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RACHEL LUMSDEN

“The Music Between Us”: Ethel Smyth, Emmeline Pankhurst, and “Possession”

But limelight is bad for me: the light in which I work best is twilight.
—Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth¹

THERE ARE FEW COMPOSERS who seemed to seek the glow of public limelight more than Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944). Smyth fearlessly forged a career for herself as a professional composer in Britain during a time when female musicians were largely regarded as inferior to male musicians and lacked equal educational and professional opportunities. Smyth’s brazen personality was evident from her early years; as a teenager, she battled for two years to gain her father’s approval to travel to Leipzig to further her musical studies. Smyth’s struggle for acceptance as a composer continued throughout her career; she composed large-scale works—including six operas—at a time when women were expected to write “feminine,” small-scale compositions (such as solo piano pieces and songs), and she fought unrelentingly to have her music performed. Throughout her career Smyth faced a barrage of sexist criticism, in which she was consistently referred to as a “lady composer” and alternatively praised and derided for writing “masculine” music: if a

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1. Virginia Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth (August 21, 1932), in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 5: 97.

critic liked her work, it would be lauded for its “masculine strength,” and if a critic didn’t like her work, it would be admonished for exceeding the bounds of female propriety.²

Yet Smyth rarely flinched from battles. A defiant and prolific writer, Smyth also published an exhaustive array of books and memoirs: *Impressions that Remained* (1919), *Streaks of Life* (1921), *A Three-Legged Tour in Greece* (1927), *A Final Burning of Boats* (1928), *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), *Beecham and Pharaoh* (1935), *As Time Went On* (1936), *Inordinate (?) Affection* (1936), *Maurice Baring* (1938), and *What Happened Next* (1940), using her literary works as a means of bringing her own experiences into the limelight. By chronicling the oppression and discrimination she consistently faced, she sought not only to draw attention to herself as a composer—whose works, in her mind, had been consistently and unjustly neglected by the public—but also to highlight the plight of female musicians in general. Smyth’s literary works are wide-ranging and cover a host of different subjects, including recollections about her own life, biographical portraits of close friends, excerpts from letters, reviews of her musical compositions, and her forthright opinions about women’s rights.

A number of scholars have explored these different aspects of Ethel Smyth’s fascinating artistic career; however, most research on Smyth has focused either on her literary endeavors or her compositions. What is missing is a thoroughgoing analysis of the connections between the two. One exception is Elizabeth Wood, who has brilliantly discussed Smyth’s writings *and* music; however, many details of Smyth’s vast array of musical works still remain largely unexplored.³ This article examines

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2. Smyth’s operas include *Fantasio* (1892–1894), *Der Wald* (1899–1901), *The Wreckers* (1902–1904), *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1913–1914), *Fête Galante* (1921–1922), and *Entente Cordiale* (1923–1924). For more information about Smyth and the status of female musicians in Britain during this era, see Jane A. Bernstein, “‘Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!’ Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer,” in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 304–24; and Eugene Gates, “‘Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don’t: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 63–71.
 3. See Elizabeth Wood, “Performing Rights: A Sonography of Women’s Suffrage,” *The Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 606–43; and Elizabeth

a small, specific slice of Smyth's oeuvre: her 1913 song "Possession," dedicated to Emmeline Pankhurst ("E.P"), her friend and leader of the British suffrage movement, and the song's connections with Smyth's writings and experiences. I argue that a careful consideration of the intersections between Smyth's literary and musical work leads to a more nuanced understanding of this powerful, provocative piece. "Possession" is of particular interest not only because it has not previously been analyzed in any substantive depth, but also because of its contemporaneous associations with Smyth, Pankhurst, and their activism within the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). These intersections have additional salience for the insights they bring to women's constructions of same-sex relationships in different kinds of artistic genres (writing and music) in the early twentieth century. Reading both genres together ultimately broadens our understanding of the various strategies creative women used to construct—and deconstruct—their intimate relationships with other women during this era.

ETHEL SMYTH AND EMMELINE PANKHURST

In her 1933 collection, *Female Pippings in Eden*, which is generally regarded as Smyth's most overtly feminist work, Smyth faced the difficult task of chronicling the well-known suffragist leader and one of the founders of the WSPU, her friend and comrade Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928).

Thus, since many women still let men set the key for them in the judging of public matters, decades may elapse before Mrs. Pankhurst is seen for what she really was—an even more astounding figure than Joan of Arc, in that instead of performing her miracles in an age of romance, religious faith, and mystic exaltation, round about

Wood, "Lesbian Fugue: Ethel Smyth's Contrapuntal Arts," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 164–83. For work on Smyth's literary oeuvre, see Christopher Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks the Truth About Her Body': Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography," *Music and Letters* 85, no. 3 (August 2004): 388–414; and Elicia Clements, "'As Springy as a Racehorse': *Female Pippings in Eden* as Rejoinder to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*," in *Rock Blaster, Bridge Builder, Road Paver: The Composer Ethel Smyth*, ed. Cornelia Bartsch, Rebecca Grotjahn, and Melanie Unseld (Munich: Allitera Verlag, 2010).

her blared the hard, skeptical light of the twentieth century.... The hope that this fragmentary record may some day be of use to an ultimate biographer could embolden even an intimate friend to attempt a portrait of one who was as simple as she was complex, as temperate as she was passionate, as loving as she was heartless; who, little as in her bottomless humility she guessed it, was of a breed it is difficult for us ordinary mortals to portray—the breed of heroes and heroines.⁴

Smyth's portrait of her "intimate friend" remains one of her most affecting and poignant literary endeavors. The book largely consists of the two lengthy essays that serve as bookends for the text: the volume opens with the sixty-page essay "Female Pippings in Eden," which details the various difficulties faced by female musicians (interspersed with Smyth's autobiographical anecdotes about her own musical experiences), and the volume closes with a one-hundred-page portrait of Pankhurst. Other shorter writings on various subjects (such as Smyth's childhood, music criticism, and her friend and musical collaborator Harry Brewster) round out the book, but the work clearly centers on the twin themes of discrimination of female musicians and Pankhurst's fight for women's rights.⁵ Smyth found writing about Pankhurst to be a difficult challenge; in her introduction to the Pankhurst essay, she writes, "Again and again a sense of the overwhelming character of that whole happening has come sweeping in like the sea, and for a while the pen refused to travel smoothly and objectively its appointed course."⁶

Smyth met Pankhurst in 1910, when Smyth was urged by her friends Lady Constance Lytton and Hermann Bahr to think seriously about women's suffrage since she had become a "woman of distinction" (Smyth had recently received an honorary Doctor of Music degree from the University of Durham). Within two weeks of meeting Pankhurst, Smyth made a radical decision—to stop composing for two years so that she could fully devote herself to the WSPU: "It became evident to me that to keep out of the movement, to withhold any modicum it was possible to contribute to the cause, was as unthinkable as to drive art and politics in

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4. Ethel Smyth, *Female Pippings in Eden* (Edinburgh: Peter Davies Ltd., 1933), 188–89.
 5. Henry B. ("Harry") Brewster (1850–1908) was a close friend (and likely one-time lover) of Smyth and wrote the librettos for several of her operas.
 6. Smyth, *Female Pippings*, 188.

double harness.”⁷ Smyth quickly became fully invested in the WSPU. Not only was she Pankhurst’s constant companion during these years, but she also composed the well-known “March of the Women” for the WSPU, which served as their official anthem. Smyth even spent two months in Holloway prison for shattering a cabinet minister’s window, along with Pankhurst (in an adjoining cell) and approximately two hundred other suffragists.

As with many close female “friendships” from this era, it is difficult to definitively categorize the relationship that Smyth and Pankhurst shared during Smyth’s tenure with the WSPU. Martha Vicinus has brilliantly envisioned same-sex relationships as a complicated form of “muted discourse,” grounded not just in the unsaid and unseen, but rather a multiplicity of “complex identifications” that reveal a “range of same-sex erotic and emotional relations.”⁸ Many of Smyth’s relationships with women reflect these ideas. Throughout Smyth’s life, most of her close personal attachments were with women; besides her relationship with Pankhurst, Smyth’s close female friends included Elisabeth (Lisl) von Herzogenberg, Vernon Lee, Edith Somerville, the Empress Eugénie of France (who was also her patron), and Virginia Woolf. Many of these relationships were also romantic: for example, Wood and Vicinus have both discussed Smyth’s love affair with von Herzogenberg in the 1890s, which Vicinus describes as an example of “eroticized mother-daughter love.”⁹ Forty years later, Virginia Woolf wrote about her anxiety regarding Smyth’s (apparently unrequited) affections for her: “An old woman of seventy-one has fallen in love with me.... It is at once hideous and horrid and melancholy-sad. It is like being caught by a giant crab.”¹⁰ Yet however ardent and forthright Smyth was in her pursuit of women in her personal life, she was not so explicit about her relationships with women in her memoirs. This silence is perhaps not surprising, since prevailing views about the “deviancy” of homosexuality discouraged writers in England from being open in print about their same-sex love affairs.

7. Ibid., 192.

8. Martha Vicinus, “The History of Lesbian History,” *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 575–76. See also Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

9. Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 126–34; Wood, “Lesbian Fugue,” 164–83.

10. Virginia Woolf, letter to Quentin Bell, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 4: 171.

An additional wrinkle in attempting to define the exact nature of women's relationships results from a general avoidance (particularly during the Victorian era) of describing *any* kind of overt sexual activity. As Sharon Marcus argues, "The question 'did they have sex?' is the first one on people's lips today when confronted with a claim that women in the past were lovers — and it is almost always unanswerable."¹¹ As Wood has noted, these kinds of existing societal constraints also require modern scholars to exercise a certain degree of "reading between the lines" in order to glean meaning from Smyth's memoirs about her romantic attachments.¹²

However, Smyth did acknowledge the supreme importance of her relationships with women in her 1919 memoir, *Impressions That Remained*, in which she describes how women have both a capacity for unique understanding and the potential for solidarity that results from their shared experiences of oppression.

Let me say here, that all my life, even when after years had brought me the seemingly unattainable, I have found in women's affection a peculiar understanding, mothering quality that is a thing apart.... I saw good, brave women obliged because of their sex to give way before dullness, foolishness, or brutality; and in natures inclined to side with the handicapped these things kindle sympathy and admiration. And further it is a fact, as H.B. [Harry Brewster] once remarked, that the people who have helped me most at difficult moments of my musical career, beginning with my own sister Mary, have been members of my own sex. Thus it comes to pass that my relations with certain women, all exceptional personalities I think, are shining threads in my life.¹³

Undoubtedly, Pankhurst was one of the "shining threads" in Smyth's life, but how intimate was their relationship? Pankhurst and

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11. Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 43–44.
 12. Wood, "Lesbian Fugue," 165. June Purvis has noted that most scholars have assumed Smyth and Pankhurst were lovers; in contrast, Purvis characterizes Pankhurst as Smyth's "close friend" and claims that it is "unlikely they were lovers in any physical sense." See June Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100, 159–60.
 13. Ethel Smyth, *Impressions That Remained: Memoirs*, vol. 2, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), 6.

Smyth were virtually inseparable during Smyth's WSPU years, so their relationship was obviously a close one, and a number of pieces of written evidence do seem to indicate that Smyth and Pankhurst may have also been romantically involved. These descriptions are of interest not because they somehow "prove" that Smyth and Pankhurst had a sexual relationship (a question that will likely never be conclusively answered), but rather because they reflect many of the ambiguous and complicated ways in which women discussed their relationships with other women during this era. First is Smyth's obvious adoration of Pankhurst, expressed not only by the considerable proportions of the essay in *Female Pipings in Eden* (its hundred-page length significantly overshadows that of the other chapters in the same volume), but also through Smyth's prose, which continually reveals her overwhelming devotion and affection for Pankhurst. Smyth clearly idolized Pankhurst for her political strength and courage, as shown by the numerous comparisons Smyth makes throughout *Female Pipings in Eden* between Pankhurst and Joan of Arc. Yet even Smyth's most reverent accounts of Pankhurst often contain glimpses of something more complex than simple adoration, emphasizing qualities associated with attraction and allure, such as Pankhurst's "magical personality" and her "fire that was always ready to blaze."¹⁴ Smyth also passionately described an early encounter with Pankhurst as "the fiery inception of what was to become the deepest and closest of friendships."¹⁵ On several occasions in *Female Pipings in Eden*, Smyth also hints that their relationship may have been different from the passionate "mother-daughter affection" that characterized some of her other female relationships, such as with von Herzogenberg (eleven years her senior).¹⁶ In contrast, Smyth and Pankhurst were the same age: both women were born in 1858, and their birthdays were less than three months apart. Smyth's most suggestive narrative of their relationship is

14. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 192 and 289.

15. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 191. Smyth also dwelled on Pankhurst's physical appearance in this same paragraph, describing her as "a graceful woman rather under middle height; one would have said a delicate-looking woman, but the well-knit figure, the quick deft movements, the clear complexion, the soft bright eyes that on occasion could emit lambent flame, betokened excellent health" (191).

16. Smyth's relationship with von Herzogenberg is discussed in Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 126–34.

the following passage, which details a profoundly intimate moment the two women shared (all ellipses in this passage are Smyth's).

I remember one night—"Census night" it was—when she and I, standing in our dressing gowns at the window, watched the dawn rise beyond the river and fight its way through the mist. She was on the eve of some terrible venture that would end in rough usage and prolonged imprisonment, thinking perhaps of the inevitable hunger-strike, while I, for my part, was tasting the bitter anguish of one fated to look on powerless. Our foreheads pressed against the window pane staring silently into the dawn, gradually we realized that her love for down-trodden women... her hope of better things for them... my music... our friendship... that all this was part of the mystery that was holding our eyes. And suddenly it came to us that all was well; for a second we were standing on the spot in a madly spinning world where nothing stirs, where there is eternal stillness. It was a curious experience. Not a word passed between us, but we looked at each other, wondering why we had been so troubled... Neither of us ever forgot that dawn.¹⁷

What is especially striking about this provocative passage is the dramatic difference in Smyth's prose, which departs from her characteristically brazen swagger into something decidedly more intimate, even lyrical. This passage also contains some notable similarities with an evocative diary entry, discussed by Marcus, in which Margaret Leicester Warren describes a particularly charged scene between herself and Edith Leicester, using an intimate setting with the two women alone before a window at dusk.¹⁸ Of course, windows have obvious symbolic connotations (as an overtly "female" symbol), and in Smyth's passage the window serves as the object that spurs both women's philosophical ruminations (as they gaze out, pondering the world "out there") and what brings the two women in close physical proximity to one another ("our foreheads pressed against the window pane..."). Smyth's unusual

17. Smyth, *Female Pivings*, 194.

18. Warren's entry notes, "The dusk had begun and I... sat... at the open window... By and bye Edith came and sat near me.... The room inside was nearly dark, but outside it was brilliant May moonlight.... Edith sat there ready to go, looking very pale and very sad with the light on her face.... We did not talk much." Warren's journals were written in the 1870s and published in 1924. See Marcus, *Between Women*, 47–49.

use of numerous fragments and ellipses (unique to this scene) is suggestive, sensual, and helps create an almost orgasmic sense of momentum as the narrative progresses. Vicinus describes the ellipsis as an especially effective way to depict same-sex passion in writing, noting, “The ellipsis contains the very act that cannot be described but can still be known. It begs for interpretation, yet resists it.”¹⁹ Although the passage begins with two autonomous women (“she and I”), by the end of the scene the women have realized their solidarity and connection with one another: a shift illuminated by the pronoun changes (from “she and I” to “we” and “our”). Significantly, this shift also seems to hinge on the phrase “our friendship.”

A different piece of evidence describing Smyth and Pankhurst’s relationship is found in one of Virginia Woolf’s letters. Woolf and Smyth were close friends for more than a decade; Smyth dedicated *As Time Went On* (1936) to Woolf, and Woolf even read *Female Pipings in Eden* and made suggestions and criticisms before the book’s publication.²⁰ On December 3, 1933, Woolf wrote to Quentin Bell,

We have a memoir meeting next week; and I have Ethel Smyth and Rebecca West to tea to discuss the life of Mrs. Pankhurst. In strict confidence, Ethel used to love Emmeline—they shared a bed.²¹

Ultimately, the more provocative questions to consider regarding Smyth and Pankhurst should focus not on what statements like these might “prove” about their relationship, but rather how these descriptions serve as important examples of the complicated strategies that women used to express their devotion to and desire for other women during this era. Toward the end of her portrait of Pankhurst, Smyth poetically characterized their relationship as “the music between Mrs. Pankhurst and myself.”²² Whether or not Smyth and Pankhurst were actually lovers, the profundity and significance of their “intimate friendship,” built on mutual respect and solidarity, is indisputable. As Marcus so eloquently concludes, “We can best understand what kinds of relationships women had with each other not by hunting for evidence of sex, which even if

19. Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 234.

20. See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 5:15, 89, 97, 110, 168, 191–95, 210–11, 249–50.

21. *Ibid.*, 256.

22. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 237.

we find it will not explain much, but rather by anchoring women's own statements about their relationships in a larger context."²³ It is to these larger contexts that we now turn.

"POSSESSION" FOR VOICE AND PIANO

"Possession" is the second of Smyth's *Three Songs* (1913), one of the first works Smyth completed when she returned to composing after her two-year commitment to the WSPU. As Wood has noted, many of Smyth's works from 1910–1914 contain autobiographical and political elements, and *Three Songs* is no exception. For example, the third song of the collection, "On the Road: A Marching Tune," is dedicated to Christabel Pankhurst, Emmeline's eldest daughter, and contains numerous transposed fragments from Smyth's earlier WSPU anthem, "March of the Women," showing a clear intersection between Smyth's music and her political activism.²⁴

"Possession" — which is dedicated to "E.P." (Emmeline Pankhurst) — also has connections with Smyth's personal life, although these connections are perhaps not as easy to uncover as those found in "On the Road: A Marching Tune." In her brief description of the song, Wood characterizes "Possession" as "a frankly personal love song" that "encodes a *lesbian* [italics in original] right to desire," but does not include any detailed analysis of specific textual or musical elements that lead to this interpretation. Here, I would like to explore both the text and music of "Possession" in depth, to see what connections might be drawn between Smyth's personal experiences and this song.

Smyth's "Possession" is a setting of a poem by Ethel Carnie (1886–1962), one of the first working-class British women to have a successful publishing career. The poem appears in Carnie's second collection, *Songs of a Factory Girl* (1911). Smyth follows Carnie's text almost exactly; Smyth's few changes to the poem have been indicated in bold brackets below.

23. Marcus, *Between Women*, 44.

24. See Wood, "Performing Rights," 625–26. Christabel Pankhurst (1880–1958) was also a leading figure in the WSPU. Smyth's works from this period include "March of the Women," "Hey Nonny No," *Songs of Sunrise*, the finale of Smyth's String Quartet in E minor, *Three Songs*, and *The Boatswain's Mate* (opera).

"POSSESSION" (CARNIE)

There bloomed by my cottage door
 A rose with a heart scented sweet
 O so lovely and fair, that I plucked it one day;
 Laid it over my own heart's quick [swift] beat.
 In a moment its petals were shed,
 Just a tiny white mound at my feet.
 There flew through my casement low
 A linnet who [that] richly could sing;
 Sang so thrillingly sweet I could not let it go,
 But must cage it, the glad, pretty [wild, happy] thing,
 But it died [pined] in the cage I had made.
 Not a note to my chamber would bring.

There came to my lonely soul
 A friend I had waited for long;
 And the deep chilly silence lay stricken and dead,
 Pierced to death by our love and our song.
 And I thought on [of] the bird and the flower.
 And my soul in its knowledge grew strong.

Go out when thou wilt, O friend –
 Sing thy song, roam the world glad and free;
 By the holding I lose, by the giving I gain,
 And the gods cannot take thee from me;
 For a song and a scent on the wind
 Shall drift in through the doorway from thee.
**[(added repetition): For a song and a scent on the wind
 Shall drift in through the doorway from thee
 By the holding I lose ... By the giving I gain.]**

The poem chronicles the narrator's experience of possessing, a progression that becomes increasingly personalized as the poem unfolds. Not only do the narrator's objects of desire become increasingly humanized (from "rose" to "linnet" to "friend"), the location of these desired things also moves closer and closer to the narrator (from "by my cottage door" to "through my casement window" to "came to my lonely soul"). And of course, each of these objects of desire (lovely rose, sweet singing bird, and friend) is easily associated with stereotypical constructions

of femininity, and the textual descriptions (“a rose with a heart scented sweet” and “tiny white mound”) also have clear associations with clitoral imagery commonly used by female writers to depict the eroticized female body.²⁵ In the first stanza, the narrator encounters a rose so sweet, lovely, and fair that it must be plucked (and it promptly withers). In the second stanza, the narrator now tries to possess a living thing: transfixed by the “thrillingly sweet” song of the linnnet, the narrator cages the bird (which stops singing and dies). In the third stanza, the narrator now is enchanted by “a friend I had waited for long,” but remembering the previous mistakes with the bird and flower, now chooses not to try to possess the “friend,” but to let the friend remain autonomous and “roam the world glad and free.” The shifts in pronouns mirror the poem’s progression: from the distinction between the rose (“it”) and the narrator (“I”/“my”) to the slightly more personified bird (which is once referred to as “who,” but otherwise called “it”). Yet, even between the narrator and bird a boundary remains, one demarcated by the cage the narrator uses to imprison it. A sense of union is finally reached in the third stanza, when the narrator and the friend “pierce the silence” together with “our love and our song.” This is a transformative experience, in which the narrator chooses not to try to possess and entrap the beloved one, but to give them autonomy to “roam the world glad and free,” ultimately learning that “by the holding I lose, by the giving I gain.” Furthermore, both the friend *and* the narrator have gained their freedom by the end of the poem. “Possession” thus can be thought of as the desire to possess, but also the state of being possessed by something or someone. In the narrator’s experience with the friend, the narrator has now reached a newfound understanding, so profound that it moves beyond the narrator’s more superficial experiences of possessing and being possessed (obsessed) with the flower and bird, into a new realm. Through loving and understanding, the narrator moves beyond mere “possession,” and learns to let go.

Another aspect of this text worth noting is its gender ambiguity. One could easily read the flower, bird, and friend as gendered female, since birds and flowers are typically associated with femininity, and also because of the mawkish descriptions of the flower and bird (“scented

25. See Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 234–37.

sweet,” “lovely and fair,” “sang so thrillingly sweet,” “glad, pretty thing”). However, a certain degree of ambiguity surrounds the narrator of the poem, whose gender is never made explicitly clear; this textual ambiguity is also reflected in the song itself, which is set for either mezzo-soprano (female singer) or baritone (male singer).²⁶ While one reading of the poem could interpret the narrator as male, with the text centering on the importance of men granting women a degree of independence and autonomy in their heterosexual relationships, the poem might also be read with two female characters, as an ode to an intimate female relationship.

A number of parallels might be drawn between this text and Smyth and Pankhurst’s relationship. Smyth composed “Possession” as she was ending her two-year commitment to the WSPU in 1913. Smyth’s decision to return to composing after her time with the WSPU was clearly not an easy one: Smyth even described their separation as “the wrench” in *Female Pipings in Eden*.²⁷ Smyth and Pankhurst maintained a prolific correspondence after their separation (in which Smyth continually addresses Pankhurst as “my darling Em”), and many of their surviving letters poignantly reflect their feelings about this “wrench” as they pursued their work on two different continents. In December 1913, Smyth wrote to Pankhurst: “Goodnight my darling. The thought of you is like a great lighthouse, visible through all the thousand miles of fog between us. And as one does with lighthouses my eyes are always wandering over to the beam... Goodnight again my dearest.”²⁸ Whatever pain they felt about their separation, Smyth and Pankhurst regarded it as an important sacrifice, necessary so that both could have the freedom to fully devote themselves to their respective political and musical careers. “Possession” reflects this sense of sacrifice, in which the narrator realizes the

26. The title page of the published version of *Three Songs* states they are written for mezzo-soprano or high baritone. At present, I have not been able to locate any information to determine if the addition of “high baritone” on the score was Smyth’s or the publisher’s (a common practice to attempt to sell more copies of songs).

27. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 215.

28. Smyth, letter to Pankhurst (December 29, 1913), Ethel Mary Smyth Letters, Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina Greensboro. Many thanks to Andrea Cole, archivist at UNCG, for her help with this collection.

importance of letting the friend maintain her independence and “roam free,” even though their separation may be painful. Smyth writes about their unique passions even in her most intimate descriptions of their relationship (see the “dawn” passage quoted above), entwining statements about Smyth’s focus on her music and Pankhurst’s “love for down-trodden women” and “her hope of better things for them” within the fabric of the scene.²⁹ The two women’s devotion to their individual careers is also evident in their letters to one another during their separation. In a 1914 letter to Pankhurst, Smyth wrote, “Well—the more brilliantly you do your job the more will I try to pull off mine as well as I can. I will succeed, too; be sure of that. But you are—I mean, of my doing all that in me lies, anyway—to succeed in it.”³⁰ Pankhurst echoed these sentiments. In a 1914 letter to Smyth, Pankhurst wrote, “Oh, my dear, I feel that all this [Pankhurst’s recent arrest] has broken into your work sadly, but you will have to feel as people do whose sons are at a war, and just go on having faith in my star and a certain way I have of smoothing my path in prison.”³¹ Statements like these become especially gut-wrenching when one considers the visceral horrors Pankhurst and other suffragists faced during these years, as a tortuous array of commonly used law enforcement policies meant that imprisoned suffragists who chose to hunger strike faced force feedings or the “Cat and Mouse Act” (the nickname for the Prisoners’ Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act) wherein gravely ill suffragists were routinely released from prison “on license” once they were sufficiently weakened through lack of food, just until they recovered their health, whereupon they were swiftly re-incarcerated. Smyth described Pankhurst’s ghastly appearance after she had been temporarily released from prison following one such hunger strike: “She was heartrending to look on, her skin yellow, and so tightly drawn over her face that you wondered the bone structure did not come through; her eyes deep sunken and burning, and a deep dark flush on her cheeks.”³² Clearly, both women had strong feelings not only about their separation,

29. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 194.

30. Smyth, letter to Pankhurst (March 1914), quoted in Wood, “Performing Rights,” 613.

31. Pankhurst, letter to Smyth (March 13, 1914), quoted in Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 227.

32. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 213.

but also regarding the degree of personal sacrifice involved in allowing one another the freedom to “go out when thou wilt.” In one of her most moving descriptions of Pankhurst, Smyth wrote that Pankhurst “had paid in her own person for the freedom of us all.”³³

As previously discussed, “Possession” contains a degree of inherent gender ambiguity in terms of its narrator; however, ambiguities regarding the characters might also be found in Smyth’s composition. Since Smyth is setting the poem and writing the song, one could obviously read the narrator as representing Smyth and the “friend” as Pankhurst—especially since she dedicated the song to Pankhurst. Yet one could equally read the narrator as personifying Pankhurst, since Smyth was “set free” to return to composing after her two years of service with the WSPU. In addition, the friend is the character who goes out into the world to “sing thy song,” and it is the *friend’s song* that “drifts into the doorway” from afar back to the narrator. In all, these textual ambiguities mirror the complex themes of freedom and sacrifice that were a central aspect of Smyth and Pankhurst’s relationship; themes that become especially salient when read against the recurring issues of possession, capture, and confinement that suffragists such as Smyth and Pankhurst faced during these years.

Smyth’s choice to dedicate a song to Pankhurst is especially provocative when one considers the broader significance of “voice” within Smyth’s biography and oeuvre. Much recent scholarship has foregrounded themes of sound and voice from a variety of different perspectives, emphasizing the importance of understanding “voice” not just as a superficial aesthetic event, but as an embodied site rich in carnal meaning. Judith Butler has described the significance of the body in spoken confessions, noting that “spoken words are, strangely, bodily offerings: tentative or forceful, seductive or withholding, or both at once.”³⁴ Roland Barthes famously discussed the “grain” of the voice in classical music, emphasizing not just its own corporeal importance (“the ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs”), but also the potentially erotic relation between performers and listeners as they experience this

33. *Ibid.*, 264.

34. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 172.

corporeality.³⁵ In contrast to Barthes, whose work argues that singing voices serve to communicate or subvert language (“song must speak, must *write* [emphasis in original]”), Wayne Koestenbaum focuses on the erotic implications of the operatic voice itself: “Voice is a system equal to sexuality — as punishing, as pleasure-giving, as elective, as ineluctable.”³⁶ Adriana Cavarero’s conception of voice has also challenged the notion that voice functions merely as a handmaiden of discursive meaning. Instead, Cavarero attempts to reclaim voice from what she describes as a longstanding tradition of “devocalization of logos,” in which voices have been devalued in favor of speech, abstract thought, and semantic meaning. For Cavarero, the voice should be considered on its own terms, for the ways in which it reveals “the uniqueness of the one who emits it.”³⁷ More than communicating uniqueness, voices also open up spaces for a kind of embodied relationality: “Destined for the ear of another, the voice implies a listener — or better, a reciprocity of pleasure.”³⁸

Space does not permit me to explore these issues in depth in this particular context, but it is important to acknowledge that Smyth drew on the latent power of the voice throughout her career. Smyth seemed to have a special affinity for vocal composition; although she wrote relatively few songs, she completed an astonishing number of large-scale, operatic works. Smyth’s vocal works are often used as sites to address issues and topics that were significant to her personally, such as her suffrage anthem “March of the Women,” or her opera *The Boatswain’s Mate* (which contains a leading character modeled on Pankhurst).³⁹ It would be a stark overgeneralization to characterize all of Smyth’s vocal music as sensual — or autobiographical — but Smyth’s vocal writing is also noteworthy for her frequent use of the (lower) mezzo-soprano range rather than the (more typical) soprano, a compositional choice that becomes additionally fraught with meaning since Smyth was a mezzo-soprano

35. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in his *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 188.

36. *Ibid.*, 185; Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 155.

37. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9.

38. *Ibid.*, 7.

39. Wood, “Performing Rights,” 628–31.

herself and often gave private performances of her own works.⁴⁰ At present, I have not been able to find any surviving evidence that Smyth ever performed “Possession,” but her decision to dedicate a song (rather than any other kind of musical work) to Pankhurst becomes additionally meaningful when one considers her infatuation with Pankhurst’s alluring speaking voice, which Smyth poignantly remembered as “a voice the deep pitying inflexion of which I shall be able to make ring in the ears of memory till my dying day.”⁴¹ In another passage, Smyth lyrically described Pankhurst’s voice as “a voice that, like a stringed instrument in the hand of a great artist, put us in *possession* [emphasis added] of every movement of her spirit—also of the great underlying passion from which sprang all the scorn, all the wrath, all the tenderness in the world.”⁴²

Smyth’s choice of setting “Possession” as an art song also becomes significant when one considers the ways in which it flirts with boundaries of “public” and “private” music making. Using a reduced texture of solo voice and piano, art songs such as “Possession” contain a degree of intrinsic intimacy since they were typically performed in private, domestic settings (for example, in a drawing room for family and friends). At the same time, published art songs such as “Possession” can also circulate freely throughout the public sphere, as they are available to anyone with the means to purchase them. Art songs were also performed in public concert settings. To further complicate matters, Smyth may have also composed an additional version of “Possession,” a large-scale setting for voice and orchestra.⁴³ Unfortunately, I have not been able to

40. Wood, “Lesbian Fugue,” 177.

41. Smyth, *Female Pippings*, 196.

42. *Ibid.*, 195. See also 261 and 289 for more descriptions of Pankhurst’s voice.

43. It is unclear which of Smyth’s *Three Songs* were also scored for voice and orchestra. The published version for voice and piano (Universal, 1913) mentions that only “On the Road” has an orchestral version. In contrast, both Louise Collis’s and Christopher St. John’s biographies of Smyth list *Three Songs* as being set with “orchestral accompaniment,” but neither book mentions the voice and piano version. See Christopher St. John, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959), 306; and Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London: William Kimber, 1984), 210. The only description I have found of an early performance of “Possession” sheds little light on the matter. It is a short listing of a performance on May 20, 1913, in Aeolian Hall with Percy Heming, voice, accompanied by

locate any detailed information about the performance history of “Possession,” but it is important to recognize its potential for serving as a highly ambiguous musical text that deftly problematizes simplistic categorizations of “public” and “private.” These multivalent levels of meaning and interpretation intersect in provocative ways with Vicinus’s ideas about lesbian sexuality as a “muted discourse” and how scholars must remain “sensitive to nuance, masks, secrecy, and the unspoken.”⁴⁴ Somewhat ironically, in this case a musical text that literally sounds also contains other, more hidden layers of meaning, ones that are not necessarily “spoken” (through performance of the song) — or recognized by the audience. Rather than choosing between one discursive “hearing” or another, listeners can revel in this ambiguity, experiencing the myriad ways in which “Possession” simultaneously functions as a simple art song, a generalized expression of desire, and a highly personal document saturated in intimate meaning.

Yet ambiguities are not just found in the text and Smyth’s choice of genre, but also in the musical setting itself. From its opening bars, striking dissonances and unexpected harmonies give the music a feeling of anticipation and uncertainty; a certain degree of tension also exists between the song’s conventional and unconventional aspects (visit www.feministstudies.org to listen to a rendition of the song). For example, Smyth maintains a rather regular phrase structure throughout the work in that the first three stanzas of the poem are organized into a consistent (4+4+5 measure) phrase structure. The song begins with a seemingly conventional strophic organization, as the first two stanzas of the poem are set to music that is virtually identical.⁴⁵ One might expect Smyth to continue the strophic setting for the third and fourth stanzas of the text; however, entirely new music is used for the third stanza of

Gwendolen Mason (harp) and “other instruments,” appearing in “London Concerts,” *The Musical Times*, June 1, 1913, 391.

44. Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 434.
45. For those readers unfamiliar with the term, “strophic” refers to songs in which the same music is used for each stanza of text; the first two stanzas are virtually identical except for the F₂ in m. 15 and the D₃ in m. 29. (“F₂” refers to the specific register in which the pitch F appears; “middle C” on the piano is designated as “C₄.”)

the poem — the stanza that depicts the narrator and the friend. Remarkably, although the third stanza is set to new music, it still maintains the (4+4+5) phrase structure used for the text in the first two stanzas. The music used for the final stanza of text, in which the friend “roam[s] the world glad and free,” is also of interest. The first eight measures are identical to the opening of the first and second strophes, with the exception of the melancholy B \flat ₄-E₄ tritone (and the E₄ in the piano) at the beginning of the fourth strophe. However, after that Smyth departs dramatically from the previous music, not only by deviating from the (4+4+5) phrase structure used in the first three stanzas, but also by extending the text through repetition of lines from the fourth stanza of the poem, to emphasize the angst-ridden separation (“For a song and a scent on the wind / Shall drift in through the doorway from thee / By the holding I lose ... By the giving I gain”). Smyth extends the final moments of the song through repeating and transforming its wrenching eighth-note motives, slowly spinning the song to its poignant F-minor conclusion. The departure from a strophic setting seems to mirror the drama of the poem; just as the narrator is transformed as the poem unfolds, so too does Smyth’s musical setting depart from its strophic setting as the song progresses.

The formal aspects of the song seem to reflect the tensions of the poem, but the music itself also contains a strong sense of ambiguity, even from its opening measures. Although the vocal part and the key signature ground the song undeniably in F minor — significantly, the parallel minor of Smyth’s *wspu* song, “March of the Women,” which is in F major — the piano part consistently destabilizes a strong sense of F minor. First, the song is marked by a noticeable lack of cadences: perfect authentic cadences are rare — for example, the first perfect authentic cadence is not found until measures 14–15.⁴⁶ As cadences are used to provide a sense of closure to musical phrases, this lack of cadences reflects the increasing momentum of the poem, while also lending a

46. “Perfect authentic cadence” (PAC) refers to a specific musical gesture that creates a definitive sense of closure at the end of a musical phrase. PACs involve harmonic motion from the dominant (or dominant seventh) to the tonic (both of which appear in root position); in addition, PACs also feature a melodic component (the tonic scale degree appears in the soprano voice above the tonic chord).

EXAMPLE 1 “Possession” (1913), measures 1–6.

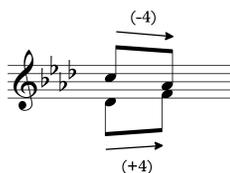
The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows measures 1-3. The vocal line begins with a whole rest in measure 1, followed by a half note G4 in measure 2, and a quarter note G4 in measure 3. The piano accompaniment features a churning eighth-note motive in the right hand, starting with a dissonant chord (F4, D5, C5) in measure 1. The second system shows measures 4-6. The vocal line continues with a quarter note B4 in measure 4, a quarter note A4 in measure 5, and a half note G4 in measure 6. The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note motive, which is spinned out in measures 4 and 5.

sense of unrest and uncertainty to the song. Yet even more striking is the use of dissonance in this song, which is found even in its opening measures.

In the opening of the song, a strong sense of F minor is obscured by the major seventh (D \flat /C), which begins a churning eighth-note motive that recurs in a variety of guises throughout the song (such as the spun-out material heard in the piano during the third and fourth lines of the first, second, and fourth strophes).⁴⁷ The opening motive is especially compelling because of its provocative dissonances, as the first notes of the song are tonally ambiguous; instead of a more typical tonal setting (in which only one key is presented as the “home” key at a time), Smyth’s

47. “Motive” in a musical sense is typically defined as “a short idea, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or any combination of these three.” A famous example of a motive is the first four notes of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 (first movement). See William Drabkin, “Motif [motive]” in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19221>, accessed January 16, 2014.

EXAMPLE 2 “Possession”: opening dyads.



opening gesture suggests both D^b major (D^b - F - A^b) and F minor (F - A^b - C). But this opening is also of interest because of its balanced construction around the shared (F - A^b) minor-third dyad. The notes of the first (D^b/C) dyad, while dissonant, are arranged symmetrically around the (F - A^b) minor-third dyad (both notes are four half steps away). Minor-third sonorities will become an important feature of Smyth's setting of the third verse of the poem.

The opening of the song also creates tension between the strongly diatonic melody and its accompaniment. The two parts are rather independent in a number of different ways: first, the piano accompaniment generally avoids doubling the vocal line; second, the vocal part begins on a weak beat, in the middle of measure 3, overlapping with the piano's first phrase; and third, the piano part contains several startling dissonances, which harmonize the rather conventionally diatonic (at least in measures 1–8) vocal line in unexpected ways (for example, the E natural in measure 5, and the D natural/ D^b in measure 4).

Clearly, a plaintive, uncertain atmosphere unfolds even in the opening measures of “Possession,” but one of the most astounding moments in the song is Smyth's setting of the poem's third verse. As previously discussed, in this stanza—which specifically depicts the relationship between the narrator and the friend—Smyth breaks away from the strophic setting used for the first two verses. Instead, the musical texture radically shifts from the lyrical, rippling eighth notes of the first two verses into a decidedly thicker, chordal texture, in which the range of the piece is also extended into the upper and lower registers of the piano. But an especially striking change in the third stanza is the prevalence of a particular harmonic sonority: diminished seventh chords. Smyth's use of diminished seventh chords is noteworthy not only because they

help create a clear departure from the music heard during the first two stanzas of the poem and not only because of the sheer number of times they occur in this passage (more than fifteen), but also because of the construction of the fully diminished seventh chord itself. Not only are diminished seventh chords built around the interval of a minor third—the second dyad of the piece, discussed above—but they are also the only four-note chord that divides the octave evenly (into a stack of minor thirds). Although a strikingly dissonant sonority, the even construction of diminished seventh chords grants them a variety of useful compositional possibilities (especially the potential for the tonicization of and modulation to different key areas). Diminished seventh chords have been used by composers since Bach to create tonal ambiguity; their symmetric construction allows them to be enharmonically respelled and used as a way to modulate to many other key areas. Perhaps a connection might be made between the use of this symmetric, evenly balanced chord and the sense of autonomy and independence between the poem's narrator and friend, as well as the eventual dissonant pain that results from their separation.

Aside from Smyth's use of specific musical techniques as a means of cultivating a heightened sense of ambiguity in "Possession," deeper examination also reveals a number of motivic connections between "Possession" and two other songs that were particularly significant for Smyth and Pankhurst: "March of the Women" and "Laggard Dawn." The following section explores how these motivic associations create a sonic fabric that renders the relationship depicted in the song as more than just simple adoration, infatuation, or obsession; instead, these motivic connections foster a musical setting that represents a complicated, multifaceted realm of intimacy, a kind of intimate nexus in which various forms of desire and passion—politics, intimacy, desire, and solidarity—converge, overlap, and spill into one another.

Why connect "Possession" specifically with "March of the Women" and "Laggard Dawn"? First, all three works were composed between 1911 and 1913, bookending the years of Smyth's involvement with the WSPU. While strikingly different from one another in tone, "March of the Women" and "Laggard Dawn" share a number of important features: the songs are both part of Smyth's 1911 set *Songs of Sunrise*; further, both were composed for women's chorus, and both were performed

by the suffragists during Smyth's tenure with the WSPU.⁴⁸ As the official anthem of the WSPU, "March of the Women" was beloved among suffragists; cards of the song were sold widely, and suffragists performed the work in a broad range of activist settings, including meetings, protests, rallies, and even in prison. Sir Thomas Beecham described his trip to Holloway prison in 1912 to visit Smyth during her incarceration for her political activism:

She was arrested, tried, convicted and sent to Holloway prison to reflect and, if possible, repent. Well, she neither reflected nor repented. She pursued a joyously rowdy line of activity. Accompanying her were about a dozen other suffragettes, for whom Ethel wrote a stirring march, 'Song of Freedom' ["March of the Women"] and on one occasion I went to see her ... on this particular occasion when I arrived, the warden of the prison, who was a very amiable fellow, was bubbling with laughter. He said, "Come into the quadrangle." There were the ladies, a dozen ladies, marching up and down, singing hard. He pointed up to a window where Ethel appeared; she was leaning out, conducting with a toothbrush, also with immense vigour, and joining in the chorus of her own song.⁴⁹

The languid song "Laggard Dawn" serves as a dreamy, contemplative counterpart to the boisterous and bombastic "March of the Women." While not as well known or widely performed as "March of the Women," "Laggard Dawn" was also a meaningful work for suffragists; a review of the song's premiere noted, "'Laggard Dawn' is simply the cry of people who are waiting for the sun to rise. Its meaning Suffragists will understand at once. It contains a verse in memory of those who died through their devotion to the cause."⁵⁰ But these two 1911 works also had additional resonances for Pankhurst and Smyth that extended beyond the surface of their overt political message, ultimately blurring the boundaries between personal and political. Wood notes that "Laggard Dawn" "acquired for both women a private, erotically charged, and political significance" because it served simultaneously as a paean to the struggles and hardships faced by the suffragists as well as a "representation

48. See Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 201, 205; and Wood, "Performing Rights," 616–22.

49. Quoted in Kathleen A. Abromeit, "Ethel Smyth, 'The Wreckers,' and Sir Thomas Beecham," *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1989): 200.

50. Wood, "Performing Rights," 641n51.

of a shared experience in Emmeline's bedroom" (a musical depiction of the scene by the window from Smyth's memoir, discussed above).⁵¹ Pankhurst's letters also reveal the personal importance of these songs to both women: when Pankhurst was imprisoned in April 1913 and weakened from her hunger strike, she wrote to Smyth, "You will smile to hear that during sleepless nights I sang the 'March' and 'Laggard Dawn' in such a queer cracked voice."⁵²

As previously mentioned, Smyth's use of self-borrowing was not unusual in her 1910–1914 works; Wood has identified how "On the Road" and *The Boatswain's Mate* both feature prominent quotations from "March of the Women."⁵³ In contrast, Smyth's motivic allusions are more subtle in "Possession" and represent a different kind of motivic connection that is more hidden and less blatant than other works; Smyth's use of motivic material from these two songs further complicates the (already ambiguous) intimacies depicted in "Possession."

The most overt borrowing occurs in the middle of the third stanza, where the music abruptly shifts from the nebulous, dissonant texture created by the hazy diminished seventh chords and static rhythmic activity, suddenly bursting forth into a bold, march-like phrase ending that occurs with the text "Pierced to death by our love and our song" (measures 36–38). The music that accompanies this swerve has a more forthright, strident quality and tonicizes a new key (E major). Although not an exact quotation from "March of the Women," the passage has strong sonic connections with the work because of its militaristic character; Smyth also ends "On the Road" (the next song in this set) by directly quoting a transposed fragment from "March of the Women." But the association with "March of the Women" is also heightened because of the motivic content of this passage. The rhythmic profile of measures 36–38 is markedly similar to that of the instrumental opening of "March of the Women": both feature the striking dotted pickup figure (a jaunty rhythm that helps lend a militaristic feel to the passage), followed by a sustained high pitch and a descending series of eighth notes. The pitch content of both these moments is similar (in "Possession," fourths and fifths replace the two distinctive leaps of a sixth in

51. Ibid., 621–22.

52. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 213, 273.

53. Wood, "Performing Rights," 625–26, 628–31.

“March of the Women”), but measures 12–15 of “March of the Women” — also based on its forthright opening phrase — may also be strongly connected with measures 36–38 of “Possession,” particularly because of the similar tonal profile of both passages (both tonicize the dominant of F major and E major, respectively). Example 3 (page 360) compares the three melodies: note the similar rhythm and melodic contour of the excerpts. In most versions of “March of the Women,” the melodic line shown in Example 3b is made prominent through doubling in both the left hand of the piano and the lowest (alto) vocal part. In “Possession,” the motive occurs in one of the inner voices of the piano and is partially echoed in the vocal line.

But other moments in “Possession” might also be connected with “March of the Women.” The first and second strophes of “Possession” begin with an evocative four-measure phrase that bears some striking motivic similarities to passages from the bridge of Smyth’s suffrage anthem, as motivic material from the Alto and Soprano I parts is seamlessly woven together to create a single vocal strand in “Possession” that alludes to motivic content from the climax of Smyth’s “March of the Women.” Example 4 (page 362) compares the phrases.

This moment of “March of the Women” is especially dramatic because of the indefatigably aspiring text in each verse. In addition, these measures also move away from the tonic key, tonicizing the dominant. But the most breathtaking moment of the entire song also occurs during this phrase, when the soprano soars up to a lowered seventh scale degree (in the home key), made especially thrilling not only because it is approached by leap and not only because it is the highest pitch in the song, but also because it is brought out by a crescendo, sustained rhythm, and even an accent. This prominent pitch serves as a climactic point of the song and also occurs with text that is especially rousing: “Lo! They Call”; “Hear the voice”; “Toil and Pain”; “Laugh in hope.” In her account of the song’s premiere in 1911, Smyth herself described the uncanny effect of this passage: “A Suffragette choir had been sternly drilled, and I remember Edith Craig plaintively commenting on the difficulty of hitting a certain E flat. But it was maintained that the interval is a peculiarly English one (which is true) and must be coped with.”⁵⁴

54. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 201.

EXAMPLE 3 Comparison of motives from “March of the Women”
with measures 36–38 of “Possession.”

- a) “March of the Women,” measures 1–3.
Note rhythm and contour of of top line.

12

cresc.

1. Song with its sto-ry, dreams with their glo-ry, Lo! they call, and glad is their word!
2. Strength with its beau-ty, Life with its du-ty, (Hear the voice, oh hear and o - bey!)
3. Ways that are wea-ry, days that are drea-ry, Toil and pain by faith ye have borne;
4. Firm in re - li - ance, laugh a de - fi - ance, (Laugh in hope, for sure is the end.)

cresc.

3

- b) “March of the Women,” measures 12–15.
Note motivic contour (in boxes) and similarity with a).

37

Pierced to death by our love___ and our song

- c) “Possession,” measures 37–38. Note similarity of vocal line with a), and similar contour of inner melodic line (shown in box) with a) and b).

Remarkably, Smyth also specifically mentions Pankhurst just after these comments, noting, “It was wonderful processing up the centre aisle of the Albert Hall in Mus. Doc. Robes at Mrs. Pankhurst’s side.”⁵⁵

Smyth’s motivic allusions to “March of the Women” serve a dual purpose in “Possession”: not only do they impart an additional layer of political meaning to the text (“Pierced to death by our love and our song”) by referencing fragments from the official anthem sung by the WSPU, the melodic motives also complicate the relationship depicted in the text as something more than hackneyed sentimentality or romance — instead, depicting a passion that is also infused with a larger political purpose.

But “Possession” also synthesizes more than these political allusions: the work may also be musically connected to “Laggard Dawn,” a tranquil song that evokes a different, more introspective kind of intimacy. One of the most haunting aspects of “Laggard Dawn” is the recurring use of a C#-B motive, a sigh-like figure that helps lend a yearning, repetitive feeling to the song — especially the first two times it appears, when it is set to the words “when will,” creating an additional sense of

55. Ibid.

EXAMPLE 4 Comparison of opening vocal line of “Possession” (heard in verse 1, measures 3–6 and verse 2, measures 17–20) with vocal parts from “March of the Women,” measures 12–14.

"March of the Women," mm. 12-14 (Soprano I and Alto)

(1)

(2)

Song with its sto - ry dreams with their glo - ry Lo! they call, and

"Possession," mm. 3-6 (1) [transposed up a fourth] (2) [transposed down a step]

There bloomed at my cot - tage door A rose with a heart scen-ted sweet

breathlessness. This C \sharp -B motive stands out not only because of the sheer number of repetitions within “Laggard Dawn” (it occurs no less than four times in the soprano alone), but also because it launches each of the phrases in measures 1, 4, and 10–11.⁵⁶ Returning to “Possession,” the third stanza is especially distinctive because of the dramatic shift in texture and harmonic palette, but it is also marked because the vocal line departs from the melodic setting used for the previous two stanzas. Instead, the opening of the third stanza of “Possession” features numerous repetitions of the pitches C \sharp -B—in the same octave as “Laggard Dawn” (see measures 31–32, 35–36, and 37). Just as with “Laggard Dawn,” in “Possession” these C \sharp -B motives are especially prominent because they begin phrases of text (measures 31–34 and 35–38); the motive is also emphasized by multiple repetitions of C \sharp , which even

56. The C \sharp -B motive also appears in the Soprano II part in measures 1–2 and measures 4–5. Although these iterations result from Smyth’s setting in parallel thirds, these appearances also emphasize the C \sharp -B figure since the texture then results in a continuous string of C \sharp -B, C \sharp -B between both soprano parts in measures 1–2, 4–5, and 10–12.

extend through an entire measure in measures 31 and 35. The conspicuous C#-B motives also occur with the text that specifically depicts the relationship between the narrator and friend (“There came to my lonely soul” and “the deep chilly silence lay stricken”).

Just as the opening of the first and second phrases of “Possession” weaves together excerpts from two different vocal lines in “March of the Women,” so too do motivic fragments from both opening vocal parts of “Laggard Dawn” entwine to form the melodic content of the vocal part in the third climactic stanza of “Possession” (see the boxed motives in the example above). The third time the C#-B motive appears in “Possession,” it soars upward to the same high E natural found in the opening measure of “Laggard Dawn” (compare measures 36–37 in “Possession” and measures 1, 4, and 10–11 in “Laggard Dawn”). This poignant gesture is immediately answered by a descending line that uses the same pitches and similar rhythmic profile to the second measure of “Laggard Dawn,” but in the second soprano part. In this instance, the motive appears in “Possession” just as it does in “Laggard Dawn,” as an untransposed version that even uses the same pitches in the same register.

Smyth’s motivic borrowings also raise larger questions about voice and meaning. One could draw some fascinating connections by reading the words that accompany these vocal motives against one another, weaving a quilt-like musical tapestry in which textual phrases such as “pierced to death by our love and our song,” “when will the weary night be over,” and “lo they call, and glad is their word” are juxtaposed against one another. But an analysis of this kind would obscure the sonic effect of these passages in favor of their written, discursive content. Following Caverero and Koestenbaum, it is vitally important to recognize the latent power of sound itself in these moments — it is the similar melodic and motivic content that helps us connect these passages, not their texts. Ultimately, it is the song of the voice that builds these bridges of meaning, not the words.

In all, this evocative moment represents a fusion of intimacy, passion, and politics, as the stirring passage in the third stanza incorporates motivic material from two different songs that were both particularly important to Smyth and Pankhurst. In “Possession,” motivic material previously heard in two distinct vocal lines is integrated and seamlessly woven together into a newly unified sonic fabric that references both “March of the Women” and “Laggard Dawn,” creating a deeply moving

EXAMPLE 5 Comparison of “Laggard Dawn” motives with “Possession,”
measures 31–38.

Soprano I

Soprano II

When will the wea-ry night be o - ver? When will the lag-gard sun a - rise?

- a) “Laggard Dawn,” measures 1–6. C#-B motive (shown with brackets and asterisks); motives (1) and (2) shown in boxes.

31

35

There came to my lone - ly soul The friend I had wai - ted for long — And the
deep chil - ly si - lence lay stri - cken and dead Pierced to death by our love — and our song

- b) “Possession,” measures 31–38, vocal line. Note repeated use of C#-B motive (shown with brackets and asterisks) and fusion of motives (1) and (2) from “Laggard Dawn.”

portrait of an intimacy that defies superficial categorization, one that blurs the boundaries between public and private, erotic and political. More than simple borrowing or allusion, this extraordinary blending of two separate melodic fragments into a single strand creates a sonic realm that not only captures the complexities of Smyth and Pankhurst’s relationship, but also ultimately deconstructs the idea of “possession” itself.

LIMELIGHT, TWILIGHT, WRITING, AND MUSIC

Yet art-makers, if big enough, can look after themselves. Either you have, or have not, strength to resist the temptation to tamper with your integrity; and in any case, whatever your label, even if no one honours you with his enlightened attention, you can go on painting or writing all the same.... if the desire to create persists in spite of no pappings on the back—or even survives the pat of faint praise—the chances are you have something to say that is really worth saying. Which means that somewhere there are people for whom you are spokesman, and that someday—no matter how long hence—these may recognize their own inarticulate thoughts and emotions in yours, and thank you for being their mouthpiece.⁵⁷

As Suzanne Raitt, Christopher Wiley, and Wood have noted, Smyth's prolific writings are noteworthy for their bold, assertive language, as well as the forthright way in which Smyth constructs herself as a heroic persona in her struggle against discrimination and oppression from the musical establishment (which she alternately christens with Woolf-esque nicknames such as "the Machine," "the Group," or "the Gang").⁵⁸ Smyth's writing style was often criticized, even by her friends; Vita Sackville-West described Smyth's letters and books as being uncomplicated and "all the same," writing, "They are Her. She might concisely have entitled her successive books *Me One*, *Me Two*, *Me Three*, and so on ... She just wants to set down what she needs to say, in the plainest, straightest prose, from which many a more self-conscious stylist might take a lesson."⁵⁹ Even Smyth's close friend Virginia Woolf had quite a bit to say about Smyth's writing. Woolf read many of Smyth's literary endeavors, and Smyth even sent Woolf chapters of *Female Pipings in Eden* prior to its publication. Woolf's letters are full of praise for Smyth's portraits of Pankhurst and Brewster (HB):

57. Ethel Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), 159–60.

58. Suzanne Raitt, "The Tide of Ethel: Femininity as Narrative in the Friendship of Ethel Smyth and Virginia Woolf," *Critical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 3–21; Wiley, "When a Woman Speaks"; Wood, "Performing Rights" and "Lesbian Fugue."

59. Vita Sackville-West, "Ethel Smyth, the Writer," in St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 246, 249.

I'm thinking of Pankhurst and HB, which I've just re-read; and kept thinking how fresh, how full, how wise they are. There you seem to dip your pen into a deeper, richer pot: no vinegar, no sand. I wish, vainly, that you'd write more biographies, like the south wind blowing through the grass. I assure you, you have a thousand natural gifts that way which we hacks have long lost.⁶⁰

However, Woolf also had strong feelings about Smyth's other work, which seemed to offend her sensibilities for its brashness, hostility, and continual focus on Smyth herself—what Woolf referred to as the “eldritch shriek.”⁶¹ In her criticism of “Female Pipings in Eden” (the opening essay from Smyth's 1933 work of the same name), Woolf described how Smyth's unabashed tone runs counter to what Woolf sought to create in her own work, writing that “I hate any writer to talk about himself; anonymity I adore”⁶² and “I didn't write ‘A room’ without considerable feeling even you will admit; I'm not cool on the subject. And I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary.”⁶³

Woolf may have sometimes been critical of Smyth's writing style, but as a musician, Smyth approached her writing from a different perspective than Woolf; Smyth's literary tone often contrasts with the authorially ambiguous “twilight” that Woolf claimed was “the light in which I work best.”⁶⁴ Smyth used her memoirs as a means of drawing attention to the difficulties she faced—writing was a way to thrust her musical works and her experiences of discrimination into the limelight and an attempt to improve her own status and that of women musicians more generally. Clearly, Smyth had very strong feelings about these subjects. In *Female Pipings in Eden*, Smyth includes an entire section on “Literary and Musical Careers Contrasted,” in which she explains the differences between women writers and composers. For Smyth, women have managed to make a “distinct mark” in literature because book printing

60. Virginia Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth (November 19, 1933), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 5: 249.

61. Virginia Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth (June 6, 1933), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 5: 192.

62. *Ibid.*, 191.

63. Virginia Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth (June 8, 1933), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 5: 194–195.

64. Virginia Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth (August 21, 1932), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 5: 97.

itself is relatively inexpensive and a writer only needs to find a publisher for a manuscript. By contrast, music engraving is a complicated, costly process, and composers require much more outside support in order to have their works heard, such as performers to play their piece, conductors to lead the ensemble, a hall in which to perform, advertising to promote the performance, and a live audience eager to hear new music.⁶⁵ Smyth also notes the differences between literary and musical criticism: for authors, “if the critics dislike your book, there is nothing to hinder people from ordering it and judging for themselves,” but for composers, a single bad review can mean that a work is never performed again, since “a new musical work may exist in manuscript only and cannot be studied at leisure, either before or after a performance.”⁶⁶ She also describes how the creative process of composition allowed her to access a uniquely intense emotional realm: “Composers like other creators can tap at will that fiery furnace which is their own heart. But in letters I only profess to be a humble autobiographer, equipped with a bucket which I let down as far as it will go into my private well of truth.”⁶⁷ In her writings music never seemed to be far from Smyth’s mind; Smyth even cast her literary work in musical terms, noting that writing served as “a second string whereon to play, as well as one can, the tune life is always making up in one’s heart.”⁶⁸

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65. See Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 14–18; and Smyth, *A Final Burning*, 7–16, 157–58. See also Christopher Wiley, “Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and ‘The First Woman to Write an Opera,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 274–75.
66. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 15, 74. For her discussion of the dangers of music criticism, see pp. 71–86.
67. Ethel Smyth, *As Time Went On* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1936), 303. Smyth also describes music as “my first, my real love” and writing as her “second string” in Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940), 2.
68. Smyth, *As Time Went On*, 4. Christopher St. John notes, “There are few allusions in Ethel’s diary to her success as a writer. She valued it at first chiefly because it roused public interest in her music, and later because it ensured her an income.” See St. John, *Ethel Smyth*, 190–91. Smyth’s literary output increased rapidly after her hearing began to deteriorate in the late 1910s. Although she composed some works during the 1920s, she eventually stopped composing because of her deafness. Wood notes that Smyth’s compositional output had ceased by 1930. See Elizabeth Wood, “On Deafness and Musical Creativity: The Case of Ethyl Smith,” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 92, nos. 1/2 (January 2009): 33–69.

Since music, as a performative, sonic art, is a medium that is less tangible than literature, perhaps Smyth may have used her musical works as a space to express personal sentiments (such as her relationship with Pankhurst) considered inappropriate to openly discuss in a more public, overt forum such as literature. Wiley notes that music may serve as an ideal realm for exploring subjects deemed “unspeakable” in literature: “Perhaps Smyth could safely be more manipulative and subversive — not to mention forcefully non-compliant — within the narrative framework provided by music.”⁶⁹ But as we have seen, Smyth’s work in both genres is infinitely complicated, and although many scholars have asserted a stark difference between Smyth’s writings and music, it is important to acknowledge that even Smyth’s brusque writings have their own occasional “twilight” lapses.⁷⁰ Smyth claimed to Woolf that in her literary portrait of Pankhurst she tried to suppress any overt discussions of their personal relationship, noting, “I’ve tried to avoid any hint that she really loved me as few people have. I hope it’s not perceptible.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, a few passages in Smyth’s prose slip into more ambiguous terrain. For example, in the “dawn” scene before the window (previously discussed), Smyth admits that sometimes she “would occupy the second bed” in Pankhurst’s room and that Pankhurst “often came down to my cottage for the night”; in another marvelously evasive passage, Smyth describes her outrage at Rev. Hugh Chapman’s eulogy of Pankhurst — in which he continually emphasized her “chastity.”⁷²

Instead of creating categorical distinctions between Smyth’s writings and compositions, a more rewarding strategy involves exploring precisely *how* Smyth “wrote” her relationships with Pankhurst and other women by drawing on the unique narrative and generic opportunities that music offers. It is not enough to claim that music’s ambiguity

69. Wiley, “When a Woman Speaks,” 411–12.

70. Anna Clark has used the metaphor of “twilight” to describe various “forbidden moments” in which individuals engage in sexual desires and practices that are not otherwise sanctioned (either by law or custom). These ideas have fascinating resonances with written descriptions of women’s same-sex relationships, in which there is often an artful dance between what is acknowledged and unacknowledged. See Anna Clark, “Twilight Moments,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, nos. 1/2 (January–April 2005): especially 140, 151–53, and 155–56.

71. Collis, *Impetuous Heart*, 194.

72. Smyth, *Female Pipings*, 194, 197, 283–84.

provides an opportunity for Smyth to depict same-sex desire; instead we must ask the more difficult questions about the specific ways in which various intimacies converge in Smyth's writings and music. We could draw on Anna Clark's "twilight" metaphor to explore how "twilight moments" might also be understood as spaces *between* genres. Examining the lapses, ruptures, and intersections both within and across an artist's oeuvre seems especially important for artists such as Smyth, who worked in dramatically different artistic mediums, leading to deeper, richer understandings of their creative compositions. "Possession" fosters an astonishing sonic realm in which themes of desire, activism, eroticism, solidarity, and sacrifice coalesce and congeal into a complex representation of intimacy—a kind of sonic meld—that illuminates the complicated ways in which women expressed their desire for other women in this era.

Since Smyth remains one of the most—if not *the* most—avid and prolific memoirists among musicians, ignoring the interconnections between her literary and musical creations runs the risk of overlooking new ways of understanding the works of an extraordinary composer, who struggled so much to have her voice heard. Although some music scholars downplay relationships between art and life, often choosing to regard musical compositions as discrete, autonomous "masterworks," analyzing Smyth's writings and music together allows scholars to envision new interpretations and new perspectives regarding the oeuvre of this important feminist and musician. But more importantly, Smyth's creative work also has much to offer for examining the complex ways in which women "wrote" their lives and experiences with other women both within and across genres during the early twentieth century.

If the sense of freedom, detachment, serenity that floods the heart when suddenly, mysteriously, the wretched backwater of personal fate is swept out of the shallows and becomes part of the main current of human experience; if even a modicum of all this gets into an artist's work, that work was worth doing. And should the ears of others, whether now or after my death, catch a faint echo of some such spirit in my music, then all is well ... and more the well.⁷³

73. Smyth, *A Final Burning*, 54.

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“Possession” appears on two different recordings: *Ethel Smyth, Kammermusik & Lieder, Vol. III*, sung by Melinda Paulsen, Troubadisc TRO-CD01405 (1992); and *In Praise of Woman: 150 Years of English Composers*, sung by Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Hyperion CDH55159 (2004).

WEB RESOURCES

To listen to a rendition of the song “Possession,” please visit the *Feminist Studies* website at www.feministstudies.org.