

Emma M. Reading

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Are We in Their Light?: A Discussion of the Portrayal of Women in John Adams' *Dr. Atomic* as
a Means to Analyze the Function of the Opera as Art

In the face of any art, great or otherwise, there is a question that often seems to arise: what is its purpose? This is a multifaceted question, with a myriad of different opinions posed by artists and philosophers alike, and thus, to explore the function of an expansive work such as John Adams' *Dr. Atomic*, a smaller lens is needed. For this opera, that lens can be the portrayal of women. Adams' uses song and poetry, along with the accompanying orchestration, to portray the female characters Pasqualita and Kitty as powerful women, with strong, obvious voices within the opera. At the same time, however, the limited, gendered roles they inhabit, seen through their interaction with male characters (namely Oppenheimer), reinforce their inability to use that power. Thus, Adams' opera *Dr. Atomic* functions as art that seeks to expose the deeper truths of reality, giving voice to injustices and placing this realization into the hands of the audience, as an education if not an impetus towards change.

Both Pasqualita and Kitty, the two main female characters, have a strong presence in the opera and this presence allows them to display a very strong power. Pasqualita's power and strength of character is apparent from our first introduction to the character. During the orchestral interlude of "Lightening in the Sangre de Cristos" Pasqualita adopts a very defiant posture towards the bomb. Instead of laying in a chair, or even standing facing the audience, she faces the ominously hanging bomb with a baby in her arms. Given that the children act as a symbol of resurrection, the stance she takes during this scene shows how she is holding up

resurrection in the face of the bomb, in defiance of its destruction. Her arias follow a similar theme. The lyrics of the cloud flower lullaby call to mind both the healing power of a rain storm and the amazing destruction of a nuclear blast and the ensuing fallout (Act II, Scene 2). These seemingly contrasting ideas are paired with the words “my little one” (Act II, Scene 2), bringing destruction and growth together again through the theme of resurrection, Pasqualita’s main defense against the bomb. The repetition of these lines, accompanied by ceremonial body movements, pulsing chords in the orchestra, and her multiple spell-like coloraturas (virtuoso vocal line with many leaps, runs, etc.) on the syllable “Ah” give her arias an aura of ritual. Within the opera, she, thus, takes on the powerful role of a summoner of the storm, resurrection, and perhaps even the power of the bomb.

Kitty also has a great deal of power as a character, yet it is unique and quite different from the power that Pasqualita holds. Where Pasqualita summons, Kitty proclaims; she is the prophet within this opera (Biringer). This role develops throughout the performance. Kitty’s first aria, “Am I in Your Light?”, opens with very polite, soft, sweet music. It is not powerful music by any means; the instrumentation is rich and the chords are warm, largely consonant, and stable. In other words, the music that introduces Kitty is stereotypically ‘feminine’ in that it creates a welcoming, soft aural environment that, paired with its setting in the Oppenheimers’ bedroom, associates it with a wife lovingly welcoming her husband home after a long day at work. Kitty is soon revealed to not be this shallow, token female character. As the aria continues, the music changes, gathering more dissonances and becoming livelier, with vibrating and pulsing strings, an idea that accompanies her later arias. Her libretto in this section is also the first poetry that librettist Peter Sellars introduced into the opera, and it already contains potent truths, such as the

final lines: “A world is to be fought for, sung, and built: / Love must imagine the world . . .” (Act I, Scene 2).

Kitty’s power only grows as the opera continues. This is best reflected by her “Easter Eve 1945” aria from the beginning of Act II Scene 1, which uses words from a poem of the same name. The poetry she sings climaxes with the idea that “peace [is]/ not lack of war, but fierce continual flame” and states that “dreams [are] the sources of action” (Act II, Scene 1). These are powerful lines, that contain powerful truths and they are being vigorously prophesized by Kitty. She does not simply state these ideas, but actively places herself as their origin adding the words “Now I say” (Act II, Scene 1) and “Now I name” (Act II, Scene 1) before several important statements. The inclusion of this pronoun places all the power of these truths in Kitty’s hands. The orchestral accompaniment backs up this realization of power though gradually climaxing and clarifying sound. The aria begins with hazy pulsations of sound, sonic waves that mimic a dream state, the raw material from where Kitty discovers the truths she speaks. As these truths are realized in the vocal line, the orchestral accompaniment speeds up the pacing of the sonic waves, increases in its dynamic strength, and the overall sound changes from a hazy cloud of chords to brilliantly vibrating harmonies. The climactic music of this aria is vibrant and full of the power of life, just like Kitty’s truths. Thus, through both the poetry she quotes and the accompanying music, it is clear that Kitty is an enlightened woman, who not only speaks truth, but who takes ownership of her knowledge.

Though women are both powerful figures with an obvious voice in the opera, their power is limited by gendered social roles that are enforced for their sex. Pasqualita is a maid and caretaker for the children, while Kitty is portrayed as a housewife without any scientific knowledge of her husband’s advanced work. Neither woman ever leaves the Oppenheimer’s

home and visits the test site, while Oppenheimer and Teller freely move between both locations. The only way, then, that they could hope to influence the events the opera depicts, is by educating male characters, namely Oppenheimer. This reality limits their power all on its own, and allows the men to inhabit the dominant roles throughout the opera. Yet, even within this narrow possibility of influence, neither woman is able change the minds of the men, and both Pasqualita and Kitty, regardless of their power, are entirely unsuccessful at affecting the events of the opera.

For Pasqualita, this is easily seen in Act II Scene 2 when the young scientist Wilson, after placing a device on the bomb tower, enters the timeless or dream state, the deeper level of reality that is often linked with the female characters. His character seems bewildered and scared as he describes the dream he “dreamed . . . several nights running” (Act II, Scene 2) of him falling off the bomb tower to a death that never reaches him. The music that accompanies him, which is full of the pulsing chords that signify the timeless state (Biringer), cue the audience into what he is experiencing while Pasqualita’s addition of another rendition of the cloud flower lullaby show that she understands this state as well. Additionally, the musical accompaniment does not change style when Pasqualita enters, and the phrases she and Wilson sing fit together well. Despite this clear evidence of Pasqualita’s knowledge of the timeless state, which theoretically means she could guide Wilson in his exploration of it, the two characters do not interact. Trapped by her gender role as a caretaker, and likely also by her race, Pasqualita remains in the Oppenheimer’s home, unable to reach Wilson and communicate to him any truths he might reach in this dream state. Thus, the knowledge Pasqualita carries is not passed onto Wilson, and he remains bewildered, while she remains unheard.

As Oppenheimer's wife and a white woman, Kitty occupies a more privileged place in society and supposedly has the ear of the man in charge of the project. Yet, this minimal privilege is still seen within a narrow gender role and the power Kitty embodies does not influence much outside of herself. The aria "Am I in Your Light?" directly shows how ineffective her ability to use her power is. When this aria begins, Kitty is seeking to transport her husband into a timeless moment that they can share together, a moment of love. She sings very physical, powerful lines of poetry, proclaiming "only my fingers in your hair, only, my eyes/ splitting the skull to tickle the brain with love" (Act I, Scene 2) while also calling him to act, saying "I love you/ and you should raise your head" (Act I, Scene 2). She places herself in a dominant role, often standing above her husband throughout the aria, seeking to shape Oppenheimer's will so that he acts as she wishes and enters the timeless state with her. Yet, Oppenheimer continues to ignore her, and she, irritated by this, returns to reality, uttering "tick tick" (Act I, Scene 2) as a piano and flute steadily play repeated pitches, echoing this return of time.

At this point, Oppenheimer finally notices his wife, and how he acts towards her, as well as the objectifying nature of the hair aria he sings, further details the ineffectiveness of her power. To begin, he is physically dominant to her—Oppenheimer only takes notice of Kitty when he can be in a physically dominant position, such as having his arms encircle her or hovering over her. Thus, it is clearly represented that he is the one in charge, the one deciding to enter the timeless state. Furthermore, he enters this state not through Kitty's power as a knowledgeable human being, but through her power as an object. Through metaphor, the poem he sings compares Kitty's hair to very powerful nouns such as an "ocean" (Act I, Scene 2), a "glowing fire-grate" (Act I, Scene 2), and the "night" (Act I, Scene 2), and though this the power

of these nouns reveal an understanding of Kitty's power, they grant it to her as an object, not a woman. Furthermore, the visions he accesses through her hair are visions of ships and the scent of tobacco, musk, and tar, fantasies that, however beautiful they may be, do not contain any great truth. This objectification has consequences for Oppenheimer's education—while, for example, Kitty understands that we are “made human, out of pain” (Act I, Scene II), Oppenheimer idealistically insists that we are “made superhuman, out of pain” (Act I, Scene II). By using Kitty as an object to enter the timeless state, he does not gain any of the knowledge she has through her experience there. Kitty's ability to use her knowledge and power to influence the events of the opera are thus restricted by her sex and the place is grants her in Oppenheimer's life.

The inability of Pasqualita and Kitty to use their power to influence the events of the opera continues up until the very end. In Act II, Scene 3 and 4, Oppenheimer often enters the living room (the space that symbolizes the timeless state (Biringer)) frantically searching for some sort of truth or answer. Pasqualita and Kitty, both determined to influence him, actively engage the scientist. At one point, while Pasqualita is singing of dancing to resurrect the dead, she speaks directly to Oppenheimer, even handing him his baby daughter, a symbol of resurrection. Kitty then follows him, angrily proclaiming with a pointed finger “fierce peace” (Act II, Scene 3) as he leaves the living room to rejoin the men. And Oppenheimer wants to listen, he is now actually quite desperate to do so, but for all his desire to learn from them, anything he gains does not change the outcome of the opera. The test is completed, the bomb detonated, the weapon is set to soon devastate Japan, and neither Pasqualita nor Kitty influence these events and their outcomes. Thus, though Adams gives Pasqualita and Kitty great voice within this opera, the power that exists within that is effectively rendered null by the restrictive gender roles they inhabit as women.

What consequences does this have for *Dr. Atomic* as art? In creating a work about history through a modern lens, one has great potential to give more recognition, voice, and essentially, visibility, to figures that embody identities that were more restricted and silenced at the time of the actual events. By looking at how women are treated in this opera, it is clear that Adams recognized that potential. Pasqualita and Kitty's extensive arias and long swaths of stage time make them visible where they were almost certainly invisible during the actual documentation of this event. The words they sing, while not poems and songs directly associated with them, come from works that hopefully represent their voices—Kitty sings the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, a feminist, anti-war poet, while Pasqualita's arias use the text of a Tewa lullaby (Biringer). Furthermore, these are powerful lines, supported by forceful, impressive music that literally vibrates with life. Adams, however, juxtaposes this power and visibility with restricted gender roles and, through the interactions and lack of influence the women have on the men, Adams shows how tethered these women were in their ability to act and influence the world through their beliefs. With this, *Dr. Atomic* explores and expresses a deeper level of reality, and, through examination, this work of art powerfully exposes the injustice of choosing to create and use this weapon without hearing and taking into account the voices of those who were not in power.

Works Cited

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