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GENRE AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION IN *THE RAKE'S PROGRESS*

by

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ABSTRACT

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W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman's libretto for Igor Stravinsky's 1951 opera *The Rake's Progress* has challenged audiences' expectations since its premiere, especially concerning its narrative arc. These frustrations resolve in Auden's cultivation of two endeavors integral to his larger oeuvre: inspiration from medieval literature, and a desire to represent the manifold, contradictory experience of the individual in modern existence. *Rake's* expression of these purposes bypasses opera's typical emotional intensity and forthright characterization, but the fifteenth-century morality play *Everyman* reveals a dramatic foundation for its narrative. Far from the overwrought, haphazard assortment of literary allusions its critics often assume, the libretto sets four traditions in counterpoint: medieval, fairy tale, eighteenth-century, and existential. These sometimes reinforcing, sometimes contradictory referents account for the work's narrative tensions and continue Modernist experiments Auden attempted in other major works of the 1940s while anticipating the ironic embrace of indeterminacy and multiplicity that characterizes postmodernism, reclaiming a great twentieth-century collaboration for fresh appreciation.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The libretto written by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman for Igor Stravinsky's 1951 opera *The Rake's Progress* poses perennial challenges to an audience's "horizon of expectations." The opera stages a twentieth-century interpretation of a fifteenth-century morality play in an eighteenth-century idiom for a genre dominated by nineteenth-century Romantic conventions. Simply put, the *Rake* libretto's structure and narrative arc more closely resemble those of medieval morality plays than those in the mainstream, primarily nineteenth-century grand opera repertory (e.g. Verdi, Wagner, Puccini). Subtitled "A Fable," the libretto exchanges the familiar operatic tropes of unbridled passion and extraordinary reversals of fortune for allegorical characters and a theme of "facing death and coming to terms with life" ("Everyman" 1629). The audience's interpretive confusion, occasioned by the piece's apparent "identity crisis" on the operatic stage, is further complicated by intricate patterns of allusion and intertextuality, as four independent literary traditions vie for the listener's attention. In addition to the eighteenth-century, Augustan surface style indebted to Alexander Pope and John Dryden, the libretto text assimilates literary components derived from Existentialism, fairy tales, and medieval texts including William Langland's fourteenth-century allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* and the fifteenth-century play *Everyman*.

As in most of the critical work on the *Rake* libretto, Auden is treated as the primary author who was principally responsible for the text. Although he claimed a "corporate personality" for authors working in collaboration and took great pains to inform reviewers of Chester Kallman's contributions to the *Rake* libretto, the fact remains that Auden and Stravinsky developed the opera's scenario together long before Kallman became involved (Auden, "Translating" 483). This is not to devalue Kallman's contributions to the finished text—he usually gets credit for the suggestion of the "three wishes" as a structural device, for example—but rather to acknowledge the libretto's strong thematic and rhetorical continuity with the vast

oeuvre of one of the major poetic voices of the mid-twentieth-century. As Daniel Albright observes, “there is nothing in *The Rake’s Progress* which falls outside the orbit of Auden’s intellectual world” (45).

The obligations of Auden’s intellectual world expanded in proportion to his professional reputation, coming to include book reviews, articles for both popular magazines and literary journals, and lectures by the 1940s. Matthew Paul Carlson suggests the “variety of publication outlets in which Auden’s ideas found a home reflects the disparate qualities of his prose style, which ranges from the casually witty to the deeply philosophical” (“Opera Addict” 70-71). More important for the present discussion, this range of professional roles afforded Auden, a practicing poet concerned with the place of poetry in the modern world, the opportunity to work through his theoretical position from a variety of aesthetic, practical, and informal perspectives. In “Making, Knowing and Judging,” an early essay in his 1962 collection *The Dyer’s Hand* that began life as his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, W.H. Auden condenses his wide variety of concerns as a reader and critic to two essential questions: 1) “Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?” and 2) “What kind of a guy inhabits this poem” (“Making” 50-51)? Considering the symbiotic relationship between his thinking on critical matters and his ever-evolving approach to poetic craft, these two questions highlight a basic duality in his own art, inviting his readers to embrace both “technical” and “broadly moral” concerns. His finesse moving between the two is one of the hallmarks of his best-known works—from early poems characterized by what Edward Mendelson calls “a laconic Old English toughness” (“Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” “Control of the passes was, he saw, the key,” and others) to the long poems from the 1940s defined by their combination of expansive allusiveness and tightly controlled structure (*New Year Letter*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, and *The Age of Anxiety*) to the quiet urbanity of his later works (*Horae Canonicae* and *Thanksgiving for a Habitat*) (Mendelson, *Selected Poems* xvi). Auden’s technical and moral concerns are highly interrelated, conditioning each other in complex ways. If Auden argued “a poet’s first duty was to master the technical elements of his craft,” employing in his work “a greater variety of poetic forms than any poet

writing in English ... for more than forty years,” this acquisition of skill was not, or was not merely, for the sake of verbal showmanship but for the articulation of substantive ideas engaged with the challenges of his historical moment (Callan 10). Indeed, Richard Johnson proposes that “the complexity of Auden’s poems is a function of the complexity of his view on man” (xi).

Auden’s “view on man” began forming early in his life, mixing his mother’s devout Anglican faith and his father’s intellectual curiosity. Long before his first published poems, young Auden read “a heterogeneous collection of books on many subjects” from his father’s library on medicine, psychology, and Norse mythology, as well as practical books on household management and Victorian plumbing (Carpenter 8-9). The eclecticism of Auden’s reading stayed with him throughout life, enriching his “range of poetic imagery” so that not only psychological theory, but chemistry, microbiology, relativity, quantum mechanics, paleontology, philosophy, and various mythologies found places in his poetic repertoire (Callan 7). While the sheer inclusiveness of Auden’s vocabulary has led some critics to dismiss him as “a heartless brainbox,” Callan reminds us Auden “valued books for their language as well as for their ideas” (Sansom 2007; Callan 4). As in his professional writing, Auden’s main poetic vocation embraces a diversity of perspectives and voices that, in his view, necessitates an extended lexicon. He describes his internal “Censor to whom [he] submits ... work in progress” as “a Censurate [that includes] a sensitive only child, a practical housewife, a logician, a monk, an irreverent buffoon, and ... a brutal, foul-mouthed drill sergeant who considers all poetry rubbish” (Auden, “Writing” 17). The comprehensiveness of Auden’s imagined audience may help explain the wide range of intellectual and emotional responses possible throughout his work.

Auden remained open to inspiration from many sources, eschewing “systematic criticism” in favor of an “attitude towards the literature of the past differ[ing] from that of the scholarly critic” (Dyer xii, “Making” 33). He gives some sense of this creative attitude, which he characterizes with the “anarchic image of a Mad Hatter’s Tea-Party” where all chronological sense of literary genre, meaning, or technique is suspended, in his account of the inner “world out of which poems are made”:

[Q]uestions must not be answered until they have been asked, and at present he [the poet] has no questions. At present he makes no distinction between a book, a country walk, and a kiss. All are equally experiences to store away in his memory. Could he look into a memory, the literary historian would find many books ... curiously changed from [those] he finds in his library. The dates are all different. *In Memoriam* is written before *The Dunciad*, the thirteenth century comes after the sixteenth. [The historian] always thought Robert Burton wrote a big book about melancholy. Apparently he only wrote ten pages. [...] *Piers Ploughman III* is going about with Kierkegaard's *Journals*, *Piers Ploughman IV* with *The Making of the English Landscape*. [...] *Gulliver's Travels* walks arm in arm with a love affair, a canto of *Il Paradiso* sits with a singularly good dinner, *War and Peace* never leaves the side of a penniless Christmas in a foreign city, the tenth *The Winter's Tale* exchanges greetings with the first complete recording of [Donizetti's opera] *La Favorita*. (Auden, "Making" 43-44)

This passage does more than give a fanciful illustration of a prolifically creative mind; it offers useful insights for understanding Auden's process in constructing his "verbal contraptions." Like Roland Barthes a little more than a decade later, Auden describes a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings ... blend and clash" (Barthes 1468). In fact, Auden's equating "a book, a country walk, and a kiss" seems to look even further ahead than Barthes's "The Death of the Author" to poststructuralism's more inclusive definition of "text," which broadens the purview of literary theory to scrutinize a myriad of discourses including those governing social conventions and the web of attitudes, anxieties, and expectations that factor into an individual's inner narrative.

The remaining sections of this introductory chapter offer background and context for understanding an audience's "horizon of expectations" approaching *The Rake's Progress*. First, the circumstances surrounding the composition of the piece are summarized, followed by an account of critical response since the opera's premiere. The introduction's concluding sections further articulate the critical approach adopted in this project before backing up to consider the

precarious literary status of opera libretti as a genre in order to account for a comparative lack of critical attention for this work.

Coffee and Whisky

In 1959, reflecting on his working relationship with W. H. Auden, the sometimes-controversial English poet with whom he collaborated a decade earlier on the opera *The Rake's Progress*, Igor Stravinsky told Robert Craft, "Auden fascinated and delighted me more every day" (Craft and Stravinsky 157). After a brief correspondence of initial thoughts concerning an opera based on William Hogarth's eighteenth-century engravings titled *The Rake's Progress* that led to Stravinsky offering to pay Auden's air fare from New York to Los Angeles, Auden arrived in California late one evening "carrying a small bag and [the gift of] a huge cowskin rug" (156). A spirit of mutual enthusiasm seemed to preside over their collaboration from the start, and "early the next morning, primed by coffee and whisky," the two set to work. The project had more than a little Hollywood glamor about it as "the world's most famous composer and the third most famous [English language] poet [after W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot]," who had just won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Anxiety*, came together for "one of the happiest conjunctions in the history of opera" (Schiff 137; Kerman, "Reflections" 8). Over the next ten days, the two artists completed an outline "not radically different from the published libretto" (Craft and Stravinsky 156-57). Their camaraderie developed quickly beyond mere professional association, with Stravinsky fondly recalling how Auden, "this big, blonde, intellectual bloodhound," mesmerized him with his "eloquent" explanations of verse forms—illustrated by examples composed "almost as quickly as he could write"—and his endless "little Scholastic or psycho-analytic propositions." They even went out together in the evenings, attending a two-piano performance of Mozart's opera *Così fan tutti*, which Stravinsky claimed was a strong influence on their conception for *The Rake* (158).

This largely unproblematic meeting of artistic visions was not haphazard. Both parties came to the project having privately nursed the idea of a foray into opera for some time. Stravinsky's oeuvre included only two much earlier, less ambitious pieces that qualified as

operas; intervening years had seen a distancing of his art from all vestiges of what he held to be late Romantic sentimentality and extravagance, with particular contempt for contemporary operatic trends indebted to Richard Wagner. For his part, Auden had completed an operetta with Benjamin Britten inspired by the story of Paul Bunyan which he unequivocally referred to as “a failure” (Carpenter 310). By the late 1940s, however, both artists seemed prepared to attempt something in the tradition of full-scale grand opera. Stravinsky “had wanted to compose an opera in English ever since [his] arrival in the United States” in the early 1940s; Auden was “excited at the prospect of working in a medium to which he [became] devoted” in the years following his own 1939 emigration to New York and subsequent immersion into the operatic repertory, for the first time in his life, though his relationship with the young American poet Chester Kallman, which led among other things to regular attendance at the Metropolitan Opera (Craft and Stravinsky 154; Carpenter 349).

Stravinsky’s stated desire to compose an eighteenth-century style “number” opera, assembled from a traditional sequence of arias, ensembles, recitative, and orchestral interludes—in contrast to the sort of Wagnerian “endless melody” aspiring to a seamless whole that was then in vogue—suggested W. H. Auden as librettist to the mind of Stravinsky’s L. A. neighbor Aldous Huxley. Justifying that recommendation, clear similarities exist in the broad outlines of both Stravinsky’s and Auden’s work: “two major figures closely allied in their respective battle against the avant-garde,” as Marc A. Roth describes their collaboration on *The Rake* (107). Several commentators appreciate the prevalent consonance between, on the one hand, Auden’s “stylistic pastiche of long-outmoded conventions” that “resembles a Tudor hodgepodge with mock hexameters, echo effects, and parody of the mass” and, on the other, Stravinsky’s use of “anachronistic musical gestures” including “distant fanfares and arias, classical textures, florid melismas, and secco recitatives” (Bru 84; Carter 59-60). The two artists’ potential to realize a collaboration is not surprising, since according to Stravinsky he and Auden were unusually thorough in their planning, “work[ing] out ... the plot and scheme of action ... together, step by

step” as well as coordinating “the plan of action with a provisional plan of musical pieces, arias, ensembles, and choruses” (Craft and Stravinsky 156).

Beyond Stravinsky’s and Auden’s collaboration on *The Rake*, this aesthetic convergence is worth noting, since both Stravinsky and Auden appear as essential figures in their respective fields’ transition from modernism to postmodernism in the twentieth century. Despite being a generation removed from one another, Stravinsky’s neoclassicism and Auden’s formalism offered such similar solutions to artistic problems that critical assessments of either artist’s work may apply with surprising fidelity to the other. For instance, Glenn Watkins’s observation that Stravinsky’s personal style was “coined not so much through the appropriation of ingredients from a particular historical or cultural model as through their fracture and purposeful reassemblage” helpfully counterpoints Richard Johnson’s claim that “the test of meaning in [Auden’s] poems is not the number of references to any given system of thought, but the way in which the poems treat the ideas they entertain [...] Auden draws upon many sources, and modifies them as he uses them” (Watkins 3; R. Johnson xi). Likewise, we may be reminded of much of Stravinsky’s neoclassical output when Daniel Remein, arguing for Auden’s pluralistic engagement with early English poetry, writes that fragments of the Old English poem *Wulf and Eadwacer* inform Auden’s early poem “The Secret Agent” in an ambiguous state between translation and allusion, “disarticulating the possibility of distinguishing between a dead past and a homogenous present” (820). Like Auden, Stravinsky was “deeply rooted in the whole tradition” of his field; and, at the midpoint of the twentieth century, both artists were looking toward the European medieval era for artistic and spiritual inspiration (Spears 21). For both artists, this happy concordance of temperament ironically belied the bewildered response of audiences and critics alike to *The Rake* through the next six decades.

Edification If Not Enjoyment

Since its premiere in Venice at the Teatro la Fenice in 1951, *The Rake* has frustrated critical attempts to articulate the dramatic arc of its action, eliciting varying levels of invective (as well as a share of praise) for both score and libretto. Critics debate the extent to which

Stravinsky's score, with its freely acknowledged debt to "golden age," anti-Wagnerian operatic masters from nineteenth-century composer Giuseppe Verdi back to the late-Renaissance composer Claudio Monteverdi, represents artistic progress, but appraisal tends to defer to Stravinsky's status at the time as an elder statesman of contemporary music. By contrast, commentary on the merits of the libretto, which was the first serious attempt at musical theater by the younger poet Auden (with Chester Kallman), is far more deprecatory. As early as 1956 Joseph Kerman, whose interpretation largely determined general opinion, laments, "The destination ... is not clear. [...] [W]hile the music grows in eloquence [towards the end], the dramatic meaning attenuates" (*Drama* 235, 246). In a 1954 article on *The Rake*, Kerman went so far as to recommend that "the authors ought to be prevailed upon to think through the conclusion again, and redo this last scene." Colin Mason, writing shortly after the first performance, includes Stravinsky in his blame: "Although most of the imperfections of the opera lie in the libretto they are all ultimately, and some directly, Stravinsky's responsibility," including the composer's decision to base a theatrical work on William Hogarth's series of engravings "in spite of its manifest shortcomings as the subject of an opera" in the first place (1). Mason's criticisms further target "the poor management of several of the curtain drops, which lowers the dramatic temperature and dissipates any possible accumulation of dramatic tension" and the ending, in which "composer and librettist try to laugh it [Tom Rakewell's concluding madness and death] off in a gay little epilogue [that] merely wound[s] the audience's feelings without convincing them that it was all make-believe" (3, 8). This line of criticism appears to assume that the libretto follows the trajectory of Hogarth's original scenario, in which the "progress" of the rake is a deserved downward spiral as payment for his "sins," which, in the opera as in the engravings, include consorting with prostitutes, marrying for ulterior motives, and wasting large sums of money for dubious ends. Further, these critics locate the fatal flaw of the work as musical theater in this morbid, moral arc, which deviates from modern operatic genre conventions rooted in melodrama and intensity of emotion.

George McFadden proposed the first opposing view to this assumption in 1955 by acknowledging Auden's engagement of later narrative moral frames, including those fashioned by Kierkegaard and twentieth-century Christian existentialists. McFadden argues that Tom Rakewell, the opera's protagonist, "progresses from unconscious guilt to consciousness of sin" through scenes portraying aesthetic religion (Brothel), ethical religion (Marriage to Baba), and revealed religion (Graveyard), culminating in a "leap ... into the absurd," represented by Tom's final transcendence of reason (i.e. his madness in Bedlam) (Chew 243). Defenses since the mid-twentieth-century—when scholars address *The Rake* at all—regard the work from various standpoints to justify the libretto's sequence of events. Geoffrey Chew finds in the opera a "progress ... from the Garden of Eden, scene of the fall, to the Garden of Gethsemane, scene of redemption," with the "result—one typical of pastoral 'fables'—[that we experience] a thorough critique of humanity," while for Herbert Lindenberger the libretto "encourages listeners to distance themselves from the onstage action" in sometimes unwelcome ways to provide the "opportunity self-consciously to re-examine the conventions of opera, in both the verbal and musical aspects" (Chew 248; Lindenberger 309). Endeavoring to address directly the piece's heterogeneity, Heather Weibe proposes that Stravinsky and Auden, reviewing the current state and future prospects of their cultural inheritance, "[stage] an argument about opera's viability in the disenchanted environment of the late 1940s" (9). Recent studies seek explanations for the opera's content in Auden's reflections on (and subsequent repudiation of) his past, as Sascha Bru connects the Kierkegaardian to the biographical to make the central trajectory one of "gain[ing] insight" (Bru 90). Matthew Paul Carlson meanwhile wonders if the whole project might be viewed as "a kind of dramatization of Auden's [operatic] theory, which posits that music itself represents the subjective experience of living in time and that opera in particular portrays human willfulness" (Carlson, "Opera Addict" 71). That the libretto supports this eclectic range of interpretations suggests a certain literary value and complexity to the text that rewards closer, continued study.

As it stands, and despite the ample amount of legitimate insight accomplished, the current body of scholarly work seems to explore two sides of one basic assumption: *The Rake's Progress* presents many admirable moments that fail to cohere easily in any significant narrative sequence. Kerman, Mason, and others who build on their work struggle to reconcile the admitted abilities of the opera's authors with the difficulties the work presents, while scholars following McFadden search for a way to read the opera that transcends its surface disappointments, in effect reasoning their way to edification if not enjoyment.

A Fixed Body of Works Endlessly Recycled

This thesis's approach to the question of dramatic narrative in *The Rake's Progress* discards what appears to be many critics' flawed starting point with the opera; namely, that this work adheres to established operatic genre conventions. Auden's singling out of the medieval morality play *Everyman* as an influence on *The Rake* may have been more than a convenient generalization to signal the work's allegorical potential. In fact, a range of medieval genres, including morality plays and allegorical poetry like William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, appear to inform the libretto.¹ Considering the work from this unorthodox standpoint immediately gives us fresh perspective on two of the opera's most puzzling features: a seeming hodgepodge of characters ("too clever by half" says one critic), and a sudden shift in tone from witty satire to the pathos of serious spiritual drama for the opera's final two scenes ("Graveyard" and "Bedlam") (Schiff 137).

Auden's style of allegory in *The Rake's Progress* is actually closer to Langland's encyclopedic method of reference to several allegorical registers at once than to *Everyman's* more streamlined, focused allegory. Comparing surprisingly nuanced allegorical characters from *Piers Plowman* like Meed the Maid or Hawkin the Active Man to *The Rake's* Nick Shadow, for example, generates parallels in which flat characters function as centers of gravity for an array of related concepts that, in skilled hands, provide a three-dimensional illusion. Likewise, readers of Middle English poetry will find analogues in *The Rake* to the sometimes meandering, shifting

style of Langland's dream-vision narrative. In such a context the transition in *The Rake's Progress* from satire to pathos is neither unprecedented nor surprising.

If such scholarly resolutions are granted, the most serious impediment to understanding *The Rake's Progress* must remain a theatrical audience's horizon of expectations, defined by Hans Robert Jauss as the anticipation set in motion by the beginning of a work, which is based on previous experience and subsequently "maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically ... according to specific rules of the genre or type of text" (1554). Foregrounding such an obstacle is not impertinent; both critics and the opera-going public arrive equipped with expectations constructed from "contemporary operatic culture, [...] a fixed body of works endlessly recycled" (Wiebe 7). For an audience familiar with the mainstream, primarily Romantic oeuvre found on most major opera schedules each season (Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, perhaps Wagner), *The Rake's Progress* stages a somewhat bizarre spectacle, with its eighteenth-century idiom and anachronistically moralizing message. As Jauss explains in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," "the resistance that the new work poses to the expectations of its first audience [...] can be so great that it requires a long process of reception to gather in that which was unexpected and unusable" at first (1562). Establishing the underlying medieval structure of Auden's libretto begins the labor of reassembling and making known "the codes which regulate [the text-reader relationship]" so that, in Wolfgang Iser's theory of audience reception, an accurate and more useful "frame of reference can be established" (1675). Such codes are challenging to process in *The Rake* to begin with, since the predominant Augustan idiom inherited from Hogarth invokes certain aesthetic expectations that Existential and Fairy Tale tropes overlay with their own aesthetic pressures. The link for uniting these traditions is the medieval aesthetic admired by both Auden and Stravinsky. Such an exposition fills the apparent blanks between the various literary traditions displayed by the libretto, which nearly all critics identify without being able to interpret in a meaningful way. Ultimately, considering the opera from an audience-centered perspective opens the door to propose possible significance for this

apparent miscellany in a way similar to what Stanley Fish endeavors with Restoration-era poetry (2074).

If *The Rake's Progress* manages both to fascinate and frustrate audiences and critics alike, they are in good company. For all his reservations regarding the execution of the idea of the opera, leading musicologist Joseph Kerman held the piece to be, along with Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, the only serious operatic work worthy of the canon produced up to the middle of the twentieth century (*Drama* 247). Bringing together the consummate craftsmanship of "the world's most famous composer" and "the first English literary figure of comparable stature" to devote serious energy to opera libretti since John Dryden, *The Rake* embodies one possible "relevant contemporary" solution to Kerman's original problem of the viability of theatrical drama portrayed through the combination of words and music (Schiff 137; Carlson 1; Kerman, *Drama* 5, 247). As such, *The Rake* assumes importance beyond its particular artistic interest not only as another exhibit submitted in the unresolved 400-year debate over the legitimacy of opera as medium, but as a key theatrical work on the cusp of the postmodern era (Kerman, *Drama* 14).

A Peculiar Type of Illusionist

If the critical status of opera remains on uncertain ground among musical genres, the literary status of libretti is practically nonexistent. Several factors may contribute to this marginalized state, but the most basic may be the "peculiar but common inclination not to take opera seriously and put it to the same tests of analytical rigor as ... sculpture or poetry" (Schmidgall 23). Joseph Kerman states opera's predicament in stronger terms, singling out the two "most stultifying" attitudes toward the genre as "the one held by musicians, that opera is a low form of music, and the one apparently held by everybody else, that opera is a low form of drama" (Kerman, *Drama* 21). Opera could stand in the same relation to the symphony or concerto as soap opera does to television or film drama—a comparatively trivial medium for dilatory, self-indulgent, or extravagant histrionics that "forgo[es] ... the values of realism in order to seek moments of expressive crisis" (Schmidgall 11). Auden captures something of this perception of frivolousness in "Notes on Music and Opera," the first of four essays from his

1962 essay collection *The Dyer's Hand* that culminate two decades of serious thought about the art form: "no good opera plot can be sensible for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible"; the good opera plot rather offers "as many opportunities as possible for the characters to be swept off their feet" ("Notes" 472, 471). In contrast to the foregrounding of structural and thematic development in the more prestigious musical and literary genres, opera by nature tends to focus on what may be considered the unintellectual phenomena of feeling and sentiment, making it in Auden's view "an imitation of human willfulness ... rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist on having them at whatever cost to ourselves" (470). Furthermore, as Schmidgall points out,

It is also hard to take opera seriously because it is so beautiful. In the sheer triumph of vocal beauty, unfortunately, we are often willing silently to sacrifice other more subtle artistic values, among them dramatic momentum, integrity of plot, intelligibility, and balance. For many who like opera, beauty is sufficient. (23)

Consequently, the spectacle opera presents is easily dismissed with much the same bemusement Samuel Johnson voiced in the eighteenth century when he termed it "an exotic and irrational entertainment" (S. Johnson xxi).

Despite lingering critical ambivalence toward the genre, opera nonetheless has long afforded composers certain opportunities for acclaim or notoriety since, even should the full production fail, the music may endure through performance on the concert stage. Librettists, however, find themselves in a far inferior position, being "seldom remembered, except by experts" (Mason 1). Colin Mason, in his 1952 article on *The Rake*, adds matter-of-factly, "operas come to be regarded as the work of their composer alone." Auden himself had no illusions about his relative position in the process, echoing Mason and others: "Nobody, of course, ever remembers the names of librettists of operas, so that it's not a thing to do unless you really enjoy it" (Auden and Kallman 624). Unlike the myriad cultural and aesthetic strands of thought that color the perception of the operatic genre as a whole, the relatively low status of the librettist seems to have two main sources, both of which Auden took time to consider to the benefit of the

art form: the force of tradition, and the practical demands of creating a text to be sung in the theatre.

Auden's collaboration with Stravinsky, which he called "the greatest honour of [his] life," inspired him to take time "to think carefully about ... his role as a librettist" (Craft and Stravinsky 155; Carlson, "Opera Addict" 71). In doing so he also characteristically thought through the entire historical development of the genre to articulate a sense of the tradition he was entering:

Before Wagner and Verdi in his middle years, no composer worried much about the libretto; he took what he was given and did the best he could with it. This was possible because a satisfactory convention had been established as to the styles and forms in which libretti should be written which any competent versifier could master. This meant, however, that, while a composer could be assured of getting a settable text, one libretto was remarkably like another; all originality and interest had to come from the music (Auden, "Translating Opera Libretti" 493).

In other words, the librettist was traditionally not an artist but a skilled artisan producing more or less polished texts for adaptation to the composer's creative endeavors. As the composer's role was to be a sort of project manager in addition to exercising his musical talent, it followed that if "he accept[ed] a weak libretto he must take the blame and pay the consequences ... since he also [got] all the credit if the libretto [was] good" (Mason 1). At best, Auden says, one might hope for what Vincenzo Bellini's librettist achieved in the text for the aria *Ah, non credea mirarti* from *La Sonnambula*, which is to "suggest to Bellini one of the most beautiful melodies ever written and then leave him completely free to write it" ("Notes" 473). This would seem to be no small task, and more than a little counterintuitive, requiring what Chester Kallman describes as "a peculiar type of illusionist" whose "text must *seem* to tell all" while "providing the music the opportunity of *really* telling all" (Auden and Kallman 620). In Auden's more pragmatic conception, Kallman's clever dictum translates to finding a balance between the "placing of a few key words" that provide an index for emotional tone and the sort of "lucid generality" that remains

emotionally neutral (625, 615). Unfortunately for the literary status of the librettist, such a practice also means that producing a text “possess[ing] poetic merit in [itself] ... is a secondary consideration.”²

Perhaps, then, literary critics have some justification in keeping their distance from libretti. Even the few major literary figures who have embraced the medium underscore the importance of a sort of disappearing act in which “most of the irony, ambiguity, tension, and other elements of inherent verbal interest [are] carefully removed, so that the words will not call attention to themselves as words, but be absorbed into the music” (Spears 289). Auden and Kallman seem to agree, remarking that “striking metaphors and images or subtle verbal ambiguities, which are highly prized in spoken poetry, have to be avoided” (Auden and Kallman 615). This turns out to be less an aesthetic than a practical necessity, since “in a performance, one rarely hears more than one word in ten” (Auden, “Translating Opera Libretti” 484). “You cannot use elaborate metaphors,” Auden says, “because you probably won’t hear them. There is no point in saying, ‘Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care’ because you just would not hear and get the metaphor” (Auden and Kallman 625). The resulting verbal style in *The Rake* becomes “a highly specialized form of poetry” with a “directness unlike anything in even [Auden’s] greatest poems” (Spears 289; Mendelson, *Libretti* xv). With the absence of obvious complexity and nuance, however, come certain reservations regarding how seriously to take the libretto. Monroe K. Spears, an early champion of Auden’s work in the genre of musical theatre, nevertheless cautions that the libretto’s “interest is, considered simply as verse, very limited,” while other commentators struggle to find anything more significant in Auden’s libretti than “the hobbies of a highly gifted poet” (Beach 205).

To claim the libretto of limited interest as verse, however, is not quite to deny it warrants further consideration. The spectrum of comment that Auden’s and Kallman’s libretto continues to accrue indicates its continued importance in the genre’s aesthetic development. Many critics initially seemed to balk at the ambitious sophistication attempted by the text, with Mason lamenting in 1952 that the production “very nearly sinks under the weight of the theories that

have gone into it” (9). By 1956, though, Joseph Kerman had a more nuanced opinion, praising the libretto for being “direct, economical, [and] well-shaped” even while taking issue with the lack of resolution or closure at its ending (*Drama* 238). More recently Edward Mendelson confidently claims for Auden’s libretti a place of honor “surpass[ing] everything written for the musical theatre in English [with] few equals in the richer operatic traditions of Italian, German, and French” (*Libretti* xv). Such grand claims may continue to motivate critical debate. The existing commentary indeed seems to embrace a certain exceptional status for this libretto that, if falling short of Mendelson’s admiration, is nevertheless in line with Kerman’s: “it is indeed unusually subtle for an opera book—though I should certainly not say unduly subtle” (Kerman, *Drama* 240). The question of merit granted, the first step to reconciling the difficulties of interpretation with this libretto is accurately to identify the generic rules governing the text and to process the ways in which the text challenges an audience. Once these two concepts are established, the heterogeneity of the text begins to come into focus as exemplifying Auden’s complex understanding of his historical moment.

CHAPTER II:

“THY RAVISHING PENITENCE BRIGHTENS ALL THE PAST”: *EVERYMAN* AND PLOT STRUCTURE IN *THE RAKE’S PROGRESS*

For more than half a century, reference to *The Rake’s Progress* as a “morality play” has been a convenient, if reductive, commonplace. This, as with much else in the body of critical literature on the piece, can be traced back to musicologist Joseph Kerman’s assessment in the early 1950s, though Kerman’s comes closer than most later appraisals to integrating coherently the work’s manifold sources of inspiration. In *Opera as Drama*, Kerman introduces the *Rake* libretto as a “moral ‘fable,’ a Bunyanesque progress” in which “fairy-tale elements” and “a clear link with classic myth ... blend in with the idealized eighteenth-century detail, color, and locale” (235). This eclectic theatrical world is then peopled with “fictional types in the comic spirit of Fielding.” Kerman’s characterization of the story as a “Bunyanesque” progress is interesting to note, as the reference to John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* shows an awareness of an allegorical, spiritual dimension to the libretto otherwise missing from his dramaturgical evaluation of the work. Oddly, in light not only of Kerman’s recognition of this characteristically medieval narrative arc of spiritual growth but Auden’s own confirmation that his libretto is “a mixture of fairy-story and mediaeval morality play,” critics have not investigated the implications of medieval influence in the text (“World of Opera” 99). This oversight is all the more surprising considering Auden’s frequent allusions in both poetry and prose to the anonymous fifteenth-century morality play *Everyman* and to William Langland’s fourteenth-century allegorical poem *Piers Plowman*. By contrast, criticism of the main oeuvre of Auden’s work does in fact document an enduring preoccupation with medieval literature.

Auden and Medieval Literature

The highest-profile product of Auden’s fascination with Middle English poetry and medieval modes of thought must be the Pulitzer-prize-winning poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), which was the last major work he completed before beginning the *Rake* libretto. Several other

pieces throughout his body of work also support Auden's claim that Middle English poetry was among his "strongest, most lasting influences" ("Making" 42). Early in his career, he gravitated toward the formal elements of alliterative meter as "an alternative to both traditional stress-syllabic meters and to the modernists' free verse" (Phelpstead 456). Auden's early poems frequently intermingle phrases adapted from Old and Middle English sources with his own tenor of "foreboding and threat" (Mendelson, *Selected Poems* xix).

Examples of this phase in Auden's development include the poem "The Secret Agent"³—which Daniel Remein argues translates and adapts the Old English poem *Wulf and Eadwacer*—and the poem published in the *Collected Poems* as "The Wanderer," which borrows its opening line ("Doom is dark and deeper than any sea dingle") from the Middle English alliterative prose homily *Sawles Warde* (Bloomfield 549). Even at this early stage, critics noted that Auden's "adaptation of alliterative meter may be inspired by—but is not constrained by—that meter's earlier history," nor does he attempt to force his modern language into "an obviously artificial diction" (Phelpstead 451). Auden frequently experimented with assimilating formal aspects of Middle English poetry in various contexts, completing about 1300 lines of an alliterative poem inspired by Langland's *Piers Plowman* that took 1930s England as its subject, known simply as "In the year of my youth". This work, left unfinished and unpublished, adopts a satirical tone, juxtaposing allusions to Langland's poem with contemporary references to popular culture:

In the year of my youth when yoyos came in
The carriage was sunny and the Clyde was bright
As I hastened from Helensburgh in the height of summer
Leaving for home in a lounge suit. (qtd. in McDiarmid 271)

Most commentators hear in the first lines of this fragment a strong echo of Langland's opening; comparison also shows what Phelpstead calls Auden's method of "deliberate adaptation":

In a somer seson whan soft was the sonne
I shope me in shroudes as I a shepe were;
In habite as an heremite unholy of works

Went wyde in this world, wondres to here. (Langland 2)

Though lacking a one-to-one correspondence, Auden's lines introduce imagery analogous to Langland's: both poems begin with a speaker in summer sun, simply attired, on the lookout for some sort of novelty. That Langland's speaker hopes for "wondres" while Auden's merely identifies his age as that of yoyos underscores an indictment of contemporary society running throughout Auden's poem.

Adaptations of alliterative meter recur throughout Auden's poetry, but they alone do not represent the full extent of his engagement with medieval literature. Entreaties to "Dame Kind," a medieval personification of nature that "combines maternal qualities with explicitly carnal ones," appear in otherwise contemporary contexts in Auden's poems from approximately the last decade of his life, and Eva Bus finds convincing evidence in her readings of the poems "Death's Echo" and "Danse Macabre" that Auden's employment of medieval imagery and tropes goes beyond "superficial" borrowings to "extend ... the semantic potential" of the borrowed forms and modes of thought (Emig 219; Bus 83, 92). "Danse Macabre," in particular, provides an interesting early precursor to *The Rake*, blending medieval aesthetic with "modern" surface style. The poem employs imagery "[b]orrowed mainly from contemporary culture" and is structured in rhymed quatrains; however, the speaker soon seems to share more and more of the "typical properties owned by the medieval representations of death" (Bus 90). By poem's end, Auden's speaker aligns himself in combat against "the damnable triad, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, who collectively tempt Mankind in morality plays" (91).

Auden later carries a similar coupling of medieval and modern into a theatrical context for the first time in his one-act play *The Dance of Death*, which embraces "all available forms of 'low' theatre—music-hall, pantomime, revue, cabaret"—on a "bare stage with a small jazz orchestra and an Announcer," to fashion a twentieth-century psychological and political interpretation of the popular medieval *danse macabre* conceit (Carpenter 165; Cawley xvi). These works, constituting another category of Auden's "deliberate adaptation" of medieval sources and "reflect[ing] an established historical sense as well as [the] conscious and confident

integration of several forms and techniques from the literary past,” set the stage, so to speak, for his collaboration with Igor Stravinsky on *The Rake’s Progress* (Bus 84). The *Rake* libretto may inherit its imagery from the eight scenes of eighteenth-century English artist William Hogarth’s series of engravings, but its plot structure shows evidence of Auden’s debt to the fifteenth-century morality play *Everyman*.

Tom Rakewell and Everyman

Plot structure in *The Rake’s Progress* is, by far, the aspect of the opera that professional critics and lay-listeners alike have most criticized. For the better part of a century, speculation has attempted to identify a key opera or text that unlocks the logic that drives Tom Rakewell’s ostensibly satirical “search for freedom and pleasure” to turn out to be “complex, equivocal, and very little fun” (Kerman, *Drama* 236-37). Musically, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* stands as *The Rake’s* closest prototype—a comparison endorsed by Auden, Kallman, and Stravinsky—but operas by Verdi and Donizetti have also entered the debate as possible sources of inspiration over the years (Mason 9; Schiff 137; Kerman, *Drama* 243-44). Heather Wiebe even takes the question of influence a step further, arguing for *The Rake* as a sort of compendium whose synthesis of rhetorical features invokes the entire history of opera. Concurrently, literary models from the ancient Greek pastoral tradition, the myth of Venus and Adonis, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* offer protagonists or trajectories sufficiently comparable to Tom Rakewell’s to invite consideration (Chew 243-48; Kerman, *Drama* 236). *The Rake’s* authors offer little guidance, seeming rather to delight in the profusion of conjectures, as Kallman remembers:

[A]fter the premiere, all seized upon Anne’s first act aria as an example of “pure pastiche”; then each gave the name of the composer who had been so “obviously” imitated. So obvious was the imitation that each cited another composer: Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Rossini, Weber, and Verdi! (Auden and Kallman 628)

Auden’s discussions about *The Rake* during and immediately after its premiere particularly add to the bewilderment with an almost kaleidoscopic range of allusions that include glib

comparisons to Theocritus, *Faust*, fairy tales, Anglican catechism, *Peer Gynt*, Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, nursery rhymes, and the Dryden-Purcell semi-opera *King Arthur* (Craft and Stravinsky 167; Auden and Kallman 609, 616, 623-25). Edward Mendelson's collection of Auden's articles and transcripts from this period concerning *The Rake* in his edition of the poet's opera libretti exposes the constant evolution of Auden's thoughts about the libretto, as if he is speaking from within a chaotic whirlwind of creative fervor he characterizes as "a Mad Hatter's Tea-Party" ("Making" 44). By 1967, however, with the distance and clarity of the intervening decade and a half, Auden sees the work differently, observing, "though setting, costumes and diction might be eighteenth century, [we knew the hero] would have to be an embodiment of Everyman, and the libretto a mixture of fairy-story and mediaeval morality play" ("World of Opera" 99). Considering the poet's scrupulous attention to language, the fact that he says "Everyman," as opposed to "an everyman," seems significant in its moral and literary associations.

A cursory comparison of *Everyman* with the *Rake* libretto indeed shows a surprising degree of congruence between the two, not to mention providing an answer to Kerman's observation that *The Rake* is "an opera that is hogged by its eponymous hero as few operas are" ("Reflections" 8). Both works trade variety in dramatic conflict for stories focused on the "progressive abandonment and increasing isolation" of their respective characters, as *Everyman* is betrayed by—and Tom Rakewell's three wishes alienate him from—friends, kinsman, and worldly possessions (Cawley xv). Following their inciting incidents, which for *Everyman* is Death's summons and is Nick Shadow's arrival with news of Tom's inheritance in *The Rake*, both plots track a "decline in fortune ... which shatters the apparent serenity of [the hero's] life, to the depth of his despair, where he can foresee only eternal damnation" (van Laan 466). *Everyman* reaches this point following the scolding he endures from Goods, when he rebukes himself, "Thus may I well my selfe hate" (*Everyman* 14). Shadow similarly scolds Tom in the graveyard for his foolish naivete before reviewing the latter's options for imminent death, after which Tom laments, "O let the wild hills cover me / Or the abounding wave" (Auden and

Kallman 83). Both main characters experience “rapid spiritual growth in the presence of death ... part[ing] with all outward things before [they] can be illumined within” to discover the solution to salvation: “Christ and his sacraments” for Everyman and “Love, first and last” for Tom (Cawley xx; Auden and Kallman 86).

Similar Spiritual Journeys

If such an overview shows suggestive parallels, more detailed analysis reveals that *The Rake* shares with *Everyman*—in contrast to the norms of both medieval morality plays and mainstream opera—a “lean and rapidly moving plot ... concentrate[ed] on a single theme” (“Everyman” 1629; Kerman, *Drama* 238). Beyond this shared theme of “facing death and coming to terms with life,” the two texts register the abandonment and isolation of their protagonists with a comparable progression of four steps: 1) the spiritual insufficiency of carnal pleasures, 2) the false security of ethical obligation, 3) the vanity of materialism, and 4) abject contrition before the possibility of eternal damnation. This underlying structure is somewhat elusive, owing to the contrasting action of the respective plots; however, a careful comparison of contexts and specific language used between the two works renders their similarities evident.

Spiritual Insufficiency of Carnal Pleasures.

After Death leaves him with the shocking summons to answer “How thou hast spente thy lyfe, and in what wyse, / Before the shefe Lorde of paradyse,” Everyman makes his first bid for spiritual and emotional support to Fellowship (*Everyman* 4). The protagonist’s reasoning is sound, citing their close, long-standing relationship: “We haue in the worlde so many a daye / Be good frendes in sporte and playe” (6). Fellowship initially seems to bear out Everyman’s faith in him with protestations of fealty, assuring him “If ony haue you wronged, ye shall reuenged be, / Thoughe I on the grounde be slayne for the” (7). Once Everyman makes the dire spiritual nature of his journey clear, though, Fellowship clarifies the limits of his companionship to decidedly earthly pursuits, explicitly excluding any reckonings in the afterlife:

FELAWSHIP. And yet, yf thou wylte ete and drynke and make good chere,
Or haunt to women the lusty company,

I wolde not forsake you whyle the daye is clere,
Trust me verily.

.....
Now in good fayth, I wyll not that waye [to eternal judgement];
But and thou wyll murder, or ony man kyll,
In that I wyll helpe the with a good wyll. (*Everyman* 9)

These terms resemble remarkably the physical pleasures praised by the chorus of Roaring Boys and Whores in the Brothel scene of *The Rake*:

ROARING BOYS: For what is sweeter to human nature
Than to quarrel over nothing at all,
To hear the crashing of furniture smashing
Or heads being bashed in a tavern brawl?
WHORES: With darting glances and bold advances
We open fire upon young and old;
Surprised by rapture, their hearts are captured,
And into our laps they pour their gold. (Auden and Kallman 55)

Fellowship's dedication to the pursuit of immediate pleasure highlights a clear affinity with the *Rake's* "Sisters of Venus, Brothers of Mars," and also marks him among the "Fellow-worshippers in the Temple of Delight" to whom Nick Shadow, as tempter, brings Tom for his initiation (Auden and Kallman 57). Tom Rakewell arrives at this stage of his journey as a sort of prelapsarian Everyman, whose "mynde is on fleshely lustes and his treasure" and "dredeth not foly," though as Auden points out, "as yet he [Tom] hasn't done anything at all" (*Everyman* 3; Auden and Kallman 622).

In each case, the hero is disabused of the easy seductiveness of carnal pleasures, realizing their transience and inability to connect to deeper spiritual need. This first stage of Everyman's disillusionment is encapsulated in his monologue after Fellowship's unapologetic exit:

Felawshyp here-before with me wolde mery make,
23

And now lytell sorowe for me dooth he take.

It is sayd, 'In prosperyte men frendes may fynde,

Whiche in aduersyte be full vnkynde.' (*Everyman* 10)

Tom's disillusionment is no less bitter, as he reflects on his implied dalliances with both the "marriageable girls" of "well-bred bawds" and "the others ... with their more candid charms" to compare them with Anne Trulove, his "honest," "chaste," "kind" betrothed (Auden and Kallman 61). Feeling frustrated and betrayed by the superficial appetites of human nature, *Everyman* and Tom next appeal for satisfaction from social structures predicated on mutual obligation.

The False Security of Ethical Obligation

As *Everyman* and Tom search for something more spiritually steadfast than the fleeting affiliations afforded by pleasure and debauchery, they attempt to avail themselves of the security of relationships that, by common consensus, oblige an ethical commitment or duty to others. Both works use familial bonds to represent these relationships of obligation. Beyond that fundamental link, the texts diverge in their spiritual and psychological explorations at this second stage more than the simple variations on carnality of the first stage. As with other "deliberate adaptations" in his canon, Auden freely transforms his source to accord with his creative vision of his present work.

Following Fellowship's exit from the stage in *Everyman*, Cousin and Kindred enter spouting conventional platitudes about family bonds:

COSYN. For, wete you well, we wyll lyue and dye to-gyder.

KYNREDE. In welth and wo we wyll with you holde,

For ouer his kynne a man may be bolde. (10)

There is potentially more reason for *Everyman* to hope for aid from family than a fair-weather friend like Fellowship, as they enter the scene open to possible adversity and sacrifice. This progression also delineates an uptick in *Everyman*'s level of concern and desperation when Cousin and Kindred also forsake him, signaling the powerlessness of human intervention to *Everyman*'s reckoning.

Desperation also characterizes Tom's arrival at the second stage of his journey. He has just uttered his second wish, for happiness, following his plaintive opening aria in Act II. Nick Shadow swiftly spins this to his purposes, encouraging him to "act freely" by ignoring the "twin tyrants of appetite and conscience" (Auden and Kallman 62). This is the infamous *acte gratuit*, or motiveless motive, proposed by Andre Gide and popularized by the senseless, unprovoked murder at the center of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. According to this philosophical stance, Shadow explains, Tom should marry Baba the Turk specifically because he neither desires nor has any obligation to her, in effect persuading Tom to what Kerman calls the "delightful" and "cock-eyed" plan to "assert his freedom by marrying" (Drama 239). This decision almost immediately comes back to haunt him, of course, with Anne locating him in London as he arrives home on his wedding day with his new bride, Baba, who waits for him to escort her into his house, nagging, "You know you're bound / By law, dear" (Auden and Kallman 67). Tom, who has just sung of "bury[ing]" his love for Anne, responds to Baba's bid for attention by "squaring his shoulders" to his duty and attempting to reassure her: "I am with you, dear wife" (68).

Though at first appearing to veer far off-course from *Everyman*'s account of ethical obligation, close attention to Tom's grave enactment of Shadow's "fashionably modern" scheme shows a protagonist who seems less the dandy "whining about how boring his life is" than the lost, despairing youth clumsily attempting to embody a disciplined subordination of physical and mental desires to some misunderstood ideal of adult responsibility (Schiff 138). This reading of Tom's marriage to Baba is reinforced by analyses that find in *The Rake* an exposition of nineteenth-century Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's three "spheres of existence"—aesthetic, ethical, and religious—characterized by "distinctive criteria" for success and priorities in life (Westphal, "Soren Kierkegaard"). In the Kierkegaardian model of spiritual development, which strongly influenced Auden throughout the period leading up to *The Rake*, Tom's marriage to Baba represents neither the elaborate joke Tom and Shadow affect it to be in their duet, nor an appeal for redemption through ethical obligation as presented above, but Tom's

progress to the ethical sphere “where, rather as in the famous Platonic ladder, reason is able to conquer the senses” (Chew 243). However, such a reading fails to acknowledge the prevalent emotional tone of the text. As with *Everyman*, in which the bold assurances of Cousin and Kindred call to mind ideals of familial solidarity “through thick and thin” in order to emphasize the devastating distance between ideal and reality, *The Rake*’s sober, solemn threshold scene with Baba intermingles with Tom’s and Anne’s duet of innocent love betrayed to conjure Tom’s heartbroken sense of self-abnegation. Realizing now how far he has strayed from the happiness that would have been his lot with Anne, he resigns himself to attempt to honor his commitment to Baba; as if, having apparently lost the chance at true happiness, he can at least try to be good. Ultimately, Tom’s appeal to ethical obligation is no more successful than *Everyman*’s; like *Everyman*, he spirals further into reckless despair.

The Vanity of Materialism

While questioning the value of materialism is well-worn territory in texts with a religious background or purpose, the placement and function of this third step of *Everyman*’s and Tom’s spiritual isolation is worth noting for its similarity. In both works, the protagonist, disillusioned with humanity, comes at last to the hopeless possibility of material goods playing some sort of role in his salvation. *Everyman*’s situation is a more straightforward critique of the love of worldly possessions, although his petition to Goods—an abstract concept—may also show the first alleviation of the blindness to “ghostly syght” that God laments at the play’s beginning, making *Everyman*’s interactions with the redemptive abstract allegorical characters possible (*Everyman* 2). To be fair, *Everyman* still misunderstands the relationship between the worldly and the spiritual realms, responding to Goods’s assurance that worldly wealth can remedy the “sorowe or aduersyte” *Everyman* has as if God is “in the worlde” to be influenced by riches. *Everyman* says:

For, paraenture, thou mayst before God Almyghty
My rekenynge helpe to clene and puryfye,
For it is sayd euer amonge

That 'money maketh all ryght that is wronge.' (*Everyman* 12-13)

Goods balks at Everyman's lack of comprehension, then admonishes him with the doctrinally sound observation, "Thou sholdest fare moche the worse for me," before the increasingly agitated exchange builds to Goods's scolding of Everyman mentioned above:

Mary, thou brought thy selfe in care,

Whereof I am gladde.

I must nedes laugh; I can not be sadde. (13-14)

In the context of the play, this scene represents the exhaustion of Everyman's appeals to the world and acceptance of "a proper Christian terror of the eternal damnation he has brought upon himself [along with] a transcendent vision of the only force that might save him" (Schiff 138). Only now does he see his spiritual estrangement clearly for the first time; his accusations shift from others to himself, and he admits he is "worthy to be blamed" (*Everyman* 14).

Tom's stones-into-bread machine debacle in the *Rake* accomplishes precisely the same dramatic effect for his spiritual journey, even if he cloaks his lack of "ghostly syght" in superficially noble rhetoric. Explaining the dream of his most abstract wish to Nick Shadow, Tom says:

I had devised a marvellous machine,

An engine that converted stones to bread

Whereby all peoples were for nothing fed.

I saw all want abolished by my skill

And earth become an Eden of good-will. (Auden and Kallman 72)

Essentially, Tom's play here is, like Everyman's appeal to Goods, an appeal to materialism. Where Everyman assumes his accumulation of worldly riches reflects favorably on—or at least can enhance—his moral worth, Tom assumes a "marvellous machine" that abolishes "all want ... by [his] skill" will help him accumulate enough good will to offset his moral failings and render him "forgiven all [his] past / For one good deed, deserv[ing of] dear Anne at last" (Auden and Kallman 72-73). Shadow underscores the monetary parallel between Everyman's material goods

and Tom's machine in the concluding portion of the scene through both his "worldly-wise" invitation to the audience to "Invest ... And praise the folly that pays dividends" as well as his reminder to Tom that the machine "must be manufactured in great quantities" before it can be advertised and sold (Auden and Kallman 73-74). Tom is careful in his insinuations of virtue, pitching the machine as an "excellent device" that "shall excite [mankind] To hallelujahs of delight / And ecstasy extreme" through its miraculous remedy of "Toil, hunger, poverty, and grief" (73). Despite this, the improbable "engine" through which "Man shall re-enter Paradise" seems to mask the protagonist's stubbornly prideful nature. Like *Everyman's*, Tom's increasingly desperate attempts to alleviate his spiritual estrangement are directed outward, as if to circumvent the necessity of self-accusation and eventual contrition. This lack of self-awareness seems to be what Auden had in mind: "Here the temptation is to do good through magic without having to change—good works without having to change yourself" (Auden and Kallman 622).

Understanding the spiritual perspective of the *Rake* is also helped by recognizing the reworking of *Everyman's* "goods" (accumulated wealth) so that Tom's machine reads as both "goods" and "good works." Unlike the neat contrast of opposites between Goods and Good Deeds in *Everyman*, the stones-into-bread machine portrays both as "obviously absurd" paths to salvation since they do not depend on internal change (Auden and Kallman 622). As Auden's remarks suggest, continuing the psychological if not the doctrinal parallel to *Everyman*, willingness to recognize one's spiritual failures and inadequacies is key. This is a recurring idea in Auden's work following his reconciliation and recommitment to the Christian faith in 1940. *The Age of Anxiety*, published in 1947, contains this characteristic expression of Auden's view, courtesy of the inebriated musings of Malin, one of Auden's four fictitious New Yorkers, after a night spent attempting—and failing—to connect with three strangers at a bar:

We would rather be ruined than changed,

We would rather die in our dread

Than climb the cross of the moment

And let our illusions die. (*Longer Poems* 350)

Tom, having seemingly exhausted all possible categories of spiritual fulfillment in the world without filling the “gap ... in [his] heart,” comes very close to just this sort of end in the graveyard (Auden and Kallman 61). Moreover, unlike *Everyman*’s, Tom’s salvation—in the person of Anne Trulove—has actually pursued him in his folly and found him despondent, yet unrepentant. Even when faced with eternal damnation, his refusal to change or let go of his illusions (or, more properly, delusions) never quite seems to leave him. That Tom’s extravagant rhetoric never really ebbs enough for anything like the directness of *Everyman*’s defeated lament is consistent with Auden’s other depictions of modern hubris. Tom’s “proper Christian terror” does, however, show subtly in the sudden vulnerability of a few of his lines after Shadow confronts him with the grim options of “Steel, halter, poison, gun” (Auden and Kallman 83). The note of avoidance in Tom’s “O let the wild hills cover me / Or the abounding wave” is consonant with his Act I disinterest in job prospects while highlighting his fundamental immaturity in its obvious melodrama, as if it is the panic of the spoiled child who realizes the seriousness of consequences incurred too late to turn back. When Tom next cries pathetically, “Why did an uncle I never knew / Select me for his heir?” we realize he is only moments away from recognizing his blameworthy state. At this point Nick Shadow, perhaps delaying for Tom’s expected moment of self-accusation, “plays the pence of hope to yield the guineas of despair” and proposes the card game for his soul, which the chastened Tom agrees to with a new sense of humility, muttering, “My heart is wild with fear, my throat is dry, / I cannot think, I dare not wish” (Auden and Kallman 85, 84). In an opera propelled by wishes, Tom’s new-found dread marks a significant shift in his awareness of his spiritual peril, bringing him to the final stage of his soul’s earthly journey.

Abject Contrition

Having brought their heroes to a visceral grasp of the precarious position of their eternal souls, both texts turn to examinations of penance and redemption. *Everyman*, rooted as it is in the “medieval Catholic doctrine concerning Holy Dying,” presents a stark contrast between the

worldly characters of the first half of the play, who show no compassion for Everyman's predicament but rather flee his company post-haste, and the sanctified spiritual characters of the second half, who patiently lead him through penance to contrition and the "holy sacrament and oyntement" necessary for his redemption (Cawley xx; *Everyman* 21). A. C. Cawley's introduction to his Middle English edition of *Everyman* addresses the play's prevalent verbal repetition, arguing that the poet's use of it is deliberate and "didactically effective," variously "sharpen[ing]" the "contrast" between characters or highlighting important links between concepts (e.g. Death and Goods; Fellowship, Kindred, and Strength) (xxvi). Such efforts underscore the depth of textual artistry on display, but the play's action juxtaposing Goods and Good Deeds at its midpoint supplies ample evidence of the spiritual reassurance and hope motivating the plot. After the abandonment of Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods, which reaches its climax with Goods's mocking of Everyman's distress, Good Deeds offers a first glimpse of compassion, saying, "Eueryman, I am sory of your fall / And fayne would I helpe you and I were able" (*Everyman* 15). This opens a path of hope beyond the spiritual powerlessness of worldly goods or reliance on mortal good will to aid Everyman's reckoning, marking the turning point for the hero's fortunes. Subsequently a growing confidence builds momentum to the end of the play.

Everyman's self-serving choices have left Good Deeds "colde in the grounde ... vnder the fete" of the protagonist's "soules heauynes," but the latter's "increasing awareness of his ... spiritual sickness" and fresh, grateful sense of priorities inspire guidance from Knowledge, who escorts him to Confession (15; Cawley xxii). From Confession Everyman receives a "precyous iewell ... [w]hiche is penaunce stronge that [he] must endure," physically rebuking his flesh in order to secure the "oyle of forgyuenes" with which to revive Good Deeds (*Everyman* 17). Knowledge then presents Everyman with a "garment ... [w]hiche is wette with [his] teres" called Contrition, and Good Deeds urges him to put it on for his "hele" since Knowledge has pointed out:

It is a garment of sorowe;

Fro payne it wyll you borowe.
Contrytyon it is
That getteth forgyuenes;
He pleaseth God passynge well. (19)

Now purified by grace, Everyman briefly enjoys a reunion with his natural gifts—Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits—in their innocent state, though they forsake him upon his announcement of intent “in to [the] caue [to] crepe / And tourne to erth, and there to slepe” (24). Everyman’s spiritual growth shows in his comparatively composed reaction to each as they depart; we see none of the histrionics that earlier attended the betrayals of Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods. Reassured that Good Deeds will accompany him to speak in his defense, Everyman enters the grave with a prayer. Knowledge presides over the scene, reminding us that “Good Dedes shall make all sure” and remarking on the “aungelles syng[ing] / And mak[ing] grete ioy and melody / Where Euerymannes soule receyued shall be” (27). An offstage angel corroborates Knowledge’s claims and Doctor comes onstage to “point the moral of the play”—“after deathe amendes may no man make,” but “he that hath his accounte hole and sounde, / Hye in heauen he shall be crounde” (Mason 6; *Everyman* 27).

Compared with *Everyman*, the space devoted by *The Rake’s Progress* to the final step of Tom’s spiritual journey is highly compressed. While the first seven of the nine scenes comprising the opera seem dedicated to reconfiguring Everyman’s implied exploits to depict Tom’s first surrender to temptation along with building Anne up to a personification of Christian agape, Tom’s confession, penance, contrition, and redemption all transpire rapidly in the final two scenes. Possibly in keeping with the modern (and postmodern) view of lamentable (or unavoidable) breakdowns in order and meaning, the phases of that redemption—or “partial redemption,” according to Kerman—do not appear in their orthodox sequence (“Reflections” 9). The result is a fraught spiritual struggle that trades steady, reassuring doctrine for the blind desperation Auden saw as symptomatic of modernity.

In the first place, Tom's despairing bid for redemption centers not on giving "acquyнтаunce" for his transgressions as in *Everyman*, but on his irrational "leap of faith" during the card game with Nick Shadow in the graveyard (*Everyman* 18). Gone is Knowledge's calm confidence in the "clensynge ryuere" of Confession (16). Tom makes the radical, illogical choice to put his faith and trust in Love (symbolized by the Queen of Hearts playing card he saw Nick cast to the ground after its first appearance), "throw[ing] away weakness and pride"—as well as rationality—just in time to save his soul (Kerman, *Drama* 237). Like *Everyman*'s "garment of sorowe" (Contrition), Tom's leap of faith "borowe[s]" him "fro payne" (*Everyman* 19). In retaliation for this unforeseen humility, Nick Shadow afflicts Tom with madness, leaving him in "a world completely of the present, that has no future and no past" (Auden and Kallman 622). This is the penance exacted for one who has "always refused" the present, living a "manic-depressive" existence between the "possibilities for the future" and "guilt and despair" of the past (623, 621). In consequence of his insanity, Tom is consigned to Bedlam, which the chorus of madmen call "these caverns of the dead," establishing yet another subtle link to *Everyman*, who is deserted by Discretion before "thrust[ing]" himself "in to the grounde" (Auden and Kallman 88; *Everyman* 25).

Anne, as personification of Christian compassion, completes her quest to reunite with Tom in the madhouse—the world of *The Rake*, reflecting Auden's view of modernity, admits no analogue to *Everyman*'s House of Salvation—and he kneels at her feet, crying, "O merciful goddess, hear the confession of my sins":

In a foolish dream, in a gloomy labyrinth
I hunted shadows, disdain[ing] thy true love;
Forgive thy servant, who repents his madness,
Forgive Adonis and he shall faithful prove. (Auden and Kallman 89)

Everyman's own confession in the House of Salvation strikes this exalted poetic mode of supplication also:

O gloryous fountayne, that all vnclennes doth claryfy,
32

Wasshe fro me the spottes of vyce vnclene,
That on me no sinne may be sene. (*Everyman* 16)

Where *Everyman*'s confession is the first stage in an established and sanctified procedure, however, Tom's confession occurs as more of a formality. The internal change, the critical act of faith, has already happened in the graveyard and Tom's mind has given "acquyenttaunce," suffering not only the fact of his madness but the testing of his faith in Anne by the other inmates of Bedlam, who insist "She will never come to you. [...] Madness cancels every vow; / She will never keep it now" (Auden and Kallman 88). Anne's response to Tom's confession, too, indicates his already-redeemed status:

What should I forgive? Thy ravishing penitence
Blesses me, dear heart, and brightens all the past.
Kiss me, Adonis: the wild boar is vanquished. (89)

Despite the jumbling of stages in Tom's redemption, the remainder of the libretto mirrors *Everyman* more or less faithfully, supporting the notion that "the final chorus of madmen may be taken as an angelic choir, indicating that [Tom] has gone to heaven" (Auden and Kallman 617). *The Rake* transforms Knowledge's report in *Everyman* of hearing "aungelles synge" after *Everyman* descends into the grave into Anne's sublime lullaby for Tom, which the "tormented" madmen call "heavenly strains" of music (*Everyman* 27; Auden and Kallman 90). After Tom falls asleep, Anne sings a duet with her father underscoring—like the Angel's short speech at the end of *Everyman*—the transience of earthly life, singing in part, "Every wearied body must / Late or soon return to dust" (Auden and Kallman 91). Finally, the main cast comes out in front of the curtain, to the edge of the stage, without wigs or beards, to deliver the epilogue, which "points the moral"—"For idle hands / And hearts and minds / The Devil finds / A work to do"—while redirecting the meaning or intent of the dramatic action to the audience much like Doctor, who fills the same function in *Everyman* (Auden and Kallman 92-93).

Of the alterations to medieval Catholic doctrine in the *Rake* libretto, perhaps the most interesting is the fact that Tom receives his penance from Nick Shadow, "his domestic Satan"

(Kerman, *Drama* 237). Such a connection makes sense in the context of Shadow's dual identity in the work as tempter and Jungian subconscious, giving dramatic distinctiveness to the "modern" Protestant concept of "personal" relationships with God and Devil. Indeed, Auden had already advanced a strikingly similar role for the Devil in his *New Year Letter*, written in 1940:

You have no positive existence,
Are only a recurrent state
Of fear and faithlessness and hate,
That takes on from becoming me
A legal personality[.] (*Longer Poems* 92)

Auden's apostrophe to "poor cheated Mephistopheles" here seems to imply a fundamentally abstract concept of negativity that only assumes form in sympathy with one's unique array of flaws and insecurities—a subtle anti-self dedicated to undermining one's certainty (91). This impetus to doubt, however, "point[s] us the way to find truth out." Like Nick Shadow's, the Devil's role in *New Year Letter* ultimately comes into focus as fundamentally ironic in that his extravagant efforts to tempt mankind to sin prove to be "so much more effective ... / Than our well-meaning stupid friends / In driving us toward good ends":

For how could we get on without you
Who give the *savoir-faire* to doubt you
And keep you in your proper place,
Which is, to push us into grace? (91-92)

The uplifting idea of Nick "push[ing Tom] into grace" may be affirming, but the reality of Tom's madness, confinement in Bedlam, and death suggest a darker religious outlook much more attuned to the moral climate of *The Age of Anxiety*. Misleadingly subtitled "A Baroque Eclogue," *The Age of Anxiety* reveals itself to be baroque only in its extravagant variations on two medieval literary methods of operation: alliterative verse and personification allegory. Near the end of this poem, the character Malin ponders a bleak future, offering what could be a concise account of Tom's trajectory in *The Rake*, musing on human pride, "the great brain which began / With lucid

dialectics / Ends in a horrid madness” (Auden, *Longer Poems* 350). The mood of impending doom and psychological crisis depicted in this long poem, the closet drama completed just before Auden began work with Stravinsky on *The Rake*, is in many ways refined and dramatized in the collaborative medium of the opera—collaborative in both the “corporate personality” of authorship as well as the semantic complexity of combining text and music—in a way that is unavailable to “Auden’s [four] burned-out Manhattanites,” whose “inward monologues” and “dream-soliloquies” sound, “[a]fter several pages of the poem,” like “Auden fourfold” (Maxwell, “Auden’s *Age of Anxiety*”). Indeed, the *Rake*’s “use of the simplest language of song to dramatize the most complex issues of history, psychology, and religion” inspired Auden to a new verbal subtlety that begins to erase the distinctions that render comprehensible his “established historical sense as well as [the] conscious and confident integration of several forms and techniques from the literary past” (Mendelson, *Libretti* xv; Bus 84). Though *Everyman* forms the structural and psychological foundation for the narrative arc of *The Rake’s Progress*, the libretto text uses “the simplest language of song” to blend and juxtapose several literary traditions in dynamic counterpoint.

Next Steps: Allusion, Closure, and Audience Reception in *The Rake’s Progress*

A continuation of this project next needs to establish the background and context for Auden’s aggressive experimentation with allusion in the 1940s beginning with “New Year Letter,” which develops the “jolly didacticism” of “Letter to Lord Byron” into “a fluent, witty, aphoristic” verse epistle in “the Augustan tradition” of Pope and Dryden (D. Mason 116; Deane 172). This first major poem of Auden’s emigration to America reflects the poet’s attempts to analyze and understand the underlying causes of the cultural crisis that brought a wave of “artists, philosophers, and theologians”—among them Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, Igor Stravinsky, Andre Breton, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Thomas Mann, and Paul Tillich—to the United States in the years following Hitler’s rise to power in Germany (Callan 172, 164; Deane 172). What results amounts to a meltdown of the Western intellectual tradition as the

“conservative order of [the poem’s] syntax and metre [struggle] to restrain the anarchic whirlwind of its ideas”:

Rhymed octosyllabic couplets give it the air of a patterned, rational argument, but this eighteenth-century manner ... masks a restless idiosyncratic exploration of vast historical changes and uncertainties. Phrases from a half-dozen languages, and quotations from Plato, Augustine, Wagner, Eliot, and dozens of others, fall neatly into metrical step at Auden’s command, but the poem cannot contain his thought or allusions, so still more quotations, together with verses and aphorisms by Auden himself, spill over into eighty-five pages of “Notes,” where they are mixed more variously than anything in *The Waste Land* or *The Dunciad Variorum* (Mendelson 100-101).

Stylistically, this exponential amplification of Modernist erudition—together with Auden’s developing dissatisfaction with his early “ominous, obscure, and politically engaged” voice—began an evolution toward a new aesthetic that was not only “rational, eloquent, and religious,” but increasingly open to multiplicity (Kirsch 175).

The *Rake* libretto, which was substantially finished by 1948, appears toward the end of this decade of evolution, after the explosion of allusive intensity represented by “New Year Letter” has settled into the “dream-soliloquies” of *The Age of Anxiety*, which, along with their alliterative meter, “suggest firelight and the mead-hall” (Maxwell, “Auden’s *Age of Anxiety*”). If *The Age of Anxiety* shows a subtlety in its allusiveness that contrasts that of “New Year Letter,” the practical demands of Auden’s work on *The Rake* lead to the paring down of “irony, [obvious] ambiguity, tension, and other elements of inherent verbal interest” even further (Spears 289). What remains are key words and plot points that connect in certain patterns of antecedent and allusion—namely, to eighteenth-century Augustan, existential, fairy-tale, and medieval literary traditions—which, while enriching the “mythical resonance” and sequential design of Hogarth’s “bourgeois cautionary tale,” complicate any satisfactory sense of closure after the final curtain (Auden, “World” 99; Auden and Kallman 617).

To begin with, there is the surface style of the work, an eighteenth-century homage inspired by Mozart on Stravinsky's part and Dryden and Pope on Auden's (Carlson, "Opera Addict" 79). Perhaps channeling Pope's own fondness for textual echoes ranging from biblical and mythological to Shakespearean, Auden superimposes the thematically appropriate Greek myth of Venus and Adonis onto the straightforward story of Tom Rakewell's descent from hubris to insanity. Kerman summarizes the work's adaptation of this classical myth:

We ... see Tom reject Anne Trulove in order to follow his desire for freedom and pleasure in the brothels, fairs, and of the Stock Exchange of London. In 'a year and a day' he is in the clutch of Hades ... but is half-redeemed by Anne's love: not with a clear temporal division, as in the myth, but with a simultaneous one; he is both on earth and in hell at the same time – that is, insane. In Bedlam, Tom imagines himself Adonis in Hades, surrounded by Minos, Orpheus, and others, awaiting the return of Aphrodite. It is spring again, and she comes. But then she leaves for good; now we need the eighteenth-century story, and the twentieth-century moral. (*Drama* 236)

Through this lens the libretto adheres to an unproblematic trajectory synchronized with the Hogarth original, "concerning a character who receives his just desserts for a life of dissipation" (Chew 241). The primary dissatisfaction with closure at this literal level of the text seems to concern what Colin Mason calls a "disparity of style" (8). This view, in which Kerman and Mason concur, sees a "decisive departure from the eighteenth-century view when [Auden] pitied the Rake and set about analyzing him," thereby failing to maintain "the impersonal classical manner to the end" (*Drama* 246; C. Mason 8). "Once our sympathies are engaged," says Kerman, "we want to know the destination of the Rake's progress, and what Tom feels about it, and what Anne feels about it, and what the dramatist feels about it" (*Drama* 246). Concerns with the absence of explicit closure to *The Rake* continue to provoke dissatisfaction, with Kerman (more than ever convinced of the mastery and nuance of the Stravinsky-Auden-Kallman team) still pondering the issue forty-five years later in the liner notes to conductor John Eliot Gardiner's recording of *The Rake* performed with the London Symphony Orchestra, observing

that “[b]oth main characters get lost in a diffuse aura of restrained elegy, without completing the psychological journeys that have heretofore engaged them – and us” (“Reflections” 11).

Against this primary arc of descent, Auden, “in order to make each step of the Rake’s Progress unique,” developed the idea to differentiate Hogarth’s various temptations to mere financial irresponsibility (Craft and Stravinsky 161). As the “stages of [Tom’s] flight from reality” came into focus, they also came to bear Auden’s “unmistakable mark of yoking any undertaking of his to contemporary philosophical ideas” (Auden and Kallman 618; Callan 215). In this case, Auden’s readings of Kierkegaard and Andre Gide influenced his reimagining of the Rake’s journey. Accordingly, Hogarth’s brothel scene becomes the temptation to lust and pleasure (“Le Plaisir”), the marriage to the rich old maid becomes the temptation to be “fashionably modern ... [i]n order to assert [one’s] freedom of will from the compulsions of Passion and Reason” (“L’acte gratuit”), and Hogarth’s scene of Tom in Fleet debtor’s prison with “get-rich-quick” schemes indicated by a telescope and an alchemy experiment in the background becomes the temptation to indulge in utopian schemes effected “by magic without having to change” (“Il desire devenir Dieu”) (Craft and Stravinsky 161; Auden, “World” 101; Auden and Kallman 622). If these adjustments seem willfully cerebral and obscure, “the results of too much rationalizing” as Colin Mason reflects, or a “soulless and idea-driven” scenario by authors “too self-conscious about producing a modern masterpiece” as Schiff says, they present the possibility of a second, ascendant narrative arc following the Kierkegaardian trajectory originally pointed out by George McFadden (C. Mason 9; Schiff 137). Through this lens the libretto moves from Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage (represented by Mother Goose’s brothel), with its focus on amusement, pleasure, and immediate gratification, through the ethical stage (Tom’s motiveless marriage to Baba), embodying a life of disciplined action and subordination of physical and mental appetites to duty, to the religious stage (introduced with the stones-into-bread machine and reaching its climax in the graveyard), characterized by the paradox that, while the individual is powerless to control the world in which he lives, the mature exercise of his free will is essential not only to his place in that world, but to the status of his soul. In this reading,

the madhouse scene represents not the final doom of a life given over to lewdness and depravity but the ultimate transcendence of faith over reason, indicated by Tom's final lines before Nick Shadow steals his sanity:

Rakewell [*spoken*].

I wish for nothing else.

[*Sung. Exalte.*] Love, first and last, assume eternal reign;

Renew my life, O Queen of Hearts, again. (Auden and Kallman 86)

In Kierkegaard's terms this moment is the triumphant leap into the absurd of revealed religion, as Tom recognizes the futility of calling on the "Queen of Hearts" on three accounts: 1) the literal card should not be in the deck, 2) on the symbolic level, he turned Anne (his "Queen of Hearts") away in Act II, and 3) he knows he is unworthy of the intercession of "Love, too frequently betrayed" (Auden and Kallman 57). By making the radical, irrational choice to appeal to an omnipotent force despite the fact that he has lost all hope for aid, Tom redeems his soul and transitions to a higher spiritual plane. This positive reading of the libretto is an attractive alternative to the bleak Hogarthian parable, and forms the basis for arguments from Bru, Carlson, and Chew that go a long way toward recontextualizing Tom Rakewell's somber end. However, this interpretation may be more satisfactory when reading the libretto in isolation from the musical factors involved with theatrical performance. In the theater, the problem of closure, aside from the cognitive dissonance of processing what appear to be diametrically opposed dramatic arcs—the literal one of ruin and the philosophical one of illumination—is that the music of the Bedlam scene, with its "aura of restrained elegy" and loss, seems at odds with any mood of redemption.

The decision to use "the three wishes" as a structural device, as well as Auden's later confirmation that the *Rake* libretto is "a mixture of fairy-story and mediaeval [sic] morality play" also invite an audience's consideration of the narrative arc of the opera through the lens of fairy tales ("World" 99). The opera is ostensibly satirical rather than tragic, and Auden's explanation

of the significance of wishing in fairy tales seems to fit with the expectations established by the beginning of the libretto:

Wishing is not the sole cause of events in the fairy tale but the license it is given prevents the fairy tale from arousing any strong emotions in the audience. This, however, is one of the peculiar pleasures the fairy story affords—that it can take images [that,] in our dreams, arouse violent emotions of desire or terror, or it can inflict horrible punishments on the wicked ... which in real life would be acts of sadism, and make them all *playful*. (“Wish Game” 213)

In fact, Kerman reminds us “it is a matter of some importance that we always laugh at Tom” (*Drama* 240). This reading of the opera, then, reinforces the primary arc of decent, but foregrounds the “playful” quality of the satire. Tom’s misfortunes may be sad, but they also make us chuckle; and the storybook frame of reference encourages us to see in his bad end a good moral, delivered dutifully in the Epilogue:

For idle hands

And hearts and minds

The Devil finds

A work to do

A work, dear Sir, dear Madam,

For you and you. (Auden and Kallman 93)

In order to follow this reading, though, the audience must bypass the same stumbling block as in the redemptive existential reading above—the wrenching drama of the Graveyard and Bedlam scenes sabotages its psychological continuity. In the case of this interpretation the frustration is perhaps greater, as Auden explains: “When a fairy story ends unhappily, we do not feel that we have been told an unpleasant truth; we merely feel that the story has been broken off in the middle” (“Wish Game” 215).

As expounded in this chapter, the medieval reading of *The Rake* follows a trajectory of spiritual ascent. This reading reinforces the Kierkegaardian interpretation without running afoul

of the musical element, which seems from this perspective to mirror Tom's psychological state throughout the work. The "disparity of style" observed in the primary narrative arc is revealed to be both effective and structurally logical.

For an audience, *The Rake's Progress* prompts great confusion: what are we to make of the multiplicity of narratives coexisting in the work? Even without considering the dramatic contribution of Igor Stravinsky's complex musical score—impressively allusive in its own right—the work presents diverse patterns of narrative logic without privileging any single interpretation. This ambivalence marks Auden's transition to "a new, essentially postmodernist and antimodernist, view of the relationship between art and the world" in its "taste for hybridization, juxtaposition, and, above all, game playing," but it may also positively embody Auden's view of the struggle of maintaining faith in the modern world (Kirsch 176; Baker 23).

NOTES

1. Humphrey Carpenter reports in his biography of Auden that “among Middle English poetry he was particularly attracted by *Piers Plowman*,” and in *The Dyer’s Hand* Auden wrote that “Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences” (Carpenter 55; *Dyer’s* 42). For confirmation that this source still influenced Auden’s work around the time of *The Rake’s Progress*, we merely need to refer to *The Age of Anxiety*, the long poem employing variations on medieval alliterative verse and extended meditations on spirituality completed immediately prior to the first communication from Stravinsky.

2. This view, like the ambivalent attitude toward Opera’s artistic worth, has a long tradition in English literature. Here is John Dryden reflecting on his collaboration with Henry Purcell on the 1691 semi-opera *King Arthur*: “But the Numbers of Poetry and Vocal Musick, are sometimes so contrary, that in many places I have been oblig’d to cramp my Verses, and make them rugged to the Reader, that they may be harmonious to the Hearer: Of which I have no Reason to repent me, because these sorts of Entertainment are principally design’d for the Ear and Eye; and therefore in Reason my Art on the occasion, ought to be subservient to his.” (Dryden 7)

3. Auden published many poems under alternate titles throughout his career. For consistency, titles are quoted in conformity with *Collected Poems* (2007), ed. Edward Mendelson.

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