Ethel Smyth, Thirza, and Mrs Waters:
Working Out a Model of Feminine Independence

> "The exact worth of my music will probably not be known until naught remains of the writer but sexless dots and lines on ruled paper . . . but if something of the immense savour of life that hope deferred has been powerless to mar; if the sense of freedom, detachment, and serenity that floods the heart when, suddenly, mysteriously, the wretched backwater of a personal fate is swept out of the shallows and becomes part of the main current of human experience; if even a modicum of all this gets into an artist's work, that work was worth doing. And should the ears of others, whether now or after my death, catch a faint echo of some such spirit in my music, then all is well, and more than well" (Wood 1983: 137, conclusion to *A Final Burning of Boats*).

This paper will focus on how the life experiences of Ethel Smyth influenced the construction of the female characters in two of her operas, *The Wreckers* (1903-4), which was written prior to the two years she dedicated to the Women's Suffrage Movement, and *The Boatswain's Mate* (1913-14), which was written immediately after. I will begin by looking briefly at her experiences as a woman in a man's field. I will then turn to an analysis of the female characters in terms of how their personalities and the situations they faced were part of Smyth's effort to create a new definition of womanhood.

Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) was born in London to a middle class military family. She received the usual inadequate education given to daughters, including piano instruction geared toward amateur performance--and catching a husband. At 12, she decided to devote her life to music. Her aspirations were not encouraged. At 19, she again announced her intention of studying in Leipzig. When it became clear that she was serious about it, she met fierce opposition from her parents, who considered the life of an artist to be the equivalent to "going on the streets" as a prostitute. In 1877, after Smyth refused to leave her room for any reason for a length of time, her father finally consented to let her go to Leipzig and study. She later wrote that she thought part of his reluctance was due to his hesitance to spend money on an unmarried daughter, who might be a failure and a continuous financial drain on him because of not being able to find a husband (Smyth 1987: 49).

Smyth spent most of the next 13 years in Germany, first as a student, and then as a professional musician. She found life in Germany increasingly difficult as a woman living alone; finally her gender precipitated the first real crisis of her life. In 1889, she was unable to find lodgings in Berlin. Respectable women were supposed to rent apartments--not rooms--and were expected to retain servants. The social understanding was that only prostitutes rent rooms. Because her budget did not allow for the extra expense, she had no place to live. She was evicted from her first lodgings after the landlord discovered she was a single woman. Already physically ill, she was forced to moved from one place to another, each noisier and less conducive to work than the last. Finally, ill and defeated and resigned to a life of sacrificing all she held dear--namely music--she returned home in early 1890. Her new impulse towards self-sacrifice found expression in the Mass. This crisis proved to be a turning point in her career since it pointed her in the direction of the large-scale dramatic works with which she had the most success.

Smyth finally acquired her own home in 1894 as a result of a friend's generosity. In 1895, after the death of his wife and of her father, she consummated her long-term relationship with Harry Brewster, her only close male friend; however, she refused to marry him because she felt it would interfere with her career. Their friendship dated back to her early days in Leipzig and he played an important role in broadening her cultural horizons to include non-Germanic influences.

Smyth had numerous passionate attachments with women, some of which were overtly sexual, but in general she seemed to be attracted to older women who did not feel it moral to reciprocate.

As a woman composer she often faced conductors and institutions unwilling to listen or give her a chance. During her struggle to arrange German performances of *Der Wald* (1899-1901), her second opera, she wrote to Brewster, "I feel I must fight for *Der Wald* also because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea. Now I am neither afraid nor a pauper, and in my way I am an explorer who believes supremely in this bit of pioneering" (White 1951: 129). The opera was finally performed in 1902 in Berlin, and went on to be the first opera by a woman composer to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

In 1903-4 she wrote *The Wreckers* on a libretto by Brewster. The story was based on her experience of visiting smuggler's caves on the coasts of Cornwall. Brewster wrote the libretto in French; Smyth agreed to this because it was expected that the next director of Covent Garden would be the Frenchman André Messager and the language would facilitate a performance there. This did not come through. In 1906 performances were arranged for Leipzig, but the conductor made unauthorized cuts, which he refused to restore, so Smyth took the scores and parts off the musician's stands before the second performance and left town.

In 1908, shortly after the first British performance of *The Wreckers*, Brewster died. Smyth describes herself as being "rudderless" without him. Not only a friend and a financial supporter, he had also had a hand in the librettos and performances of all of her operas to date. She left England for the Continent to recuperate and also to escape the claims of the Suffragists: "I left England in 1908 to find a refuge from the turmoil of the fight for Votes for Women. . . As a composer I wanted to keep out of it. It seemed to me incompatible with artistic creation" (Abromeit 1989: 205). She also wrote that she had "always been deficient in group sense," which is a common feeling in women who are successful in traditionally male fields (Heilbrun 1979: 38-39).

In 1910 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Durham. Shortly thereafter she received a letter from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) "as was their habit when any woman received a distinction" asking her what her "views were on the Suffrage in general and militancy in particular" (Smyth 1987: 293). Her initial thought was to answer sarcastically, but because her travelling companion spoke highly of Emmeline Pankhurst, co-founder of the WSPU, she went to a meeting to hear her speak. "Before a fortnight had passed it became evident to me that to keep out of the movement, to withhold any modicum it was possible to contribute to that cause, was as unthinkable as to drive art and politics in double harness. At the moment I was deep in certain musical undertakings. These liquidated, I decided that two years should be given to the WSPU after which, reversing engines, I would go back to my job" (Smyth 1987: 294).

During her involvement she wrote "The March of the Women" and other directly feminist songs. She became intensely personally involved with Emmeline Pankhurst. She also spent three weeks (of a two-month sentence) in jail for throwing a brick through the window of a Cabinet Minister as part of an organized protest.

After her "tour of duty" was up, she left for Cairo to work on *The Boatswain's Mate*, based on a short story by William Wymark Jacobs. She was attracted to the independent-minded heroine, who may be modelled on Pankhurst in her libretto. Upon completion of the opera, she made arrangements for simultaneous performances of this work and of *The Wreckers* at two different opera houses in Germany, but WWI intervened. She began her prose writing career

during the war with her first volume of memoirs, *Impressions That Remained* (1981). After the war, her professional career picked up, and by the 1920s she was successfully conducting her own pieces internationally. It seems that her acceptance as a conductor was made possible in part by the social changes brought about by the Suffrage Movement. In 1922 she was made a Dame of the British Empire.

Smyth had begun to lose her hearing in 1913. Her last major work, The Prison, a symphony with soloists and chorus based on writings of Henry Brewster, dates from 1929-30. After this point, her hearing was so bad that she was unable to compose any more; however she continued to write prose until her death in 1944.

In her prose writings Smyth often wrote about women, incorporating sketches of individual friends and comments on women in general and their position in society. Throughout her life, women were her primary source of both financial and emotional support. It seems, however, that her early views of women in general are very stereotypical. In 1895 she writes of the "one fundamental instinct of womanhood, the tendril-like instinct" (St. John 1959: 72). She talks of women's ladylike daintiness, the "peculiar understanding, mothering quality" of their affection (Smyth 1987: 114), and their being "readier to spend and be spent emotionally than men" because their emotions are "nearer the surface" (Ibid: 340). She also accepts the traditional view that married women should think first of their husbands and children (Neuls Bates 1982: 165). But even in accepting stereotypical gender characteristics, she is bothered by the position of powerlessness women are forced to occupy in a world run by men: "I saw good, brave women obliged because of their sex to give way before dullness, foolishness or brutality" (Smyth 1987: 113-114).

Her experiences in the Women's Suffrage Movement, and in particular the time she spent in Hollingsworth prison with Suffragist women from all classes does seem to affect her view of women in general. Traits she had hitherto ascribed only to individual women she now perceived in women as a group. "I had always thought the worlds of women, but now I saw they were even bigger, more wonderful, than I had ever dreamed, that there were untapped reservoirs of faith and heroism, of *depth* in short, that surprised even me. . . . More than a hundred women parked together, old and young, rich and poor, strong and delicate . . . forgetful of everything save the cause for which they had faced imprisonment" (St. John: 155).

I will now turn to an analysis of the women characters in the two operas and relate them Smyth's life.

The Wreckers

This opera is set in a Cornish village of "wreckers," that is, people who make their living off of shipwrecks. They "help" nature by extinguishing lighthouse lights or by putting lights in the wrong places. It is a very religious community; they view themselves as God's chosen people and see their destruction of the ungodly as a virtuous act.

The story centers on Thirza, the young wife of Pascoe, an older man who is the headman and preacher. She is an outsider and detests the villagers' way of life. At her instigation, her young lover Mark has been putting bonfires on the rocks to warn ships of danger. Avis, the young daughter of the lighthouse keeper is in love with Mark, but realizes that he loves Thirza. Avis accuses Pascoe of lighting the fires, thinking that his downfall will destroy Thirza (also she is angry at Pascoe for chiding her for using "ungodly" jewelry). She says the ultimate blame is Thirza's, because lust for her has caused Pascoe to betray his people.

The men form search parties to verify that Pascoe is the one. Thirza overhears part of the conversation, and goes out to warn Mark not to light the fire tonight. They sing of their unrequited love with love/death imagery. Mark persuades the reluctant, fearful Thirza to agree to run away with him. They light the beacon. Pascoe sees their embrace from the cliff above. After they leave, he comes down and faints near the fire, where he is discovered by the others.

In the early morning hours the community holds a trial in a cave that floods at high tide. Pascoe refuses to speak, so they assume his guilt and sentence him to death. To prevent this outcome, Mark steps forward and confesses. Thirza has entered, unnoticed, and affirms Mark's words, accepting the responsibility as her own. Avis swears it is not Mark, that he spent the night in her arms. Thirza and Mark sing of their love, and Avis cries out for their deaths, for which she is banished by her father. Jack, who has loved and been scorned or used by Avis throughout the opera, follows her. Thirza and Mark are sentenced to die locked in the cave. Pascoe tries to save Thirza's life, but is overruled by the community. After they are left alone, Thirza and Mark rejoice in their unity in love/death in the embrace of the sea.

Smyth's inspiration for the opera came from a trip to the smuggler's caves in the Scilly Isles in 1886. When she was preparing to write her third opera she asked Brewster to write the libretto based on her idea of "two lovers who, by kindling secret beacons, endeavoured to counteract the savage policy of the community; the woman impelled by humanity, and perhaps hoping that her action might palliate her unfaithfulness to her husband, her lover because for her sake he was ready to take any risk" (Smyth 1987: 260).

When she received the libretto, she was initially shocked. "His story was so devoid of conventional morality that some timid spirit wanted me to persuade him to soften things down a little; for instance to let the heroine, wife of the aged preacher Pascoe (who after all adored her, and had been indulgent to her), express remorse for having yielded to her lover, and even mention Pascoe's wrecking proclivities as explaining her aversion to him! But Harry would not hear of it. 'Of course she hated Pascoe,' he cried; 'never mind about his being the leader of the Wreckers, and whether all that is or is not an excuse. *He was old and amorous*, and she was young and madly in love with Mark; that's all there is to it!'" (Ibid: 261).

After she agreed to Brewster's interpretation, a French friend of his "hazarded the conjecture that it is perhaps the job of some creative women of these later days to sweep once for all into the dustbin the old-fashioned darling of the gallery--the heroine made of timidity, purity and pounded sugar. This had not occurred to me when H and I were discussing the character of Thirza, but I have nothing against it!" (Ibid: 261).

Later she states that she is struck by how each person thinks he is *"doing right* : [italics hers] the Wreckers in wrecking; Thirza, Pascoe's wife, in trying to save their victims and using Mark's passion to make him turn traitor to his clan; Avis, her young rival, who is willing to blast her own reputation and even risk death in a wild attempt to save Mark's life; her father in casting her off as one lost beyond hope of redemption, and so on" (Ibid: 261).

My initial reactions to this libretto were that the female characters were disappointingly stereotypical. Neither woman seems to care about the community or humanity; they are both too wrapped up in their individual concerns. Both are motivated primarily by love--or by love scorned, in the case of Avis.

Avis is the typical operatic jealous woman who destroys her ex-lover and his new love out of personal revenge. She uses--and scorns--Jack, the man who loves her, to prevent another woman from getting the man that she loves who does not love her. In the end she loses her family and community; everything but the love of a man she does not love.

Thirza seems to be another Isolde, all for love and the epitome of passivity. References in Act III imply that she was rescued from a shipwreck and nursed back to health by Mark, yet she apparently passively accepted her marriage to Pascoe, a man she did not love. She accepts the villagers' shunning of her; she initially begs Mark not to leave Cornwall, not to leave her, although she eventually accepts his decision to leave. She is too timid to consider options herself, and can only consider leaving if Mark takes her. It is only at the very end that she acts of her own volition, choosing death with Mark over the return to her old life that is offered by Pascoe. And choosing death is itself a resignation.

Thirza can be seen as the traditional "femme fatale" who wrecks men's lives by causing them to love her inordinately. She ruins her husband, Pascoe, who at the end cries "Love and honor are lost." Even though he is a wrecker, he seems heroic in his willingness to sacrifice his life--and his honor as minister and leader of the community--to save her by accepting the blame for the bonfires. Thirza ruins Mark by leading him into an adulterous affair which makes him decide to betray his community. She turns him aside from his earlier lover for Avis, who is his appropriate match because of age, marital status, and position in the community. He is heroic in his decision to light the beacons, risking punishment by death; in his decision to leave his home rather than return to life as a wrecker; and in his acceptance of guilt and death to save the innocent Pascoe.

After this initial disappointing reading, I started to look at Smyth's comments about the opera and other topics. I began to see that my original reading, while it may be true to my time, is not true to her perception of what she was portraying. At first I was disturbed that she accepted Brewster's reading of Thirza as being "all for love." From my perspective, that makes her passive and not self-determining. It is not, for me, a sufficient motive. I want her to be motivated by moral outrage; I want her to be outwardly directed; a strong woman not dependent on a man. And yet, I began to realize that the sexual freedom exemplified by Thirza's "all for love" is a kind of liberation that Smyth herself--and many other women at the time--was in need of, especially because of its direct relation to sexuality.

Smyth writes, shortly after the consummation of her relationship with Brewster, that "according to my own ideas I was no longer in the running" for marriage proposals. (Smyth 1987: 214). In 1895 she believed, as she had been taught to believe, that women ought to be chaste virgins at marriage. During this period, it was denied that women could feel sexual desire. Queen Victoria, her sovereign and sometimes patron did not believe in the possibility of female homosexuality. Smyth often felt obligated to write about her lesbian sexuality in subtle, round-about ways (Wood 1993: 165). In this context of denied or subverted female sexuality, Thirza can be read as a way for Smyth to work out her acceptance of her own strong sexual desires. As proposed by Citron, she "may have modeled the heroine, courageous and willing to defy conventional morality, on Wagner's Isolde as well as on herself " (Citron 1991:138).

I think it is also important that Thirza is a married woman who puts herself first in her choice to enjoy Mark's love. She looks outside her loveless marriage to find the emotional sustenance she needs, rather than sacrificing herself and her own needs for her husband, which Smyth, in 1895, thought wives ought to do. In the end Thirza accepts the punishment of death for her transgressions, but this acceptance of death can also be seen as a moment of illumination in which she realizes that truth and love are more important than life under the constraints of this community.

The opera ends with the two lovers alone in a cave. Wood comments that "the cave engulfed by water is also a female symbol of the womb as sanctuary and as a seal of sexuality"

(Wood 1987: 496). The moment of death becomes also a moment, in a sense, of sexual fulfillment and spiritual union. Their last cry is "Our last ecstacy, thy embrace, oh sea."

The Boatswain's Mate

The opera begins with bantering between Mary Ann, a servant girl, and Harry Benn, ex-Boatswain and a regular at Mrs. Waters' tavern. Mary Ann is vociferously anti-men and anti-marriage. After Mary Ann leaves to visit her mother, Benn begins to try to persuade Mrs. Waters to marry him. She refuses for the umpteenth time. Mrs. Waters runs off on an errand, leaving Benn to mind the tavern. Ned Travers, unemployed ex-Soldier, comes in for a drink. After the two men get to talking, Benn reveals his unrequited love for Mrs. Waters. It occurs to him that if he can scare her while she's alone in the house at night, she will realize that she needs a man about the place to protect her. He convinces Travers to pretend to burgle the tavern for a small sum of money--and a written contract in case something untoward happens.

In the middle of the night, Travers tiptoes into the house. Benn is waiting in the garden for Mrs. Waters' scream, so that he will know when to come to her rescue. Instead, she traps Travers in a cupboard at gunpoint. Travers reveals all, and she lets him out. Once he is out, they are both struck by each other's youthfulness and attractiveness and fall for each other. Mrs. Waters asks Travers to help her get revenge on Benn. She fires a shot, then runs down the stairs screaming. When Benn comes in, she tells him she has just killed a burglar. He is, of course, aghast. She tells him to dig a grave because she doesn't want anyone to know--after all, her house could get a bad reputation. He thinks she's gone mad. After he staggers out, he runs into a policeman, to whom he tells the story. He and the policeman return, and she explains that Benn has been drinking too much. She presents Travers, who she says she has hired to do some odd jobs. She then chases Benn and the policeman away.

Travers and Mrs. Waters, now alone, begin to be self-conscious with each other. She fixes him a nice breakfast, thinking about how he'll like her homemade jam. He asks her to marry him because he's been so impressed with her cool-headedness. She says she will think about it. He plans to come by and visit that night. He leaves. As she is daydreaming about how it's not too late and she's not too old to fall in love, she begins to dance around the room. Mary Ann enters and begins to mimic her. She sees Mary Ann, and runs upstairs, stopping on the way to "menace" Travers who is standing outside the window laughing.

Smyth decided to write this comic opera after her two-year stint in the Women's Suffrage Movement. She felt she was not ready to write another tragic opera, and chose the story by W.W. Jacobs because she liked the independent woman character. Although the opera does not deal with the serious issues of the vote or other rights for women, there are several significant differences between the original story and her libretto which reveal her feminist consciousness. For example, the absence of the servant girl is merely mentioned in he original story. Smyth's inclusion of Mary Ann provides her a mouthpiece to express radical anti-male sentiments. The policeman is a totally new character, and Mrs. Waters' vanquishment of him echoes the experiences of the Suffragists, who frequently outsmarted the Police.

The original story begins with a brief rejection scene between Mrs. Waters and Benn followed by Benn's leaving and running into Travers. The most extensive part of the story involves their working out the plot to "catch" Mrs. Travers. We learn much more about their motivations and characters than we do about Mrs. Waters, of whom we know only that she has rejected Benn. In Smyth's libretto, however, Mrs. Waters is much more central. She is onstage almost the entire time and is presented as resourceful and independent, as not needing a man to protect her or complete her--and as being rather disillusioned with men in general. Smyth also evokes feminism by quoting her feminist choruses "March of the Women" and "1910" in the Overture.

According to Collis, Smyth "declared the story reflected her suffragette experiences and views, but this is true only in the most attenuated and indirect sense. Both the men are ridiculous and the woman is reminiscent of one of Emmeline's personal bodyguard, handy with gun or indian club as the case required. There is nothing of politics, votes for women, the wrongs and injustices suffered by women, or any other serious topic" (Collis 1984: 135). Smyth conceives of the work differently. In a letter to Pankhurst she writes, "(my work) amuses me greatly and I am bringing in all sorts of little aspects of the male in my couplets which will please C(hristabel). . . . Making the boatswain a typical instance of fatuousness and, of course, Mrs. Waters the reverse" (Ibid: 135). She is clearly enjoying the prospect of making fun of the male characters--seeing some of the dull, foolish, brutes forced to give way before the good, brave woman who usually has to give way before them (see p. 6 above).

Wood asserts that "Mrs. Waters is a strong, independent woman, modeled on Mrs. Pankhurst herself; she outwits and ridicules the three male characters (appropriately, a policeman, a sailor, and a soldier) (Wood 1983: 130). She asks whether the ambiguous ending--in which it is not clear whether she is contemplating marriage--is a "mean form of revenge on an aloof, formidable Mrs. Pankhurst whose relationship with Smyth ended in argument and distrust?" (Wood 1987: 497).

My own initial reaction to the libretto was disappointment that Mrs. Waters, who is so wonderfully self-reliant, seems at the end so ready to marry Travers--only a marginally better bargain than Benn. It also bothered me that Mrs. Waters' opposition to marriage is entirely based on the personal experience of disillusionment in her first marriage, rather than any philosophical premise. Mary Ann's more philosophical opposition is marginalized since she appears only briefly and the beginning and end.

Again, I tried to look at it from Smyth's perspective. This is the first opera she wrote after the death of Brewster--and the first written without his involvement. His loss was quite a blow to her. As late as 1932 she writes "no woman was ever so understood, so looked after, had such treasures of help and wisdom and kindness and warmth put at her disposal" (Collis 1984: 92). In

view of this relationship, it is possible to see that marriage for Mrs. Waters doesn't need to mean the end of her independence.

There are aspects of her choice of Travers over Benn that also seem important. Travers is impressed with her as a self-reliant, cool-headed individual; Benn, on the other hand, sings an aria about how he really prefers women who are soft and little and will flatter and coax. Benn seems to have "chosen" Mrs. Waters primarily because he's interested in becoming landlord of the establishment. He doesn't know her well enough to understand why his savings don't attract her. Mrs. Waters' chooses Travers because he admires her for who she is. Her choice would certainly be disapproved of by society--Travers is a homeless, unemployed ex-Soldier, with no money. The question of who is choosing is important.

I think it is also significant that presenting two female characters on the same side--opposed to marriage--yet very different in their reasons and outlooks on life, provides a way for more women to relate to the sentiment. Radical feminists can cheer on Mary Ann; women who have had the experience of unhappy marriages can relate to Mrs. Waters' "once burnt, twice shy." The opera suggests that even women who are in favor of marriage, as ultimately Mrs. Waters is, are injured by the way it is worked out in a patriarchal society.

Conclusions

When I began to write this paper, I expected to find echoes of Smyth's feminism in her treatment of her women characters. I also expected to see a big difference between the characters in an opera written before and one written after her involvement in the Women's Suffrage movement. What I found instead is that the characters represent a continuum in a process of development reflected not only in the characters but also in her personal life. I found that the issues in her characters' lives--their sexuality, their independence, their attempts to be women in a man's world--were also issues in her personal life. Working through the problems in her characters' lives provided a way to understand them in her own life, and vice versa.

Women writers have sometimes been faulted with failure of imagination because their female characters' lives have not been as remarkable as their own; their characters have not exhibited the same degree of independence their creators possessed (Heilbrun: 71-73). I am not sure I agree that this is due to failure of imagination. I believe that these more traditional female characters provide a way for their creators to work out the conflicts between their inner dreams and the external reality of living with a patriarchal society. It may also be that the struggle to not conform as an individual is as much--or more--as can be expected of any artist in a situation where nonconformity can mean not being heard.

I think Smyth uses the female characters in her operas to struggle with her own questions about feminine identity. Questions about a woman's right to "own" her sexual desire are clearly dealt with in the case of Thirza. I think they can also be seen in the case of Mrs. Waters, whose most lyrical moments are soliquoys dreaming about love. When Mrs. Waters and Travers first face each other, there is a long sequence of parallel soliquoys in which they talk about their physical appearance--and Mrs. Waters is very aware of being underdressed and of being attracted to Travers.

Another theme is the problem of how to work out relationships with men, which Smyth repeatedly referred to as "the eternal sex problem between men and women" (Wood 1987: 500, from *As Time Went On*). Both Thirza and Mrs. Waters attempt to choose their own lover. Thirza defies the moral strictures of the marriage bond in encouraging Mark. Mrs. Waters chooses the

man society would deem less appropriate because of his socioeconomic status. Both Mark and Travers love the women for who they are, not for what they represent (youth, beauty, property). This epitomizes the key factor in Smyth's successful relationship with Brewster--his acceptance of her as she was: bisexual, independent, and unwilling to marry.

Virginia Woolf, a close friend of Smyth's in the decade before Woolf's death, calls Smyth, like Thirza in her opera, a "wrecker." She sees Smyth wrecking the gender barriers to women's participation in traditionally male fields. "She drew the enemies' fire and left behind her a pathway. . . . She smashed, and broke, and toiled, and drew upon herself hostility and ridicule in order that it might not be wicked . . . or disgraceful for women now . . . who come after her" (Wood 1983: 125, final draft of speech given 1/21/31).

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