

## Disembodied Identity. Patriotism, Gender, and Homosexuality in Francis Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*

In the final months of the Second World War, Francis Poulenc completed his first opera at his rural home in Noizay. The opera, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, was adapted from Guillaume Apollinaire's farcical play, which was written in 1903, but revised and premiered in 1917. For many, Apollinaire's play seemed a strange choice for a libretto; critics and scholars have questioned why Poulenc chose to set the text as well as how he set it since the opera's 1947 premiere. After the premiere, the critic Fred Goldbeck asked in «Le Figaro Littéraire»: «Comment Francis Poulenc, cet homme de goût, a-t-il pu, pour un opéra-bouffe, choisir ce texte, et, de mai à octobre 1944 – autour du 6 juin et du 20 août – s'amuser et se concentrer devant ce livret?». <sup>1</sup> Poulenc publicly emphasized the carefree, joyous side of the work, recalling in 1954: «Ayant chanté ma soif d'espérance dans *Figure humaine*, en 1943, j'estime que j'avais bien le droit de célébrer l'allégresse de la liberté retrouvée avec une œuvre un peu folle écrite». <sup>2</sup>

*Les Mamelles de Tirésias* seemed a still stranger choice in the context of the works Poulenc had written in previous years. Since 1936, his style had become more serious, as he turned to sacred music and large scale works like the *Concerto for Organ in G major* (1938) in an attempt to establish his reputation as a serious composer. Though some works from the early years of the German Occupation exhibit a light-hearted tone, by the time he began working in earnest on *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in 1944 Poulenc was writing in a serious style

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<sup>1</sup> «How could Francis Poulenc, that man of taste, choose this text for an *opéra-bouffe* and, between May and October of 1944 – around the time of June 6 and August 20 – enjoy himself and concentrate on the libretto?», FRED GOLDBECK, *Poulenc et Tirésias à l'Opéra-Comique*, «Le Figaro Littéraire», June 14, 1947, p. 5. June 6, 1944 was D-Day, while August 20 was the date of several massacres in France during the German retreat. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> «Having sung my desire for hope in *Figure humaine* in 1943, I believe I had the right to celebrate the joy of rediscovered liberty with a work written a little wildly», FRANCIS POULENC, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand*, Paris, Julliard, 1954, p. 146.

inspired by Enlightenment and humanist values, of which *Figure humaine* (1943) is the representative example.<sup>3</sup> The openly resistant text of *Figure humaine* along with its frank depiction of the realities of life in occupied France reflects the extent to which Poulenc had begun to penetrate the gravity of life under German occupation.

The apparent contradiction between Poulenc's life and work in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* can be explained through an examination of the fundamental personal and political issues at stake for him in the outwardly silly plot of the opera. Scholars and critics have previously noted the radical treatment of gender in the opera; Wilfrid Mellers and Richard D. E. Burton both note the political relevance of the inversion of gender norms in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, although both frame the opera as a light-hearted sigh of relief following the war.<sup>4</sup> In a 1944 letter to Pierre Bernac, however, Poulenc wrote: «Quand je songe que Noizay est si totalement intact<sup>5</sup> je me sens un peu honteux. J'espère que *Figure humaine* et *Les Mamelles* seront un tribut de Français suffisant»,<sup>6</sup> thereby presenting *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* alongside *Figure humaine*, each a different expressions of his patriotism. A deeper evaluation of the opera reveals that Poulenc's conception of the work stems from its relevance to important political and personal subjects which took on particular importance for him in the context of the Second World War.

Specifically, I claim that *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* allowed Poulenc to raise two issues on the stage of the Opéra-Comique. On a national level, the opera related to the widely discussed issue of depopulation that many viewed to be at the root of France's decline in power. On a personal level, however, the opera allowed Poulenc to publicly examine identity, gender, and sexuality in a suitably ambiguous way to protect him from exposing his sexuality for public comment. Relying on the conception of the homosexual composer's relationship with an oppressive social climate as conceived of by Lloyd Whitesell in *Britten's Dubious Trysts*, I will argue that the sexuality inherent in the plot finds further expression

<sup>3</sup> See JANE F. FULCHER, *From Hybrid to Metamorphosis: Poulenc's Path toward Symbolic Resistance and Counter-Discourse during Vichy*, in *Verwandlungsmusik: Über komponierte Transfigurationen*, ed. Andreas Dorschel, Wien [etc.], Universal Edition, 2007, pp. 432-484; LESLIE A. SPROUT, *Music for a "New Era": Composers and National Identity in France*, PhD Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 2000, pp. 306-315.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. WILFRID MELLERS, *Francis Poulenc*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 98-99; RICHARD D. E. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, Bath, Absolute Press, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Poulenc refers here to the fact that his home commune of Noizay was left relatively unscathed by the military campaigns at the beginning and end of the Second World War.

<sup>6</sup> FRANCIS POULENC, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, réunie, choisie, présenté et annoté par Myriam Chimènes, Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 574 («When I think that Noizay is so totally untouched I feel almost ashamed. I hope that *Figure humaine* and *Les Mamelles* will prove a sufficient tribute from a Frenchman», FRANCIS POULENC, «*Echo and Source*»: *Selected Correspondence 1915-1963*, trans. and ed. Sidney Buckland, London, Victor Gollancz, 1991, p. 143).

and development through Poulenc's musical setting.<sup>7</sup> The two core issues explored in this paper, depopulation and homosexuality, were deeply linked in French society, since concerns about depopulation had long been a driving force behind the stigmatization of homosexuality in France. Given the increased persecution of homosexuality during Vichy, I finally claim that Poulenc's combination of a patriotic message towards depopulation and a relatively open exploration of sexuality in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* constituted a subtle but significant response to the dominant discourse on homosexuality of his time.

In order to understand Poulenc's decision to write *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, one must first look to the context of the political issues explored in Apollinaire's play. The most prominent of these issues, natalism, or the ideology of those who advocated for measures to increase France's population, can be seen to stem from larger concerns about the decadence and degeneration of European culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These concerns were famously expressed in Max Nordau's widely distributed denunciation of modernist decadence, *Degeneration* (1892, published in a French translation in 1894), which singled out *fin-de-siècle* Paris as a central location in the perceived degeneration of traditional values.<sup>8</sup> These views held significant sway in France, where concerns about the degeneration of rural family life resonated strongly with the fear that its low birthrate was sapping the nation of its strength. Natalism was discussed particularly widely in France following the First World War, when France had lost 1.3 million young men in combat and in the following decades advocates known as *natalistes* took aim at a variety of cultural forces that they believed to threaten France's future existence.<sup>9</sup> The conservatives among the natalists argued that abortion, contraception, feminism<sup>10</sup> and homosexuality<sup>11</sup> were among the most significant causes of France's depopulation problem; for these groups, these societal problems stemmed from the deterioration of traditional gender roles in French society – a loss of national virility. It was at this time that mainstream politicians

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. LLOYD WHITESSELL, *Britten's Dubious Trysts*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», LVI, 3 (2003), pp. 637-694.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MAX NORDAU, *Degeneration*, New York, Appleton, 1895 (orig. ed. *Entartung*, Berlin, C. Duncker, 1893<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>9</sup> See MARTHA HANNA, *Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over Corydon*, in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey W. Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan jr., New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> See MARY LOUISE ROBERTS, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 120-148.

<sup>11</sup> See M. HANNA, *Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over Corydon*, cit., p. 204.

and social commentators including Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau brought the issue into the national spotlight.<sup>12</sup>

The issue of depopulation rose to particular prominence again in 1940. Many blamed France's rapid defeat in the Second World War on the failure of its people to reproduce during the interwar years, and the Vichy regime used France's declining birthrate as a symbol of the moral decline of French culture during the Third Republic, the central national problem which traditionalists in the regime sought to counteract. As part of an attempt to return to a more traditionally rooted culture, these factions of Vichy instituted new regulations on divorce, homosexuality, and abortion, using the image of a pregnant, barefoot mother tending her home as their symbol of ideal family life. Antony Copley argues that a resurgence of Catholicism during Vichy also increased pressure on men and women alike to follow traditional gender roles.<sup>13</sup>

The prominence of conservative natalism has sometimes resulted in the belief that it was a largely traditionalist cause, but even if this was often the case Vichy's restrictive measures were far from the only solutions proposed for the problem. Concern for France's depopulation was a national issue, which found resonance among cultural groups with a variety of cultural and political backgrounds, particularly in the context of the nationalist fervor during the First World War. A central impetus behind Guillaume Apollinaire's 1917 production of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, despite the fanciful elements of its story, was its engagement with the issue of depopulation in a way that directly counteracted the conservative narrative around the issue. In *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Thérèse, whom Apollinaire modeled after the male Greek mythological figure Tiresias, chooses to disavow her gender. Just as the mythical Tiresias transformed into a woman, Thérèse discards her femininity and transforms into a man, leaving behind the responsibility of bearing children. She then disappears to take advantage of the rights and responsibilities afforded by her new gender, becoming a warrior in the army. Her anonymous husband responds to her departure by taking over the role of reproduction, artificially producing 40,049 babies in a single day. In the end, Thérèse and the husband are reunited, having chastised the citizens of Zanzibar, where the play is set, for being «chaste» and «no longer willing to give birth to infants», and promising fame and fortune to those who have earned them by producing children.<sup>14</sup> In the

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<sup>12</sup> See M. L. ROBERTS, *Civilization without Sexes*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. ANTONY COPLEY, *Sexual Moralities in France, 1780-1980*, New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 204.

guise of a fortune teller, Thérèse further predicts that those who do not produce children will die in disgrace.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the exaggerated, farcical tone of the plot, Apollinaire's commentary in the preface to the published edition version demonstrates his intended political message. Apollinaire wrote that the drama «Il a également pour but de mettre en relief une question vitale pour ceux qui entendent la langue dans laquelle il est écrit: le problème de la repopulation».<sup>16</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, given the tone of the play itself, Apollinaire elaborated,

le sujet est si émouvant à mon avis, qu'il permet même que l'on donne au mot drame son sens le plus tragique; mais il tient aux Français que, s'ils se remettent à faire des enfants, l'ouvrage puisse être appelé, désormais, une farce. Rien ne saurait me causer une joie aussi patriotique.<sup>17</sup>

Apollinaire considered the issue of depopulation so grave that he couldn't consider the work a farce, but identified an entirely separate cause for France's depopulation than those highlighted by the conservative natalists. He did not blame the moral degeneration of French culture, but rather the decline of «Amour fécond» («fertile love») in French society, and he proposed practical changes to help resolve the problem in the preface.<sup>18</sup> For instance, he argued that the marriage process should be made simpler, a position distinctly at odds with those who saw divorce as a major cause of France's depopulation problem. Peter Read has connected Apollinaire's preface to his other social commentary, which sometimes came from an anarchist or feminist point of view.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the 1917 première of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* – which the young Poulenc attended – Apollinaire's pro-reproduction message, though tinged with irony, was clear.

Poulenc adapted Apollinaire's text with relatively few changes, leaving the theme of repopulation abundantly present; if anything, he further emphasized the message by bringing the story closer to home for French audiences. Apollinaire set the play on the

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<sup>14</sup> «Chastes citoyens de Zanzibar / Qui ne faites plus d'enfants», GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE, *Œuvres poétiques*, éd. Marcel Adéma et Michel Décaudin, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p. 910 (English transl. GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE, *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*, transl. Maya Slater, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 203).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 911 (*ivi*, p. 204).

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, p. 866 («it aims to give prominence to a vital question for everyone who understands the language in which it is written: the problem of repopulation», *ivi*, p. 154).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem* («In my opinion, the subject is so moving that it even allows the word 'drama' to be given its most tragic sense; but if the French start having children again, the work could be called a farce from then on: it is up to them. Nothing could bring me greater patriotic pleasure»).

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 868.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. PETER READ, *Apollinaire et "Les Mamelles de Tirésias": La revanche d'Éros*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000, p. 163.

distant, exotic island of Zanzibar, but in one of Poulenc's only major changes to the plot he changed the setting to a fictional town called Zanzibar situated on the French Riviera,<sup>20</sup> which he considered «rather tropical» enough for his taste.<sup>21</sup> By moving the setting to a location more familiar to the French public, Poulenc accentuated the specificity of the pro-reproductive message to French society.

Poulenc removed significant portions of text from Apollinaire's script, but left its message and syntax essentially intact. He retained much of the director's prologue, which spells out the moral content of the farce for the audience:

Ils feront appel tout simplement à votre bon sens  
 Et se préoccuperont avant tout de vous amuser  
 Afin que bien disposés vous mettiez à profit  
 Tous les enseignements contenus dans la pièce  
 Et que le sol partout s'étoile de regards de nouveau-nés  
 Plus nombreux encore que les scintillements d'étoiles

Ecoutez ô Français la leçon de la guerre  
 Et faites des enfants vous qui n'en faisiez guère<sup>22</sup>

Although Poulenc's use of the text referred to the Second World War rather than the First, Apollinaire's text retained its specificity to the particular demands of wartime culture.

In some cases, Poulenc even made small changes to the text that reinforced the opera's morality, most clearly in its final scene. Apollinaire's text concludes with a moral proposition, which shows not only his final message for the audience, but also the difference between his pro-reproduction message and the restrictive aims of conservative natalist groups:

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<sup>20</sup> Poulenc often referred to the setting as Monte-Carlo; his note in the 1947 score reads: «Le décor devra représenter une ville imaginaire de la Riviera française, quelque part entre Monte-Carlo et Nice» («the set should depict an imaginary town in the French Riviera, somewhere in between Monte-Carlo and Nice»), FRANCIS POULENC, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Paris, Huegel, 1947, piano-vocal score, sixth unnumbered page prior to p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> «Assez tropical», F. POULENC, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> G. APOLLINAIRE, *Œuvres poétiques*, cit., p. 881 («And they'll [the actors] aim above all to amuse you / So you'll feel well-disposed and learn / From all the lessons in the play / And so that everywhere the ground will be sparkling / With the eyes of new-born babes / More of them than the twinkling stars // O Frenchmen hear the lesson of the war / Make children now you couples who forbore», G. APOLLINAIRE, *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*, cit., p. 165).

Et puis chantez matin et soir  
Grattez-vous si ça vous démange  
Aimez le blanc ou bien le noir  
C'est bien plus drôle quand ça change  
Suffit de s'en apercevoir<sup>23</sup>

Poulenc retained this section, but in a rare departure added a single, final admonition: «Cher public faites des enfants» («Dear public, have children»)<sup>24</sup>. The addition of this clear statement encapsulates the social message apparent throughout the opera, leaving the audience with a direct charge following Apollinaire's text suggesting the proliferation of all kinds of love.

Despite its sometimes ironic tone, Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* is inseparable from the cultural dialogue around reproduction in France. Following Vichy's implementation of restrictions on homosexuality and divorce, the opera presented a more open message than the conservative standard yet still advocated in favor of reproduction. In light of this advocacy for an atypical solution to France's population problem, Poulenc's description of the work as a "contribution" to the fight against the Germans seems far more natural. This moralistic side of the opera, however, has been overshadowed by something in some ways more controversial: the radical undermining of gender norms and stereotypes which form the basis of its larger than life plot. Poulenc described this side of the work as its «gags apollinairiens»<sup>25</sup> that shocked the conservative Opéra-Comique audience, but an examination of the opera's text and music indicates that the gender bending actually contributed significantly to the social message of the opera, and even provided Poulenc with a venue to subtly relate his music to his own struggle regarding sexuality.

### **Gender, Sexuality, and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias***

Poulenc's sexuality has been the subject of much recent exploration, but the inconsistency of his personal life and a lack of documentary information have limited such efforts. Richard D. E. Burton, in his 2002 book on Poulenc, Catholicism, and homosexuality,

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<sup>23</sup> G. APOLLINAIRE, *Œuvres poétiques*, cit., p. 913 («So sing from morn till night / And scratch wherever you itch / Feel free to go for black or white / It can be fun to switch / Just mind you get it right», G. APOLLINAIRE, *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*, cit., p. 207); F. POULENC, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, cit., Act II, Scene 8: in this final scene the text is repeated many times between mm. 46 and 159.

<sup>24</sup> F. POULENC, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, cit., Act II, Scene 8, mm. 159-163.

<sup>25</sup> FRANCIS POULENC, *Moi et mes amis*, Paris, La Palatine, 1963, p. 69.

describes Poulenc as «essentially, but not exclusively, homosexual»,<sup>26</sup> yet Poulenc's most prolonged romantic interest was his childhood friend Raymonde Linossier, who, arguably because she understood his conflicted sexuality, did not share the same feelings for him. Poulenc appears to have unsuccessfully proposed marriage to her in 1928 and experienced much personal suffering in the following years, whether due to anguish over coping with his failure to conform to societal expectations or out of genuine dismay over the events.<sup>27</sup> When Linossier died in 1930, Poulenc asked that she be buried with the manuscript of *Les Biches*, then his best-known work. Burton describes Poulenc's love for Linossier as an “*amour de lonh*” (love from a distance) that let him avoid confronting his repressed homosexuality.<sup>28</sup> Citing a letter in which Linossier expressed her distaste for «l'élément chic, inoccupé et pédéraste»,<sup>29</sup> Burton concludes that she most likely suspected his homosexual tendencies.<sup>30</sup> To further complicate the issue, Poulenc's interest in marriage may have been influenced by a desire to please Catholic family members on the paternal side of his family.

Although little is known about Poulenc's sexuality in his first thirty years, his correspondence reveals that he began to explore relationships with men around the time of Linossier's death.<sup>31</sup> His first known relationship with a man was with the painter and gallery owner Richard Chanlaire; later, the wealthy Poulenc would demonstrate an affinity for men from the lower class through his relationships with the salesman Lucien Robert and the chauffeur Raymond Destouches. Yet his early love for Linossier, whether romantic or not, remained potent throughout his life, as he dedicated major works including the 1942 ballet *Les Animaux modèles* and the 1954 publication of *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand* to her memory. The complexity of Poulenc's sexuality can further be seen in the sheer variety of terms used to describe it in recent scholarship. Modern descriptions such as “gay,” “homosexual,” “bisexual” and “queer” have all been used to describe his sexuality, each carrying separate, conflicting, and anachronous implications.<sup>32</sup> Myriam Chimènes describes

<sup>26</sup> R. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> For discussion of these events, see F. POULENC, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. R. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> «The chic, idle, homosexual element», F. POULENC, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, cit., pp. 255-257; translation from R. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> See F. POULENC, *Correspondance, 1910-1963*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> See R. BURTON, *Francis Poulenc*, cit., p. 37, and CHRISTOPHER MOORE, *Camp in Francis Poulenc's Early Ballets*, «The Musical Quarterly», XCV, 2 (2012), pp. 299-342.



Poulenc's «tendances affectives» («affective tendencies»), but refrains from labeling his sexuality further.<sup>33</sup> In his letters, Poulenc himself confessed a «gros secret» («large secret»), an «amour fou mais si angoissant» («mad but agonizing love»), and an «anomalie» («abnormality»)<sup>34</sup> when referring to his feelings for Chanlaire.

The complexity of Poulenc's sexuality must be understood in the context of French terminology and beliefs about same-sex relationships in the early and mid-twentieth century. Sexual relations with a partner of the same sex had been legal in France since 1791, but despite the lack of official discrimination widespread public disapproval and the influence of Catholicism contributed to the stigmatization and occasional prosecution of *pédérastes*, a term then used to refer to men who had sex with men which did not always carry the connotation of the current word pederasty.<sup>35</sup> In the early twentieth century, while some major figures including André Gide practiced an out-of-the-closet approach to their lifestyle, many others including Marcel Proust went to great lengths to avoid discussion of their sexuality. Even those like Gide who pushed the issue frequently practiced divisive politics toward other homosexual groups; in *Corydon* (1924), Gide argued for a firm distinction between the *invert*, or the passive partner in an adult homosexual relationship, and the *pédéraste*, casting the former in an extremely unfavorable light.<sup>36</sup>

Despite these stigmas, a homosexual subculture flourished in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s. Specialized bars catering to a homosexual clientele began to gain visibility, and early signs of political organization can be seen in the publication of the first French homosexual journal, *Inversions*, in 1924. Scott Gunther, in *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-present*, argues that public discourse around homosexuality at the time was tightly controlled by medical authorities, police, and by the Church, despite the progressive signs in *Inversions* and the increased visibility of homosexual subcultures.<sup>37</sup> Under the influence of natalist politics and Catholic moral tradition, homosexuality was portrayed as a sign of weakness among French men which reflected the decadence of modern society. Increasingly, psychiatrists attempted to understand homosexuality as an illness, using terms like *anomalie* and defining homosexuality as a neurotic condition. They

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<sup>33</sup> F. POULENC, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 304.

<sup>35</sup> See SCOTT GUNTHER, *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-present*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 18-21.

<sup>36</sup> See M. HANNA, *Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over Corydon*, cit., pp. 207-208.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. S. GUNTHER, *The Elastic Closet*, cit., p. 24.

further categorized homosexuality in terms of the virility of different categories of homosexuals in an attempt to distinguish between what they viewed as more and less dangerous forms of homosexual behavior.<sup>38</sup> Police associated homosexuality with violence and criminal behavior, and used laws against public indecency to target homosexuals for arrest.<sup>39</sup>

During Vichy, this heightened discourse around homosexuality had led to the first explicitly discriminatory law against homosexuals in France since 1791. As part of an attempt to roll back the moral laxity of the Republic, Philippe Pétain signed a law that increased the age of consent for homosexual relationships to twenty-one in 1942, while leaving the age of consent for heterosexual relationships at thirteen. This reform specifically reflected the widespread belief that young people were particularly “susceptible” to homosexuality, as well as association of homosexuality with pederasty and pedophilia among the public.<sup>40</sup> Despite the increased visibility of the homosexual subculture during the interwar period, the Vichy law demonstrates that homosexuality was still highly stigmatized, if not even more so than in the 1920s, when Poulenc chose to write *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.

Although Poulenc does not appear to have been targeted publicly for his sexuality, the stigmatization of homosexuality would have made it impossible for him to publicly discuss the topic, and explicit references to the topic are indeed rare in his correspondence, writings, and music. Christopher Moore, however, has tried in a recent study to connect what is known about Poulenc’s sexuality to the composer’s musical style in the ballets *Les Biches* (1923) and *Aubade* (1929).<sup>41</sup> Moore describes Poulenc’s style as reflective of the camp aesthetic, in which gay men participated in the dominant musical discourse of the time in a way that protected their identity while allowing them to express themselves. Moore uses Matthew Tinkcom’s concept of the alibi, in which an artist creates a plausible defense against being accused of expressing «a subjective point of view based on queer experience».<sup>42</sup> Musically, Moore claims that Poulenc’s queerness was expressed largely

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<sup>38</sup> On the French medical discourse on homosexuality, see A. COPLEY, *Sexual Moralities in France*, cit., pp. 135-154.

<sup>39</sup> On police treatment of homosexuals, see CAROLYN DEAN, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 143-161.

<sup>40</sup> See S. GUNTHER, *The Elastic Closet*, cit., pp. 25-35.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. C. MOORE, *Camp in Francis Poulenc’s Early Ballets*, cit., pp. 299-342.

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 301-302.

through moments of «failed seriousness», in which his music and drama «draw undue attention to their own incongruity».<sup>43</sup>

Although Moore argues convincingly for his interpretation of Poulenc's early style, his analysis does raise a conceptual problem. Conceiving of the incongruity of Poulenc's style as a failed attempt at seriousness renders the style unintentional, a by-product of his sexuality that he was unable to avoid. Yet, in talking about his music, Poulenc made it clear that his shifting musical style was quite intentional. For instance, he spoke to Stéphane Audel of his «complexe personnalité musicale» («complex musical personality»)<sup>44</sup> in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, and further discussed what Claude Rostand described as his «style musical mélange» («blended musical style») in the work.<sup>45</sup> Seeing this aspect of Poulenc's music as unintentional serves Moore's analysis because the works he studied were written early in the composer's sexual development when, as Moore argues, his sexuality functioned on a more subconscious level.<sup>46</sup> Viewing the incongruity of Poulenc's style from another perspective, however, will allow us to understand the music and plot of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in relation to its composer's sexuality.

Lloyd Whitesell's 2003 examination of queer expression in Benjamin Britten's operas, *Britten's Dubious Trysts*,<sup>47</sup> provides a useful model for understanding the role of Poulenc's sexuality in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. Whitesell adapts theories developed by D. A. Miller and Eve Sedgwick on the relationship between the queer individual and society to a musical topic. He argues that a closeted composer's work is influenced by the cultural – as opposed to official – censorship that it is subjected to.<sup>48</sup> According to Whitesell, cultural censorship results in the «loss of specificity of texts written from a closeted queer perspective».<sup>49</sup> He further argues that, despite the loss of specificity «the threads of queer representation are no less meaningful for being fragile and cunningly disguised»,<sup>50</sup> a claim that allows Whitesell to investigate the subtle coding of queer experience in Britten's characters, plots, and music.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, p. 303.

<sup>44</sup> F. POULENC, *Moi et mes amis*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> F. POULENC, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand*, cit., p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. C. MOORE, *Camp in Francis Poulenc's Early Ballets*, cit., p. 304.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. L. WHITESELL, *Britten's Dubious Trysts*, cit., pp. 637-694.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 639.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ivi*, p. 640.

While attitudes in Britain towards gender and sexuality differed from those of in France in many ways, including in that homosexuals were openly persecuted in its legal system, significant parallels exist between the two nations. This is particularly true of the Second World War period, when a form of masculinity was a central component of the cultural agendas of both Britain and France as part of their respective attempts to protect their national sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> Several of Britten's operas including *Peter Grimes* (1944-45), *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Albert Herring* (1946-47) date from this period, each of which has been examined in terms of Britten's queer perspective, most famously by Philip Brett.<sup>52</sup> Though Britten's operas differ significantly in tone from *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, both composers were confined in their expression due to the cultural oppression of homosexuality in their respective home states, and therefore turned to unspecific means of expression. For Poulenc, his selection of Apollinaire's play, which Apollinaire had described as surrealist and was deliberately separated from reality, would give him an alibi to play with sexuality in a way that subverted the dominant discourse on sexuality and reproduction.

On the surface, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* is an opera about gender rather than sexuality. Thérèse does not only take on the sexual or societal role of her husband; she literally disembodies her breasts and becomes a man. In early twentieth-century France, however, sexuality was frequently discussed in terms of gendered characteristics. Arguments for the persecution of homosexuals were often predicated on the femininity (or lack of virility) which defined them to society, and even some arguments in favor of homosexuality defended homosexuals as being more masculine than they were perceived as being by society. André Gide argued that practitioners of pederasty were particularly virile men, thereby attempting to masculinize their gender identities and legitimize their sexual practices in the eyes of the public.<sup>53</sup> Some opponents of homosexuality, however, attempted to present all homosexuals as men with the sexuality of a woman, or men with an «inverted sexuality».<sup>54</sup> This concept of sexual inversion directly parallels the gender inversion that occurs in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. Though sexual inversion would not have been an acceptable topic for an opera at the time, the distinct connection between conceptions of

<sup>51</sup> See SONYA O. ROSE, *Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain*, in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh, Manchester – New York, Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 177-195.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. PHILIP BRETT, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> See M. HANNA, *Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over Corydon*, cit., pp. 202-224.

<sup>54</sup> A. COPLEY, *Sexual Minorities in France*, cit., p. 144.

gender and sexuality in France suggests that the gender inversion in the opera could have significant parallels with Poulenc's struggle with his nontraditional sexuality.

Apollinaire's radical treatment of gender in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* provided a strong basis of gender inversion for Poulenc to expand on in the operatic version. In *Apollinaire et "Les Mamelles de Tirésias": La revanche d'Éros*, Peter Read claims that, alongside Apollinaire's consciousness of differences between man and women, the work displays

une nostalgie de l'unité primordiale, sentiment profond et tragique qu'il dramatise sur un ton burlesque et parodique. Il adopte un ton ludique, déploie toute une panoplie de ressources visuelles et linguistiques, afin de masquer la conscience douloureuse qui l'a toujours hantée, celle d'une opposition irrémédiable entre les aspirations masculines et féminines, une fissure dans la condition humaine. Dans la pièce, la dualité fatale se résout.<sup>55</sup>

Although some critics at the time of the 1917 production characterized Thérèse's eventual return to family life as a "return to order" and as an indicator that Apollinaire's was ultimately a traditionalist,<sup>56</sup> Read argues that Apollinaire actually proposed a redefined moral order in the final scene of the play:

En effet, le mari qui a réalisé son instinct maternel est, à la fin, plus joyeux, moins autoritaire, moins borné d'esprit: il est féminisé. Thérèse, pendant son absence, a pu vivre la part refoulée de son identité virile, se montre plus calme, moins intransigente, sans renoncer toutefois à sa vitalité naturelle.<sup>57</sup>

The gender of both individuals is fundamentally changed through the course of the plot, and in the final scene Thérèse even refuses to reclaim her cast-off breasts upon her reunion with the husband, telling him: «Nous nous en sommes passés l'un et l'autre / Continuons».<sup>58</sup> Although the dissolution of traditional family structure does not appear to be Apollinaire's aim, the play's ending cannot be considered a simple return to order.

In a major connection with the natalist political message of the play, a significant component of Thérèse and the husband's gender exploration occurs in relation to the tradi-

<sup>55</sup> «A nostalgia for primordial unity, a profound and tragic sentiment that he dramatizes with burlesque and parodic tone. He adopts a playful tone, displayed with an array of visual and linguistic resources, in order to mask the painful conscience that always haunted him, that of the irremediable opposition between masculine and feminine aspirations, a fissure in human condition. In this work, the inevitable duality is resolved», P. READ, *Apollinaire et "Les Mamelles de Tirésias"*, cit., p. 174.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *ivi*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>57</sup> «Indeed, the husband, who has realized his maternal instinct, is, in the end, more cheerful, less authoritative, less narrow-minded: he is feminized. Thérèse, during her absence, has given life to the repressed part of her virile identity, appearing more calm, less intransigent, without entirely renouncing her natural vitality», *ivi*, p. 176.

<sup>58</sup> G. APOLLINAIRE, *Œuvres poétiques*, cit., p. 913 («You and I managed OK without them / Lets just carry on», G. APOLLINAIRE, *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*, cit., p. 206).

tional sexual roles of a woman and a man in society. By becoming a man, Thérèse takes on the sexual appearance of a man by casting off her breasts. The husband, on the other hand, takes on the reproductive role of the woman as a bearer of children, albeit by technological means. Questions of sexuality in the debate around natalism in France often revolved around the reproductive role of men and women; those who feared the moral decay of the country concerned themselves not only with the *femme moderne* who had liberated herself from her reproductive role via contraception and abortion, but also with the man who lacked virility and had absconded his own reproductive role, often by means of his homosexuality.

Poulenc, in selecting a text for his libretto, chose a plot that undermined traditional conceptions of gender separation, but it was also through his music that he shaped the role of gender and sexuality in the opera. Critical descriptions of the opera's premiere reveal the extent to which Poulenc's contemporaries saw a connection between Poulenc's music and the sexual topics of the opera. René Dumesnil wrote in «Le Monde»: «Qu'on nous donne beaucoup d'ouvrages comme celui-ci, et personne ne parlera pas du "divorce" qui sépare musiciens et public»,<sup>59</sup> presenting Poulenc's music as the sexual bridge between the long-divided public and avant-garde. In *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*, Nadine Hubbs has argued that a circle of queer American composers including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Marc Blitzstein, and others, emerged in the early twentieth century with a similar aim of writing music that was accessible to the public.<sup>60</sup> Many of the members of this circle had been encouraged to write distinctly American music during their studies with Nadia Boulanger in France, who was a close friend to Poulenc and helped him develop his choral style in the late 1930s. Poulenc also had strong personal connections with other queer composers who were writing in a tonal style including Benjamin Britten. For Poulenc as for these other queer tonalists a retrogressive musical style could be seen to provide cover for potentially subversive ideas.

Fred Goldbeck proposed another sexualized metaphor for Poulenc's music in «Le Figaro Littéraire», writing: «On ne lui demande pas les ascèses de Stravinsky ou de Schoenberg: ce serai contre sa nature».<sup>61</sup> Goldbeck presented Poulenc as an unrestricted composer who follows his passions, a slave to his nature. This flighty conception of

<sup>59</sup> «If we could only have more works like this no one would talk of the "divorce" that separates musicians and the public any longer», RENE DUMESNIL, *OPERA-COMIQUE: "Les Mamelles de Tirésias". "La Rose rouge"*, «Le Monde», June 3, 1947, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. NADINE HUBBS, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 125.

Poulenc's style, as highlighted by Christopher Moore in relation to *Les Biches* and *Aubade*, has strong relevance to his musical language in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* as well. Poulenc uses many musical styles in the opera to reflect the shifting genders and sexualities of the characters. For instance, as Thérèse considers relinquishing her breasts, she sings a sweet, pondering line with the expressive marking *très doux et tendre*. After releasing them, however, she sings the text «I feel extremely virile. I am a stallion» to a brusque Spanish dance.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef, 3/4 time, and starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The lyrics are: "Je me sens viril en diable Je suis un é-ta-lon". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef, 3/4 time, and features chords and a bass line with a forte (f) dynamic. The score is in G major and consists of 10 measures.

Ex. 1: *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Act I, Scene 1, piano reduction, mm. 165-171

Later, after Thérèse becomes a general, Poulenc uses an accented, martial style with percussion to accentuate her new identity.<sup>62</sup> These styles carry strongly gendered implications, and exemplify one side of Poulenc's contribution to the examination of signifiers of gender in the opera.

The Spanish dance and the march, however, are only two of the many styles which Poulenc utilized in the opera. Fred Goldbeck's review alone mentions Rameau, Ravel, Mozart, Debussy, Puccini, and Offenbach as among the diverse group of composers whose influence pervades the opera.<sup>63</sup> While some of these influences are stronger than others, Poulenc does incorporate many styles derived from the traditions of art music into the opera.<sup>64</sup> Yet even more prominent are the many popular styles evoked by Poulenc's music; he uses many dance styles including the polka and often draws from the music-hall style. The incorporation of popular music into his style had long been a central component of his

<sup>61</sup> «One does not ask Stravinsky or Schoenberg's asceticism of him [Poulenc]; that would be against his nature», F. GOLDBECK, *Poulenc et Tirésias à l'Opéra-Comique*, cit., p. 5

<sup>62</sup> F. POULENC, *Le Mamelles de Tirésias*, cit., Act I, Scene 6, mm. 85-88.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. F. GOLDBECK, *Poulenc et Tirésias à l'Opéra-Comique*, cit., p. 5.

unique musical personality, and in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* this suited the young star Denise Duval's (Thérèse) background as a popular performer well.

Rather than giving each scene a unique and coherent style derived from a particular influence, Poulenc allowed his many influences to emerge continuously within the context of a single scene, giving the opera a rapidly shifting musical pace. A typical example comes in the penultimate scene, in which Poulenc alternates between evocations of dramatic recitative, dance music, melancholy, tumultuous fear, and deep love, shifting between meters and tonalities frequently and drawing from several completely distinct compositional styles<sup>65</sup>. Within the scene's 146 measures, Poulenc abruptly changes styles no less than eight times. The shifting between styles is most dense in the middle of the scene, in which a three measure recitative section marked *pompeux* is followed immediately by a melancholic section marked *très doux*.

The image shows a musical score for a piano reduction of a scene from 'Les Mamelles de Tirésias'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line on top and a piano accompaniment on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line is marked with a piano dynamic (*p*) and the instruction 'très doux'. The lyrics are: 'Sa - chez que la for - tune et la gloi-re Les fo-rêts d'a - na - nas'. The piano accompaniment is marked with a pianissimo dynamic (*pp*) and the instruction 'très doux'. The score shows several measures of music with various rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

Ex. 2: *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Act II, Scene 7, piano reduction, mm. 58-62

The sweetly played section lasts only twelve measures, and is soon followed by a tempestuous section in triple time.

<sup>64</sup> Emmanuel Chabrier, whose opéra bouffe *L'étoile* had been revived earlier during the war, should be added prominently to the list of Poulenc's influences in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* as well. Poulenc wrote an article praising *L'étoile* in 1941: see FRANCIS POULENC, *Centenaire de Chabrier*, «La Nouvelle Revue Française», 329, July 1, 1941, pp. 110-114.

<sup>65</sup> F. POULENC, *Le Mamelles de Tirésias*, cit., Act II, Scene 7.



Ex. 3: *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Act II, Scene 7, piano reduction, mm. 73-76

Sometimes Poulenc uses this stylistic juxtaposition for comedic effect, but more often he uses it to highlight the juxtaposition between the opera's unique characters and between the shifting emotional states of individual characters.

Critics noticed Poulenc's juxtaposition of styles in the opera and discussed it in terms that made strong implications about the composer's personality. Roger Lanne wrote that the opera could have been neither more impetuous nor nobler, describing Poulenc as an unrestricted, whimsical composer.<sup>66</sup> Fred Goldbeck described Poulenc as «ce compositeur d'angoisse et de fuite» whose music is «impulsive».<sup>67</sup> The choice of terminology by Lanne and Goldbeck to describe Poulenc's style is particularly interesting in the context of the implications of their language in relation the public discourse around homosexuality in France. For instance, the sexuality of men who showed interest in other men was frequently described as a sort of sexual anxiety, or a crisis of sexual identity.<sup>68</sup> Impulsivity, flightiness and impetuosity carry strong homosexual connotations as well. This ambiguous, impetuous

<sup>66</sup> Cf. ROGER LANNE, "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" à l'Opéra-Comique: Une satire du féminisme dans un style de ballet russe, «Le Figaro Littéraire», June 7, 1947, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> «That composer of anxiety and flight», F. GOLDBECK, *Poulenc et Tirésias à l'Opéra-Comique*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> The treatment of homosexuality as an anxiety or neurosis stems from the widespread belief that it was a psychological abnormality in the early twentieth century, but even in the 1960s the reactionary Dr. Maurice Eck stated: «I have never seen a homosexual who didn't show at least several neurotic signs. The genuine homosexual, free from all possibility of neurosis, seems to me out of the ordinary», quoted in A. COPLEY, *Sexual Moralities in France*, cit., p. 217. André Gide attempted to undermine the psychological conception of homosexuality as sexual anxiety in *Corydon*, writing: «Usually the doctors who deal with the subject are only concerned with homosexuals who feel ashamed; the pitiful, the plaintive, the inverted, the sick», ANDRÉ GIDE, *Corydon*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1950. See also CHRISTOPHER E. FORTH, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2004; MICHAEL SIBALIS, *Defining Masculinity in Fin-de Siècle France: Sexual Anxiety and the Emergence of the Homosexual*, «Proceedings of the Western Society for French History», XXV (1998), pp. 247-256.

music, in the context of the fluidity of gender in the opera's story, carries strong parallels with Poulenc's own ambiguity regarding his sexuality.

Two separate but highly related currents therefore run through *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. One, a continuation of Poulenc's increased political involvement over the course of the war, found expression in the pro-reproductive elements of the work.<sup>69</sup> The other, a continuation of his personal examination of his sexuality, found expression in the exploration of gender roles and sexuality in the work's ambiguous musical style. Within the traditionally conservative genre of opera, this complex exploration of political and personal issues provides particularly provocative meaning to the work.

To return to the terminology used by Whitesell, a significant "loss of specificity" in the discourse in the opera allowed the subversive meaning of the text to exist at the repressive time it was composed in. This loss of specificity importantly includes its focus on gender rather than specifically on homosexuality. Additionally, the pro-reproductive message of the opera further obscured the subversive nature of its treatment of gender and sexuality. In a letter to Henri Hell, Poulenc called *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* «l'œuvre la plus près de mon cœur», continuing: «peut-être que le pire de moi-même est le meilleur de moi-même».<sup>70</sup> Poulenc's expression of his own conflict about the piece's nature reflects the ambiguity of the opera itself. While *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* can be seen as a celebration of rediscovered liberty, the complexity of its meaning also renders it a complicated, veiled, and subversive statement on gender and sexuality.

#### NOTE

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<sup>69</sup> By the time he composed *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in 1944, Poulenc had joined the intellectual resistance organization known as the "Front National des Musiciens".

<sup>70</sup> «The closest work to my heart [...] Maybe the worst of me is the best of me», F. POULENC, *Correspondance, 1910-1963*, cit., p. 776.