

GENDER IN GERSHWIN'S *PORGY AND BESS*

From its inception, public reaction to the diversity of Bess' character from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has been very mixed. Many African-Americans were insulted by her portrayal as a low-life character¹, which they felt would engender a negative perception of their culture, while many others sympathized with her meager circumstances.² Bess is, consequently, a very controversial character and because of this, she is able to bring to light many issues, particularly regarding gender. As she is a less than ideal heroine, Bess' often conflicting actions subject her to be perceived as weak and adhering to gender stereotypes. However, I would like to argue that while she is dependent upon men and trapped in an androcentric world, she is also able to defy these gender roles, creating a character that is ultimately very human in her conflicts. Through his music (particularly rhythms, text setting, and contrasting music), Gershwin was able to portray a woman who embraced and yet defied her role as a 1930s woman. I will discuss Bess' musical roles and compare them with the arias of the women of Catfish Row, as well as examine the transformations Bess' music undergoes in order to portray her diverse character, proving that she is both trapped by gender roles, yet unable to adhere to them at the same time.

Three different versions of this story exist; DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy*, a theater adaptation called *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts*, by Heyward's wife, Dorothy, and Gershwin's opera, *Porgy and Bess*. DuBose Heyward's portrayal of Bess is unflattering, as he describes her to be "extremely drunk and unpleasant to look upon...an ugly scar marked her left cheek, and the acid of utter degradation had etched hard lines about her mouth."³ Her lifestyle choices are reflected in her

¹ Gwynne Kuhner Brown, "Problems of Race and Genre in the Critical Reception of *Porgy and Bess*" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2006), 4.

² Ellen Noonman, *The Strange Career of *Porgy and Bess*: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 149.

³ DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925), 53.

physical appearance as a way to show she is far from the ideal woman. Bess even uses Porgy's money to buy drugs and consequently enters into a frenzy "like a dervish," calling "horribly upon her God, striking and clawing wildly,"⁴ which results in her arrest and incarceration. This wild behavior shows that Bess is far removed from the sphere of domesticity that was prescribed to women at the time.

The notion of women belonging to the domestic sphere has been around for centuries; in *Politics*, Aristotle prescribes women to be confined to the private realm, whereas the men should occupy the public realm.⁵ This concept was so engrained that even women themselves promoted and upheld this domesticity. In Fanny Fern's "How Husbands Rule" (1853), Harry wishes for his wife Mary to break ties with her intellectual and satirical friend. After a struggle, Mary realizes that "perhaps, after all, Harry was right about Mrs. May; and if he wasn't, one hair of his head was worth more to her than all the women in the world,"⁶ indicating a woman's place was to be subservient to her man. Despite progress in gender equality during the 1920s, the "feminist fervor" disappeared during the Great Depression, which allowed for a regression towards the traditional belief that women belonged at home.⁷ Women were expected to reside in the private realm of the domestic sphere, which included child-rearing, housekeeping, and religious education,⁸ qualities in which Bess is lacking. By refusing to be confined to the domestic sphere, Bess sets herself apart as being highly unfeminine. She is also depicted to be incognizant of the roles she is to play; instead of victimizing herself and blaming Sportin' Life for her rampage, she takes responsibility for her actions by saying

⁴ Ibid, 85.

⁵ Mary Ann Tétreault, "Frontier Politics: Sex, Gender, and the Deconstruction of the Public Sphere," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26 (2001): 53 – 72.

⁶ Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (Auburn: Derby and Miller), 118, accessed May 14, 2015, doi: <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/snesffa12t.html>.

⁷ Mickey Moran, "1930s, America-Feminist Void?," *Department of History Outstanding Paper of 1988 – 89*. Loyno Educators.

⁸ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 – 1860" in *Women and Womanhood in America*, compiled by Ronald W. Hogeland (Lexington: DC Health, 1973), 1.

“T’s a ‘oman grown. Ef I tek dope, dat muh own business.”⁹ This is not something a typical 1930s heroine would say; she is outside the prescribed feminine norm.

Dorothy Heyward softened Bess into a more sympathetic character in her play, which made the story more moving, which, in turn, makes the ending more tragic. Dorothy’s Bess is “slender, but sinewy....she flaunts a typical, but debased, Negro beauty.”¹⁰ She is neither wild nor ugly. She even has moments of reason at time, telling Crown to flee after he kills Robbins and asking Sportin’ Life not to give Crown the “Happy Dust”. Likewise, she is depicted more as a victim, such as through the assault by Crown. Her dilemmas and struggles are apparent, making her relatable to the audience and she adheres to gender norms more as a result. The play’s script and the libretto are largely identical, so Bess has a more generous portrayal in the opera, which is further enhanced by the music.

To understand Bess as a character, it is necessary to examine portrayals of women in literature. The differences in the portrayals of Bess are due in part to language being a construct of gender, an operation that “depends on women’s silence and absence, so that when women write, they do not represent themselves as women.”¹¹ This leaves the depiction of women to be decided entirely by men. Because Bess is not an ideal woman, she is portrayed negatively by DuBose Heyward, which sends a message that a woman will be perceived negatively for breaking normalcy. Indeed, Bess is a social pariah for being unmarried, childless, an alcoholic, and a drug addict. In addition, “women who live with men outside the bonds of marriage are condemned to isolation, and married women joined the patriarchy in isolating those who deviated from societal norms.”¹² Bess’ existence and actions defy the patriarchy, so she is consequently isolated by the women of Catfish

⁹ Heyward, *Porgy*, 95.

¹⁰ Heyward, *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1927), 14.

¹¹ Caroline G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman’s Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 41.

¹² *Ibid*, 41.

Row. She lacks domestic bliss that is granted by a marriage and children¹³, and is unable to conform to their standards. While Gershwin and Dorothy Heyward deepened the complexity of Bess' character, they too were influenced by contemporary depictions of women. Bess' identity is always defined by the man with whom she is associated; she is referred to as "Crown's woman", or "Porgy's woman", and in the end it is implied she is "Sportin' Life's woman". Her lack of voice is reflected in the opera as Bess is not given music that solely characterizes her (compared with the other women who have distinct styles of music). In addition, she warps and twists the other characters' music, is assigned melodic ideas that are introduced by other characters, and even appropriates other women's characteristic music and motives in an attempt to integrate into society. While this contrast of music can reflect the complexity of human nature, she is portrayed as fickle because of it.

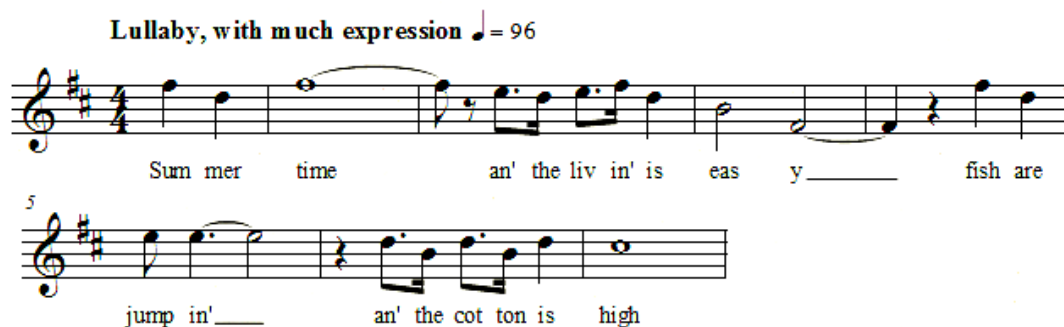


FIGURE I: CLARA'S "SUMMERTIME"

In order to understand Bess' complexity and how she defies and adheres to gender stereotypes, her music must be compared with the music of the other women of Catfish Row. Clara and Serena are set up as womanly and moral foils to Bess. Clara's characteristic melody is "Summertime", which is very elegant and lyrical in style. As seen in Figure I, this melody is largely pentatonic, which adds to the feeling of simplicity, and intervals of thirds and fourths create a sense

¹³ Ashlyn K. Kuersten, *Women and the Law: Leaders, Cases, and Documents* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 16.

of ease and openness. The orchestration adds to this affect by using woodwinds and upper strings in ambiguous quarter note and triplet rhythms to create a shimmering and smooth quality (see Figure II). There are also bells (indicated in the right hand of the piano in Figure II), which add to this purity. The melody itself only spans one octave and is rhythmically very simple, which creates the feeling of a folk song. The chordal texture is also very hymn like, which further adds to the purity of expression.

“Summertime” is first introduced by Clara as a lullaby for her baby. She sings of domestic joys, which is perhaps a reflection of the social roles that are assigned to women. Certainly, having a family was the goal for most women during this era, and they were often considered incomplete if they could not achieve this. The melody in “Summertime” reflects Clara’s purity while the text reflects her status as a good mother and wife. This emphasis on family qualities reveals Clara’s priorities are typical for the time. Her devotion to her husband is so strong that she even runs into a hurricane to find her husband, showing that she is “the ideal woman who follows her husband into death.”¹⁴

(Lullaby, with much expression)

CLARA *p* **17** *Moderato* ♩ = 96

Bells Sum-mer time an' the liv-in' is

rit. *pp* *espz*

mp poco rit. *a tempo*

eas-y, Fish are jump-in', an' the cot-ton is high.

poco rit. *mf a tempo*

FIGURE II: CHORDAL TEXTURE AND BELLS IN CLARA’S “SUMMERTIME”

¹⁴ John Andrew Johnson, “Gershwin’s ‘American Folk Opera’: the Genesis, Style, and Reputation of ‘Porgy and Bess’ (1935)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1996), 383.

Serena is also presented as a foil to Bess through her maturity, her role as an experienced mother, and her devoutly religious behavior. To portray her piety, Gershwin composed spiritual-inspired music for her, music which Gershwin learned from the Gullah people of South Carolina.¹⁵ The spiritual itself is largely indicative of the style of music that is associated with African American culture, but also reveals the religious devotion that was expected of African American women.¹⁶ Due to its emergence during years of oppression and slavery in America, the spiritual often addresses sadness. African-American historian W. E. B. DuBois viewed spirituals as “the articulate message of the slave to the world” that hinted at the tensions and fears of the Negroes¹⁷, but which also provided consolation by speaking of hope in the life to come.¹⁸ Therefore, Serena’s spiritual-inspired music helps define her role as a devout Christian and to express her sadness over the death of her husband. The influence of spirituals can be heard in her famous aria “My Man’s Gone Now” (Figure III) through the “blues” notes, such as the lowered third scale degree (G) and the lowered seventh scale degree (D)¹⁹, the syncopations of the accompaniment, as well as the responsorial style that is prevalent in African-American music²⁰. Serena also swings all of her 8th note rhythms, a trait which is often found in blues music²¹. To accentuate this grief, Gershwin includes a half-step appoggiatura “sigh motive”, or the *suspirans*, which has traditionally represented sorrow due to its

¹⁵ Brown, *Race in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess*, 111

¹⁶ Susan Hill Lindley, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 178. In the slave era, Negro women were told that the color of their skin made them inherently sinful, but converting to Christianity would grant them access to Heaven. Later, religion gave these women a sense of worth and belonging in a racist and oppressive society.

¹⁷ John White, “Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience,” *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 2 (Aug 1983), 253 – 255.

¹⁸ John Lovell, *Black song : the forge and the flame; the story of how the Afro-American spiritual was hammered out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 193.

¹⁹ Bruce Benward and Marilyn Nadine Saker, *Music in Theory and Practice* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 359.

²⁰ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “Dancing with the Enemy: Cuban Popular Music, Race, Authenticity, and the World-Music Landscape,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol 25. No 3. (May 1998), 118.

²¹ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 866.

aural imitation of weeping²². This further emphasizes the sadness that is reflected in the community as well as Serena's devotion (to her husband and to God), which are qualities Bess lacks entirely.

The image shows a musical score for the song "My Man's Gone Now". It consists of two systems of music. The first system is for the vocal part, labeled "Serena", and the piano accompaniment, labeled "Piano". The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. The lyrics under the vocal line are: "My man's gone now ain' no use a". The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "liste nin' for his ti red foot steps climb in' up de stairs". The piano accompaniment continues with a dynamic marking of *fp* (fortissimo piano). Red circles are drawn around specific notes in both the vocal and piano parts, highlighting syncopations and blues notes. The piano part features a complex, syncopated accompaniment with many chords and moving lines.

FIGURE III: SYNCOPATIONS AND BLUES NOTES IN “MY MAN’S GONE NOW”

The simplicity of the melody in “My Man’s Gone Now” is apparent through the 2-bar phrases (Figure IV), which indicate Serena is restraining her sadness, only to burst out in a wordless wail at the aria’s end²³. Akin to Clara’s “Summertime”, “My Man’s Gone Now” portrays the qualities of the Catfish Row women; namely, devotion to family and loyalty to their husbands’ religions. In contrast, Bess lacks these qualities by drinking alcohol, consuming drugs, and having pre-marital sex. She also defies the archetypal devotion to man by moving onto Porgy (and later onto Sportin’ Life) without mourning Crown’s murder. Though this trait cannot be seen as defining independence in character, since Bess still needs a man, she defies gender expectations by breaking

²² This sighing motive was discussed in Russell Stinson’s book *Bach, the Orgelbuchlein* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 61. Bach often used this half-step sighing motive in his cantatas and instrumental works, particularly in his funeral cantata (No. 106, *Actus Tragicus*).

²³ Johnson, *Gershwin’s American Folk Opera*, 383.

in turn, associates her with evil for which she is ostracized. In addition, by starting a tritone away, Bess has guaranteed that she will be unable to sing in the same key as Serena, revealing that Bess does not know how to be part of the community, ensuring further alienation from the other women. Bess' re-iteration of this line also sounds quite haphazard; an extended sequence of triplet rhythms of non-diatonic notes is an indication that she is quite different from the other "stable" women. Interestingly, Serena insults her by comparing her to a man, which further highlights Bess' lack of femininity.

See that hus sy drink in' like a ny man

Here Rob bins have one fo the Gawd fear in' la dies

FIGURE VI: BESS' DISTORTION OF SERENA'S LINE

Following Crown's disappearance, Porgy is the only person willing to take care of Bess. While this is a testament to Porgy's character, it also reveals how Bess will follow anyone simply because she does not have the means to be truly independent. As Porgy is highly respected within the community, Bess also conforms to live "decently". This alters the community's perception of her and she is slowly accepted by the community. This acceptance is not through her own actions, but through her relationship with Porgy. Despite daring to go out of her domestic sphere, she is still ultimately dependent upon men to define her. She adopts Clara's baby following Clara's death, which can be seen as her unconscious attempt to be the nurturing mother. By creating a nuclear family by living with a man and adopting a child, she attempts to adhere to societal norms. She even appropriates Clara's "Summertime", though she sings it in a different key (A minor). This is significant because Bess is not only altering "Summertime" to better represent herself, but reveals

that she cannot replicate Clara's purity. The meter, too, is different, as Clara sings in $\frac{4}{4}$ time whereas Bess sings in cut time (Figure VII). Typically, pieces notated in cut time have two beats per measure and consequently have a faster and more upbeat quality (such as marches), which is not suited for the gentle rhythm of a lullaby. Bess' rendition shows that she does not know how to sing a lullaby, and by extension, that she does not know how to be a regular mother. This is another indication that Bess tries to recreate herself as Clara, but does not quite get it right. The accompaniment differs as Clara's orchestral accompaniment is full of lush strings with rhythmically ambiguous triplets. Bess' "Summertime", on the other hand, has a flute ostinato that outlines the underlying chords. As the flute plays continuous 8th notes, the piece is more rhythmically structured, which also adds tension against the triplets in the orchestra and the dotted eighth rhythms in the vocal line, lacking the ease of Clara's rendition. Bess is also largely accompanied by woodwinds, particularly the oboe, which even doubles her melody at times and can be seen as her necessity for support in order to recreate Clara's role for herself. Bess' melody is also truncated, being nearly one-third of the original melody, which further implies that Bess does not know how to sing a lullaby.

The image shows a musical score for Bess's "Summertime" in cut time. The score is written for voice and piano. The tempo is marked "Moderato" with a metronome marking of quarter note = 96. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into two systems. The first system starts at measure 18 and includes the lyrics "Sum-mer - time an' the liv - in' is". The second system includes the lyrics "eas - y, Fish are jump - in'". The piano accompaniment features a prominent flute ostinato in the right hand, marked "pp espr. R.H.", consisting of continuous eighth notes. The vocal line is in cut time, with lyrics written below the notes. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

FIGURE VII: CUT TIME AND FLUTE OSTINATO IN BESS' "SUMMERTIME"

The image displays a musical score for a scene from 'Porgy and Bess'. The top system features a vocal line for Bess with the lyrics 'hap-pi-ness is jes' be - gun.' and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a 'poco rit.' marking. The bottom system is marked '98' and 'Tempo I. molto cantabile'. It shows Bess's vocal line with the lyrics 'Por - gy, I's yo' wo - man now, I is,' and a piano accompaniment with a 'piu espressivo' marking. The key signature changes from B-flat major to D major between the two systems.

FIGURE IX: MODULATION FROM B-FLAT MAJOR TO D MAJOR AT BESS' STATEMENT OF THE MOTIVE

In contrast, Bess' duet ("What You Want Wid Bess?") with Crown is quite different, containing highly syncopated rhythms and disjunct leaps (Figure X). While these traits are highly prevalent in African-American styles of music, the music of the other Catfish Row women do not display these qualities, nor is their music accompanied by an uneven, lurching bass rhythm. All of these qualities help to denote something wild, particularly the "exotic" African American rhythms which are often associated with blues and jazz²⁶. Jazz itself has long been associated with sex (the word jazz is even rumored to be slang for copulation²⁷) and the seedy life, due to its perceived low class origins among the black communities. As this is the sector to which Crown belongs, it aptly suggests the lifestyle he and Bess share. Interestingly, when Bess is with Porgy she has diatonic melodies (see Figure IX), but when she is with Crown her melodies are chromatic, which is a direct reflection of how Bess acts traditionally and wildly, respectively, when she associates with each man.

²⁶ Kuhner, *Race in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess*, 109.

²⁷ Mervyn Cooke and David Horn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

The image shows a musical score for the song "What You Want Wid Bess?". It features two vocal parts, B. (Bess) and Cr. (Crown), and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Moderato sempre ritmato" with a metronome marking of 88. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f ben marcato*, and *p ma sempre marcato*. The lyrics for Bess are: "What you want wid Bess? She's get - tin' ole now; Take a fine young gal." The lyrics for Crown are: "You're my wo - man Bess, I'm tell-in' you, now I'm your man."

FIGURE X: DISJUNCT LEAPS AND SYNCOPATED RHYTHMS IN “WHAT YOU WANT WID BESS?”

Bess and Crown also do not appear to align emotionally for most of the duet. Originally, their texts and melodic materials clash, but Bess is eventually persuaded by Crown and they begin to sing in harmonies, typically in tenths (Figure XII), which are often associated with love duets (despite the content to be far from pure love in this case). In contrast, Porgy must yield to Bess in order to sing with her. By the end of the aria, Bess and Crown sing in octaves, representing their unity as a couple (Figure XI).

The image shows a musical score for the final part of the duet, where Bess and Crown sing in octaves. The tempo is marked "poco rall." and "più rall.". The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *poco rall.*, and *più rall.*. The lyrics for Bess are: "What you want wid Bess? Oh, let me go to my man,". The lyrics for Crown are: "You're my wo - man Bess, I'm tell-in' you, now I'm your man."

FIGURE XI: BESS AND CROWN SINGING IN OCTAVES

The image shows a musical score for the song "What You Want Wid Bess?". It consists of two systems of music. The first system includes vocal lines for Bess (B.) and Crown (Cr.) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "now an' for ev-er, I am his wo-man, he would die with-out me, An' dat is you, yes, dat is you, yes,". The second system also includes vocal lines for Bess and Crown, and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Oh, Crown, won't you let me go to my I need you now an' you're mine jus' as long as I". The piano part includes the instruction "mf gradatamente cresc." at the end of the second system. The score is in G major and 4/4 time.

FIGURE XII: BESS AND CROWN ALIGN MELODICALLY IN “WHAT YOU WANT WID BESS?”

Following the love duet “Bess You Is My Woman Now” and Bess’ acclimation into Catfish Row society, Bess finally receives her own aria. “I Loves You Porgy” is perhaps the most similar to the other women’s arias. The melody is very simple and contains arpeggios, and the largely diatonic music helps to portray Bess as a traditional woman that Porgy and the community now perceive her to be. Historically, diatonicism has been associated with tradition, and indicates purity of emotions, whereas chromaticism conveys a sense of instability and unrest. For example, in Georges Bizet’s opera, *Carmen*, the title character sings diatonically when she is with Escamillo, her true love, but chromatically in other parts of the opera when she is portrayed as a wild and loose woman. Likewise with Bess, the same musical conventions are followed, which only enhance her portrayal as a dependent woman.

The image shows a musical score for three systems of music. Each system consists of a vocal line (soprano, marked 's.') and a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs). The first system has the lyrics: "He's goin' to han-dle me an' hol' me so." The second system has the lyrics: "It's goin' to be like dy-in', For-gy, deep in-side me." The third system is marked with a box containing the number "212" and has the lyrics: "But when he calls, I know I have to go." The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *ten.* (tension).

FIGURE XIII: BESS TELLS PORGY SHE WILL LEAVE HIM FOR CROWN

Despite her attempts to sing lyrical music like the other women, Bess still inherently rejects the established female order to follow her innate sexual desires when she tells Porgy she cannot resist Crown (Figure XIII). This inability to commit to a steady relationship can be construed as weak. On the other hand, this lack of desire for a committed relationship liberates her from the stereotypical female mold. As she seems to realize her inability to become a “true woman”, she admits that she will leave Porgy.

Bess’ contrasting styles of music indicate that she is complex and does not fit into a single stereotypical model of female characters. Bess has to take her identity from the man she is with, which is potentially the most apparent way in which she adheres to gender norms. This is why she is perceived as vulgar and crass with Crown and more demure with Porgy, and she often tailors her actions to fit these situations. That she relies on men for her identity and adheres to what they want reveals one way in which she is constrained by gender roles. However, there is a tension between

following physical and materialistic desires and her desire to be part of a community, but in such an androcentric society, she is unable to have both. In some regards, Bess is a very modern woman in that she has to struggle with these juxtaposing labels. Her sexuality is appealing to men, but ensures her exclusion from the female community. In order to be accepted by female society she must repress her desires. Bess is always at odds in society and as a result, she is possibly the most complex character in the opera, and consequently she is the most human. By helping the audience to appreciate why Bess might be swayed by these men, the opera's music "transforms her from a weak and unsteady character into a complex woman in the grip of a genuinely wrenching moral dilemma."²⁸ By doing so, Gershwin was able to portray a woman who attempted to adhere to but also defied gender expectations of the 1930s, revealing that Bess was an empowered woman who dared to step out of the domestic sphere but also an unfortunate victim of the era in which she lived.

²⁸ Brown, *Race in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess*, 114.

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