W. H. AUDEN AND OPERA: STUDIES OF THE LIBRETTO AS LITERARY FORM

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ABSTRACT

MATTHEW PAUL CARLSON: W. H. Auden and Opera: Studies of the Libretto as Literary Form
(Under the direction of George S. Lensing)

From 1939 to 1973, the poet W. H. Auden devoted significant energy to writing for the musical stage, partnering with co-librettist Chester Kallman and collaborating with some of the most successful opera composers of the twentieth century, including Benjamin Britten, Igor Stravinsky, and Hans Werner Henze. This dissertation examines Auden’s librettos in the context of his larger career, relating them to his other poetry and to the aesthetic, philosophical, and theological positions set forth in his prose. I argue that opera offered Auden a formal alternative to his own early attempts at spoken verse drama as well as those of his contemporaries. Furthermore, I contend that he was drawn to the role of librettist as a means of counteracting romantic notions of the inspired solitary genius and the sanctity of the written word. Through a series of chronologically ordered analyses, the dissertation shows how Auden’s developing views on the unique capacities of opera as a medium are manifested in the librettos’ plots. In his best-known libretto, for Stravinsky’s The Rake’s Progress, Auden adopts a conspicuously intellectual approach, structuring the opera’s story to reflect his theories about music’s relationship to temporality and free will. By contrast, his later operatic texts deal with the dangers of privileging the intellect and suppressing instinct; in the end, he relies on the medium of opera itself, with its formal constraints and exuberant emotions, to synthesize reason and
passion. Taken together, my readings of Auden’s librettos address an important yet neglected facet of a major poet’s career. At the same time, the dissertation challenges narrow definitions of the literary that exclude texts written for musical setting and expands critical conceptions of the possibilities for poetry in the postwar era.
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There is more freedom within the narrowest limits, within the most specialized task, than in the limitless vacuum which the modern mind imagines to be the playground for it.

—Hugo von Hofmannsthal
INTRODUCTION

When Ben Jonson published the first folio edition of his collected works in 1616, his contemporaries were shocked to find that he had included stage plays, which they considered an ephemeral, unserious form (Donaldson 22). While the texts of spoken drama have long since shed their sub-literary status among English writers and critics, the same cannot be said of opera librettos, in part because so few major English-language poets or dramatists have attempted to write them. When W. H. Auden began writing librettos in 1939, he became the first English literary figure of comparable stature to do so since John Dryden. Unlike Jonson, Auden did not compile his own collected works—aside from the poems—during his lifetime; that task has been left to the literary executor of Auden’s estate, Edward Mendelson, whose scholarly editions wonderfully exhibit the full range of Auden’s achievement as playwright, librettist, and critic (six volumes have appeared already, and the poetry is still to come). The volume containing the librettos was reviewed in a wide variety of periodicals on its release in 1993, but despite this brief flurry of critical interest, the texts remain understudied and undervalued today. Even those Auden scholars who devote some attention to his operatic career are often dismissive of the librettos’ literary merit. For instance, in W. H. Auden: A Commentary, a book that explicitly aims for comprehensiveness (viii), John Fuller refers to “the fact that the libretti written in collaboration with Chester Kallman [which includes all but one] are in their details of limited poetical interest, whatever the authenticity of their themes”
The confidence with which Fuller refers to the librettos’ “limited poetical interest” as a fact is somewhat disheartening, especially for someone about to embark on a book-length study of those librettos—that is, until one remembers that much the same sentiments were once expressed about Volpone and The Alchemist.

In the same year that Princeton University Press published the collected edition of Auden’s librettos, they also published a new edition of the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, a standard reference work in the field of literary studies. The entry on “Dramatic Poetry,” as one might expect, contains several paragraphs on the Renaissance, one of which includes the following demarcation: “In Italy, opera emerged, based on the assumption that the dialogue of Greek tragedy was sung rather than spoken; but when music dictates the meter of dramatic dialogue, relegating language to a secondary function, the work does not fall into the province of dramatic poetry and hence will not be considered here” (Cohn 305). This justification of neglect speaks not only for the reference work in which it appears, but also, to a large extent, for the field as a whole. The distinction between spoken verse drama and opera librettos written in verse is a valid one; in fact, Auden’s evolution as a librettist is characterized, in part, by his increasing ability to distinguish between the two. However, even if one agrees that language is relegated to “a secondary function” in opera, it does not disappear entirely; the addition of music transfigures, but does not eliminate, the literary elements of the dramatic text. Indeed, the theoretical distinction between “work” and “text” is particularly applicable to the libretto (Barthes 156). Like the screenplay, which is in many ways its closest analogue, the libretto is “a text of suggestive incompleteness that demands the writerly activity of others” (Price 41); as such, it poses a special challenge to romantic notions of
the author and the work that privilege the inspired, original products of autonomous individuals. Given Auden’s general antipathy toward lofty romantic claims regarding art and the artist, his embrace of the librettist’s role as a unique mode of authorship makes perfect sense.

Although Auden did not view playwriting and libretto writing interchangeably, he did conceive of opera as a theatrically viable alternative to verse drama as well as a renewed opportunity for poets to enjoy “the last refuge of the High style” (116). In a 1961 essay on opera called “A Public Art,” he explained the rationale behind his decision to abandon verse drama:

Dramatic poetry, to be recognizable as poetry, must raise its voice and be grand. But a poet today cannot raise his voice without sounding false and ridiculous. The modern poetic dramatist seems faced with these alternatives: either he writes the kind of verse which is natural to him, in which case he produces little closet dramas which can only make their effect if the audience is a small intimate one, or, if he wishes to write a public drama, he must so flatten his verse that it sounds to the ear like prose. Neither alternative seems to me satisfactory. (310)³

Auden does not cite particular examples of the two alternatives to which he alludes, but his descriptions provide strong clues. The reference to “closet dramas” and “small intimate” audiences reflects the staging practices of many of W. B. Yeats’s plays. At the Hawk’s Well, for instance, “was performed for the first time in April 1916, in a friend’s drawing-room, and only those who cared for poetry were invited” (Yeats, “Yeats’s” 691). As Auden implies, there is nothing “public” about such performances, and, in fact, this was not Yeats’s aim; he describes one of his plays as “unsuited for the public stage” (Resurrection 481), and in his notes on another, he rejoices in his “freedom from the stupidity of an ordinary audience” (“Yeats’s” 694). Auden contrasts this elitist conception of verse drama with a veiled reference to the later plays of his other great predecessor,
T. S. Eliot, who in 1951 stated unapologetically that “If the poetic drama is to reconquer its place, it must, in my opinion, enter into overt competition with prose drama” (87). Dissatisfied with both options, Auden pursued an entirely different path for dramatic poetry, and, remarkably, it has become the road more traveled. Irene Morra persuasively argues that “the negative reception of verse drama in 1950s Britain coincided with the rise of the literary librettist” (8), a specimen that is becoming more and more prominent on the contemporary opera scene on both sides of the Atlantic.

Among English-language writers, Auden is the most prominent twentieth-century example of what Morra calls “the literary librettist.” Paradoxically, the literariness of his librettos constitutes both the source of their achievement and the feature for which they are most often criticized. Even after learning that librettists should avoid displays of linguistic virtuosity, he found it difficult to do so. In the process, however, he recovered and elevated libretto writing as a field of creative activity worthy of talented, high-profile poets, dramatists, and (increasingly) novelists. There is a hint of defensiveness in almost all of Auden’s operatic endeavors: just as his prose writings on opera consistently rationalize what Samuel Johnson, encapsulating a centuries-long Anglophone bias, called “an exotick and irrational entertainment” (160), his librettos’ self-consciously literary dimensions seem to advertise the form’s potential as an instrument for poetic skill and dramatic sophistication.

In the chapters that follow, I seek to provide readings of Auden’s librettos that explore these literary dimensions without losing sight of the texts’ ultimate purpose as words for music. My examinations of the resulting operas are deliberately centered on Auden’s contributions, which I aim to situate in the context of his career. Nevertheless,
the discussion ranges widely, reflecting the diversity of Auden’s intellectual and creative interests as well as those of his collaborators, on whom I typically focus more directly at the conclusion of each chapter. I have refrained from offering a surplus of facts about the genesis and evolution of each opera because Mendelson has already performed this task so admirably in his edition of the librettos; in fact, I hope that my study will be viewed as a kind of companion to that volume. Thanks to Mendelson’s enabling work, I have felt free to pursue my own arguments and interpretations, which I have briefly outlined below.

Analyzing each of Auden’s librettos in chronological order, the dissertation’s four chapters trace the development of the poet’s views on opera and his expanding sense of its possibilities. My first chapter, “Auden and Britten’s Paul Bunyan and the Frontiers of Opera,” shows how, even before Auden began to espouse opera proper, his dramatic writings increasingly inclined toward the operatic. I argue that the 1941 operetta Paul Bunyan, in particular, marks a pivotal transition in both Auden’s career and the history of English-language opera; the work’s eclectic mix of musical theatrical genres led to its initially poor reception, but the experiment ultimately encouraged Auden and Benjamin Britten to find the answers to their dramaturgical problems through the fixed forms and conventions of opera. “The Rake’s Progress and Auden’s Theories of Music and Opera,” the second chapter, demonstrates how Auden’s newfound knowledge of the operatic tradition influenced his 1951 collaboration with Igor Stravinsky. I contend that the opera’s protagonist, Tom Rakewell, ironically dramatizes Auden’s evolving ideas about the singular capacities of music and opera to represent the subjective experience of the will’s free movement within the bounds of time. Yielding realist objectivity to the rising
art of cinema, Auden and Stravinsky’s opera celebrates artifice as it explores the relationships between tradition and innovation, cyclicality and linearity, and recurrence and becoming.

While the first two chapters concentrate on Auden’s initial attraction to opera and his intellectual justification of its appeal, the last two demonstrate how his adoption of the librettist’s role challenges narrow understandings of a poet’s proper function and subject matter. My third chapter, “Master Poet or Master Librettist: Yeats, Auden, and Elegy for Young Lovers,” highlights the friction between content and form in Auden’s first collaboration with German composer Hans Werner Henze, the 1961 opera Elegy for Young Lovers. I contrast the satirical characterization of the Yeats-inspired protagonist, Gregor Mittenhofer, with Auden’s collaborative practice, which involves the subordination of words to music and implicitly rejects the neo-romantic myth of solitary genius that the librettist associated with Yeats. In the final chapter, “Passion and Reason in The Bassarids [1966] and Love’s Labour’s Lost [1973],” I examine Auden’s reworkings of Euripides’ late tragedy, The Bacchae, and Shakespeare’s early comedy. Building from a consideration of opera’s unique combination of expressive latitude and formal restraints, I investigate how Auden’s late-career librettos transform their adapted texts in order to foreground the dangers of suppressing passion in the name of reason. The resulting works, both of which dramatize Eliot’s notion of the “dissociation of sensibility,” also exemplify an alternative outlet for the reintegration of thought and feeling.
NOTES

1. Fuller devotes more space to *Paul Bunyan* than any of the other librettos because it was the only one written by Auden alone. Auden, however, felt that it was his least successful effort (see chapter 2, page 1).

2. For the sake of readability, I have spelled out the abbreviations in the original text. An entirely new editorial team has produced a revised, fourth edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which will be published in July 2012. I, for one, am interested to see whether the new editors will adopt a similar stance toward dramatic poetry written for musical setting.

3. I cite Edward Mendelson’s editions of *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden* whenever possible (six volumes to date). For references to Mendelson’s textual notes and cross-references within each chapter’s list of works cited, I use the following abbreviations: *Plays, Libretti, Prose I, Prose II, Prose III*, and *Prose IV*. Full citation information is available below.

4. Detailed performance histories are also beyond the scope of this study, although each chapter includes some remarks on the operas’ premieres.
WORKS CITED


CHAPTER 1
AUDEN AND BRITTEN’S PAUL BUNYAN AND THE FRONTIERS OF OPERA

In a recent issue of Modern Drama, Patrick Query offers a fascinating explanation for why W. H. Auden’s “verse drama project burned out so quickly and completely” (579). Query shows how, in Auden’s series of dramatic collaborations with Christopher Isherwood, “the amount and range of the poetry would decrease in each play, a pattern tied to the authors’ waning confidence in ritual means for evoking cultural order” (586). Ultimately, he argues that Auden’s visit to Civil-War-torn Spain and his subsequent conversion (or return) to the Anglican faith of his childhood mark “the beginning of the end of his pseudo-ritualistic verse drama. A taste for ritual, it appears, was no longer enough to sustain it. Once he had found an objective and historical ritual community—one, besides, with a personal appeal—the urgency behind constructing a substitute for it in the theatre began quickly to fade” (601). As an account of why Auden and Isherwood’s theatrical vision was doomed to failure, Query’s narrative is thorough and convincing; it seems inevitable that the exuberance and vitality of a play like The Dog Beneath the Skin would eventually give way to its underlying rootlessness—a rootlessness both generic and ideological. When Auden and Isherwood emigrated from England to America at the beginning of 1939, their collaborative relationship dissolved. Isherwood soon relocated to southern California, while Auden remained behind in New York. What is problematic about Query’s rather tidy conclusion, however, is that, for Auden at least, the quest for a
theatrically viable form of dramatic verse was far from over. In fact, I want to suggest precisely the opposite—that a lasting solution to this problem was only just on the horizon.

One of the most compelling aspects of Query’s argument is its concentration on Auden’s enthusiasm for ritual. He is also right to recognize that Auden had, indeed, “found an objective and historical ritual community” that provided him with a more stable worldview, and that he would have no interest in “constructing a substitute for it in the theatre” (601; emphasis added). But just because Auden had rediscovered a satisfactory form of religious ritual does not mean that he had lost interest in ritualized art; on the contrary, during the years in which Auden was returning to the Christian faith, he was also undergoing another conversion—he was becoming a lover of opera, a dramatic form with its own well-established rituals and traditions. Eventually, libretto writing would become the primary outlet through which Auden could exercise his threefold passion for creating a ritual drama, composing verse for the theater, and practicing collaboration (with various composers as well as his co-librettist Chester Kallman). If we can only widen our conception of “verse drama” beyond non-musical forms, we will see that Auden’s dramatic project did not burn out as “quickly and completely” as Query supposes. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how Auden’s dramatic writings—rather than simply fizzling out—evolved in the direction of the operatic, a mode with built-in conventions that resolved many of Auden’s dramaturgical problems. First, I investigate the role of music in Auden’s earlier dramatic works and his increasing reliance on the contributions of Benjamin Britten; next, I analyze the varied formal strategies in Auden and Britten’s first and only large-scale collaboration, the 1941
operetta *Paul Bunyan*, which stands at the crossroads between the Group Theatre productions of the thirties and the later operatic achievements of both artists; finally, I briefly consider the dissolution of the Auden-Britten partnership and their respective contributions toward the resuscitation of English-language opera at mid-century.

**ON THE FRONTIER OF VERSE DRAMA AND OPERA**

Auden’s proclivity to ritual is generally acknowledged, but the integral role of music in his experiences of ritual requires further emphasis. In an autobiographical passage from *The Prolific and the Devourer*, he describes his family background: “In one way we were eccentric: we were Anglo-Catholics. On Sundays there were services with music, candles and incense, and at Christmas a crèche was rigged up in the dining-room, lit by an electric-torch battery, round which we sang hymns” (414). A definite bias toward traditional, high-church forms of worship remained with Auden throughout his life. Indeed, even during the years of his estrangement from the church, he could never resist the urge to employ its forms in dramatic works. Isherwood’s 1937 comments on this matter are particularly valuable since they foreground the intimate connection between music and ritual:

> Auden is a musician and a ritualist. As a child, he enjoyed a high Anglican upbringing, coupled with a sound musical education. The Anglicanism has evaporated, leaving only the height: he is still much preoccupied with ritual, in all its forms. When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him—or down flop the characters on their knees (see F6 *passim*): another constant danger is that of choral interruptions by angel-voices. If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass. (“Some Notes” 74)

That opera and the Mass constituted overlapping categories in Auden’s mind at the time.
is confirmed in Isherwood’s travel-diary portion of their travel-book collaboration, *Journey to a War*. In response to a “highly artificial and ritualistic” performance of a Chinese opera, Auden remarked, “it was like hearing Mass in an Italian church” (520). But Isherwood’s extended comment above, in spite of its lighthearted tone, hints that these endearing tendencies of Auden’s were also potentially problematic for the success of their plays. His choice of words—“I have to keep a sharp eye on him,” “another constant danger,” “If Auden had his way”—suggests the presence of conflicting forces in their collaborative works.

From 1935 onward, Auden wrote all of his full-length plays and librettos in collaboration, with the exception of *Paul Bunyan*, which is yet another reason why that work marks such an intriguing and pivotal moment in his dramatic career. Biographer Richard Davenport-Hines claims that “Literary collaboration was valued by Auden as a sort of marriage” (137), and the dedication of his *Collected Poems* to his two dramatic collaborators, Isherwood and Chester Kallman, seems to confirm this assessment (xxxv). Poetry may have come naturally to Auden, but drama was another matter. Alan Jacobs points out that he enlisted collaborators “who could provide him with narrational and structural forms upon which he could poetically elaborate” (101). In his account of Auden’s and Isherwood’s individual contributions to *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, Edward Mendelson notes, tellingly, that “The organization of the play is by Isherwood; Auden’s *Chase* [an early version of *The Dog Beneath the Skin*] is a sprawling mess” (“Auden-Isherwood” 284). Likewise, Roger Savage credits Chester Kallman with bringing a “feeling for the role of words in large-scale musical structures which Auden had not yet fully grasped” to their collaboration on *The Rake’s Progress* (56). Isherwood and
Kallman, then, may have succeeded in providing “the narrational and structural forms” for Auden’s “poetic elaborations” (to adapt Jacobs’s terms), but do the resulting works cohere as wholes? The answer depends on the formal conventions—and the audience’s rejection or acceptance of those conventions—in and through which each work is written and received.

The Auden-Isherwood plays, it seems, were plagued almost from the beginning with tensions between different dramatic modes. Query’s article, quite accurately, describes these works in terms of a contest between realism and ritual, “verse and prose, seriousness and satire” (595). In the introduction to his edition of the plays, Mendelson frames these dichotomies in rather exciting terms: “Auden’s dramatic works ranged in style from rude comedy to prophetic admonition. . . . They combined the energy of popular entertainment with the urgency of sacramental ritual”; somewhat more soberly, he adds, “Some were acknowledged and abandoned failures. Others, although flawed, were both profound and exhilarating” (xiii). Of course, this prodigious range of style is also characteristic of Auden’s own lyric output, but it appears that Isherwood’s contribution (though supplying much-needed dramatic structure) led to a further fracturing of stylistic and generic focus. In Isherwood’s own account of the creation of The Ascent of F6, he emphasizes the two collaborators’ distinctive roles: “Our respective work on this play was fairly sharply defined. . . . We interfered very little with each other’s work. The only scene on which we really collaborated was the last. It was understood, throughout, that Wystan’s specialty was to be the ‘woozy’ and mine the ‘straight’ bits” (Christopher 241). This last distinction, between the “woozy” and the “straight” bits, is particularly provocative; among the woozy bits, one can list all of the
songs and choruses for which Auden is well known. Without fully intending to, Auden and Isherwood were writing dramatic texts that very closely approximated opera librettos.

In the preface to his libretto for the opera *Albion and Albanius*, John Dryden made a distinction similar to Isherwood’s: “The recitative part of the *Opera* requires a more masculine Beauty of expression and sound: the other, which (for want of a proper *English* Word) I must call *The Songish Part*, must abound in the softness and variety of Numbers; its principal Intention, being to please the Hearing, rather than to gratify the understanding” (4). Auden was certainly most gifted at providing “Songish Numbers” for the plays, while Isherwood excelled at “gratifying the understanding” with narrative momentum and plot structure. I do not intend to suggest that all opera follows Dryden’s binary model—Wagner’s through-composed music dramas are a major exception—but I do believe that the alternating aria-and-recitative format offers a useful analogue for thinking about the Auden-Isherwood plays.² (The comparison seems especially prescient as one looks forward to Auden and Stravinsky’s revival of number opera in *The Rake’s Progress.*) It is, perhaps, this very structural characteristic that Auden had in mind when he observed much later that his 1930s plays “seem to me now to be libretti *manqués*” (qtd. in Innes 94). The crucial difference, however, is that an opera audience considers the “Numbers” or “Songish Parts” the highlights of the performance—opportunities for the composer to “please the Hearing” and, no less important, for the singers to display their virtuosity. In a spoken drama, on the other hand, they might threaten to hinder the flow of the action or disrupt any sense of illusion the more “realistic” elements have established. One solution is to accentuate those unrealistic, “woozy” passages with actual music so that the tonal shifts appear more deliberate. Some dramatists might think this
approach would detract from the verse itself, but for Auden, this became an increasingly attractive strategy—not because he wanted his words to become a mere wash of sound, but because he sought a theatrically viable function for his poetry.

From the beginning, Auden’s dramatic works incorporated specific musical components. The text of Auden and Isherwood’s very first play, *The Enemies of a Bishop* (1929), calls for “American recitative with jazz accompaniment” played through a wireless (58). Beginning with *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, the playwrights began exploiting (and most likely straining) the musical resources of the London Group Theatre, requesting, for instance, that “The music of the ensuing duet should be in the style of Wagnerian opera” (251). In this case, of course, the music was requested for the sake of parody and satire, but the role of music changed in Auden and Isherwood’s next play, *The Ascent of F6*, which featured a score by Benjamin Britten. Auden and Britten had met in 1935 while working for the GPO Film Unit, and the poet’s encounter with a young composer whose technical gifts and attitude toward professionalism were comparable to his own must have inspired him.³ In a 1936 letter to Britten, Auden writes, “Look here, would you be prepared to do the music for our new play, in which there is a lot. . . . The music is more serious and operatic than in *Dogskin*” (Britten 487; underlining in original). The role of music, then, was to be heightened, and in more ways than one. Evidently, Britten rose to the occasion, for his score—particularly his choral setting of Auden’s now-famous “Funeral Blues”—proved to be one of the most successful aspects of the production. Isherwood later recalled “that it was often Ben’s music that saved the day dramatically speaking in the case of *The Ascent of F6*” (Mitchell, “Down” 446). In *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the
Thirties, Michael Sidnell observes, “Since the [later plays of Auden and Isherwood] are now known merely by their published texts it is easy to overlook the essential role of music in them” (260). He also speculates that if the performance of The Dog Beneath the Skin had “been endowed with the vitality that Britten’s music imparted to The Ascent of F6 and On the Frontier, it would surely have been theatrically explosive” (163).

Britten’s “incidental” music, then, like all notable examples of its kind, was anything but incidental. Herbert Lindenberger makes the point particularly well:

Incidental music is . . . scarcely incidental in the effects it tends to exert on its audiences, for it advertises the fact that the plays for which it was composed stand close to the generic boundary separating verbal from musical drama. Whenever we hear music in the so-called background or in the interstices between the lines a character speaks, we are made aware that the play is no longer attempting an unselfconscious mimesis of some real world but that it is aiming for the ceremoniousness and formality we associate with operatic representation. (34)

Auden and Isherwood’s last play, On the Frontier (1938), which they subtitled “A Melodrama” (357), stands very close indeed to that “generic boundary separating verbal from musical drama.” Modifying Walter Pater’s famous claim that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music” (124), Mendelson asserts, “On the Frontier aspired to the condition of opera” (Plays xxviii). The play’s character notes specify that “All the Chorus must be able to sing” (358), and when Auden requested Britten’s assistance this time, he made sure to mention, somewhat dauntingly, that “There will be a lot of notes to write” (Britten 591). Presumably, the authors’ dedication of the play to Britten was intended to compensate for its demands on the composer, but the tribute also signals just how integral his contributions had become: on the program covers for the first productions, Britten’s name appears in the same size font as Auden’s and Isherwood’s (Britten 593). Perhaps the most operatic elements are the lyrical love duets Auden
composed for the play’s versions of Romeo and Juliet, Eric and Anna; these are set to
“Distant, dreamy music” (387-90, 415-18). The second of these duets concludes the
entire play, and some of the lines in its final exchange anticipate the imagery Auden
would employ in great poems like “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and “September 1, 1939”
(Hynes 310):

Anna. Europe lies in the dark
   City and flood and tree;
   Thousands have worked and work
   To master necessity.
Eric. To build the city where
   The will of love is done
   And brought to its full flower
   The dignity of man.
Anna. Pardon them their mistakes,
   The impatient and wavering will.
   They suffer for our sakes,
   Honour, honour them all.
Both. Dry their imperfect dust,
   The wind blows it back and forth.
   They die to make man just
   And worthy of the earth. (417-18)

The contemporary critic F. McEachran suggested that these lines look “uncommonly like
a Christian hymn to a better world” (202). That may be so, but the prevailing response
seems to have been articulated by Auden’s friend and collaborator, Louis MacNeice, who
said, “The mystical love scenes of Eric and Anna made one long for a sack to put one’s
head in” (qtd. in Hynes 309).

The title of McEachran’s review of On the Frontier may provide a clue to why
these operatic love duets did not come off: “Topical Drama.” The conventions of spoken
drama at the time—especially for plays where audiences expected some kind of direct
commentary on contemporary political events—just did not allow for scenes this
ritualized or unrealistic. When T. S. Eliot reflected on two passages that “used the device
of a lyrical duet” in his own 1939 play The Family Reunion (which is less immediately topical than On the Frontier), he criticized them for being “too much like operatic arias. The member of the audience, if he enjoys this sort of thing, is putting up with a suspension of the action in order to enjoy a poetic fantasia” (88). Eliot’s quest for the proper form for spoken verse drama would continue until the end of his career, and as his dramatic language evolved, he purged it of anything resembling a “poetic fantasia.” Meanwhile, as Auden’s work grew less political, he gave up spoken verse drama altogether—On the Frontier was his last effort in this direction, and it was clear that he was very nearly approaching the generic frontier of opera itself. Suspensions of action and poetic (or musical) fantasias are precisely what the conventions of opera require and what Auden’s dramatic verse was capable of providing. But Auden and Britten’s next collaboration, begun in 1939, is not an opera in any strict sense; in fact, they seem to have been bent on first undertaking almost every other form of musical theater—and all within the same work.

**PAUL BUNYAN’S MULTIPLE FRONTIERS**

In some ways, and especially on the page, Paul Bunyan feels like a continuation of Auden’s verse dramas. Humphrey Carpenter, who is both Auden’s and Britten’s biographer, considers the libretto “as exuberant and undisciplined as were Auden’s early attempts at writing plays. Like them it sets doggerel alongside fine lyric poetry” (W. H. Auden 277). Peter Porter labels it “a transitional work whereby Group Theatre Auden is initiated into America” (“Great” 10). Significantly, however, this is Group Theatre Auden
without Isherwood, and it shows. Of the contemporary reviews of the original production, almost all are negative and most single out the conspicuous lack of plot development and dramatic structure. Virgil Thomson, in his New York Herald Tribune review (titled “Music-Theatrical Flop” and easily the harshest of the bunch), complains, “Paul Bunyan” has, as dramatic literature, no shape and very little substance . . . What any composer thinks he can do with a text like ‘Paul Bunyan’ is beyond me. It offers no characters and no plot”; this judgment seems particularly damning coming from a composer who was resourceful enough to compose operas to texts by Gertrude Stein. According to Sherill Tippins, the director Milton Smith had his doubts before the work was ever performed, and he attempted, without success, to persuade Auden to alter it; it was Smith’s opinion that “The opera had begun to resemble more a strung-together series of tableaux vivants, each illustrating a separate theme, than a convincing and captivating story” (182). This is what happens, Dryden might say, when a libretto is written by a poet who excels at “Songish Parts” and “variety of Numbers” but who neglects to “gratify the understanding” (4).

It is ironic that a libretto about taming the wilderness and establishing civilized order out of chaos should itself be so untamed and chaotic. But if one can get past Thomson’s notion that Paul Bunyan “offers no characters and no plot,” one notices that there is an underlying pattern to Auden’s design. The “choral operetta” (Auden and Britten’s own designation) has less to do with particular people or events than with large-scale shifts in the history of human civilization (Auden and Kallman 569). In fact, during the extended prologue, humans have not even appeared yet; instead, Auden and Britten present us with singing trees and geese in a vaguely politicized version of Eden. (The
young trees want change, so the old trees accuse them of being “Reds” [6], which is Auden’s Americanization of “Bolshevism” from an early draft [Auden and Kallman 539].) The end of the operetta marks another evolutionary phase; Bunyan’s work is done, the American wilderness has been tamed, and the establishment of a more complex democratic society must begin. In between these cosmic turning points, various characters emerge who represent types rather than well-rounded individuals. In a promotional piece for the New York Times, Auden emphasized this aspect: “Associated with Bunyan are a number of satellite human figures, of which the most interesting are Hel Helson, his Swedish foreman, and Johnny Inkslinger, his book-keeper. These are eternal human types: Helson, the man of brawn but no brains . . . and Inkslinger, the man of speculative and critical intelligence” (“Paul” 571). The two other prominent human figures—Paul’s daughter Tiny and Hot Biscuit Slim, the cook—are similarly archetypal: one suspects they were included primarily as an excuse to write love songs. Bunyan himself is presented as an offstage voice, which helps evade some staging difficulties but also limits his role in the action (the frontier hero’s legendary exploits are relegated to brief folk-ballad interludes between scenes). In addition, his lines are spoken, not sung, which might lead one to think that his character could serve as a vehicle for those “straight bits” which Isherwood had attempted to provide in the plays. But Bunyan’s grandiloquent meditations—sometimes conveyed in the form of long, Whitmanesque free-verse lines—rank among the “wooziest” parts in the libretto.

The basic dramaturgical problems presented by Auden’s libretto were exacerbated, for Paul Bunyan’s original audiences, by the radical shifts in tone and style. The operetta’s erratic quality was the result of several factors: the nature of the work’s
commission; the various dramatic models Auden and Britten imitated; and also the uneven, episodic character of the sources Auden consulted on the Bunyan legend. In letters to Ralph Hawkes (of the major British music publisher Boosey & Hawkes), Britten initially describes the work as “an operetta for children” or “a High School Operetta” (675, 700). At the same time, however, Britten reports to his sister that “Wystan & my opera is settled for Broadway when we have done it” (707; underlining in original). These somewhat clashing aims were reflected in the final product; as Bernard Holland puts it, “Britten and Auden do excellent work, but they have created music for children and texts for grown-ups” (B12). In the end, Paul Bunyan was first performed neither in high schools nor on Broadway but at Brander Matthews Hall on the campus of Columbia University. I have already cited Virgil Thomson’s scathing review of the production. Other critics were less severe, but not very encouraging either. For a variety of reasons, some of which I will address below, Auden and Britten’s operetta virtually disappeared for over thirty years after its fleeting initial run. The score acquired a kind of mythical status among Britten scholars, but as late as 1969, Patricia Howard wrote in the foreword to her otherwise comprehensive book, The Operas of Benjamin Britten, “Because I am writing for potential opera audiences rather than scholars I have not included a work which they are unlikely to have the opportunity of seeing—Paul Bunyan.” The operetta seemed to have very little hope of surviving as a living piece of theater. Just five years later, however, after Auden’s death in 1973, Britten resurrected the work, first as a radio production and then as a complete (and fundamentally unchanged) stage production at the 1976 Aldeburgh Festival. According to Donald Mitchell, in Britten’s last years, he was “profoundly touched—sometimes to tears”—by parts of the work; “You know, Donald,”
he said, “I simply hadn’t remembered that it was such a strong piece” (qtd. in “Origins” 148). Since 1976, many critics and audiences have come to concur with Britten’s later judgment; through periodic revivals, Paul Bunyan has achieved a modest success within the repertoire. But in 1941, it must have seemed a strange bird indeed. As Auden’s trio of geese informs us in the operetta’s prologue, “The eccentric or unusual isn’t likely to succeed, / Successful new experiments are very rare indeed” (8).

What was new and experimental about Paul Bunyan was not so much any one style that it introduced, but rather the jarring presence of multiple genres and traditions of musical theater. For Auden and Britten, both masters at the art of mimicry, the composition of the operetta was a virtuosic exercise in bricolage. As Wilfrid Mellers claims, “Auden made a book that was not so much an opera libretto as a play for music, using techniques derived from English ballad-opera, from music-hall and musical comedy, from Gilbert and Sullivan and, more sophisticatedly, from Brecht and Weill” (98); Britten’s music ranges widely, too, reflecting all of the stylistic twists and turns suggested by the text. Mellers’s designation, “play for music,” suggests that Auden’s contribution was very much a continuation (or perhaps consummation) of his efforts for the Group Theatre, but it also implies that Auden had a lot to learn as a librettist. One such lesson had to do with his apparent determination to one-up W. S. Gilbert. In an interview for the Chicago Daily News, Britten had expressed the desire that their work-in-progress would “one day win a place with the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas as a high-school vehicle” (Letters 756). Auden’s plans also refer to Gilbert and Sullivan explicitly; in a letter to Mrs. A. E. Dodds, he writes, “At the moment I am hard at work on my Operetta which is rather fun; Gilbertian rhymes etc” (qtd. in Auden and Kallman 533).
The finished work does contain several entertaining comic numbers: the “Lumberjacks’ Song,” the “Quartet of Swedes,” and the “Food Chorus” (all of which occur in Act I) certainly help establish a lighthearted tone. But occasionally one senses Auden was having a little too much fun concocting Gilbertian rhymes. Inkslinger’s “Love Song” is a prime example. The text of the song is a tour de force, not just for its abundance of humorous triple rhymes, but also for its form, which miraculously expands to include one more rhyme in each successive stanza, as in the third and fourth stanzas:

Speaking with deference,
I have a preference
    For a nice view:
Your look of spaciousness,
Your manner’s graciousness,
Your limb’s vivaciousness,
Your mind’s herbaceousness
Your whole palatiousness
    Makes me love you.

Some force mysteriously
But most imperiously
    Warms my heart through:
I on detecting it,
After inspecting it
Find that correcting it
Will mean reflecting it,
Back and convecting it,
In fact connecting it
    Firmly with you. (25)

The song is not quite half over at this point, and some will protest that the verbal gymnastics are excessive. Britten evidently thought so: he cut the number from the 1976 production.5

Auden and Britten were not merely attempting to write an operetta, however. It was intended to be a uniquely American one. In this respect, they had something else in common with Gilbert and Sullivan; as Mendelson observes, “Auden’s characters were
American in the same way that the characters in *The Mikado* are Japanese, and American critics who were not bored were offended” (Later 97). Others have been more generous in assessing *Paul Bunyan’s* Americanness. Britten scholar Peter Evans claims that the operetta “shows a determination on the part of poet and composer to identify themselves not only with the American folklore from which the plot is drawn but with American ways of thinking and feeling” (5). Part of the effort to identify “with American ways of thinking and feeling” involved adapting the features of that distinctively American theatrical form, the Broadway musical. Indeed, just two years after *Paul Bunyan’s* premiere, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* would succeed in portraying notions of American identity in an analogous, albeit much more successful, manner (Carter 186).

While Auden and Britten’s early plans to produce *Paul Bunyan* on Broadway with the help of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein never came to fruition (Auden and Kallman 533-34), the guiding idea certainly survived in various aspects of the finished work. David Hirst compares Auden and Britten’s collaboration to the marriage of cynicism and romanticism in the Rodgers and Hart musicals (135), and Auden’s lyrics also frequently evoke the cleverness and sophistication of Cole Porter. Furthermore, Mitchell insists that “The catchy chorus numbers . . . with which Britten so prodigally littered his score . . . are brilliant examples in (not parodies of) the Broadway manner” (“Origins” 91). One of the operetta’s most beautiful numbers, Tiny’s lament for her dead mother, also owes its stylistic inspiration to the musical. Of “Tiny’s Song,” Mitchell writes, “It was as close as Britten was ever to get to composing a genuine popular song, one that was genuinely rather than artificially sentimental” (“Origins” 126). The effortless lyricism of the piece is especially remarkable given how it came into being.
Evidently it was discovered during rehearsals that the woman playing the part of Tiny could really sing, so, amazingly, Auden and Britten wrote a solo for her overnight (Mitchell, “Origins” 123).

Mitchell’s distinction between the “genuinely” and the “artificially sentimental” calls to mind one other potentially inspirational dramatic model: the satirical music theater of Brecht and Weill. On the one hand, it would be foolish to deny the Brechtian lineage of the operetta’s didactic impulse; the Group Theatre productions had also exhibited this trait. Stylistically, too, there are clear links. The Brecht-and Weill-inspired “Blues” numbers from *The Ascent of F6*, as well as Auden and Britten’s *Cabaret Songs*, anticipate unmistakably many of the tunes in *Paul Bunyan*. Sidnell even proposes that Hedli Anderson, the singer for whom the *Cabaret Songs* were written, had been “cast by Auden and Benjamin Britten as the Lotte Lenya to their Brecht and Weill” (68). One opera in particular, though, appears to have strong connections to *Paul Bunyan*’s plot and imagery: *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, a work that Auden and Kallman would later translate. *Mahagonny*’s portrayal of the American frontier, complete with lumberjacks, offers a clear parallel to the subject of *Paul Bunyan*. Auden’s libretto seems to have some of the details of Brecht’s text in mind, too. The “Quartet of Defeated,” a “Blues” which is one of the jazziest (and also one of the most cynical) numbers in the operetta, explicitly refers to Alabama (15), perhaps a nod toward Weill’s famous “Alabama Song” (or “Moon of Alabama”). In fact, the lunar imagery present in *Mahagonny* recurs in *Paul Bunyan*, most prominently in the tutti chorus that concludes the prologue (which, like the Rodgers and Hart ballad, also echoes the familiar phrase “once in a blue moon”):
But once in a while the odd thing happens,
Once in a while the dream comes true,
And the whole pattern of life is altered,
Once in a while the Moon turns Blue. (8)

Yet despite these intertextual references and the two works’ overlapping content, I agree with John Fuller’s reading of Paul Bunyan as “an answer to the profound pessimism of Mahagonny” (312). I also support Evans’s distinction between the two librettists: “if Auden’s verse has a virtuoso quality foreign to Brecht, at the same time it is far less single-mindedly committed, far readier to succumb to the diverting irrelevance” (97). Although Paul Bunyan does have something serious to say about America, Auden’s libretto is predominantly characterized by his firm belief in the artist’s right to frivolity. Most of the work’s critical commentary on America is playful rather than trenchantly satirical. The tenor and bass duet of “two bad cooks” (4), Sam Sharkey and Ben Benny, is notable not only because it is the only instance of grand opera in the score (in this case, a parody of the bel canto style) but also for its display of Auden’s excellent ear for Madison Avenue advertising culture:

SAM. The Best People are crazy about Soups.
BEN. Beans are all the rage among the Higher Income Groups.
SAM. Do you feel a left-out at parties, when it comes to promotion are you passed over, does your wife talk in her sleep, then ask our nearest agent to tell you about Soups for Success.
BEN. You owe it to yourself to learn about Beans and how this delicious food is the sure way to the Body Beautiful. We will mail you a fascinating booklet Beans for Beauty by return of post if you will send us your address. (13)

Earlier versions of the text included scenes for two additional characters who unflatteringly depict “American” attitudes: “Bill Booster, a boaster, Bass” and a salesman peddling an “amazing brochure entitled ‘It’s Modern to Be Immortal’” (Libretti 544, 549). The aforementioned “Blues” also contributes to the intermittent aura of
disenchantment. Bunyan introduces the number as “a dream of warning” (15), and in one of its concluding lines, the quartet cautions, “America can break your heart” (16). Indeed, the entire operetta is preoccupied with exploring the notion of dreams in general and the American dream in particular; in this regard, Auden’s “woozy” verse is a very appropriate formal match for its subject matter. Auden had long been a student of Freud, and he was then in the midst of a Jungian phase. In an extended sequence that was originally intended to end Act I, a quartet of “Lame Shadows and Animas” (who also portray “Film Stars and Models”) appear to complain of their status as “idols of a democratic nation” and “representative Americana” (30). Despite the gorgeous opening lullaby (one of Auden’s specialties, here set as a canon), Britten eventually cut the entire nine-minute sequence. The Hollywood motif returns, however, in the final scene: Inkslinger (Bunyan’s surrogate artist figure) gets a job on an “all-star lumber picture” (44), a decidedly ambivalent fulfillment of every artist’s own American dream.

There is some evidence, though, that Inkslinger’s “Hollywood ending,” so to speak, is not intended to be entirely cynical. Auden’s former dramatic collaborator had headed west for film work, and his current collaborator seems to have entertained similar designs. For the postscript of a May 1939 letter to fellow composer Aaron Copland, Britten writes, “I may have to go to Hollywood!!!!” (634; underlining in original). A year and a half later, he writes the same words in a letter to his friend Wulff Scherchen, but this time he drops the underlining and exclamation points; he also elaborates, “I may have to go to Hollywood, which I should hate; but if I had the chance I must take it, since it is a grand way of making alot [sic] of money quickly” (876). As Johnny Inkslinger puts it in his first solo, “I guess that a guy gotta eat” (23). Britten’s disdain of Hollywood
is typical of his initial impressions of America, which differed from Auden’s. While Auden was never wholly uncritical of American culture (the preceding paragraph offers a few examples of his critical views), he was more predisposed than Britten to embrace it.

Part of this certainly had something to do with the fact that he had just recently fallen in love with an American (Chester Kallman), but he also possessed a constitutional openness that Britten simply did not share. After less than a year in America, Britten (in a particularly dismal moment, perhaps) wrote the following:

I hate to have to admit it, but America seems to be letting us down in every way. I don’t mean us personally, so much as all the things one believes in. She is so narrow, so self-satisfied, so chauvanistic [sic], so superficial, so reactionary, & above all so ugly. . . . This country is dead, because it hasn’t been lived in, because it hasn’t been worked on. It may come in several hundred years but I doubt it, if the Americans go on as they are going on at the moment. Everything comes too easily—success, wealth, luxury. They have no standards; no culture (800; underlining in original)

The Eurocentric snobbery is difficult to ignore. I agree with those who suggest that one of Bunyan’s final lines, “America is what we choose to make it” (46), is in fact Auden’s private message for Britten.8 Auden was attracted to the idea of leaving England behind, while Britten was soon eager to return there, which was one reason why the collaboration ultimately could not continue.

Despite the composer’s misgivings about the nonexistence of American culture, the operetta’s vision of America, though sometimes inaccurate or insufficient, is largely positive. Peter Porter accurately describes the general spirit of the dramatic proceedings: “Paul Bunyan’s tone is unique. It is a gentle tempered and uplifting work: it accepts America with grace and imagination” (“Bunyan’s” 194). This acceptance is communicated most emphatically through its wide-ranging use of popular, and often
peculiarly American, forms. The folk-ballad interludes mentioned previously are accompanied by guitar in a surprisingly convincing Appalachian or country idiom. In fact, if there was any aspect of *Paul Bunyan* that the first reviewers agreed was worthy of praise, it was Mordecai Bauman’s performance of these interludes as the narrator. By and large, though, as Suzanne Robinson’s overview of the press’s response makes plain, “the critics were shocked by the populist idiom and disappointed that an established composer like Britten should ‘stoop so low’”; they “exhibited little patience with *Paul Bunyan* because it so transparently succumbed to the lure of commercialism” (335).

While some in the audience may have enjoyed what Auden and Britten offered as an evening’s entertainment, critics confessed their disappointment. Surely part of the reason the operetta was more successful at the time of Britten’s revival—and has been more warmly received ever since—has to do with the notion that, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we are more comfortable experiencing art that does not perpetuate “the Great Divide,” that modernist insistence on “the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture” (Huyssen viii). Without making any grand claims on behalf of *Paul Bunyan*’s postmodernist status, one can appreciate the novelty, or at least the boldness, of a work that juxtaposes a guitar-strumming narrator with this lofty and cryptic speech of Bunyan’s, which was added at a late stage to conclude the first act:

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Now let the complex spirit dissolve in the darkness
Where the Actual and the Possible are mysteriously exchanged.
For the saint must descend into Hell; that his order may be tested by its disorder
The hero return to the humble womb; that his will may be pacified and refreshed.
Dear children, trust the night and have faith in to-morrow
That these hours of ambiguity and indecision may be also the hours of healing. (31-32)
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Though Auden’s lines reflect the uncertainty of the times for which they were written (as well as his new mania for Kierkegaard), the last two lines in particular also exhibit that “gentle tempered and uplifting” attitude that Porter identifies.

But undergirding the heterogeneity of Paul Bunyan’s genres and styles—a hodgepodge that itself constitutes a certain vision of American culture—the work’s basic form, choral operetta, indicates a strong collectivist impulse. Auden had made extensive use of choruses in his plays, from his very first attempt, Paid on Both Sides (1928), to all of the Group Theatre productions. Yet what was frequently a peripheral aspect of the plays became the central feature of his dramatic collaboration with Britten. A statement Auden prepared for use in the program note highlighted the work’s status “as a choral operetta” “with many small parts rather than a few star roles”; the statement also describes the mythical Bunyan, in somewhat Jungian terms, as “a projection of the collective state of mind of a people whose tasks were primarily the physical mastery of nature” (Libretti 569). Of course, some took issue with this bid to elucidate the essential nature of the American people, especially coming as it did from two British expatriates who had been accused of abandoning their own country to avoid wartime service or danger. Nevertheless, in Paul Bunyan as a whole, and in the final scene in particular, Auden and Britten are able to achieve something that Query says had vanished from the poet’s dramatic project. In Auden and Isherwood’s later plays, he argues, “the utility of ritual action and some of its attendant features—poetic language, heightened awareness, sacred space—is increasingly associated with the individual as opposed to the collective, and it loses its power to unify, in the process” (597). In writing his first libretto, however, Auden had not only discovered a suitable dramatic medium for his unique brand of poetic...
language, he had also found a venue for a kind of collective ritual action.

The last scene of *Paul Bunyan* is a festive Christmas Eve celebration, which in turn concludes with a pseudo-Anglican litany. It is the only scene Auden did not revise while working on extensive revisions for a post-production text (*Libretti* 569), perhaps because it was here that he came closest to achieving that synthesis of “grand opera and high mass” he had sought in his collaborations with Isherwood. The libretto’s preoccupation with the everyday aspects of food—from the vital importance of a good cook to Inkslinger’s realization that even artists and intellectuals “gotta eat”—takes on a sacred dimension. As Fuller rightfully observes, “The Christmas Eve celebration is, in this context, almost a sacrament” (313). Though Britten’s music is largely responsible for the scene’s ritual power, Auden’s design is based on a fundamental dramatic pattern. What Northrop Frye writes of comedy applies just as well to the finale of *Paul Bunyan*: “In the last scene, when the dramatist usually tries to get all his characters on the stage at once, the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration. In comedy as in life the regular expression of this is a festival, whether a marriage, a dance, or a feast” (81). Adhering to this archetype, Auden has the Christmas party double as a wedding celebration: Slim and Tiny’s engagement is solemnized with the choral epithalamium, “Carry her over the water” (see note 7). But the approaching marriage is only one facet of that more extensive “birth of a renewed sense of social integration,” an important theme at the conclusion of this collective myth. In the context of a lecture on one of his own dramatic heroes, Shakespeare, Auden remarked, “We have festivities to mark the pauses between one form of life and another: . . . The past is over, and a new life, with new failures and triumphs, begins” (“Midsummer” 57). This is precisely the role
that the Christmas Eve feast performs in the context of *Paul Bunyan*, just as the operetta itself marks the transition in Auden’s career between one form of drama and another.

For the Americans in the operetta (and by analogy, those in the audience as well), Bunyan’s departure marks a critical historical moment. At the beginning of the work, the chorus sang, “the whole pattern of life is altered,” and now Paul Bunyan, in leaving, initiates yet another phase of human history:

Now the task that made us friends  
In a common labour, ends;  
For an emptiness is named  
And a wilderness is tamed  
Till its savage nature can  
Tolerate the life of man.  
All I had to do is done,  
You remain but I go on . . . (44-45)

This ceremonial farewell, written in the same meter Auden had recently used to conclude his elegy for Yeats, leads directly into the final litany. Several critics have complained about what John Frayne calls the “great disparity in tone” of the Christmas party scene in general and of the litany in particular (10). In the litany, Auden characteristically expresses half-serious, topical concerns about the future of American society in the serious, fixed form of an Anglican chant, as in the following:

From a Pressure Group that says I am the Constitution,  
From those who say Patriotism and mean Persecution,  
From a Tolerance that is really inertia and disillusion  
Save animals and men. (45)

Although the modern-day gripes may undermine the solemnity and universality suggested by the scene’s overall atmosphere, perhaps this very unsettledness is also part of Auden’s design. David Mason, in his excellent article on *Paul Bunyan* and the contemporaneous “New Year Letter,” makes the point exceptionally well: “Although the
playful language of New Year Letter turns to prayer, although the litany ending Paul Bunyan asks someone or something to ‘Save animals and men,’ prayer and litany are symptoms of incompleteness. Our pilgrimage takes place when the book is closed, or we have left the theatre” (126). The operetta is primarily concerned with collective action, and it culminates in a ritual feast, but just before the curtain falls, the emphasis shifts to “the life of choice” and the importance of individual action (45):

Every day America’s destroyed and re-created
America is what you do,
America is I and you,
America is what we choose to make it. (46)

THE FINAL FRONTIER: THE REVIVAL OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE OPERA

Auden did not begin his next libretto, The Rake’s Progress, until 1947, and, as in the conclusion of Paul Bunyan, his writing during the 1940s took a subjective turn. As Mendelson observes, “his work and thought [in the intervening years] focused on lonely inward crises and existential choices of the kind he wrote about in his longer poems from ‘New Year Letter’ in 1940 through The Age of Anxiety in 1944-46” (Introduction, Prose III xiii). “New Year Letter” was a kind of private, epistolary treatment of the themes addressed more publicly and collectively in Paul Bunyan (see Mason), but the three succeeding long poems, despite the Kierkegaardian subjectivism of their content, are all cast in dramatic form. Furthermore, the forms are often specifically musical. In the case of “For the Time Being,” Auden’s “Christmas Oratorio,” the intention is obvious—he wrote it thinking Britten would set it to music—yet the next two poems share comparable traits. The second part of “The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare’s The
“Tempest” is labeled “The Supporting Cast, Sotto Voce,” and the work as a whole is sufficiently suggestive of music that Auden’s later collaborator, Nicolas Nabokov, proposed setting it, though one reasonably wonders how he would have handled Caliban’s lengthy address to the audience. Similarly, *The Age of Anxiety*, whose fifth part is a masque, inspired Leonard Bernstein’s second symphony and, ultimately, Jerome Robbins’s 1950 ballet version. Referring to Auden’s labeling of his 1930s plays as “libretti manqués,” Christopher Innes suggests that “The same could be said of such long poems as ‘For the Time Being’ and *The Age of Anxiety*” (94). Innes is right to emphasize the continuity of musical inspiration and form in Auden’s dramatic efforts, but perhaps these long poems might be better construed, if I may coin a term, as “closet librettos.” Like most closet dramas, Auden’s long poems are rich in philosophical content (and philosophy with a particular emphasis on interiority at that), yet their forms are utterly dependent on the idea of the musically dramatic. In “For the Time Being,” his most explicitly Christian poem, sacred music serves as a singular influence; Stan Smith notes that Auden’s oratorio “contains a whole range of liturgical and religious forms, including those of miracle and nativity play” (5). The sheer length and baroque density of the work, however, surely discouraged an actual musical setting. As late as 1944 (the poem was finished in 1942), Britten would write to Auden’s and his mutual friend, Elizabeth Mayer: “I shall have to be an older & better composer before I get round to [Auden’s] Oratorio, but I am going to, one day” (1201). He never did; just as many closet dramas are unstageable, the “Oratorio” ultimately proved unsettable.

Whether any of Auden’s texts for music are especially settable is a matter of some debate. Britten scholar Arnold Whittall claims that “After *Paul Bunyan*, Britten never
again set a text with Auden’s ironic, knowing, idiosyncratic tone: like most opera composers, he was happiest and most successful with librettos that did not in themselves aspire to the condition of Art” (Music 70). For Whittall (as for many musicologists, one suspects), that which makes opera “Art” is solely the province of the composer. But Auden—and here I agree with Whittall—simply could not prevent himself from creating art with a capital “A”; for good or ill, he had “the habit of art,” as the title of Alan Bennett’s new play about Auden and Britten reminds us (see esp. 21). Nevertheless, though this is probably the exception to the rule, librettos that are themselves literary art can provide the basis for successful operas, as is eminently the case in the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaborations. (Auden himself asserted that “Hofmannsthal is the one librettist you can read apart from the music” [Ansen 18].) But it was not just the literariness of Auden’s texts that prevented further collaboration with Britten; a host of personal issues led the composer back to England and away from the poet’s shaping but domineering influence. It is a shame to consider that, given each of their extraordinary gifts, Auden and Britten might easily have become the Strauss and Hofmannsthal of twentieth-century English opera. Mendelson—quite rightly, I think—rates their combined talents alongside Dryden and Purcell: “When their friendship ended, so did the second, and still the last, collaboration between a great writer of English poetry and a great composer of English music” (“Making” 192). The fruitfulness of this collaboration should not be underestimated: besides Paul Bunyan, Auden and Britten produced an array of engaging shorter works—from the early song cycles, Our Hunting Fathers and On This Island, to the glorious Hymn to St. Cecilia (a piece whose subject places it in direct competition with Dryden and Purcell). Yet many will still share Stephen Spender’s
regret that the partnership never yielded that one defining work which would have cemented their legacy: “The unwritten masterpiece of the century—the early part of this century—is the collaboration between Auden and Benjamin Britten. That ought to have been written and I think they both knew it ought to have been written” (qtd. in Britten 1339).

While *Paul Bunyan* itself may not have been a masterpiece, it served as the apprentice work for two genuine operatic masterpieces: the composer’s *Peter Grimes* (1945) and the librettist’s *The Rake’s Progress* (1951). In *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, both works are listed among “those operas composed in the twentieth century which have been most often performed” (Whittall, “Opera” 5). If one were to restrict the list to operas premiered after World War II, both would certainly rank at or very near the top. For Britten, *Peter Grimes* initiated a long, prolific career in opera and helped to reestablish a native English operatic tradition. After achieving mixed results attempting an “American” opera, he determined to write a quintessentially English one; unmistakably returning to his roots, he chose a story based on the poem *The Borough*, written by George Crabbe, who hailed from Britten’s native Suffolk. As Peter Evans explains, Montagu Slater was a more natural fit as the librettist than Auden would have been: “those sentiments which in 1942 impelled the composer to return home while the poet remained in America also required him to seek a collaborator more in sympathy with them, since the new opera was patently conceived as a token of Britten’s Englishness” (104). *The Rake’s Progress* may take place in London (loosely based as it is on Hogarth’s paintings), but Auden’s operatic career was much more cosmopolitan in character than English. He collaborated with two Russian-born composers, a German
composer, and an American librettist, and while almost all of Britten’s operas were first performed in England, Auden’s premiered in Venice, Schwetzingen, Salzburg, and Brussels.\(^\text{13}\)

Although their operatic outputs differ in their degrees of nationalism (or internationalism), the ex-collaborators were both drawn to the operatic medium for similar reasons. Whittall’s description of Britten’s affinity for opera applies equally well to Auden: “His concern was not to find the best way in which to be novel, but to discover the form best suited to dealing with the themes which mattered most to him, and offering the greatest scope for the deployment of his preferred techniques” (*Music* 96). In their thirties’ collaborations for theatre, film, and radio, Auden and Britten had experimented in a host of “innovatory forms” (*Mitchell, Britten* 27), the very employment of which signaled a kind of progressive political commitment. Thus, it might seem odd for both of them to gravitate toward a medium often noted for its highbrow conservatism. But, for Auden at least, this movement away from the politically engagé was quite intentional and had begun long before. Even in the thirties, Auden and Isherwood had already abandoned any firmly avant-garde convictions by shooting for the West End with *On the Frontier*, and neither Britten nor Auden seemed to have any serious qualms (as Brecht did) about commercial theater. What was more important to both of them was opera’s capacity to offer “the greatest scope for the deployment of preferred techniques” (Whittall, *Music* 96). And rather than grasping at various traditions of musical theater, as they had in *Paul Bunyan*, or striving to create one from scratch, they adopted the set forms and conventions of opera. Paradoxically, this commitment to convention allowed them the greatest opportunity for invention. Auden would have heartily endorsed the aphorism of
master librettist Hofmannsthal: “There is more freedom within the narrowest limits, within the most specialized task, than in the limitless vacuum which the modern mind imagines to be the playground for it” (149).

So while “the absence of a living tradition” may have “destabilized and undermined Auden’s verse-drama project” (580), as Query claims, Auden soon discovered another tradition that enabled him to write verse for the stage more satisfactorily than he had ever done before. The specialized demands of an opera libretto—its requirement for a variety of arias, ensembles, and choruses—matched Auden’s natural poetic gifts. Moreover, opera resolved the problems surrounding the unnatural occurrence of verse interludes in a predominantly spoken dramatic context; the artifice of opera is thorough and unapologetic. As Auden later observed, “for a singer, as for a ballet dancer, there is no question of simulation, of singing the composer’s notes ‘naturally’; his behavior is unabashedly and triumphantly art from beginning to end” (“Some” 298). Opera is also a highly ritualized form, an aspect linked to its very roots as a rebirth of ancient Greek drama. Auden had found not just one “objective and historical ritual community” in the years following his departure from England (Query 601), he had found two—one religious and the other aesthetic. And for anyone still doubting whether opera could truly satisfy all of Auden’s unique needs and capabilities as a dramatic poet, Lincoln Kirstein’s letter to Igor Stravinsky (written just after Auden had begun work on his first true opera libretto) provides rather convincing testimony:

Wystan Auden spent the evening with me talking about The Rake’s Progress. He has wonderful ideas. I am so glad you are working with him; for me, he is the greatest English poet of our time. He is not only a superb technician, an amazing mind on a purely intellectual level, but a very passionate and touching lyric poet as well. He adores opera; he spends half his time playing records of Mozart and Verdi; for him opera is a ritual.
You can tell him just what you want, and you will get it, but to a degree of intensity and perfection that is quite stupendous. (Stravinsky 269).
NOTES

1. A version of this chapter appears in the Winter 2011 issue of Modern Drama (409-34).

2. Harry White offers a similar reading of Synge’s plays as “musical works by analogy” in Music and the Irish Literary Imagination. “It is the shifting tonalities as a whole,” he argues, “rather than any one tonality in particular, that licenses an operatic paradigm for [The Playboy of the Western World]” (129).

3. Much attention has been paid to Coal Face and Night Mail, but Auden and Britten’s abandoned plans for a documentary called Negroes (later retitled God’s Chillun)—which call for tenor and soprano solos, bass recitative, and chorus—indicate an even more extensive and ambitious role for settings of poetry in film.

4. Auden conducted his research at the New York Public Library and relied primarily on two books: James Stevens’s Paul Bunyan (1925) and Esther Shephard’s Paul Bunyan (1924), the second of which folklorist Daniel Hoffman calls “Mrs. Shephard’s Careless Document” (87).

5. Not everyone agrees, however. Some subsequent productions have reinstated the number. See Philip Reed’s “A Rejected Love Song from Paul Bunyan,” which defends the song’s place within the drama.

6. “Gold in the north came the blizzard to say” was one of three Paul Bunyan numbers Auden reprinted in volumes of his Collected Poems, though he excluded it after the 1950 edition; the other two—the choral epithalamium “Carry her over the water” and the trio written for a dog and two cats, “The single creature leads a partial life”—were included in every edition from 1945 onward.

7. Britten had also written to Ralph Hawkes in September 1940: “Auden has been in Hollywood & has made some excellent contacts for him & me (& Christopher Isherwood who is on contract there now) to do a musical film” (855-56).

8. See, for example, Carpenter’s Benjamin Britten (149) and Claire Seymour’s The Operas of Benjamin Britten (33).


10. See, for example, Peter Evans (103) and Daniel Hoffman (152).

11. One assumes that Caliban’s speech was one of the “extensive cuts” Nabokov
wanted to make in the text, cuts that Auden would not allow (Nabokov 226). Instead, Auden, Kallman, and Nabokov collaborated on a different Shakespearean project: an operatic adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (see chapter 4).

12. Of the oratorio’s fifty-two pages of text (in the *Collected Poems* edition), only two short excerpts were set by Britten: the concluding chorale from “The Summons” (Britten’s *Chorale After an Old French Carol*) and a section that began “O lift your little pinkie and touch the winter sky,” which Auden eventually discarded (Britten’s *A Shepherd’s Carol*).

13. In fact, for Irene Morra to devote a chapter of her recent book, *Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain*, to Auden (who became an American citizen in 1946) is somewhat misleading.
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In a draft memoir about his collaborations with Benjamin Britten, Auden reflected on his beginnings as a librettist:

It was during this period [1939-40] that Britten wrote his first opera, and my first libretto, on the subject of an American Folk hero—Paul Bunyan. The result, I’m sorry to say was a failure, for which I am entirely to blame, since, at the time, I knew nothing whatever about opera or what is required of a librettist. In consequence some very lovely music of Britten’s went down the drain. (Berg)

Paul Bunyan, while certainly flawed, was not the unqualified failure Auden thought it was in the early 1960s; unfortunately, he would not live to see the operetta successfully revived the following decade. But the claim that he “knew nothing whatever about opera or what is required of a librettist” is more accurate. In fact, although his recollection labels Paul Bunyan Britten’s “first opera,” it was not an opera proper but rather an amalgam of various other musical-theatrical forms (see chapter 1). Auden later traced his ignorance of opera, in part, to the inherited cultural biases of his middle-class English upbringing: “I was brought up to believe that opera was a bastard art-form. The great Mozart operas might just do because Mozart was Mozart, but Wagner in one way and Verdi in another were considered vulgar; as for Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, they were simply beyond the pale” (“Public” 309). By 1948, however, these very composers dominated Auden’s list of favorite records (“My” 500), and in his introduction to The Portable Greek Reader, which may seem an exceptionally controversial place to publish
such a claim, he boldly affirms that “as a period of sustained creative activity in one medium, the seventy-five-odd years of Athenian drama, between the first tragedies of Aeschylus and the last comedy of Aristophanes, are surpassed by the hundred and twenty-five years, between Gluck’s *Orpheus* and Verdi’s *Othello*, which comprise the golden age of European opera” (358). That same year, the title of a short prose piece openly declared his allegiance to the medium: he had become, irretrievably, an “Opera Addict.”

As many have observed (e.g., Carpenter 261-62; Hartwig 374), Auden’s love affair with opera developed alongside his love affair with Chester Kallman; indeed, one could argue that the former, which was certainly the steadier relationship of the two, eventually helped to transform and sustain the latter by providing opportunities for collaborative projects. Yet while Auden’s operatic education—shaped by Kallman as well as by the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera—proceeded throughout the 1940s, it is no coincidence that he chose to profess publicly his love of the medium in 1948. By that date, Auden, with Kallman’s assistance, had completed his first true opera libretto, *The Rake’s Progress*, for Igor Stravinsky, who had just begun setting it to music. Although “Opera Addict” only provides a sketch of Auden’s operatic theory (even back then, one could not expect more from the pages of *Vogue*), it provided the basis for a series of essays that constitute an important contribution to the aesthetics of opera. In 1951, the year of the *Rake’s Progress* premiere, the British music journal *Tempo* published his essay, “Some Reflections on Opera as a Medium,” which he expanded the following year for the *Partisan Review* under the title “Some Reflections on Music and Opera.” This version is reprinted in Ulrich Weisstein’s 1964 anthology *The Essence of*
Opera and, with some alterations, in Auden’s essay collection The Dyer’s Hand, where it opens the final section, labeled “Homage to Igor Stravinsky.” The variety of publication outlets in which Auden’s ideas found a home reflects the disparate qualities of his prose style, which ranges from the casually witty to the deeply philosophical. His theories are best understood, however, in the context of his writing the libretto for Stravinsky’s opera and anticipating its premiere. Auden made a habit of dedicating writings of all kinds to his friends, and in the case of his concluding “homage” in The Dyer’s Hand, the tribute is particularly significant.

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between theory and practice in Auden’s approach to opera. The opportunity to collaborate with a composer of Stravinsky’s stature caused Auden to think carefully about both his role as a librettist and the singular capacities of opera as a medium; although his essays on music and opera from this period (1948-52) never mention The Rake’s Progress directly, they are better understood in the context of its development. At the same time, the opera can be viewed as a kind of dramatization of Auden’s theory, which posits that music itself represents the subjective experience of living in time and that opera in particular portrays human willfulness. According to Peter Conrad, opera “is drama about music, not just accompanied by it” (13); this is especially true of The Rake’s Progress, in which Auden’s own ideas about the meaning of music provide the opera’s primary thematic material. In the second part, I offer a reading of the libretto in light of these ideas and argue that the opera’s hero, Tom Rakewell, embodies the unmusical by refusing, in Auden’s words, to assume “responsibility for time” (“Their” 581). Finally, I will discuss the unique suitability of Stravinsky’s music from that period, as opposed to other mid-century
classical styles, for conveying the specific theories of music and opera expressed in
Auden’s essays and dramatized in the libretto.

JUSTIFYING THE ADDICTION

Music is the best means we have of digesting time.

—Igor Stravinsky (Craft, Stravinsky 4)

In his biography of Auden, Charles Osborne notes the poet’s tendency to “find
intellectual justification for his addiction[s]” (229). The Dyer’s Hand essay, “The Guilty
Vicarage,” like “Opera Addict” and its sequels, began as a magazine article subtitled
“Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict” (“Guilty” 261). Introducing yet another
prose piece on opera in 1961, Auden eventually confessed, “Any arguments I may
advance to prove the virtues of opera are rationalizations to convince myself that my
passion is not a mania” (“Public” 309). And since he began the process of rationalizing
his opera addiction in the late 1940s, it is not surprising that his reflections took on an
obliquely theological dimension. In a letter, he would refer to “Some Reflections on
Opera as a Medium” as “my series of Pensées for Tempo” (Berg). When visiting Auden
during the years 1947-49, his friend Stephen Spender perceived that “He now had two
main intellectual interests: one, theology; the other, Italian opera” (299). Throughout the
decade, he had immersed himself in the writings of contemporary Protestant thinkers
such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, the latter of whom Auden
befriended; his dedication of the 1951 volume Nones (written between 1946 and 1950) to
Niebuhr and his wife, Ursula, is a sign of their friendship as well as his newfound affinity for Neo-Orthodox theology. Auden later explained to Spender that the fundamental subject of The Dyer’s Hand is Christianity and Art: “Re Xtianity and Art, that is what the whole book is really about, the theme which dictated my selection of pieces and their order” (Berg). Edward Mendelson observes, “The sequence of eight parts in the whole book seems to move, with some interruptions, through a spectrum of moral experience that gradually becomes more complex and problematic before shifting toward a vision of forgiveness in time and an eternity beyond it” (Introduction xxxiv). It is revealing, then, that the book’s final “vision” materializes through Auden’s grouping of essays on music, the “Homage to Stravinsky.” His thoughts on opera in particular may have begun as a playful attempt to account for an addiction, but they are also a serious effort to unite his “two main intellectual interests.”

Like most of the contemporary theologians he admired in the 1940s, Auden was profoundly influenced by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who also happened to be (along with Nietzsche and Rousseau) one of the foremost opera fans in the history of philosophy (Dolar 1). As early as 1944, near the end of his review of Kierkegaard’s Either/Or, Auden alluded to the chapter called “The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or the Musical Erotic”: “Kierkegaard’s essay on music is the only illuminating suggestion for a musical esthetic that I have seen” (“Preface” 218). When the time came for him to develop his own musical aesthetic, he clearly kept Kierkegaard in mind. Like Auden, Kierkegaard explored the nature of music because of his intense fascination with opera—in his case, with one opera in particular, Mozart’s Don Giovanni. As Mladen Dolar puts it, “Never before or after has any opera undergone such comprehensive philosophical
reflection” (50). From Kierkegaard Auden inherited a medium-specific approach to aesthetics, a common methodology in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy exemplified by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s “Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.” Even apart from Kierkegaard's influence, such an approach would have directly appealed to Auden's inveterate fondness for classificatory schemes. He defines his understanding of medium-specificity in the opening paragraph of “Opera Addict”: “Just as art in general can only deal with a portion of our total experience, so each of the arts has its special field with which it can deal better than any rival medium can, and its special limitations which it transgresses at its peril” (400). The key question for Auden, then, is “What is opera about?” (400). Significantly, he had arrived at an answer precisely as he began writing the libretto for The Rake's Progress; in December 1947, he told Alan Ansen, “I’ve decided that opera represents the wilful display of emotions” (Ansen 92). In “Opera Addict,” he makes the claim more concise—opera “is about wilful feeling”—and supports it with examples of “All the great operatic characters,” particularly Don Giovanni, “who is wilfulness incarnate” (401). Kierkegaard had made the similar but not identical claim that “Don Juan is . . . flesh incarnate” (Either 71), yet for both him and Auden, the legendary libertine is strongly linked to opera’s essence. Kierkegaard viewed Don Giovanni as an unsurpassable conjunction of form and content: “It was Mozart’s good fortune to have found a subject that is absolutely musical, and if some future composer should try to emulate Mozart, there would be nothing else for him to do than to compose Don Juan over again” (Either 45). And in fact, Auden and Stravinsky came close to following Kierkegaard’s advice; as Daniel Albright points out, “The Rake’s Progress is a kind of sequel to Don Giovanni” (Stravinsky 59).
After describing his ideal operatic character—willful and impetuous rather than passive or reflective—Auden concedes, “Whether or not you will like opera will depend . . . upon how characteristic of human nature, and how important to understanding it properly, you believe wilfulness to be” (“Opera” 401). For himself, of course, wilfulness was supremely important; the previous year he had written, “The only serious possession of men is not their gifts but what they all possess equally, independent of fortune, namely their will” (“Squares” 342). In its consistent emphasis on the will, Auden’s musical aesthetic echoes that of Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom music was a “copy of the will itself” (257). Yet after writing the *Rake’s Progress* libretto, Auden began to refine his ideas. In his 1951 *Tempo* article, he maintains that opera is “an imitation of human wilfulness” (“Some” 252), but he now devotes the opening section of the essay to a consideration of music in the abstract. Mimicking the central question of “Opera Addict,” he asks, “What is music about? What, as Plato would say, does it ‘imitate’?” His immediate response is a single word, “Choice” (250), although later in the essay he also states, “music in general is an imitation of history” (252). Finally, in *The Dyer’s Hand*, he expands the single-word sentence “Choice” to the following:

> [Music is about] Our experience of Time in its twofold aspect, natural or organic repetition, and historical novelty created by choice. And the full development of music as an art depends upon a recognition that these two aspects are different and that choice, being an experience confined to man, is more significant than repetition. (783)

Without claiming that music imitates any one experience in particular, Auden is nevertheless intent on relating music to the essential conditions of human existence, *our experience* of temporality and the possession of free will. This emphasis becomes clearer in contrast to earlier images of music from his poetry.
Unlike Yeats, whose poetry “not only aspires to the condition of music, but presents itself to the world as an objective correlative of musical discourse” (H. White 80), Auden always insisted on music’s unique capacities; in the process, he often ended up making the kinds of grand romantic claims he never would have made for poetry. Anticipating his medium-specific arguments about the nature of music, the opening octave of his 1938 sonnet “The Composer” highlights the differences between the arts:  

All the others translate: the painter sketches  
A visible world to love or reject;  
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches  
The images out that hurt and connect,  
From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,  
Relying on us to cover the rift;  
Only your notes are pure contraption,  
Only your song is an absolute gift. (181)  

The non-musical arts are inextricably tied to the “visible world” and artists’ messy lives, but music, as Auden views it here, is a purely aesthetic phenomenon. By the end of the poem, however, he strives to describe how music might relate to human experience: “You alone, alone, imaginary song, / Are unable to say an existence is wrong, / And pour out your forgiveness like a wine” (181). The Eucharistic image is potent, and for several years afterward, whenever Auden referred to music, he would assign it the same quasi-divine function of restoration and communion. In “New Year Letter,” the music of Buxtehude, Schubert, Mozart, and Gluck is capable of establishing “a civitas of sound,” “ideal order,” and a sense “privileged community” (198, 219). Likewise, in his “Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day,” the poet asks music, which symbolically represents “a world of truths that never change,” to “Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange” (279). The final phrase of Caliban’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror” picks up the refrain: “the sounded note is the restored relation” (443). Yet despite the invocations in these poems,
music remains an otherworldly force; it can serve as a pattern of things to come, perhaps, but it is uncontaminated by “our fallen day.”

After investigating his assumptions about music and opera while working on *The Rake’s Progress*, Auden’s views began to change. He would continue to confer a symbolic status on music, but now this status has a more direct bearing on the here and now. Monroe Spears correctly identifies the 1955 poem “Homage to Clio” as an expression of Auden’s mature understanding of music (40), though he does not consider this development in the context of Auden’s career as a librettist. The crucial stanza comes near the end of this encomium to the “Muse of Time” and “the unique / Historical fact” (610-11):

Lives that obey you move like music,
Becoming now what they only can be once,
Making of silence decisive sound: it sounds
Easy, but one must find the time. (611)

Time is inescapable, but by “mov[ing] like music” and structuring the passage of time through decisive action, one can, to adopt another phrase of Auden’s, turn “time into history” (Introduction 371). In the 1954 essay “Balaam and the Ass,” he elaborated on the difference between the natural and historical aspects of time: “So long as we think of it objectively, time is Fate or Chance, the factor in our lives for which we are not responsible, and about which we can do nothing; but when we begin to think of it subjectively, we feel responsible for our time, and the notion of punctuality arises” (469). Providing intellectual justification for yet another mania, perhaps—Auden was obsessively punctual—he explains the deeper significance of being on time: “the first serious analysis of the human experience of time was undertaken by St Augustine, and . . . the notion of punctuality, of action at an exact moment, depends on drawing a
distinction between natural and historical time which Christianity encouraged if it did not
invent” (“Balaam” 468). For Auden, the glory of music is that it can provide “a virtual
image of our experience of living as temporal, with its double aspect of recurrence and
becoming” (“Music” 810). In *Theology, Music and Time*, Jeremy Begbie argues that
“music is a thoroughly *this*-worldly art”: “it is especially free to offer a peculiarly intense
experience of the temporality not only of human existence but of the world we indwell as
physical creatures” (55-56); “More than this,” he writes later in the book, “the Christian
faith affirms that this temporality is a gift” (97). Auden the mature librettist would have
heartily agreed.

Interestingly, the theological conception of music’s relationship to human
experience—whether Auden’s, Begbie’s, or even Kierkegaard’s—is primarily based on
an analysis of Western music from the “common-practice period” (c. 1700-1900) and its
twentieth-century tonal derivatives. Kierkegaard, of course, was concerned with Mozart
above all, but he also remarks, more generally, that “music did not really become
developed in the ancient world, but belongs to the Christian era” (*Either* 57). In his
*Tempo* article, Auden fleshes out this claim: “Music as an art, i.e. music that has come to
a conscious realization of its true nature, is confined to Western Civilization alone and
only to the last four or five hundred years at that. . . . Only in the West has chant become
song” (“Some” 250); just as Christianity encouraged “the notion of punctuality”
(“Balaam” 468), surely it also influenced the temporal character of Western music, which
“declared its consciousness of itself when it adopted time-signatures, barring and the
metronome beat” (“Some” 250). Auden is not just concerned with temporality, however,
but with the operation of the will in time, and it is melody—preeminently among musical
elements—that is capable of expressing this: “A successful melody is a self-determined history: it is freely what it intends to be yet is a meaningful whole not an arbitrary succession of notes” (250). Even aside from opera’s general “imitation of human wilfulness” (252), then, it is no surprise that Auden would be drawn to Mozartian or Italian bel canto operas, forms in which melody is king. By the mid-twentieth century, the Western classical music tradition had undergone drastic changes; indeed, tradition and tonality themselves had fallen on hard times (in part three, I will discuss how Stravinsky’s score relates to these developments). But in the months leading up to the Rake’s Progress premiere, Auden remained cautiously optimistic about opera’s present and future. Fully aware that he was writing in the wake of a catastrophic world war, he concludes his 1951 essay with the following appeal:

The golden age of opera, from Mozart to Verdi, coincided with the golden age of liberal humanism, of unquestioning belief in freedom and progress. . . . To say that operas are more difficult to write does not mean that they are impossible. That would only follow if we should cease to believe in free-will and personality altogether. Every high C accurately struck utterly demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance. (“Some” 255)

“OUR INCORRIGIBLE STAGINESS, ALL WISH AND NO RESOLVE”

Wishing to be free is an easy matter, but wishing is the most paltry and unfree of all performances.

—Søren Kierkegaard (Provocations 291)

William Hogarth’s series A Rake’s Progress (1732-33) proved remarkably
inspirational during the mid-1940s. Sidney Gilliat’s 1945 film *The Rake’s Progress* (retitled *Notorious Gentleman* in the United States) opens with a still of Hogarth’s tavern scene before proceeding to its loosely related, contemporary tale. The Val-Lewton-produced *Bedlam*, a period horror film from 1946, not only takes its visual cues from Hogarth (the final plate of *A Rake’s Progress* in particular), but also gives the eighteenth-century painter and engraver a writing credit. This surge of cinematic interest in Hogarth may seem surprising until one considers how readily his “pictorial narratives” present themselves “as if they composed a motion picture’s preparatory ‘story board’” (Momberger 49). Similarly, when Stravinsky saw Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* engravings in Chicago in 1947, they “immediately suggested a series of operatic scenes” (Stravinsky and Craft, *Memories* 154). Yet despite their shared inspiration, Gilliat’s and Lewton’s films and Stravinsky’s opera have almost nothing else in common. At the time, the two dramatic media were moving in different directions. As Mervyn Cooke explains,

> cinema was in the 1940s viewed as the realist art-form *par excellence*—
> and, just as the visual arts became less representative once photography became commonplace, so stage productions of opera and drama gradually yielded realism to the cinema and cultivated in its stead more compellingly stylized approaches to their raw material. (290)

This development perfectly suited Auden, who often went out of his way to denigrate film and also firmly believed, as he put it in “Opera Addict,” that “verismo is fatal” and “reduces opera to comic bathos” (402). This is not to say that he thought opera had no mimetic potential; on the contrary, we have already heard him argue that opera is uniquely capable of imitating “The only serious possession of men . . . namely their will” (“Squares” 342). So while he grants that opera is “totally unrealistic” (in the strict sense), he also claims it is “far from presenting an ‘unreal world’”; it can offer “a better
‘imitation’ of life as we experience it subjectively than any naturalistic reflection can hope to be” (“Eliot” 259; emphasis added).

When Stravinsky, at the suggestion of Aldous Huxley, asked Auden to write the libretto for his opera, he made it clear that he would “compose not a musical drama, but just an opera with definitely separated numbers” (Selected 299). It is no coincidence, then, that Auden would defend not just the dramatic merits of opera in general but of eighteenth-century “number operas” by Gluck and Mozart: “a naturalistic music drama seems much more absurd, more ‘artificial’ than a formal opera like Alceste or Così fan tutte” (“Opera” 402). Whether by luck or through Huxley’s intuition, Stravinsky had invited Auden to write in a dramatic form that played to the poet’s strengths. Number opera—with its variety of self-contained arias, ensembles, and choruses connected by recitative—is just the sort of mixed genre, from a poetic standpoint, that Auden preferred and in which he excelled (Jacobs, “Auden” 289). This kind of opera has the further advantage, in relation to his theory of music, of being able to represent “Time in its twofold aspect, natural or organic repetition, and historical novelty created by choice” (“Notes” 783). Gabriel Josipovici, who correctly observes that “The Rake . . . is committed from the first to the musical articulation of the acceptance of time” (65), also understands that “an opera which denies the unfolding of time in its form is able to examine time and its workings in a way which an opera that lives under the aegis of time . . . never can” (63). In a Wagnerian music drama, for instance, the music is “freed . . . from the necessity to create its own abstract unity through formal devices of repetition and recapitulation” so that it can “flow on in ‘endless melody’ . . . unbounded” (Goldman and Sprinchnorn 23-24). But this very unboundedness is antithetical to Auden’s (and
Stravinsky’s) understanding of melody: “Without a strictly natural or cyclical time, purified from every trace of historical singularity, as a framework within which to occur, the irreversible historicity of the notes themselves would be impossible” (Auden, “Some” 250-51). For Auden, unbounded freedom is not freedom at all, and the specific limitations and constraints of both Stravinsky’s commission and the nature of number opera helped him live this notion practically and express it artistically.

While the restrictions of number opera lent The Rake’s Progress more formal consistency than Auden and Britten’s Paul Bunyan, they did not prevent Auden from imparting his own trademark eclecticism in adapting the content of Hogarth’s sequence. Echoing Kierkegaard once again (Either 56, 96), Auden argued that music and opera are immediate—unlike literature, which is reflective. This distinction directly affected his approach to characterization: “Opera . . . cannot present character in the novelist’s sense of the word, namely, people who are potentially good and bad, active and passive”; hence, his characters all represent mythic archetypes or “state[s] of being” rather than well-rounded individuals (“Some” 252). Alan Jacobs has noted a similar dramatic strategy in the poem Auden finished just before working on The Rake’s Progress. “The means of characterization” in The Age of Anxiety, he argues, “are not those of the novelist but rather those of the taxonomic psychologist . . . Auden’s practice here is far closer to Theophrastus or Everyman than to Tolstoy” (Introduction xxvii-xxviii). Auden himself explicitly named Everyman as an influence on the Rake’s Progress libretto (“World” 99), and the medieval morality play would seem a natural fit for adapting Hogarth’s allegorical portraits. Intriguingly, he also described Everyman using precisely the same language he had used to defend opera’s singular manner of achieving verisimilitude: “If I
try . . . to project *my subjective experience of life* in dramatic form the play will be of the allegorical morality type like *Everyman*” (“Globe” 573; emphasis added). Not content merely to superimpose the dramatic structure of the morality play onto Hogarth’s series, however, Auden embellished his libretto with an astounding range of thematic material from art and literature of the past.⁸ Promiscuous borrowings from Goethe’s *Faust*, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* are juxtaposed with elements of nursery rhymes and fairy tales and supplemented with echoes of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, all of which is colored by the philosophy of Kierkegaard and the psychology of Jung.⁹ This is not to mention the myths of Orpheus and, especially, Venus and Adonis, which are alluded to throughout the opera until they come to the foreground in the final scene. Yet despite its complexity—complemented and enhanced by Stravinsky’s allusive compositional style—*The Rake’s Progress* remains “at heart, an opera about opera” (Cross 137). More specifically, it is an opera about Auden’s conception of music and its representation of the will’s free movement within the bounds of time.

Opera is one of the most inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary of art forms—a feature that constituted much of its appeal to Auden—but Albright is right to insist that “Though Stravinsky helped with the construction of the scenario, and Auden’s friend Chester Kallman wrote much of the libretto—including some of its best scenes—there is nothing in *The Rake’s Progress* that falls outside the orbit of Auden’s intellectual world” (Stravinsky 45). This is truer of the *Rake* than of any of Auden’s later librettos, all of which were conceived in partnership with Kallman. While agreeing that “The preoccupations of Auden the singular Christian . . . are all over the libretto in its final
form” and that “it is Auden’s aesthetic which colours the whole text” (53, 57), Roger Savage reminds us that “on a verbal level it is quite unjust to think of the libretto as predominantly Auden’s” (57). In fact, one of Stravinsky’s biographers, Stephen Walsh, offers an insightful description of the two librettists’ distinctive contributions:

[While Kallman’s verses are consciously operatic (like highly polished translations from some Italian original), Auden’s are precise, stylized English poetry, beautifully conceived for patterned musical setting, but . . . not amenable to conventional operatic manipulations of the kind that routinely destroy scansion and rhyme schemes. (220)]

Just as Stravinsky would study the scores of baroque and classical works by Handel and Mozart in preparation for the Rake (Oliver 158), Auden had decided that he should mimic Dryden and Pope. Even before his first meeting with Stravinsky, he told Alan Ansen, “The standard meter will have to be heroic couplets” (Ansen 77). But heroic couplets, while poetically appropriate, were not necessarily the best choice from an operatic standpoint. Near the end of his career, Auden knew better: “composers find short lines of verse easier to set than long ones. The decasyllabic line of English blank verse and heroic couplet, for example, appears to be too long for natural musical phrases” (“World” 92). Nevertheless, the Augustan model had its advantages. As he argued in a program note for the 1953 American premiere, “its very conventions, its insistence upon the lucid generality make it a style better suited to operatic treatment . . . than, say, the poetry of the Romantics” (“Met” 615). To see just how conventional and general this verse can be, one need look no further than the opera’s opening scene.

Unlike Hogarth’s series, which takes place exclusively in London, the libretto opens with a contrasting idyll. In their scenario, Auden and Stravinsky indicate a “Pastoral comme Theocritus of love youth country etc.” (Libretti 581). The hero, Tom
Rakewell, and Anne Trulove (based on Hogarth’s Sarah Young), sing a love duet in the
garden of her father’s country cottage. As in the opening of Paul Bunyan, Auden cannot
resist the Edenic symbolism, though here it is filtered through an archaic poetic idiom:

**ANE.**

The woods are green and bird and beast at play
For all things keep this festival of May;
With fragrant odors and with notes of cheer
The pious earth observes the solemn year.

**RAKEWELL.**

Now is the season when the Cyprian Queen
With genial charm translates our mortal scene,
When swains their nymphs in fervent arms enfold
And with a kiss restore the Age of Gold. (49)

Although the language evokes a particular historical moment, the eighteenth century,
Anne’s stanza, in particular, summons Auden’s notion of “a strictly natural or cyclical
time” as a melodic framework, without which, he claimed, “the irreversible historicity of
the notes themselves would be impossible” (“Some” 250-51); indeed, the phrase “with
notes of cheer / The pious earth observes the solemn year” reads like a poeticized
formulation of this theory. Again, as in Paul Bunyan, the action of The Rake’s Progress
follows the changing of the seasons, but the earlier operetta ended with a Christmas party
whereas the Rake returns to springtime, asserting more emphatically the unavoidable
cyclicality of time as “natural or organic repetition” (“Notes” 783). Meanwhile, Tom’s
mention of “the Cyprian Queen” introduces us to the Venus and Adonis motif; potentially
more significant, however, is his reference to the mythical “Age of Gold,” which brings
to mind both Auden’s grand claims about “the golden age of opera” and the art form’s
origins. Tim Carter identifies “the pastoral’s celebration of the Age of Gold—that idyllic
time of prosperity and peace” as a favorite subject among opera’s earliest practitioners
(3), and Stravinsky’s brief instrumental prelude fittingly recalls the introductory toccata
from Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, the oldest opera in the standard repertoire (Griffiths 318). In “Opera Addict,” Auden had written, “New operas may and, let us hope, will be written, but their composers can not carry on from where their predecessors left off, but must start anew from the beginning” (401). Both librettist and composer seem to have taken this advice quite literally in their respective attempts to “restore the Age of Gold.”

After initiating the seasonal cycle that will provide the story’s framework and establishing several thematic threads, the libretto moves toward its first solo number. Given Auden’s theory that opera imitates human willfulness and his corresponding belief that it is incapable of representing passivity, the content of Tom’s recitative and aria, at least initially, is rather surprising. Trulove, who is sagely suspicious of Tom from the very beginning, encourages him to take a job, but Tom is uninterested. The recitative that follows begins with the famous (and possibly apocryphal) Lutheran phrase “Here I stand” (Weisstein 291), but it ends with an appeal to Calvinist doctrine: “Have not grave doctors assured us that good works are of no avail for Heaven predestines all?” (50). Tom’s mock-theological attempts to justify his laziness culminate in an aria that is essentially a hymn to Fortune:

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Since it is not by merit
We rise or we fall
But the favor of Fortune
That governs us all,
Why should I labor
For what in the end
She will give me for nothing
If she be my friend? (50)
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It is extremely ironic, in relation to Auden’s theory, that the opera’s hero should reject the possibility of “historical novelty created by choice” in his very first aria; clearly, Tom Rakewell represents Auden’s ideas about the operatic and the musical only in a negative
sense. By denying free will, Tom also hastens his own expulsion from Eden—an event signaled in the aria’s final lines: “My life lies before me, / The world is so wide: / Come, wishes, be horses; / This beggar shall ride” (51). Just recently, Auden had borrowed the conclusion to *Paradise Lost* for the epigraph to *The Age of Anxiety*’s final section. In Milton’s epic, the prospect of facing the wide world is expressed more soberly:

> Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
> The world was all before them, where to choose  
> Their place of rest, and providence their guide:  
> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,  
> Through Eden took their solitary way. (618)

In his epigraph, however, Auden truncates this passage and places an ellipsis after the word “choose” (528), emphasizing, as we might expect, the centrality of the individual will and subtly omitting any temptation to rely exclusively on providence.

The final lines of Tom’s aria echo not just Milton but also Auden’s own poetry. In a 1932 poem (later excluded from his *Collected Poems*), he writes, “Let wishes be horses as fast as they can” (“The sun” 120), a request that provokes a reply at the end of the decade in “New Year Letter”: “But wishes are not horses” (238). Both poems allude to the English nursery rhyme “If wishes were horses / Beggars would ride,” one version of which makes the disparity between wishful thinking and industrious action quite plain:

> “If ifs and an’s were pots and pans, there’d be no work for tinkers’ hands” (Opie and Opie 513). It was Kallman’s idea to grant Tom three wishes in an effort “to suggest that he had a little will of his own,” although, as he himself admitted, their protagonist remained “almost as passive as his Hogarth original” (627). Kallman’s apologetic tone is misleading; it seems clear to me that Tom’s character was intended all along to be an inverse image of the truly operatic rake, Don Giovanni, who is “wilfulness incarnate”
Auden’s prose writings help clarify the antithetical relationship between wishing and willing. Defining the features of fairy tales, he contends, “A world in which all wishes were magically granted would be a world without desire or will” (“Interlude: The Wish” 602). The fairy-tale wishes that structure the plot of *The Rake’s Progress*, then, do not endow Tom with an authentic will; they strip him of one altogether. The opera’s hero suffers from what Auden would call “a disease of consciousness”; according to him, “All wishes, whatever their apparent content, have the same and unvarying meaning: ‘I refuse to be what I am’” (“Interlude: West’s” 621). Tom’s first wish—“I wish I had money” (51)—is no exception. The libretto’s insistence that each wish be spoken and not sung is entirely appropriate since, for Auden, music expresses the “experience of pure volition and subjectivity” (“Some” 251).

After Tom announces his intention to “trust to my luck” and makes his first wish, the libretto’s Faustian dimensions spring to life (Auden surely knew that in Latin faustus means “lucky”). Nick Shadow, the opera’s Mephistophelian villain, “appears immediately at the garden gate” and announces that Tom has inherited an uncle’s fortune and must go to London (51-53). But the Faust-Mephistopheles motif is not simply a plot contrivance; as Albright contends, *The Rake’s Progress* “is specifically a Faust story on the model of Goethe” (Stravinsky 43). Indeed, in Auden’s analysis of Goethe’s *Faust* in *The Dyer’s Hand*, one could easily replace the names “Faust” and “Mephisto” with “Rakewell and “Shadow”: “the story of Faust is precisely the story of a man who refuses to be anyone and only wishes to become someone else. Once he has summoned Mephisto, the manifestation of possibility without actuality, there is nothing left for Faust to represent but the passive consciousness of possibilities.” “[I]n an ideal production,” he
adds, “Faust and Mephisto should be played by identical twins” (534). This suggestion, that Faust and Mephistopheles are really two aspects of one individual, is advertised in Tom’s case by his alter ego’s name, Shadow, which also happens to be Jung’s term for “that dark half of the psyche which we invariably get rid of by means of projection” (571). Promoting the American premiere in Harper’s Bazaar, Auden made the psychological dimension explicit: “Shadow is, of course, a Mephisto disguised as [Don Giovanni’s servant] Leporello, who brings into Rakewell’s consciousness what is already latent there” (“Rake’s” 617).

In the following brothel scene, which parallels Hogarth’s third image, we see this process at work. Building on Tom’s quasi-theological rationale from the first scene, Shadow, who functions as a kind of stage manager for much of the opera, organizes an elaborate ceremony so that Tom can begin to act upon the implications of his beliefs. In fact, both the scene’s language and its dramatic form are overwhelmingly religious. Shadow serves as “godfather” while the brothel’s madam, none other than Mother Goose, doubles as a “lady-Bishop” for Tom’s mock catechism and his initiation into the mysteries of “The Temple of Delight” (56-57). The scene’s liturgical elements are reminiscent of the pseudo-litany near the end of Paul Bunyan, though here the perversion of Christian rite and meaning is much more drastic. Shadow encapsulates Tom’s new dogma in a couplet: “See. Time is yours. The hours obey your pleasure. / Fear not. Enjoy. You may repent at leisure” (57). But the apostle Paul had responded to just such an argument in his epistle to the Romans, a response Auden had used as his epigraph to “For the Time Being”: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid” (347).
While Tom tests the very limits of grace, Anne personifies it; as Mendelson points out, Anne derives from the Hebrew Hannah, which means “grace” (*Later* 271). She is also, of course, the representative of “true love,” and several commentators draw attention to the fact that Auden’s and Kallman’s respective scene assignments constituted a role reversal: Kallman, a real-life rake, wrote most of Anne’s part, and the jilted yet faithful Auden wrote most of Tom’s (e.g., Carpenter 353-54; Mendelson, *Later* 272-73). At the same time, Anne’s *musical* identity contrasts with Tom’s. Act 1, scene 3 seems designed to showcase the soprano voice, which, as Herbert Lindenberger claims, “simulate[s] willfulness in an extraordinarily persuasive way” (269). The libretto emphasizes Anne’s purposiveness in her prayer that God “strengthen my resolve” as well as in the stage direction indicating that she “rises and comes forward with great decision” to sing her (literally) show-stopping cabaletta (60). Kallman’s words for the cabaletta—especially the lines “If love be love / It will not alter”—recall Shakespeare’s sonnet 116, the third quatrain of which nicely summarizes Anne’s role in the opera: “Love’s not Time’s fool . . . Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, / But bears it out even to the edge of doom” (116). In a clever paradox, Stravinsky’s score requires Anne to alter her pitch virtuosically as she declares the unalterable nature of her love for Tom (*Rake’s* 128-29), yet the character’s constancy is never in doubt. Most significant, perhaps, is Auden’s request (one of the few compositional requests he would make in this collaboration) that Stravinsky conclude the cabaletta with a high C (Craft, *Stravinsky* 13-14), the quintessential operatic flourish for the soprano voice. Remembering Auden’s affirmation that “Every high C accurately struck utterly demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance” (“Some” 255), Peter Conrad recognizes the
symbolic import of Anne’s final note: “Pole-vaulting above the stave, the singer has performed an existential miracle” (229).

Anne’s decisiveness, demonstrated most powerfully by the “existential miracle” that ends act 1, contrasts sharply with Tom’s deepening existential crisis, which the libretto’s text expresses in specifically musical metaphors at the beginning of act 2:

Vary the song, O London, change!  
Disband your notes and let them range;  
Let Rumor scream, let Folly purr,  
Let Tone desert the flatterer.  
Let Harmony no more obey  
The strident choristers of prey—  
Yet all your music cannot fill  
The gap that in my heart—is still. (60-61)

Tom’s “prayer for chaos” (Stravinsky 57)—as Albright calls it—sounds remarkably like a description of much twentieth-century classical music. As Heather Wiebe observes, “It is Anne’s acceptance of constraints—of operatic convention and the pastoral—that allows her to sing” (16). But Tom cannot abide any such restraint, and his yearning for constant change and unlimited freedom leads him in a new philosophical direction. When Tom utters his next wish, “I wish I were happy” (61), Shadow encourages him to “Take Baba the Turk to wife” as a manifestation of his independence from “those twin tyrants of appetite and conscience” (62). The concept of the completely gratuitous act—the acte gratuit made famous by Sartre and Gide—occurs frequently in Auden’s prose, but in this context, he is clearly mocking it. Though there is an existentialist strand in his thought, he once told Alan Ansen that “the Existentialists were absolutely phoney” (Ansen 32). The second stanza of Shadow’s aria is Auden’s synopsis of their “phoney” philosophy:

That man alone his fate fulfills,  
For he alone is free  
Who chooses what to will, and wills
His choice as destiny.
No eye his future can foretell,
No law his past explain
Whom neither Passion may compel
Nor Reason can restrain. (62-63)

Shadow is right to believe that freedom will bring Tom happiness, but his definition of freedom is suspect. According to Auden, “To be happy means to be free, not from pain or fear, but from care or anxiety. A man is so free when (1) he knows what he desires and (2) what he desires is real and not fantastic” (“Red” 683). Tom’s decision to marry Baba represents the illusion of willfulness and desire, not the real thing. In “The Sea and the Mirror,” Caliban advises the audience not to seek freedom via “the ultimately liberal condition,” in which “your existence is indeed free at last to choose its own meaning, that is, to plunge headlong into despair” (437-38). Shadow, of course, offers no such advice.

It becomes clear rather quickly that Tom’s marriage to Baba will not bring happiness, but he soon develops another scheme. After dreaming of “An engine that converted stones to bread / Whereby all peoples were for nothing fed,” he makes his third (and seemingly final) wish: “O I wish it were true” (71-72). The dream is a variation on the devil’s first temptation of Christ in the wilderness: “If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread” (Luke 4.3). In his unfinished prose book, *The Prolific and the Devourer*, Auden had written, “Satan knows that the miracle is impossible, and hopes by persuading Jesus to attempt it, to destroy his faith in the shock of failure” (434). Likewise, Shadow aims to destroy Tom’s spirit by encouraging him to entertain his impossible dream. Mendelson notes that “This something-for-nothing fantasy casts a sardonic glance at the political programs Auden had brought himself to endorse in the 1930s” (*Later* 271), which is certainly true, but it is also yet another
example of Tom’s persistent avoidance of responsibility. In a letter to Stravinsky, Auden describes this step of Tom’s progress (in misspelled French) as “Il desire devinir Dieu,” he desires to become God (Libretti 590). And because it is fantastic and not real, this desire cannot bring freedom or happiness. Tom’s Utopian vision is similar to that of the Social Gospel movement, of which both Auden and Niebuhr were critics:

Thanks to this excellent device
Man shall re-enter Paradise
From which he once was driven.
Secure from want, the cause of crime,
The world shall for the second time
Be similar to heaven. (73)

Against these naïve beliefs in the inevitability of progress and the perfectibility of humankind, Auden held to the doctrine of original sin, a doctrine he found increasingly persuasive during and after the Second World War. The choral refrain in the following auction scene—“Ruin. Disaster. Shame” (74-75)—summarizes the result of Tom’s scheme to restore earth to “an Eden of good-will” (72). The auction scene’s pseudo-religious ingredients correspond to the earlier brothel scene. Sellem, the auctioneer, “mounts the dais” as if it were a pulpit and delivers a sermon to the assembled mob:

“Truly there is a divine balance in Nature: a thousand lose that a thousand may gain; and you who are the fortunate are so not only in yourselves, but also in being Nature’s very missionaries” (76). The message serves as an emphatic reminder of Tom’s fateful decisions, in act 1, to “entrust myself to Fortune” and “follow Nature as my teacher” (50, 56). In the penultimate scene, however, he is given the opportunity to test his luck one last time.

In his Harper’s Bazaar piece on the opera, Auden characterizes Tom’s “progress” as a “flight from reality” in which he continually turns from the present moment
(“Rake’s” 618); he is either “elated by the prospect of the future” or “disgusted by the remembrance of the recent past” (“Rake’s” 617). Shadow cultivates Tom’s dissociation from time by manipulating it, suggesting its unreality. In the brothel scene, Shadow reverses time so that Tom feels free to indulge his lusts (57), and now, in the graveyard scene, Shadow stops time altogether, offering Tom the chance to win back his soul (the servant’s diabolical identity is no longer in question) through a game of cards (84). In both cases, the manipulation of time is accomplished after Tom utters the words “too late” (57, 84), which is just one of many instances of repetition in this pivotal scene. In fact, the entire scene evokes Mozart’s Don Giovanni while highlighting Auden’s particular interpretation of the Don Juan legend. In his introduction to the Portable Greek Reader, he analyzes “The two great modern erotic myths”—“the myth of Tristan and Isolde . . . and the countermyth of Don Juan”—and concludes that “The great enemy of both is time: Tristan and Isolde dread it because it threatens change” and “Don Juan dreads it because it threatens repetition and he wishes each moment to be absolutely novel” (Introduction 370-71). Knowing that Tom resembles Don Juan in precisely this way, Shadow attempts to win the game by inserting the queen of hearts back into the pack after Tom had already chosen it once; as he explains to the audience, “That there is no return, I’ve taught him well, / And repetition palls him” (85). In act 2, Tom had apostrophized, “O wilful powers, pummel to dust / And drive into the void, one thought—return!” (65). And in a similar aside in act 1, he sings, “Love! / That precious word is like a fiery coal, / It burns my lips, strikes terror to my soul” (56). The reference to the “fiery coal” is not merely a convenient rhyme for “soul”; in the book of Isaiah, a “live coal” touches the prophet’s lips and his “iniquity is taken away,” his “sin purged”
Finally, as he stands at “the edge of doom” (Shakespeare 116), Tom recognizes that repentance and rebirth are possible: “Return! and Love! / The banished words torment. Return O Love—” (86). As the stage direction indicates, “He breaks off, startled, when he realizes he is singing with Anne,” who is repeating the same plea to “merciful Heaven” and the same musical phrase from the previous act: “A love that is sworn before Thee can plunder Hell of its prey” (64, 86). Emboldened by her intercession, Tom makes his final wish: “[spoken] I wish for nothing else. / [Sung. Exalté.] Love, first and last, assume eternal reign; / Renew my life, O Queen of Hearts, again” (86). In an earlier draft of the libretto, Tom says, “Wishful chance, farewell!” rather than “I wish for nothing else” (Libretti 602), which makes the divorce from his previous way of life more explicit. In the final version, however, Tom’s transformation is symbolized in the transition from speech to song. By adopting the form of his first three wishes, he acknowledges for one last time the “world without desire or will” that wishing represents (“Interlude: The Wish” 602); he proceeds, then, to burst into passionate song, a resolute act of “pure volition and subjectivity” (“Some” 251). Of course, Tom has been singing throughout the opera (how could he not?), but his musicality in this moment takes on a new significance in relation to the notion of “return”; in Kierkegaardian terms, he has “willed repetition.” Auden’s 1952 anthology, The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard, includes a passage that distinguishes the concept of repetition from recollection and hope, both of which belong to youth. In contrast to recollection’s preoccupation with the past or hope’s focus on the future, repetition is “the blessed certainty of the instant” (73); “Repetition is reality, and it is the seriousness of life. He who wills repetition is matured
in seriousness” (75). In choosing Anne again, Tom’s “flight from reality” is over. For Auden, as for Kierkegaard, the idea of repetition is essential for understanding the difference between romantic love, “which is doomed by its immediacy and hostility to time,” and “married love, which can only take place in time, and must be reaffirmed every single day” (Wetzsteon 90). Tragically, Shadow curses Tom with madness just as he accepts “responsibility for time” and demonstrates his mature understanding of committed love (87).

In keeping with Hogarth’s series, then, the story ends in an insane asylum, yet the Bedlam of The Rake’s Progress does not represent eighteenth-century London; instead, it strongly suggests an image of the afterlife. In a BBC radio talk from 1953, Auden himself described the scene as a kind of purgatory (Libretti 622), but the opening of the madmen’s chorus—“Leave all love and hope behind” (88)—is more reminiscent of the inscription over the gate of hell in Dante’s Inferno: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here” (Alighieri 42). When Anne arrives, however, the scene becomes more like paradise. She joins Tom, who now believes he is Adonis, and together they sing a duet of reconciliation, the concluding stanza of which seems to unite the present, the “Here” and “now,” with the eternal:

Rejoice, belovèd: in these fields of Elysium
Space cannot alter, nor time our love abate;
Here has no words for absence or estrangement
Nor now a notion of Almost or Too Late. (89)

Earlier in the opera, the phrase “too late” had led Tom to escape time (57, 84), but now repentance and forgiveness have enabled him to live wholly in the present, despite his madness. Imitating Solveig’s song at the end of Peer Gynt, Anne sings Tom a lullaby and then prepares to depart: “Tom, my vow / Holds ever, but it is no longer I / You need”
Like Dante’s Beatrice, or even Goethe’s “Eternal-Feminine” (503), Anne has been Tom’s intercessor, and now he must leave “this earthly city” for his eternal rest (91). During the final elegiac chorus—“Mourn for Adonis, ever young, the dear / Of Venus: weep, tread softly round his bier” (91)—the opera itself seems to have departed this world and reached a kind of otherworldly stasis.

In order to jolt the audience out of this seductive sense of timelessness, however, Auden and Stravinsky append a moral epilogue in the manner of Mozart and Da Ponte’s Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte. The characters appear before the curtain, “the men without wigs, Baba without her beard” (92), and the music (with mathematical precision) abruptly doubles its tempo (Stravinsky, Rake’s 393, 396). The overall effect of the epilogue is to encourage the audience to return to this world, as the characters collectively sing the moral, which delivers on the opera’s promise to be a “fable” (47): “For idle hands / And hearts and minds / The Devil finds / A work to do” (92-93).

Though some have criticized its seeming unsuitability (Griffiths 318-20), the proverb is both timeless and timely. One version appears in the work of Hogarth’s contemporary, Isaac Watts: “Satan finds some mischief still / For idle hands to do” (Manser 72). But a more ancient version is attributed to St. Jerome: “Find some work for your hands to do, so that Satan may never find you idle” (Manser 226). The libretto playfully insists on the moral’s eternal applicability (“Since Eve went out with Adam . . .” [92]), yet a passage from Auden’s “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio” (written in 1941-42) suggests that the opera’s message, like the nativity story, may also have a specific relevance in the twentieth century: “Since Peace was signed with Honour he’s been minding his business; / But, whoops, here comes his Idleness, buttoning his uniform; / Just in tidy time to
massacre the Innocents” (395).

Despite its quaintly allegorical trappings, then, *The Rake’s Progress* is very much an opera of and for its time. In fact, its vast layers of symbolism have proven amenable to the twenty-first century, too. One review of a recent Royal Opera House performance begins, “With debt and ruin all around, no opera could be more timely than *The Rake’s Progress*” (Jones 54). But the opera has not always been welcomed with open arms. The 1951 Venice premiere sparked controversy, and although the Metropolitan Opera staged the American premiere and seven more performances in 1953-54, the opera did not appear there again until 1997. Of the American premiere, *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes noted that the libretto’s rake “is a Freudian Faust with Freudian overtones, also a touch of Peer Gynt, Don Giovanni and other literary and operatic characters—who make a strange stew of a bizarre and semi-symbolic progress to the tragical end”; Downes’s critique is actually rather insightful, and his accusation that at moments “the poet-philosopher takes precedence over the opera librettist” is probably just (61). As more recent commentators have observed,¹³ both critics and audiences have begun to warm to the *Rake*, although the libretto, in particular, still has its detractors. When *The Rake’s Progress* returned to the Met in 1997, Stravinsky scholar Richard Taruskin reviewed it for the *New York Times*, and his conclusion that the opera is “a broth created by a committee of not terribly well-matched chefs” embellishes Downes’s “strange stew” metaphor. For Taruskin, “the opera’s plot line remains a problem, coy farrago that it is of Greek mythology, Arabian Nights, Augustan oratory, Victorian moralism, dime-store existentialism (the most obvious ‘period’ flavor of all, by now) and opera queenery” (38). The claim that the opera’s plot is a “farrago” is not inaccurate, but Auden might have
responded with a culinary analogy of his own from “The Sea and the Mirror”: “the real, the only, test of the theatrical as of the gastronomic . . . is the mixed perfected brew” (423). Like Paul Bunyan—except to a greater extent—the Rake seems to have benefited from the passing of time. Audiences accustomed to all that we now call postmodern are increasingly willing not just to tolerate but to enjoy the heterogeneous nature of Auden’s first two librettos. Furthermore, Auden and Stravinsky, despite their superficial differences, were more “well-matched” than Taruskin lets on.

A COLLABORATION IN THE HIGHEST SENSE

Return need not be regression.

—Linda Hutcheon (175)

When Auden wrote to accept the invitation to collaborate on The Rake’s Progress, he immediately assured Stravinsky that “it is the librettist’s job to satisfy the composer, not the other way around”; near the end of the letter, he added, “I need hardly say that the chance of working with you is the greatest honor of my life” (Stravinsky, Selected 299-300). The sense of deference Auden expresses in the letter survives in his discussion of the poetic qualities of librettos in “Some Reflections on Opera as a Medium.” Though he never mentions Stravinsky (or their opera) by name, one imagines he found it easier to make the following claim knowing that he had collaborated with the greatest living composer:

The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of
glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody: once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them. (255)

Auden would continue to believe this notion in theory, but in his future collaborations with Hans Werner Henze and Nicolas Nabokov, he was, perhaps, less inclined to carry it out in practice. In his earlier collaborative relationship with Benjamin Britten, on the other hand, he had no notion of adopting the subservient role. As for Stravinsky, he seemed perfectly pleased with his choice of librettist, and even years later, he would speak glowingly of Auden’s contribution to *The Rake’s Progress*: “At the business level of the collaboration he wrote ‘words for music’ . . . At a different level, as soon as we began to work together I discovered that we shared the same views not only about opera, but also on the nature of the Beautiful and the Good. Thus, our opera is indeed, and in the highest sense, a collaboration” (Stravinsky and Craft, *Themes* 97). Stravinsky’s reference to the “business level of the collaboration” is not unimportant. The very fact that both men viewed their work as “business” helps explain the success of the partnership. Roger Savage perceptively characterizes their compatibility: “crucially both were ‘makers’; that is to say, in the practice of their arts they saw themselves less as personal outpourers of inspired genius in a romantic-expressive tradition than as producers of sheer artefacts whose existence was in a vital sense independent of themselves as people” (45). Auden and Stravinsky were both drawn to technical challenges and approached them as skilled craftsmen, and *The Rake’s Progress* is, among other things, an exercise in artistic form by two formal masters. Savage’s characterization has the added advantage of emphasizing that the very process of artistic creation, as practiced by Auden and Stravinsky, is a matter of decisive action and choice—of *making*—rather than relying on
“inspiration,” which, taken to its extreme, could represent the artist’s equivalent of entrusting oneself to fortune.

The terms “maker” and “making” reoccur throughout Auden’s poetry and prose, but it was an important concept for Stravinsky, too. In his *Poetics of Music* (based on his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of 1939-40), he stresses from the beginning that the Greek verb *poiein* “means nothing else but to do or make” (4). The lectures proceed to outline a neoclassical aesthetic that is remarkably accordant with Auden’s views on music and opera (though Stravinsky had not yet conceived his idea for the *Rake*). Defying “the learned intellectualism that held sway among music-lovers of the serious sort,” he claims, “I am beginning to think, in full agreement with the general public, that melody must keep its place at the summit of the hierarchy of elements that make up music” (40). He concludes the same lecture with “Verdi’s admirable injunction: ‘Let us return to old times, and that will be progress’” (43). Early in his career, Stravinsky had expressed an active dislike of opera and described it as “a backwater” (qtd. in E. W. White 225); now he was quoting a quintessentially operatic composer with approval. Importantly, however, Stravinsky’s eventual embrace of opera’s past was not a matter of passive acquiescence but of purposeful selection—he may have been ready to embrace Verdi, but certainly not Wagner. He clearly emphasizes this willful aspect in his distinction between habit and tradition, the latter of which “results from a *conscious and deliberate* acceptance. A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present” (56-57; emphasis added). In another context, Stravinsky admitted that his “instinct is to recompose, and not only students’ works, but old masters’ as well” (Stravinsky and Craft, *Memories* 110). The idea of *re*composition, it
seems to me, is a peculiarly appropriate form of “willed repetition.” The Rake’s Progress may recompose Don Giovanni (as Kierkegaard had recommended), as well as Mozart’s Cosi fan tutte and assorted operatic moments from composers as distant as Verdi and Monteverdi, but it is also undeniably Stravinskyan. While still completing the score, Stravinsky played some of it for the choreographer George Balanchine, who was “overwhelmed”; Auden repeated Balanchine’s marvelous description of the music in a letter to Kallman: it sounded, he said, like “Don Giovanni reflected in a Coney Island Mirror” (Berg). Although the opera’s music imitates Mozart (and other earlier music), it is filtered through a uniquely Stravinskyan soundscape, with all of the harmonic—and especially rhythmic—idiosyncrasies such a filtering entails. So while the score is certainly an instance of repetition, it also represents, in Auden’s words, “historical novelty created by choice” (”Notes” 783).

Of course, not everyone subscribed to Auden and Stravinsky’s shared notions about “the Beautiful and the Good.” Many of the younger generation of composers, in particular, were antagonistic to Stravinsky’s continued traffic with tradition and convention. In a December 1951 letter to John Cage, Pierre Boulez asks, “Have you heard Rake’s progress? What ugliness!” (Nattiez 118). The Rake’s Progress was composed and introduced to the world’s opera houses in an era when the ideological implications of musical styles and methods were vigorously debated. As Wiebe points out, “freedom and unfreedom were . . . loaded categories in these Cold War years,” and “For Stravinsky’s most prominent critics, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, his music was one of unfreedom; it was an antimusic” (11-12). Stravinsky’s most severe critic was Theodor Adorno, whose 1948 book Philosophy of Modern Music famously
praised the progressiveness of Stravinsky’s rival and inventor of the twelve-tone method, Arnold Schoenberg, and denounced Stravinsky’s regressiveness. Schoenberg himself liked to refer to the “emancipation of the dissonance” that his system helped to achieve (216), though not all composers perceived the emancipatory effect. In an interview, Britten objected to the arbitrariness of “serial ‘rules’” and added that “‘Socially’ I am seriously disturbed by [the] limitations” of Schoenberg’s method (120). Even Schoenberg’s great champion, Adorno, could not discuss the method’s liberating power without acknowledging the paradoxical loss of freedom it represents: “Twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music. It enchains music by liberating it” (67-68; emphasis added).\textsuperscript{14}

Although Schoenberg died the year of the \textit{Rake}’s premiere, his influence was stronger than ever. His “progressive” techniques had inspired not just one school of followers, but a general trend toward constant revolution. In his discussion of postwar classical music, Alex Ross observes, “The language of modern music was reinvented on an almost yearly basis: twelve-tone composition gave way to ‘total serialism,’ which gave way to chance music, . . . and so on” (355-56). As Auden lamented in 1951, “From the artist’s point of view, the worst feature of this age is not its horrors—every age has been full of them—but the acceleration of its historical tempo . . . Custom has been replaced by fashion and the icon to which incense is burned is that of the Muse who Astonishes” (“In an Age” 240). His remarks appear in a review of Nicolas Nabokov’s book \textit{Old Friends and New Music}, so it seems he is particularly concerned about recent developments in music and not just the general state of artists. At precisely this time, in fact, the correspondents Boulez and Cage were each developing one of the two
approaches Ross names as immediate successors to Schoenberg’s method: by 1950-51, Boulez had adopted “total serialism,” and Cage began tossing coins and rolling dice in order to determine his compositional “choices” (Ross 366-67). On the surface, the rigorous demands of the serial technique seem antithetical to the sheer arbitrariness of Cage’s aleatoric music. At the same time, however, both methods are profoundly deterministic in that the notes used are not freely chosen, but are in some sense given. In a discussion of both composers, Begbie effectively sums up the irony: “the struggle to be free of a supposedly oppressive teleological system (such as tonality) would seem to come close to resulting in two kinds of (oppressive?) necessity, the one the necessity of a particular mathematical system, the other the somewhat bland necessity of ‘the way things happen’” (196). Even more interesting, perhaps, the musical results sound strangely similar (Begbie 188; Ross 371). Begbie’s characterization of Cage’s approach—“Composition is about accepting rather than making” (189)—seems especially appropriate for our context. And when Begbie opposes the views of Boulez and Cage with the idea that “freedom is mediated through, and in relation to constraint,” one is not surprised to find that he cites an extended comment from Stravinsky (from 1947) as his counter-example (198-99).

It is supremely ironic, then, that in the years following his work on The Rake’s Progress, Stravinsky would turn to serialism, as if he “wished to extend his empire over every kingdom of music, including that of his principal rival,” Schoenberg (Albright, Modernism 223). Having composed an opera in an idiom that wonderfully expresses Auden’s conception of free will, he would begin writing music in which “There are no ‘free passages’ or ‘free notes’” (Straus 174). Meanwhile, Auden and Kallman had already
developed plans for a new opera, later titled *Delia*. Auden perceived that Stravinsky, who seemed open to another collaboration, was interested in composing an opera that resembled a “Jonsonian masque”; in a December 1951 letter to Kallman, he writes, “The comic antimasque will, of course, present some of our bugaboos like Twelve-Toners, Sociologists etc.” (Berg). Given the direction Stravinsky’s music was headed, one can imagine the potential clash between form and content. In any event, the follow-up to the *Rake* was never written. Stravinsky’s music after 1951, which retains some neoclassical elements and is still recognizably Stravinskyan, was not inherently antagonistic to the operatic stage. After all, he had been discussing a possible collaboration with Dylan Thomas when the poet died in 1953. Yet clearly the composer and the librettists of *The Rake’s Progress* were moving in different directions: Stravinsky was eager to move “forward” while the libretto for *Delia*, “suggested by George Peele’s play, *The Old Wives’ Tale*” (Auden and Kallman, *Delia* 95), would have required him to reach even further into the past. When asked, in the late 1950s, about Auden’s idea that music represents “a virtual image of our experience of living as temporal, with its double aspect of recurrence and becoming,” Stravinsky replied, “if I understand ‘recurrence’ and ‘becoming’, their aspect is greatly diminished in serial music” (Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations* 18). He did understand them correctly—or at least his music for *The Rake’s Progress* does. But rather than grieve the loss of a second opera, we can be thankful for “one of the most successful operas written after the Second World War” and “the greatest opera composed in English since Purcell” (E. W. White 468; Lindenberger 216). As for Auden and Kallman’s career after the *Rake*, what Robert Craft said of the text of *Delia* still holds true: it is “complete, awaiting a composer with some of the gifts
of a Stravinsky or of a Mozart” (“The Poet” 154). The librettists eventually began working with Hans Werner Henze later in the decade, but in the interim, they honed their skills by collaborating with the composer who, perhaps even better than Stravinsky, exemplified Auden’s operatic ideal: Mozart.¹⁵
NOTES

1. All of Auden’s letters and manuscripts referenced in this chapter are from the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature in the New York Public Library (cited as “Berg”), unless otherwise noted.

2. The complete draft memoir is published (with some minor inaccuracies) in Charles Osborne’s *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (112-13), in which Osborne speculates that the piece “was probably intended as a contribution to a volume, *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on his Fiftieth Birthday* (1963), though, in fact, it does not appear in that book” (112).

3. See Mendelson’s textual notes in *Prose III* (738).

4. The unique capacities Auden attributes to “The Composer” stand out still further when the poem is read alongside its companion sonnet, “The Novelist” (180).

5. In his introduction to *Theology, Music and Time*, Begbie writes, “We are limiting ourselves in this book chiefly to Western music organised according to the ‘tonal’ system” (37).

6. Auden’s description of melody and its relationship to willfulness is strongly reminiscent of Schopenhauer: “in the melody, in the high, singing, principal voice, leading the whole and progressing with unrestrained freedom, in the uninterrupted significant connexion of one thought from beginning to end, and expressing a whole, I recognize the highest grade of the will’s objectification, the intellectual life and endeavour of man” (259).

7. See Caliban’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror” (442).


9. Soon after writing *The Rake’s Progress*, Auden would begin to distance himself from both Kierkegaard and Jung. The libretto marks his last major engagement with both thinkers and thus is also a consummation of his 1940s work.

10. The Jungian shadow appears frequently in Auden’s poetry after 1939, and in “New Year Letter,” he directly links the idea to Mephistopheles (207).

11. The “countermyths” of Tristan and Isolde and Don Juan are a favorite motif in Auden’s work; they show up regularly in his prose as well as his poetry, beginning with the 1940 epithalamium “In Sickness and in Health” (316).

12. Auden published Anne’s lullaby under the title “Barcarolle” in *The Shield of*
Achilles (49), though he later removed it from his *Collected Poems*.

13. See especially David J. Baker’s article “Reversal of Fortune,” which provides a helpful overview of the opera’s changing critical reception up to 2003.

14. Anton Webern, one of Schoenberg’s greatest disciples, makes a similar claim: “To put it quite paradoxically, only through these unprecedented fetters has complete freedom become possible!” (55-56).

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In The Table Talk of W. H. Auden, Alan Ansen records a 1947 conversation during which Auden remarked, “I have to give a talk on Yeats before the MLA in Detroit. You know, the more I read him, the less I like him. . . . He was a horrible old man.” Then, seemingly in response to an unrecorded question from Ansen, he added, “No, I couldn’t launch an open attack on him. This is supposed to be some kind of celebration, after all” (72). Auden’s MLA talk, which was published soon afterward in the Kenyon Review, strikes a delicate balance between attack and celebration: he opens by poking fun at Yeats’s occultism (“Yeats” 385), yet he concludes by praising his ancestor’s poetic legacies (388-89). The roots of these conflicted feelings go back further than 1947; in fact, the conflict seems to have reached an initial crux in 1939, just as Auden had emigrated from England to America, when he wrote the famously ambivalent elegy “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and its complementary prose piece, “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats.” But it was not until 1959, when Auden and Chester Kallman began writing their libretto for Hans Werner Henze’s opera Elegy for Young Lovers, that Auden created what Edward Callan calls his “most direct repudiation of what Yeats stood for” (146).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the nature of this “repudiation,” which I
believe is more complex than has been previously recognized. While some critics have rightly observed that the opera’s protagonist, the poet Gregor Mittenhofer, is modeled on Yeats, they have often left this claim unsupported; in part one below, I will spell out the significant parallels. More importantly, I will argue that, in the very act of writing an opera libretto, Auden is adopting a form that implicitly rejects the romantic (or neo-romantic) model of poetry he connected with Yeats; the chapter’s second and longest section is devoted to analyzing the literary status of librettos in general as well as some of the specific features of the *Elegy for Young Lovers* libretto. To conclude, I will look at the collaborative relationships among the opera’s “three makers.” Humphrey Carpenter is correct to assert that “the opera is not an essay in autobiography” (as some have supposed) and that “Its subject is not Auden but the kind of poet he desired not to be” (399). An interpretation of *Elegy for Young Lovers* that aims to prove this must not only consider the opera’s content (its unflattering characterization of the “Master” poet Mittenhofer) but also its form, the inherently collaborative medium of opera, whose essence involves the subordination of words to music.

MASTER POET

*Every artist is a cannibal, every poet is a thief*  
*All kill their inspiration and sing about the grief.*

—U2, “The Fly”

As Edward Mendelson observes, “Auden enjoyed deflating romantic images of inspired poets driven only by their genius” (Introduction xiii). The creation of Gregor
Mittenhofer is the culmination of this impulse, but it was not Auden and Kallman’s first attempt to represent dramatically the romantic artist-genius. While Stravinsky was still composing the score for The Rake’s Progress, Auden and Kallman devised a scenario for a comic opera called On the Way, the subject of which was supposed to be “the romantic sensibility of the post-Napoleonic period in Europe as exhibited by its artists, in particular by its musicians” (481-82). The scenario itself is a trifling work and was soon abandoned, but some of its details clearly foreshadow the theme and subject matter of Elegy for Young Lovers. Both works take place at an inn in the Alps, and two of On the Way’s three main characters, “bards who resemble Berlioz, Mendelssohn . . . and Rossini” (479), are described as “sharing an enthusiasm for alpine scenery” (484). Although Elegy for Young Lovers, like On the Way, aims to present a generalized “European myth” (“Genesis” 247), Auden knew that the Alps occupied a particularly privileged place in the English romantic imagination; one immediately thinks of the Alpine-inspired reflections in works such as Wordsworth’s The Prelude (book VI), Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” and Byron’s Manfred. In fact, in their essay that accompanied the program for Elegy for Young Lovers, the librettists explained that they originally conceived the main character as “a great actor . . . whose supreme ambition in life is to play the lead in Byron’s Manfred” (“Genesis” 245).¹ Eventually, the “great actor” became a great poet, Gregor Mittenhofer (whose name is prefigured in the On the Way scenario by the character Gregor Schöngeist). However, in the same essay, the librettists are careful to note that, though the poet is Viennese, “this does not mean that we think his outrageous behavior an Austrian characteristic. As a matter of fact,” they continue, “the only things about him which were suggested to us by historical incidents were drawn from the life of a poet—
no matter whom—who wrote in English” (247).

Although Mittenhofer’s character combines the features of several great poets and artists (including Auden himself), I believe that the “poet . . . who wrote in English” whose life suggested certain “historical incidents” was indeed W. B. Yeats. A summary of the opera’s major plot elements will illustrate the specific similarities. At one level, *Elegy for Young Lovers* is a portrait of an aging poet’s relationship to his entourage. The first character to appear is a widow named Hilda Mack, whose visionary spells Mittenhofer exploits for his poetry. Later in Auden’s life, when his tactfulness began to flag, he made Hilda’s inspiration explicit: “Remembering that Yeats had a wife from whose mediumistic gifts he profited, it seemed plausible that Mittenhofer should have discovered Frau Mack” (“World” 104). Similarly, when the libretto has Countess Carolina von Kirchstetten, Mittenhofer’s aristocratic patron and de facto secretary, discuss her habit of hiding money for the poet “behind his bedroom clock” (194), Auden and Kallman were drawing on stories about Yeats’s interactions with Lady Augusta Gregory. This secret, too, Auden eventually revealed in a 1970 interview (Loney 14).

Another member of Mittenhofer’s entourage, Dr. Wilhelm Reischmann, provides the poet with stimulating injections, which have their real-life parallel in the Steinach operation for male rejuvenation that Yeats underwent; partly as a result of this operation, he began to adopt the persona of the “wild old wicked man.” In the libretto, a reviewer’s description of Mittenhofer’s poetry as “The erotic dreams / Of impotent old age” certainly evokes this later phase of Yeats’s career (193), as does the character of Elizabeth Zimmer, Mittenhofer’s young mistress and muse, who seems to be a composite representation of the young women with whom Yeats became romantically involved.
during his self-described “second puberty” (Ellmann 10). All of these ancillary characters have, in one way or another, sacrificed themselves for the “greater good” of Mittenhofer’s poetry, though they receive no credit for the end result; as Carolina and the Doctor sing in the final couplet of their first-act duet, “No one thanks, in Essays or Reviews, / The Servants of the Servant of the Muse” (196). But by placing these (literally) supporting characters on the stage, the librettists and the composer give them voices and effectively demystify the idea of the solitary artistic genius.

The disturbing yet orderly network of servile relationships between the poet and his entourage is disrupted by the appearance of the doctor’s son (and Mittenhofer’s godson), Toni, whose arrival sets the main plot in motion. Not surprisingly, Toni and Elizabeth promptly fall in love and become the “young lovers” of the opera’s title—a development about which the great poet seems suspiciously unconcerned. Meanwhile, at the news that her long-lost husband’s body has been found, Hilda snaps out of her visionary state, leaving Mittenhofer without images for his poetry. Deprived of his two main sources of inspiration (Hilda’s trances and Elizabeth’s youthful beauty), the poet sends the young lovers up the mountainside to gather edelweiss, “a visionary ‘aid’ / [He has] often found effective when all else / Failed” (228). While they are out, an Alpine guide informs Mittenhofer a snowstorm is approaching and asks whether anyone is on the mountain, but Mittenhofer neglects to mention Toni and Elizabeth, thus sealing their fate. The lovers perish, and the poet now has the appropriate subject matter for the poem that has been incubating throughout the opera, an “Elegy for Young Lovers,” which he “recites” in the final scene. It is this sequence of events that renders the opera more than just an unflattering portrait of a poet in old age; it is also a serious commentary on the
privileging of the aesthetic at the expense of the ethical. In their program note, Auden and Kallman claim that “The Theme of *Elegy of Young Lovers* is summed up in two lines by Yeats: ‘The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work’” (“Genesis” 246). The lines come from Yeats’s 1933 poem “The Choice”; based on the libretto’s characterization of Mittenhofer, one clearly gathers that Auden and Kallman thought Yeats had pursued “Perfection . . . of the work” rather than the life. At one point, Mittenhofer essentially admits his abandonment of moral principles for the purposes of aesthetic gain: “in time / One no longer knows / What is true and false / Or right and wrong. / Only what goes / And won’t go into song” (218). The climactic offering of the young lovers on the mountain, then, is simply the most powerful symbol—and the logical outcome—of a pattern of life in which the superior god-like artist considers himself beyond good and evil and demands the servitude of the lesser beings that surround him.

Despite all of the evidence assembled above, I do not mean to suggest that Mittenhofer is a straightforward biographical portrayal of Yeats. Auden never did “launch an open attack.” (After all, the opera is set in Austria, not Ireland). In fact, when the opera is performed in German translation, as it was as its premiere, audiences are more apt to see the ghosts of other overbearing artists: Stefan George, Rilke, Wagner, and Goethe are among the most frequently cited. Some critics have even taken Mittenhofer to be Auden’s self-portrait, and indeed, there are a few correspondences. Richard Davenport-Hines points out that the relationship between Mittenhofer and Carolina von Kirchstetten “cruelly resembles the contacts of Auden and [his former patron] Caroline Newton in the 1940s” (254). (Kirchstetten is also the name of the small Austrian town in which Auden had recently purchased a summer home.) And when Carolina complains
about Mittenhofer’s illegible handwriting, anyone who has spent time attempting to
decipher Auden’s manuscripts will recognize a touch of autobiography. However, if one
extends this argument too far, the opera’s message is lost. Assuming that Auden, a great
poet himself, would naturally celebrate the elevated status of the artist, an anonymous
contemporary reviewer came to the conclusion that the opera’s “tragicomic moral” is that
“death for art’s sake is O.K.” (“Surprise” 56). But this interpretation gets it precisely
wrong. If Auden sees himself in Mittenhofer at all, he only does so out of self-loathing.
In a letter to Stephen Spender, Auden confessed that Yeats “has become for me a symbol
of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my
own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities . . . His [poems] make me
whore after lies” (qtd. in Carpenter 416). Auden, like Yeats perhaps, realized he would
never attain “Perfection of the life.” But unlike Yeats, he did not then strive for the
“Perfection . . . of the work” at the expense of truth and goodness. Instead, he deliberately
sought poetic modes that would counteract any lingering Promethean pretentions, and it
is in this context that Auden’s attraction to the libretto as a literary form should be
viewed.

“MASTER” LIBRETTIST(S)

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the work. (Yeats.)
This is untrue; perfection is possible in neither.

—Auden (“Writing” 468)
Elegy for Young Lovers is “gratefully dedicated by its three makers” “To the memory of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Austrian, European and Master Librettist” (189), and the work pays tribute to Hofmannsthal’s memory in some obvious ways. In addition to the Austrian location, the opera’s historical setting (circa 1910) alludes to the era of Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss’s greatest triumph as librettist and composer, Der Rosenkavalier. The libretto also explicitly refers to Hofmannsthal on two occasions, and in both cases, he is presented—first indirectly, then directly—as competition for Mittenhofer (196, 202). I believe that, for Auden, this notion of Hofmannsthal as a rival has a deeper significance; if Mitchenhafer-Yeats represents “everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry,” Hofmannsthal represents an alternative role for the poet, one that Auden found particularly attractive. Indeed, the two poets’ careers share a similar shape. Each man achieved great fame prematurely as a tremendously gifted lyric poet with an uncanny command of poetic forms—Hofmannsthal as a member of Jung-Wien in the 1890s and Auden as the leader of a left-leaning group of British writers in the 1930s. Each one also developed his gift in the shadow of a great Bard (Stefan George played the role of Yeats in Hofmannsthal’s life). More significantly, both Auden and Hofmannsthal turned away from the kind of poetry that initially brought them recognition to devote their energies in new directions. Hofmannsthal, whose early poetry is reminiscent of Yeats and the French symbolists (Steinberg 144), radically abandoned the lyric altogether, turning exclusively to dramatic forms, eventually leading to his great series of operatic collaborations with Richard Strauss. And while Auden did not give up lyric poetry entirely, he did reject many of his most famous poems and, like Hofmannsthal, became increasingly involved in the world of opera. In the year of the
Elegy premiere, Auden reviewed Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s selected correspondence, and his observations reveal both his admiration for Hofmannsthal and a sense of self-recognition: “Hofmannsthal was the first poet with an established public literary reputation to write libretti and, in his day, this was a daring thing to do. In the literary circle to which he belonged opera was not highly regarded as an art-form . . . Certainly most of his friends thought that he was wasting his time and talents writing libretti” (“Marriage” 352). Writing for the operatic stage may not have enhanced either poet’s status in literary circles, but between them, along with Chester Kallman, they produced many of the finest librettos of the twentieth century.

As Patrick Smith argues, Hofmannsthal’s example “served to revive and restore the concept of the librettist as a creative artist on a par with the composer” (364), and clearly Auden hoped to imitate his operatic success. But to label either of them a “Master Librettist” is, in one sense, profoundly oxymoronic. To adopt the role of librettist is to relinquish the role of “Master” (the role that Mittenhofer performs so well) and to surrender mastery of one’s own poetic material. A libretto is an intrinsically incomplete medium: even if the composer chooses to keep every word, the text will still be altered through its musical setting and even further in performance. This notion of the written word’s ephemerality is something that appealed to Auden, a poet who wrote in the foreword to the 1965 edition of his Collected Poems that “On revisions as a matter of principle, I agree with Valéry: ‘A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned’” (xxx). In fact, he was often willing—sometimes to the chagrin of his readers—to discard whole poems for being “dishonest,” a requirement that obviously never would have occurred to a poet like Mittenhofer. For Auden, writing librettos was a way of ensuring that he would
not be tempted to believe in the “Perfection . . . of the work”; the composer’s revisions emphatically deny the text’s claim to completeness or self-sufficiency. For the opera’s “three makers” to dedicate *Elegy for Young Lovers* to Hofmannsthal the librettist evokes a collaborative model of creativity that contrasts sharply with the romantic conception of the isolated artist-genius. Edward Mendelson makes the inherently anti-romantic aspects of collaboration quite clear:

>[A]side from a solitary couplet by Wordsworth somewhere in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’ there was no collaboration among the romantics. Although the romantic experience of loss, isolation and quest takes similar forms in all who endure it, that experience can never be shared. Romantic vision is private. . . . before collaboration could again become a factor in English poetry it was necessary for a poet to break free of the whole set of assumptions and methods that informed the romantic tradition. Auden was the first poet to achieve this. (“Auden-Isherwood” 276)

Mendelson writes this in the context of discussing Auden’s early dramatic collaborations with Christopher Isherwood, but Auden’s practice as a librettist is an even more radical example of his anti-romanticism. Not only did he continue to collaborate on a purely textual level (with his co-librettist Chester Kallman), but he also handed over these words to be transformed by the composer. Auden’s embrace of opera as a medium and of the libretto as a poetic form represents a further step in his “break[ing] free of the whole set of assumptions and methods that informed the romantic tradition,” that very tradition which is embodied by Mittenhofer.

Although the *Elegy for Young Lovers* libretto is by far Auden’s most extended poetic engagement with Yeats’s legacy, both its thematic preoccupation with the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical and its formal insistence on transience relate directly to Auden’s only other works about Yeats in his *Collected Poems*: his 1939 elegy and a limerick from 1960. It is especially appropriate that Auden and Kallman’s
libretto should deal with the creation of an elegy since Yeats and Auden were jointly
responsible for reinvigorating that poetic genre in the first half of the twentieth century.
Toward the end of his life, Auden reflected, “Poets seem to be more generally successful
at writing elegies than at any other literary genre. Indeed, the only elegy I know of which
seems to me a failure is [Shelley’s] ‘Adonais’” (Certain 147). And in his 1947 MLA talk,
he credits Yeats with transforming the occasional poem, specifically citing the elegy “In
Memory of Major Robert Gregory” as “something new and important in the history of
English poetry” (“Yeats” 388). The very title of this historic elegy inspired Auden’s “In
Memory of W. B. Yeats,” which echoes several of Yeats’s later poems as well (see S.
Smith). Like the MLA talk, Auden’s elegy initially subverts Yeats’s romantic image
(along with the conventions of the pastoral elegy) but ends with an homage to the
decesced. Parts I and II, in particular, seem to foreshadow the formal and thematic
concerns of Elegy for Young Lovers. The down-to-earth, biological metaphor in the lines
“The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living” refuses the traditional
elegy’s assertion of the dead poet’s immortality while also providing a rather stark image
of the fate of a libretto’s words, which are quite literally “modified in the guts of the
living” (89). Furthermore, the first line of part II, “You were silly like us: your gift
survived it all” (89), could serve as a succinct characterization of Mittenhofer, whose
poetry prospers despite his basic foolishness. In their unromantic acknowledgment of the
great artist’s personal flaws, both elegy and Elegy exhibit an anti-elegiac quality that is
broadly characteristic of the genre in its modern guise (Ramazani xi). Indeed, although
Elegy for Young Lovers shows the development of Mittenhofer’s poem about Toni and
Elizabeth, on another level, the opera itself is a kind of large-scale anti-elegy for
Mittenhofer’s factual counterpart.

Part III of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” appears more decorous, as if Auden had belatedly remembered (as in his MLA tribute) that his poem “is supposed to be some kind of celebration, after all” (Ansen 72), but it also raises ethical questions that would reemerge in *Elegy for Young Lovers*. In his book on the English elegy, Peter Sacks finds the final section of Auden’s poem “the least satisfying”: “it is difficult not to resist much of [its] highly formal pomp and ceremony, together with its rather hollow impersonation of the Yeatsian mode” (304). Late in his career, Auden seems to have come to the same conclusion about at least a portion of the poem. Though he did not erase the work from his oeuvre, he did remove the following three stanzas from part III, beginning with his 1958 edition of *Selected Poetry* (53):

```
Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well. (90)
```

Like the previous sections of the poem, these lines still insist on the reality of the poet’s physical demise, yet unlike the rest of the poem, they also make a special ethical exemption for those with literary skill. Auden did not agree with the conservative political views of Kipling, Claudel, or Yeats, but he pardons them all “for writing well.” In “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats,” Auden had claimed that, despite
Yeats’s “false or undemocratic ideas,” his language displays “the true democratic style” (7). By generously excusing Yeats, however, Auden is (unwittingly, perhaps) espousing the very ideal that is represented by Mittenhofer—that the artist is an exceptional individual and thus is not subject to common standards of moral judgment. It is almost as if, in mimicking the trochaic tetrameter as well as the diction of “Under Ben Bulben” and “Man and the Echo,” Auden had absorbed some of Yeats’s ideas, too.

Auden’s second—and last—poem about Yeats does not risk being too Yeatsian. Auden’s 1960 volume, Homage to Clio, concludes with an addendum called “Academic Graffiti,” which contains thirty-two irreverent clerihews about famous personages, from Socrates’ wife, Xantippe, to the botanist Hugo de Vries. Most of the poems, however, are about great writers, and the last two treat Auden’s immediate predecessors, Eliot and Yeats. Interestingly, these poems are not clerihews but limericks, and the final one on Yeats is the naughtier of the two:

To get the Last Poems of Yeats,
You need not mug up on dates;
All a reader requires
Is some knowledge of gyres
And the sort of people he hates. (“Academic” 685)

As usual, Auden is unable to resist the urge to ridicule Yeats’s metaphysical system (the gyres), but he also hints, more seriously, at a reprehensible capacity for hatred in Yeats. Perhaps sensing that he was participating in the hate that he was condemning, Auden removed the poem from an expanded edition of Academic Graffiti (1972), though he also removed the Eliot poem, so it is possible he simply wanted to be the first major poet to publish a book consisting solely of clerihews, the least refined of light verse forms. In any case, the very notion of poetry as “graffiti” suggests the same kind of ephemerality
that inheres in the libretto as a poetic form. In fact, in the expanded version, Auden adopts a librettist-like stance toward the book’s illustrator, Filippo Sanjust, who was also the designer for the premiere of Auden, Kallman, and Henze’s next opera, *The Bassarids.* Once again subordinating his contribution in a collaborative partnership, Auden writes, “I know that my verses are a small matter, compared to Filippo Sanjust’s illustrations” (Forenote). And just as *Elegy for Young Lovers* retains some of the anti-elegiac qualities of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” it also incorporates the spirit of the clerihew, which “mocks both the famous and the learned by providing a cockeyed look at the great” (Teague 219). Although Auden’s last poem about Yeats is technically a limerick, it, too, participates in the same project: the poetic equivalent of drawing mustaches on the illustrious images of Bards like Mittenhofer who take themselves too seriously.

Relatively early in his career (1937-38), Auden edited *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, which he conceived, at least in part, as a kind of complement—or even rival—to Yeats’s recently published (and more solemn) *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (see Auden, *Prose I* 707-08). Auden’s commitment to light verse only increased over the years, and writing librettos gave his talent for comic and folk poetry another outlet. Indeed, much of the *Elegy for Young Lovers* libretto, despite its serious themes, tends toward farce. For instance, the humor of Dr. Reischmann’s lines in his first-act duet with Carolina, for which Auden was responsible (see *Libretti* 645), is rather broad:

```
    Tooth decay,
    Muse away;
    Blood-pressure drops,
    Invention stops;
    Upset tum,
    No images come;
    Kidney infected,
    Diction deflected;
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Joints rheumatic,
Rhythm erratic;
Skin too dry,
Form awry;
Muscle tense,
Little sense;
Irregular stools,
Inspiration cools. (194-95)

The comical rapid-fire rhymes call to mind Inkslinger’s “Love Song” in *Paul Bunyan* (25-27), but in this case, the comedy and cleverness have a more serious thematic purpose. The stanza above—along with the two that follow—draw attention to those mundane elements of a poet’s life, with which Auden was all too familiar, that the romantic Bard (through his underlings’ assistance) painstakingly conceals from the public’s view: his often embarrassing physical needs, his reliance on patronage and secretarial work, and his reputation’s dependence on that ever-growing body of parasites, literary critics. Moreover, the lightness of the poetic form itself is an affront to the kind of poet it satirizes. When the critic Arthur Jacobs reports that his colleagues objected to the coarseness and absurdity of the opera’s representation of Mittenhofer at the 1961 Glyndebourne performance, he understands that this point is moot: “That this un-admirable man writes admirable poetry is the given thing in *Elegy for Young Lovers*” (30). Fascinatingly, the very fact that audience members would object to Mittenhofer’s vulgarity offers proof that the myth of the romantic artist-genius endures; perhaps the same people, hearing the phrase “Irregular stools” in the elegant atmosphere of Glyndebourne, were startled to see the name of a poet as renowned as Auden on the covers of their programs.

While some are uncomfortable with the allegedly sub-literary elements in Auden’s librettos, others accuse him of writing librettos that are hyper-literary and hence
resistant to musical setting (an accusation that is also sometimes leveled at his hero, Hofmannsthal). According to Peter Porter, “For all Auden’s stipulations about the humble status of the poet when working with the composer, his practice has been as self-indulgent as that of any other writer” (194). Interestingly, however, Porter goes on to claim that “Auden is the greatest librettist of this century” and that he “would certainly put him above Hofmannsthal” (194). The paradox is that to be a “great librettist” is simultaneously to be a defective one. Auden himself declared that “Hofmannsthal is the one librettist you can read apart from the music” (Ansen 18), yet he also criticized Hofmannsthal’s *Rosenkavalier* libretto for being “too near real poetry” (“Some Reflections” 254). Likewise, Allan Altman observes that “In the theater, some of [Auden’s] librettos may have seemed dense and ‘over-literary,’ but on paper they make absorbing, rewarding reading” (41). This tension between the literary quality of a libretto and its suitability for the operatic stage becomes especially interesting in the case of *Elegy for Young Lovers*. In 1961, Andrew Porter published two write-ups on the opera for *The Musical Times*. Before ever hearing or seeing the music, he calls the libretto “masterly” and gushes, “Auden’s poetry, when it is written for singing, goes into music more readily, more perfectly, than any other of our day” (419). But after seeing the opera four times, he writes, “It soon becomes clear that—whatever I may have written in these pages earlier—the Auden-Kallman libretto is a concoction whose only merit is that it provides a framework for music” (639). Porter’s extreme about-face reflects just how divergently a libretto can be judged for its effect on the page rather than on the stage. Not all critics have been this severe in their assessments of the opera, but the apparent tension between the libretto and its setting persists as a dominant theme. Like Porter, *New
York Times critic Bernard Holland has written two pieces on the work, and their titles alone are enough to suggest the issue at stake: “A Dominion of Words” (1988) and “Music and Words, Passing in the Night” (1996).

Critics and audiences have found one sequence in the libretto particularly problematic: the lovers’ duet just before death (act 3, scenes 6-8), which is entirely Auden’s work (see Libretti 645). In his review of the German premiere, H. H. Stuckenschmidt complains, “The third act must be vigorously re-worked: the mountain scene is much too expansive, and poetically not ideal. As it stands it serves no purpose, for no one wants to watch events which have been almost excessively predetermined” (436). Auden himself later admitted that the sequence is “far too literary and complicated in the argument, far too dependant upon every word being heard to get across when set to music” (“World” 108), and at Glyndebourne, it was omitted (Jacobs 29), leaving Henze’s orchestral snowstorm to communicate indirectly the lovers’ fate. The duet’s failure, however, might have less to do with its own immanent weaknesses than with the way it differs from the rest of the opera. In their program note, Auden and Kallman express the desire to achieve a kind of psychological complexity that is rare in opera, and they cite Ibsen (along with Hofmannsthal) as guiding forces (“Genesis” 247), but the mountaintop sequence feels like a scene from Peer Gynt has been inserted into the last act of A Doll’s House.

Yet despite its incongruity in a quasi-naturalistic context and the fact that its events are clearly prefigured in Hilda’s visions (199-201), the scene still has an important function. Like Tom Rakewell and Anne Trulove in The Rake’s Progress—and to a lesser extent, Slim and Tiny in Paul Bunyan—Toni and Elizabeth are archetypal lovers, more
symbolic than actual; one might expect as much given that they are played by a lyric
tenor and soprano (190). The opera’s fundamental structure is based on their inevitable
union, and its three acts have deliberately non-specific titles: “The Emergence of the
Bridegroom,” “The Emergence of the Bride,” and finally, “Man and Wife.” Even the
stage directions seem to deny them individual personalities: “their forms [are] only
vaguely visible through the driving snow” (240). What makes the characters unique,
though—and what appears to save them finally—is their awareness that their love is
merely “illusory but rhymable” (244). The resulting scene may be too “complicated in the
argument,” but the lovers’ final moments are nevertheless beautiful:

Not for love were we led here.
But to unlearn our own lies,
Each through each, in our last hour,
And come to death with clean hearts.

What Grace gave, we gladly take,
Thankful although even this
Bond will break in a brief while,
And our souls fare forth alone.

God of Truth, forgive our sins,
All offences we fools made
Against thee. Grant us Thy peace.
Light with Thy Love our lives’ end. (242)

The dream-like setting and duet for two lovers is strongly reminiscent of the finale of
Auden and Isherwood’s play On the Frontier. A contemporary reviewer of that play
thought its concluding passage looked “uncommonly like a Christian hymn to a better
world” (McEachran 202), but with these lines from Elegy for Young Lovers, Auden
produced an authentically Christian hymn. In its liturgical echoes (particularly in the final
stanza), the hymn briefly counteracts the libretto’s otherwise rather pessimistic
worldview, in which the only god is “the Great White Bard” (221). Auden’s use of a
flexible, four-stress line and unrhymed stanzas seems amenable to musical setting, though perhaps, with their skillful employment of alliteration, the stanzas make a little too much of their own verbal music. But if the words of the penultimate scene insist upon themselves too forcefully, this dramaturgical dilemma is effectively sidestepped in the opera’s final scene, which eliminates words from the equation altogether and, at the same time, illuminates yet another way in which Auden the librettist distances himself from Mittenhofer.

After the death of Toni and Elizabeth, Mittenhofer prepares to recite his elegy from the stage of a Vienna theater, which features “an ornamental backdrop” depicting “Mount Parnassus, the Muses crowning a Poet,” and “Apollo with lyre and cherubim.” The libretto goes on to indicate that “We do not actually hear the words, but from behind him come one by one until they are all together, the voices of all who contributed to the writing of the poem” (243). In the program note, Auden and Kallman offer a pragmatic rationale for choosing music rather than words to portray Mittenhofer’s elegy: they argue that the work of a great poet cannot be convincingly represented by another poet but must be conveyed through a different artistic medium—in this case, the “orchestral sound and pure vocalisation” of Henze’s score (“Genesis” 247). But this unusual solution goes beyond mere dramaturgy; it also highlights the moral dilemma at the center of the opera. In an article on the representation of evil in opera, Walter Bernhart explains how difficult it is to interpret Mittenhofer as a plainly sinister figure because of the innately positive connotations of music (171-78). Even Henze was initially unclear about whether Mittenhofer ought to be condemned (Music 108-11). Yet, in one respect, this response is perfectly fitting. Auden knew his Shakespeare and would have remembered that “music
oft hath such a charm / To make bad good” (Shakespeare 440). Without any knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the poem’s creation, the imaginary audience in that Vienna theater would only experience the lyrical beauty of the great poet’s art, which is wonderfully evoked through Henze’s music. In the 1947 poem “Music Is International,” Auden remarks on music’s “enigmatic grammar which at last / Says all things well” (338), a claim he develops further in his collection of aphoristic reflections, “Dichtung und Wahrheit” (written about the same time as the *Elegy for Young Lovers* libretto): “The language of music is, as it were, intransitive, and it is just this intransitivity which makes it meaningless for a listener to ask:—‘Does the composer really mean what he says, or is he only pretending?’” (648). When Mittenhofer’s poem is considered as music—that is, on its aesthetic merits alone, divorced from all questions of truth or goodness—it should impress us as a triumph.

But while the final scene seems to vindicate Mittenhofer as a poet, it also exposes his ethical failure as a man. In another section of “Dichtung and Wahrheit,” Auden maintains that “The ‘symboliste’ attempt to make poetry as intransitive as music can get no further than the narcissistic reflexive—‘I love Myself’” (648). The librettists make Mittenhofer’s narcissism unmistakable (if it was not already clear) at the beginning of the final scene, when the poet is instructed to stare into the mirror and chant “One. Two. Three. Four. / Whom do we adore? / Gregor! Gregor! Gregor!” (242). These lines may seem shockingly banal coming from a character who we are supposed to believe is a great poet, yet they effectively convey the essential emptiness at the heart of his poetic vision. When Mittenhofer’s poem reaches the audience through music alone, it creates the illusion, in true romantic fashion, that it is the product of a solitary artist-genius. At
the same time, however, that very music (as indicated in the libretto) can only come into being through the voices of those who made the poem possible by their personal sacrifices. Henze weaves each individual character’s voice into the score, thereby providing one final metaphor for the egomaniacal artist’s unacknowledged dependence on those whom he exploits. Of course, applying all of Mittenhofer’s demonic qualities to his real-life inspiration, W. B. Yeats, is probably going too far. But I think it safe to assume that Auden would have taken some pleasure in seeing Yeats’s fictional equivalent swallowed up by music at the fall of the curtain. When Yeats commented on the use of music in his plays, he insisted that “words must always remain words”; in a somewhat dictatorial tone, he writes, “No vowel must ever be prolonged unnaturally, no word of mine must ever change into a mere musical note, no singer of my words must ever cease to be a man and become an instrument” (“The Music” 757-58). For an arch-romantic such as Yeats, words possess a kind of sacred completeness, which should not be distorted by “mere musical note[s]”; as he wrote in one of his earliest lyrics, “Words alone are certain good” (“The Song” 5). On the other hand, Auden’s librettos, like Hofmannsthal’s—no matter how “literary” they may be—“incorporate . . . the awareness that they do not stand alone as linguistic documents” (Steinberg 151). Auden recognized that Yeats’s “conception of song implies the complete subordination of the composer to the poet” (“I Am” 518), and so, partly to counter his influence, he subordinated the poet to the composer.
THREE MAKERS

For One is perfect and good being at unity in himself.
For Two is the most imperfect of all numbers.
For everything infinitely perfect is Three.

—Christopher Smart (qtd. in Auden, Prolific 423)

Auden believed in subordinating words to music for both personal and aesthetic reasons: personally, he was able to neutralize any latent Mittenhofer-like instincts, and aesthetically, he considered opera an essentially musical form. Of course, these beliefs place a great degree of trust in the composer’s gifts. One of Benjamin Britten’s librettists, Eric Crozier, once wrote that “a librettist is a craftsman working for an artist” (137), and Auden would have agreed, except that he would have insisted that both librettist and composer are in fact craftsmen, or “makers.” Yet Crozier submitting himself to Britten—and even Auden submitting to Stravinsky while working on The Rake’s Progress—seems almost inevitable, whatever the theoretical views on operatic collaboration of the parties involved. Auden’s collaborations with Hans Werner Henze are another matter. Whether he liked to acknowledge it or not, Auden was an internationally acclaimed master, while Henze, who is still active today, still seems to be working toward that status. In 1996, New York Times music critic Jamie James claimed that “In Europe, Mr. Henze is widely regarded as a master, at or near the top of anyone’s list of composers whose works are likely to survive to posterity” (H37), but the title of his piece—“A Master Awaiting Acclaim”—sums up the German composer’s reception in the English-speaking world. Even among those who recognize Henze’s place in musical—
and especially operatic—history, he is granted a decidedly ambivalent status. In *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, Guido Heldt writes, “the representative German opera composer after 1945 is Henze, for better or worse” (164). When he began collaborating with Auden and Kallman, Henze’s reputation, though on the rise, was even less secure. The composer was not yet thirty years old when the three men first became acquainted during the summers Auden and Kallman spent on the Italian island of Ischia during the mid-1950s, but they did not begin collaborating until the librettists had changed summer residences to Kirchstetten in 1958. Although he had already written more operas than Auden and Kallman by this time, the younger Henze adopted a deferential attitude toward Auden in particular. In preparing to compose the score for *Elegy for Young Lovers*, Henze “read widely from Auden’s collected works,” and the librettists did not hesitate to give the composer highly specific musical suggestions (“On Writing” 433).

Notwithstanding the librettists’ suggestions, the score of *Elegy for Young Lovers*, with its unique synthesis of “tradition and innovation” (Stuckenschmidt 436), is undeniably Henze’s. Unlike Stravinsky’s music for *The Rake’s Progress*, however, the innovative aspects of the score are typically much more prominent than the traditional ones. To a conservative ear, Henze’s frequent use of serial techniques and his adventurous orchestrations can sound quite radical, which is why critics often note that, despite the estimations of coterie audiences attuned to modern classical music, he will never enjoy widespread public appeal (e.g., Rickards 198 and Lindenberger 227). But in the context of twentieth-century music history, Henze is a better fit for Auden and Kallman than he appears at first glance (or first listen). To Henze’s colleagues in postwar
Germany, his early operas’ incorporation of “tonal material, Stravinskyan neoclassicism, and Romantic textures” was hopelessly passé (Ross 393); indeed, he was “damned by the avant-garde for writing singable works for the musical theatre” (Roth 108). In his review of the Glyndebourne production of Elegy for Young Lovers, Jacobs attests, “Henze writes real melodies—really vocal ones” (29), preemptively addressing his readers’ misgivings about “modern” operas. Henze himself explained, “Though I have written in a new idiom, not yet in general use, I really only wanted thereby to declare my love for old opera” (“On Writing” 434), and elsewhere he refers, more specifically, to “the love for the nineteenth-century Italian opera that inspired our collaboration” (Music 107). Certainly Hilda’s “mad” scenes owe something to Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor, but the casual listener might be hard-pressed to find more precise echoes of the bel canto tradition. The opera’s basic form, however, carries on the number-opera model reintroduced ten years earlier by The Rake’s Progress. So while audiences might never mistake Henze’s music for Mozart’s, the score for Elegy for Young Lovers still would have satisfied some of Auden’s traditionalist inclinations. In fact, when Auden and Kallman wrote their next libretto for Henze, he became the only composer with whom they worked more than once.15 Henze’s music may have stretched Auden artistically more than he had initially bargained for, but that very stretching constitutes both the risk and the reward of collaboration.

Auden experienced artistic and personal benefits in his partnership with Kallman as well. Up until they began collaborating on librettos, Kallman plays a predominantly negative role in Auden’s biography. In his introduction to an edition of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Auden characterizes the “fair youth” or friend to whom most of the poems are
addressed, but his description is a little too exact and could be inspired by his own stormy past with Kallman:

As outsiders, the impression we get of his friend is one of a young man who was not really very nice, very conscious of his good looks, able to switch on the charm at any moment, but essentially frivolous, cold-hearted, and self-centered, aware, probably that he had some power over Shakespeare—if he thought about it at all, no doubt he gave it a cynical explanation—but with no conception of the intensity of the feelings he had, unwittingly, aroused. (Introduction liv)

Over the years, however, Kallman stopped serving as a kind of antagonistic muse and became an equal partner in one of Auden’s most fulfilling artistic pursuits. As Davenport-Hines observes, what seemed like an irreparably broken relationship was partially redeemed: “For Auden personally the most important feature of his work as a librettist was the happiness it brought him with Kallman . . . Their collaboration in The Rake’s Progress revivified—perhaps even saved from destruction—Auden’s relations with Kallman” (254-55). For Kallman, the collaboration was both a blessing and a curse: he was given opportunities as a librettist that he almost certainly would not have experienced apart from his attachment to a great poet, but what Auden wrote of the relationship between librettists and composers would have taken on an extra dimension for the lesser-known co-librettist: “your public fame will always be less than that of your collaborator” (“Marriage” 352). (Until the very end of his career, Auden found himself correcting those who failed to grant his partner an equal share of credit for their collaborations.) Although Kallman’s 1963 volume of poems, Absent and Present, is dedicated to Auden, a quatrain from one of its final poems, “Notes for an Ars Poetica,” intimates an ongoing struggle to be free of the older poet’s influence: “The true beginning is the lonely day / When any poem or poet you adore / Must serve you purely as an
ancestor / And not a guide to what you have to say” (71).

After *The Rake’s Progress*, Kallman assumed an even greater role in the partnership, usually writing more than half of each libretto’s text. So when the *Rake’s* successor was not an immediate triumph, he took it to heart. Auden and Kallman’s friend Thekla Clark recalls that “Their collaboration went along smoothly until the performance of *Elegy for Young Lovers*, and the severe criticism that followed. Chester, who had done most of the work on the libretto, was troubled by the opera’s lack of success. And when a respected critic singled out the libretto as faulty he saw it as a personal offence” (91). But Kallman was too quick to take offense. While the librettos written after *The Rake’s Progress* (particularly the Henze collaborations) are less thoroughly Audenesque, they are not less successful dramatically. In fact, from a purely dramatic—and not just poetic—standpoint, some of the librettos’ least successful scenes (such as the mountaintop duet discussed above) were wholly Auden’s work; considering his limited dramatic talents, one might even expect this. Another memoir of Auden and Kallman’s relationship places the blame for the *Elegy’s* lackluster English premiere on the composer; according to Dorothy Farnan (Kallman’s stepmother), “Friends of the librettists insisted that the fault lay in Henze’s music” (191). There may be some truth to this, for despite the opera’s relative success in continental Europe, it was long neglected in England and the United States, where Henze is less well regarded (see Roth 100-01). Yet I think all of this blame-laying would not have interested Auden; after all, there is something ethically dubious, he might have said, about a “perfect” work of art. And in spite of its imperfections, the opera seems to have survived rather well. In his 2009 essay, Bernhart claims that “Together with the libretto of *The Rake’s Progress* by the same
authors, [*Elegy for Young Lovers*] is the finest post-Hofmannsthal opera libretto, and . . .
is still Henze’s most attractive and most often produced stage work” (171). The largely
positive reviews of the English National Opera’s 2010 production provide reason to
believe that the work might soon become better known in the English-speaking world.¹⁶
Even the modest success *Elegy for Young Lovers* has already achieved is remarkable for a
modern opera, especially for one based on an entirely original libretto. It is somewhat
ironic, perhaps, that the libretto can be praised for a trait prized by the romantic artist:
originality. In their next two works, however, the librettists would engage in the distinctly
unromantic task of adaptation, supplying Auden with one more means of escaping
Mittenhofer.
NOTES

1. This conception also recalls Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s 1936 play, *The Ascent of F6*, whose protagonist, Michael Ransom, is a Manfred-like mountaineer.

2. Auden seems to have been well informed of Yeats’s proclivity to May-December romances. Writing to James Stern from Swarthmore College in 1942, Auden reports, “At my last Thursday Evening At home, my room was packed to capacity with girls who wanted to know if I felt inspired when I wrote. How Yeats would have enjoyed himself. I didn’t [sic]” (“Some Letters” 86).

3. See part two, below, for an explanation of how this “recitation” is dramatized.

4. Henze’s score emphasizes this moment of insight with a fortississimo (fff) climax (*Elegy* 252).

5. Auden, Kallman, and Henze might also have been trying to capitalize on the recent success of Samuel Barber and Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Vanessa*, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in January 1958. Although Barber and Menotti’s protagonist is not an artist, the basic atmosphere is quite similar (*Vanessa* is set in a chilly European country house, around 1905). The stories have overlapping qualities, too: both feature an aging protagonist vying for the affection of a younger lover, and both also include a snowstorm as a prominent plot element.

6. Patrick Smith also calls Hofmannsthal “the greatest librettist of love” and claims that his last collaboration with Strauss, *Arabella* (1933), is “one of the finest librettos of love ever written” (365, 378). Robert Craft reports Auden saying that “The Elegy was our version of *Arabella*” (344).


8. Somewhat surprisingly, many of these texts were also set to music by the American composer Leo Smit.

9. When Auden revised this essay for publication in *The Dyer’s Hand*, he removed his critique of *Der Rosenkavalier*, perhaps realizing it could easily be turned against his own librettos.

10. Fascinatingly, Porter preferred the German-language production of the opera to the original English; one assumes the text’s literary qualities seemed less conspicuous in translation.

11. According to one of Robert Craft’s 1958 diary entries, Auden also “denies the possibility of dramatizing the life of a composer unless his music is used” (175), which suggests another reason why the composer-protagonists of *On the Way* ultimately
transformed into the poet Mittenhofer.

12. At the first performances, the role of Mittenhofer was played by the great baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whose beautiful singing would only have increased the audience’s sympathy for the character.

13. For more on Auden’s conception of “making,” see the final section of chapter 2.

14. This facet of the collaboration would have an even greater impact on Auden, Kallman, and Henze’s next opera, *The Bassarids* (see chapter 4).

15. Auden and Henze also collaborated on three scenic cantatas called *Moralities* (1967). The texts, which are based on Aesop’s fables, are included in Auden’s *Collected Poems* (816-22).

16. In March 2012, the Curtis Opera Theatre reintroduced the opera to American audiences, staging a new production in association with the Opera Company of Philadelphia.
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CHAPTER 4

PASSION AND REASON IN THE BASSARIDS AND LOVE’S LABOUR’S LOST

The drama of pure feeling is no longer in the hands of the playwright: it has been conquered by the musician, after whose enchantments all the verbal arts seem cold and tame.

—Bernard Shaw (Preface 196)

At the center of his short 1971 poem “A Shock,” Auden offers the following self-description:

gun-shy myopic grandchild
of Anglican clergymen,
suspicious of all passion,
including passionate love (866)

The “shock” of the poem’s title comes from the poet’s experience of being “frisked by a cop for weapons” “at Schwechat Flughafen” in Vienna. The real shock, though, is that someone “suspicious of all passion” could grow to love the art of opera as enthusiastically as Auden did. Indeed, his infatuation with the medium became so all-encompassing that, in this poem at least, he views his life in the context of operatic history: he mentions that he was “born in ’07 when Strauss / was starting on Elektra,” which happens to be one of the most impassioned works in the standard repertoire. Given Auden’s natural inclinations, one begins to suspect that he elected to become involved in opera precisely because of his emotional shortcomings, as both an artist and a person.
Just as he was eager to adopt the role of librettist in order to counteract feelings of self-importance and self-sufficiency (see chapter 3), he viewed opera as an opportunity to express the passionate, irrational, and instinctive aspects of human nature that he might otherwise be prone to ignore or suppress. By writing opera librettos, Auden found a medium for dramatic verse in which intense emotion was not only tolerated but encouraged or even demanded.

In this chapter, I argue that the release of suppressed passions is not just the key to understanding Auden’s attraction to opera in general; it also represents the core theme of his later operatic texts, particularly his adaptations of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Like *Elegy for Young Lovers*, these librettos serve as cautionary tales; in this case, they warn of the dangers of denying the irrational or natural in the name of reason and order. Although the operas *The Bassarids* (based on *The Bacchae*) and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* were collaborative creations, Auden chose both of the subjects, and his choices were by no means arbitrary. Besides resurrecting and transfiguring historical forms of poetic drama in which music played a vital role (Attic tragedy and Shakespearean comedy), Auden’s selection of source texts foregrounds characters who futilely attempt to subdue the instinctual: *The Bacchae*’s Pentheus, the Theban king who refuses to acknowledge the god Dionysus, and the King of Navarre and his lords, who vow to forgo all sensual pleasures in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. In the two sections below, I consider the inherently operatic qualities of each adapted text and explore the ways in which Auden and Kallman’s librettos accentuate the central conflict between reason and passion, a conflict that the very conventions of opera ultimately help to resolve.
THE BASSARIDS

As Peter Burian observes, when the members of the Florentine Camerata who “invented” opera at the turn of the seventeenth century assumed “that Greek tragedies were entirely sung,” this was “an historical error with the most fruitful consequences” (262). Although opera might not be the resurrection of Greek tragedy that its first proponents supposed it to be, the dramatic force of both forms derives from a similar blend of elements and, in particular, a distinctive relationship between form and content. In his book Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation, Michael Ewans cites Charles Segal’s description of Oedipus the King by way of introducing the “achievement of Greek tragedy” that the medium of opera seeks to recover: Oedipus, claims Segal,

embodies the “classic” in its combination of intensely powerful emotions contained in an austere, controlled structure. This is not to say that there are not tensions and dissonances, but these are firmly contained within the design of the whole. Both plot structure and language operate within a severe economy that is both dense and lucid. (5)

According to Ewans, this “combination of highly emotional subject matter and rigorous formal shaping” characterizes not just Oedipus but Greek tragedy in general as well as, he implies, its belated offspring, opera (4). In A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera, Peter Conrad makes Ewans’s point more explicitly. Conrad’s title, with its allusions to the instinctual drives of eros and thanatos, seems to deny opera any connection to reason; in fact, in the book’s opening pages, he admits as much, calling opera “the song of our irrationality” (11). Yet he also acknowledges that the operatic singer “can express violent and animalistic passions . . . without surrendering to them,
because music has imposed on them a rational form” (283); paraphrasing English director Peter Hall, he adds, “opera’s unique benison” is that “the huge emotions in which it deals have an elaborate vocal technique to discipline them” (284). If love and death, or emotion and irrationality, constitute the “meaning” of opera, this meaning is not communicated rawly; instead, the material is conspicuously shaped, ordered, economized, and refined. Moreover, the tension between opera’s passionate content and its formal straitjacket is not accidental but rather part of its essence as a reincarnation of Greek tragedy.

This dualistic conception will be recognizable to anyone who has read Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, which begins with the claim that Attic tragedy represents “an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art” (33). “Tragic myth,” he argues later, “is to be understood only as a symbolization of Dionysian wisdom [i.e. content] through Apollinian artifices [i.e. form]” (131). By this point in the book, however, one realizes that Nietzsche is concerned not so much with his ostensible subject, the origins of ancient Greek drama, as with the *rebirth* of tragedy in the guise of Wagnerian opera. George Steiner’s critical lament, *The Death of Tragedy*, whose title alone clearly echoes Nietzsche, likewise asserts that “Verdi and Wagner are the principal tragedians of their age, and Wagner in particular is a dominant figure in any history of tragic form” (285); “*Tristan und Isolde,*” he elaborates, “is nearer to complete tragedy than anything else produced during the slack of drama which separates Goethe from Ibsen” (288). Thus, despite Steiner’s insistent claim “that ‘high tragic drama’ is no longer a naturally available genre” (xii), his eulogy for the genre really applies only to spoken drama: tragedy had not died but rather relocated to another medium, as he himself concedes: “In the twentieth century, opera has further strengthened its claim to the tragic
succession. There is little in the prose theatre or in the revival of verse drama to match the coherence and eloquence of tragic emotion which we find in the operas of Janáček and Alban Berg” (288). Here again we find the familiar formula intended to explain the unique appeal of genuine tragedy, whether classical Greek or operatic: Steiner emphasizes the role of heightened emotion, yet the emotion is balanced by its “coherence,” which suggests logic, order, and formal clarity.

In 1951, the year of the *Rake’s Progress* premiere, Auden had decided that opera is “the ideal dramatic medium for a tragic myth” ("Some” 252). Like Nietzsche and Steiner, Auden uses *Tristan und Isolde* to illustrate his point, yet he had just finished collaborating with the most anti-Wagnerian of composers. If opera in general can be said to unite Dionysian and Apollonian elements, individual operas and operatic composers do not necessarily exhibit both qualities in equal measure. While Wagner’s works constitute the pinnacle of Dionysianism, Stravinsky’s are unmistakably Apollonian.¹ Indeed, Stravinsky’s description of his own compositional process is especially telling in this regard:

What is important for the lucid ordering of the work—for its crystallization—is that all the Dionysian elements which set the imagination of the artist in motion and make the life-sap rise must be properly subjugated before they intoxicate us, and must finally be made to submit to the law: Apollo demands it. (*Poetics* 80-81)

The insistence on *subjugation* is not just an artistic creed; it has both political and psychological ramifications, as we will see when we look more closely at the story of Pentheus. Auden might not have expressed his own philosophy of artistic creation in quite these terms; however, in at least one crucial sense, it is not surprising that he and Stravinsky worked so well together when they devised *The Rake’s Progress*: both artists
were preoccupied with matters of form above all else. In fact, when they joined forces once again to compose their *Elegy for J.F.K.* in 1964, each of them concentrated on the technical attributes of the work rather than the emotional sensitivity that such a subject would seem to require. Describing his initial ideas to Auden, Stravinsky focused on details of structure and instrumentation, and Robert Craft reports that Auden was “tickled by these carpenter-like measurements” (392). Stravinsky later observed, “Wystan is wholly indifferent to J.F.K.; what he cares about is the form” (qtd. in Craft 392). The particular poetic form Auden adopted for the elegy was the haiku stanza, which is distinguished by its circumscription. Yet Stravinsky’s remark about Auden’s emotional detachment is just as applicable to himself. After all, Stravinsky is responsible, along with Jean Cocteau, for creating an operatic version of *Oedipus* that, to borrow Segal’s terms, manages to enhance the “austere, controlled structure” of the play while subduing its “intensely powerful emotions” (5).

Strictly speaking, Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* (1927) is not an opera at all but rather an “opera-oratorio” hybrid that represents both Greek tragedy and the operatic medium at their Apollonian extremes. For precisely this reason, Ewans makes a special point of excluding it from his study of operas adapted from Greek literature. According to Ewans, Stravinsky’s “preference for the supremacy of rationality over emotion is a fatal flaw in neo-classicism, when it attempts to engage with the great tragic myths” (201). On the other hand, in an essay about the process of writing the *Bassarids* libretto, Auden and Kallman cite Stravinsky’s coolheaded *Oedipus Rex* as one of “the most successful . . . musical works in this century on ‘Greek’ themes” (“Why” 707); interestingly, however, they also reference the opera Auden mentions in “A Shock,” Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s
hot-blooded *Elektra*, which Burian suggestively characterizes as “a child of the marriage of Wagner and Freud” (267). That these two early twentieth-century works could inspire the same later twentieth-century opera is remarkable; not only do they represent two highly distinct approaches to adapting texts by Sophocles, but they also represent two competing conceptions of ancient Greek culture and civilization. Despite Auden and Kallman’s respect for Stravinsky’s achievement, *The Bassarids* would end up having more in common with *Elektra* than with *Oedipus Rex*. Earlier in the same essay, the librettists explain some of the measures they took to prevent the opera from “teetering over into oratorio” (“Why” 706). And as for the opera’s Dionysian quotient, Auden secured this in two ways, one pertaining to the score and the other to the text: first, he insisted that Henze “overcome [his] dislike for Wagner” and sit through *Götterdämmerung* (Henze, *Music* 144); second, aware of his own tendency to suppress the Dionysian within himself and his art, Auden chose for his subject a Greek myth in which the god’s powers are simply inescapable.

The idea for an opera based on *The Bacchae* was not new. Philip Ward notes that Hofmannsthal toyed with the idea in 1918 (238), and though that project never came to fruition, Euripides’ tragedy has yielded many other operatic adaptations, particularly during the twentieth century. The play itself enjoyed renewed popularity during the postwar era (Easterling 36), and interest peaked in the 1960s, which, as Ewans observes, “were Dionysus’ decade” (154). Near the end of that decade, Auden reflected, “While no genuine myth is ever totally irrelevant, their rank of importance varies with time and place. To one age or one culture *this* myth may seem more relevant, to another age and culture *that one*” (“World” 95). For Auden, unlike some other adapters of *The Bacchae*,
the specific relevance of its mythological material had less to do with the first stirrings of
the counterculture in the 1950s and early 1960s than with a change in the relationship
between “Reason and Unreason” that had occurred over the course of the entire century
(“World” 109). Just as Hofmannsthal “used a Greek model for a discussion of a modern
condition” in Elektra (Steinberg 152), Auden sought to use Euripides in order to illustrate
“what the psychologists have taught us about repression and its damaging, sometimes
fatal effects” (“World” 109). Auden felt that Freudian psychoanalysis had fundamentally
changed how we view ourselves; as he wrote in his 1939 elegy for Freud, “to us he is no
more a person / now but a whole climate of opinion / under whom we conduct our
different lives” (“In Memory” 273). Yet Freud did not live to see the Second World War,
which brought still more uncomfortable truths about human nature to the fore. Explaining
The Bacchae’s renewed relevance for the postwar era, Auden wrote, “Today we know
only too well that it is as possible for whole communities to become demonically
possessed as it is for individuals to go off their heads” (“World” 109).

Auden’s distinctly twentieth-century interpretation of Euripides is greatly
indebted to the classical scholar E. R. Dodds, with whom Auden corresponded during the
making of The Bassarids (Libretti 680-81). Both the psychological emphasis on
repression and the oblique reference to the political dangers of mass hysteria can be
found in Dodds’s edition of The Bacchae and his seminal 1951 book, The Greeks and the
Irrational, which Walter Kaufmann praises for documenting the “‘dark’ side of ancient
Greece” (10). In addition to offering insightful commentary on the play’s content, Dodds
makes some fascinating remarks about its formal elements. One particular passage might
have caught Auden’s attention:
[The play’s] severity of form seems to be deliberate: it goes beyond what the conditions of the theatre enforced. And in fact the play’s tremendous power arises in part from the tension between the classical formality of its style and structure and the strange religious experiences which it depicts. As Coleridge said, the creative imagination shows itself most intensely in “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities,” and especially in combining “a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order.” Such a combination is achieved in the Bacchae. (Introduction xxxviii; emphasis added)

Dodds’s characterization of The Bacchae clearly anticipates Segal’s description of Oedipus (cited above), yet The Bacchae, which is the swan song of Euripides as well as of Attic tragedy more generally, goes beyond even Sophocles’ magnum opus in attaining what Kierkegaard called “The happy characteristic that belongs to every classic, . . . the absolute harmony of the two forces, form and content” (39). Dodds does not state the relationship explicitly, but the formal “tension” he describes also precisely reflects the central tension within the plot of the play between Pentheus and Dionysus. Recognizing this thematic conflict within the adapted text, Auden shaped his libretto to emphasize it while trusting that the formal conventions of opera would achieve “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” in a way that Coleridge never imagined (Coleridge 16).

Although the opera’s conception was Auden’s (Davenport-Hines 312), Kallman continued to take on a greater and greater role in their partnership. One way this shift manifests itself is through the often overindulgent stage directions. In several instances, however, these extended passages help illuminate the fundamental contrast Auden envisioned at the heart of the work. As the libretto opens, for example, the stage directions indicate “a clear division between the fore-stage (Thebes) and the small amphitheatre which fills the back of the stage (Mount Kithairon)” (251). The archetypal
division between the forces of civilization and order on the one hand and the untamed wilderness on the other is borrowed from Euripides, but by positioning Thebes firmly in the foreground, the libretto places more power (at least temporarily) in the hands of the young Theban ruler, Pentheus. The final portion of the opening stage direction is even more thematically and structurally significant: “At the rise of the curtain, it is midday: brilliant hard light. Citizens of Thebes are gathered in tribute to their new King; they are arranged in perfect, somewhat lifeless symmetry, wearing with a certain stiffness the traditional white draperies of a generalized classical Antiquity” (251). Every aspect of the scene contributes to our understanding of what Pentheus stands for, and the overall image represents a thoroughly artificial, Apollonian vision of Greek culture. In its initial stiffness and lifelessness, then, the opera starts almost as if it were going be a Stravinskyan opera-oratorio in the Oedipus Rex vein. Unlike The Bacchae, which begins with a long speech from Dionysus, The Bassarids opens with a citizens’ chorus, the refrain of which proclaims, “Pentheus is now our lord” (251-52). The rest of the work, however, consists of a gradual erosion of this vision through the powers of Dionysus; artifice is steadily overtaken by nature. At the opera’s midpoint, a chorus of Bassarids (a gender-neutral term for the followers of Dionysus) signal the transition: “Closer to Delphi the sun / Drops, drops, drops. God of the vine, / Stronger and worthier we / Grow, grow, grow into the night” (280). The “brilliant hard light” from the opening scene has evaporated (251), and “The sky begins to darken quickly” (280). Dionysus ultimately sets fire to the royal palace, destroying the symbol of civilized order (310), but the libretto’s final stage direction pushes the symbolism still further; unmistakably demonstrating the victory of unchecked creativity (and providing a visual echo of the Bassarids’ earlier
chorus), a portion of the text reads, “Vines descend and sprout everywhere, wreathing the columns, covering the blackened wall” (313).

Like the opening stage direction, the libretto’s first description of Pentheus’s physical characteristics is particularly revealing: “In appearance spare, athletic, scholarly. In dress, monastic and soldierly: a medieval king in the sort of dress he might wear on a pilgrimage. . . . The color of his costume is that of undyed sackcloth” (261). Pentheus’s outward aspect combines an exaggerated masculinity with a rigidly observed asceticism. Significantly, however, he first makes his presence known not in bodily form but through a written proclamation, which an invented character called the Captain of the Guard reads from a scroll. The text of the proclamation is undoubtedly Auden’s work (Libretti 684), and through it he begins to reveal the psychological profile behind the man whose sackcloth costume suggests a determination to deny the pleasures of the flesh. Projecting his own personal repressiveness onto his subjects, Pentheus outlaws all “ridiculous inventions” that sexualize the gods: “that the Immortal Gods do lust after mortals,” “that the Son of Chronos [Zeus] did abduct Europa from Tyre and ravish her,” and that “the Father of the Gods [Zeus again] had carnal knowledge of Semele” (260-61). The last of these decrees is the most significant since it specifically denies the divinity of Dionysus, who claims to be the son of Zeus and Semele. Yet beyond the scroll’s precise content, Pentheus’s form of address places him at odds with the Dionysian. As John Bokina points out, Auden and Kallman’s “Pentheus is a man of words. He is thoroughly logocentric” (181), and his reliance on the powers of reason and eloquence contrasts sharply with the Bassarids’ repeated, inarticulate cry of “Ayayalya.” At one point later in the libretto, Tiresias encourages Pentheus not to “be too literal / About the Gods” (277), recognizing
the King’s urge to find rational explanations for supernatural phenomena. In a certain sense, Pentheus does not just represent literal-mindedness but also literariness; that is, he believes in the expressive power of words alone and considers the nonverbal and the sensuous as threats to the carefully maintained order of his kingdom and his mind.

In his first moments on stage, Pentheus’s character is developed further, and one soon discovers that Auden and Kallman have transformed him into more than simply a rationalist; their Theban king is a full-fledged Platonist. In a conversation with Cadmus about Dionysus’ claim to divinity, Pentheus pursues the theme of his proclamation: “the Gods / Do have my awe: would they, the Serenely Pure, / Ravish our blue-eyed children?” (267). As he elaborates on his theological ideas, however, his vision of the divine grows increasingly abstract: “Light unsullied, they beckon us / To perfect brief lives in Immortal Truth” (267). In the following scene, written by Auden (Libretti 684), Pentheus finally spells out the true nature of his creed in language that is unmistakably Platonic:

The best in Thebes
Do but worship shadows
Of the True Good.

They honor its excellence
Under many a name
Of God and Goddess:
But the Good is One,
Not male or female,
They acknowledge Its glory
With statues and temples
Fair to behold:
But the Good is invisible
And dwells nowhere. (269)

First, Pentheus rejects polytheism, in large part because it grants sexual identities to the gods. He then proceeds to deny divinity any kind of physical manifestation, thus
projecting his own personal distaste for all bodily things onto the gods (or, rather, onto the metaphysical principle of “the Good”). Expressed in this form, Pentheus’s theology runs directly counter to Auden’s, especially as it evolved in his later life. In one of his very last poems, written in 1973 as his own body was clearly failing him, Auden nevertheless affirmed the beauty of corporeal existence. The poem is called “No, Plato, No,” but it could easily be retitled “No, Pentheus, No”:

I can’t imagine anything
that I would less like to be
than a disincarnate Spirit,
……………………………………
No, God has placed me exactly
where I’d have chosen to be:
the sub-lunar world is such fun,
where Man is male or female
and gives Proper Names to all things. . . . (891)

While Auden’s Pentheus seeks to subsume all things within an undifferentiated Oneness, Auden himself insisted on the uniqueness of individual human beings and believed in a personal God who had inhabited “the sub-lunar world” at a particular moment in history. In the context of a polytheistic Greek culture, Pentheus’s disbelief in the Olympian gods is, in fact, heretical, which is why he does not confess it openly except in the presence of his nurse, Beroe. On the other hand, Auden’s determination to eliminate all traces of Platonism from his Christian theology led him to his own heresy; Edward Mendelson notes that “of all the doctrines that the early Church had condemned as heresies . . . , the only one in which he believed was patripassianism, the doctrine that the Father voluntarily suffered with the Son” (“Auden” 74). Firmly committed to an incarnational theology, Auden would rather overemphasize God the Father’s humanlike qualities than conceive of him as an abstract principle like Plato’s the One or the Good.
The climax of this crucial sequence in the libretto occurs at the end of Pentheus’s aria, when he kneels and swears a solemn vow:

I, Pentheus,
King of Thebes,
Henceforth will abstain
From wine, from meats
And from woman’s bed,
Live sober and chaste
Till the day I die! (270)

Pentheus takes this vow not out of genuine spiritual devotion, but out of his fear of Dionysus, whose cult seems to encourage the idea that “Men are beasts / And beasts are men” (270). For Auden, this action constitutes Pentheus’s tragic mistake; the librettists’ program notes make this interpretation clear: “His attempt completely to suppress his instinctual life instead of integrating it with his rationality brings about his downfall. One might say that a similar fate would have befallen [The Magic Flute’s] Sarastro, had there not been a Tamino and a Pamina to marry and so reconcile Day to Night” (Libretti 700).

The goal, then, is neither repression nor utter abandon but integration—the healthy union of reason and instinct, both of which belong equally to human nature. The reference to The Magic Flute here is not coincidental; according to Mendelson, “Auden remarked to friends that The Bacchae was The Magic Flute without Christianity” (Later 459). And yet, Mozart’s opera is not just a product of Christian culture; it is also a product of the Enlightenment. Auden, however, views Sarastro from a decidedly post-Enlightenment perspective from which reason is no longer completely trustworthy. In fact, in Auden and Kallman’s controversial 1955 translation (and reinterpretation) of The Magic Flute libretto, Sarastro ultimately relinquishes his throne, recognizing that, like the Queen of the Night, he “must also lose [his] power” and make way for the union of “Light and
Darkness” rather than insisting on the supremacy of one over the other (170). Both Sarastro and Pentheus are incomplete men. Thus, Pentheus’s tragic demise is peculiarly appropriate—his dismemberment and decapitation at the hands of the Maenads (led by his own possessed mother, Agave) serves as a physical manifestation of his psychological condition; Pentheus was bent on severing mind from body, and the Maenads grant him his wish in a horrifically literal sense. It is only just before his body is torn apart that Pentheus realizes his error and achieves anagnorisis. The stage directions indicate that he has finally become “fully conscious” as he cries “No! No! This flesh is me!” (301).

Although Auden’s version of the myth makes Pentheus’s shortcomings abundantly clear, it also casts a critical eye on the divine nature represented by Dionysus. This dimension becomes especially clear in the wake of Pentheus’s death, when Cadmus and Agave confront the triumphant god. While Pentheus may have gone too far by seeking to eliminate all human qualities from the gods, Cadmus complains that Dionysus’ vengeance is all too human: “An immortal / God ought to forgive, not be angry / Forever like ignorant men” (310). Cadmus seems on the verge of (anachronistically) delineating the difference between Christian and pagan beliefs, but Dionysus abruptly cuts him off. A few moments later, Agave adopts a pagan metaphor to suggest prophetically that the entire Greek pantheon will soon be supplanted by another religious system: “Rape, torture and kill while you can: one / Tartarus waits for you all” (311). In his book Auden and Christianity, Arthur Kirsch notes, “Auden interpreted classical writers teleologically, arguing that classical thought was made intelligible, and its weaknesses diagnosed and eventually resolved, by the advent of Christianity” (74). The libretto for The Bassarids effectively diagnoses the weaknesses of both the Penthean and the Dionysian varieties of
Greek thought and culture, but it does not offer a straightforwardly Christian resolution; instead, it only gestures toward that resolution indirectly. As Alan Jacobs remarks, “The Bassarids, as a religious drama, may be understood as evoking a God of love by emphasizing its absence from the Euripidean text on which the libretto is based” (94).

Auden’s resistance to overtness stemmed from his lifelong belief that “it’s impossible to represent Christ in art” (Ansen 3). In a 1946 conversation, Alan Ansen challenged him on this point: “How about Bach? The scene in the St. Matthew Passion in which Christ inaugurates the Eucharist is certainly convincing” (3); as usual, however, the poet was prepared with a response: “Yes, but there it’s a direct quotation from the Gospels, a matter of feeling brought about through the music” (4). Despite his quick rebuttal, Auden seems not to have forgotten this conversation or Ansen’s counterexample. Although his Dionysus is a heavily distorted Christ figure, Auden still wanted the audience to be aware of the parallels, so he requested that Henze incorporate two carefully placed quotations from Bach’s St. Matthew Passion into the score.

As Auden’s particular musical request indicates, his desire to shape the opera’s final form stretched far beyond the words on the page. Indeed, both the text of the libretto and the librettists’ extensive musical and dramatic specifications reflect a very Apollonian quest for control, the opera’s Dionysian elements notwithstanding. After sending Dodds a copy of the libretto, Auden wrote to him, somewhat apologetically, “As you can see, the ‘poetry’ has to be pretty bare in order to be set to music” (Libretti 681). Auden had, in fact, improved his ability to provide settable verse, but his placement of “poetry” in quotation marks is an instance of false modesty. In a letter to Henze, Auden confessed, “C[hester] and I are vain enough to believe that our text is worth reading an-
und-für-sich. That is to say, whatever cuts are made in the setting . . . we want our text to be printed as is” (Libretti 682); he then proceeds to defend the merit of their work on poetic grounds: “The libretto is strictly metered throughout—there is no free verse” (682). Although the opera’s plot shows how excess eventually conquers restraint, the lesson does not necessarily apply to the text itself. One of the libretto’s most conspicuously formal passages occurs at a moment when one might expect something much less disciplined; Agave has become aware of her role in Pentheus’s death and begins to grieve:

At your bier-side, my dead son,
I will not speak of a mother’s care
Or a son’s love that were not there.
Without choice we are made one:
A bond binds us for all time,
For your death is my crime. . . . (308)

Two more stanzas follow, and although the syllable count remains flexible, the rhyme scheme is rigid. The stanzaic form (abbacc) appropriately mimics that of Tennyson’s In Memoriam but adds a rhymed couplet, which provides an even greater sense of containment. In the quoted passage above, this restrictiveness is enhanced further by the double consonance of “bond binds” (the phrase itself contributing a binding effect).

Given the opportunity to convey Agave’s grief through an outburst of emotion, Auden opts instead for a careful balance of form and feeling. Whatever compromises he was making with the god Dionysus by writing The Bassarids, his poetry never quite abandons its Apollonian nature. Keeping this distinction in mind, one can understand why Auden would imagine the bacchants dressed like Beats (“World” 115), who at the time represented the most recent incarnation of Dionysian art. Agave’s lament for Pentheus—like most of Auden’s poetry—is precisely the opposite of a Ginsbergian howl.
Beyond envisioning the “bacchic revelers as contemporary counter-culture youths” (Innes 92), Auden and Kallman’s libretto also instructs the main characters to wear costumes reflecting various religious or cultural attitudes from across history; thus, Agave’s “dress and hairdo are elaborate: in the style of the French Second Empire,” while “Tiresias is dressed in the complete get-up of an Anglican Archdeacon” (253). Although Christopher Innes believes “the text’s deliberate anachronism and mix of different periods formed a model for subsequent postmodern stagings” (92), the librettists’ attempt to achieve both contemporary relevance and timelessness through costuming often clutters the stage with conflicting symbolic frameworks. Auden’s ideas for the music were just as specific; however, in this case, the prescriptions were more consistently successful. In his review of the opera’s premiere, Andrew Porter notes that the “libretto does everything except actually set down the notes” (886-87); he claims, moreover, that the musical direction had a positive impact on the composer: “Henze has embraced the suggestions to produce his least self-indulgent and most theatrically effective piece” (887). In order to attain the results he desired from his composer, Auden seems to have adopted his most domineering attitude since collaborating with the young Benjamin Britten. Over and above his particular requests—such as the Bach quotations—Auden wanted an opera cast in the Wagnerian mold. Henze’s remarks on this issue are especially revealing:

Auden and Kallman agreed to write the libretto for me on one harsh condition. Auden forced me to listen to *Götterdämmerung*, sent me to the Vienna State Opera for this purpose, and sent Kallman along too, to make sure I really sat through it right to the end. . . . [J]ust as a pupil passively bends to the will of his mentor I yielded to him and sat through *Götterdämmerung*—quite joylessly. (*Music* 143-44)
Like most postwar German composers, Henze had political reasons for not wanting to associate himself too closely with Wagner; nevertheless, whether he had soaked up the influence “joylessly” or not, “Götterdämmerung . . . had made its impact” and persuaded the composer to push “forward to a through-composed large-scale form of opera” (*Music* 144-45). Even when critics do not refer to *The Bassarids* as a direct descendent of Wagnerian opera, they typically compare it to some other work of Wagnerian lineage; Alex Ross, for instance, mentions “the opulently orchestrated, *Elektra*-like climaxes of *The Bassarids*” (211). Critics are much less inclined to liken Henze’s score to Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, which suggests that Auden and Kallman’s goal of avoiding oratorio had been met.

Auden’s strategy for summoning appropriately Dionysian music from his collaborator proved almost too successful; the music took on a life of its own, swallowing up some of the text’s subtleties in the process and making a coherent interpretation of the opera difficult. Three decades after composing *The Bassarids*, Henze reflected on the power of his score: “the musical material associated with the god Dionysus slowly, insinuatingly, insidiously and, finally, with the most terrible brutality destroys Pentheus’s monastically chaste world of sound, undermining it and, in the end, annihilating it utterly” (*Bohemian* 207). It is fitting that Dionysus and the music that represents him should dominate the opera at its conclusion, but the libretto makes it clear that the god’s ascendency should be terrifying, not attractively awe-inspiring. As Burian observes, however, “The seductive and powerful Wagnerism of Henze’s score might be invoked to support either view of Dionysus, depending on the proclivities of the listener” (269). Robert Cowan goes further, suggesting a competition between the opera’s librettists and
its composer: “Auden and Kallman depict a totalitarian Dionysus . . . , but Henze provides music of transcendence and liberation. Dionysus has unquestionably triumphed in the action on stage, but the struggle between Apollonian and Dionysian continues over the interpretation of that triumph” (338-39). Although Auden hoped to avoid equating Dionysus with Hitler (Libretti 682), Cowan is right to identify a modern-day commentary on totalitarianism in the libretto. In fact, Auden’s fear at the beginning of the Second World War, that “an ecstatic and morbid abdication of the free-willing and individual before the collective and the daemonic” would turn humans into “obscene night worshipers” (“Jacob” 38), sounds remarkably like a description of The Bacchae’s (and The Bassarids’) denouement. The libretto reflects its historical moment even more precisely by making the Captain of the Guard an Eichmann-like figure, “who does whatever authority orders” (Libretti 680). Indeed, in the wake of Pentheus’s death, the denial of complicity becomes a kind of epidemic. Agave’s sister, Autonoe, mechanically repeats the refrain “I didn’t want to do it. / Agave made me do it” (307), while the chorus of Bassarids claims, “We heard nothing. We saw nothing. / We took no part in her lawless frenzy, / We had no share in his bloody death” (308). The libretto’s insights into the darkness of human nature revealed by recent history coexist rather uneasily with Henze’s music, which, to many ears, portrays Dionysus’s revolutionary overthrow of Pentheus’s repressive regime much more sympathetically.

Like Elegy for Young Lovers, in which the librettists’ harsh portrayal of Mittenhofer is softened through the power of Henze’s music, The Bassarids’ moral content is obscured by conflicting representations of Dionysus. Nevertheless, the friction among the collaborators’ differing attitudes to Euripides’ myth produced a complex and
enduringly fascinating work. Auden thought that his and Kallman’s libretto was “the best libretto we have done so far” (Libretti 680), and he was also “convinced that Hans [had] written a masterpiece” (Libretti 683). Five years after George Steiner had pronounced the genre dead, Auden, Kallman, and Henze had succeeded in creating high tragic drama. After The Bassarids’ 1966 premiere at the Salzburg Festival, Andrew Porter pronounced it “a major addition to the repertory” (887), and twenty-five years later, Antony Bye hailed it as “one of the best post-war operas and certainly the best post-war German opera” (41). Despite Auden and Kallman’s contribution, The Bassarids is still usually thought of as a “German opera” and has not attained the kind of international reputation enjoyed by The Rake’s Progress; in fact, the Bassarids premiere, like that of Elegy for Young Lovers, was given in a German translation. No English-language performance took place until 1968 at the Santa Fe Opera, and the English National Opera’s 1974 production constituted the work’s belated British premiere. The opera has since gained wider recognition, and one hopes it will continue to receive its due. Although many critics persist in identifying the over-literary elements of Auden and Kallman’s work, Dana Gioia is right to argue that, with The Bassarids, the two librettists had finally succeeded in shifting their “authorial attention . . . from poetic considerations to dramatic ones” and producing a text that performs at least as well as it reads, if not better (71-72). The libretto for The Bassarids is Auden’s greatest achievement in the tragic vein. Its dramatic impact, however, is largely due to the great emotional resources summoned by Henze’s music, for Auden’s genius was predominantly comic, in both the common and Dantean senses of the word. In fact, when adapting Euripides’ “tragedy of tragedies” (Melchinger 188), Auden could not resist leavening the myth’s bleakness. Drawing on
the Greek tradition of introducing a satyr play between tragedies, as well as the performance practices of “the earlier days of Opera Seria” (“Why” 706), Auden and Kallman inserted a comic intermezzo in which the audience sees Pentheus’s fantasies of what his mother and the bacchantes are doing on Mount Kithairon, “the fantasies of a sexually repressed man” (“World” 114). Kallman wrote the opening portion, which is rather campy, but Auden’s contribution—a play within a play within a play called “The Judgement of Calliope”—is more interesting. As Mendelson observes of this section, Pentheus’s “repression causes his fantasies to take the superficial aestheticized form of a rhymed charade, . . . a rococo fantasy entirely different from the Attic solemnity in which it is framed” (Introduction xxviii-xxix). Significantly, this is the only part of the libretto that calls for closed forms, whose stasis contrasts sharply with the symphonic flow of the rest of the opera. Moreover, Auden’s verse, which employs an excessive amount of assonance and internal rhyming, becomes ostentatiously artificial in order to illustrate the distance between Pentheus’s mental state and reality:

Calliope, I, by Jove on high
Appointed to try this case,
Bid all abide by what I decide
And neither chide nor grimace. . . . (287)

Despite the text’s baroque flourishes and silliness (a quality Auden never tried very hard to avoid), the intermezzo and its contrasting formal strategies are intended to make a serious thematic point: while Apollonian artifice can help shape raw emotion into expression (as in the case of Agave’s grieving), it can also conceal—or sublimate—emotion, resulting in an empty classicism or formalism. Ultimately, like many reviewers, Henze decided that the intermezzo’s drastically different tone interrupted the opera’s tragic momentum, so he omitted it from later productions. Auden and Kallman’s next and
final libretto also features a dramatic shift in tone and an exploration of artificiality; however, in this case, these components are not imported from without but are rather the essential elements of the adapted text.

**LOVE’S LABOUR’S LOST**

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is regularly identified as Shakespeare’s most “artificial” work (Bloom 147; Van Doren 51), and not always to its credit. In William C. Carroll’s very sympathetic book on the play, he identifies two main aspects to which critics have commonly objected: that the style of its “complex language” “is felt to be too clever or too convoluted” and that the plot is simply “too thin” (6). These are precisely the same criticisms that had dogged Auden throughout his dramatic career as both a playwright and a librettist, so it is not particularly surprising to discover that, while he admitted “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* is not the greatest of Shakespeare’s plays,” he nevertheless believed it to be “one of the most perfect” (“*Love’s*” 33). In the same year as *The Bassarids* premiere, Auden remarked, “obviously the only Shakespeare that could be made into English-language opera is *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and that would take a great deal of making” (Craft 426). On the surface, no two plays could be more different than *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Bacchae*. Yet, beyond envisioning their suitability for operatic adaptation, Auden perceived that Shakespeare’s early comedy and Euripides’ final tragedy had something else in common; as Mendelson astutely recognizes, *The Bassarids* portrays “the triumph of instinctual passion over rational thought in a mood of tragedy,” while *Love’s Labour’s Lost* offered Auden the opportunity to create an opera
“that would portray the same triumph in a mood of comedy fulfilled in reconciliation” (Introduction xxx). Auden realized that the adaptation “would take a great deal of making” (Craft 426), but he assured the opera’s composer, Nicolas Nabokov (Vladimir’s cousin), that the transformation would not be too painful: “Love’s Labour’s Lost . . . is structured like an opera and so much of it is already rhymed verse,” he argued (qtd. in Nabokov 228). As it turns out, Auden was neither the first nor the last person to think that Shakespeare’s works are inherently operatic.

Shakespeare’s career nearly coincides with the earliest years of opera, and although he was not attempting to recreate ancient Greek drama, it is fascinating to note how often his plays are characterized in operatic terms. In an effort to distinguish Shakespeare’s plays from nineteenth-century realist drama, Hofmannsthal labeled them “pure operas” and claimed, “With Shakespeare the word is always expression, never information” (qtd. in Lindenberger 77). This notion of operatic expressiveness is perhaps most evident in Shakespeare’s soliloquies. Like arias, these speeches represent significant pauses in the forward thrust of the dramatic action; at the same time, they afford the character speaking—as well as the author—an opportunity to display his or her linguistic virtuosity. Critics commonly resort to musical terminology to explain the unique impressions produced in such moments. In his book Shakespeare’s Language, Frank Kermode refers to Mercutio’s “solo about Queen Mab” in Romeo and Juliet and describes it as a “brilliant scherzo” (55). Other linguistic features of the plays elicit similar comparisons. In one literary dictionary, the authors note that the Venus and Adonis stanza “has a ‘curiosity’ interest because Shakespeare used it in Love’s Labour’s Lost and Romeo and Juliet, where its effect is to produce dramatic stylization of an
almost operatic kind” (Cuddon and Preston 963). But it is not only the language that inspires operatic analogies. In his series of lectures on Shakespeare given at the New School for Social Research in 1946-47, Auden claimed that the method of characterization in *King Lear* is like that of an opera: Shakespeare juxtaposes characters who represent passionate and willful states of being in order to achieve a composite portrait of human nature, and although a degree of probability is lost, according to Auden, “A certain universality is gained” (“King” 220).

If the linguistic texture and dramatic structure of Shakespeare’s works as a whole can be said to exhibit operatic characteristics, this is especially so in the case of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Gary Schmidgall writes that the play “is at once characteristically Shakespearean and operatic; the motto for both genres, and for the play’s cast, could be borrowed from Oscar Wilde: ‘Nothing succeeds like excess’” (27). Even if one disagrees with Schmidgall’s claim that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is “characteristically Shakespearean,” one must at least grant that many of the Shakespearean qualities that can be called operatic are found in abundance in this particular play. In fact, in the later twentieth century, when the play began to make something of a mild comeback, it seemed to be those productions that embraced precisely the excessive or operatic qualities that received favorable attention. Not surprisingly, perhaps, multiple modern reviewers have compared *Love’s Labour’s Lost* to one specific work: Mozart’s opera buffa *Cosi fan tutte*. In 1974, John H. Harvey praised a production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* for its Mozart-like (and especially *Cosi*-like) qualities: “its gayety, its wit, its parody of love’s extravagances, . . . its winged arias and its clouded ending, so like Mozart’s sudden, delicate plunges into melancholy” (377). Giles Gordon’s review of the 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company
production was even more gushing: for Gordon, “Love’s Labor’s Lost is one of the supreme glories of dramatic art, the equal of that most essential of operas, Mozart’s Così fan tutte. The wit, brio and erudition of the verbal music are marvelous to experience” (qtd. in Arthos 191). In these remarks, one can hear an implicit claim that Harold Bloom would later make quite explicitly: “Love’s Labour’s Lost is itself an opera, rather than a libretto that an opera could enhance” (122).

Evidently, the complexity of the play’s language is not always a stumbling block for appreciation, yet in almost every case, it is being appreciated as a species of music. George Bernard Shaw, who was not averse to finding fault with Shakespeare’s dramatic abilities, was forced to admit that “Much of [Love’s Labour’s Lost’s] verse is charming: even when it is rhymed doggrell [sic] it is full of that bewitching Shakespearean music which tempts the susceptible critic to sugar his ink and declare that Shakespear[e] can do no wrong” (Shaw 114). In another context, Shaw insists that Shakespeare’s real “power lies in his enormous command of word-music” (Shaw 2-3). If Shaw is right, then the prospect of adapting Shakespeare’s “word-music” for a musicalized adaptation raises certain difficulties. By supplementing or replacing the “word-music” of Love’s Labour’s Lost with actual music, the librettist and composer seem to be, at best, distracting the audience from the verbal virtuosity by adding another layer of musicality; at worst, they are destroying that which makes up the very substance of the play. If Love’s Labour’s Lost is nearly “plot-free” (Gay 58), then actual music might diminish its greatest asset—the elaborate word-games. To adopt Bloom’s terms, why bother making an opera out of something that is already an “opera”?

Nabokov, who thought the play “forbidding” and the task of adapting
Shakespeare “terribly risky” (227), was more concerned about these difficulties than his librettists. Auden and Kallman were surely aware that few English-language librettos based on Shakespeare have been really successful, but for Auden, in particular, this kind of technical challenge was irresistible. The most prominent twentieth-century example of Shakespearean opera in English is Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1960), with a libretto by Britten and his partner, Peter Pears. Their version makes plenty of cuts, which is unavoidable for an opera, but they treat the remainder of the text with the utmost reverence: only one non-Shakespearean line is added (Kennedy 205). The same cannot be said of Auden and Kallman’s libretto for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. In Kallman’s words, they “stamped Shakespeare to bits and then put it together again” (qtd. in Levy 36). The few Auden scholars who have written anything about the libretto indicate that not many of Shakespeare’s words survive, but this is misleading; moreover, I think Kallman’s comment about treating Shakespeare like Humpty Dumpty is merely intended to shock. In fact, the librettists perform a remarkable poetic feat by preserving many of Shakespeare’s most memorable lines, rearranging and compressing others, and composing new verse that avoids tasteless Shakespearean pastiche; rarely does the result give the impression of the Bard having been maimed. The libretto effectively retains much of the original’s witty spirit yet allows room for the music to supply the ornamental excess suggested by Shakespeare’s text.

In the process of adaptation, Auden and Kallman focused on those characters and situations that they felt to be intrinsically operatic, taking full advantage of the resources of musical drama. Though the libretto dispenses with many of the play’s “low” characters, it accentuates the role of the boastful Don Armado, whom Shakespeare’s King
describes as “One who the music of his own vain tongue / Doth ravish like enchanting harmony” (1.1.165-66). Like many an opera singer, Armado is enchanted by his own voice, but he also insists on having music performed for him so that his moods are complemented and enhanced. In act 1 of the play, he instructs his sidekick, Moth, “Sing, boy. My spirit grows heavy in love” (1.2.118); sixty lines later, he exclaims, “Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet” (1.2.176-77), which sounds like a wonderful lead-in to an operatic number. Likewise, act 3 begins with Armado’s command to “Warble, child. Make passionate my sense of hearing” (3.1.1-2). In their libretto, Auden and Kallman keep all of these lines intact but collapse them into a single scene that precedes an aria for Moth. The stage directions instruct Armado to “scribbl[e] furiously” during the aria (325), and the entire sequence serves as a wonderful distillation of his falsely romantic attitude and his ridiculous attempts at adopting the pose of a Petrarchan lover.

In both the play and the opera, the King and his lords prove to be just as self-deceived as Armado. Like Pentheus, they vainly attempt to subdue the flesh in order to pursue the life of the mind, and as in the libretto for The Bassarids, Auden characterizes this philosophical stance with Platonic language that is extraneous to the adapted text. In the King’s opening solo, for instance, he proclaims, “All earthly pleasures we’ll eschew, / All vain delights exclude, / In contemplation of the True, / The Beautiful, the Good” (317-18). In a striking structural echo of The Bassarids, Berowne reads the King’s decree from a scroll, symbolizing faith in the verbal and the rational:

For three years we ban
All women from court,
From our tongue and our thought,
And during that time
It shall be a crime
In Navarre for a man
To speak with a maid.
This we decree. (319)

The swearing of an oath also recalls Pentheus’s solemn vow of chastity; in both cases, the characters disregard the strength of their instinctive natures. In the *Love’s Labour’s Lost* libretto, it becomes clear by the end of the first act that the men’s failure is imminent. Moth and Boyet, both of whom stand apart from the action and comment on it, sing a pair of stanzas that provide a Freud-inspired image of repressed love:

Agitation unexpected
Blurs the surface of the pool
What has churned it? What has turned it
From an aspect clear and cool.

Tropic winds have roughed and burned it;
And, below, a thrashing school
Of neglected, half-suspected,
Fierce emotions play the fool. (332)

Beyond the Freudian implications, these lines also suggest an artistic metaphor; the “clear and cool” aspect of the Apollonian cannot always contain the fierce Dionysian emotions that reside below the surface. As the opera proceeds, the librettists increasingly choose to highlight the dissociation between form and feeling.

In a famous scene from the play, the King and his lords each betray an inability to keep the oath that they have sworn by reciting poetry written for their forbidden love interests. As the scene develops, a series of concentric eavesdropping circles takes shape—a highly improbable and artificial piece of stagecraft. Auden and Kallman repeat this scene but exploit operatic conventions to enhance its impact, casting shorter excerpts of the lovers’ sonnets as miniature arias and then combining them into a magnificent quintet for the climax. The arrangement of the quintet produces a moment of beautiful
cacophony, in which individual words are lost while each lover sings to the same tune, revealing the essential uniformity of their attempts at romantic love. The blurred words reflect the fact that the men have not yet learned to love their women as individuals; rather, they are in love with the idea of love. The theme is driven home by Moth’s contribution to the quintet; as he consults a textbook, he repeats the Latin forms of the word “love”: “Amo / Amas / Amat” and so on (338). Near the end of both the play and the opera, the King and his lords seem to have learned their lesson—that highly artificial poetic language, however beautiful, is no substitute for true love authentically expressed.

In Shakespeare’s text, the virtuoso wordsmith Berowne swears off linguistic display with a showy sonnet (5.2.403-16). Auden’s version preserves the irony but puts the renunciation in the form of a litany recited by all the male lovers:

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From what boys call
Poesy, all
That merely verbal is,
From filling a canticle
With figures pedantical,
Three-piled hyperboles,
Tropes metaphorical,
Conceits rhetorical
And phrases hollow,
Save us, Apollo! (352)
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Vowing to give up literariness, the men exhibit their most literary language. Clearly, no lesson has really been learned, and in a sense, this is as it should be. In an essay on “Music in Shakespeare,” Auden identified “a kind of comedy, A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Importance of Being Earnest are good examples, which take place in Eden, the place of pure play where suffering is unknown” (822). For most of its duration, Love’s Labour’s Lost falls into this category, too, but in its atypical finale, the illusion is broken.
For nearly five acts, Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is his most artificial play, but it also features what might be considered his least artificial ending, at least for a comedy. Through a series of incidents, the men seem to have been put in their place and made to realize the foolishness of both their vow to avoid passionate love and their subsequent attempts to woo fashionably. The play includes an amateur theatrical piece at this point, which functions much like the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The production is called “The Nine Worthies,” and it mirrors the men’s absurd quest to escape time and achieve fame. The libretto, however, discards this portion of the scene and moves directly to one of the strangest moments in Shakespeare. Just as the men appear to have learned their lesson and the lovers are ready to pair off as couples, a messenger arrives and announces that the Princess’s father has died. The marriages that seemed inevitable from the outset are postponed for a year and a day. Even Shakespeare’s most bitterly dark comedy, *Measure for Measure*, ends with the planning of multiple marriages. As if anticipating his audience’s confusion, the playwright has his characters acknowledge that comic conventions have been defied:

BEROWNE. Our wooing doth not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill. These ladies’ courtesy Might well have made our sport a comedy. KING. Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day, And then ’twill end. BEROWNE. That’s too long for a play. (5.2.864-68)

Here at its conclusion, the drama confronts its audience with the inescapability of time and of death. It is a potent example of what Auden’s Caliban in “The Sea and the Mirror” calls “the intrusion of the real” (429), and it also offers an implicit critique of all the temporal tricks of traditional dramatic spectacles. When time must be endured and not manipulated, we are unmistakably leaving the realm of artistic magic.
In a promotional piece for the opera’s premiere, Auden and Kallman commented on the abrupt shift: “Hitherto, the characters have lived in a world of pure play, flirtation and banter, where nothing serious could happen. Now, the awareness of death as a physical fact thrusts them out into the real world, where personal relations are real and always involve suffering. Music, we felt, might make this change even more impressive” (“Labour” 733). At the most basic yet powerful level, the score helps to achieve this impressive change by bringing its almost perpetual allegro to a halt and proceeding with a tempo marking of “lento assai.” Before the men and women slowly leave the stage in opposite directions, the librettists also insert a penultimate song, which is wholly original to the opera. The score calls for “careful articulation of every word,” and the last stanza reads:

But we instead
Have wakened from a light and youthful dream
To find a day
Resembling night, where dead
And living in a long communion dwell,
Where all things go and all things stay,
And are and are not what they seem,
And time and death are real. Farewell. (357)

The song is sung by the entire cast except Moth, whom the libretto has transformed into a kind of Ariel figure, a representative of the world of art. Fittingly, then, Moth sings the final song, which in the play represents a dialogue between the natural forces of spring and winter. The libretto, however, separates the song’s two parts to provide a frame for the action, using the spring portion to establish the pastoral setting at the opening and leaving the winter portion to emphasize the Lenten-themed reflections that displace the opera’s predominantly carnival-like atmosphere.

Both The Bassarids and Love’s Labour’s Lost conclude with the reminder that
human nature is composed, as one of Auden’s most famous poems puts it, “Of Eros and of dust” (“September” 97), and as a passionate and embodied art, opera is especially capable of communicating that message. Indeed, as Armado delivers one of the libretto’s final lines (borrowed directly from Shakespeare), his words take on added significance, both literally and metaphorically. Addressing the audience directly, he says, “The words of Mercury / Are harsh after the songs of Apollo” (358). In the context of an operatic performance, the reference to Apollo as the god of music seems to indicate not only the song just concluded but the entire “secondary world” conjured by the composer (Auden, “World” 87). At the same time, the statement also neatly encapsulates Auden’s dramatic career as a whole. His first experiments with musical theater in Paul Bunyan were not entirely successful, but given a taste of opera’s expressive potential, he refused to return to purely verbal dramatic forms. By making this choice, Auden relinquished a certain amount of control over his legacy as a dramatic poet and was dependent, to a large degree, on the capabilities of the composers with whom he collaborated. It is no accident that Auden and Kallman’s best-known libretto is the one they wrote for Stravinsky or that their English version of Mozart’s The Magic Flute was the only original or translated libretto that Auden published through the ordinary book trade” (Mendelson, Introduction xxvi). Love’s Labour’s Lost is by no means Auden’s least accomplished work as a librettist, yet it is certainly his least well known. According to most accounts, Nabokov’s score is quite pleasant, but it never established itself in the greater world of opera, in which the odds are always stacked against a new work; perhaps Nabokov found, like the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn (who also writes an operatic version of Love’s Labour’s Lost in Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus), that “Parody of artificiality was
difficult to maintain as a style” (224). In any case, after a few performances in Brussels and Berlin in 1973, the opera vanished. The libretto, however, still has its admirers, most notably J. D. McClatchy, whom a recent Opera News article calls “the most important librettist on the current American opera scene” (Wasserman 28). In addition to recognizing that Love’s Labour’s Lost is “a perfect comic opera” “on the page” (44), McClatchy understands, better than most, Auden’s attraction to the libretto as a literary form:

[N]o doubt Auden, the most virtuosic and searching of all the modern poets, was drawn to the language of opera because it was another (and unlikely) singing robe to try on. And wasn’t it just like Auden to be attracted to a style precisely because it represented everything opposed to the dry, witty, rational, endlessly subtle voice that we hear in his own later poems? (41)
NOTES

1. In 1958, Auden wrote a review essay on books by Stravinsky and Paul Valéry called “The Creation of Music and Poetry,” which he had originally titled “Two Apollonians” (*Prose IV* 917).

2. For more information on Auden and Stravinsky’s collaborative relationship, see chapter 2, especially pages 30 ff.

3. See pages 18 ff. for further discussion of Henze’s music and Auden’s influence on it.

4. In addition to *The Bassarids*, at least five other twentieth-century operas are based on (or inspired by) Euripides’ *The Bacchae*: Karol Szymanowski’s *King Roger* (1926), Egon Wellesz’s *Die Bakchantinnen* (1931), Giorgio Federico Ghedini’s *Le Baccanti* (1948), Harry Partch’s *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1960), and John Buller’s *BAKXAI* (1992).


6. In Dodds’s *Bacchae*, see especially the section titled “The Nature of Dionysiac Religion” from the introduction to the second edition (xi-xx); in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, see the first appendix, called “Maenadism” (270-82).

7. This is not true of all Henze’s music, however. See chapter 3 (page 23) and also Everett Helm’s review of Henze’s *Muses of Sicily*: “In its extremely clear formal construction as in its rhythmic procedures and, not infrequently, harmonic idiom, the work seems to take up where Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* and *Symphony of Psalms* leave off” (413). (Note that Helm’s comparison is based on the works’ shared Apollonian traits—their “extremely clear formal construction.”)

8. Ewans offers a similar interpretation. In *The Bassarids*, he claims, “we encounter a librettist and composer totally at odds” (7).

9. For criticisms of the libretto’s literariness, see Helm (408), Dean (1057), and Ewans (161-62).

10. Pairing *Love’s Labour’s Lost* with *Cosi fan tutte* is not an exclusively twentieth-century pastime. According to Joseph Kerman, Mozart’s music was adapted to a nineteenth-century French version of the play (92).

11. Of course, librettos in languages other than English are another matter. Verdi and Boito’s late masterpieces, *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), are perhaps the best examples of Shakespearean opera.
12. Auden was not fond of Britten and Pears’s take on Shakespeare. In a letter to Stephen Spender, he wrote, “We saw B. B.’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* the other day . . . It’s dreadful! Pure Kensington” (qtd. in Carpenter 428).

13. When Stravinsky looked over Auden and Kallman’s libretto for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, he confessed wanting to compose the music himself (*Themes* 289). One can only wonder what might have been.


---. “Music in Shakespeare.” *Prose IV* 807-826.

---. “No, Plato, No.” *Collected Poems* 891.


Auden, W. H., and Chester Kallman. *The Bassarids: Opera Seria with Intermezzo in One*


Cuddon, John Anthony and Claire Preston. A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary


