

# **From Prop to Partner: The Evolution of Female Roles in American Opera**



Honors Thesis

Mariah Berryman

Department: Music

Advisor: Andrea Chenoweth-Wells, DMA

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## Abstract

For many years, women in opera have been in service to their plots. They have always been present but have either been relegated to passive roles in their own stories or actively considered societal outcasts. They were dramatically stereotyped as either airheads or witches, mothers or daughters, love interests or foes to be conquered. And, along with the character stereotypes came typically associated vocal stereotypes. Lighter and higher voices were assigned to roles that portrayed virtue, innocence, and other general characteristics of the “feminine ideal.” Conversely, lower voices were assigned to sinful, outcast, “fallen women.” These vocal stereotypes are especially prevalent for the women condemned to the fringes of society, the othered “them” in contrast to the idealized “us.” Examination of opera plots in contrast to historical documents and artifacts through time reveals an important movement towards more accurate dramatic and musical characterization of women in American opera.

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## I. Introduction

Opera as a musical genre has existed for over 400 years. It draws inspiration from a number of different countries and cultures: Italy, Germany, France, and in more recent times, America. The American operatic style began with Scott Joplin's 1911 opera *Treemonisha* and was solidified in the 1950's with the premiere of works now regularly performed all over the world, including *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. And, while many now acclaimed and standard works would follow, *The Crucible* and *Cold Mountain* stand as examples for the development of female American operatic characters. Each opera marks a steady increase in the number of facets we see in each woman's character, allowing them to be more than their relationship with their male partner. This thesis explores the lives of three women--Baby Doe Tabor, Elizabeth Proctor, and Ada Monroe--and analyzes their lives on and off the stage, their sung and spoken words, and what is left in the silences in between.

## II. Elizabeth "Baby Doe" Bonduel McCourt and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*

### Historical Account of Baby Doe Tabor

Elizabeth Bonduel McCourt was born in 1854 to Elizabeth Anderson Neilis and Peter McCourt, Irish-Catholic immigrants in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Known as Lizzie, she was the fourth of eleven children, and was reportedly doted on by her mother, who made sure her daughter had the time and knowledge to use her good looks. Mr. McCourt tried to combat her developing vanity by putting her to work in his tailor shop at 16, but it was already too late. Accounts from Lizzie's early years in Oshkosh speak of her determination, beauty, and thriving social life, especially among the young men of the

town. She was even known as “The Belle of Oshkosh,” a title whose origins are found in a love poem dedicated to her by an admirer known simply as Harry (Brooks, pg 20).

Tragedy struck the McCourt family when fires raged through Oshkosh in 1874 and 1875, leveling her fathers clothing store, theater, and home. However, Peter McCourt refused to give up, and plunged his family into years of debt to rebuild his house and his twice-burned businesses. Scholars of the Baby Doe legend, such as Jim Metz in his book *Lizzie McCourt: The Baby Doe Legend Begins*, cite McCourt's determination as the source of Lizzie's mettle, but the evidence for this is all circumstantial. Her father was praised for his stubborn refusal to let natural disasters get in the way of his business, but how much influence this had on Baby Doe is difficult to prove. Lizzie met her husband, Harvey Doe, a year later in 1876, and married in a Catholic Church in 1877 despite protests from Harvey's Protestant family. They promptly traveled to Central City, Colorado with Harvey Doe's father to become involved in the mining business.

It was during the Doe's stay in Central City that Lizzie earned the nickname “Baby Doe.” It is also during this time that Baby Doe starts gaining a reputation for bucking Victorian era social norms. Her husband and father-in-law would go out every day on the hunt for gold, but met with very little success. After about a year, her father-in-law moved on to Denver while Harvey picked up work as a coal miner. Harvey was content, but Baby Doe wanted to be more than a common laborer's wife. After all, she grew up on the assurance that she was too beautiful to settle for anything less than great. So, while her husband was away laboring in the mines, she attracted the attention of the town's menfolk, especially Jake Sandelowsky, a local store owner who was “described as a fellow about thirty, good looking, and a ladies man.” (Marvin Brooks, *Researching the*

*Baby Doe Tabor Legend*, pg 37) According to accounts from Baby Doe later in her life, the pair quickly became more than friends. Jake gifted Baby Doe jewelry, took her out on the town, and even stood by her side in the place of her husband when she gave birth to a stillborn son that was widely rumored to not be Harvey's. It is unclear when the affair started, but in 1879 Jake and Baby Doe traveled together to Leadville. Here Baby Doe learns about Horace Tabor, who had "a plain wife and an eye for the ladies." (Brooks, pg 37). Baby Doe then found her husband in Denver (he had reportedly 'disappeared' months ago when he learned of her affair with Jake) and, before returning to Leadville, obtained a divorce after supposedly finding her husband in a brothel. A letter from Harvey dated March 29th, 1880 supports the claim that Baby Doe followed him into a brothel after a final argument between them, but the divorce was granted to Baby Doe on grounds of non-support, not adultery (Brooks, pg 39). Baby Doe then returned to Leadville, and lived with Jake in a boarding house until she began her affair with Horace Tabor.

On its surface, Baby Doe's life appears to be well documented. The availability of specifics about her upbringing, her character, and her relationships before Horace Tabor only strengthen the perceived validity of the stories published about her. But, Baby Doe was the victim of popular history, even during her lifetime. Popular history, defined by Brooks, is much like historical fiction, but instead of acknowledging that events are a mix of reality and story, 'historians' try to pass off their 'documentation' as completely truthful (Brooks, pg 49-57). So much of her life was embellished upon by authors such as Caroline Bancroft and even the opera's composer Douglas Moore that much of the "factual" information that audiences take for granted about Baby Doe, is, in truth,

fictitious. Everyone claimed to have the story, to have the most credible sources, or to have either very reputable second-hand accounts or even accounts straight from Baby Doe herself. In its foreword, the opera claims that “The dramatic treatment of [Horace] Tabor’s life, and the two women who dominated it, closely follows the pattern of fact.” (Moore). Before she died, there were several articles, books, and even a movie produced about her life filled with details that would have been impossible to know, much less prove. In the film version, for example, Baby Doe’s story centers around a scandalous hometown beauty who wooed her first husband by winning a men's-only ice-skating competition in a revealing outfit. Such a story sells better than the truth. Baby Doe did not often talk about her life before Horace. Official town documents become the only reliable primary source, and thus, there is no way to validate many of the romantic fairy tales published by popular historians. However, there was also no reason for readers at the time to suspect that the account might be completely invented. Taken as the truth, these stories compounded upon one another and blended together with the facts of her life, culminating into the opera we know today.

### ***The Ballad of Baby Doe Plot Synopsis***

*The Ballad of Baby Doe*, music by Douglas Moore and libretto by John Latouche, was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation of the Library of Congress for the bicentennial of Columbia University. It premiered at the Central City Opera House in Central City, Colorado, in 1956, and again at the New York City Opera in 1958 and has been performed at Central City Opera every ten years, and even more frequently all over the world.

The opera opens with Horace Tabor, the so-called ‘Silver King’ of Colorado, congratulating himself and the people of Leadville, Colorado over their prosperity due to the success of the Matchless Mine and the opening of the Tabor Grand Opera House. He voices his discontentment with his wife of 23 years, Augusta Tabor. When the inaugural performance pauses for intermission, Augusta tells her husband that she wishes he would act more like the wealthy and dignified figure he is, and less like a part of the common rabble. Horace disagrees, stating that her committee’s work in creating the opera house and running the town is no different nor more important than the work of the barmaids and prostitutes. A mysterious woman appears and asks Horace to direct her to a hotel. He does so, and the two go their separate ways, the woman to the hotel and Horace back to the opera with his wife.

Later that same night, as Horace is smoking a cigar he overhears Augusta’s cohort discussing Elizabeth ‘Baby’ Doe's arrival. Their scathing critiques reveal that she is putting on airs and married to one Harvey Doe in Central City. They quip “Guess he can’t afford that kind of baby” (Douglas Moore, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, pg 37). The women predict she will bring trouble to the Tabors, but Horace ignores this. Pleased he now knows the mysterious woman’s name, he listens to Baby Doe playing the piano and singing “Willow Song” to herself in the hotel lobby. He applauds her skill, startling Baby Doe, and calls her name. Shocked that he knows who she is, Baby Doe quickly explains that Horace has no need to introduce himself, as she had heard many stories about “fabulous Horace Tabor,” (Moore, pg 43) filled with passion and “Eye’s afire with disarming like a boy of 17.”(Moore, pg 44). Horace then sings “Warm as the Autumn



Light,” and explains that he was drawn in by Baby Doe’s singing. The two grow increasingly intimate until Augusta calls Horace back upstairs.

### **“Willow Song”**

One of the most famous and frequently performed of Baby Doe’s arias, it is a stunning blend of sweeping opera and simple parlor song styles common at the time, similar to songs Baby Doe might have grown up hearing and singing. Its folk-song-like lyrics speak of Baby Doe’s loneliness as she laments over a lost love. It distinguishes itself as a blend of American folk song and operatic aria by melodic movement in steps and small skips throughout the verses, and then having octaves or more jumps at the end, or when emotions peak. It also finishes with an extended vocalise, which is a non-textual expression of emotion. Soprano Beverly Sills was Moore’s favorite interpreter of the role. She was a young coloratura soprano when she premiered the role in New York in 1958, and her light, sparkling voice defines how people cast Baby Doe today. While Baby Doe is listed as a lyric soprano in the score, she is often cast as a coloratura to emphasize her youth and naiveté. This interpretation of the fabled meeting of Horace and Baby Doe is one of many, as there is no historical record of this first meeting. However, all accounts agree that they met in Leadville, and that Baby Doe was in her 20’s while Horace was in his 50’s. Moore is clever in his presentation of Baby Doe. Even before we see her, the miners praise her sweetness and beauty, and the women sense a threat to their marriages. But, the “Willow Song” speaks to neither of these overtly. Instead, Baby Doe sings of her past love and of her current loneliness. The audience is left to infer that the source of her grief is the fact that her husband has abandoned her. History shows that Baby Doe was materially driven, ambitious, and deliberately sought out the affections of Horace Tabor,

but Moore was captivated by the romantic notion of a young girl swept up by the temptation of riches and Horace Tabor's luxurious lifestyle.

***The Ballad of Baby Doe Plot Synopsis (Cont.)***

Several months pass. Augusta discovers a pair of gloves and a love letter in Horace's study, and assumes they are for her until she reads the letter. The two clash during a duet, where Augusta attempts to remind her husband that it was her work, not his luck, that earned their wealth. Augusta confronts her husband about his relationship with Baby Doe, reminds him of his station and of his marriage, and warns him about the rumors surrounding Baby Doe. Horace responds by dismissing the rumors and in the same breath confirms them by extolling the beauty of Baby Doe and telling his wife of 23 years that she "... should be ashamed of the coldness which divides us." (Moore, pg 68). When Augusta threatens to leave and expose him, Horace recants his previous conviction of not needing "... to live as if one were already dead?" (Moore, pg 68) and attempts to stop her.

Later that year, Baby Doe has a revelation. Under the pretense of leaving to visit some family in her hometown of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, she secures a ticket for the next train to Denver. The lobby empties out, and Baby Doe sings the "Letter Aria". In it, she reveals to her mother everything that has happened in the past few months--her loneliness, her divorce from her first husband, Harvey, her discovery and love for Horace, and the unhappy reality that they can never be together. As Baby Doe finishes, Augusta enters. She introduces herself, and warns Baby Doe that there will only be trouble for her if her affair with Horace continues. Baby Doe then sings the third of her five arias, "I Knew it was Wrong", claiming that he was simply "... kind to me, But that

was all...,” (Moore, pg 82) and that the two did nothing of which to be ashamed. She continues saying that, since Horace is such a great man, that it “... is our duty. That is our privilege[to] ...try to be worthy” of him, but assures Augusta that she is leaving. (Moore, pg 84) Augusta scoffs at her for putting Horace on a pedestal and calls him “Too big for his britches.” (Moore, pg 85). After all, it was only with Augusta’s prudent management of Horace's money that he became the ‘Silver King’, worth \$10,000,000 (adjusted for inflation). Augusta concedes that she might be harsh at times to Horace, but assures Baby Doe and herself that she is too valuable for Horace to discard her. Augusta leaves as Horace enters, distressed at the news of Baby Doe’s leaving. Perhaps Augusta should have stayed a little longer, because Baby Doe assures Horace that she is now not leaving, and the two sing of their love.

### **“Letter Aria”**

The “Letter Aria” is the first time we see Baby Doe truly alone on stage and affords a great opportunity for character analysis. It rivals “Willow Song” in its popularity as a concert piece. It is a passionate plea for validation from a daughter to a mother and it is compelling to study and perform. This is the first time Baby Doe stands alone, away from the influence of Horace, Augusta, and Leadville society, and there are a lot of details that hold greater implications than an audience ignorant of the real Baby Doe may realize. She writes “Dearest Mama, I am writing for I am lonely and distressed.” (Moore, pg 75) as she acknowledges that her controversial relationship with Horace is dangerously close to ending. Baby Doe may be materially motivated when it comes to her love life, but she knows when to not overstay her welcome. She continues “I am staying here in Leadville, without Harvey, by myself. Everything is over now

between us. He has left me and it's better that way too." (Moore, pg 75-76). Historically, the divorce was granted to Baby Doe before she left Central City, and it was Baby Doe, not Harvey, who requested the divorce. The next section is quite cleverly written. Baby Doe sings "Dearest Mama, you often told me that I was beautiful, and that my beauty deserved to find a man someday, so rich, a man so powerful, that he could give me anything and make me like a princess in olden days..." (Moore, pg 76-77). Baby Doe's motivations are obvious in this text--her material ambition can only be sated by someone of great wealth. The middle section affords Baby Doe a chance to express her excitement and to show off vocally, rising to C above the staff. Coincidentally, it becomes difficult to fully articulate words while singing that high, and clarity of speech is sacrificed for clarity of sound. So, when her motivation cannot be cut from her character, it is instead deliberately obscured in the music by Moore. The final section of the aria is structured the same as the first, and Baby Doe laments her situation to her mother, saying that she has found her 'prince'-- "... I have found him, and he loves me truly too. Every moment we're together we both know it had to be." (Moore, pg 77). This does sound like something the real Baby Doe would say. When she discusses her relationship with Harvey, she constantly needs to be right. The point of the letter is her justifying her actions to her family before she faces them in person. She continues "But, dear mama, he's not free to marry. It is wrong for us to feel the way we do." (Moore, pg 78). This sentiment did not stop Baby Doe from entering into and maintaining an adulterous relationship with Horace, so it is interesting to see her declare it as a stumbling block now. But, it also foreshadows Baby Doe's relationship with her regrets: she never stops in the moment, but instead vows to atone after her bad acts. She finishes with "I know I

love him, and that he needs me, but I have to give him up and we must part forever.” (Moore, pg 78). This line is the peak of Baby Doe’s hubris. In a brief reversal, Baby Doe speaks of Horace as if he is an object she possesses, and as if he had ever been hers to give up in the first place. But, this moment is glossed over as her repetition of the word ‘forever’ emphasizes the futility of their love.

### ***The Ballad of Baby Doe Plot Synopsis (Cont.)***

A year later, Augusta holds council with the other society ladies of Denver about her new living situation. She strives to maintain the high ground as details of Horace and Baby Doe’s blatantly adulterous affair spread. Augusta remains aloof, until one of the ladies reveals that Horace intends to divorce her, if he has not done so already, and that Baby Doe claims to be the reason behind the Tabor wealth. Incensed, Augusta exclaims “I am Missus Tabor!,” and that her husband cannot “... give away the name that he gave me like I was common dirt.” (Moore, pg 101). With the threat of divorce looming, Augusta swears to ruin Horace by targeting what he needs most to win a seat in the senate: popularity. She vows to make “A newspaper scandal his money can’t buy off.” (Moore, pg 103-104).

The last scene of act one brings us to the official marriage of Horace and Baby Doe in Washington D.C. Doubling as a publicity stunt, the Catholic wedding is lavish and full of all pomp and circumstance the Tabor’s could buy. Baby Doe’s dress alone cost \$7,500, or \$178,000 today. Baby Doe’s mother, Elizabeth McCourt, praises her daughter's skill in striking a rich match, but the other ladies of society deride her. All negative comments are silenced, however, as the couple enters. The reception proceeds as normal with the topic of conversation soon turning to the silver standard. Baby Doe,

assured of her and her new husband's eternal wealth in silver, sings the "Silver Aria". She tells the gathered assembly that "gold is a very fine thing" but that she "is a child of the moon," or of silver (Moore, pg 123). At the aria's conclusion, Horace presents her with a gift-- a necklace worn by Queen Isabella of Spain (Moore, pg 127). In the meantime, Baby Doe's mother accidentally tells the Catholic priest that presided over the marriage of the divorced status of the couple, and scandal rocks the reception until the President of the United States, Chester A. Arthur, enters and gives a toast to the newlyweds.

The second act of *The Ballad of Baby Doe* chronicles the failures of the new Tabors. With their political aspirations dashed after only a month, the Tabors return to Leadville. Augusta warns Baby Doe of the impending adoption of the gold standard, but Baby Doe responds "I have no head for bus'ness." (Moore, pg 158) and that she has complete confidence in Horace. Horace enters, and ignores Augusta's pleas to save himself and sell the Matchless Mine, and the new Tabors vow to always believe in the wealth of silver and the Matchless.

Some time later, Horace seeks out old business partners to support him, but they vehemently decline when Horace tries to convince them to back William Jennings Bryan over McKinley in the presidential election. Horace and Baby Doe scramble to retain their wealth as it runs like sand through their fingers. Horace sells all his investments, including the opera house he was so proud of in the beginning, but continues to lose money as the Panic of 1893 at the repeal of the Silver Act decimates the worth of silver. In his final scene of the opera, Horace returns to the opera house. Dying and delusional, he relives his victories and mistakes through a series of hallucinations. He also receives a vision of the future. Augusta tells him that his older daughter with Baby Doe, Elizabeth

Bonduel Lily Tabor, will renounce the name of Tabor and his younger daughter, Rose Mary Echo Silver Dollar Tabor, will become a prostitute and die young. His visions are interrupted by the entrance of Baby Doe, who holds and comforts him until he dies proclaiming that she was “The only real thing.” (Moore, pg 246). Baby Doe then sings her final aria, “Always Through the Changing”, vowing to always remain faithful to her Horace as she stands in front of the Matchless Mine and the curtains close.

### **Historical Account of Baby Doe Tabor (Cont.)**

Horace dying in the arms of Baby Doe is quite romantic. However, the letters exchanged by the couple at the time reveal that all was not as loving as the opera portrays. For the six months before Horace's death on April 10th, 1899, Baby Doe and her two daughters were in Manhattan at Baby Doe's behest. Many letters from Horace to Baby show that while he was writing to Baby Doe, Lily, his older daughter, was the one responding. Why Lily was writing instead of Baby Doe is a mystery. It is suggested that Baby Doe suffered from neuralgia and that she traveled to Manhattan to meet with a doctor who claimed he could treat her, but later Baby Doe herself claims that she had “never been sick a day in her life” (Brooks, pg 84). We will never know why Baby Doe was in Manhattan, but she and her daughters returned home seven days before Horace died, in his bed, of appendicitis. Baby Doe was said to have been at his bedside the whole time, and even refused surgery on Horace's behalf because of his “advanced age” and her alleged “fear of surgery” (Brooks, pg 83). So, while this lacks the drama of an operatic stage death, the warning Augusta imparts to Horace about his daughters rings true. His older daughter left her increasingly delusional mother and younger sister after living for years in poverty in a cabin near the Matchless Mine. She returned to Oshkosh, Wisconsin

to live with her McCourt relatives and cut all contact with her mother. His younger daughter, known simply as Silver Dollar, grows up as the main emotional support for an emotionally unstable mother. She also eventually leaves and has a string of affairs thanks to her beauty (much like her mothers). She gets caught up in the fast-paced life of 1920's Chicago and found dead due to burns all over her body on September 18th, 1925. She was 36 years old.

Baby Doe Tabor's obsession with the Matchless Mine is well-documented. She guarded the drained mine, alone, for over 30 years. Before he died, Horace supposedly advised Baby Doe to hang on to the Matchless Mine. While the last words of Horace Tabor were not recorded, we can logically assume that this premonition from Horace is a product of popular history. At the end of his life, Horace was looking to regain his wealth in the same way he had first earned it, but this time through gold mines. However, whatever luck he had in striking silver must have run dry, as none of his investments in gold mines panned out. Horace sold his investments (including his silver mines) in an attempt to recover financially from the gold standard and his silver mines running dry, but only continued to lose money as he searched for gold. So, if anything, Horace would likely have advised Baby Doe to guard his meager gold investments rather than continue to hope for a return to silver. This does not explain Baby Doe's self-imposed vigil. Popular historians attribute Baby Doe's long vigil at the mine to her love for Horace, but that love seems more akin to stubborn obsession and refusal to accept her fall from grace. Baby Doe was not without offers for help when she became a widow. One of her own brothers, Peter McCourt, offered financial assistance time and time again, but Baby Doe refused him each time. And, it was by the generosity and pity of the Matchless Mine's



final owner, millionaire and businessman J.K. Mullen, that Baby Doe was able to stay there. He “bought the mine to allow the elderly Baby Doe, then seventy-one years old, to stay in her cabin” (Encyclopedia Staff) and continue to guard the Matchless. To summarize the paradox, “Baby Doe abhorred charity, but yet ‘held on’ to her most cherished possession strictly due to the charity of J.K. Mullen.” (Brooks, pg 149). There is also Baby Doe’s mental state to consider. After the death of Horace, Baby Doe spiraled ever deeper into her own dream-like reality. She became quite a prolific writer and self-proclaimed poet and wrote on whatever she could afford. Her writings and mental state are documented and discussed in Judy Nottle Temples' book *Baby Doe Tabor, the Madwoman in the Cabin*, but in short, her pride, Catholic upbringing, grief, and loneliness merged into a stringent self-imposed purgatory where Baby Doe was apparently atoning for the sins of her life. However, what Baby Doe actually thought we will never know, as she was found dead on March 7th, 1935, frozen to her cabin floor. Looters made quick work of her cabin soon after, and her piles of writings were either destroyed, sold, or lost, and whatever gaps popular historians had in Baby Doe Tabor’s story they filled in with their own imaginings.

Of the three works examined, Baby Doe Tabor is the most prop-like of the women. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is the first opera of the trio to be composed and premiered, and features the most stereotypical soprano character in Baby Doe Tabor. She is a coloratura soprano, a voice type characterized for their agility and lightness. They are usually cast as young women who are flighty, naive, and are often showpieces rather than characters. Her historical shortcomings are romanticized by Douglas Moore to make her more reliant on Horace Tabor. Her attempt at independence in the “Letter Aria” is short-

lived- as soon as she faces resistance from Augusta and Horace comes back she gives up on her plan to be alone. And upon Horace's death, she immediately goes insane-- she is not able to function without a male character to ground her. Given the societal expectations of women in the 1950s, these character choices fit with the expectations of behavior for women at the time. But, things were changing for women in the 1960s, and we see this transition reflected in the next character, Elizabeth Proctor.

### III. Elizabeth Bassett Proctor and *The Crucible*

#### Historical Account of Elizabeth Bassett Proctor

Elizabeth Proctor was born Elizabeth Bassett in 1651 in Lynn, Massachusetts. While her life is not as well documented as Baby Doe's, there is some information that does survive. She married John Proctor, becoming his third wife on April 1st, 1674. Together they had two children, William and Sarah, and lived together outside of Salem, Massachusetts until the Salem Witch Trials in 1692. Both she and her husband were accused of witchcraft, with John accused by Mary Warren, the Proctors' servant and ward, and Elizabeth accused on different occasions by Mercy Lewis and Abigail Williams. At least two petitions, signed by members of the community, have been found defending the Proctors against the accusations, but on August 5th, 1692 both John and Elizabeth were convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to hang. When it was discovered that Elizabeth was pregnant while in jail, she was granted a stay of execution until after the birth, and John was executed on August 19th, 1692.

Elizabeth Proctor (and the events of the Salem Witch Trials as a whole) suffers from the same malady of popular history as Baby Doe. Surviving official documentation

from that time is scarce, as it had to survive the tests of time and the free market. For example, the official deposition of Mary Daniels against Margrett Scott, submitted to the Salem Court on September 15th, 1692, sold for \$137,500 at auction on June 15th, 2017 according to an article by Sarah Prutt published by History. While the purchaser is not named, the deposition “had been circulating among private collectors until they were both purchased by the Eric C. Caren Collection in the 1980s.” (Prutt). So, access to official records was limited by the fact that historical records themselves were limited when Arthur Miller wrote his play, *The Crucible*, which serves as the source material for the opera of the same name.

### ***The Crucible* Plot Synopsis**

*The Crucible* play was published in 1952. The opera based on the play premiered in 1961. The story is best known for its commentary on the seduction of power and the authority that guilt holds over the lives of those in Salem, and has been widely analyzed as an allegory to McCarthyism and the Red Scare. The opera is an adaptation of the play, with music by composer Robert Ward and libretto by Bernard Stambler. commissioned by the New York City Opera.

A key factor regarding *The Crucible* is that Arthur Miller acknowledges that the work is a piece of historical fiction, and that he did his best to recreate accurate portrayals of the men and women of Salem based on what little information survived. Some acknowledgements include that “...many characters were fused into one” and that “Abigail's age has been raised” from 11 to 17. (Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, A Note on the Historical Accuracy of this Play. pg. 2) He also states that “The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model”, and that no character has been added that was not

there already. (Miller, *A Note...*, pg. 2) So, while the events portrayed are not an exact retelling, they are as historically informed as possible. Also, since the operatic version of *The Crucible* is based on the play and does not attempt to be a one-to-one re-enactment of either the play or historical events, the work is granted more room for interpretation.

The action of the opera takes place over the span of half a year, starting in the spring of 1692 and opens in the house of the Reverend Parris. He kneels at the bedside of his daughter, Betty, who will not wake up. Tituba, the slave woman from Barbados, is banished from the room with harsh words by the Reverend after asking if “My Betty goin’ to die?” (Robert Ward, *The Crucible*, pg 8). Abigail Williams, an orphan and niece of the Reverend, enters. Her uncle begins to interrogate her, and Abigail reveals that she and the other girls of the town danced in the forest. She balks at the mention of witchcraft, but only denies that Reverend Parris saw someone running naked through the trees. The Reverend then speaks of his enemies, saying that “My ministry here’s at stake;” and demands that Abigail give him an “...upright answer...” (Ward, pg 16) on another matter--her dismissal from Goody Proctor’s service. As an answer, Abigail accuses Elizabeth of being a “...sniveling woman.” (Ward, pg 18) and a liar, and asserts that Abigail is “... clean, as clean as any woman in Salem.” (Ward, pg 19).

The Putnams enter the bedroom, and immediately claim that their daughter Ruth, the last one alive of eight children, has been touched by the Devil. The Putnams and Reverend Parris debate the existence of witchcraft in Salem until Giles Cory, Francis, and Rebecca Nurse enter. They too doubt Ann’s claim, with Giles going so far as to accuse Thomas Putnam of making up the whole affair to expand the Putnam estate. The tension between the two men is broken by the gentle wisdom of Rebecca Nurse, who concludes

that Ruth, Betty, and all the other affected girls will "... wake in their own time." (Ward, pg 36). The adults must simply wait, and the children will return. John Proctor then enters, applauds Rebecca's wisdom, and inquires as to how Thomas Putnam was able to send for Reverend Hale, a minister experienced in the ways of witchcraft, without the consent of the congregation. Arguments once again break out, and are once again soothed by Rebecca. As Proctor and Giles leave, Parris sings a psalm with the rest of the house. When the name of Jesus is mentioned, Betty bolts for a window and attempts to fly. The assembled villagers take her outburst as a sign of witchcraft, just in time for the Reverend Hale's entrance. He is briefed on the recent events, and immediately turns to his books to search for a way to free Betty. Abigail is interrogated again, this time in front of the Reverend Hale, and Ann Putnam confesses to sending Ruth to Tituba to commune with the dead. She is convinced that her seven other children were murdered. Abigail's story of simply dancing in the woods continues to unravel until Tituba enters the room. Abigail shifts the blame to Tituba, saying "She made us drink babies' blood" (Ward, pg 76). Tituba is now interrogated until she confesses to being tempted by the devil to kill Parris and the Putnams, and that the devil made several offers to give her freedom and to bring her back to Barbados. Tituba accuses Sarah Good of having a contract with the devil, and the gathered villagers rejoice as they believe the curse to be broken.

Scene two opens with John Proctor returning home after a day of work on the farm. Elizabeth Proctor, his wife, is waiting for him, and the two discuss the goings on in Salem. The court is now in full swing, with Abigail leading the other girls in the accusations. Elizabeth urges John to go to Salem himself and reveal the true motivations behind the trials, and only responds with "I'll think on it." (Ward, pg 119). Elizabeth

continues to impress the importance of John exposing Abigail for the fraud that she is until John, in a fit of guilt, exclaims “Let you not judge me.” (Ward, pg 121). Elizabeth responds with her aria, explaining that “I do not judge you John. The court that judges you sits in your own heart.” (Ward, pg 127). Upon the aria's dramatic conclusion, Mary Warren enters, fresh from the day's proceedings. She informs the Proctors that there are now 39 people jailed, and that Goody Osborn will hang, while Sarah Good was pardoned as she confessed to being a witch. She claims that she condemned Goody Osborn for using witchcraft to choke her in court, and when John threatens to whip her for being disobedient and neglecting the house, she reveals that she saved Elizabeth's life. It is as Elizabeth feared- Abigail Williams has started to accuse her of witchcraft. The conflict between Elizabeth and Abigail is not directly discussed until Act III, but John Proctor had an adulterous affair with Abigail Williams while she worked for the Proctors. This happens before the events of the opera, so the exact timeline is unknown, but eventually John confessed his transgression to Elizabeth, and Abigail was dismissed from the Proctors service. So, Abigail loathes Elizabeth for separating her and John, and Elizabeth fears Abigail's revenge through the witch trials.

### **“I do not judge you, John”**

Elizabeth's aria is a great moment for her character, as we see her process the implications John's affair with Abigail has had on her and the town. It is sung like a long recitative, as the rhythms of the notes closely follow patterns of speech until the aria's climax. Before Elizabeth's aria, John has one explaining that he is afraid to expose Abigail, for it will expose him too. She begins by reassuring her husband that “I do not judge you John. The court that judges you sits in your own heart,” a line that comes

straight out of the play (Ward, pg 127). She continues “I never thought you but a good man, though perhaps a little bewildered. That’s all.” (Ward, pg 128). This line too is in the play, but only after a couple more pages of dialogue between John and Elizabeth. After these two lines the aria deviates from the play and builds Elizabeth into a multifaceted woman whose fears of rejection are not dismissed by her husband, but rather acknowledged and proven to be valid by his behavior. She remembers what life was like when they first married “But oh, the dreams I had for our proud young love, a love that would never turn, or falter.” (Ward, pg 129) and mourns the loss of those dreams. They are replaced by “... an icy hand (that) closes round my heart” (Ward, pg 129). Elizabeth drives right at the heart of the couples grief, saying “How could it be you turned from me to one like Abigail? How could it be, John?” (Ward, pg 129). She attempts to understand John’s fear “You say she’ll call you lecher,” where Abigail will expose John to the contempt of the community, and points out that if she were to do so, she would risk the same treatment-- “... but won’t she fear to damn herself?” (Ward, pg 130). She then echoes John's aria “think of those who rot in jail, those whom you might save... think on them and then think on your sons” (Ward, pg 130-131). Here, Elizabeth reminds John that exposing Abigail is not a matter of losing his good reputation, but of choosing the consequences of his actions. He either condemns himself and Abigail, or condemns those accused and arrested for witchcraft. Elizabeth returns to her own experience, saying “John, grant me this. You do not know a young girl's heart” (Ward, pg 131). Elizabeth reminds John that he does not, and cannot, fully know what the affair looks like to Abigail, but Elizabeth can. She tells John “A promise is made in any bed, spoken or silent, it is surely made.” (Ward, pg 131), a promise that John once made to Elizabeth,

and broke when he made that same promise with Abigail. Elizabeth continues narrating Abigail's perspective, saying "Now Abigail may dream on that. I know she does," because Elizabeth knows the power of such a dream. (Ward, pg 132) It has kept her faithful to John, even after he confessed his adultery, and Elizabeth fears such an attachment between Abigail and John will damn her, if not everyone involved. She begs John to "go to her... and break that promise that she may dream no more" (Ward, pg 132). Elizabeth knows what she is asking is difficult and reveals that she too fears what Abigail will do "All this week I've been haunted by fear of what she may do next." (Ward pg 133), but stresses that the only way to avoid their ruin is to "... tear yourself free of her! You must, John, you must." (Ward, pg 134). The music culminates in this moment as Elizabeth switches from suggestion to command, saying to John "You will tear yourself free from her" (Ward, pg 134) and gives him an ultimatum: "For know that I will be your only wife, know that, John... or no wife at all." (Ward, pg 134-135). Elizabeth hits her highest and longest note on 'will' as the orchestra sustains with her, reflecting the strength of her conviction before she collapses to the floor.

### ***The Crucible Plot Synopsis (Cont.)***

As Elizabeth again begs John to go to Salem, Reverend Hale and John Cheever enter on business from the court. They bring a warrant for Elizabeth's arrest, citing Abigail's claim that she was stabbed by a needle in the belly through a proxy poppet, or doll, in an act of malevolence carried out by Elizabeth. The two find a doll on the mantle of the Proctor home, and indeed do find a needle in the doll's belly, and take it as evidence for Elizabeth's arrest. Confused, Mary says that she was the one who made the doll in court and was the one who stuck the needle in it for safekeeping. But, Mary's



claim is not enough to clear Elizabeth of suspicion, and as she begs John to bring her home soon, she is taken away. John, emboldened by Mary's testimony, resolves to bring both her and himself into court to expose Abigail, for "...my wife will never die for me. That goodness will never die for me." (Ward, pg. 165). Mary attempts to dissuade him, revealing that Abigail told her everything about the affair and John will be accused of lechery, but he is undeterred, saying "all pretense has been ripped away... our sins walk side by side" (Ward, pg. 166).

Act Three takes place outside the Reverend Parris' house at night. Abigail is ecstatic that John has returned to her, but soon discovers that he has come to stop her, not to join her in her "...holy work." (Ward, pg. 177). She demands John leave his "sickly wife" (Ward, pg. 176) for her, and when Proctor threatens to expose her, she runs away, taunting "Do what you like, but if your sniveling Elizabeth dies, remember... it is you who kill her." (Ward, pg. 178).

The next scene chronicles the trial of Giles Cory. He alone sees through to the true scheme of the Putnam family--if someone is accused and killed, their land goes up for sale. And "Who here in Salem has the coin to buy it up? None but... Thomas Putnam." (Ward, pg 187). When Judge Danforth demands Giles provide proof that the Putnams prompted their daughter Ruth to accuse his wife of witchcraft, Giles cites three other honest men, but refuses to name them, saying "You'll send them off to jail to rot just as you have the others" (Ward, pg 188). He is arrested on contempt of court and taken away. John Proctor comes forth with the deposition from Mary Warren and begins to make his case that there never was any spirits or witchcraft in Salem. Mary reluctantly admits to perjury, but Abigail refuses to change her stance. John confesses to being an

adulterer, but is cut off when Abigail begins to see a dark spirit sent by Mary. Determined to "... reach the bottom of the swamp today," Judge Danforth asks for Goody Proctor to be brought into the court as she reportedly never lies. (Ward, pg 213-214)

Elizabeth makes the fatal decision to cover her husband's mistakes. In a final act of doubt about her husband's trustworthiness and in an attempt to save him, Elizabeth testifies to the court that her husband is not a lecher. Abigail seizes the following chaos to scare Mary Warren into recanting her earlier testimony, and together they accuse John Proctor of being "the Devil's man." (Ward, pg 232).

The final act of the opera finds Tituba and Sarah Good in prison, wishing to escape to Barbados, where the Devil will "lead us to Barbados..." (Ward, pg 246), parallel to Abigail's last ditch attempt to take John Proctor for herself. Abigail tempts John with material pleasures and escape, but he refuses by slamming his cell door in her face. She flees, unable to confront the fact that she who condemned everyone has now condemned herself. Judge Danforth, Minister Hale, and Reverend Parris enter, arguing the wisdom of hanging Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor. Elizabeth is brought into the room, and they beg her to convince her husband to confess. She is given a chance to speak to John, and tells him about Giles Cory's execution. She then confesses her love, saying that she "counted (herself) so very plain... that no honest love could come to me" (Ward, pg 268), apologizes for doubting John, and declares that she will respect whatever decision he makes. John decides to confess, but Danforth will not accept John's confession without accusing others. John balks under the demand to sign away the lives of other town members, ultimately choosing to hang in his famous line "I have given you my soul. Leave me my name." (Ward, pg 279-280). As he is led away, he commands

Elizabeth not to give them the satisfaction of crying, and as Parris and Hale beg her to undo some of the damage they have done, she refuses with “He has his goodness now. God forbid I take it away from him.” (Ward, pg 287-288).

### **Historical Account of Elizabeth Bassett Proctor (Cont.)**

After the events of the witch trials, Elizabeth Proctor faced a long battle with the law and the courts of Massachusetts to clear her name and regain her rights. Because of her conviction, she was legally considered dead. In one petition from her to the General Court to recover the estate of John Proctor dated May 27th, 1696, she writes that:

“and although god hath Granted my life yet those that claime my s'd husbands estate by that which thay Call awill will not suffer me to have one peny of the Estat nither upon the account of my husbands Contract with me before mariage nor yet upon the account of the dowr which as I humbly conceive doth belong or ought to belong to me by the law for thay say that I am dead in the law...” (SWP No. 172.1).

Her sentence as a witch condemned her to death and stripped her of financial support from both her marriage counteract and her dowry, and the law did not account for the accused still being alive. Spectral evidence was disallowed in 1703 by the Massachusetts House of Representatives, but only Elizabeth Proctor, John Proctor, and Rebecca Nurse were officially pardoned. It was not until October 31st, 2001, when Governor Jane Swift signed a resolution that acknowledged “the courage and steadfastness of these condemned persons who adhered to truth when the legal, clerical, and political institutions failed them.” (Roach, pg 587) that all the falsely accused and executed were named and proclaimed innocent.

So, Elizabeth Proctor is the transitional soprano character of the trio. She has moments where she stands out as an individual, like in her aria, and moments where she is relegated to more stereotypical soprano moments, like in the jail. The popping in and out of independence for female roles became standard in American opera as women continued the fight to redefine their place in society. It's latest efforts and achievements can be seen in the final role, Ada Monroe.

#### **IV. Ada Monroe and *Cold Mountain***

##### **Historical Account of Ada Monroe**

While W.P. Inman was a real person (author Charles Frazier's great-great-uncle), Ada Monroe, the protagonist of *Cold Mountain*, is fictional. However, there are many first hand accounts from women in similar situations to Ada--white North Carolinian women of privilege suddenly tasked with running a plantation while the men went to war only to have all of that stripped away with the end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction of the Union. Diaries still survive documenting the everyday lives of women such as Mary Jefferys Bethell, Catherine Devereux Edmondston, and Emma Holmes. The day-to-day accounts of these women's lives taken together form the vast patchwork of the Civil War from the often overlooked perspectives of women and of civilians. The diary of Mary Jefferys Bethell starts in 1853. It documents her life in Rockingham County, North Carolina, and she writes about her family, marriage, home neighborhood, church, etc. She had two sons join the Confederate Army, and eventually her husband left to join the army as well, leaving her in charge of her already declining plantation. Catherine Devereux Edmondston was a white woman whose husband owned Looking Glass plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina. In her diary, she writes of

her husband, their summer home, and the Civil War when it comes. Her husband joins the Confederate Army, and since they have no children, leaves Catherine alone as the only white person on their plantation. Catherine believes that she is safe, as the slaves all rely on her too much to harm her, and she keeps abreast of news of the war as much as she can. As the war tips in the Unions favor, however, she worries that her diary will fall into Union hands. Emma Holms was from Charleston, South Carolina, and had the life Ada Monroe might have had if she had decided to embrace her predetermined path in life and marry as a lady in Charleston. Emma is 23 at the start of the war. She travels to Camden, South Carolina for safety, and worries about the war's proximity to her. She becomes a teacher and seamstress to make ends meet, and becomes very interested in a captain of the Confederate Army. She writes about how she keeps her diary on her at all times, and even documents an encounter with Union soldiers, who ransacked her employers house looking for diaries such as hers. From these firsthand accounts, we can see that life was not easy for these women. They, like Ada, were not equipped to handle the fight for survival the war suddenly thrust upon them. They were raised to be ladies, not workers or managers, and did not all successfully adapt after their husbands and lovers were called away to war. Stephanie McCurry contemplates further the implications of the many roles women played in the Civil War in her book *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*. She notes that, while the vast majority of soldiers on the front lines were men, women were not exempt from the war. The fight for survival at home was just as pivotal a battlefield as the ones many miles away (or in some cases they were one and the same). This parallel struggle runs through *Cold Mountain* in all its iterations, and its effect on Ada especially is a rather unique one.

### ***Cold Mountain* Plot Synopsis**

The book *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier was published in 1997 and was adapted into a movie in 2003. American composer Jennifer Higdon was co-commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Minnesota Opera, and North Carolina Opera to compose the opera in 2011. After a few years of writing and some copyright hassles, *Cold Mountain* premiered in 2015. The original cast recording was released in 2016, and it has been performed several times in the United States since in Philadelphia, North Carolina, and Minnesota.

*Cold Mountain* takes place near the end of the Civil War in 1865, after the battle of Petersburg. The opera opens with Teague, the main antagonist, leading the local Homeguard on the hunt for Confederate deserters. He demonstrates his great capacity for cruelty with the latest in his long list of victims, Owens. With a cry of “Hallelujah Amen!” (Jennifer Higdon, *Cold Mountain*, pg 6), one of Teague’s men stabs Owens while two others bury him alive to draw out the deserter he harbors--his own son. Owens’ son breaks cover and retaliates wildly in an attempt to save his father, but is restrained, tied to a nearby tree, and killed.

The perspective shifts to W. P. Inman. He is recovering in a hospital from a neck wound. As the chorus of nurses and staff mourn the losses of life and culture in the South, Inman contemplates his options-- to die in the hospital or die on the front lines. He leaves the chaos of the dead and dying briefly to visit the cryptic Blindman, and the two contemplate the repercussions of seeing too much or nothing at all. Inman envies the Blindman’s ignorance, as he feels the carnage he witnessed has stripped him down to “... a hut of bones... nothing more” (Higdon, pg 16). He recounts the story of his injury and

laments over the dawn of mass production saying “The metal age has come...” (Higdon, pg 20) as the lights come up on Ada Monroe. Inman wonders aloud after Ada as the focus shifts to Ada’s story back near Cold Mountain, North Carolina. Ada encounters Teague as she hunts for her breakfast in the church graveyard, and the two men sing of the dream that Inman has of Ada and the reality that Teague sees before him- a beautiful gentlewoman of culture and a woman ill-equipped to handle the struggles of everyday farm life.

After a brief conversation, Teague leaves, and Ada ruminates on the circumstances that led her out to Cold Mountain. Her late father, Monroe, the preacher of the local church, wanders through the gravestones as Ada regrets her decision to not marry in Charleston. However, she is comforted in the knowledge that she did fall in love in her father’s church, and flashes back to when she and Inman first met. At first, Ada pokes fun at Inman not approaching her like a typical prospective suitor- equipped with rounds of questions about her. She questions Inman’s motives, and Inman tells her that their conversation so far has been “Like grabbing a chestnut burr.” (Higdon, pg 35). Ada laughs at Inman’s honesty, but is forced back into the present by the entrance of Ruby. She introduces herself, explains she was sent by Old Lady Swerenger to help Ada run her farm, and declares that “You need a miracle. That’s a fact!” (Higdon, pg 37). Ruby continues right along, listing what needs to be done to put the farm back in working order, but Ada has her doubts, as she has only seen men do the hard labor Ruby proposes they do themselves. Ruby reminds Ada that “every man worth hiring is off and gone” (Higdon, pg 40), so they have no one but themselves to rely on. The two continue to get acquainted, and the women find they both have two things in common--their mothers

died at childbirth and their fathers are dead. But, while Ada's father supported her, Rubys' only knew how to drink and how to pretend Ruby did not exist. Ada explains she has no way to pay Ruby, but Ruby tells Ada she is not interested in money as much as being Ada's partner, and the two return to the farm to work out the details.

Inman is now a deserter. Tired of four years of conflict, he decides to return to Cold Mountain in secret. Along his way he runs into a number of characters, including Veasey and Laura. Inman strives to remain unseen by the distressed Veasey, but intervenes before Veasey throws an unconscious Laura off of a cliff. Veasey sees Inman as a "message from God" (Higdon, pg 50) not to kill Laura, and reveals that he is a betrothed preacher trying to cover up an affair by killing his mistress and unborn child. Inman and Veasey hide briefly from a mob of Homeguards. Inman urges Laura to forget about Veasey and, as Veasey convinces himself of Inmans ill intentions toward Laura now that he knows he is a deserter, begins to write down what Veasey almost did for Laura to read later. Veasey, panicking and desperate to avoid the repercussions of his actions, begs Inman to shoot him. Inman refuses, and carries Laura away as Veasey grapples with his ruin.

The scene shifts back to Ruby and Ada. Ruby calls Ada down to write the list of what needs to be done to save Black Cove Farm. Ada compares her education to Ruby's and finds herself lacking. While Monroe taught Ada how to draw and speak French and all the other things a lady in Charleston might need to know, Ruby tells Ada "My only teacher was hunger... the only companion who never turned his head." (Higdon, pg. 68). Ruby had to teach herself how to survive, as ever since she could remember her "daddy only cared for moonshine." (Higdon, pg 69). She reassures herself and Ada with the



knowledge that they are both here for a reason, and that she will not let them fail. Ruby claims this as her truth, and asks Ada for hers. Ada confesses that she should have returned to Charleston after her father's death, but has remained in the hopes of Inman returning. Ada reads the last letter from Inman out loud to Ruby, as she is illiterate, and Inman appears to sing the letter as a duet. The scene transitions to a flashback of the last time Ada and Inman were together- a Christmas party in 1861. The two speak of the impending war, and regret they cannot simply just be together away from the struggles of life. Back in the present, Ada finishes the letter as Inman sprints toward a river with the Homeguard close behind him.

Desperate to cross, Inman flags down the only boat he sees, only to find Veasey as its owner. Veasey demands his pistol, which Inman took from him to prevent him from shooting Laura at their first meeting, and Inman's gun as payment for passage across. Inman is forced to comply. As Inman ferries them across, Veasey explains how he ended up on the river. He was beaten and driven away from his congregation after they found Inman's note, but remains optimistic as he believes his 'lucky star' always watches over him. This luck seems a little lackluster at the moment, however, as bullets from the Homeguard sink the boat and the men are swept down the river. An undetermined amount of time later, the two men are found by four sisters on the riverbank. As they squabble over Inman, he wakes. Veasey is desperate to get the woman's attention while Inman ignores the sisters, and Junior, husband of one of the sisters, enters and tells the men they're lucky to be alive. He invites them to stay for dinner, and goes to check his traps. However, he does not return with food, but some Homeguard, and sells both Veasey and Inman to them for five dollars a person.

Back at Black Cove, Ruby teaches Ada how to survive by observing the natural world. As they listen for the birds, they hear someone wailing from their corncrib. Ada runs for the shotgun while Ruby investigates and finds her own father, Stobrod, caught in the trap. He has deserted, and is living with others further up the mountain. He begs the women to free him, as he needs both hands for his new passion--the fiddle. He swears music changed him and the war changed everyone, which alarms Ada and disgusts Ruby. Ruby reluctantly agrees to free her father, but is interrupted by the arrival of Teague and his Homeguard, and the women stash Stobrod away instead. Teague admires the farm, and sees Ada now has a partner; Ada sees that Teague now has a 12-year-old boy in his troupe, Birch. Ruby distracts Birch when he wanders dangerously close to Stobrod, and Ada does the same for Teague. As Teague expounds on the virtues of building fences to keep the Northerners out, the rest of the group wonders if people really do change, and what the war will leave behind. Ada leads Teague and Birch to the entrance of the farm, and Stobrod swears he will prove his changed nature to Ruby.

The focus returns to Veasey and Inman, now part of a deserter chain gang. Veasey, physically incapable of being silent for any significant amount of time, continues to insist that he is a preacher, not a deserter. He only stops when he is struck unconscious by one of the guards. Union troops approach, and the guards hide while the gang, led by Inman, seize the opportunity to break free. They attack their guards and force them to fire their guns, giving away their position to the passing Union troops. The soldiers charge in, but not before the guards open fire on their own prisoners. They inspect the corpses for any living, but find none as the scene shifts back to Ada. She sees Inman in her mind, handsome and strong, and the two vow to return to each other as the first act ends.

The second act opens with Lucinda, a runaway slave, rifling through the corpses of the chain gang in search of food. She examines a picture of Ada in Inman's hat, and guesses that "she's got everything..." (Higdon, pg 150), and is startled by Inman's reply of "You're wrong" (Higdon, pg 151). He tells her to search the bodies of the Homeguards for food, and as she eats the two compare their experiences in chains. Lucinda swears if she had a gun she would kill every white person in retribution, and Inman directs again to the Homeguards who lay by their firearms. Startled by the opportunity to carry out her revenge, she asks what Inman did to end up in chains, and he says "I don't want to fight anymore..." (Higdon, pg 156) and all he has left is his hope to marry Ada. Lucinda frees Inman and continues north to Chicago, but not before pointing a gun at his head and reminding him "I do not trust you. And I never will trust you." (Higdon, pg 158). Twenty-eight days pass, and as Inman looks at the night sky under a new moon Ada appears and the two sing about how much time has passed and how much has changed. Inman continues, and Ada stays as the scene shifts to her and Ruby giving supplies to Stobrod. He and Pangle, another deserter, sing and play in honor of Ruby. Ada is impressed, but Ruby's focus is on how they're going to keep themselves and the deserters fed during the winter. Stobrod tells of how he came to prefer a fiddle over moonshine, but Ruby is unmoved by her father's words. She still resents his alcohol addiction for most of her life, and storms away as Ada warns Stobrod to watch out for Teague.

Inman follows the sound of a baby crying, and finds Sara, a widow, at her cabin. She sends Inman away, claiming "I ain't got nothin' mister. Best be on your way..." (Higdon, 177), but changes her mind when Inman suggests giving a few drops of whiskey to her crying child. She explains her circumstances, and the two sing a lullaby which

finally quiets the baby. As thanks, Sara gives Inman some food and a place to sleep for the night. Back at Black Cove, Teague approaches Ruby as she constructs a scarecrow. Teague asks after Ada and taunts Ruby with information about her father. Now literate, Ruby reads that her father has a bounty, and Teague swears either the war or he will kill him. He further insults Ruby by insinuating that one day he will marry Ada and have run of the farm, and then she will be all alone again. In the meantime, three Union soldiers approach Sara's cabin demanding food. She tells them the same thing she told Inman, but instead of moving on they tie her up and wait for her to either give them food or let her child die. She gives in, but before the soldiers can get their food Inman shoots and kills two of them, and Sara kills the last as he tries to plead his innocence. The focus expands to Ruby, Ada, and Inman, all saying "I should be cryin', but I just feel numb." (Higdon, 199). The trio contend with their apathy as Stobrod and Pangle try to provide answers "There are some things... that are too much... But there are some things... that no one knows..." (Higdon, pg 202-203). The trio fade and the deserters continue to play music around a fire, but the moment is ruined by the approach of Teague and Birch. Reid, one of the deserters, hides in the bushes and watches Teague's men attack Stobrod and Pangle. He recounts this to Ruby and Ada, and together they set out to find their corpses. The walk slowly up Cold Mountain as the chorus mourns the dead. They find Stobrod alive but unresponsive, and Ruby runs off to find medicine while Ada sings her aria.

### **"I feel sorry for you"**

Ada is listed as a soprano in the score, but the role was premiered by mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard. Mezzo-sopranos have a richer and more mature sound than coloratura or lyric sopranos, and often represent older women-- mothers, aunts, older

sisters, etc. Their arias tend to be more stable and less romantic than coloratura arias, showing off support and fullness of the sound rather than the agility and lightness. Also, the willingness of a director to cast a singer as either a soprano or mezzo-soprano is a relatively modern practice, and shows how far the walls of stereotype have been brought down. Female roles are no longer relegated to one voice type or interpretation, but give freedom to other productions to explore different interpretations of women. The rhythms of Ada's melody line seek to emulate English speech patterns, and so focus on the content and intention of the words rather than the beauty of the music. She does have some climactic moments near the end of aria, but even then, her vocal range does not reach the same heights as Baby Doe.

Ada Monroe's aria represents a culminating moment for her character. It is sung near the end of act two, so her character arc is nearly complete. It begins with Ada singing to Stobrod. Ada pities him, not because he is dying - death is a constant companion of everyone in the opera at this point- but instead she grieves his lost opportunities to connect with his daughter, Ruby. Ada greatly values what Ruby has taught her about independence and survival, but does not realize the magnitude of her appreciation until the line "While you were off numbing yourself to life tangles, she was learning the name and purpose of every bird." (Higdon, pg 224). The numbing refers to Stobrod's addiction to moonshine, but takes on a new meaning as Ada realizes Ruby saved her from becoming like Stobrod, teaching her to learn from life rather than trying to hide away from it in books or letters. As the aria reaches its climax, Ada tells him "I feel so, so, so sorry for you." (Higdon, pg 227) and "How much you missed, so much you missed." (Higdon, pg 228). Ada pauses again, and takes a moment to reflect on her

relationship with her late father, and wonders how Stobrod still could not “find a connection to your only child?” (Higdon, pg 228). Her thoughts then drift to Inman, the male protagonist and her future husband, and she vows that “Nothing will go unnoticed or unvalued.” (Higdon, pg 229). This realization represents a great contrast to the way she viewed the world at the beginning of the opera, with her head in the clouds or in books. She continues, echoing the end of Ruby’s aria, solid in her own truth that Ruby helped her discover- “For that is what Ruby has taught me... that’s what I know...” (Higdon, pg 229). She returns her focus to Stobrod as her aria concludes, and tells him he would have learned the same “if you only opened your eyes soon enough.” (Higdon, pg 229) as the use of the lower register encompasses Ada’s conviction and her dread at who she almost became. In this aria, the conversational style that transitions into more melodic sections when Ada reaches emotional peaks. The culmination of this aria is a blend of beautiful melody and textual honesty that lasts until the end where Ada dips into her lower register to convey the sincerity of her message.

### ***Cold Mountain Plot Synopsis (Cont.)***

A couple days later, Inman stops and examines a fiddle left in the grass- Stobrod’s fiddle. As he does, Ada enters the clearing, but only sees a mysterious man with a pistol, and aims her shotgun at Inman. Inman recognizes Ada’s voice, and the two embrace. Ada brings Inman to their campsite where they are caring for Stobrod, and introduces him to Ruby. Ruby briefly objects to the introduction of a man in the partnership, telling Ada “We can do without him... You don’t need him” (Higdon, pg 236-237). Ada agrees, but defends her choice saying “I know I don't need him. But I think I want him.” (Higdon, pg 236). Ruby leaves the couple alone, and they reflect upon their fear that the war has

changed them into people they may not like anymore. Inman begins to tell Ada his story, and each character returns to tell their part. Some time later, Ada, Ruby, and Inman gather to discuss future plans. Teague hides behind some trees, and envies Inman's intimacy with Ada. His musings are cut off when Inman shoots one of his Homeguard, and Teague and Inman finally clash. Inman wins, but his victory is short-lived when Birch fatally wounds him with a cry of "Hallelujah, Amen!" (Higdon, 270). Birch flees as Ada runs to Inman, and he dies in her arms.

Nine years later, Black Cove Farm is prosperous. Ruby and her husband Reid call the children into bed with the promise of a song from Grandpa Stobrod, but one of the children stays behind to watch the stars come out. She calls to her mother, and Ada and her daughter watch the constellations as the opera closes.

Now that all three operas have been explained and all four aria's examined, it is time to define the variables at work and to see what they reveal about each woman.

## **V. Conclusion**

### **The Relationship Between Stereotype and Agency**

The two variables that change with each opera are stereotype and agency. Or, to put it differently, how unique these women are allowed to be and how active or passive a role they play in their own story. The relationship of the stereotype and agency of women in opera has been debated for years, with arguments from both sides. French philosopher Catherine Clement argues that women are the victims of opera in her book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. In it, she argues that because women are often subjected to the whims of the tenors and basses on stage (and, in some cases, literally live and die by them), they have very little agency in their operas and are therefore 'undone'. She

concludes that the deaths of these women are byproducts of that times social and sexual inequalities, and that the defeat of these women is a pleasure to the men watching.

Carolyn Abbate, an American Musicologist, wrote her entry “Opera, or the Envoicing of Women” from *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* in direct refutation to Clement’s claim. Analyzing the role and music of *Salome*, an opera by Richard Strauss, she demonstrates that even though Salome dies in the end, she is not undone. In fact, she, and many women like her, are empowered because of this.

I posit that the answer lies somewhere in the middle. There is a correlation between stereotype, agency, and historical accuracy in American opera, and it is this--the more stereotyped a female character is, the less historically accurate the story is and the less agency she has in her own story. The converse is also true. The less stereotypical the female character is, the more historically accurate the opera is and the more agency she has in her own story.

### **The Agency of Baby Doe Tabor**

Baby Doe Tabor is a stereotypical soprano. Like many tragic opera sopranos before her, she falls in love with a man, becomes entangled in a love triangle, and comes as close to dying with her husband as she can without actually dying. Baby Doe plays a passive role in her story, letting Horace take charge for her through the majority of the work. Other female roles are similarly minimized. Augusta Tabor, Horace’s first wife, and Baby Doe meet twice on stage. Augusta attempts to take an active role in the story, but is denied by either Baby Doe’s deference to Horace or by Horace himself. These women are unable to work together due to their relationship with the primary male character. And since Augusta cannot take an active role and be positively incorporated



into the story, she is relegated to the stereotype of intelligent female outsider. In real life, these women were far from stereotypical. They both bucked social norms and took charge of their lives to achieve the goals they wanted. And, in actuality, there are no recorded meetings between Augusta and Baby Doe in real life. In fact, many events in the opera are either rewritten or filled in according to what Douglas Moore believed to be true. So, even though he claims in the opera's forward - "The dramatic treatment of Tabor's life, and the two women who dominated it, closely follows the pattern of fact." history shows that he changed the character of Baby Doe to conform to the social norms of the time (the 1950's). Rather than the ambitious social climber she was, he cast her as the sympathetic victim of circumstance, corrupted by wealth, and left alone and insane at the end of the opera.

### **The Agency of Elizabeth Proctor**

In the case of Elizabeth Proctor, she fluctuates between stereotypical Puritan housewife and an original character with hopes and fears for the future of her family and Salem as a whole. There is a small interval between Elizabeth's introduction and her aria, and it gives her character a chance to take, or at least strongly encourage, action. She is not content to wait for John to decide if he will confront Abigail and his guilt. She analyzes her husbands' objections, and breaks them down to one truth- it is not about whether or not John will suffer for his actions, but how many will suffer with him. His wife? His family? The whole town? Elizabeth then gives John her own ultimatum- that "I will be your only wife, or you will have no wife at all" (Ward, pg 134-135). Soon after, Elizabeth is taken away by the court officials, and is forced into a more passive role and to place her trust in her husband. The next time we see Elizabeth, it is when she is called

into court to testify about John's lechery. Once again, Elizabeth is given a chance to take action, and she does. She decides to protect her husband, and denies his transgression, damning her husband and giving Abigail the chaos needed to regain control of the court. The fact that a husband's judgement is contingent upon the testimony of his wife is something while not historically proven, is a remarkable step forward for female characters in opera. It is also remarkable that Elizabeth is given the space to make that incorrect choice, and that it is so well respected that it seals the fate of her husband in a Puritan town. But, she is called in only to exonerate her husband, not herself. Even at her most active moment she is only allowed to advocate for herself within her own home. The last time we see Elizabeth is when she and John meet in the jail. She is again passive, playing the role of unquestionably supportive wife to whatever John decides to do in repayment for landing him in jail. John denies this and states he is there by his own actions, but that does not change Elizabeth's role. Elizabeth supports him to the end, like Baby Doe. But, unlike Baby Doe, there is no face-to-face interaction between the two women in John Proctor's life. The rift between the women happens before the opera, and the closest they come is when Abigail is facing a wall in the courtroom and Elizabeth is not allowed to look at her. Both women play alternating active and passive roles in the opera, and pop in and out of stereotypes- Elizabeth as the gentle, pragmatic wife and Abigail as the vivacious young woman- similar to Augusta and Baby Doe. But, unlike Augusta and Baby Doe, who either tried to actively advise her husband and were shunned or who refused to do anything contradictory to Horace's wants, Elizabeth and Abigail are heard and respected sometimes. And this fight for respect is consistent with Elizabeth's actions after the witch trials. Elizabeth spent the rest of her life advocating for herself and

the other victims of the witch trials. She personally fought for nearly over a decade with the courts to have her own legal death be overturned, and when only she, her husband, and Rebecca Nurse were officially pardoned worked to have everyone else receive the same. So, while Arthur Miller and Robert Ward did make changes to the characters of the witch trials, they are acknowledged and are still in line with history.

### **The Agency of Ada Monroe**

Ada Monroe's character arch demonstrates the potential for a female character to engage in effective active participation in her own life. While Ada is not a one-to-one depiction of a real person, she was created as a representation of real-life women as sourced from existing first-person accounts. She was raised and taught how to be a stereotypical lady in Charleston, but even before the war she rebelled against societal constraints. And, unlike Baby Doe or Elizabeth Proctor before her, Ada finds her support in another woman--Ruby. Together, the women learn from each other and become better versions of themselves because of it. Both the male and female protagonists, Inman and Ada, are given the space and tools to be active throughout the story, and neither are relegated to stereotypical roles. Also, unlike Baby Doe, Ada's life does not stop when her husband is killed. She continues despite her loss. As for Ruby, she also busts stereotypes through her focus on practical matters like running a farm. Neither is Ruby stereotyped into the spiteful spinster who decries men as the root of all the problems--at the end of the opera we see her happily married with many children. So, we see the women of *Cold Mountain* treated and sung as people first. Their gender does not define them, but is merely a facet of who they are. In our 21st century, it is starting to be widely socially acceptable (even encouraged) for women to cast away gender norms and stereotypes in

order to be fully self-actualized. So, it follows that female characters written now would exhibit similar characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

*The Ballad of Baby Doe, The Crucible, and Cold Mountain* provide the lens through which we have examined the development of female American opera characters and their evolving relationship between stereotype and agency. The evolution of female roles in American opera has allowed for a rich performance practice in staging to optimize the audience's understanding of the characters' relationship to other characters and with historical perspective. This dramatic range results in fewer stereotypes and allows for more fully fleshed and nuanced personalities to take equal part in the action and to reflect more historically accurate representations of female life. If this trend continues, particularly as more operas are being written by women, then we can look forward to many great self-actualized female operatic characters to come.

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