

**Appropriating Myth: Exoticism, the American West, and the New Woman
in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West***

*No other nation has taken a time and place from its past and produced
a construct of the imagination equal to the America's creation of the West.
And having created it, America promptly and successfully exported it,
so that it became the property of much of the world.*

-- David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West* (vii)

*The real emancipation of women began well before Susan B. Anthony
marched and carried signs declaring that women, too, were created equal.
Genuine freedom began when some unnamed, obscure woman of the
border regions looked at the world from atop a horse and realized
how different and fine the view was, how far she could go, and who she might become.*

-- Joyce Gibson Roach, "Introduction: Cowgirls and Cattle Queens" in Sara Massey's *Texas
Women on the Cattle Trail* (20)

Introduction

I can hardly speak of myth without conjuring images of the ancient gods and goddesses, remembering the theories of Roland Barthes, Joseph Campbell, and Claude Levi-Strauss, or contemplating the life processes of birth, death, and resurrection. Furthermore, the link between opera and myth is so pervasive that humanities scholar, Vlado Kotnik, makes the following observation: "When speaking about opera within myth and myth within opera, it is evident that the history of opera with its first setting greatly showed its primordial tendency for myth" (326). As I examine the titles of the earliest operas, I find truth in this statement: *Orpheus*, *Euridice*, and *Dafne*. Moreover, operatic traditions throughout the centuries reveal a trend toward myth. Celebrity, ghosting of star productions, and vocal and musical tradition all provide a taste of the

areas in which myth participates in the making of opera (or opera in the making of myth). In this paper, I examine the ways in which Puccini's opera, *La Fanciulla del West*, perpetuates the exoticized myth of the American West. Further, I argue that the mythological foundation of the setting allows for the central female character's (Minnie's) agency and for my reading of her as a "New Woman" in the opera.

Before continuing this exploration, I find it important to ensure an understanding of "myth" as I intend it. In his germinal book, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explores the meaning of myth in contemporary society. He defines "myth in a bourgeois society" as "*depoliticized speech*. One must naturally understand *political* in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world; one must above all give an active value to the prefix *de-*: here it represents an operational movement" (143). Barthes goes on to argue that it is the depoliticization of speech that renders things "innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (143). A myth, then, according to Barthes is a particular social construction of "truth" (typically rendered by the bourgeois so as to maintain the status quo). I agree with Barthes' assessment that social constructedness is a key element of myth, but I also believe that it is important to realize myth's ability to make safe disruptions from the accepted social norms, as I explicate through Kotnik's ideas below.

Kotnik argues that part of the effectiveness of myth in opera relies on the "distance it keeps from everyday reality which is a marvelous advantage and privilege of the myth because only in this manner is it possible to play it with the effect of reality. By using myth we can say more, we can express even what in some formal language could be too scandalous, shocking, indecent, improper, or offensive for the audience" (325). I imagine that this reasoning is, in part,

why Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* was originally so successful. The mythologized American West provides a world in which violent, masculine behavior is transported to the feminine realm without de-feminizing the heroine. As I will later explicate, throughout the course of the opera Minnie never runs, lassos, or yells and yet she is seldom characterized by critics in light of her feminine characteristics. She is instead primarily referred to as a masculine woman, a New Woman, something to be laughed at, sadly and inappropriately, dismissed. Before turning to this subject, however, let me first place Puccini's *La Fanciulla* within its historical context.

Puccini, Belasco, and the Inception of *La Fanciulla*

The kernel that would become *La Fanciulla del West* began in 1907 when Giacomo Puccini was in New York in order to oversee the American premieres of *Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*. While in New York, Puccini saw several plays but was particularly drawn to David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*. At first the composer dissuaded himself from the American subject matter but he found the "Wild West" seductive. He had witnessed Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West spectacle when the troupe was in Italy in 1890. While it is unclear whether Cody's production was Puccini's first exposure to the mythologized American West, it is known that he was drawn to American literature (Phillips-Matz 202), and American landscape painting. *The Girl* lingered in Puccini's imagination and eventually the composer succumbed to her intriguing power.

While most biographical accounts illustrate only Puccini's interest in the "Wild West," his attendance at Belasco's play, and the premiere of *La Fanciulla*, Randall and Davis' recent publication (2005), *Puccini and the Girl*, significantly expands this narrative. The authors publish a series of Puccini's letters that detail the entire process from the inception of the opera, to Puccini's marital troubles, and to his frustration with the librettists. What is unique about this

new narrative is its detail and its inclusion of previously unpublished primary source material. The new source material allowed the authors to create a book length study of what had previously been regarded as one of Puccini's less successful operas.

The process of *Fanciulla's* creation revealed in these letters is fascinating. Certainly Puccini's interest in the West played a role in his choice of subject matter but after reading many accounts of the opera's inception, I speculate that the composer's identification with David Belasco's artistic approach was also significant in his choice to pursue *Fanciulla*¹. Helen Greenwald argues that both Puccini and Belasco were "obsessed with controlling every aspect" of their "creative output, making countless revisions in the process" (282). She further notes the similarity in artistic approach between the two artists in production. She argues that "Puccini demanded that the motivation and action of the drama be self-explanatory. . . . Given this attitude toward the theater, it is no surprise that Puccini . . . would be taken with the work of a man [Belasco], who, independently and thousands of miles away, developed his own art form from a similar point of view" (283). Greenwald's statement exemplifies the artists' similar approach to realism or "verismo."

Despite the similarities noted by Greenwald, the artists also differed in their approaches. As witnessed in his lighting effects, Belasco was interested in a naturalistic aesthetic on the stage; whereas, Puccini's lighting and scenery cast a more romantic glow. The slight differences between the two artists' conceptualizations can be witnessed in the opening moments of *Fanciulla*. At the outset of the story, "the combination of Belasco's midnight opening and his [depiction of] reveling miners projects a more obviously coarse image, whereas Puccini's early-evening time and long-distance shouts of 'hello' seem to romanticize and soften the same setting

¹ *The Girl of the Golden West* is the second of David Belasco's plays that Puccini adapted into an opera. The first was Belasco's one act, *Madame Butterfly*. Belasco directed the world premieres of both operas.

and characters. Perhaps it is a foreigner's image of the American West" (Greenwald 290). Whether *Fanciulla* is a "foreigner's image" of the American West is debated among the critics, but Toscanini (the conductor for the premiere production) told a *New York Times* reporter that "The music of this opera is Italian, and that we understand . . . but the play is American, and not only American, but Mr. Belasco's. We want every detail to be correct, because other theatres in the future must copy this production. And Mr. Belasco is the man to initiate us in those details" ("Teaching").

Toscanini's suggestion that future productions will copy and thereby ghost² the Metropolitan Opera's premiere of *Fanciulla* helps to further support my attempt to link opera and myth. As noted above, definitions of myth vary but most simply defined, myth is a narrative that explores cultural identity. Even when that term is complicated by scholars such as Barthes, myth remains a narrative meant to influence someone or society (either productively or through ideological manipulation). The ghosting of opera works similarly. Toscanini's statement, here, suggests that Puccini's original production of *Fanciulla* will function mythologically because of its power to influence later productions. The image of the production's premiere is what will come to mind when the opera is referenced in later scholarship or in research for later productions and that image will more often than not pervade those productions in a similar manner.

The composer also points out that David Belasco served as the stage director for the Metropolitan Opera's premiere production of *Fanciulla*³ in 1910. There is documentation that he

² See Marvin Carlson, "Invisible Presences: Performance Intertextuality," *Theatre Research International*. (1994) vol. 19. 111-117 for an explanation of "ghosting." In *Performance: a critical introduction*, Carlson defines ghosting as "the external associations that the continually recycled material of theatre brings in from the external world as well as from previous performance" (48).

³ *Fanciulla* was the Metropolitan Opera's first world premiere by an internationally renowned composer. Needless to say, European opera houses were upset that New York "stole" Puccini's new work but Puccini felt that, due to the subject matter, it was appropriate for his opera to premiere at the Met ("Puccini's New Opera").

attended each rehearsal and that he was widely admired by the cast. Even Puccini answered to Belasco in rehearsal. For example, it is reported in a well known account that Belasco once cried out, “you mustn’t let the Indian tie Johnson . . . All these men hate Johnson and want to see him hanged, but there is such a thing as caste in the West, and if the Indian bound him they would all let him go” (“Teaching”). Puccini must have listened to Belasco’s advice because in the libretto Ashby enters (not Billy) “leading Johnson, who is tied up” (101). About his direction of *Fanciulla*, Belasco says: “I am more interested in this production . . . and prouder to be connected with it, I think, than with almost anything else during my entire career” (“Teaching”). Apparently Puccini was pleased with Belasco’s direction, for in a letter to his wife dated December 7, 1910, he wrote “the rehearsals are excellent. I think it will be a success and let’s hope it will be a big one . . . Belasco has been at all the rehearsals with great interest and love . . . The staging is magnificent” (qtd. in Randall and Davis 105). Unlike Puccini’s work with other collaborators, his collaboration with Belasco went smoothly. Perhaps it is because the men equally respected one another or perhaps the thousands of miles between the two artists provided ample cushioning to curb dissention. Regardless of the cause, the narrative surrounding Puccini and Belasco’s collaboration reveals a rehearsal process unencumbered by the conflict that typified most of Puccini’s collaborative efforts.

La Fanciulla del West

That Puccini was inspired by American landscape painting is evident because *La Fanciulla del West* takes place in a rustic mining town at the foot of the majestic Cloudy Mountains in California. The year is 1849. Act I begins in the Polka, a saloon owned by Minnie, the opera’s heroine. It is the end of the work day and the miners enter the tavern to await the arrival of their beloved Minnie. When Minnie finally arrives she jokingly admonishes the men

for acting up and then lovingly accepts the various gifts they offer to her. While these first few “scenes” allow the audience to acclimate to the setting, the action is not incited until the arrival of Ashby, the Wells Fargo agent. He has heard that a gang of Mexican bandits plan to rob the miners of their gold which they store at the Polka.

The arrival of Johnson (a stranger) causes friction until Minnie calms the miners by vouching for his good intentions as she alone knows him from her past. Minnie once met Johnson while traveling. They were then immediately attracted to one another and apparently that attraction never faded. The sheriff, Rance, who is in love with Minnie, senses her attraction to Johnson and treats him with disdain. When Johnson asks Minnie to dance, she admits that she is nervous because she has never danced before, which metaphorically conveys her virginity. Following the dance, one of the Mexican bandits, José Castro, is brought into the Polka. From him the audience learns that Johnson is really Ramerrez, the leader of the group of bandits. Castro tells the miners he can show them where Ramerrez is hiding out, which lures them out of the tavern so that Johnson can steal the gold. But Johnson refuses to steal from the woman with whom he has fallen in love. Minnie invites Johnson to her house in the mountains to “say goodbye” (72).

Act II takes place at Minnie’s cabin in the mountains. The act begins in a frenzy as Minnie tries to prepare for her guest. From Wowkle, the Indian woman that works for Minnie, the audience learns that Minnie has never had a visitor, a fact that reinforces the insinuation in Act I that Minnie is a virgin. Prior to Johnson’s arrival, Minnie “feminizes” herself. She exchanges her (masculine) work clothing for a corset and her best dress. She places flowers in her hair, removes her gun, spritzes herself with perfume, and puts on gloves and shoes: “I’d like to wear these slippers from / Monterey, / provided they’ll fit me! / Ouch! They’re tight!” (76).

Johnson arrives and the sexual tension builds, both in the music and on stage. Once the tension reaches its peak, Minnie and Johnson kiss (her first kiss):

Johnson: A kiss, one kiss, at least!

Minnie: *(falling into Johnson's arms)*

Here it is, it's yours! (80)

At this pinnacle moment, the stage directions read: "Minnie and Johnson embrace, kissing passionately, oblivious to a gust of wind that suddenly blows open the door and sends snow violently flying inside. Gradually the wind subsides, the door closes by itself, and a calm descends upon the room. The gusts of wind are still heard howling outside" (80). Suddenly the lovers hear sheriff Rance and his gang approaching the cabin and Minnie hides Johnson for fear that Rance will overreact to his presence. Rance bursts through the door and informs Minnie that, not only is her beloved Johnson really the bandit Ramerrez, but also that he learned this information from Ramerrez's lover, Nina Micheltorena (the town "whore"). Minnie is crushed not because Johnson is a thief but because he lied to her about his relationship with Nina.

After Rance departs, Johnson tries to reconcile with Minnie but she will have none of it. Resigned, Johnson leaves but is shot by one of the miners. Minnie hears the gunshot and realizes that the man she loves is in terrible danger. She drags him back into the cabin and hides him in the loft just in time for Rance's return. Rance storms into the cabin, sure that Johnson has sought refuge with Minnie but he cannot find the bandit. The sheriff, with "unbridled passion," sings of his love for Minnie and throws himself upon her: "You see, I'm crazy for you! / I love you! I want you. *(Rance violently grabs Minnie, attempting to kiss her. She fends him off and he chases around the room)* . . . You're wild! You love him! / You want to keep yourself for him! / Yes, I'm going. But I swear to you that he won't have you!" (91). Just as Rance is about to rape

Minnie, a drop of blood falls through the ceiling and lands on his hand. Johnson is discovered. Minnie, in a desperate attempt to save the man she loves, offers to play a game of poker with Rance. If she wins, Rance must let Johnson go. If Rance wins, Minnie sacrifices Johnson and must marry the man she despises. Minnie knows that Rance is a professional gambler so she sneaks a “good hand” into her stocking. Rance loses and is disgruntled but he stays true to his word and leaves Minnie’s cabin for good.

The final act of the opera takes place on the street. The manhunt for Johnson continues but he is soon caught, tied, and brought before the mining camp. The miners accuse Johnson of committing a series of murders. Johnson protests. He admits that he has thieved in the past but he claims that he is no murderer and that since he has fallen in love with Minnie, he has changed his ways. The miners plan to hang Johnson for the crimes of which he is accused and Johnson says he will die willingly if they promise to let Minnie believe he escaped and is living safely in a far away land. Just as he is about to be hanged, Minnie gallops in on horseback to save the day. She pleads with the miners, reminding them that she has always loved them. She has served as their mother, their sister, their teacher, and their friend. If they love her, she argues, then they will grant her the opportunity to love whom she wishes. Eventually she wins them over and against the sheriff’s protests, the miners allow Johnson to go free. Johnson and Minnie set off for a new life in a new town. The opera’s happy ending maintains a sense of melancholy. The miners are sad to see Minnie leave and Minnie is sad to leave the land that intrinsically defined her sense of self.

Exoticism and the Myth of the American West

It should be obvious from this description that Puccini provides a romanticized view of the American West. In doing so he situates the West as “other,” and therefore essentially

exoticizes it. In *Fanciulla*, Puccini paints a West idealized and influenced by Bret Harte and David Belasco. In an early *New York Times* review of *Fanciulla*, Richard Aldrich writes that “M. Puccini let it be known that he wanted an American libretto upon his first visit” to America. Aldrich further asserts that Puccini “looked longingly toward the ‘good Western American.’ . . . He knew it at that time from Bret Harte’s stories. Mr. Belasco’s play revealed it to him further” (col. 1). Here, I will focus on the myth of the American West (as presented in *Fanciulla*) as it has been appropriated by multiple parties: most obviously by Puccini, an Italian native, and by extension all of Europe, but also by Americans living east of the Mississippi River.

Puccini has often been criticized for failing to present an “authentic” picture of the West in *Fanciulla*. Other critics have gone so far as to argue that he should never have attempted to combine the western genre with the genre of opera because they are drastically different and not complementary⁴. Yet, a significant question to ask might be, what is the “authentic” West of which the critics so lovingly speak? Ask any contemporary American to visualize the Wild West and in her mind she will see cowboys galloping against a mountainous landscape, bandits with bandanas and spurs, saloons with “promiscuous” women, shootouts on vacant streets, and the lone sheriff who is just as “bad” as he is “good.” This is the West of movies, stage plays, visual and literary arts, and popular culture. In short, when one visualizes the American West, one visualizes the *myth* of the American West, an exoticized West, not the “authentic” West.

Historian and folklorist, David Hamilton Murdoch points out that this “image of the West has reached beyond the United States to other cultures, other nations who have not shared America’s historical and cultural determinants – and generated a sympathetic and enthusiastic

⁴ Arguably, opera (like theatre) can be viewed not as a genre but as a medium of discourse. According to Eli Rozik’s study *The Roots of Theatre*, the theatre is a medium that can be used as a tool to communicate. Thus, while a “western” is most certainly a genre, opera exists in a gray area that could function both as a genre of theatre or a medium of its own right.

response. That image, and the beliefs that underpin it, are, in the precisest [sic] use of the term, a modern myth” (11). Whether or not one buys the notion that the West is a concocted *myth*, it is obvious that popular culture perpetuates these images. Preceding contemporary insight, in *Fanciulla*, Puccini aids the dissemination of the Western image that was available to him at the time via the media. Helen Greenwald writes that “Puccini is not entirely to blame for this rather ingenuous portrait of the ‘Wild West.’ It is straight out of Belasco’s play, in which can be found a prototype for nearly every cowboy to inhabit American (and Italian) television and cinema” (624-25).

This *myth* of the West is so pervasive that in his review of the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *Fanciulla* (1910), Richard Aldrich writes that “the characters seem true to life—a life that we have taken on faith from Bret Harte. They are characters that he would have revealed in” (col. 2). Certainly, Aldrich realized that Puccini’s (and Belasco’s) romanticized characters are not representative of reality. Yet the Western *myth* is so ingrained in popular belief that he recognized these stereotypes as real. The characters are not “true to life” as Aldrich suggests but (excepting that the characters sing the dialogue in Italian), they *are* true to the Western myth. That the chorus of miners (they are not cowboys as would be the case in Bret Harte’s Western narrative) sing in Italian, however, was enough to unsettle some critics.

I imagine this critical reaction partially stems from the fact that through the representation in the opera, America found itself viewed as “other.” Randall and Davis observe that *Fanciulla* “was met with chagrin by most early American critics, who resisted seeing their countrymen portrayed as ‘them’ in the us/them formulation that lies at the heart of operatic exoticism” (131). Because of America’s colonial power and its assumed equality with Europe, “it is hardly surprising that *Fanciulla*’s early reviews reflect annoyance that Americans had been

made the object of the voyeuristic imperial gaze on the opera stage” (131). I believe it is important to recognize that Puccini is not the only person to exoticize the American West. Americans, themselves participate in perpetuating the Western myth, which presents the West as “other.” The difference, however, is that Puccini was an outsider and Americans could blame his “othering” of Americans on his outsider status.

In the concluding chapter to Randall and Davis’ study of *Fanciulla*, the authors pose the following question: “are the conventions of opera and the western so firmly established that they are hopelessly at cross-purposes?” (171). The very fact that some critics refuse to suspend their disbelief and accept that Puccini’s “cowboys” could sing in Italian is sufficient evidence to suggest that the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” But the popular success of *Fanciulla* seems to suggest otherwise. On opening night in New York, the opera garnered no less than nineteen curtain calls. Tickets to the premiere sold for triple the Metropolitan’s normal price. It seems that despite the negative critical environment, the initial reaction of the opera-going public was appreciative of Puccini’s attempt to capture the “American Spirit.”

Puccini foregrounds this “spirit” so that the medium of opera will explore new representational and musical forms through the Western myth. His situating of the opera in an “exotic” locale provides a somewhat safer place from which to experiment:

This is a new place because its space is articulated by sound in ways literally unheard. In *Fanciulla* the American West becomes the destination of an operatic emigration in search of new representational strategies: there one hears differently, with a giant ear – perhaps the sonic equivalent of what is known as the “big sky” of the West. Minnie’s new femininity, the new landscape of the Sierra Nevada, and the opera’s new modes of operatic representation, crucially

articulated as new modes of hearing space, make the American West of *La fanciulla del West* a radical experiment not only for Puccini, but also in the history of Italian opera. (Senici 258)

Yet Puccini's experimentation did not stop there. *Fanciulla* is Puccini's first opera to break from the old "number" system⁵. Instead, Puccini creates a through-composition with no internal breaks within the acts. Many critics thoroughly disliked this change in Puccini's art and wished him to return to his extravagant arias and number composition that so thrilled audiences in *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*. Setting the opera in the West gave Puccini license to experiment, for his compositional choices could accord with the realm of fantasy. As Emanuele Senici eloquently writes, ". . . only in the Californian Sierra Nevada . . . [is] it possible for the mountains to find their own voice and sound world in Italian opera" (261).

Landscape's Influence on Gender in *La Fanciulla*

Puccini highlights the significance of Western landscape through his insistence on incorporating "realistic" stage elements: snow, three-dimensional trees, and leaves blowing in the wind are just a few. As was common in many nineteenth and early twentieth century operas, the world of *Fanciulla* extended past the boundaries of the physical theatre space. According to Ziter, these operas

. . . mastered the much wider space that connected periphery to metropole, the place of the play with the place of the stage. The stage space, in this sense, acted as synecdoche for the geography created by the play. The stage stood in for vast terrains through which the protagonist journeyed, and scenic design stood in for a range of geographic practices intended to make distant regions legible and available to the European audience. . . . The "exotic" stage was no longer viewed

⁵ A trend popularized by Wagner in which the opera is broken into "numbers," alternating recitatives and arias.

as a complete and self-contained landscape suitable for imaginative (and potentially transgressive) projection but was instead seen as the reproduction of a fragment in the “real” geography that linked London and the East. (204)

Ironically, Puccini never experienced the authentic landscape of the West. His representation of the American landscape is constructed from his research and viewing of landscape paintings. Thus, the synecdoche described above actually stands in for a myth constructed by various painters, not the “real” geography.

Authentic or not, the characterization of Minnie grows out of Puccini’s view of the Western landscape and it is within that landscape that she finds her voice. In Act II, Minnie sings of her love and respect for nature:

Oh if you knew how happy my life is! / I have a little colt that takes me down
there / at a gallop, down through the fields of / daffodils, of red carnations, and
through / deep shores whose banks are scented with / jasmine and vanilla. / Then I
return to my pines and the hills of the / Sierra that are so close to Heaven that God
can / almost touch them with His hand as He passes / by, and it’s so far away
from the earth that I can / almost knock at Heaven’s threshold to enter! (78)

This description paints an innocent (virginal?) *Pelleas and Melisande*-esque portrait of Minnie. Yet Minnie’s lifeblood, like that of many (actual) westerners, springs from the land. *Fanciulla* highlights, in addition to Minnie’s innocence, also the physical and emotional strength that she has garnered from the landscape in which she exists.

Randall and Davis use a quote from Jane Tompkin’s book, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* to compare Minnie’s “bond with nature” with that of the male hero in a conventional western. Tompkins illustrates:

The interaction between hero and landscape lies at the genre's center. . . . In the end, the land is everything to the hero; it is both the destination and the way. . . . The rhythms of the landscape's appearance and disappearance in the hero's consciousness, the way it impinges on his mind, body, and emotions, are fundamental to the experience Western narratives provide. . . . Perhaps more than anything, nature gives the hero a sense of himself. For he is competent in this setting. He knows his horse will lead him to water, knows how to build a fire and where to camp. He can take care of himself." (81)

According to Randall and Davis, Tompkins' statement quite accurately describes Puccini's characterization of Minnie, despite the masculine pronouns. Even more pointedly, they assert that a reversal of the pronouns illustrates Minnie's displacement of the "male as hero" as well as her appropriation of "his most iconic props—a gun and a horse—with the same sense and show of entitlement" (172).

Minnie's comfort with a "cowboy's" props is significant to Puccini's characterization of her. In Shelly Armitage's essay entitled, "Rawhide Heroines," she discerns two types of "cowgirls" that consistently surface from within the Western myth: the "Sport" and the "Pard." The "'Sport' was usually a beautiful woman dressed in a mannish fashion, who performed manly feats with gun, whip, and knife, drank liquor straight, and swore expertly. She might save the hero from danger, but she almost never got his romantic attention" (172). This characterization does not suit Puccini's *la Fanciulla*. The "Pard," on the other hand, fits his heroine like a glove. "The 'Pard' character . . . often won the hero. She was also masculine in her skills, but she did not try to pass for a man like the rougher "Sport." Rather she was a partner to the hero, capable

of doing what he did, sharing equally in danger and daring with occasional concessions to femininity” (172).

Minnie is comfortable with a gun. She carries a pistol in her bodice and, as illustrated by the 1992 Metropolitan Opera production, she is not afraid to use it. In the Met production, the audience’s first encounter with Minnie comes with her powerful entrance. She takes the stage by storm and breaks apart the fighting miners by grabbing Billy’s rifle and firing it into the air. Furthermore, Minnie is in possession of her pistol for the entirety of the opera and it surfaces during two key moments. The first is in Act I when Rance gets too pushy in his profession of “love” (lust?). The stage directions read: “Minnie takes out her pistol and flashes it before Rance” (61). Once the threat is past, Minnie “puts her pistol back in her blouse” (61). More significantly, however, the gun resurfaces in the final act of the opera. After Minnie’s stunning entrance on horseback, she flashes her gun throughout the scene. The phallo-centric nature of the pistol gives her power in this violent mythological and masculinized West. In the final moments of the opera Minnie “throws down her gun” and sings “Here! I’m throwing down this weapon! / I’m returning to being who I was for you: / the friend and sister who one day taught / you the supreme truth about love!” (107). She must surrender her power (the gun) and sport her femininity before the miners will release the man she loves.

According to Senici, Minnie’s release of the gun connotes two possible readings of her character at the opera’s conclusion:

[First] Minnie has reached a point in her evolution as a character where she can be a mother, a sister, a friend and a lover at the same time, where the different aspects of her femininity are reconciled in one final complex picture. But another, perhaps more radical conclusion is that Minnie has learned that this complex

femininity is a performance, that she can draw on all these different materials in order to construct a new kind of gender identity for herself, which she can somehow control. (242)

While either reading is applicable and certainly equally fair in its portrayal of Minnie's character, I am particularly drawn to the notion that Minnie is so self aware at this point that she can use her femininity to get what she wants, for it is this performed femininity that distinguishes Armitage's "Pard" from the "Sport."

While the "Sport" character is always viewed from a masculine point of view, the "Pard" is willing, when necessary, to strategically deploy her feminine self. Armitage further describes the "Pard" whose

character thus was a matter of independence, ingenuity, and physical skill fostered by the demands of the environment. The heroine typically coped with female concerns—love, marriage, family, societal expectations—by exhibiting "masculine" traits. The metaphor of the "natural" woman was a statement of her ability to cultivate these traits, yet still be a woman. (175)

In this way, I believe the "Pard" can be situated as the "'New Woman' of the frontier" (179), and in doing so, I can by extension, situate Minnie as the "New Woman" of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*.

The New Woman

Before launching into a discussion of Minnie as a "New Woman" and before giving undue credit to Puccini for championing women's agency, I find it necessary to first develop an understanding of the "New Woman" and how it can be applied to *Fanciulla*. The New Woman emerged in response to the Victorian Era "Cult of Domesticity" and is often suggested to have

been a pre-cursor to the women's suffrage movement. While there is no simple "definition" of a "New Woman," Carolyn Forrey offers the following description:

The New Woman was never an objective historical reality. She was an ideal which, like most popular ideals, meant different things to different people. Nonetheless, the endless attempts at a definition of the New Woman produced a fairly consistent image. The keynote of the ideal was independence. The New Woman was self reliant. She was determined to live her own life and to make her own decisions. She was eager for direct contact with the world outside her home. She held independent views. Often she managed to be financially independent as well, earning her own living and perhaps committing herself to a lifelong career. She was well educated. She was physically vigorous and energetic. Above all, she wanted to stand in a new relation to man, seeing herself as a companion—an equal—rather than as a subordinate or dependent. (38-39)

As is suggested by Forrey, the New Woman was an ideal, a constructed myth. Even so, the New Woman as an idealized construct quickly gained currency in literary and theatrical circles. It is Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that is typically credited as the first play to incorporate the New Woman "ideal" on stage.

With the exception of her educational level,⁶ Minnie fits steadfastly within the ideal of the New Woman as delineated by Forrey. In Act I, she describes her living situation to Rance: "I live alone, and you know that it's because / I like it that way" (61). Certainly, Minnie's statement substantiates her independence and self reliance. Furthermore, as the sole proprietor of the Polka she is unquestionably capable of earning a living for herself. And in the capacity of the bartender

⁶ By education, I am strictly speaking to her formal education. Despite having very little formal education, Minnie is clearly intelligent.

at the Polka, she proves that she is perfectly able to defend herself. Minnie further illustrates these capacities in a brief exchange with Johnson in the Polka near the end of Act I:

Minnie: Mister Johnson, have you remained behind
 to join me in guarding the saloon?

Johnson: If you wish,
 It's so strange, to find you here where
 anyone can come in to drink or steal.

Minnie: I promise you that I know how to stand up
 to anyone. (69)

Here Minnie asserts her ability to take care of herself and in doing so she places herself equal to men. That she views herself as equal is, perhaps, even more evident in Act II when she offers to play a game of poker with Rance in hopes that she can win her beloved's life. She sings: "Let's talk between ourselves and end this! / Jack Rance, who are you? / A gambler. And Johnson? A bandit. / Me? Owner of a tavern and gambling house. / I live on whiskey and gold. / We're both the same! / Both bandits and cheaters!" (92). It is obvious that Minnie does not view herself as "subordinate or dependent" to Rance. Lastly, Minnie inhabits characteristics of the New Woman's ability to be "physically vigorous and energetic" as for example, when she gallops on horseback onto the stage in the final moments of the opera.

Senici warns us, however, not to view Minnie as "simply another stereotypical 'new woman'" (243). Instead she paints a picture of Minnie as embodying traits of both the New Woman *and* displaying the traits of the more "traditional" Cult of Domesticity:

Hers [Minnie's] could be the portrait of a dangerously masculine woman: she lives alone "because she likes it," has a man's job, cheats at cards, rides horses

and knows how to use a pistol; moreover, she has never danced with or kissed a man and she is not comfortable in overtly feminine attire. But she could also be a paragon of traditional femininity: she acts as the miner's mother and sister, taking care of their education as if they were children; her dream is to reproduce the happy family that she remembers from her childhood, and especially the happy marriage between her parents; and she is ready to do anything to save her man's life. (244)

Here, Minnie becomes more well-rounded. She is a very strong character that absolutely embodies the traits associated with the New Woman but, as Senici points out, Minnie can not be "diminished" to only that characterization.

Despite the fact that incorporated into Minnie's character is the desire to marry and a celebration of familial love, early critics could hardly see past "Minnie the New Woman." Randall and Davis argue that while *Fanciulla* is often faulted by critics for its "weak libretto," it is much more likely that this criticism stems from the presence of the New Woman at the opera's core (159-160). Audiences and critics alike were accustomed to viewing "domestic" women on stage and Minnie, a "Pard," hardly fit this picture. Randall and Davis further assert that, while such a woman may have been suited for (and accepted in) melodrama,⁷ in opera, the New Woman character was viewed as ridiculous because she ran counter to the

. . . unspoken, expectations of the conservative opera establishment, who were accustomed to seeing and hearing women portrayed in conventional roles and relationships as defined by turn-of-the-century patriarchy . . . The New Woman icon of the women's suffrage movement and other causes such as the feminist

⁷ For a discussion of David Belasco's "Girl," as a New Woman in melodrama, see Lesley Ferris, "The Golden Girl." *The New Woman and Her Sisters*,. Eds. Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 37-55.

legal reform, family planning, and labor unionism, threatened to destabilize the social, political, and economic order by which opera's privileged patrons maintained their wealth and social status . . . Minnie's survival, her centrality, and her portrayal as equal or superior to the male characters all seem to be at the heart of early criticisms of the opera's "ridiculous" premise. (159)

Minnie's character is dramatic, well-rounded, and filled with intricacies and unique traits yet in the critical reviews, she is often referred to as the stereotypical heroine of the American West. In light of these stereotypes, Daniel Gerould refers to Minnie as a Western cowgirl who can "outrun, out-ride, out-shoot, out-lasso, and out-yell any man in town" (26).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Minnie is essentially curtailed by patriarchal expectations in the end (she marries the man and lives happily ever after as her newly feminized self), it is the image of Minnie's ghost, the image of a strong, gun-slinging, horse-straddling, independent, Pard, intrinsically tied to the Western landscape that resonates. While it is most certainly a stretch to argue that Puccini's Minnie is the forerunner of women's emancipation or can be elevated to the status of Susan B. Anthony, it is not a stretch to state that Minnie has more agency than the majority of fictional women who graced the stage during her time. It is precisely because Puccini sets his opera in an exotic locale, the mythological American West, that he is able to craft a story centered on such a strong, outspoken, New Woman. Despite negative critical reactions at the opera's 1910 premiere, Minnie is generally referenced as the strongest of Puccini's heroines. Perhaps her demonstrable strength is why she is often ignored. Audiences and critics alike are generally drawn to the more "traditional" Puccini heroines—the women who, as Catherine Clement might suggest, are "undone." Minnie is not undone. She survives and will have a future.

She maintains her agency, her independence, and her self-reliance. Most importantly, Minnie is forgiven these characteristics because of where she lives. Women are allowed to “act like men” in the hyper-masculine mythological West. While the New Woman may not be happily accepted or understood by early critics, her popularity suggests audiences could revel in her triumphs because she could be rationalized as a “myth” not a “reality.”

For Barthes myth is an unspoken social construction created to justify and perpetuate bourgeois social norms; whereas, for Kotnik, myth provides a way of distancing ourselves from that which is considered scandalous or indecent. While on the surface, Barthes and Kotnik’s readings of myth differ substantially, it is the unspoken assumption that myth offers “safety” that links the two theories. For Barthes, myth is the safety net for the maintenance of the bourgeois ideal. For Kotnik, myth serves this function but it also serves as a screen from behind which mythmakers can speak in order to safely critique prevalent social norms. For Barthes, we need to deconstruct the myth. For Kotnick, we need to use myth to deconstruct society. Whereas Puccini’s opera perpetuates the Barthesian mythological foundations of the American West, it also intentionally or not, uses Kotnik’s formulation of myth to portray the New Woman in a safe, mythologized landscape.

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