

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Genre, Class and Gender in a Suffragist Operetta: *Melinda and Her Sisters* (1916) at the Waldorf-Astoria

Kendall Hatch Winter 

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA  
Email: [khwinter@live.unc.edu](mailto:khwinter@live.unc.edu)

### Abstract

Alva Belmont and Elsa Maxwell's *Melinda and Her Sisters* (1916) is a little-known work promoting women's suffrage, which was publicly performed only once in New York City. It was advertised as an operetta, a decision which minimised its overt stylistic and functional similarities to other genres of popular musical theatre from the period, namely, musical comedy and pageantry. Framed through Jeffrey Kallberg's concept of genre as a 'gesture of labeling', this article asks what could be gained – artistically, financially and politically – by Belmont and Maxwell's invocation of operetta and by their disavowal of other appropriate genre alternatives. I argue that the strategy reflects their fundraising priorities, the attitudes of their intended audience, and the social, political and artistic climates that constrained women's activities. This case study offers genre as a productive lens through which to interpret gynocentric musical production and performance.

**Keywords:** Musical theatre; United States; Women; Genre; Twentieth-century music; Suffrage

On the evening of Friday, 18 February 1916, members of the New York City social elite crowded into the grand ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to enjoy the one-night-only performance of *Melinda and Her Sisters*, a 'suffrage operetta' in two acts written by Mrs O.H.P. [Alva] Belmont, with music and lyrics by Elsa Maxwell.<sup>1</sup> The plot joins the fictional Pepper family on the evening of a gala to celebrate their seven daughters' return from finishing school abroad and their subsequent debut in the high society of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The eighth and youngest daughter, Melinda, is conspicuously absent from the event because, the audience is told, she is the family's 'skeleton in the closet'.<sup>2</sup> When the party is in full swing, Melinda bursts in with her boisterous entourage of factory workers and shop girls, revealing that she has spent her time abroad becoming the worst thing imaginable (in her mother's eyes): a suffragette. Melinda's ensuing musical antics and stirring rhetoric challenge traditional societal expectations of marriage and motherhood for women and rail against the injustice of their exclusion from the body politic. In

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the product of postgraduate research conducted at Tufts University (Medford, MA, USA) under the direction of Stephan Pennington. I presented earlier versions of this research at the Darkwater Women in Music Festival (Pembroke, NC, USA, March 2020) and the virtual meeting of the Southeast Chapter of the American Musicological Society (October 2020). I am grateful to the attendees at these events for their generative questions and discussion. I extend special thanks to Annegret Fauser, Melinda Latour, Stephan Pennington, Kristen Turner and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their generous suggestions and comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs O.H.P. Belmont, *Melinda and Her Sisters* (New York, 1916), 8.

the end, Melinda successfully converts her family and neighbours to the suffrage cause. With luck, the audience that night would have been convinced, too.

Belmont had originally written *Melinda and Her Sisters* as a play in the summer of 1915, and it was privately performed by and for Congressional Union suffragists during their annual convention, hosted on this occasion by Belmont at her opulent Marble House estate in Newport, Rhode Island. In November 1915, Maxwell, who then resided in London, was brought on to supply music for the story, and scarcely two months later she had composed a full complement of songs.<sup>3</sup> With the professional actor Marie Dressler in the leading role of Mrs 'Ma' Pepper and lending her expertise to many aspects of direction and production, the new *Melinda and Her Sisters* was cast, rehearsed and performed in just six weeks. Belmont was one of the richest, most philanthropic and politically active women in New York City, and her celebrity afforded the project regular attention in local and regional newspapers and the nationally circulating suffrage press.<sup>4</sup> Yet just as quickly as *Melinda and Her Sisters* came into existence, so too did it fall into obscurity, despite the publication of its score by Schirmer that same year.<sup>5</sup>

A high-society enterprise with a pointedly suffragist message, Belmont and Maxwell's *Melinda and Her Sisters* offers a unique window into the role that musical theatre played at the interstices of social class, political agency and gender. One particularly crucial facet of this story lies in the way the work was labelled in terms of genre. Though designated an opera or 'suffrage operetta', its tone and musical style have as much if not more in common with musical comedy, while many of its performative conventions strongly evoke political pageants. By centring my argument on the role genre played in this context, I offer a fresh lens through which to interpret gynocentric musical practice. This article makes no universal claims on genre theory *per se*. Rather, it invites reflection – through a close reading of one work and its performance – on the socio-political, cultural and musical meanings of three different genres in the waning days of the Progressive Era.

My analysis is informed by Jeffrey Kallberg's formulation of genre as a 'gesture of labeling' that supersedes taxonomies of shared characteristics and instead identifies the socially contingent, often extramusical, associations of a genre name that are continually co-produced by composers and listeners as both the site and substance of generic meaning.<sup>6</sup> To determine whether *Melinda and Her Sisters* is a 'good' operetta by weighing its adherences to against its deviations from generic conventions of structure or style – that is, whether or to what degree it fits its designated genre category – is to seek an answer to the wrong question. According to Kallberg, a better question, indeed the only question, is: What kind of dialogue between creators and audiences – about the work, about performance or listening

<sup>3</sup> 'Crossed the Ocean to Compose an Operetta', *New York Times* (23 January 1916).

<sup>4</sup> Belmont began cultivating her celebrity not long after her first marriage to William K. Vanderbilt in 1875; see Sylvia Hoffert, *Alva Vanderbilt Belmont: Unlikely Champion of Women's Rights* (Bloomington, 2012), 24–9. Newspapers from many major East Coast cities – Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Washington, DC – and as far west as Detroit reported on the project. The *New York Times* showed the greatest interest, printing articles about *Melinda* roughly twice a week from December 1915 to February 1916.

<sup>5</sup> In 2003, the Preservation Society of Newport County (PSNC) in Rhode Island, USA mounted a notable public revival of the work as part of its 75th anniversary celebrations. Additionally, an unknowable number of private performances may have been given following the publication of the score, which was available for purchase for \$2.10 (USD) from the Congressional Union. The recurring advertisement in its weekly publication, *The Suffragist*, declared that 'Every Suffragist should possess a copy of this enchanting work.' In 2020, *Melinda and Her Sisters* was among the many works of suffrage drama scheduled for revival to commemorate the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution. The PSNC, this time in collaboration with the League of Women Voters, and the Parlour Opera Players in Boston, for example, were both planning to perform the work. Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic halted these plans.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Kallberg, 'The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor', *19th-Century Music* 11/3 (1988), 238–61, at 239.

practices, about their shared socio-political moment or any number of things – is produced by *their choice of genre*? By focusing on the cultural contract of genre rather than its musical and formal conventions, my interpretation of *Melinda and Her Sisters* employs musical analysis sparingly and only as it underpins the larger takeaway from this case study: namely, that the stakes of gynocentric musical practice – whether financial, professional, artistic or political – crystallise in the generative, gestural act of genre naming.

First, I briefly present the salient features of the work, the circumstances of its performance, and its reception history to show how a genre-identity problem was already built into this project from the beginning. Then, I establish that the primary goal of the 1916 performance of *Melinda and Her Sisters* was to fundraise for the suffrage cause by marketing it to a wealthy audience. I argue that Belmont and Maxwell called *Melinda* an operetta because they believed that this genre denomination legitimised it in ways that would enable them to reach their goal. I probe the use of the designation further by contrasting the perceived added value of operetta with some assumed drawbacks of other potential genre classifications. For practicality, I limit this discussion to only two alternatives – musical comedy and pageantry – chosen for the likeness *Melinda* bears to each of them and for their popularity at the time of the performance. Because it focuses on the artistic, professional, financial and political stakes of naming, this article presents a productive interpretive mode that can be applied to works by women, by activists, by amateurs or by any marginalised creator.

### Genre identity in *Melinda and Her Sisters*

Between late 1915 and February 1916, *Melinda and Her Sisters* was publicly labelled as everything from an opera, operetta, comic opera or *opéra comique* to, much less frequently, a musical comedy or a play.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, the word *suffrage* or *suffragist* preceded the genre designation at least once, usually in the headline, alerting readers to the politically charged and gendered subject. Although its witty satire and the uproarious performance by Marie Dressler were prominent marketing features, the genres with comedy evident in *their names* were seldom applied to *Melinda*. *Opéra comique* was preferred early on, appearing together with other appellations half a dozen times across four articles, but had fallen into complete disuse by mid-January. Interestingly, the use of ‘comic opera’ was limited to the show’s modest display tile printed alongside advertisements for a variety of live entertainments, restaurants and hotel accommodations. The lone designation of the work as a ‘musical comedy’ was in London’s *The Tatler* in the caption of a photograph of Belmont and Maxwell, entitled ‘Two Lady Dramatists’, inset into a weekly column by Richard King.<sup>8</sup> The caption does not mention suffrage. The score prominently subtitles the work ‘A Musical Play’ on its inside cover. And, despite boasting some tell-tale characteristics of pageantry, which I describe later, it was never called a pageant.

The use of so many genre names early in the production suggests that Belmont and Maxwell were trying on labels to see what suited the show, its aims and the taste of its intended audience. This was not uncommon. According to Katherine Preston, musical theatre since the nineteenth century had consisted of ‘myriad different types ... that

<sup>7</sup> *Melinda* was called a play only under very specific circumstances: when discussing the 1915 version, to refer to the script separately from the songs, or as a synonym for plot when discussing the characters or narrative events.

<sup>8</sup> Because King makes no reference to *Melinda* elsewhere in his column, it is unclear whether the text of the photo’s caption should also be attributed to him. Richard King, ‘With Silent Friends: America and the War’, *The Tatler and Bystander* 59/766 (1916), 272.

materialised, metamorphosed, became popular, disappeared, re-emerged and cross-fertilised'.<sup>9</sup> Musical theatre could be designated as opera, operetta, comic opera, burlesque, vaudeville, variety show, minstrelsy, melodrama and musical comedy, to name just a few. Moreover, in places like New York City, producers and theatre owners desperate to compete in a crowded market and appeal to audiences' changing tastes would regularly 'choose a label that primarily suit[ed] their marketing strategy'.<sup>10</sup> While audiences relished the plentiful and diverse musical-theatre offerings, this 'varied and inconsistent terminology' became a problem for critics reacting to shows, and *Melinda* was no exception.<sup>11</sup> The amorphous and permeable 'definitional lines' of genres from the period have led to 'inevitable disagreements' among scholars over 'whether a piece is best served by being called' this or that genre.<sup>12</sup>

That *Melinda's* genre variety all but disappeared by February 1916 seems to indicate that Belmont and Maxwell reached a consensus around (suffrage) operetta/opera, which they used interchangeably. Later, scholars of suffrage drama and music further disambiguated *Melinda* by dropping 'opera' completely – in all likelihood because it failed to meet the familiar criterion of being entirely (or predominantly) sung.<sup>13</sup> However well-intentioned, tidying up *Melinda's* genre historiography in this way is detrimental, because it invites value judgments about the work through an imposed genre lens. So much is evident when Sam Staggs, the author of several books about film and movie stars, including a 2012 biography of Elsa Maxwell, wrote of her achievement, 'To call *Melinda* an opera, or even an operetta, is to inflate the merits of the work.'<sup>14</sup> My intervention is not meant to challenge Belmont and Maxwell's decision to call the work an operetta or to argue for a reclassification, but rather to empathise with and better understand their decision discursively. The first step is to interpret the piece on its own terms.

### The music

Elsa Maxwell wrote eighteen musical numbers for *Melinda and Her Sisters*, later published in a Schirmer piano-vocal score. Seventeen of these are songs for solo voice or unison chorus. There are no duets, trios or quartets, even though the cast includes two dozen named roles and some fifty additional chorus members. Although it bears no identifiers as such, Schirmer's published score could be a reduction of a parts score for a small ensemble. After all, Belmont's script (published separately by Robert Shores) contains cues for 'the orchestra' and 'the band', and several performance reviews corroborate the presence of diegetic accompaniment for *Melinda's* entrance ranging from, specifically, a fife and drum, to, vaguely, a marching band. At the same time, Maxwell was a pianist who had previously made a living composing popular songs for voice and piano – several

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Preston, 'American Musical Theatre Before the Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge, 2008), 3–28, at 3.

<sup>10</sup> Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta*, ed. Belina and Scott (Cambridge, 2019), 1–14, at 3, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Orly Leah Krasner, 'Birth Pangs, Growing Pains and Sibling Rivalry: Musical Theatre in New York, 1900–1920', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. Everett and Laird, 54–71, at 54.

<sup>12</sup> Belina and Scott, 'Introduction', 3, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> For examples, see Bettina Friedl, ed., *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Boston, 1987), 343–61; Leslie Elizabeth Goddard, "'Something to Vote for": Theatricalism in the United States Women's Suffrage Movement' (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2001), 85–6; and Elizabeth Wood, 'Performing Rights: A Sonography of Women's Suffrage', *The Musical Quarterly* 79/4 (1995), 606–43, at 637n21.

<sup>14</sup> Sam Staggs, *Inventing Elsa Maxwell: How an Irrepressible Nobody Conquered High Society, Hollywood, the Press, and the World* (New York, 2012), 75.

of which made their way into West End revues – and many articles confirm that she led rehearsals of *Melinda* from the piano.

Maxwell's score skilfully deploys melody, rhythm and harmony to create an eclectic pastiche of styles. She composed foxtrots, marches and waltzes, a Debussy parody, and songs approximating folk-music traditions (including Irish and Japanese). Most of her songs are built with some number of alternating verses and choruses. Those that deviate from this form have a metanarrative explanation. 'Melinda's Song', for example, which the title character performs before her suffragist identity is revealed, is a modified ternary ABA' form, foreshadowing the new ideas Melinda will soon present. 'The Melinda Fox-Trot', the lone instrumental number, is contrived for an Irene and Vernon Castle-style social dance, and so is structurally constrained.<sup>15</sup> Maxwell appears not to have written any overture, underscoring or interludes, even though her stint as a silent-film accompanist would have made her level to the task.<sup>16</sup>

### The book

Belmont's plot for *Melinda and Her Sisters* establishes light verisimilitude: a refined debut party for seven daughters in an upwardly mobile midwestern family is thrown into chaos by the intrusion of an uninvited guest, who happens to be the eighth daughter. It has no love plot to speak of. Each of the characters (except Melinda) appears deliberately one-dimensional: Mrs Pepper is a new-money social climber; her husband, Mr Pepper, is impotent in her presence; the socialites, Mrs Grundy and Mrs Malaprop, are gossips whose dialogue accomplishes much of the exposition. Dr Doolittle, Mayor Dooless, the teacher Mrs Knowitall, Reverend Wontstop and others fill out the party's guestlist, but they also represent the areas where women's rights and suffrage encountered significant resistance: medicine, politics, academia and religion, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the identities of the seven other Pepper sisters are coterminous with their talents. Other characters tell us that among them there is a ballet dancer and a social dancer, a comic actor and a tragic one, a singer, a poet and an athlete. Each performs a musical number demonstrating her talent, but the sisters have no lines.

The story is set in contemporary Oshkosh, Wisconsin, a place sufficiently removed from the audience in New York City so as to feel foreign or imagined. This displacement is a time-tested technique for creating effective satire and allegory. The unnamed critic of *The Suffragist* summarised the show's moral like this:

The motif of the opera brought out the selfish vanity of women who pursue their own 'bent' for self-aggrandizement and social gratification ... [and] whose narrow vision had not encompassed the cause of women ... 'Melinda's' argument was directed against the selfish vanity of women who study music for self-advancement and those who learn to dance in order to dominate the ball room, and still others who study languages as a means of 'shining' in intellectual circles. As a means of leading her sisters to a broader field, she [Melinda] enlightens them on the question of suffrage and wins them to work for the ballot.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Maxwell's composition has all the makings of a rag: the tempo, metre, abundant syncopation, chromaticism and four 16-bar strains that modulate to the subdominant in the third strain. Her ABCB pattern and the lack of repeats for each strain are unusual, however.

<sup>16</sup> See Elsa Maxwell, *R.S.V.P.: Elsa Maxwell's Own Story* (New York, 1954), 64–8.

<sup>17</sup> There appears to be no connection between Belmont's Dr Doolittle and author Hugh Lofting's Dr Dolittle, the children's book character appearing in 1920.

<sup>18</sup> 'Suffrage Opera Scores Immediate Success', *The Suffragist* 4/9 (1916), 6.

The comedic effect of Belmont's script arises from a combination of sophisticated and coarse elements. Highbrow wordplay and satirical situations that lampoon the plot's aspiring provincial parvenus for the enjoyment of elite insiders in the audience feature alongside ribald jokes and thinly veiled caricatures of real New Yorkers. For example, Mrs Malaprop unsurprisingly commits many of the work's verbal faux-pas – *cache* instead of *cachet*, for example – and there is a scene in which the party guests inflate their own importance with ridiculous strings of unearned honorifics, such as 'His Excellency the Most High Lord Mayor Dooless of Oshkosh'. Conversely, the lines for the veterinarian, Mr Vermifuge, consist almost entirely of 'potty humour', and both principal antagonists – Mrs Pepper and Mayor Dooless – hyperbolise the flaws in Belmont herself and in the Republican Governor of New York, Charles Whitman, who attended the performance as the invited guest of honour.

Most of the dialogue in Act I consists of jokes and a steady plot development with songs interspersed. After Melinda's arrival at the beginning of Act II, however, all plot development ceases, and Melinda instigates a Socratic interrogation of the mayor concerning his political, moral and social beliefs about women. There are no jokes or musical numbers here, although the exchange comprises nearly a third of the entire dialogue. Melinda wins the debate with a final rallying, moralising speech that converts the entire company to suffragism and immediately launches the whole ensemble into the two-part musical finale.

### *The performance*

The show was engaged for one night only at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel ballroom, rather than for a traditional run at a theatre. The venue offered three tiers of alcoves that approximated theatre boxes. Given several comments in performance reviews about how the actors moved 'up' and 'on' the 'stage' and how the scenery 'framed' it, we may speculate that Belmont requested that the venue's optional temporary stage and proscenium arch be erected on this occasion. Theatre-industry professionals originated the lead roles, and society debutantes performed in the chorus. The latter were amateurs in the strict sense of being non-professional, but, as privileged young ladies, they would have had the opportunity to take music lessons and become proficient. Musical direction at the performance is attributed to Max Herzberg, but it is unclear whether he conducted an instrumental ensemble or was the sole accompanist at the piano.

Some performance choices challenged what was otherwise a self-contained, fictional musical production. There were extra-narrative 'Special Parts' interpolated by celebrities appearing as themselves. Notably, Dorothy Fellowes-Gordon – a trained lyric soprano and Maxwell's partner – performed 'Shine, Little Searchlight', a comic love song about real-life anti-bombing efforts exposing poor Londoners' trysts. Inez Milholland, the woman widely recognised as the face of the American suffrage movement following her appearance as the herald on horseback at the 1913 Suffrage Procession in Washington, DC, was the flag bearer in Melinda's entourage. Melinda's entrance, it should be noted, was also unusual because it shattered the fourth wall between the audience and the performers. She marched from 'the back of the theater in the foyer ... down the center aisle ... and onto the stage' with a parade of factory workers, shopgirls and orphans.<sup>19</sup> And even though the daughters' debuts form part of the plot, they are presented to the assembly back-to-back without any interceding dialogue. As an uninterrupted string of dances, skits and songs – many of which bear no topical relation to the plot – the episode begins to feel more like a wholly separate variety showcase.

<sup>19</sup> Belmont, *Melinda*, 24.

It is difficult to account for all the features of the score, script and performance with the conventions of a single genre. The flexibility of its classification in the run-up to the performance confirms that Belmont and Maxwell did not follow a single genre ‘template’ when they drafted *Melinda and Her Sisters*. Instead, they borrowed freely from many styles of popular theatre to which their lived experiences in New York City and London had exposed them. This flexibility and multivalence suggest that their audience of New Yorkers could reasonably be expected to accept *Melinda*’s idiosyncrasies, given that – as Krasner, Preston and other scholars have shown – generic fluidity was a common practice in early twentieth-century New York. All this raises questions about Belmont and Maxwell’s insistence on designating the work an operetta. To understand what might have been their reasoning behind the genre appellation, it is necessary to first understand what they wanted to accomplish with *Melinda and Her Sisters*.

### ***Melinda and Her Sisters* ‘for the cause’**

Belmont was transparent about her fundraising objective from the start. When the *New York Times* declared that ‘votes for women will be the beneficiary’, Belmont boasted that the performance would net one million dollars.<sup>20</sup> In truth, the performance grossed \$8,000 (USD) and netted \$6,600, still a sizeable sum that, in 1916, had the buying power of over \$192,500 at the time of this writing.<sup>21</sup> Belmont contributed the entire proceeds from the single performance to the Congressional Union (CU), the national women’s suffrage organisation on whose National Executive Committee she served and whose New York state branch she chaired. At that time, the CU was several months into a campaign to raise \$150,000 to mobilise hundreds of thousands of enfranchised women in the suffrage states – eleven of them, all west of the Mississippi River – to lobby their representatives for a federal woman suffrage amendment. According to Treasury Reports published in the CU’s weekly organ, *The Suffragist*, the \$6,600 proceeds from the 18 February performance of *Melinda and Her Sisters* exceeded the combined total year-to-date contributions from all other revenue streams, nationwide.

Belmont was able to generate such an impressive sum by keeping her costs low and selling tickets high. Her cost-saving measures included using her own immense wealth to cover some expenses (like the post-performance banquet), enlisting a cast of wealthy professionals and socialites happy to perform *pro bono* and supply their own costumes and props, and tasking her friends – some of whom were theatre professionals – with various behind-the-scenes aspects of the production. Tickets were offered at the ‘generous prices’ of \$10 for singles (the buying power of \$292 dollars today) and \$125–150 for boxes (\$3,646 and \$4,375 respectively).<sup>22</sup> At \$10, tickets to *Melinda and Her Sisters* cost about twice as much as tickets to the Metropolitan Opera and more than ten times as much as tickets to the various Broadway theatres, suggesting that Belmont did not intend for *Melinda* to compete with other theatre fare.<sup>23</sup>

To appreciate the enormity of the ticket prices for *Melinda and Her Sisters*, it is necessary to understand them not only in terms of their modern buying power and value relative to other entertainments, but also in their historical economic contexts. In 1916, the

<sup>20</sup> ‘Mrs Belmont Hits Society in Operetta’, *New York Times* (28 December 1915).

<sup>21</sup> All calculations of buying power throughout the article have been made with April 2023 data using the United States’ Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Suffrage Opera Tonight’, *New York Times* (18 February 1916).

<sup>23</sup> A single ticket to the Metropolitan Opera’s performance of Richard Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* on the same evening cost between \$3 and \$7, while tickets to non-opera entertainments in New York City ranged from about \$0.15 to \$1.

average annual wage in America was \$708.<sup>24</sup> Thus, a \$10 ticket to *Melinda and Her Sisters* would cost the average wage-earning American 75% of their gross weekly income of scarcely more than \$13. *Melinda and Her Sisters* set a bar so high that only the super-rich could reach it, and there was no shortage of them in New York City.<sup>25</sup> All of this, coupled with a casting call seeking only 'prominent women of New York', points to a fundraiser created by and for members of the uppermost socioeconomic class.<sup>26</sup>

This economic exclusivity makes sense, given that by 1916, patronage of the arts and benefaction of charitable causes through the arts were both established pastimes for wealthy people, especially women. The ticket prices to attend *Melinda and Her Sisters* were comparable to some other elite fundraisers of the period. For example, Elsa Maxwell hosted a World War I relief charity event at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel ballroom in May 1916 and charged \$100 for boxes. Similarly organised around entertainment, she arranged for 'elegant dinners ... intimate suppers ... music and dancing ... and short sketches and *tableaux vivants* featuring famous stage and screen actors'.<sup>27</sup> She even reprised 'The Melinda Fox-Trot' that had succeeded at the suffrage benefit just three months earlier. Still, Belmont's fundraiser was unusual for two reasons. In the first place, unlike the cabaret-style event described above, *Melinda and Her Sisters* was an entirely original, bespoke, cohesive programme. Second, it was to benefit women's suffrage, which in New York in 1916 was still a controversial idea: a women's enfranchisement ballot measure in the state had just been defeated in November 1915. Belmont clearly intended to make a lot of money for suffrage quickly by a performance of *Melinda and Her Sisters*, and genre naming was a consideration in her marketing strategy. In the following section, I argue that calling *Melinda and Her Sisters* an operetta was an attempt to appeal to a wealthy audience and to package the controversial message in a way that they would find palatable.

### Operetta, musical comedy and transatlantic circulation of genres

By 1916, operetta in America laid unique claim to three different varieties of entertainment. It belonged to the imported tradition of European art music and was performed by classically trained professionals. At the same time, it had been fully assimilated into popular cultures in America and abroad. Finally, operettas were also commonplace in parlour-music cultures, making them ideal for private performance by amateurs. Each of these proved advantageous in classifying *Melinda and Her Sisters*, as they framed the work at the interstices of art music, popular entertainment and private music-making.

Operetta of the nineteenth century did not so much belong to European art music as participate in it. The earliest operettas were interludes given between the acts of larger operas. They employed many of the same musical conventions and vocal techniques, but incorporated spoken dialogue, and often parodied opera in their plots and characters. Because they still made similar demands on their performers, operettas were generally performed by classically trained musicians and vocalists.<sup>28</sup> Under the operetta label,

<sup>24</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, 1975), 168, D 779.

<sup>25</sup> For exact figures on the wealth and poverty of Americans (nationally and by state), see United States Treasury Department, Office of Internal Revenue, *Statistics of Income* (Washington, 1918), 20–1, Table 2; 29, Table 5; and 79, Table 2a. For information on population density in New York state and the New York City Metropolitan Area, see United States, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, 1918), 56, Table 36; and 74, Table 50.

<sup>26</sup> 'Mrs Belmont Hits Society', *New York Times* (28 December 1915).

<sup>27</sup> Staggs, *Inventing Elsa Maxwell*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> For the development and evolution of operetta, see Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, rev. edn (New York, 2003).



then, Belmont and Maxwell could attract high-calibre professional artistes and then market those appearances to their audience. For example, Frances Alda, a leading soprano with the Metropolitan Opera, was among those who performed ‘Special Parts’. Enrico Caruso, the tenor who frequently sang opposite Alda, endorsed *Melinda* in the press, an endorsement suggesting that the approval of the operatic community was perceived to add value to the production.

Operetta’s association with Western art music professionally benefitted Elsa Maxwell as well. Although she would ultimately be remembered as a socialite, Maxwell’s intention had been to make music her ‘meal ticket’.<sup>29</sup> Her autobiography is full of colourful stories about being born in a theatre during a performance of Ambroise Thomas’s *Mignon*, of being so moved by Richard Wagner’s *Lohengrin* that she changed her name from Elsie to Elsa (the principal soprano role), and of possessing such ‘extraordinary musical talent’ and perfect pitch that even without training or the ability to read music, she easily found work as a professional accompanist. In the early 1910s, she had written some of what she called ‘serious music’ – her *Deux Morceaux pour Violon et Piano* (1914) is one example – but acquiesced to the ‘opportunity and money’ in writing popular songs and moved to London, which she believed would be a more receptive market for music by women.<sup>30</sup> The operetta *Melinda and Her Sisters*, then, positioned Maxwell to advance her reputation as composer of ‘serious’ music. Crucially, Maxwell takes this professional step not by making altogether different musical choices, but by calling *Melinda and Her Sisters* an operetta and reaping the benefits of prestige and skill discursively attendant to that genre.

Later in the nineteenth century, operetta drifted further from the European art-music tradition as theatres dedicated to operetta performance were being established.<sup>31</sup> Operetta became a standalone good for public consumption, and composers and librettists were quick to adopt the musical and dramatic fashions of popular culture. This led to localised operetta styles and practices throughout Europe.<sup>32</sup> As imports coming from London, Paris, Vienna and elsewhere, operetta in the United States became synonymous with sophistication and cosmopolitanism.<sup>33</sup> Soon, so-called ‘American operetta’ followed, incorporating ‘home-grown’ musical idioms – jazz, ragtime, blues – plots and characters.<sup>34</sup> As operetta moved towards the market centre with more comical plots, irreverent characters, and popular-style songs making fewer technical demands on vocalists, the type of singers engaged to perform them changed. Over time, it was vaudevillians, not opera singers, who were appearing in operettas. This opened a door for Belmont and Maxwell to recruit the famous stage and film actors Marie Doro (a long-time friend of Maxwell’s) and Marie Dressler for the leading roles. Like Alda and Fellowes-Gordon, Doro and Dressler were also marketable celebrities.

Once it entered popular-theatre markets, operetta could no longer be defined in any taxonomical way by structural and stylistic likenesses identified among works inside the category, or contrasted with works outside the category. By the 1870s, Michela Nicolai and Clair Rowden have written, operetta was ‘employed to describe diverse

<sup>29</sup> Maxwell, *R.S.V.P.*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Crossed the Ocean’, *New York Times* (23 January 1916).

<sup>31</sup> This was in Europe, not necessarily in the USA, where operettas were readily performed by opera companies throughout the nineteenth century. Preston, ‘American Musical Theatre’, 22–5.

<sup>32</sup> Marion Linhardt, ‘Local Contexts and Genre Construction in Early Continental Musical Theatre’, in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin: 1890 to 1939*, ed. Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton (Cambridge, 2014), 44–61.

<sup>33</sup> Derek B. Scott, ‘Early Twentieth-Century Operetta from the German Stage: A Cosmopolitan Genre’, *The Musical Quarterly* 99/2 (2016), 254–79.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond Knapp, ‘Camping along the American Operetta Divide’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta*, ed. Belina and Scott, 120–34.

forms of spectacle which alternate sung numbers with spoken dialogue (lighter *opéra-comique*, revue, musical comedy, music-hall ...).<sup>35</sup> This elision somewhat diluted operetta's meaning in terms of form, style and status – that is, until Franz Lehár premiered his operetta, *Die lustige Witwe* (1905). It was an overnight success in continental Europe and was equally beloved in London and New York, where it debuted in translation under the title *The Merry Widow* in 1907. Suddenly, operetta meant something again, but as Orly Leah Krasner explains, that something concerned the genre designation: 'American operettas composed after Lehár's New York triumph were not substantially different from those that preceded it, but their creators gained cachet from the association.'<sup>36</sup> For Belmont and Maxwell, then, labelling *Melinda and Her Sisters* an operetta told audiences they were offering a story as exciting, music as compelling, in short, a product as desirable as Lehár's, all of which they hoped would spell profits for suffrage.

Operetta also conjured a third category of practice: private and amateur performance. Because operettas typically required fewer performing forces – like string quartets or operatic excerpts did – they were a natural fit for the smaller rooms of the home. Even the most demanding musical passages could be executed (with perhaps an emphasis on parody) by a bourgeoisie which benefitted from a rigorous musical education. Sometimes, these private performances would accompany a fundraising event hosted by an individual or a club.<sup>37</sup> Thus, for Belmont and Maxwell to solicit donations to a cause from *Melinda's* attendees was not unusual. Furthermore, operetta's established presence in salon culture therefore exempted *Melinda's* debutante participants from prominent families – the Vanderbilts, Oelrichses, du Ponts, Astors, Kahns and Tiffanys among them – from the kinds of suspicions or accusations of promiscuity that had traditionally haunted performers of other theatrical genres on some professional stages.

Operetta was equally at home in small and large public theatres with a professional cast performing for a paying audience, and in private venues where amateurs took part for fun or for a cause. The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel ballroom, which belonged at once to both categories, thus helped to both inform and justify Belmont and Maxwell's calling the work an operetta. The space was large enough that it could hold hundreds of paying audience members, yet was not, strictly speaking, a theatre, giving participants and audience the familiarity and exclusivity of an upper-class home parlour. This venue was also something of a second home to New York City's elite who regularly hosted and attended exclusive events there.<sup>38</sup> The choice was also symbolic because of the hotel's progressive policies toward women, being among the first to admit women to lodge and to dine without a chaperone or male escort, and to make leisure spaces available to them. For these reasons, suffragists favoured the hotel for their conventions, speakers and banquets.

Operetta's varied performance practices and markets made it a malleable genre that suited Belmont and Maxwell's needs. It was uniquely able to marry commercialism with philanthropy and artistry with accessibility. Moreover, it blended and borrowed from so many genres and musical styles that it invites characterisation as a product and a reflection of a cultural moment in which creators were experimental and consumers were omnivorous. *Melinda*, therefore, could have been called a musical comedy (or something else), and indeed

<sup>35</sup> Michela Niccolai and Clair Rowden, 'Introduction', in *Musical Theatre in Europe: 1830-1945*, ed. Michela Niccolai and Clair Rowden (Turnhout, 2017), ix.

<sup>36</sup> Krasner, 'Musical Theatre in New York', 64.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr, 'Patronage – and Women – in America's Musical Life: An Overview of a Changing Scene', in *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists Since 1860*, ed. Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr (Berkeley, 1997), 15–45.

<sup>38</sup> Elsa Maxwell would later become one of the hotel's permanent residents. See her autobiography, Staggs, *Inventing Elsa Maxwell*, and Ward Morehouse III, *The Waldorf-Astoria: America's Gilded Dream* (New York, 1991), 92–106.

it briefly was: once in *The Tatler* and in the published score, when it was identified as ‘A Musical Play’. Belmont even referenced the genre in a tongue-in-cheek manner when she created Melinda’s sister Bessie, the ‘would-be musical comedy star’.

Indeed, in the United Kingdom, musical comedy was, according to Len Platt, ‘the predominant musical theatre, outpacing operetta for most of its history’, beginning at the *fin de siècle*.<sup>39</sup> It was a familiar genre for both Maxwell – who had composed songs for vaudevillians while she lived in London – and Belmont, who visited the British capital repeatedly. Like operetta and other musical-theatre forms, it crossed the Atlantic and found a receptive audience in the United States. Yet although it participated in cultural transfer, musical comedy remained ‘a phenomenon of popular culture emphatically linked to British society’.<sup>40</sup> Its Britishness, perhaps its preoccupation with aristocracy, may not have suited *Melinda and Her Sisters*, in the end, even if that genre’s formal and narrative structures formed part of the work’s artistic framework.

At first glance, the strong association of musical comedy with femininity might seem a reason for the genre’s suitability for a suffragist play. However, the multiple versions of femininity habitually presented in musical comedy were disadvantageous to *Melinda*. The dancing choruses of elegant women – the so-called ‘gaiety girls’ after the Gaiety Theatre that produced dozens of musical comedies – were not just something on display for male viewers to gaze at, although they were that, too. They were also mannequins on which to hang clothing and accessories for female audience members to covet.<sup>41</sup> *Melinda* certainly engaged in some of this, with the partygoers on stage dressed in the latest fashions, but by juxtaposing these displays with the other modestly attired characters brought through the ballroom to the stage by the protagonist, the effect was to cast such gendered norms and material excess in negative relief. Moreover, the lead female characters in musical comedy were written into love plots and, invariably, happily married in the end. This is exactly the fate that Belmont’s heroine, Melinda, emphatically denounces, saying to the party assembled for her sisters’ societal debut, ‘If your way of living, thinking, and acting are those of a lady, then I am glad to dissociate myself from so ambiguous a term.’<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the ‘gaiety girls’ and romantic leads, musical comedy also occasionally portrayed the so-called New Woman, but not in a manner that a staunch suffragist like Belmont would have found complimentary. As a constructed persona, the New Woman had been around since the middle of the nineteenth century, but by the early twentieth, popular culture had reduced her to a punchline. She was originally a capable woman, educated and intellectual, and financially independent working in her chosen profession. A pragmatist who cared not for frivolities, the New Woman was always sensibly dressed, and frequently remained unmarried for convenience or on principle. Quickly, she was ridiculed in popular societies on both sides of the Atlantic as masculine, perhaps a lesbian or a bitter old spinster, and a failure in her field.<sup>43</sup> While she was not necessarily an outright joke in musical comedies, the New Woman was considered the modern gaiety girl’s ‘antithesis’.<sup>44</sup> One musical comedy in London’s West End attempted to restore the New Woman as a positive character: *Nelly Neil* (1907), which starred Edna May, had little success, however. The heroine is nominally a socialist and advocates for de-masculinising politics, but in a stunning eleventh-hour reversal, she reveals in song that she is ‘just

<sup>39</sup> Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage: 1890–1939* (New York, 2004), 2, emphasis original.

<sup>40</sup> Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> See ‘Interventions in the Politics of Gender and Sexuality’, in Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 104–25.

<sup>42</sup> Belmont, *Melinda*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> For New Woman caricatures in theatre, see Emma Dassori, ‘Performing the Woman Question: The Emergence of Anti-Suffrage Drama’, *American Transcendental Quarterly* 19/4 (2005), 301–19.

<sup>44</sup> Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 116.

like every other girl', thus proving that meaningful progressive ideologies like feminism and suffragism had, indeed, no place in musical comedy.<sup>45</sup>

*Melinda and Her Sisters* may well have been a fine musical comedy, and in some ways, it certainly resembled one. Yet as a genre designation for Belmont's and Maxwell's suffragist project, musical comedy was, all in all, somewhat lacking in terms of added cultural capital that could be translated into profits. As a genre that overemphasised not-so-progressive femininity, it might even have been detrimental to the message the authors were trying to convey in *Melinda*. Instead, they not only drew on the multivalency of operetta's performance practices at the interstices of home and public theatre, but they also relied on the genre's history of expanding the boundaries of acceptability, giving both licence and protection for Belmont to express potentially transgressive ideas.

### Subversion, satire and self-effacing humour in *Melinda*

Originating in times of political repression and artistic censorship, operettas frequently were satirical in tone. They broached the deep 'social and moral issues ... of a capitalist economy' through 'mockery, satire, bacchanalia and frivolity'.<sup>46</sup> In the style of Gilbert and Sullivan, American operettas featured superficially comic plots, 'often offset by a more serious dramatic core' that questioned norms and critiqued authority.<sup>47</sup> In *Melinda and Her Sisters*, Belmont invited her audience to laugh at extreme caricatures of their own foibles – women's feminine vanity and desire for social status, especially. Simultaneously, the work challenged them to admit that these pursuits blinded them to their duty to be more effective stewards of their communities through political participation and, worse, left them without the skills to rise to the challenge.

Belmont dramatised the culpability high society bore in hindering women's suffrage in Mrs Pepper, her daughters, Mrs Grundy and Mrs Malaprop. Belmont portrays all these women as ridiculous and ineffectual because of their self-absorption: Mrs Pepper is fixated on gaining admission to the social elite club by flaunting her new wealth to Mrs Grundy and Mrs Malaprop, who are too busy gossiping and gatekeeping to have time for anything else.<sup>48</sup> The Pepper daughters, compelled by their mother, pursue 'educations' designed with marriageability in mind. Mrs Pepper quips that 'a perfect lady ... should know nothing, think nothing, say nothing, but dress well, look well, and dance', an attitude Belmont scorns through contrast with the estimable character of Melinda.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond satirising society in general, *Melinda and Her Sisters* also, in typical operetta fashion, lampoons (and flatters) actual people. One reviewer was so amused by the 'topical song about advertising' that they printed one verse in its entirety:

If Gaby de Lis [sic] should take the veil,  
If Governor Whitman should drink only ale,  
If Osborne should have his own little jail,  
And if Mrs O.H.P. could drive a nail.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> C.M.S. McLellan, quoted in Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 116–17.

<sup>46</sup> Belina and Scott, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>47</sup> Knapp, 'Camping along the American Operetta Divide', 125.

<sup>48</sup> Belmont's audiences assuredly would have recognised each of these characters as borrowed from eighteenth-century plays. Mrs Malaprop is a well-to-do character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1775 play, *The Rivals*, who frequently mispronounced or misused words to comic effect. Mrs Grundy originated as an unseen but famously disapproving character in Thomas Morton's 1798 play, *Speed the Plough*.

<sup>49</sup> Belmont, *Melinda*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> The song in question is undoubtedly Mrs Malaprop's solo, 'If "Ad's" Were True', but the verse quoted was deleted before publication of the score.

While Mayor Dooless is a general stand-in for politicians opposed to women's suffrage, the character seems specifically to represent New York's Governor, Charles Whitman, who attended the performance as the guest of honour.<sup>51</sup> Besides the callout to Whitman's prohibitionism in the lyrics above, Belmont writes Melinda's impromptu debate with Mayor Dooless with Whitman's interests in mind. Melinda's arguments do not centre on any of suffragists' perennial favourites – that the Fourteenth Amendment secures the 'privileges and immunities' of *all* citizens, or that taxation without representation is tyranny, or that without the vote, law-abiding and capable women were made to be the political equals of other disenfranchised groups, namely criminals and institutionalised men. Instead, she makes a moral argument about women's desire to use their votes to end corruption in their community. Such an argument seems directed at Whitman, whose 'campaign against police corruption' and platform to introduce budget reforms that would quell embezzlement secured his victory in the gubernatorial election of 1914.<sup>52</sup> Mayor Dooless's 'feeble' and 'indignant' performance in the exchange, however, might have wounded the governor's pride since he declined to escort his wife to the lavish post-performance banquet.

The characterisation of Governor Whitman in Mayor Dooless pales in comparison to Belmont's caricature of herself in the form of Mrs Pepper. Like Mrs Pepper, Belmont was something of a new-money woman. She enjoyed a comfortable childhood as the daughter of an Alabama merchant but married up into two prominent New York families: first the Vanderbilts and then the Belmonts. Mrs Pepper's strained relationship with her youngest daughter, Melinda, echoes the open hostility between Belmont and her only daughter, Consuelo, whom she had coerced into an advantageous but loveless marriage to the Ninth Duke of Marlborough in 1895.<sup>53</sup>

In the context of this fundraising venture, Belmont's transparent comic exaggeration of her own faults in the character of Mrs Pepper might have been intended to smooth over the potential bristling of her peers. She risked driving them and their money away with *Melinda's* 'really clever dialogue' that 'unsparingly scorned' the 'dyed hair, divorces and other characteristics of a certain type of society'.<sup>54</sup> By packaging her sharp criticism of an indifferent elite and government in operetta's satirical conventions, Belmont was able to engage with members of her own social class and potentially win them over to suffrage activism and financial support. The satirical tactic seems to have worked as planned according to one witness: 'Mrs Belmont calculated well its effect upon her audience. It was as Mrs Burton Harrison, society's novelist, often said, quite safe to administer a blow, for each present thought the quip was intended for his or her neighbor and accordingly laughed with unsuspecting heartiness.'<sup>55</sup> Those same conventions also gave Belmont the ability to distance herself from *Melinda's* tone if she was perceived to have been too malicious in her mockery or too radical in her suffrage convictions.

### Pageantry, gendered performativity and political activism

If the purpose of *Melinda* had been to cultivate ideological (not financial) buy-in from the audience, there was another genre better suited to that, and it was not operetta. By the 1910s, American suffragism had been churning for more than half a century, and its activists had precious little to show for it. The titans who had blazed the first trails – Susan

<sup>51</sup> 'Whitman Suffrage Patron', *New York Times* (12 January 1916).

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Capozzola, 'Charles Seymour Whitman', in *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt (Syracuse, 2005), 1699.

<sup>53</sup> For biographical information on Belmont, see Hoffert, *Alva Vanderbilt Belmont*.

<sup>54</sup> 'Suffragists Make a Hit in Mrs Belmont's Opera', *New York Sun* (19 February 1916).

<sup>55</sup> A.P., 'Society and Stage in a Suffragette Operetta', *The Theater* 23/181 (1916), 127.

B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton among them – were gone. The generation of campaigners who succeeded them – led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns – brought the suffrage fight out of the halls of government, where suffragists had lectured and petitioned, and into the public eye. Inspired by their contemporaries in the United Kingdom's Women's Social and Political Union, they picketed, paraded, performed, demonstrated and even committed acts of lawlessness that made headlines and sometimes landed them in jail. Staging pageants was one such tactic.

Pageantry has a centuries-long history in Europe, but it was still in its relative infancy in the United States, having spread during the Reconstruction, when there was a great need to teach the lessons of patriotism and brotherhood to heal the nation. Peacetime had guaranteed a return to the social and economic status quo, and women (of a certain class) who had spent their days doing all manner of work during the Civil War watched as their sphere of influence quickly shrank back to the boundaries of their homes once again. They established women-only special interest clubs that satisfied their lingering desire to be useful and meet the challenges of their time. Clubwomen who had the necessary interest in performance, storytelling, music, art, garment-making – not to mention education and philanthropy – and the time to commit to preparations, were the drivers of American pageantry. Then interest in pageantry on both sides of the Atlantic skyrocketed following the monumental success of the Louis Napoleon Parker pageant for the 1200th anniversary of the founding of Sherborne, England, in 1905. The author of one of several pageantry how-to guides written to meet this demand estimated in 1914 that 'a map of the United States dotted at every point where a pageant has blossomed during the last decade might be as thickly-speckled as a fertile meadow in the season of dandelions'.<sup>56</sup> Karen Blair later summarised American civic pageantry of the era in this way:

The pageant, ordinarily a two-and-a-half-hour program, was devised and enacted by huge numbers of amateur performers. Utilizing acting, singing, orchestral accompaniment, dancing, costumes, and props, it generally consisted of six, twenty-minute episodes, placed in chronological sequence to illustrate a common theme such as the history of a town or, with some frequency, the history of women's contributions to civilization. The scenes were typically interspersed with brief interludes in which young girls dancing in Greek tunics represented abstract values and ancient ideals. The program finale consisted of a giant parade that included all the actors, plus clusters of community club members who represented associations that had supported the pageant with money, personnel, or enthusiasm.<sup>57</sup>

Unsurprisingly, through its association with women's clubs, women's subjects and amateur performance, pageantry came to be both feminised and artistically democratised as the 'theatre of the people'.

It is something of an inevitability, then, that suffragists would seize on pageantry to mobilise their rank-and-file members in the promotion of their cause. Cicely Hamilton, in collaboration with her colleague, theatre producer Edith Craig, was perhaps the first to do this with her *Pageant of Great Women* (London, 1909). By spotlighting dozens of exemplary women from history, the piece makes a case for women's equality with men and

<sup>56</sup> Ralph Davol, *The Handbook of American Pageantry* (Taunton, MA, 1914), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Karen Blair, *The Torchbearers: Women and Their Amateur Arts Associations in America, 1890-1930* (Bloomington, 1994), 118. For additional discussion of pageant structure and style, see Linwood Taft, *The Technique of Pageantry* (New York, 1921), and Davol, *The Handbook of American Pageantry*.

imagines a global, atemporal community of women.<sup>58</sup> Hamilton may have been the first, but the most prolific creator of suffrage pageants was Hazel MacKaye. She was a founding and lifelong member of the American Pageant Association, a writer and director and a suffragist. MacKaye authored a dozen suffrage pageants, including four for the CU.<sup>59</sup> The first and most beloved of these was *The Allegory*, staged on the steps of the Treasury Building as part of the 1913 Woman Suffrage Procession in Washington, DC.<sup>60</sup> A year later, MacKaye was appointed to the CU's inaugural Advisory Council, where she undoubtedly interacted with then-Executive Councilwoman Alva Belmont.

As colleagues in the leadership of a fast-growing national organisation, Belmont and MacKaye undoubtedly would have worked side-by-side on many strategy sessions. Belmont surely understood pageants to be a reliable tool for the CU and witnessed their impact on spectators at events she had had a hand in planning and financing. She may even have read MacKaye's 1914 essay promoting suffrage pageantry to *The Suffragist's* readers, which asserted:

Four very practical problems must be solved daily by every suffrage organization in the country in its campaign for the vote. These are:

To convert people to suffrage.

To keep the movement constantly before the public.

To stimulate interest and cooperation among members.

To make money to carry on the campaign.

Now, I believe that in organized pageantry we find the elements which successfully solve all four of these problems.<sup>61</sup>

*Melinda and Her Sisters* accomplished many of these same goals. The main narrative arc in which Melinda persuades her family and friends to become suffragists models the conversion that was pageantry's desired effect on the audience. Even Marie Doro was persuaded by the text during rehearsals, telling *The New York Times*, 'I did not know suffrage meant all that. It appeals to the very highest and best there is in me.'<sup>62</sup> Between the pre-production hype in the form of casting calls, teasers, exclusive interviews and post-performance reviews and gossip, *Melinda* was in the papers several times a week for some three months. Evidence of cooperation manifests in Maxwell's tailoring of numbers to each performer's abilities and in the professionals in the cast coaching the novices on technique. It also manifests in the support famous suffragists like Alice Paul and Doris Stevens showed by attending the performance. *Melinda's* ability to make money for the campaign is undeniable.

Though it functions like a pageant, *Melinda* does not have a pageant's structure. Belmont dispenses with the defining structure of six disparate chronological episodes

<sup>58</sup> Rebecca Cameron, 'From *Great Women* to *Top Girls*: Pageants of Sisterhood in British Feminist Theater', *Comparative Drama* 43/2 (2009), 143–66.

<sup>59</sup> For further discussion and biographical information, see Karen Blair, 'Pageantry for Women's Rights: The Career of Hazel MacKaye, 1913–1923', *Theatre Survey* 31 (1994), 23–46. See also National American Woman Suffrage Association, 'Hazel MacKaye', *Official Program: Woman Suffrage Procession*, 15–17.

<sup>60</sup> Alice Paul, founder of the CU, may have been the link between Hamilton and MacKaye. She was a principal organiser of the Procession and had personally invited MacKaye to write the pageant, and she had also been active with the WSPU in London in 1909. When Hamilton's pageant premiered on 10 November, Paul did not attend because she had been arrested the previous evening for disrupting a banquet in the Lord Mayor of London's honour.

<sup>61</sup> Hazel MacKaye, 'Pageants as a Means of Suffrage Propaganda', *The Suffragist* 2/48 (1914), 6–7. Shortly after publishing this essay, the CU convened a Committee on Plays and Pageants and appointed Hazel MacKaye as its chair.

<sup>62</sup> 'Marie Doro in *Melinda*', *New York Times* (31 December 1915).

in favour of a unified, contemporary plot. However, I contend that many of *Melinda's* performative elements are, by design, gestures toward pageantry that would have registered as such to an audience that had been steeped in the club culture of the late nineteenth century and in pageantry's concurrent resurgence. Like a pageant, it is a rather large-scale, semi-amateur production; pageants could easily have hundreds or thousands of community performers, but these were, without exception, performed outside; and *Melinda* premiered in February in New York City. It also had a very limited run. Rarely would a pageant stage more than three performances because it was just too difficult to coordinate so many individuals. *Melinda's* entrance – with scores of shop girls, factory workers, domestic workers and orphans, a flagbearer and band – is every bit a parade. There may even have been a second grand recessional to which the rest of the Peppers and their guests were added; the finale 'Carry On!' suggests one by its subtitle, 'A Marching Song'.

To satiric and didactic effect, Belmont retained, but updated, some of pageantry's neo-classical elements. For one reviewer who approved of the set decoration 'attractively arranged' in a 'classic scene', Belmont's instructions for 'a pretentious garden in [a] more pretentious villa' seem not to have landed as intended. Though set in modern times, some members of the chorus and *Melinda* were costumed in Greek-style tunics. *Melinda* even donned a laurel crown and carried a torch, which *Vogue* magazine, in its discussion of the show's fashion, explained 'are to be noted as significant in any oratory of enthusiasm'.<sup>63</sup> Her costume may even have been a conscious reference to the one that Florence Noyes, as the character Liberty, had worn three years earlier in MacKaye's *The Allegory*. In the sisters, Belmont replaced personifications of virtues like Liberty, Wisdom, Charity with modern attributes like Sports, Ballroom Dance and – as I have mentioned earlier – Musical Comedy. As part of their 'education', each of *Melinda's* sisters adopts a classical persona – some more fitting than others – in the ironic charade to lend their transformation into marriageable women greater legitimacy. The 'sporting sister', Mollie, for example, becomes Atalanta, the mythological huntress and foot racer, and the family poet, Bettie, assumes the identity of Sappho.<sup>64</sup> The exercise critiques both the Peppers' misguided feminine priorities and pageantry's pomp. Belmont also preserves pageantry's tradition of celebrating women's contributions to civilisation. They are not dramatised, but *Melinda* mentions them in her speech: 'Why, women have proved their efficiency in the arts, the professions, and the vocations.' Significantly, these historical references take a backseat to forecasting women's future accomplishments that will come to pass when they 'take their proper place in the world'.<sup>65</sup>

Shortly after the Waldorf-Astoria performance, Belmont stated her intention to raise more money for the CU by staging subsequent productions of *Melinda* in Chicago and San Francisco.<sup>66</sup> This idea seems to act on MacKaye's call to 'link together all organizations

<sup>63</sup> 'Amateur Stars from Society, with Professional Assistance, Give a Merry Operetta, "Melinda and Her Sisters" in the Cause of Suffrage', *Vogue* 47/7 (1916), 148.

<sup>64</sup> Dollie, the tragic actor, identifies as Iphigenia, whose legendary sacrifice to the gods at the hands of her father, Agamemnon, was dramatised by the Athenian tragedian Euripides in the fifth century BCE. Pollie, the social dancer, is called Orchesteria, a personification of the orchestra, 'dancing space' of Greek theatres. Belmont appears to have invented this identity to solve the problem of having only one Greek Muse of dance, Terpsichore, whom she had already paired with Nellie, the 'Classic dancer'. What is meant by the remaining pairings is harder to interpret; Annie, the operatic singer, invokes Symphorosa, a Catholic widow martyred during the Roman emperor Hadrian's reign, and Bessie, the 'silly' musical comedy star, is Ariadne, the mythological Cretan princess, scorned lover of Theseus, who slew the Minotaur (with her assistance).

<sup>65</sup> Belmont, *Melinda*, 33–4.

<sup>66</sup> '\$1,000 Gift to Suffrage: Mrs Belmont Helps to Finance Campaign for New Party', *The Washington Post* (18 March 1916).



throughout the country by a series of pageants planned to go from coast to coast'.<sup>67</sup> For unknown reasons, these performances never materialised. Yet although *Melinda* functioned like a pageant and, in several performative ways, looked like a pageant, and despite Belmont's direct exposure to MacKaye's ideas about suffrage pageantry, the creators insisted on calling the work an operetta. Why? One simple explanation is that an operetta constituted something nominally new when suffrage pageants were quickly growing unfavourable. In 1914, the New York City Men's League for Women's Suffrage was harshly criticised for their staging of the unpopular *American Woman: Six Periods of American Life* by Hazel MacKaye.<sup>68</sup> Later that year, the New York Equal Franchise Society lost precious time, money and morale laying plans for a pageant to travel across New York state that went nowhere.<sup>69</sup> In this way, *Melinda* trod carefully by iterating some of what had been successful in pageantry and presenting it under an altogether different genre designation.

In addition to shrewdly avoiding the soured market for suffrage pageantry, the two authors may also have wanted to put distance between their own production and the humble, feminine civic pageantry of the recent past. Because it was primarily undertaken to educate children, pageantry was accessible and uncontroversial, characteristics that did not reflect *Melinda*'s satire or bold political message. It was also conventional for musical directors of pageants to borrow existing music – often religious hymns, patriotic anthems and symphonic excerpts – but Maxwell had composed an original score for which she deserved unambiguous attribution. This is not to say that operetta, as an alternative to pageantry, was unfeminine or, better yet, masculine: etymologically, the suffix *-etta* is both diminutive and feminine. But as *Melinda* was already a musical theatrical project created by women, the public would already have been disinclined to take it seriously, without the added difficulty of pageantry's generic associations with contented angels of the home singing the praises of American values.

Indeed, even with the work having been presented as an operetta, most reviewers failed to comment on Maxwell's score or Belmont's political message. Instead, they reported on the notable attendees, the costumes, and the allure of the female performers. For example, one review – promisingly titled 'Suffragists Make a Hit' – begins 'The most striking things about "Melinda and Her Sisters" ... were Marie Dressler's dress and Miss Pam Day's undress'.<sup>70</sup> When they did mention Maxwell's score, reviewers assumed a complimentary tone that dismissed the composer's skill in gendered terms: 'a nice lilting lay', 'a jolly little song', 'pretty' and 'delightful'. Praise for the dialogue tended to focus on the cleverness of the jokes and the satire, and only *The Suffragist* (quoted above) paid serious attention to the political implications of the text.<sup>71</sup> One reviewer allowed that *Melinda*'s proclamation for women's rights was 'an earnest little speech', but only after giving a description of Marie Doro as 'a slender little creature in a simple yellow frock', such that his voyeuristic assessment of the actress's physique took precedence over her delivery of Belmont's ideas.<sup>72</sup> The prevalence of the adjective 'little' is telling.

These reviews exemplify the common journalistic practice of 'undermin[ing] or dismiss[ing] the political work of suffrage activists' (to quote theatre historian Christine Woodworth), by 'the deployment of language that invokes signs of bourgeois femininity' or that otherwise foregrounds the 'exterior trappings of her femininity through

<sup>67</sup> MacKaye, 'Pageants as a Means of Suffrage Propaganda', 7.

<sup>68</sup> Blair, *The Torchbearers*, 139–40.

<sup>69</sup> MacKaye, 'Pageants as a Means of Suffrage Propaganda', 7.

<sup>70</sup> 'Suffragists Make a Hit', *New York Sun* (19 February 1916).

<sup>71</sup> Even the insightful A.P. of *The Theater*, quoted above, dedicated three-quarters of their review to quoted dialogue, the cast and attendees.

<sup>72</sup> 'Society Satirized in Suffrage Opera', *New York Times* (19 February 1916).

descriptions of her attire'.<sup>73</sup> Another reviewer dared to use the metaphors of ballots and political partisanship – the very same exclusive spheres to which women were seeking admission – to praise the work: 'Whether pro or anti suffrage, pro-ally or against, Democrat or Republican, for bonuses or opposed, everybody in the big audience last night at the Waldorf voted for the suffrage opera, "Melinda and Her Sisters"'.<sup>74</sup> The coverage of *Melinda* routinely appeared in the Society pages, rather than in sections dedicated to either news or the arts. All this suggests that despite Belmont's and Maxwell's best efforts to leverage the cachet of operetta and to garner a thoughtful critical reception, the press persisted in treating the work as feminine, amateurish and inoffensive. The faltering suffrage pageantry and politically neutered civic pageantry notwithstanding, pageants had another recent history as a tool for other leftist political agendas that might have further disinclined Belmont and Maxwell to invoke that genre.

By the mid-1910s, pageantry had rapidly developed strong cultural associations with various progressive political movements beyond women's suffrage.<sup>75</sup> The genre was also co-opted to decry class strife, promote labour reform – even call for socialism – and to condemn racial injustice and challenge white hegemony. Through these uses, pageantry had become politicised in gendered, classed and racialised ways. As such, the pageant label would have recalled certain agendas that many considered controversial or radical in 1916, which would have been disadvantageous to the fundraising objective of *Melinda's* performance.

These associations would have been especially keen to a New York City audience, since the city had witnessed several such productions in recent memory. MacKaye had already brought suffrage pageantry to New York City in 1914 with *American Woman: Six Periods of American Life* and *The Progress of Women*.<sup>76</sup> In the summer of 1913, the International Workers of the World (IWW) assisted striking silk workers in the creation of a pageant condemning capitalist greed at the expense of the working class. Though the laborers were from neighbouring Paterson, New Jersey, their pageant premiered at Madison Square Garden.<sup>77</sup> For historian Leslie Fishbein, the Paterson Strike Pageant is a watershed moment that 'irrevocably altered the possibilities of the pageant form' to include its weaponisation in politics.<sup>78</sup> Also in 1913, W.E.B. DuBois premiered his *Star of Ethiopia* pageant, which dramatised Black history and lived experiences, as part of New York City's semicentennial of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. David Krasner has argued that the pageant was a critical way of cultivating a Black collective consciousness and fostering solidarity in the emergent Black nationalist movement.<sup>79</sup>

For all the logic there would have been in marketing *Melinda and Her Sisters* in the lineage of such suffrage pageants as MacKaye's *The Allegory* and Hamilton's *Pageant of Great Women*, the genre's equal connections to labour and economic reform, racial strife and Black nationalism would have triggered the classist and racist fears of Belmont's and

<sup>73</sup> Christine Woodworth, "'Equal Rights by All Means!': Beatrice Forbes-Robertson's 1910 Suffrage Matinee and the Onstage Junction of the US and UK Franchise Movements', *Theatre History Studies* 37 (2018), 209–24, at 212–14.

<sup>74</sup> *New York World* (19 February 1916), quoted in 'Suffrage Opera Scores Immediate Success', *The Suffragist* 4/9 (1916), 6.

<sup>75</sup> For discussion, see David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of the Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

<sup>76</sup> 'Hazel MacKaye', *Who's Who in American Pageantry* (Boston, 1914), 10.

<sup>77</sup> The programme announces the zero-sum stakes in no uncertain terms. 'Th[is] Pageant represents a battle between the working class and the capitalist class ... It is a conflict between two social forces – the force of labor and the force of capital.' Reprinted in Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor, 1964), 210–14.

<sup>78</sup> Leslie Fishbein, 'The Paterson Pageant (1913): The Birth of Docudrama as a Weapon in the Class Struggle', *New York History* 72/2 (1991), 197.

<sup>79</sup> David Krasner, 'The Pageant is the Thing: Black Nationalism and *The Star of Ethiopia*', in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theatre*, ed. Jeffrey C. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (Ann Arbor, 1998), 106–22.

Maxwell's elite audience. The Paterson Strike Pageant in particular cemented a lasting correlation between pageants and working-class agitation, especially keen in the memories of those industrial tycoons whose very identities internalised the capitalist structures that labour pageants upbraided. These were, of course, the same individuals in attendance at *Melinda and Her Sisters* and on whose patronage the suffrage movement depended. The probable forfeiture of financial contributions and ideological support over a genre classification would not have been justifiable.

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*Melinda and Her Sisters* undoubtedly succeeded in its purpose by raising a significant sum for suffrage activism. To what extent genre determined either the floor or the ceiling of its fundraising potential is unknowable. Nonetheless, that the work was labelled and relabelled so many times suggests several other conclusions about its genre. In the first place, it attests to the structural connection between genre, marketing and profits. Belmont and Maxwell were exploring different genre classifications, and it stands to reason that one aspect of their scheme, even if unspoken, consisted in determining which would be most profitable and palatable. Put another way, the pair used genre to communicate their intention to stage *Melinda* as a benefit performance. Second, the fact that so many related terms were used – opera, operetta, *opéra comique*, comic opera – suggests that nuanced differences between these related genres mattered little to New Yorkers, who ravenously consumed a musical theatrical diet rich in, above all else, variety. Furthermore, it places aesthetic claims about the work at the centre of the naming decisions by discursively cementing a dissociation between *Melinda* and genres like musical comedy and pageantry that, though ascendant and trenchant, did not share operetta's established cultural capital.

The ultimate decision to call the work an operetta not only communicates the funding objective by calling to mind the parlour performance practice and patronage culture around that genre, but it also imparts professional legitimacy to the production. The genre at least etymologically connected *Melinda* to a classical European music tradition whose cultural value was incontestable even as it simultaneously registered as a popular commodity. The former was a particularly worthwhile association for Maxwell, who wanted to advance her reputation from popular songwriter to that of a 'serious' composer. Finally, operetta's satirical habitus provided cover for Belmont to recycle her existing script and preserve its biting social criticism.

By calling *Melinda and Her Sisters* an operetta – though it could easily have been called a musical comedy because of its structure and despite its obvious performative and ideological indebtedness to pageantry – Belmont and Maxwell were able to maximise its cultural capital, fundraising potential and political immediacy. This case study reaffirms that genres are fluid and interconnected, that their utility is not limited to taxonomy, and that the act of assigning genre labels is never neutral. Indeed, if the meaning of genre resides in the dialogic 'gesture of labeling', as Kallberg asserts, then understanding a genre's aesthetic and socio-political meanings and its associated capital in historical context matters. It is critical when engaging with works by marginalised creators – women, people of colour, amateurs, activists, to name a few – for whom the stakes could not be higher.

**Kendall Hatch Winter** is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is completing her doctoral dissertation on pro- and anti-women's suffrage music and songs in the United States from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

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