

NOTES

on

Les Mamelles de Tirésias

Francis POULENC & Guillaume APOLLINAIRE

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SYNOPSIS of the Opera

Les Mamelles de Tirésias (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) - Francis Poulenc

After a rather sombre prologue setting out the 'moral' of the play, we find ourselves in the mythical town of Zanzibar, somewhere on the Riviera. Therese is tired of the burden of her sex and believes it is time to assert her rights. She ties up her poor husband and, in the form of two balloons, liberates her breasts, the symbol of her womanhood. Now a man (Tiresias) she departs on a worldwide journey of discovery, leaving her now trans-gendered husband with the task of bearing babies - he obliges with 40,000 in a single day!

Traversing this bizarre world are other characters such as the gamblers Lacouf and Presto, who fight a duel to the death, only to be resurrected soon after! There is the Gendarme who, while investigating the deaths of the gamblers, courts the husband, taking him to be a woman. There is an investigative journalist, an ungrateful son and the many colourful inhabitants of Zanzibar, who now face famine because of the recent population explosion.

Matters are resolved with the appearance of a Fortuneteller, who it is revealed is none other than Therese. Having seen the world and experienced life as both a man and woman, she has come to the conclusion that in a 'surreal' world, love is the only thing that matters.

Brief Background to the composer FRANCIS POULENC (1899-1963)



Francis Poulenc



Guillaume Apollinaire

Born of a freethinking, artistic mother and a devout catholic father, Poulenc's life and work reflected these extreme positions. Described by one critic as "half bad boy, half monk", these opposites fuelled his compositional energy.

A largely self-taught composer, the young Francis Poulenc joined a circle of emerging composers gathered around the eccentric Erik Satie. Satie's followers opposed the vagueness of Impressionism, the Romantic excess of Wagner and the harsh atonality of Schoenberg's New Viennese School, and advocated simplicity, clarity and emotional restraint. In January 1920 the critic Henri Collet dubbed the half-dozen leading members of this circle - Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey - "Les Six." Although each of the Six

always insisted that the group was just a collection of friends, with no communal musical aims, the name stuck and became a convenient label for publicity purposes with Jean Cocteau, their self-appointed spokesman, capitalising on the possibilities.

Poulenc rode on the crest of the emerging wave of modernism and like many of his generation was influenced by such reactionary movements as Dada and Surrealism (see explanations below) that followed WW1. He was particularly drawn to the poetry of the French Surrealists, befriending some of its finest exponents such as Paul Eluard, Max Jacob and Louis Aragon. Although they never met, he developed a particular empathy with the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire. It is the poetry of Eluard and Apollinaire in particular that are most celebrated in his significant contribution to French Artsong.

The duality spoken of above is easy to spot in his compositions. There are works that entertain, others that touch the hearts and many that do both. Between 1932 and 1939 he had regained his Roman Catholic faith and one can certainly note a shift in his artistic focus following this period. The powerful and passionate song-cycle *Tel jour, telle nuit* written in 1936-7 is a watershed for this new direction and the 'impertinent' Poulenc was never again to be granted total dominion. One could argue that *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, written in 1945 in a period that he called his "second youth", was a regression to earlier preoccupations. However, I hope that you will come to see that despite its 'froth and bubble' exterior, the opera takes on some quite serious issues. The 1950s however did see him turn his energies to more overtly graver subjects. In particular, three vocal works of the utmost seriousness: the *Stabat Mater*, the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* and the "lyric tragedy" *La Voix humaine*.

His music is eclectic yet has a strong personal style. It is essentially diatonic and melodious, embroidered with dissonances derived from musical sources both popular and classical. It has wit, elegance, depth of feeling, and a bitter-sweetness which springs from those extremes of exuberance and despair that are so indicative of the manic-depressive. Poulenc died of heart failure in Paris on January 30, 1963.

Artistic Movements of the early C20th that influenced Poulenc & Apollinaire.

The **Symbolist** movement was primarily associated with and developed from a C19th movement in Painting, in which art became infused with mysticism. It is also allied to a corresponding movement in literature of which Athur Rimbaud is a good example. It had its roots in the Romantic tradition, particularly in the works of such artists as Caspar David Friedrich, Fernand Khnopff, William Blake and John Henry Fuseli.

Mythology and dream imagery were used for a visual language of the soul but the symbols used in were not the familiar emblems of mainstream iconography but rather those of an intensely personal, private, obscure and ambiguous nature. In their exploration of dreamlike subjects they are also precursors of the Surrealists, some of whom might be best explained as Symbolism with the content of Freud!

Dada sprang up as a reaction to the horrors and futility that was the First World War and to the bourgeois interests and intellectual rigidity that Dada adherents believed caused the conflict. The movement was powered by fantasy and incongruity; everything conventional was rejected, and satiric pointlessness was embraced.

"Dada" is French baby talk, a word chosen by its leaders because it evoked nothing but meaningless babble. (Interestingly enough, the word 'dada' is also the word used by French children for a 'hobby horse', the toy on which the Gendarme makes his entrance in *Les Mamelles*!)

Even though the movement was relatively short-lived (most had abandoned it by 1920) it had a great influence on later styles and movements including Surrealism, Absurdism (read the works of Albert Camus) and Pop Art (Andy Warhol).

The proponents of Dada proclaimed that it was not art at all but, in fact, "anti-art". For everything that art stood for, Dada was to represent the opposite. If art was concerned with aesthetics, Dada ignored aesthetics. If art was to have at least an implicit or latent message, Dada strove to have no meaning or interpretation. Dada is dependent entirely on the viewer and is more often than not meant to be provocative if not downright offensive!

Surrealism was a 20th-century literary and artistic movement that attempted to express the workings of the subconscious by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter. While it principally grew out of the earlier Dada movement, Surrealism's emphasis was not on negation but on positive expression. Like Dada, the movement represented a reaction against what its members saw as the destruction wrought by the "rationalism" that had guided European culture and politics in the past and that had culminated in the horrors of World War I. According to the major spokesman of the movement, the poet and critic André Breton, who published "The Surrealist Manifesto" in 1924, Surrealism was a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in "an absolute reality, a surreality."

Drawing heavily on theories adapted from 19th psychologist Sigmund Freud, Breton saw the unconscious as the wellspring of the imagination. He defined genius in terms of accessibility to this normally untapped realm.

The movement encompassed most areas of artistic expression but was most prominent in painting, sculpture, cinema and photography. It was in literature however that the name was first coined. The writer Guillaume Apollinaire was the first to use the phrase 'surréalisme' to describe his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, which of course provided the basis for Poulenc's opera.

POULENC'S THREE OPERAS.

Les Mamelles de Tirésias (The Breasts of Tiresias) was Poulenc's first opera, performed at the Paris Opéra-Comique in 1947. It was his aim to create something in the same milieu as his songs and again as he so often did in this smaller genre (*Le Bestiaire*, *Banalités* etc) he used Guillaume Apollinaire as his inspiration.

In 1957, *Les Dialogues des Carmélites* (The Dialogue of the Carmelites) was given its premiere at La Scala in Milan. It is Poulenc's most renowned work for the stage. The story, dealing with the execution of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution, is based on Gertrud von le Fort's novel *Die Letzte am Schafott* (The Last on the Scaffold).

Poulenc's final opera was a one-act tragedy by Jean Cocteau, entitled *La Voix Humaine* (The Human Voice). In this monodrama, written for the talents of Denise Duval, the telephone ironically stands for the symbol of isolation and detachment in a modern world. It was premiered at the Paris Opéra Comique on February 6, 1959.

Of the three, the "Dialogue of the Carmelites", comes closest to grand opera and while its size and casting is at opposite poles to his one act monodrama, *La Voix Humaine*, it shares its highly dramatic approach. This aspect lies in stark contrast to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* which has its musical roots in the vaudeville music of the 1920s. In fact, the only thing all three share in common is that the principal female role in each was written for the remarkable Denise Duval.

Les Mamelles ... simply “froth and bubble”?

The following article will explore Poulenc’s opera from several perspectives and hopefully give an insight into this unique work, showing that despite its overt silliness, there is much more to it than meets the eye and that like all great works of art can be enjoyed and appreciated on many levels. It will also give an indication of the creative concept and direction that our September presentation will take.

While it is certainly meant to be good fun, there are some underlying issues which one should expect to encounter with two great artistic and imaginative minds like those of Poulenc and Apollinaire. On the surface, Poulenc’s opera would seem to be no more than a light and rather silly excursion exploiting the Dadaist’s nihilist philosophy. Indeed the description of the work as an *opera buffa* might easily mislead those who have traditional conceptions of that operatic form.

The first thing to consider is the inspiration for the work – the poet, Guillaume Apollinaire and specifically his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* first performed in 1917. One cannot underestimate the uniqueness of response that Apollinaire’s poetry evoked in the composer. Poulenc states this debt over and over again in his correspondence and other writings.

Ever since ‘Le Bestiaire’¹ I have felt a definite and mysterious rapport with the poetry of Apollinaire.

And again, this time specifically in regard to *Les Mamelles*....

It is definitely ‘Les Mamelles’ that prevails over all my other creative projects. I am so enjoying it that, the day before yesterday, I spent two hours bawling some of the sketches at the top of my voice. There is no question about it, Apollinaire is made for me. Nothing in his work presents any obstacles to my music.

So, what is it about Apollinaire’s poetry that so engaged Poulenc and evoked such a special response in his music? More than anyone else, I think, he was able to recognise that sense of melancholy that concealed itself behind the lightness of touch, humour and ironic word play that was the essential Apollinaire. Not only did he recognise it but he was able to identify with it in a unique meeting of artistic minds. Again, in a comment to a friend:

One only has to look at any photo of Apollinaire to understand that in him, irony is always veiled with tenderness and melancholy.

...and another quote, again with specific reference to his composition of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.

¹ *Le Bestiaire* is one of the shortest song cycles ever written. The young Poulenc set six of Apollinaire’s poems about various creatures, including a camel, a goat and a crab. It takes no more than five minutes to perform. Musicians were not the only artists inspired by Apollinaire’s poetry. Raoul Dufy responded by producing some wonderful woodcuts to match each poem and the whole was published in 1911, in lavish, art-book format. The result was a financial failure but an artistic delight!

Right in the middle of the most slapstick parts, whenever a single phrase can give rise to a change of lyrical perception, I have not hesitated to alter the tone, knowing the sadness that was concealed behind Apollinaire's smile.

But it is more than just an insight, for Poulenc shared many of Apollinaire's melancholy traits. His compositions are often too readily dismissed as being lightweight or insubstantial. As with the works of Apollinaire, one needs to look beyond the surface meaning and to their life and times, if we wish to come to a true understanding of the works of these two extraordinary artists. Poulenc hints at this when talking about the interpretation of his little cycle (again to Apollinaire's poetry) *Le Bestiaire*.

“To sing *Le Bestiaire* with irony and above all *knowingly* is a complete misconception. It shows no understanding whatsoever of either Apollinaire's poetry or my music.... It needed Marya Freund to sing *Le Bestiaire* as gravely as a song by Schubert to prove that it was more than just a bit of nonsense.”

And so it is with his opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. If we approach it with some of the above thoughts in mind, we can begin to make some sense of the seemingly bizarre plot and non-sequiturs that constitute the work. They take on a certain ‘grotesque grandeur’ and this, along with the ‘dislocation’ of tone (*le ‘décalage’ du ton*), as Poulenc called it, presents a work that can be as unsettling as it is endearing.

“I have just this summer composed an opera bouffe on ‘Les Mamelles de Tiresias’.... a very Rabelaisian² play in which the grotesque attains a kind of grandeur. It is the very opposite of a light work.”

So, what is *Les Mamelles* about? One can identify two main issues that Apollinaire's original play dealt with. One addressed quite a serious national problem, namely the dwindling population. There is the exhortation from the ‘Director’ in the opera's prologue: ‘Faites les enfants’ (“have children”). Its statement here, and further references elsewhere later in the play, are unambiguous! The low birth rate was a problem that had beset France for many generations but was a particular point of focus following the decimation of its population in WW I, something that was again a matter of focus when Poulenc wrote his opera immediately following WW II. In current times, this would seem less of an issue and indeed, may be a contributing factor as to why the opera is now considered somewhat dated and rarely found in the standard repertory.

The other theme that dominates the opera is more universal and is less constrained by place or time. It is a theme that inhabits much of Apollinaire's writing but is probably most explicit in this play – this is the theme of gender and more specifically, ambiguity of gender. While we will have some fun with the ‘faites les enfants!’ exhortation in our production, it will be this latter theme that will dominate, albeit in a light hearted way.

² Rabelais was a French Renaissance writer, Franciscan (later, Benedictine) monk, humanist, and physician, whose comic novels *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* are among the most hilarious classics of world literature but which were banned by the Catholic Church. His heroes are rude but funny giants traveling in a world full of greed, stupidity and violence. His writings emphasised the physical joys of life - food, drink, sex, and bodily functions connected to them - and mocked asceticism and oppressive religious and political forces. "Drink always and you shall never die," he wrote in *Gargantua*.

With the impact that the writings of Sigmund Freud had upon the world and upon the French Surrealists in particular, it is not surprising that sexuality plays a big part in their artistic output. Perhaps more than any other, it is the work and philosophy of Marcel Duchamp, that galvanises the artists of this early part of the C20th. So, it is worth taking a little time to examine his legacy.

Often called the “Daddy of Dada”, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) is now widely considered to be the most influential artist of the C20th, even more so perhaps than Picasso and Matisse. In his desire to attain the sacred through the secular, he based much of his work on the ideal of Androgyny³. Now, please do not confuse this term with the superficial interpretations of the word as popularised in contemporary culture, where the term is most likely to conjure up thoughts of ‘men in drag’! It is also misleading to associate the term with homosexuality, although there are corresponding issues here⁴.

Duchamp’s exploration of the term has its roots in the primitive and consequent religious use of the word, where the true male-female balance was often something that was at the centre of worship. It refers more to those qualities which bring together within ourselves the so-called "male" capacity to be rational and the so-called "female" capacity to be intuitive. This duality corresponds to the stated goals of the great meditative religious traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, in which the dynamic harmony of this duality was said to be a key to Enlightenment, a quest for wholeness.



Examples from the iconography of Androgynes found in Eastern and Western Religious traditions.

³ The androgyne (from the Greek *andros*, "man," and *gune*, "woman") that shares both male and female characteristics. In mythology, these creatures are usually gods and sometimes called hermaphrodite. In religious parlance however, androgyny is a much more comprehensive and abstract concept & is based on gender ambiguity rather than the display of dual sexual characteristics. An androgyne is a figure of uncertain gender in whom identifying sexual characteristics are stylised or combined.

⁴ The notion of the homosexual as a sort of feminine man or masculine woman (an "invert") has contributed greatly to the popular connection of androgyny with homosexuality. Oppressed and secretive gays of earlier generations could use such images as coded references for mutual identification; and they frequently identified with androgynes as a symbol of their difference. Thus, androgynous figures in visual culture have continued to resonate with a gay and lesbian audience.

In Christian theology and iconography, ‘angels’ are the most obvious example of the androgynous. They have no sex, consistent with the belief that the angel of the Annunciation played no role in the conception of Christ. (See Fra Angelico's famous *Annunciation*). In support of the androgynous being a god-like characteristic, classical thinkers such as Herodotus theorised that the original state of humankind was indeed androgynous. A similar idea could be extracted from the account of the creation of man in the Book of Genesis. Following the Fall, we are told that Adam and Eve, created in the image of God, became “conscious of their nakedness”. Was this ‘consciousness’, the recognition of their individual genders, a consequence of the loss of their perfected state of oneness?

This metaphysical theme is a recurring one in Duchamp’s artistic and theoretical oeuvre and was to have a profound influence on his contemporaries and followers, having many and varied interpretations! We already see references to it in an early work like his "Nude Descending a Staircase" which created a scandal when shown in New York in 1912. This was not only because the painting was a radical departure from realism, but also because it was against the law in those days to display a nude. Although the gender of the person in the painting is impossible to recognise, everyone who saw it assumed that the nude was a woman, in keeping with biased conservatism of the time, where any nude was assumed to be female. It was not until much later in his life that Duchamp disclosed the truth about the painting, that it was actually a self-portrait! He delighted in this misunderstanding because it sustained his themes regarding human sexuality, and in particular, this notion of androgyny.



Marcel Duchamp: *Nude descending a Staircase* (1912)

Duchamp was probably most famous - or infamous - for his controversial *L.H.O.O.Q.*⁵. This was a typical example of a Dada ‘tout-fait’ or ‘ready made’ and like much of Duchamp’s work was delivered with a smile, a twinkle in the eye - a joke. At

⁵ The title is typical of the word play that so delighted the artists of this period (something that Apollinaire was to continue in *Les Mamelles*). Pronounced in French these letters sound like “Elle a chaud au cul”, which roughly translates as “She has a hot ass!”

the same time, however, it was meant to shock people into looking at art from a different perspective. He desired that art move away from that which was just nice to look at and focus on the metaphysical and upon art as ideas. By taking what is probably the most famous of all paintings and ‘vandalising’ it in this manner, he makes his point clearly, while at the same time progressing his flirtation with the androgynous.

Another notorious ‘ready-made’ is a work entitled, *Fountain* (1917). It is also shocking but at the same time much richer in symbolism and potential interpretation. Here he takes a male urinal and by turning it upside down, creates a work of art.



L.H.O.O.Q.

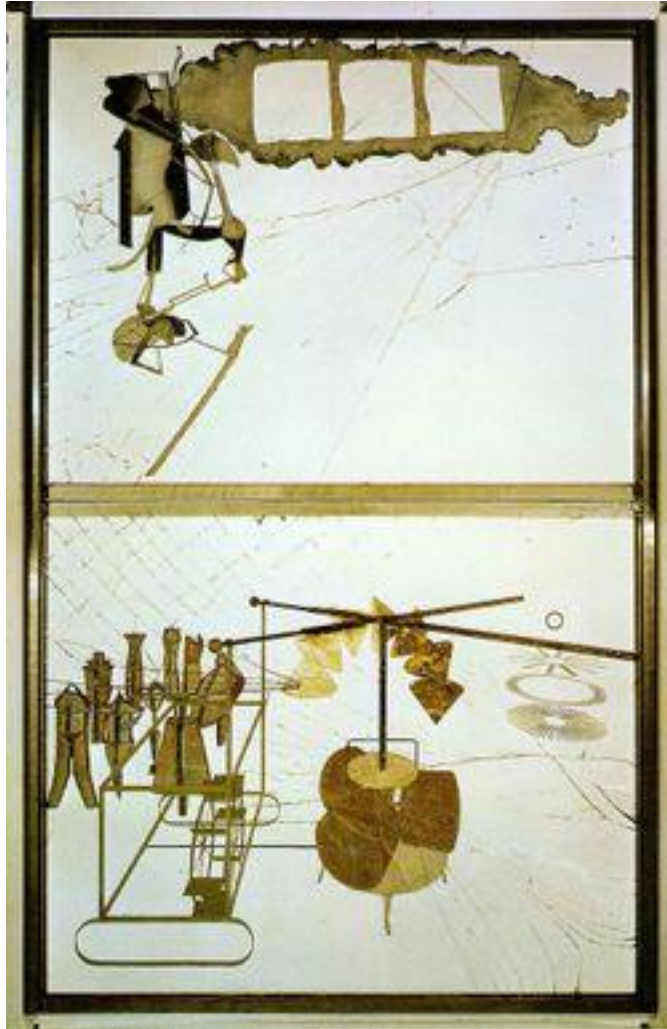


Fountain

To declare this plumbing fixture a work of art certainly was a striking challenge to the aesthetic sensibilities of the time, and for many the challenge remains! Even though it is now generally accepted as just that, a work of art, what might be Androgynous about it? The discussion it has provoked and the wide variety of interpretations, mostly centre around this idea of Androgyny. For example, some religious people saw in the image an abstract form of Buddha and/or the Virgin Mary, two religious icons, male and female in one form. Such would certainly echo the ancient idea of Androgyny if the combination of Divine Mother/Divine Son were deliberate, but there's no evidence that this was the case in Duchamp's mind and he certainly had little time for religion. Those with more Freudian orientation saw this open receptacle as a female space into which a male enters. Such sexual symbolism may have played on Duchamp's mind but the symbolism of common copulation is not the iconography of Androgyny. The truth is probably more straightforward than either of these interpretations. Simply, the urinal was turned on its back and named "Fountain" to indicate that its function had changed from a device for collecting fluids to the potential opposite function – that of a fountain. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to see "Fountain" as an androgynous object, having both male and female qualities.

Duchamp's excursion in this area is best illustrated by his most intriguing work "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even". This work involves a system of symbolism that is so complicated that entire university courses are sometimes devoted to this single painting! So, I will certainly not even attempt to analyse it here. Suffice

to say that the painting portrays the actions of a large androgynous machine with female parts (the bride) in the top panel and male parts (the bachelors) in the lower panel and that it has been described by some critics as an abstract androgynous self-portrait of the artist.



Marcel Duchamp: *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*

For further reading, I refer you to an excellent detailed article on Duchamp and “Androgyne” by Lanier Graham (former curator of the Australian National Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in New York). It can be found at the following site: http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/articles/graham/graham1.html

While these ideas had a profound influence on his contemporaries and the emerging Surrealist movement (see such elements in the works of Salvador Dali, Max Ernst and Paul Klee for example.), it must be said that Androgyne held different meanings for different artists and while Duchamp’s vision was rooted in a certain spirituality, others were more interested with the physical. One particular female artist, Whitney Chadwick, addresses the male Surrealist’s view of androgyny, stating that

"the metaphysical fusion of male and female into the perfect being had a physical and spiritual counterpart in the sexual act, an ecstatic union that blurred the distinction between the sexes and moved the male artist to greater creativity."

So, what are the implications for Apollinaire and Poulenc's⁶ work in general and *Les Mamelles* in particular? While there is no profound message here, I would like to think that Duchamp's concerns with wholeness and completeness had a resonance with these two artists and that such is reflected in this work. The two main characters change gender, separate and in their new respective roles undertake and complete huge tasks in the course of the opera. Therese, we would be told, has conquered every imaginable 'male' career and political ambition, while the husband has taken on the 'female' task of procreating - enough, it would seem, for a whole generation (40000 in one day!). Having completed their respective journeys and experienced the world of the other, they re-unite and in becoming 'whole', find a simple but profound happiness in the union. Poulenc writes some quite remarkable music here, finding just the right voice to echo Apollinaire's text, beautifully illustrating his remarks (quoted earlier) regarding his insight into the sadness, tenderness and melancholy that he recognised in Apollinaire's poetry. As it was with Duchamp's 'ready-mades' this is all done with the greatest of ease, a wink and a smile, if not a downright belly-bouncing gaffaw!

Apollinaire's wordplay in *Les Mamelles*

As for past productions in the Conservatorium theatre, we will again provide surtitles to assist the audience in their enjoyment of the operas. A real problem arises with the Poulenc work for Apollinaire's text is riddled with puns, word play and very often untranslatable sections.

Here are just two examples:

In one of the first scenes that the Husband and the Gendarme have together, the Husband, tells him that his wife has gone off to become, among other things, a "merdicene". This is a bastardisation of the word for a doctor (medicin) and with this spelling could possibly be translated 'Doctor S*#t'! The Gendarme seems to mishear him and asks is she a 'mère de cygnes' (literally 'mother of swans') a play on words which, of course, makes no sense in any other language but the original.

Another example is the play on the word 'Paris' and its river 'Seine' in the scene following the duelling deaths of the gamblers Lacouf and Presto.

*Monsieur Presto a perdu son pari
Puisque nous sommes à Paris
Monsieur Lacouf n'a rien gagné
Puisque la scène se passe à Zanzibar
Autant que la Seine passe à Paris*

⁶ It is not widely known that Poulenc was contemplating another opera on the subject of Casanova and Apollinaire was again to be the poetic inspiration. It pursues a not dissimilar theme to *Les Mamelles* in focusing on that period in the great libertine's life when he fell in love with a young castrato, who in reality was a woman masquerading as the male singer - sound familiar? The opera did not proceed.

The Greek Myth of Tiresias

In Greek mythology, Tiresias was a blind prophet, the son of the shepherd Everes and the nymph Chariclo. While out walking one day, Tiresias encountered two snakes mating. He hit them with a stick and he was immediately transformed into a woman.

As a woman, Tiresias became a priestess of Hera, married and had children. According to some versions of the tale, Lady Tiresias was a prostitute of great renown. After seven years as a woman, (see the reference in the Act I Finale of Poulenc's opera... "et cependant la boulangère les sept ans changeait de peau" which translates as "...meanwhile the baker's wife changes her skin every seven years") Tiresias again found mating snakes and again struck them with her staff, becoming a man once more.

As a result of his experiences, Zeus and Hera asked him to settle the question of which sex, male or female, experienced more pleasure during intercourse. Zeus claimed it was women; Hera claimed it was men. When Tiresias sided with Zeus, Hera struck him blind. Since Zeus could not undo what she had done, he gave him the gift of prophecy.

The myth of Tiresias in post-classical literature

The figure of Tiresias has been much-invoked by fiction writers and poets. Since Tiresias is both the greatest seer of the Classical mythos and a figure cursed by the gods, and a man/woman, he has been very useful to authors.

In *The Divine Comedy* (Inferno, Canto XX), Dante sees Tiresias in the fourth pit of the eighth circle of Hell (the circle is for perpetrators of fraud and the fourth pit being the location for soothsayers or diviners.) He was condemned to walk for eternity with his head twisted toward his back for in life, while he strove to look forward to the future, in Hell he must only look backward.

More recently, T. S. Eliot used Tiresias as the primary speaker in his landmark Modernist poem, *The Waste Land*.

In popular culture, Frank Herbert also uses the mythic characteristics of Tiresias in his third Dune novel, *Dune Messiah*, where the protagonist Paul Atreides loses his sight but gains prophetic powers to counter this stemming from insights into both the male and female part of the psyche.

And then of course there is Apollinaire and Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*.