey of operas, Clément lists the ways these operatic women die: nine die by knife, two by suicide, three by fire, two by jumping, two by consumption, three by drowning, three by poison, two by fright, and some from unknown causes.
self-sacrifice. Even Carmen, a woman of free will, dies for saying no to masculine desires.

Abbate claims that Clément “chooses to neglect the locus of women’s operatic triumph, even though it is exemplified in the very works she discusses, in the overwhelming sound of female operatic voices and the musical gestures that enfold those voices into a whole. It is in this essence that women exert their authority.”

Although women die on stage and sing their eternal “undoing,” the sound of their voices and their physical presences are undefeatable. Clément states that the “emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die.”

Mrs. Dalloway is an exception. She has the last word in the opera (a truly feminine ending), but Septimus, her male counterpart, commits suicide. Mrs. Dalloway, however, commends his decision to take his life and her presence confirms her own struggle between the forces of life and death, as well as her understanding of the individual’s relationship to society.

At the end of the opera, it is Septimus’s voice that is unconquerable. The audience hears Septimus’s disembodied voice coming from offstage, saying, “Fear no more.”

Whereas disembodiment is often associated with men in opera, embodiment is usually associated with the feminine. Women are often the objects of observation by men in opera, and the consequences of being gazed at are often fatal. However, Abbate argues that opera may

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53 Clément, Opera or the Undoing of Women, 5.

54 Abbate argues that most disembodied authorities are male and embodiment “makes you a woman” because women’s voices are grounded in the corporeal. Abbate, In Search of Opera, 52. Theodor Adorno claimed that women’s singing voices do not record well because they demand the “physical appearance of the body that carries it.” Hutcheon and Hutcheon, Bodily Charm, xviii. Disembodiment is not an issue that one frequently thinks about in the twenty-first century because of the numerous available recordings, and because some operas, such as Libby Larsen’s The Invisible Man, are written for radio.

actually reverse the object-objector role, and therefore corporeality becomes powerful.\textsuperscript{56} Salome, for example, has always been considered monstrous because she claims female power\textsuperscript{57} and subverts nineteenth-century gender roles; therefore she is punished. Although musically Strauss attempts to subdue Salome, Abbate argues that he struggles to “invert any notion of an objectifying masculine voice.”\textsuperscript{58} Salome is given the crystal, into which no woman is supposed to gaze, and therefore \textit{she} is the one doing the staring. Furthermore, in the “Dance of the Seven Veils” Salome “turns the gaze back against itself by making it impossible for the male spectator to structure the visual field . . . subjugating the eye that subjugates her.”\textsuperscript{59} She thus becomes even more monstrous and Medusa-like because she is able to escape being the object of an observer. Salome’s vocality and corporeality, along with those of other \textit{femmes fatales}, are “signifier[s] of sexual otherness and a source of sexual power, an object [of] desire and fear.”\textsuperscript{60} Her presence is just as important as what she sings.

In attempts to reclaim the power of women’s voices, scholars have studied the relationship between vocality and corporeality. Irigaray and Cixous have long argued that corporeality is an essential element when considering the voice,\textsuperscript{61} but other scholars, including

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 228.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Salome overtly states her sexual perverseness and insists on being a female artist.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Abbate, “Opera; The Envoicing of Women,” 240.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Dunn and Jones, \textit{Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Terry Threadgold, “performativity voice corporeality habitus becoming assemblage: Some Reflection on Theory and Performing Metaphors,” in \textit{Musics and Feminisms}, ed. Sally Macarthur and Cate Poyton (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1999), 64.
\end{itemize}
Peter Brooks, have claimed that the body and the voice act as one. Vocality, then, is not limited to the physical voice, but rather is connected with the performance dimensions of vocal expression. Eddie Vedder’s (Pearl Jam) voice, for example, often rises “like a cracked howl.” This vocal expression appeals to teenage boys who are going through puberty because they identify with the changing voice. Vocality is therefore the “locus of articulation of an individual’s body to language and society,” and operatic voices perform the borders between the interior and exterior of the body. If one genders the body, then one also genders the voice.

The presence of tangible bodies in opera also enables the body to act as a mute text. The body is endowed with highly emotionalized messages, which otherwise cannot be communicated through words, as in Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils.” Text, in this case, is not the deciding authority. The “folding of gendered bodies into texts and of texts into bodies” is an act of performativity.

Considerations of performativity are essential to the analysis of the role of gender in opera. Judith Butler’s ground-breaking work on performativity suggests that humans perform


63 Cate Poyton posits that even though there are biological differences between the voices of men and women, “much of what is taken as biologically based, as ‘natural,’ is in fact culture wearing the disguise of nature.” She cites Margaret Thatcher as an example: she undertook voice training to lower the pitch of her voice when she became Prime Minister. Cate Poyton, “Talking like a Girl,” in Musics and Feminisms, ed. Sally Macarthur and Cate Poyton (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1999), 120.


67 Peter Brooks, “Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera,” 120.

gender and sex. Butler relies on the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig, and Luce Irigaray to argue that although scholars debate the inherent definitions of gender, all agree that gender is not a noun, but rather a performative act. Gender is a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” Such scholars as Terry Threadgold and Teresa de Lauretis have expanded upon Butler’s initial ideas of performativity to account for the differences between gender performance in everyday life and gender performance on the stage. The performative body produces different effects in different contexts, but it is not just the context that changes. De Lauretis states that the “made text can also be rewritten and changed to effect changes in context.” Humans also read gender differently depending on the framework in which it is experienced. An audience member may read the performative gender on stage differently in a classical concert, for instance, than in a rock concert, and may even act differently themselves.

How do characters perform gender in musical performances? Can other elements of music and text, such as notation or word choice, indicate gender? Cusick believes that there is never a faithful performance of the composer’s original intentions because everyone performs differently through the body, based on factors of gender, sex, and experiences. Genders are performed by means of expression and multiple gestures of the body, which interpret the music. One can perform gender in one’s vocal quality. Cusick illustrates this concept in her analysis of Eddie Vedder’s angst-ridden adolescent singing, using such vocal techniques as a cracking voice.


70 Ibid., 43.

71 Threadgold, “Performativity voice corporeality habitus becoming assemblage,” 67.
Musical aspects, such as text or gestures in the score, can also be interpreted differently depending on gender. Francesca Caccini, for example, used the texts in her spiritual songs that spoke in the third person rather than her own voice. She performed a gender that was historically appropriate in her time because she preserved her feminine modesty, denying her own agency.72

Those who do not “properly” perform their genders are often punished because these genders are outside the boundaries of binary oppositions. Many of the female characters I have mentioned, have been punished because, like Carmen and Salome, they did not perform their “proper” gender roles. Mrs. Dalloway is no exception. There is a side of her character which performs her gender “correctly” within her society. Other people praise her reputation as a party hostess and she concerns herself with the details of her parties, such as the flowers. However, she does not fit neatly into a category of heterosexual or homosexual. As stated in Chapter III, music critics were confused and concerned that they could not label her clearly, and scholars find the same issue in considering Woolf’s own sexuality. Is she heterosexual, homosexual, or asexual? The Lacanian view of lesbianism is associated with asexuality.73 Irigaray states, “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex.”74 If lesbianism is beyond the categories of sex, it is not surprising that scholars attempt to label Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway as asexual. Mrs. Dalloway’s and Woolf’s performative genders cannot be categorized as either/or, and Virginia Woolf therefore once again destroys and disrupts social norms. Woolf would agree

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72 Suzanne Cusick, “Performing/Composing Woman: Francesca Caccini Meets Judith Butler,” in Musics and Feminisms, ed. Sally Macarthur and Cate Poyton (Sydney: Australian Music Center, 1999), 93.

73 Ibid., 66.

74 Ibid., 26.
with Butler that there “is no gender identity behind the expression of gender, [and] identity is performativity constituted by the very ‘expression’ that are said to be its results.”

CONCLUSION

A feminist criticism of opera, combined with traditional theoretical analysis, will reveal aspects of meaning of any piece dramatic music and uncover its society’s embedded values and structures. Specifically, the tools that I have discussed in this chapter are essential to understanding how we as a culture perceive and articulate gender, “otherness,” race, madness, death, and identity. Some people say they are attracted to music as a sort of escapism, but the underlying analysis of the music reveals to us what we already understand in our society. If music were simply a matter of form and structure, the majority of the population would not be as awed and moved as theorists are. We must uncover music’s meaning to reveal the values and issues that our society often dismisses verbally. In the next chapter, I will apply these critical tools to Libby Larsen’s Mrs. Dalloway to understand how Larsen portrays Woolf’s ideas of gender, madness, and identity.

75 Ibid., 25.
CHAPTER V

AN ANALYSIS OF LIBBY LARSEN’S MRS. DALLOWAY

THE STRUCTURE OF MRS. DALLOWAY

In Mrs. Dalloway, Libby Larsen uses recurring ostinati and musical gestures to define important structural points and to shift from one milieu or plot line to another. Many of these gestures change slightly in tonality or rhythm over the course of the opera, and Larsen associates and connects them with different characters and recollections. The way in which Larsen changes and transforms the gestures throughout the opera enhances the perception of changing time and place. There are eight main gestures used throughout the opera. With the guidance of Dr. Karin Pendle, I identified the most commonly recurrent gestures throughout the opera. Through a close reading of the opera and the novel, I assigned meaning to the gestures based on my own textual and musical interpretations. Larsen herself identified the first gesture (the trill) as being structurally important as both a scene divider and as related to the “Fear no more” motive. I have labeled the gestures “A” through “H.”

Example 1. Gesture A. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, mm. 1–5

Gesture A, a trill which is ubiquitous throughout Mrs. Dalloway, embodies all that is ambiguous textually and musically within the opera. When one first hears the E natural to F
natural trill at the opening of the opera, one does not know whether it is modal, atonal, or diatonic, and Larsen never enlightens us. The trill functions in many different ways. Sometimes it acts as a scene divider or accompaniment; at other times the B-flat clarinet plays the original rhythm of the opening trill, but on a single pitch, rather than oscillating pitches. In Example 1a, the trill-like figure acts as an echo to the Old Woman’s vocal lines.

**Example 1a. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 845–46**

Larsen frequently uses the trill figure in vocal lines. The most obvious example is the “Fear no more” motive, which usually consists of a two-note oscillation. Larsen also layers vocal oscillations with accompanimental ostinati that contain the semitone property of the trill. In Example 1b, Larsen composes Peter’s lines as a two-note oscillation.
Larsen often uses Gesture B (Example 2) in conjunction with the text “Fear no more” and mainly associates it with characters’ inner turmoil through the gesture’s chromaticism and tritone span. We first hear Gesture B at the beginning of the opera when the spotlight focuses on Septimus. In its second appearance, Mrs. Dalloway’s previously joyful outlook becomes gloomy and cynical as she observes London’s social life. At this point she states, “For at any moment the brute can stir . . . How it rasps me! This hatred within me, this brutal monster.” Her vocal lines become jagged and Gesture B’s rhythm changes. In the bass part of Example 3, part of the London theme (Gesture C) is also present as is a fragment of Gesture B (C#-E-D#-F).
Larsen also transposes Gesture B throughout the opera, but it always remains the same pitch-class set [02346]. It not only accompanies Septimus’s and Mrs. Dalloway’s moments of fear, anger, and sorrow,¹ but also signifies musically Peter’s emotional breakdown. Although Peter does not vocalize his emotions in this scene, the stage directions indicate that he “changes noticeably from the macho, self-assured Peter Walsh to an uncertain, emotional person. To Peter’s utter amazement, as though ‘suddenly thrown by those uncontrollable forces thrown the air,’ he bursts into tears and ‘weeps without the least shame, the tears running down his cheeks.’”²

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¹ Other occurrences of Gesture B include Septimus’s “mad” scene, particularly when he screams, “Human nature is on me.” We also hear it when Dr. William Bradshaw diagnoses Septimus and when Mrs. Dalloway talks about her reaction to Septimus’s suicide.

² Libby Larsen, score of Mrs. Dalloway, 50.

Gesture C represents the social milieu of London. The motive is chromatic, and largely linear, and appears whenever Mrs. Dalloway discusses London. We first hear Gesture C when she watches the hustle and bustle of London streets, observing passers-by. Grice notes, “We feel London—‘the dead, the flag, the Empire.’” The same gesture occurs when Peter proclaims his fidelity to and love of London, although its rhythm is augmented. Finally, because Mrs. Dalloway’s parties represent the stifling aristocratic air of London, Gesture C is also connected with the party. It appears when Peter questions Mrs. Dalloway’s motives for her parties, and we hear it as well in the concluding party scene. In the course of the opera, Gesture C undergoes several variations, but it returns to its original form when Mrs. Dalloway greets her guests in the final scene. Perhaps the rhythmic and tonal changes over the course of the opera represent the different characters’ visions and realities of London, but the original gesture returns at the end to solidify Mrs. Dalloway’s perspective on London society.

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3 Score of *Mrs. Dalloway*, 5.
Some of Larsen’s gestures, such as Gesture D, are not associated with a specific character or emotion. Rather, they usually signifies a change in plot line. When Gesture D is used to cover a shift in the plot line, it is often accompanied by a trill. There are a few times, however, when we hear it accompany a character’s change in thought or emotion, especially with regard to marriage. Gesture D occurs, for example, when Mrs. Dalloway wistfully remembers her girlhood and realizes her subsequent anger and sadness over her loveless marriage. Larsen also uses Gesture D when Septimus notices that Rezia’s wedding ring is missing; he then believes that the marriage is over and that he is suddenly free.

Example 6. Gesture E. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, mm. 100–101

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- All the vertical sonorities in Gesture D are of the interval-class 1 (minor seconds and major sevenths), which connects it with the trill figure. This may explain why it often occurs with the trill. There is both horizontal and vertical ambiguity.
Few places in the opera contain prolonged diatonic or triadic harmony. One of them is in Gesture E, which consists of E-flat chords in second inversion. I have also labeled this gesture the “remembrance gesture” because Larsen uses it when Mrs. Dalloway, Sally Seaton, or Rezia express memories of pleasant past times. During the first appearance of the gesture, Mrs. Dalloway reminisces about her days prior to marriage. She states, “I remember, I remember long before the choices were made. . . . Dreams and wild flowers.” Although she sings over E-flat major triads, her vocal lines are composed of dissonant chromatic pitches. At other times the vocal lines, while extracted from the same diatonic collection, are pandiatonic over the E-flat major harmony, not referring to any particular tonal center. This occurs, for instance, when Mrs. Dalloway recalls her love for Peter and when Rezia remembers the happiness in her marriage (see Example 7).

Example 7. Gesture E. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1044–1050
Example 8. Gesture F. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Act I, mm. 622–624

Gesture F is the dance gesture. Every time it appears it occurs at a different pitch-class level. It first appears when Mrs. Dalloway and Peter dance. However, the dotted dance rhythm is awkward. There are ties and syncopations which are metrically unusual for a dance, and the repetitive rhythm is underscored by an awkward leap of a tritone in the bass. The opera concludes with Gesture F following Mrs. Dalloway’s last line, “I had hoped to have dancing.”\(^5\) Instead of a tritone, the dance rhythm is then accompanied by a perfect fourth from E to A. The dance rhythm slowly disintegrates into an E-flat–C dyad, finishing on a single E-flat.

Example 9. Gesture G. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Act II, mm. 1006

Gesture G symbolizes both Rezia’s and Richard Dalloway’s roles of caregiver for their respective spouses.\(^6\) Although this gesture changes pitch-class level throughout the opera, the chromatic pitch class set [0123] remains the same. I believe that Gesture G holds a certain

\(^5\) Score of *Mrs. Dalloway*, 143.

\(^6\) Several times in the opera, however, Gesture G seems to have no role other than that of a formal scene divider.
emotional significance for Rezia in particular, since it frequently occurs under her compassionate
lines, as when she assures Septimus that “I won’t leave you.” The gesture also occurs when
Rezia tries nonverbally to calm Septimus from one of his rants. Gesture G returns after Septimus
kills himself and Dr. William Bradshaw speaks impassively about the incident. Perhaps Gesture
G used in this example musically denotes Rezia’s care and concern for Septimus, juxtaposed
with the doctor’s objective vision (Example 10).

Example 10. Passages related to Gesture G. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1498–1503

Gesture G is not limited to Rezia and Septimus’s relationship. In Act II Rezia questions
Dr. Bradshaw about Septimus’s sanity. The doctor answers that all Septimus needs is a sense of
proportion and a long rest. Simultaneously, Richard tucks Mrs. Dalloway into bed and says, “An
hour’s complete rest.” At this point, Gesture G returns and cements the parallels between the
lives of Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway. Finally, at the end of the opera, when Mrs. Dalloway
posits that Septimus must have committed suicide because he felt he was “suffocating in blackness,”” we hear Gesture G one last time. Perhaps the appearance of this gesture may represent Septimus’s marriage as the “blackness,” but it is seen from the viewpoint of an intermediary—Mrs. Dalloway.

Example 11. Gesture H. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1473–1475

Gesture H is associated with Peter’s character and the ideals represented by the patriarchal world of Big Ben. The gesture is stately and frequently occurs as Peter begins to speak. In addition, Larsen uses the gesture when the both the Prime Minister and Dr. Bradshaw arrive at Mrs. Dalloway’s party, and she sometimes uses it as a prelude to the contrapuntal London theme, Gesture C. Gesture H therefore symbolizes the snobbery of the aristocratic world and everything that Mrs. Dalloway detests. Its musical character lies in its decisive rhythm rather than its pitches. Larsen chooses not to distinguish melodically the two worlds in which Mrs. Dalloway lives, but instead separates them rhythmically.

The way that Larsen manipulates and weaves these gestures throughout the opera reinforces Woolf’s literary techniques discussed in Chapter III. The opera is saturated with appearances of the gestures in different contexts, thus confirming Woolf’s lack of a linear plot line. The gestures act instead as a type of musical free indirect discourse, eradicating the

\[\text{Score of Mrs. Dalloway, 138.}\]
narrator’s traditional function. Each gesture renders its own narration, which the audience must digest and connect to an action or emotion. The musical gestures are like the “sea of voices, waves of words [or musical gestures] that continually pass between what Julia Kristeva has identified as the semiotic and the symbolic in such a way as to erase hierarchies and to emphasize multiplicity and transformation.” Furthermore, the repetition of the gestures musically exposes Woolf’s refusal to let her language be pinned down to one essential meaning. Other scholars may disagree with my analysis of the gestures and their associations, but I would argue that Woolf, Grice, or Larsen would attach any single meaning to them. Woolf’s writing and Larsen’s music corroborate the importance of ambiguity within the opera and the novel.

**MELODY AND HARMONY**

The lack of definite tonal centers in *Mrs. Dalloway* confirms the theme of dramatic ambiguity throughout the opera. Its entirety, with a few exceptions, is atonal, with constant melodic or harmonic emphasis on semitones, sevenths, and tritones. Some of the gestures discussed, such as Gesture G, consist completely of chromatic pitches [0123]. Such motives as the London theme (Gesture C) emphasize sevenths and some chromaticism (see Example 12).

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An analysis of pitch-class sets not only reveals the chromatic saturation of the opera, but also makes evident the similarities between gestures. Gesture B (characterizing turmoil and madness) and Gesture H (associated with Peter, Big Ben, and the patriarchal world) have much in common. Gesture B is comprised of pitch-class set 5–8 [02346], while Gesture H uses 4–12 [0236]. [0236] is a component of [02346] in two forms. Larsen’s music, then, may support Woolf’s blurring of the lines between sanity and insanity. One cannot define the “mad” characters by chromaticism and the “sane” characters by diatonicism; characters and ideals that appear to be complete opposites may have more in common than might first be apparent.
The love/friendship scene between a younger Mrs. Dalloway and Sally Seaton is the only part of the opera in which melodic and harmonic material move with clarity from one diatonic area to another. This is also the only scene in which Mrs. Dalloway finds true happiness, hope, love, and the time to cultivate her own personal interests, including literature. Melodic and harmonic distinctions expose the side of Mrs. Dalloway, and perhaps Woolf herself, that is private and honest. The scene begins with a rhythmically augmented trill between A and B. Although initially tonally or modally ambiguous, the melodic lines use the A major diatonic
collection of pitches (see Example 13). The middle of the scene digresses to the C major
diatonic collection, and the conclusion of the scene returns to the A major collection. In addition,
the melodies are lyrical and less chromatic than many of Mrs. Dalloway’s previous melodies.

**INSTRUMENTATION AND OTHER MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH MAJOR CHARACTERS**

*Mrs. Dalloway* is scored for ten singers and a ten-piece orchestra, consisting of first and
second violins, viola, cello, string bass, flute, clarinet, saxophone, percussion, and keyboards.
Larsen uses unusual percussion instruments, along with innovative techniques on the orchestral
instruments. Salad bowls struck by mallets, for example, denote the sound of Big Ben. Larsen
often connects certain instrumental combinations with characters or their emotions. To depict the
tormented world of Septimus, for example, Larsen uses bowed cymbals and a chamber ensemble
of clarinet, piano, synthesizer, string quintet, and percussion tape.

The bowed cymbal is first heard at the opening of the opera when the stage light opens
on Mrs. Dalloway. Thereafter, except for another passage associated with Mrs. Dalloway, the
bowed cymbal appears only in conjunction with Septimus’s ravings: when he screams out for
Evans, and when he exclaims, “The world has raised its whip” or “Human Nature is upon me.”
The few but significant uses of the bowed cymbal with Mrs. Dalloway, however, further confirm
the interconnectedness of Mrs. Dalloway’s and Septimus’s lives and feelings. It reappears after
their simultaneous declaration of “Fear no more.” Larsen also places the bowed cymbal between
the “Fear no more” motive and the chiming of Big Ben. Simultaneously, Miss Pym asks, “Are
you all right Mrs. Dalloway?”

Larsen also includes a recurring improvisatory sequence, which frequently involves tape.
The predominant gesture in this sequence is Gesture B, but new instruments and motives are
added or removed each time the sequence is heard. Larsen uses the sequence at moments when characters experience significant emotional changes. One of its most notable appearances is Peter’s single emotional breakdown, which is not verbalized, but instead physically represented through his stage actions and musically represented by the improvisatory sequence. The improvisatory nature of the sequence with an added glass harmonica greatly contrasts with his otherwise stately militaristic music. Larsen also uses the sequence in Act II after Septimus grieves for Evans and notices Rezia’s missing wedding ring. The sequence also acts as a transition into an aria in which Septimus believes he is experiencing a sense of freedom, peace, and beauty in the world. Here, Gesture B is augmented into eighth-note triplets, the percussion plays alternating tritones, the saxophone plays Gesture B, and the tape sounds the improvisatory sequence.

Larsen often musically differentiates between those characters associated with Big Ben and the patriarchal world and those connected with the “other,” although there are some overlapping characteristics. Peter and Dr. William Bradshaw are the two characters consistently linked with the world of Big Ben. As stated, Peter’s gesture (H) conjures militaristic and stately images. It frequently appears when Peter is playing with his knife (see Example 14).

**Example 14. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, mm. 449–50**
Peter’s music also includes other militaristic characteristics, such as the prominent roles of the snare drum and martial rhythms (see Example 15). In addition, the snare drum sometimes prepares the audience for Dr. Bradshaw’s entrance.

**Example 15. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 928–36**

![Musical notation](image)

**MADNESS**

Woolf obscures the divisions of sanity and insanity in the novel, and Larsen’s musical portrayal does the same. Although Larsen distinguishes much of Septimus’s music with such unusual instrumentation as the bowed cymbal or improvisatory material on tape, which includes heartbeats and whooping cranes, his melodies are no more chromatic than those of other characters. There are obvious exceptions, in which Larsen places an authoritative “framework” around Septimus’s music. This framework is especially obvious in the scene where Dr. William
Bradshaw diagnoses Septimus’s illness. Dr. Bradshaw’s lines are generally monotone and speech-like, compared with the usual jagged and chromatic lines of Septimus. Example 16 is, however, one of the few places in the opera where Larsen creates two distinct melodic styles to highlight the differences in the characters’ worlds. Septimus does not submit to Dr. Bradshaw’s style (and thus the patriarchal world of Big Ben). Instead, as seen below, he mimics Dr. Bradshaw’s monotone, then returns to his declamatory, jagged lines.

Example 16. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1230–33
Septimus’s emotional journey passes through moments of denial, understanding, disillusionment, complete breakdown, and ultimately, suicide. Larsen’s music implicitly reveals an understanding of Septimus and madness. In Act II, after Septimus notices that Rezia’s wedding ring is missing, he begins a recitative-like passage in which he suddenly feels free and “understands” the world around him (see Example 17). Unlike his previous multi-layered accompaniment, his accompaniment in this scene is simple: chords over an A pedal tone. His vocal range is narrow with frequent repeated notes and the text setting is mostly syllabic. Larsen’s music, then, suggests Septimus’s incorrect sense of control and understanding. Even though the melodies imply balance and control and the rhythms are conventional, there is
something eerie. The accompaniment consists of alternating tritones, there is a single appearance of the bowed cymbal in the middle of his aria, and there are occasional outbursts of screams.

The recitative-like passage is interrupted by the improvisatory tape sequence in which Gesture B figures prominently, and Septimus’s emotional state turns to confusion. When the tape ends, a sense of calm returns and we hear part of the melody Rezia previously sang when she recalled her happy life in Milan. Septimus continues his aria, but his vocal rantings become more obscure as he believes that “music is visible” and he “went under the sea.” Many different musical worlds collide in the multi-layered accompaniment, and at the same time Septimus, more panicked, screams out for Evans. We hear parts of Gesture B, a repetitive, chromatically descending line, Rezia’s transposed melody, the rhythmic figures of Peter’s Gesture H, and the snare drum, which corresponds to the word “time.” The snare drum continues all the way through the scene as Septimus tells the world that Evans is “dead, and yet he lives;” it ceases once Dr. Bradshaw enters and records in his notebook the exact time of Septimus’s breakdown. In addition, an offstage violin plays G major triads, which I believe represents the disembodied voice of Evans. The predominantly triadic nature of the offstage violin’s melody may suggest how clearly Septimus hears Evans voice, even over the crescendi of the snare drum. Larsen portrays the world of the sane and the insane side by side by simultaneously layering different themes, but does not favor one over the other. The audience thus does not have a point of reference from which to judge normality or abnormality within the context of the opera.
Even though the main male character, Septimus, overtly exhibits traits of madness and “weakness” within the context of his society, the overlay of text and music between Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway expose the similarities between their lives. At these significant moments in the opera, Septimus vocalizes the feelings which Mrs. Dalloway cannot because of her social class. Sometimes their internal thoughts are sung simultaneously, as in the numerous
exclamations of “Fear no more.” Although the “Fear no more” motive usually occurs as a trill-like oscillation of notes, there are two instances in which Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus sing “Fear no more” in counterpoint, then add the remainder of the Shakespeare text from which it is derived. The first occurs at the beginning of the opera, following Mrs. Dalloway’s aria about London life. Before the second instance, Septimus reads Shakespeare and Rezia approaches him, stating, “So serious! You are reading Shakespeare [having trouble with the name].” Neither Richard Dalloway nor Rezia understands Mrs. Dalloway’s and Septimus’s interest in Shakespeare, and they keep their literary interests hidden from their respective partners. After correcting Rezia’s pronunciation of Shakespeare, Septimus begins to sing the Shakespearean passage: “Fear no more the heat of the sun, and the furious winter’s rages. Fear no more the frown of the great, Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke.” The duet turns into a trio, including Mrs. Dalloway. Although Septimus and Rezia sing to each other, Mrs. Dalloway sings “Fear no more,” to herself. The passage ends with Septimus singing alone, and the trill returns (see Example 18).
Example 19. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Act I, mm. 130–35

The characters also repeat such significant lines as “That is all” in succession. In Example 19, Larsen furthers the connection between Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway by using the same pitches for each declamations, but spelling them enharmonically. Furthermore, the consecutive lines, “So far away” and “So long ago,” sung by Rezia and Mrs. Dalloway, also display the parallel lives of the characters, and both melodies follow the same contour.

I believe Larsen and Grice layer moments of anguish and uncontrolled outbursts of both Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway onto each other to show that Mrs. Dalloway’s internal feelings are equivalent to Septimus’s external displays. In the following musical example, Mrs. Dalloway speaks to herself in her bedroom, while Rezia listens to Septimus’s thoughts. Larsen and Grice
create parallels with the lines “I am not old yet” and “I am not dead yet,” and both lines are similar rhythmically. Both characters consecutively cry out “No” with a high, anguish-filled scream, and the stage directions also simultaneously indicate, “She calms” and “He calms” (see Example 20).

Example 20. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, mm. 143–53
Sometimes Septimus responds to a situation rather than Mrs. Dalloway because she cannot externalize her inner turmoil. For example, Peter asks Mrs. Dalloway if she is happy. Instead of Mrs. Dalloway’s response, we hear Septimus scream, “No! It’s no use.” We understand Mrs. Dalloway’s hopelessness at her inability to express her true feelings. When she finally does respond, her daughter Elizabeth walks through the door; instead of answering his question, she responds properly as a hostess, “Here is my Elizabeth. Peter! Remember my party tonight.”  

The lines that Mrs. Dalloway delivers to other characters, such as “Remember my party tonight,” stem from her role as hostess and wife, which she has been taught to fill. I posit that although Mrs. Dalloway’s last line reflects her role as hostess, “I had hoped to have dancing,” the world that “feels too much”—the world of Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus—prevails in the end, not the patriarchal world that Mrs. Dalloway detests. Before Mrs. Dalloway returns to her party, she realizes that Septimus’s suicide was an act of defiance and she sings a repetition of the line taken from her scene with Sally Seaton, “If it were now to die, ‘twere now to die most happy.” We then hear the melody sung in the park by the Old Woman. The stage directions state:

We hear the sounds of the party from the other room. She [Mrs. Dalloway] parts the curtains. She sees the Old Woman in the room opposite staring right at her. The Old Woman is going to bed. She moves about, preparing herself. Mrs. Dalloway is fascinated. The Old Woman slowly pulls the blind as the clock is striking the hour of midnight. The Old Woman puts out her light. Clarissa realizes she doesn’t pity Septimus. She feels somehow like him. The clock is striking. The leaden circles dissolve in the air. We hear Septimus’s voice.

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9 Score of Mrs. Dalloway, 62.

10 Septimus’s character is essential in the novel and opera because he displays the multiple facets and feelings of Mrs. Dalloway, which she does otherwise not outwardly express because of her societal position.

11 Score of Mrs. Dalloway, 141.
Larsen combines the sounds of Big Ben with the Old Woman’s melody (shown below in the instrumental soprano line), and even includes the disembodied voice of Septimus. The act of pulling the blinds as Big Ben strikes may signify the ultimate power to reject the sound of the clock and the outside world and all that they symbolize. In addition, Mrs. Dalloway seems to “hear” Septimus’s disembodied voice, as she echoes “Fear no more” (see Example 21).

**Example 21. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1567–70**

Gesture F (the dance gesture) concludes the opera after Mrs. Dalloway says, “I had hoped to have dancing.” The dotted rhythms slowly disintegrate into a C-E-flat dyad over octave As, which moves to a tritone (A-E-flat), and ultimately a single E-flat. The opera begins on an E-natural and ends on an E-flat. There can be many interpretations of the significance of this half step change from beginning to end, and I will suggest several. Many of Mrs. Dalloway’s vocal lines end a semitone away from their beginnings. This large-scale, half-step relationship may confirm that this is ultimately Mrs. Dalloway’s story to tell. Even though Mrs. Dalloway’s true feelings about Septimus’s death and her own life will be disguised in her role as hostess, Mrs. Dalloway has had an important revelation. The half step change from the beginning to the end
may indicate a transformation in Mrs. Dalloway’s life and feelings, especially because Septimus’s and her lives finally intertwine in a way that only they can understand.

**Example 22. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, m. 138**

Besides Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, the other character who exhibits traits of madness is the Old Woman singing in the park. She does not express madness in as anguished a manner as Septimus, but rather embodies that which is unknown to and misunderstood by the patriarchal world. Like Ophelia in *Hamlet*, the Old Woman sings in her staged world rather than within the context of an art form, and she sings nonsense syllables. Even though we cannot understand what she sings, she represents the “voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring sprouting from the earth.” Larsen distinguishes her musically from the other female characters by means of her low tessitura and narrow range. Because she is the “voice of no age or sex,” I believe that Larsen’s choice of vocal range compared to that of other characters represents her androgynous nature—she does not embody feminine characteristics typical of the other female characters and she represents an ageless wisdom which defies any categorization of sex. Her melodies are also atonal. In Example 22, nine out of the twelve chromatic notes are present, with intervals of semitones and sevenths prevalent.

In addition, although she sings mostly unaccompanied, the Old Woman’s lines are interrupted by the B-flat clarinet trill. The presence of the trill augments the ambiguity. The second time she sings, however, she sings in English, using the A-minor diatonic collection. I contend that, as in the scene between Mrs. Dalloway and Sally Seaton, Larsen chooses to base

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12 Score of *Mrs. Dalloway*, 72.
the Old Woman’s melodic lines in diatonic collections to illustrate an element of truthfulness. The Old Woman turns to Peter and asks, “What matter they?” What does it matter what the outside world thinks of you? What does it matter if you express your true emotions? Peter, however, still cannot understand the Old Woman even though she ultimately sings in English. He even averts her glance. Perhaps he turns away because he cannot understand her, because he does not want to understand her, or maybe because her physical presence is somewhat imposing.

Septimus, on the other hand, adopts the A minor diatonic collection and whistles a tune with a contour similar to that of the Old Woman’s song. Simultaneously, Rezia hears the Old Woman, understands her message, and sings to Septimus, “What matter they?” Woolf and Larsen once again show two distinct worlds intertwining, but without understanding one another. The world of Big Ben and the world of feeling are not necessarily more or less sane than their opposites. A true definition of madness would therefore be as difficult to formulate.

**Gender Constructions in Music**

Musical constructions of gender and madness are intimately intertwined in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as are evident in the role of the Old Woman. Woolf’s ideas of both gender and sanity/insanity are as ambiguous as the trill. Larsen does not make obvious musical distinctions between the sexes in the same way as, say, Bizet does in *Carmen*. Because of the predominance of atonality, with heavy emphasis on semitones and sevenths throughout the opera, it is impossible to argue that diatonicism/chromaticism, or stable/unstable music, define a character’s gender or sex.13

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13 There are a few instances, however, where I believe Larsen does consciously make a musical distinction to set apart a character not only by chromaticism, but by melody in general. As stated, Dr. Bradshaw sings in an extremely monotonous tone when diagnosing Septimus. This musical characterization sets an authoritative, masculine tone.

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Septimus’s and Mrs. Dalloway’s melodies, however, contain the most chromatic and unpredictable figures. Septimus fits the stereotype of the operatic male figure fraught with grief and guilt, whose masculine ego has been worn down, thus making him vulnerable because he feels too much. The most chromatic passages are those associated with excessive feeling. Although militaristic figures often accompany Peter’s music, some of his melodies also contain chromaticism and large leaps, especially when he discusses his feelings with Mrs. Dalloway. If one buys into the stereotype that feeling is associated with the feminine and reasoning with the masculine, then one could argue that Larsen’s most chromatic passages are ultimately associated with the feminine. One could also argue that Larsen’s use of chromaticism, along with disjunct melodic lines, has more to do with Woolf’s ideas of sanity/insanity (the world of rational thought versus the world of feeling) than with a gender distinction.

One of the most distinct musical passages is the scene between Sally and Clarissa. I believe the emphasis on diatonic pitch collections and regular metrical rhythms indicate Clarissa and Sally Seaton’s sense of power and triumph over the gender norms of the outside world. Woolf and Larsen depict Clarissa and Sally Seaton’s sexuality at its fullest in this scene and theoretically give it the most rooted, stable music. Does this mean that Larsen supports the theory that Mrs. Dalloway is indeed homosexual? I will not categorize her sexuality, but I do think that Larsen’s musical choices in this scene indicate an internal sense of power and comfort in expressing Clarissa’s gender and identity with Sally Seaton, as opposed to the gender role she is expected to fulfill.

Mrs. Dalloway also identifies herself as Clarissa around Sally Seaton. “Clarissa” represents her identity before marriage and perhaps a freedom of gender expression. In another

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14 As stated in the previous chapter, male operatic characters who possess these qualities are often associated with the feminine and die in the way that many femme fatales die.
musical example, Larsen uses an E-flat triad when Mrs. Dalloway recalls her days as “Clarissa” instead of as Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Larsen’s use of diatonicism may indicate the characters’ comfort level with their own identities by means of the listener’s comfort with diatonicism. The problem of distinguishing and defining gender and madness in Mrs. Dalloway, I believe, shows Woolf’s correct hesitation to claim one identity or the other, as well as her desire for an interconnectedness between the characters.

**Death and Disembodied Voices**

Like many heroes’ and heroines’ deaths in other operas, Septimus’s suicide represents an ultimate act of defiance against the society in which he lives. The moments leading up to his suicide are filled with unusual instrumental and vocal techniques. Larsen uses techniques such as *sotto voce*, arhythmical notes, spoken pitches, and screams. The underlying tape sequence highlights Septimus’s memories of Evans’ death as we hear whooping cranes, heartbeats, a wok top, and howling chimes. Immediately before Septimus jumps, the tape sequence returns and the heartbeats become louder. His speech becomes breathless, with rests between each pair of words and the heartbeat ends when Septimus screams, “That is all.” The tape then switches to the sound of police sirens; Peter’s militaristic motive returns briefly, and we hear the trill juxtaposed with Big Ben. Larsen once again combines the worlds of sanity and insanity and the text at this moment corroborates this concurrence. Peter states, “It takes one’s breath away, these moments where things come together. This ambulance, and life, and death.”

**Example 23. Mrs. Dalloway, Act II, mm. 1205–08**

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15 Score of *Mrs. Dalloway*, 129.
His suicide is not the last we hear from Septimus. At the end of the opera, we hear his disembodied voice singing “Fear no more” with Mrs. Dalloway. It is as if he assures us from beyond that now he does not fear life. We also hear another male’s disembodied voice—that of Evans. Evans does not actually sing, but the offstage violin represents his voice. Septimus says, “Evans! Sing with me!,” at which point we hear the violin (see Example 23). Because Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus believe that death is a true form of communication, the disembodied voices speaking from the dead play a significant role in their understanding of death.

**Performativity**

As stated in the previous chapter, Mrs. Dalloway performs at least two different expressions of female identity within the context of the opera. The first is her sophisticated role as Richard Dalloway’s wife and a much-admired party hostess. The second is represented in her overt sexual desire for Sally Seaton. Because of her conflicting genders (is she heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual?), it is important to remember Butler’s theory that there “is no gender identity behind the expression of gender, [and] identity is performativity constituted by the very
‘expression’ that are said to be its results.”¹⁶ That is, I will not show that Mrs. Dalloway performs either a heterosexual or homosexual identity, but that Mrs. Dalloway performs gender differently in different situations.

Mrs. Dalloway sometimes performs her conflicting gender roles through symbolism. Much of this gender symbolism occurs while Mrs. Dalloway is by herself in her bedroom. In her “prison-like” bedroom,¹⁷ Mrs. Dalloway reveals her true yearnings and her daydreams, away from the pressures of the world. In Act One, for example, Mrs. Dalloway sings about how her identity was stolen from her after her marriage to Richard. She states, “And now, invisible, unknown. Missus Richard Dalloway. That is all. No room for Clarissa anymore.”¹⁸ She then screams “Clarissa” while looking at herself in the mirror. We see her struggling as the scene progresses into her daydreams of Sally Seaton.

The green dress she wears symbolizes which gender she must perform. Her dress is silver-green silk charmeuse with a lace collar, and hides her feminine figure. This is unlike Sally Seaton’s dress, which is off the shoulder with swirl patterns and a large flower sash. Sally’s dress is much more flirtatious and young, whereas Mrs. Dalloway dresses like a proper conservative hostess. However, in the scene where Mrs. Dalloway begins to daydream of her time with Sally Seaton, she removes her dress and lets her hair, which is otherwise kept up tidy, down. When Peter interrupts her daydream, Mrs. Dalloway quickly hides her green dress under her robe and petticoat, “like a virgin protecting her chastity.”¹⁹ Furthermore, as Dr. Bradshaw diagnoses

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¹⁷ Score of Mrs. Dalloway, 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 37.
Septimus’s illness, we see Mrs. Dalloway lying on her bed in her green dress, waiting for Richard Dalloway, the green dress seeming to act as a barrier between the gender role she is supposed to fill, and that which she desires to fill.

**Example 24. Mrs. Dalloway, Act I, mm. 240–49**

Sally Seaton performs the gender role in which Mrs. Dalloway yearns to fulfill herself. Sally puffs on cigars, exposes her bare legs, and sings “like a suffragette.”

Although Mrs. Dalloway does not adopt these actions, her melodic lines dictate her expression of freedom and happiness (see Example 24). They span a large vocal range, with many ascending melismas that suggest jubilation and ecstasy. Many of her lines are also triadic and diatonic (G major collection), and move in stepwise motion. These vocal lines help her perform the gender role in

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20 Ibid., 25.
which she finds joy and comfort, as opposed to the highly atonal and disjunct lines she sings when she feels anxious and angry. Of course, her caresses and glances toward Sally Seaton also constitute an element of performativity.

The dance (Gesture F) she performs with Peter and her ecstatic twirling dance in the scene with Sally Seaton also constitute an element of performativity. Grice indicates that the dance between Mrs. Dalloway and Peter is like a mating ritual. It seems as though Mrs. Dalloway dances through the motions she has been taught, and yet the music to the dance is awkward (with irregular rhythms and tritones). We understand that she is performing the acceptable gender and identity, but there is something uncomfortable about the dance. On the other hand, in the scene with Sally Seaton, Mrs. Dalloway twirls around in an ecstatic dance, without a care in the world. The two dances show Mrs. Dalloway performing two completely opposite identities. Her performative body produces different effects in different contexts, and in the case of the dance, Larsen’s music helps identify those distinctions.

**Narrativity**

As Abbate claims, music possesses moments of narration, which are set off from the rest of the music by a characteristic way of speaking. Like Wagner’s leitmotives in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Larsen’s recurring gestures function as a form of narrativity, which manipulate time and place in the opera. Although many of them are associated with a character or emotion, or act as scene dividers, they sometimes appear out of context, combined with other gestures. For example, as Mrs. Dalloway’s emotions run rampant while she muses over the social scene of London, the accompaniment consists of an augmented version of Gesture B (Septimus’s gesture), part of the London gesture (Gesture C), and the chimes of Big Ben (see Example 25).
Although Mrs. Dalloway does not state directly that the monstrous brute she describes is London, the presence of these combined gestures and the sound of Big Ben indicate what the words do not. In this case, the gestures do not function as referential types of narrativity like Wagner’s leitmotives, but rather a symbolic type of narrativity that aids the listener’s understanding of the text.

Earlier, I discussed Peter’s emotional breakdown, when he bursts into tears after telling Mrs. Dalloway about his newfound love in India. At the point of his breakdown, the improvisatory passage—which includes Gesture B and a glass harmonica—distinguishes itself within the context of Peter’s music and his character, and thus functions as a type of narrativity.

There are two other duets between Mrs. Dalloway and Peter in the Act One that are completely different from the rest of the opera, and therefore disruptive to the ear. Mrs. Dalloway and Peter sing two lines homorhythmically and in thirds. Both sing the first line, “Do you remember,” internally (see Example 26a). They sing the second line, “It was not meant to
be,” externally, toward each other (see Example 26b). These lines of homorhythmic consonance give a moment’s reprieve, where for an instant we wonder whether two characters’ lives interconnect in real time (unlike those of Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway), and whether they fully understand each other.

**Example 26a.** *Mrs. Dalloway*, Act I, mm. 576–77

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Mrs. D

Peter

Do you remember?

Example 26b. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Act I, mm. 679–82

Mrs. D

Peter

It was not to be.

Another place of narrativity in *Mrs. Dalloway* occurs in the scene between Mrs. Dalloway and Sally Seaton. As previously discussed, the pitch and harmonic content of the scene
center on specific diatonic collections, and the accompanying melodies are comprised of linear or triadic lines. The composition of this scene is completely different from any other surrounding scene, not only because of the verbal exchange between the characters, but also because of Larsen’s choice of tonality and melody. This type of narrativity acts as a disruptive element within an atonal discourse, but in the case of Mrs. Dalloway, it is disruptive because there is a clear tonal basis.

**Conclusion**

Any opera critic whose main complaint about Mrs. Dalloway is that Larsen and Grice did not show the party scene at the end of Woolf’s novel,\(^\text{21}\) or that Larsen should not use kitchenware (salad bowls) as musical instruments,\(^\text{22}\) missed the point. However, Mrs. Dalloway is not an opera that one can view only once and immediately comprehend its musical and literary ingenuity. For those audience members who attend opera to enjoy passively an evening out, Mrs. Dalloway will not satisfy; similarly, one would not pick up a Woolf novel for some light reading. Mrs. Dalloway does, however, open a world of possibilities for audience members to explore and challenge their own perceptions of opera’s limitations and the professed relationships between operatic characters.

I have shown that an analysis of Mrs. Dalloway must rely upon interdisciplinary approaches—specifically the intersection of literary and feminist criticism of music. Just as feminist criticism’s ideas are indebted to the earlier work of literary feminists, literary criticism can also be enhanced by musicological ideas. This partnership is especially significant when

\(^{21}\) Writer Heidi Waleson’s review of Larsen’s Mrs. Dalloway in The Cleveland Plain Dealer states, “Dancing—or something equally festive—might have been a good idea. As it was, Ms. Larsen and librettist Bonnie Grice eliminated the part and took all the fun out of poor Clarissa Dalloway.” Page number and date of article unknown. This article was provided to me by Libby Larsen.

\(^{22}\) James Damico’s article “Theater: Mrs. Dalloway: In Limbo” from The Cleveland Free Times (July 28, 1993) states, “I may have missed something, but I thought salad [bowls] [were] for eating and opera was for singing.”
considering opera because of the reliance on both text and music. However, one cannot rely on scholarly criticism alone; one must also examine the historical and cultural framework in which the work was composed or written. This is why it is important to examine Woolf’s background and ideas: her literary works were closely bound to her own experiences in Victorian England. Larsen’s music, on the other hand, is written from a late twentieth-century American perspective. While Woolf’s and Larsen’s worlds may seem to clash, Larsen understands and conveys the novel’s most pertinent issues, which are timeless. Her ability to speak the vernacular clearly and dramatically and her willingness to extend the opera’s orchestral palette help move American opera in a direction with which contemporary audiences can relate.

Larsen’s musical setting corroborates Woolf’s literary ideals. Larsen’s depiction of madness and gender/sexuality stretches beyond the confines of traditional definitions, as she overlaps similar musical characteristics, such as the gestures, in dealing with characters associated with both sanity and insanity. Woolf believed that there were no grounds for genuine unions between people because patriarchal society objectifies and splits people into separate objects, pigeon-holing them into an external identity. Yet through the juxtaposition of recurring literary and musical gestures, among other techniques, Larsen and Woolf establish an authentic interconnectedness of characters who never meet, such as Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, and show the similarities of characters who are supposed to be complete opposites. In effect, Larsen and Woolf uncover the fallibilities of patriarchal society in a unique combination of literary and musical social commentary.
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