

A Fractured Iconography of Gender in *Four Saints and Three Acts*

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The character of Alice, in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, claims that the origins of *Four Saints in Three Acts* lay in a visit she and Gertrude Stein made to Spain in 1912: "I felt I needed nothing but Avila. We were both very violent about it. We did however stay for ten days and as Saint Theresa was a heroine of Gertrude Stein's youth we thoroughly enjoyed it. In the opera *Four Saints* written a few years ago she describes the landscape that so profoundly moved me" (Stein *Autobiography* 116). Gertrude Stein is famous for her appreciation not only of Spanish culture, but also of the Spanish cubist painter Pablo Picasso. However, in the composition of the libretto for *Four Saints*, Stein's writing expands to include not only her cubist influence but also her collaboration with friend and composer Virgil Thomson. Like Picasso, Thomson was included in the famous afternoon salons at Stein and Toklas's Paris apartment, and in appreciation for this friendship, Thomson set a few of Stein's poems to music. She liked his settings and agreed to write an opera libretto for him based, Thomson claims in his autobiography *Virgil Thomson*, on the artist's working life. As her model of the "artist," and at Thomson's prompting, Stein chose the Spanish Saints Teresa and Ignatius. Finished and set by 1927, the opera was not premiered until 1934 in Hartford, Connecticut, after which it had a very brief run on Broadway. Stein never saw this first production, nor was she directly involved in the musical treatment of her words; nevertheless, she and Thomson engaged in an active dialogue, both about the work and within it. It is this dialogue that makes *Four Saints* a work eminently suited to what John Mowitz, in his book *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object*, terms the "antidisciplinary" critical act. That is, *Four Saints* specifically and opera in general provide a clear collaboration between text and music and ample opportunity to blur the distinctions between them. In opera, the librettists and the composers share more than an analogy of form and/or meaning. Traditionally, the libretto forms an uneasy and subservient alliance with the music, though both, as cultural productions, carry distinct and often dialogic associations. What interests me particularly about *Four Saints in Three Acts* is the movement

of language signification away from the illusion of representation and music's movement towards a greater self-reflexivity, or awareness of itself as a social event. In its dialogue between text and music, the opera examines not only language as social construct but also gender. Specifically, the "characters" of the saints are fragmented portraits, similar to cubist paintings, and yet through that fragmentation the materials of portraiture are revealed to be socially determined discourses. In *Four Saints*, music, language and gesture repeat their gendered or ideological associations, but any notion of a complete representation of gender identity is deconstructed through the fragmentation and juxtaposition of these discourses.

Stein's specific innovations in form, attention to the sensual/aural elements of language and experiments with indeterminacy, open her language up to a dialogue with Virgil Thomson's music. The loss of clear referentiality in Stein's libretto points to a shared element of music and language: neither has a fixed point of origin or a concrete objective reality, both are ultimately constituted through performance (whether by reader, player or musician). In order to get at the relationship between the signification of language and that of music (or visual art, or movement), one must examine the way in which articulated events acquire meaning. I am suggesting that signification takes place on a continuum from greater to lesser specificity and that it is bound up in a performative process of displacement, or repetition with difference. Music, though without concrete reference, is a discourse in circulation with other discourses. This model of signification requires a dynamic and fluid process that dispenses with the absolute dichotomies erected by disciplinary theories. This process of dynamic displacement offers an alternative to notions of substance and spatio-temporal fixity traditionally associated with textual (print) signification or with the logocentrism of representation attempted by conventional theatre. Ironically, in the notion of music/text dialogue I propose here, music 'means' through an increased awareness of the possibility of reference while language slides closer to music through a disruption of the signified/signifier binary.

Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance is useful for this analysis of Stein's and Thomson's work since *Four Saints* provides a variety of discourses to (re)define gender. Gender identity in Butler's theory, is a performative constellation of discourses, and since perfect repetition is impossible these constellations are constantly undergoing revision. As a repetition becomes more excessive, as it exceeds its disciplinary boundaries, it draws attention to the act of gender construction itself. By extension, any collection of performative discourses is a variable and conflicting association of cultural fragments. Repetition of social structures reveals their construction under cultural and

historical restraints and it reveals their potential for subversion. In *Four Saints*, the model for narrative or poetic form engages in a similar project of self-creation and self-reference through the employment and juxtaposition of a variety of social discourses. Further, discourse is revealed to be performative in this function through the dialogue between music and words. If identity is created in discourse, so is character and by extension, narrative. In performance, the dynamic of that creation is emphasized by the overlap of apparently divergent modes of expression. In the performing subject, gesture combines with vocal timbre and costume, as well as with dialogue, to reinforce or unsettle gender identity. In the staged performance, the discourses of movement, voice, setting, costume, dialogue and music, are combined to reinforce or unsettle unified notions of textual signification. In *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the construction of character closely resembles Butler's notion of the performative constitution of gender identity, and character, or images of identity, indicate the equally variable construction of text.

The production of *Four Saints* was scenically marked as portraiture even in the program notes for the Broadway production. After the title page, the first image is Bernini's "Saint Teresa in Ecstasy", the visual construction of a moment of fluidity. Following this picture is Carl Van Vechten's introduction "How I Listen to Four Saints in Three Acts" in which he suggests that listening can also be looking:

If the auditor demands a plot he [or she] will be disappointed, but why should he [or she] demand a plot? It is like looking at a painting and demanding a story. . . . Are theatre-goers more naïve than picture viewers? Besides, to compensate for the lack of a story in the accepted sense, there is abundant action, action which is witty, beautiful, suggestive, and full of entrancing double meaning (3).

In the passage, Van Vechten collapses the distinction between the activity of listening and watching, and suggests that though plotless and static like a painting, the opera is also full of activity and doublings. Then follow four pages of cross-disciplinary portraiture: "Portrait of Gertrude Stein by Christian Bérard"(5), "Musical Portrait of Gertrude Stein by Virgil Thomson"(6), "Portrait of Virgil Thomson by Gertrude Stein"(7), "Portrait of Virgil Thomson by Christian Bérard", and "Portrait of Virgil Thomson by Kristains Tonny"(8). The scene as it is linked to conceived notions of representation is not, in fact, a mirror to the world but instead an invitation to the viewer/listener to take part in its processes. Instead of narrative coherence, the attempt at fixed reproduction of the sitter, the portrait offers "abundant action." The action is produced by the listener/ viewer's investment of association in the juxtapositions of fragmented

quotations before him or her. Each quotation plays on a received convention simply through its ability to evoke association, in repetition, and thus invites an expectation (desire) which is never satisfied but is instead transferred to the next fragment (displaced).

The program's emphasis on the portrait, the static spectacle constructing the subject, serves to introduce the audience to the main preoccupation of the opera, and brings into play the collaborators' various, but similar, attitudes towards representation in the portrait. Florine Stettheimer designed the sets, costumes and lighting for the opera, basically its "scene," and in her portraits, "the person — or better the persona — was composed of decor as much as of himself" (Tyler 55). Though her paintings are not cubist in style, Stettheimer's attitude towards portraiture is similar to the cubist incorporation of the figure with its surroundings. Similarly, the baroque excesses of set design, costumes and props are presented not as a background for the action to take place, but as extensions of character, or, on the other hand, character is a stage object like any other. The inner life of the character does not exist; instead, the elements of the construction of the performing subject are put into circulation on stage. For Virgil Thomson, musical portraiture was the epitome of his compositional method: "the discipline of spontaneity" (Thommasini x). The sitter for the portrait inspires the activity of composition. The portrait is not a representational medium but a compositional or improvisatory act. For Gertrude Stein, the portrait in language is removed from any sense of explicit representation, and once again, the activity of composition is foremost.

As Marjorie Perloff (among others) has suggested, Stein's approach to character is much like Picasso's approach to the portrait. Subjectivity is for Stein the performance of a collection of various intersecting and conflicting discourses. Like the cubists, Stein represents gendered subjectivity as a surface suspension of snippets or tokens of gender. The juxtaposition and fragmentation of these snippets creates the "characters" in *Four Saints*, and these characters, like a cubist portrait or collage, vibrate with disjunction. They shift planar relations and reorganize representative discourse. Just as Picasso's and Braque's portraits often merge their human subjects with their backgrounds, *Four Saints* resists the separation of identity or subjective discretion. And just as Picasso or Braque incorporated many "found" objects into their collages, the Stein/ Thomson collaboration allows for a cross-over between musical and linguistic discourses. Each becomes representative of a loose representation of gender, and each refers to the activity of the other.

The delineation of character is associated with differentiation, and, as we have seen, an oppositional notion of difference is systematically questioned

throughout this opera. Thus, even while characters are associated with distinct discursive positions, they are merged, fractured and repeated. The Prologue to Act One announces the divisions between saints in the libretto: “Four

The image shows a musical score for a chorus section. It features three staves: a Soprano staff at the top, a Chorus staff in the middle, and a Piano accompaniment staff at the bottom. The Soprano part has the lyrics "Four saints an op-er-a in three acts." and "My coun-try 'tis of thee sweet land of". The Chorus part has the lyrics "Saint saint saint saint." and "Saint saint saint." The Piano part includes dynamic markings like *p*, *f*, *pppp rit.*, and *p a tempo*. The music is in 3/2 time and shows a complex interplay of overlapping notes and rests between the vocal parts.

(fig. 1)

saints born in separate places” (19). However, the music, perhaps in conflict with the libretto, perhaps anticipating its later confusion of saints, undermines that division as Thomson set the repetition of “saint saint saint saint” in a two-part, overlapping chorus section (figure 1). The upper voices repeat “saint” four times, the first and last repetition having quarter-note values and the middle two having half-note values (the bar is in 3/2). The lower voices repeat “saint” three times in three straight half-notes. Thus, once again, the three interrupts the four (lower interrupts upper), blurring apparently clear distinction in articulation and in numbers, and the four interrupts the three in upsetting a metrically predictable line (3/2). The saints are not only blurred but split, Thomson having divided the part of Saint Teresa into two, playing on the line “how many are their halving” which is itself a pun playing on the opera’s continual expression of number anxiety (the characters repeatedly ask, “how many saints are there in it?”). This play between blurring subject distinctions and fragmenting the subject is contained in one of many puns: “Saint Teresa left in complete” (55). Thomson’s setting underlines the ambiguity of character or subject representation with the introduction of an eight-note rest between “in” and “complete”. The word is itself incomplete and yet by separating these two words, the alternative reading, that Saint Teresa is left in wholeness, is introduced. Saint Teresa as a representation is always left, there and not there, and in this state she is framed and constructed but also inevitably fragmented.

Four Saints does not have characters in the conventional sense, that is, as

motivators of a narrative line, but it does present figures on stage who carry consistent personas. These personas are more than names: the subtle associations of language and music offer readings of character, rather than delineations of it. Like the portraits in and out of the opera, character is a place of performative and dissociative invocations. Character is an active constellation rather than a fixed subject identity. In one of the more coherent moments of the libretto, Saint Ignatius describes a scene which depicts his character's vision of "place": "When three were together one woman sitting and seeing one man leading and choosing one young man saying and selling," and the chorus responds with the assessment: "This is just as if it was a tribe" (73). As the male character who subtly assumes a cultural authority throughout the opera, Saint Ignatius takes up a limiting position in relation to St. Teresa, whose gender and saint roles are more flexible: "In act 3 St. Ignatius, having failed to bend St. Teresa to his wishes or dominate her mystical visions, has withdrawn from this happily mixed company of queer saints, along with his exclusively male companions, and enforced the tragic divisions of gender separatism" (Blackmer 337). Here St. Ignatius offers his vision of a stable society. The vision is associated primarily with stability and fixity since it is set in clear sentence structure; that is, it offers a conventional narrative moment which, ironically, disrupts the bewildering free-play of the opera. Further, the stable society, the "tribe," is a clear statement of gender politics, or conventional gender roles: the woman silent and passive, the older man as social leader, the younger man speaking and moving the cultural apparatus along. But this statement of stability also carries the material of its own reinterpretation. It is a statement of Saint Ignatius's construction of social (patriarchal) order. That is, throughout *Four Saints*, the saint, though passive (seated), is the locus of creative activity (seeing), and within the context of the opera this passive/ active oscillation is the primary constituent of stage/saint culture. As well, the chorus's use of the conditional "as if" lacks the grammatically correct subjunctive ("it *was* a tribe"), inviting a collision of two states of being: the conditional and ephemeral, and the empirical and verified. This conflict both reinforces Saint Ignatius's statement of solidity and subverts it. Every self-reflexive or ambiguous, unstructured moment is a contradiction of the notion of cultural stability, and the contradiction here reveals itself to be a contradiction of patriarchal notions of cultural stability. The project of the opera is thus disruptive of Saint Ignatius's reasoning, as the stable is associated, through Saint Ignatius, with the patriarchal, authoritative, monologic voice/vision.

In his contrast in settings of St. Theresa's "arias" (for lack of a better word) and St. Ignatius's, Thomson adds his voice to this alternative dialogue. In his

setting of Stein's text, Thomson decided to split the character of St. Teresa into two parts (St. Teresa I and St. Teresa II). This division has the effect of increasing the dialogic nature of characterization, at least for St. Teresa, and adding to the libretto's overall ambiguous representation of subjectivity. With the St. Teresas, subjectivity is divided and multiple, and it is capable of a diversity of positions denied to conventional dramatic characters. In contrast, St. Ignatius's character is unified to the extent that he remains undivided in the setting and that his language and position in relation to St. Teresa is relatively monologic. Ignatius is associated in the opera not only with determined expressions of conventional gender relations, but also with pompous Latinate language. While Teresa's language tends to be simple and playful, Ignatius's is polysyllabic and grammatically tortuous. In his representation of a clearly established, traditional masculine or patriarchal persona, Ignatius's musical settings emphasize and add to the irony of his language. For the most part, the long and complex words of Ignatius's dialogue are set with reductive and repetitive chant rhythms, with little melodic variation, and accompanied by a low register chordal or bell accompaniment. The low register settings emphasize his gender associations while the chants and bells associate Ignatius with restrictive church solemnity. An example of this dialogue between music and text occurs at the end of the "Dance of Angels" in Act Two. Ignatius's dialogue pokes fun at pretentious, over-educated expression: "More needily of which more anon. Of which more which more. A saint to be met by and by by and by continue reading reading read read readily" (*Four Saints In Three Acts* 80). Thomson sets these words to a ponderous descending line in the voice accompanied by a held chord.

In contrast, Thomson provides the two St. Teresa's with a much more playful and melodic accompaniment generally. Their language, mostly monosyllabic, invites a more flexible rhythmic setting than Ignatius's and hence a greater melodic range. As well, Thomson associates the Teresa's with a self-reflexive musical motif, the third. Since they sing in duet often, their songs are set a third apart, and Thomson refers to the number play in Stein's dialogue with his musical setting. In the libretto, the chorus suggests, "sound them with the thirds and that" and "Saint Teresa made it be third" (*Four Saints* 44), and Thomson's setting of the two characters' songs emphasizes this very (third) quality of their dialogue. This self-reflexive gesture points to character as construct, and, moreover, to the role that musical discourses play in constructing character and gender relations. The duets between the Teresas, in their harmony (set a third apart), suggest a dialogue, but a merging dialogue. This quality of self-conscious slippage between separate-but-not characters takes on erotic overtones between the Teresas that are never suggested in the overt courting of Teresa by Ignatius.

In the tableau of the opera that Thomson designated as the “Love Scene” between the *commère* and *compère*, the Teresas follow the male-female couple and pick up on their arpeggiated motif. With the melody and its accompaniment in the upper register, the two women sing in relations of a third ending with the gentle cadence (also on a third, B-D#) on the words “nestle” (figure 2):

(fig. 2)

The gentle melodic accompaniment, the upper register setting and the self-reflexive emphasis on the “third” of the two-woman party, all contrast with Ignatius’s overdetermined masculinity. While these setting and characters are distinct, they are not reduced in the opera to a binary relation with one another. Instead, the division of the Teresas opens the dialogue to a “third” option, and though Ignatius may not ultimately be able to rise to the occasion, he does participate at least once in a trio with the women. In the end, however, Ignatius is “withdrew with withdrew” (*Four Saints* 97).

In *Four Saints in Three Acts*, collaboration adds differing interpretive dialogues since Gertrude Stein’s work provides a clear contrast in discourse with Virgil Thomson’s, even as each offers a support to the expression of the other. As well, the more conflicting dialogues, discourses, and subjectivities in the narrative, the more fragmented and variable it becomes. In their book on collaboration Andrea Lusford and Lisa Ede propose two alternative models for the collaborative project: the dialogic and the hierarchical. Though they do not suggest that these models are mutually exclusive or in binary opposition, they do privilege the dialogic as being productive of a fluid exchange of discourses,

ideas and roles. The participants in such projects generally “value the creative tension inherent in multivoiced and multivalent ventures” (133). This dialogic method allows for contradictions and conflicts between positions, as well as an interdisciplinary approach to the material, but the contradictions need to be valued and celebrated if authority is not to be a unitary act of power: “in a transformed context, collaborative writing and the pragmatic necessity to use it well will tend, we believe, necessarily to foreground issues of power, ideology and difference” (138). Since the collaborative relationships under discussion here are specifically interdisciplinary, this text inevitably invites a comparison of composer and writer as well as modes of expression. *Four Saints in Three Acts* invites a critique of disciplinary boundaries, by means of a dialogic collaboration, that crosses over into an ideological critique and questions the power relations implicit in diverse forms of representation and exchange.

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