



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Elizabeth Bowen's *Mélanide*

Adam Parkes

Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Volume 59, Number 4,  
Winter 2017, pp. 457-476 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/679405>

🔗 For content related to this article

[https://muse.jhu.edu/related\\_content?type=article&id=679405](https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=679405)

# Elizabeth Bowen's Mélisande

ADAM PARKES

**I**N *THE LAST SEPTEMBER* (1929), ELIZABETH Bowen's fictional re-creation of the last days of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in 1920–1921, the pro-British Irish Catholic Mrs. Fogarty hosts a tea party attended by various young ladies, including the heroine, Lois Farquar, and some British soldiers from the nearby barracks. As so often in Bowen's fiction, visual elements impress themselves on our attention: the room is full of photographs of dead British soldiers, a detail with fateful implications for Lois's suitor, the subaltern Gerald Lesworth, who is conspicuous by his absence from the party. But music, too, plays a significant role in this episode, especially when the pushy, trivial army wife Betty Vermont sings a song called "Melisande." Mrs. Vermont's rendition, Bowen observes with comic irony, "sent every girl there into a trance of self-pity; it was so clearly written about oneself" (*Last* 104).

**KEYWORDS:** Elizabeth Bowen, Maeterlinck, modernism, music, narcissism, symbolism

**ABSTRACT:** Elizabeth Bowen's novel *The Last September* features several allusions to the story of Pelléas and Mélisande. Traced to their original source in Maeterlinck via a once-popular song by Ethel Clifford and Alma Goetz, these allusions clarify Bowen's links to symbolism. They also bring into focus themes of narcissism and thanatophilia that disclose the limitations of some political readings of Bowen's novel.

The full title of the song is “Mélisande in the Wood,” written by Ethel Clifford and set to music for voice and piano by Alma Goetz.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1902 and widely performed in the Anglophone world during the early decades of the twentieth century, the song was inspired by Maurice Maeterlinck’s symbolist play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which had been published in 1892 and first performed in 1893.<sup>2</sup> Itself clearly influenced by Wagner, *Pelléas et Mélisande* spawned several musical adaptations by such composers as Gabriel Fauré, Arnold Schoenberg, Jean Sibelius, William Wallace, and, most important, Claude Debussy, whose opera of the same title premiered in Paris in 1902.<sup>3</sup> When they wrote their song, Clifford and Goetz may have been familiar with Debussy’s opera, as well as with Wallace’s suite (first performed in 1900) or Fauré’s incidental music (composed for a London production of Maeterlinck’s play in 1898, it was performed again in 1900).<sup>4</sup> Whether Bowen knew the music of Debussy, Fauré, or Wallace is unclear; she may have attended one of three performances of Debussy’s opera, with an English translation by Edwin Evans, at His Majesty’s Theatre in June 1924, when she was living in Northampton with her husband, Alan Cameron (Glendinning 61), although there is no direct evidence of this.<sup>5</sup> But Bowen clearly knew Maeterlinck’s play, weaving some of its key plot elements into the fabric of her novel.<sup>6</sup> Manuscript evidence shows that she accentuated these elements during revision.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the borrowings from Maeterlinck concern Bowen’s heroine, Lois Farquar. But they have wider implications, both for the novel’s approach to characterization and for the tricky question of how the sequestered world of Bowen’s Anglo-Irish characters relates to larger historical developments that are “pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion” (*Last* 25). Bowen’s allusions to the story of Pelléas and Mélisande shape the social comedy unfolding in Mrs. Fogarty’s drawing-room and inflect the characters’ own assessments of their situation, in its personal, social, and political aspects. The dramatic component of these allusions is crucial, of course. But the dramatic is inseparable here from the musical.

## **Bowen and Music**

Bowen is rarely discussed in the context of music, and the biographical record, it must be said, offers little encouragement. Bowen’s biographer Victoria Glendinning has pronounced her “strictly unmusical” (151).<sup>8</sup> The fiction, too, seems short on musical allusions or ambitions. Bowen’s World War II novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1948), famously begins with an open-air concert in Regent’s Park, but the interest there lies in the occasion—an opportunity for a

pick-up—while the music itself is barely mentioned. It is a concert *scene*: the emphasis falls on the play of looks and glances, not of sounds. As she works up a verbal picture of “the open-air theater, shelving below the level of the surrounding lawns” and “walled by thickets and a few high trees,” Bowen places the concert at the base of a “muffled hollow,” from which “the music could not travel far through the park,” and as listeners are drawn in by the few “hints” of “disturbing” sound that do reach them, “this hollow which was the source of music was found to be also the source of dusk” (Bowen, *Heat* 3). The rest of the paragraph takes this cue, describing the play of light, shadow, and gathering darkness in an aurally subdued world. For all the lyrical cadences of her descriptive prose, Bowen seems not to worry here about music as a force that shapes action or character, or as the source of metaphorical texture or tone.

On such evidence, Bowen appears indifferent to what Aldous Huxley called the “musicalization of fiction” (384), or to the experiments in literary-musical relations that are often seen as central to the modernist avant garde. Such works as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), the “Sirens” episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and Huxley’s own *Point Counter Point* (1928) have generated a considerable secondary literature taking a variety of critical approaches. According to Alex Aronson, music gave modern novelists a transcendent metaphor of “harmonious coexistence” (32). For David Melnick, by contrast, modernist writers found in music a source of “dissonance,” which allowed them to explore “the disorder of the actual” (13). Steering a middle course, Brad Bucknell argues that modernism sometimes reinforced, sometimes subverted the romantic idea of music as expressive and supra-rational, thus revealing its own “self-divided nature” (4). The examples cited by these and other critics have ranged from Eliot, Joyce, and Huxley to Pater, Pound, Stein, Woolf, Proust, and Mann.<sup>9</sup> Bowen has not featured.

In some respects, *The Last September* seems to confirm the absence of a musical dimension from Bowen’s fictional world. Time, often related by artists and aestheticians to music and poetry, is rendered in visual and tactile metaphors, as when Bowen describes it as “loose-textured” (*Last* 14): no dance to the music of time there. Mrs. Fogarty’s tea party, however, provides a telling exception to this nonmusical tendency, as her guests perform Clifford and Goetz’s “Mélisande in the Wood” together with three popular ballads of the time: Robert Service’s “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” (1907) and J. Milton Hayes’s “The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God” (1911) and “The Whitest Man I Know” (1914).

In alluding to the ballads by Service and Hayes, Bowen perhaps meant to indicate how her gentry and army officers share the same middle-class

culture, as well as identical assumptions about the social order of the British empire. David Deutsch has argued that musical appreciation in modern Britain typically functioned in this way, serving as an index of larger social ambitions and anxieties. But whereas Deutsch's study of various musical "sub-cultures" reveals a general process of "liberalization," as increasing access to classical music broadened the appeal of "a cosmopolitan musical humanism" (8), Bowen's allusions to popular music suggest the reverse: a narrowing of taste and vision, as characters representing the dominant culture find in these ballads cause for self-affirmation. Bowen's reference to Hayes's "The Whitest Man I Know," which was set to music by R. Fenton Gower, provides a case in point. A misogynistic ballad of male camaraderie blighted by an unfaithful woman, this piece also gives vent to stock-in-trade xenophobia and racism. "I don't think you need to have read it to feel that you've read it," John Lanchester has wittily remarked, noting the popularity of "The Whitest Man" among the Edwardian middle classes (40); in describing its enthusiastic reception in Mrs. Fogarty's "artistic drawing-room" (*Last* 101), Bowen may have wanted her readers to draw a similar inference.

But it is the allusion to Clifford and Goetz's song, and to the Maeterlinck play that inspired it, that has the most interesting and consequential implications for *The Last September*. By connecting the world of her characters to the tragic story of Pelléas and Mélisande, Bowen insinuates some lovely nuances into the social surfaces and psychological recesses, as well as the political subtexts, of this beguiling novel. One result of the Mélisande allusion involves a complication of the sexual dynamics of this particular scene. The air is thick with courtship, desired and declined, but the overtones of narcissism and thanatophilia introduced via the allusion to "Mélisande in the Wood" imply a refusal of marriage on the part of the novel's young unmarried women. Another result of this allusion is some awkward reflection on the wider Anglo-Irish situation. What price the alliance between the Anglo-Irish and the British, whose armed forces are meant to guarantee their survival, if Lois, for example, refuses to marry an eligible British soldier, or declines to engage with the marriage plot altogether?

Bowen's allusion to Maeterlinck creates an additional layer of complexity, generating double and triangular patterns among her Anglo-Irish characters. But instead of assuaging the anxieties evoked by the allusion to Clifford and Goetz, such complexity sometimes exacerbates them. As the next two parts of this essay show, Bowen's Mélisande complex implies that beneath the social and political surface of the text, fateful psychological forces are working to resist assimilation into political narratives about Anglo-Irish relations, or at

least to complicate the process by which such assimilation might occur. It is virtually axiomatic in Bowen criticism that *The Last September* “treats the historical and social forces that shaped Bowen’s life and vision” (Lassner 26). With varying emphases on the identity politics of nation, or class, or gender, the novel is usually read as a commentary on the historical events—the Irish war of independence and the consequent destruction of the Ascendancy—to which its plot and setting manifestly refer. While critics have differed in their assessments of Bowen’s politics, Vera Kreilkamp’s reading of *The Last September* as “subversive of ancestral pieties” expresses the consensus on this novel’s depiction of the Ascendancy (151). Kreilkamp’s account is typical in another sense, too. Pointing to the place of the “unconscious needs” of the characters in the novel’s “social and psychological texture,” she argues that Bowen ultimately subordinates those needs to the “meaning of political events” (151). There is much to recommend this approach, as a substantial critical history attests.<sup>10</sup> But Bowen’s allusion to the *Mélanide* story and its musical associations creates a cross- or countercurrent of psychological reflection that eludes political meaning. Rather than leading back to Irish political history, this current issues in isolated pools of solipsism and narcissism that may reflect nothing but themselves. Thus Bowen’s text intimates psychological tendencies in her characters that involve indifference, even resistance, to the social and political imperatives emphasized in many accounts of her work.

### **Narcissism and Thanatophilia**

Written in the form of a sonnet, “*Mélanide in the Wood*” focuses exclusively on the figure of *Mélanide*, treating her as a female Narcissus, or an Echo transformed into a peculiarly Decadent, death-wishing kind of Narcissus. Here is the full text of the poem, which consists of two quatrains flanking a sestet:

Lean down, lean down to the water, *Mélanide*,  
And look at your mirrored face,  
With your eyes for fear and your mouth for love  
And your youth for pity’s grace.

Look long, look long in the water, *Mélanide*,  
Is there never a face but your own?  
There is never a soul you shall know, *Mélanide*,  
Your soul must stand alone.  
All alone in the world, *Mélanide*,  
Alone, alone.

- lone, in the world, Mé - li - san - de, a - lone,

- lone

Drink deep, drink deep of the wa - ter, Mé - li - san - de, From the

**Figure 1.** Ethel Clifford and Alma Goetz, “Mélisande in the Wood” (London: Chappell, 1902).

Drink deep, drink deep of the water, Mélisande,  
 From the shadowed pool drink deep.  
 Your soul shall long for the water, Mélisande,  
 As your eyes shall long for sleep.  
 (Clifford 109)

A metrical variation at the end of the second stanza underscores the theme of narcissism. Thirteen of the poem’s lines alternate between tetrameter and trimeter, but Clifford concludes the second stanza by using dimeter to emphasize the repeated word “Alone.” Goetz’s setting, a late Romantic melody

in simple 4/4 time, matches this emphasis by extending the second syllable, “lone,” over one and a half bars; only the final word, “sleep,” is prolonged to the same extent. The choice of a minor key also indicates Goetz’s intention to convey a wistful, melancholy mood (see fig. 1).<sup>11</sup>

When Bowen quotes “Mélisande in the Wood,” she synthesizes the third and fourth lines with the tenth:

*With your eyes for fear and your mouth for love  
And your youth for Pity’s grace  
—All alone, Mel-lisande, all alone.*  
(*Last* 104; original italics)

This compression, which is not to be found in any text published by Clifford, illustrates how a song may change in performance or to suit the occasion. At the same time, it focuses our attention on the motif of loneliness, suppressing the themes of narcissism (which requires unsullied solitude if it is to be perfected) and the Decadent desire for death that the poem as a whole implies. Bowen’s point looks plain enough: loneliness is what her girls fear, especially her Anglo-Irish girls, who must marry to secure their future.

Initially, Bowen seems more interested in differences between male and female responses to the song than in differences among the women. “The sub-alterns thought it pretty, high class but rather dull, and clapped with abandon when it was over,” Bowen comments sardonically (*Last* 104); the men urge David Armstrong to recite the rollicking verses of Service and Hayes, presumably to put an end to such girlish nonsense. But the women return to the subject of Mélisande during their ride home, and differences among them emerge. When her friend Livvy Thompson remarks, “Melisande was a beautiful poem, wasn’t it?” (*Last* 106), Lois objects.

Something stiffened in Lois: she said she thought it was sentimental.

“All that fuss, if you know what I mean, about just somebody.”

“Well, love is that, if you come to think,” said Livvy, “and myself I think it is very satisfying.” There was something so very experienced about the top of her nose that Lois went flat. She felt that she herself must be like a cake for which the flour had been forgotten. (*Last* 106)

Bowen seems eager to distinguish young women like Livvy, for whom the key to the song is the theme of loneliness, from Lois, who is uninterested in a lot of fuss “about just somebody.”



To understand Lois's attitude, though, we must overrule her complaint about sentimentality and consider the larger context of Clifford's poem, with its implications of narcissism and thanatophilia. For Bowen's young heroine may be more worried that she *won't* be left alone than that she will. Lois does not appear to spend a lot of time in front of the mirror, but she spends some: at the beginning of the third chapter, she "ran to the glass" for an "apprehensive interchange with her own reflection" (*Last* 22), a moment that evokes the narcissistic motif of "Mélisande in the Wood." By the end of the novel, Lois has drifted away from her suitor Gerald entirely; apart from one brief spasm of emotion, when she thinks she does want to marry him, she seems immune to his charms, as if unable to love him, or perhaps unable to feel romantic love for anyone.

The threat to the marriage plot is clear, as is the doubt cast on Lois's symbolic potential as a nexus of Anglo-Irish hopes for a future beyond the present crisis. Much of the political force of Bowen's novel depends on the well-known historical irony that, by the time of writing, the so-called Ascendancy had been finished off as a social and political power.<sup>12</sup> Yet the allusion to Clifford and Goetz's song suggests an apolitical psychological counternarrative that may make us wonder how easily the story we are being told fits into political narratives about modern Irish history. It may be possible to draw an analogy here with the moment in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) when the flow of the narrative and its upper-crust social surface are interrupted by the chthonic sounds of a mysterious love song emanating from an old woman outside a tube station. Woolf's anonymous figure might be read as representative of the socially oppressed and marginalized; "battered" and possibly homeless (81–82), she evokes the expressively inexpressive outcasts of Wordsworth's early poetry. The point of her song, however, may be to signal textual resistance to such interpretative urges. Similarly, the narcissistic and thanatophilic overtones of Lois's association with Clifford and Goetz's Mélisande invite us to pause, at the very least, before glossing them in social or political terms.

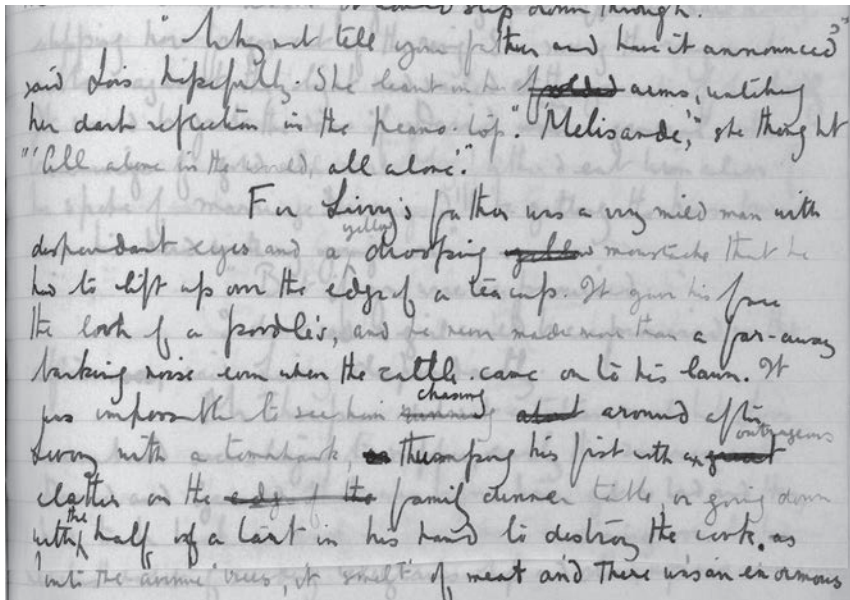
### **Doubles and Triangles**

Lois, as we have seen, wants to dismiss "Mélisande in the Wood" as "sentimental" (*Last* 106). Yet there is a moment in the middle of the novel when she, too, seems drawn to Mélisande's story, and self-consciously so. Livvy Thompson arrives with news of her engagement to the subaltern David Armstrong; advising Livvy to inform her father without delay, Lois "watched her own face looking up from the mottled piano-top and felt very singular,

distant and destined, like Mélisande” (158). Such feelings clearly evoke the narcissistic Mélisande of Clifford and Goetz’s song, the “mottled piano-top” serving as a mirror for Lois’s reflection like the water in the poem. But this Mélisande allusion also leads us back to the song’s original source in Maeterlinck. Tracing connections between Bowen’s novel and Maeterlinck’s play, we find tendencies toward doubling and triangulation that complicate not only the psychological forces driving Bowen’s heroine but also the social and sexual dynamics at work in several relationships among her characters—some involving Lois, some not.

Manuscript evidence confirms Maeterlinck’s importance as a source for Bowen’s novel. Instead of the single sentence just quoted from the published version, the autograph text gives this pair of sentences: “She leant in her [folded] arms, watching her dark reflection in the piano-top. “Mélisande,” she thought “All alone in the world, all alone” (Bowen Collection; see fig. 2). The narratorial gloss on Lois’s association with Mélisande, absent from the manuscript and therefore added in revision, shows how Bowen dwelled on the connection between the two heroines. As we explore the relevance of *Pelléas et Mélisande* to Lois’s situation, further correspondences with Bowen’s novel emerge, emphasizing how Lois might be seen as Bowen’s Mélisande. It is possible that Bowen wanted to restage aspects of Maeterlinck’s symbolist drama in an Anglo-Irish context in order to suggest the presence of psychological and emotional forces that resist the invitation, so overt elsewhere, to account for the text in political terms.

In Maeterlinck’s play, Mélisande is part of a classic love triangle involving two brothers. At the start of the play, one of the brothers, Prince Golaud, discovers her at the edge of a fountain. Mélisande is in a state of distress, although she can’t (or won’t) say why; distracted by grief, she has lost a crown given to her by another man, whose identity, like his relationship to Mélisande, remains unknown.<sup>13</sup> Golaud, a widower, takes her in and marries her, making her the stepmother of his young son; she wins the favor of Golaud’s ailing grandfather, King Arkel of Allemonde; and they all live in the king’s castle. But when Mélisande meets Pelléas, Golaud’s half-brother, they fall under each other’s spell. Playing carelessly with the ring Golaud has given her, Mélisande lets it fall into a fountain; at the very same moment, Golaud is badly hurt in a riding accident. Noticing her ring is gone, Golaud sends her to find it and urges her to take Pelléas with her. Maeterlinck does not explain why Golaud forces his wife and brother together instead of accompanying Mélisande himself, and indeed the overly rational Golaud is doomed to solitude by a lack of intuitive feeling for mystery, the very quality that gives



**Figure 2.** Elizabeth Bowen’s autograph manuscript of *The Last September* (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Reproduced with permission of Curtis Brown Group, Ltd., London. Copyright © The Estate of Elizabeth Bowen 2017.).

Pelléas and Mélisande their peculiar distinction; ironically central to the play as they are not, he lacks their interiority. The precise nature of the relationship between Pelléas and Mélisande is never clarified, however, and musical settings have developed this uncertainty in different ways—Wallace’s suite, for example, alternating between the almost melodic innocence of “Spinning Song” and the startling passion of “The Death of Mélisande,” while Debussy’s opera sustains the ambiguity to the very end. What is clear, though, is that as Pelléas and Mélisande grow closer together Golaud’s suspicions mount until eventually he kills his brother and mortally wounds his wife. She dies later after giving birth to a daughter, whose arrival heralds the start of a new cycle of love and destruction.

Not all of the parallels between Bowen’s novel and Maeterlinck’s play are straightforward, but their number and variety suggest that Bowen drew on

Maeterlinck to develop patterns of identity and difference that complicate the social surface and psychological underworld of her text. Formally, *The Last September* bears some resemblances to a symbolist drama; lacking overt scenes of action, concerned instead with developing a mood or sequence of moods, the novel consists for the most part of loosely connected scenes and episodes conveying the sense of removal from everyday reality that characterizes the Anglo-Irish state of mind. Aurélien Lugné-Poe, who directed the first production of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Paris in 1893, stretched a gauze veil across the stage to enhance the effect of dreamy otherworldliness (Knapp 68); in *The Last September*, Bowen presents the Anglo-Irish as if a veil has been dropped between them and the world outside. In fact, Lois complains to Gerald that she feels she "might as well be in some kind of cocoon" (*Last* 66). Intriguingly, the image might be applied not only to Anglo-Irish relations with the wider social and political world, but also to Lois's interpersonal relations within the big house. Lois is doubly cocooned because she inhabits a private world remote from the lives of others; she seems so deeply embedded inside herself that she often appears inaccessible to other characters and even to the novelist and her reader. Rarely dipping into the consciousness of this or any other character, Bowen's realist narrative technique grants them their privacy but also allows large areas of their personalities to remain unknown. This effect might be described as a kind of modernist impersonality. Another term for it is symbolist mystery.

If Lois is Bowen's *Mélisande*, her character perhaps draws on the ambiguity both of *Mélisande* herself and of *Mélisande*'s relationship with *Pelléas* in Maeterlinck. Musical settings and adaptations have responded to this ambiguity in different ways, as we have noted, and the parallel with Lois in *The Last September* is suggestive here. The relationship affected most significantly by Lois's inwardness and elusiveness is that with Gerald Lesworth: Lois's feelings about him are so obscure and underdeveloped that it is hard to tell what she imagines their relationship amounts to. Is Lois too young and innocent to experience a grand passion? Is her interest in Gerald merely a late-adolescent flirtation, one that he takes to be more serious than it really is? Or is there something a little studied, manipulative, even cruel, in Lois's indifference to Gerald? As these are questions that circulate around *Mélisande* throughout Maeterlinck's play, their reemergence in *The Last September* intimates the depth of Bowen's immersion in her source.

Bowen intensifies the mysteriousness of Lois's relationship with Gerald by hinting at parallels between him and Golaud, the tragically impercipient

prince of Maeterlinck's play. Indeed, in Gerald, Lois has a ready-made Golaud: wooden, rational to a fault, and doomed to spiritual isolation. Gerald was probably modeled, in part, on Gerald Crich in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920).<sup>14</sup> But his name also suggests a subtle echo, partly to the ear and partly to the eye, of Golaud. Golaud prides himself on his transparency, his lack of ulterior motive, and plainspoken honesty: "Je n'ai pas d'arrière-pensée. . . . Si j'avais une arrière-pensée, pourquoi ne la dirais-je pas?" ("I have no reservations. . . . If I had reservations, why wouldn't I say so?"; Maeterlinck 51).<sup>15</sup> Unable to understand his own motives or even to think to ask what they might be, Golaud lurks behind Bowen's Gerald here.

The comparison with Golaud clarifies Gerald Lesworth's limitations; he represents an even more extreme case of a character who is all surface, no depth. Gerald never approaches the ironic self-recognition that Maeterlinck's Golaud experiences when he sees himself as "comme un aveugle qui cherche son trésor au fond de l'océan!" ("like a blind man who looks for his treasure at the bottom of the ocean!"; Maeterlinck 43), a beautiful image formed by the confluence of the two fountain scenes in which Mélisande loses her crown and wedding ring. In contrast, Bowen's Gerald is viewed exclusively from the outside. The first time we see him he "almost shone" in his "gold-white" tennis flannels, language absent from the manuscript but added in revision to enhance the sense of externalization; later, he appears as a "trench-coat [that] flickered between the trees" (*Last* 45, 120). Gerald moreover seems unable to grapple with any kind of complexity, as we observe in some painful scenes of conversation. In other words, Gerald is Golaud in diminished form. Not only wooden but hollow, with a surname that is "worthless' back to front" (Ellmann 62; Jordan 49), Gerald Lesworth falls well short of the tragic stature that Golaud attains in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Having taken pains to position Lois as a double of Mélisande and Gerald as a counterpart of Golaud, Bowen follows Maeterlinck's lead again with a further complication of the sexual geometry governing her characters. Like Mélisande, Lois precipitates love triangles.<sup>16</sup> Gerald isn't the only man attracted to Lois: she has at least two other admirers in the soldier-singer David Armstrong, who seems to consider throwing over Livvy Thompson, and Captain Carmichael, who is so eager to flirt that he shares military intelligence with her (91). None of these men is a full-fledged Pelléas figure, however; none excites in Lois the feelings that Pelléas provokes in Mélisande. Lois, then, may approximate more closely to the Mélisande figure in Clifford and Goetz than to the heroine of Maeterlinck's play. But the comparison with Maeterlinck remains instructive. The absence of a Pelléas figure constitutes

one of Bowen's clever variations on the script—and there are others. Golaud doesn't die in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the lovers do; Golaud's tragedy is that he remains alone, forever isolated from the inscrutable realm of mystery in which the lovers move. In *The Last September*, the character who dies is Gerald, the accidental, inauthentic hero, while Lois survives; sent when the reader isn't looking to live with an anonymous family in Tours, supposedly to improve her French, Lois is cut adrift from the only world she has known—a world that will literally go down in flames in her absence. This variation on Maeterlinck's story heightens the sense of futility at the heart of Lois's predicament. Thinking of herself as *Mélisande*, she feels "destined" (Bowen, *Last* 158), but packing her off to Tours makes the Loire valley sound more like a destination than a destiny. This denouement suggests purgatory, not freedom.

In a maneuver that combines doubling with triangulation, Bowen reinforces and complicates the links between her novel and Maeterlinck's drama by producing a second *Mélisande* figure: Marda Norton. As well as generating another double for *Mélisande*, the introduction of Marda, a house-guest of the Naylor's, converts the *Mélisande/Lois* relationship into one side of an intertextual triangle. Observing how each of Bowen's young women relates to *Mélisande* also complicates the potential doubling that seems intrinsic to the relationship between Lois and Marda. Thus it makes sense to read Bowen as more interested in creating different kinds of *Mélisande* than in simply mapping one character onto another.

In some ways, it must be admitted, Marda seems an even better fit for the *Mélisande* role than Lois. The notoriously accident-prone Marda, whose name is an anagram of *drama* (Ellmann 64) but also evokes *murder*, once lost an engagement ring given to her by a fiancé who later died in the First World War. Bowen reiterates the story of the lost ring—a clear allusion to *Pelléas et Mélisande*—at several points in the novel. The ground is prepared even before Marda appears, as Lady Naylor's nephew, Laurence, imagining a "resurrection day" when the world would yield up its misplaced objects, envisions beaches giving up "all their engagement rings" (Bowen, *Last* 55). On the drive home from Mrs. Fogarty's party, Lois relates the story of Marda's lost ring in a manner that reinforces the allusion to Maeterlinck: "She wrote afterwards to say it didn't matter because she had broken off her engagement anyhow and the man said he didn't want the ring, he said he wished it were at the bottom of the sea" (107). As well as echoing the disappearance of *Mélisande's* ring, this sentence evokes Golaud's self-recognition as a blind man looking for his treasure on the ocean floor.

Another detail in the manuscript indicates that as Bowen worked to tighten the connection with Maeterlinck, she played up Marda's significance as a second *Mélanide* figure. In the autograph text, Bowen writes of Marda: "She said afterwards: 'Never mind, I expect I should have broken off that engagement [afterward] <anyhow>!'" (Bowen Collection). But when Bowen introduced the image of the ring "at the bottom of the sea" during revision, she amplified the echo of the Golaud/*Mélanide* story (*Last* 107). In the published version Marda, engaged to another man now, refrains from wearing her new ring in order to avoid a *Mélanide*-like repetition of that earlier loss. This decision proves wise, as her left hand is injured in a mysterious episode at an abandoned mill, where she and Lois encounter a gunman whose gun goes off "by accident," according to Marda (183). When Marda shows her ring to her hosts shortly before returning to England, Lady Naylor can't resist remarking: "My dear, . . . it is really a terrible pity about your hand. Especially as it's the left hand, as I'm afraid you will have to be conventional and start wearing your ring again now you are going to England. It is extraordinary, Marda, the way things happen to you" (194).

The remark is spiteful, but it rings true: things *do* happen to Marda. Like Maeterlinck's *Mélanide*, and also like *Pelléas*, Marda is a passive character in a dreamlike world. The effect of Marda's presence may be to jolt others out of their torpor, and she distinguishes herself from Bowen's other Anglo-Irish characters by a directness of speech verging at times on tactlessness, but in other respects she seems disengaged, her noncommittal nature illustrated by her history of unfulfilled romantic attachments. She gestures toward action but then retreats; her mere presence provokes responses in others, but she herself remains unchanged, like the catalyst in a chemical reaction. Marda arouses unsatisfied desires in those around her: the middle-aged Hugo Montmorency falls in love with her, and both Laurence and Lois develop obsessions. From this unidirectional variation on the love triangle, however, Marda herself stands curiously apart, as if immune to reciprocal attraction. Her attitude to her fiancé in England, the stockbroker Leslie Lawe, is similarly detached.

Bowen makes Marda seem so remote from others, from any recognizable social or political reality, that she may resemble Clifford and Goetz's narcissistic *Mélanide* more closely than Maeterlinck's heroine, who declares her love for *Pelléas* and dies for it—although Maeterlinck, too, as Patrick McGuinness argues, "lends her an air of disengagement from others and from the events in which she is also, paradoxically, the centre" (136). Insofar as Lois's obsession with Marda carries an erotic charge, she may be seen as a female adolescent

version of Pelléas playing opposite Marda's Mélisande. But perhaps Bowen's point here is that just as there is no Pelléas for Lois to love, there is no Pelléas for Marda either—just a series of misfits and misfires. Even the encounter with the gunman, which may seem to supply an element of action otherwise absent from the narrative, ultimately reinforces this effect of dreamy disengagement from everyday reality. That the moment of Marda's injury is not actually shown serves to maintain this symbolic inertia: like Gerald's death near the end of the novel, the mill episode disappears into Bowen's version of E. M. Forster's Marabar caves. Thus Marda's scrambled name suggests a drama that has been botched or thwarted.

In this sense, Marda's condition has a broader significance that is underlined by her connections to Mélisande in her different incarnations, and also by the parallels we have been observing between her own variation on the Mélisande role and Lois's. One way of understanding that significance would be to refer to the political context usually emphasized in Bowen criticism. Bowen might be read as implying that Marda's Mélisande-like disengagement from others is typical of the Anglo-Irish and even appropriate to their historical predicament: as a social and political class, they are about to be extinguished. Lois, too, might be described as illustrating the precarious condition of the Anglo-Irish and, in her role as another Mélisande, as helping to confirm it. Lois's sense of herself as "singular, distant and destined" perhaps speaks to the historical destiny of her class (Bowen, *Last* 158), but it may also suggest her vexing relationship to that class.<sup>17</sup> For, just as Lois becomes conscious of how her fate is bound to that of the Ascendancy, she may realize that the Ascendancy is about to fall. Absorption into the role of Mélisande, then, may suggest some sort of escape, however imperfect or problematic.

As we have seen, though, the effect of Bowen's allusion to the story of Pelléas and Mélisande may be to discourage such deference to the claims of social and political context. Indeed, another way of appreciating the wider import of Mélisande's afterlives in Lois Farquar and Marda Norton would entail some skepticism about the primacy of "historical and social forces" (Lassner 26). It is clear that Bowen's allusion to Mélisande functions as a powerful source of suggestion, allowing her to develop symbolic correspondences with Maeterlinck's play and Clifford and Goetz's song that exfoliate throughout the text. The result is what I have been describing as a Mélisande complex, a pattern of identifications and relationships that involves several of Bowen's characters. This complex might be read on some levels as a function of the Anglo-Irish situation in 1920, as we have noted. But with its implications of narcissism and thanatophilia (which enforce a turn away from the social



world) and also of an underlying geometry of doubles and triangles (which insinuate a model of personal relations indifferent to political context), Bowen's *Mélisande* complex invites us to ask how susceptible to political interpretation her characters really are. Rather than confirming how her novel reflects the political situation of the early 1920s, Bowen may be suggesting that her characters are engaged in a form of psychological drama that loosens the grip of that context on their world.

*University of Georgia*  
*Athens, Georgia*

## NOTES

---

1. Ethel Clifford (1876–1959) was the daughter of the mathematician and philosopher William Kingdom Clifford and the fiction writer Lucy Lane; on her marriage in 1905, Ethel became Lady Dilke. For more detail on the Clifford family, see Chisholm. Biographical information on Alma Goetz is harder to come by, as she does not appear in any of the standard musical reference works. But I have been able to establish that she was a younger sister of the soprano and composer Liza Lehmann (1862–1918), who mentions Alma's 1905 marriage to Charles Goetz in her memoir, *The Life of Liza Lehmann, by Herself* (15). Charles's mother, Mrs. Edward Goetz, was herself a composer and hostess whose house served as a meeting place for notable musicians of the late nineteenth century (Lehmann 75). I am grateful to David A. Parkes and Timothy Day for their help in assembling this information.

2. The long-standing popularity of "Mélisande in the Wood" in the modern period is attested by the fact that it was performed at the Proms eleven times from 1902 to 1925 ("All Performances"). English translations of Maeterlinck's play didn't take long to appear, but Bowen won't have needed them—her French was excellent, as is demonstrated by her unpublished translations of Flaubert, Proust, and other French writers (see Hepburn).

3. The Scottish composer William Wallace's five-part suite was first performed in New Brighton, on Merseyside, in 1900. Schoenberg's symphonic poem, *Pelleas und Melisande*, was completed in 1903. Sibelius's music for a Swedish translation of the play was performed in Helsinki in 1905. As with Debussy's opera, however, there is no evidence that Bowen was familiar with any of these works.

4. For more information on productions involving Fauré's music, see Wearing, *The London Stage 1890–1899* (640) and *The London Stage 1900–1909* (24–25).

5. For information on the 1924 London production of Debussy's *Pelléas*, see Wearing, *The London Stage 1920–1929* (302). There was also a production at Covent Garden from May to June 1920, but it seems doubtful that Bowen attended any of those four performances. Otherwise, Debussy's opera was hard to come by in England. Although it enjoyed a long run in France before the First World War, none of the six productions in prewar London ran for more than three performances, and the 1930s saw just two more brief productions; see Wearing, *The London Stage 1900–1909* (469), *The London Stage 1910–1919* (27–28, 55, 77, 214, 281), and *The London Stage 1930–1939* (39, 603).

6. I have discovered just one other reference to Méliande in Bowen's *oeuvre*. In the minor short story "Emergency in the Gothic Wing," which first appeared in *The Tatler* on 18 November 1954, Cousin Anastasia, a trying houseguest at Lady Cuckoo's Christmas party, has "once played Méliande" on the stage (Bowen, *Bazaar* 174). Apart from establishing Anastasia's "highbrow" credentials—or, given the brevity of the reference, their flimsiness—the allusion serves no other purpose here. Bowen didn't include the story in any of her collections.

7. I will make several references during this essay to the manuscript of *The Last September* held by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. (Reproduced with permission of Curtis Brown Group, Ltd., London. Copyright © The Estate of Elizabeth Bowen 2017.)

8. The published diaries of Bowen's lover Charles Ritchie refer to wine, dinners, friends, walks in the park, and extensive discussions of her writing but never to music. Alan Cameron served as an editor of the *Oxford History of Music on Record* and as a governor of the British Institute of Recorded Sound, as Glendinning notes (210), but it remains unclear how much of this rubbed off on Elizabeth.

9. See also Albright, *Panaesthetics* and *Untwisting*; Brown; Shockley; and Wolf.

10. See, for example, Bennett and Royle (15–22); Corcoran (39–60); Ellmann (40–68); Kiberd (364–79); McCormack, *Dissolute Characters* (208–40) and *From Burke to Beckett* (401–10); and Moynahan (229–44). For a dissenting voice, see Osborn, who argues that Bowen criticism often takes for granted "rules of mimetic representation and realistic discourse" that are violated by the stylistic "irregularities" of Bowen's prose (8, 5).

11. Different printings, all issued by Chappell in 1902, give different versions—one in C minor, another in D minor, another in B-flat minor—but the use of a minor key is consistent.

12. On the extent and rapidity of the Ascendancy's demise, see Cannadine 167–80.

13. According to Peter Sellars, the dramatic director of a recent production of Debussy's opera at London's Barbican, Méliande is a "refugee fleeing from a place

of terrible violence,” her tale typical of “women traumatised by violence” (Service). This pitch for contemporary relevance in the age of the Syrian refugee crisis strikes me as forced. But a case may be made for seeing *Mélisande* as a traumatized figure by interpreting her in light of Maeterlinck’s 1902 play *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (*Ariane and Bluebeard*), in which *Mélisande*, one of Bluebeard’s seven wives, is viciously attacked by him (Smith 2). In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, however, Maeterlinck gives no indication as to *Mélisande*’s origins or the cause of her initial distress—and the mystery is part of the point, as Taruskin emphasizes (86–96).

14. The death of Bowen’s Gerald might be called an ironic martyrdom, like that of Lawrence’s doomed Gerald, whose surname, Crich, famously suggests “Christ.” Ironic martyrdom, though, because each character is a figure in what Lawrence’s semi-autobiographical hero Rupert Birkin calls a “barren tragedy” (Lawrence 476). As Maria DiBattista has noted (150), the name Gerald derives from Old French and Germanic words for “spear” (*ger*) and “to rule” (*waldan*): the etymological significance seems even more apposite to Bowen’s character, a soldier in the British army, than to Lawrence’s. I spell out this argument in more detail in a paper I presented to the South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Jacksonville, Florida, in November 2016.

15. Translations of Maeterlinck are my own.

16. The love triangle is a common feature of Bowen’s fiction, as Ellmann has shown (see, especially, chapter 3).

17. Jed Esty puts it well when he describes Lois and her cousin Laurence as “orphaned and disinherited children with a precarious foothold in a class that itself has a precarious foothold in history” (162).

## WORKS CITED

---

Albright, Daniel. *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*. Yale UP, 2014.

———. *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*. U of Chicago P, 2000.

“All Performances of Alma Goetz: *Mélisande* in the wood at BBC Proms.” *BBC*, [www.bbc.co.uk/proms/events/works/6b4e2480-bb9b-4408-b5f8-c0b6aa6e8c6d](http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/events/works/6b4e2480-bb9b-4408-b5f8-c0b6aa6e8c6d). Accessed 25 July, 2016.

Aronson, Alex. *Music and the Novel: A Study in Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1980.

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives*. Macmillan, 1995.

- Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Bazaar and Other Stories*. Edited by Allan Hepburn, Edinburgh UP, 2008.
- . Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Box 7, Folder 1. The Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . *The Heat of the Day*. Anchor, 2002.
- . *The Last September*. Anchor, 2000.
- Brown, Calvin S. *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*. 1948. UP of New England, 1987.
- Bucknell, Brad. *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce, and Stein*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Cannadine, David. *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*. Vintage, 1999.
- Chisholm, Monty. *Such Silver Currents: The Story of William and Lucy Clifford, 1845–1929*. Lutterworth, 2002.
- Clifford, Ethel. *Songs of Dreams*. John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1903.
- Clifford, Ethel, and Alma Goetz. *Mélanide in the Wood*. Chappell, 1902.
- Corcoran, Neil. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*. Clarendon, 2004.
- Deutsch, David. *British Literature and Classical Music: Cultural Contexts 1870–1945*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- DiBattista, Maria. *First Love: The Affections of Modern Fiction*. U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Ellmann, Maud. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*. Edinburgh UP, 2003.
- Esty, Jed. *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Glendinning, Victoria. *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography*. Anchor, 2006.
- Hepburn, Alan. “French Translations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Idea of Character.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 79, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1054–63.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Point Counter Point*. Vintage, 2004.
- Jordan, Heather Bryant. *How Will the Heart Endure? Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War*. U of Michigan P, 1992.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Jonathan Cape, 1995.
- Knapp, Bettina. *Maurice Maeterlinck*. Twayne, 1975.
- Kreilkamp, Vera. *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*. Syracuse UP, 1998.
- Lanchester, John. *Family Romance: A Love Story*. Penguin, 2008.
- Lassner, Phyllis. *Elizabeth Bowen*. Barnes and Noble, 1990.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Women in Love*. Edited by David Farmer et al., Penguin, 2007.
- Lehmann, Liza. *The Life of Liza Lehmann, by Herself*. E. P. Dutton, 1918.

- Maeterlinck, Maurice. *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Editions Labor, 1992.
- McCormack, W. J. *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen*. Manchester UP, 1993.
- . *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition, and Betrayal in Literary History*. Cork UP, 1994.
- McGuinness, Patrick. *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Melnick, David C. *Fullness of Dissonance: Modern Fiction and the Aesthetics of Music*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994.
- Moynahan, Julian. *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture*. Princeton UP, 1995.
- Nichols, Roger, and Richard Langham Smith. *Claude Debussy: Pelléas and Mélisande*. Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Osborn, Susan, editor. *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*. Cork UP, 2009.
- Ritchie, Charles. *The Siren Years: A Canadian Diplomat Abroad, 1937–1945*. Macmillan, 1974.
- Service, Tom. Interview with Simon Rattle and Peter Sellars. *The Guardian*, 7 January 2016, [www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/07/simon-rattle-peter-sellars-interview-pelleas-et-melisande-gerhafer-kozena](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/07/simon-rattle-peter-sellars-interview-pelleas-et-melisande-gerhafer-kozena). Accessed 21 February 2016.
- Shockley, Alan. *Music in the Words: Musical Form and Counterpoint in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Ashgate, 2009.
- Smith, Richard Langham. “The Play and Its Playwright.” Nichols and Smith, pp. 1–29.
- Taruskin, Richard. *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*. Oxford UP, 2010.
- Wearing, J. P. *The London Stage 1890–1899: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.
- . *The London Stage 1900–1909: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.
- . *The London Stage 1910–1919: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.
- . *The London Stage 1920–1929: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.
- . *The London Stage 1930–1939: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.
- Wolf, Werner. *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*. Rodopi, 1999.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Harcourt, 1990.