SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT *LISTEN TO ME*

Q: Where do the horses come from?
The short answer: the horses come from Gertrude Stein's vocabulary of images.

In March of 1936, Gertrude Stein wrote in letters to her friends, including Thorton Wilder, the author of *Our Town*, that she was thinking of "Wilson's *The Lion Tamer*" while she was composing *Listen to Me*. Stein probably saw *The Lion Tamer* during its 1892 Boston run, when she was 17, visiting her brother Leo at Harvard.

The Lion Tamer was a comic opera with circus acts, including live horses, starring Francis Wilson. The lion-tamer's wife, the role of Angelina, was an equestrienne. Angelina's second act entrance on horseback was the occasion for a grand parade of circus acts and animals, accompanied by a John Philip Sousa march. I am imagining that Gertrude Stein, thinking of *The Lion Tamer* in 1936, would have also been reminded of the Circus Medrano of Paris, and to Picasso's paintings of the Saltimbanques, inspired by the Circus Medrano performers. Some of these paintings hung on Gertrude Stein's walls. If she looked up while writing *Listen to Me, Stein* would have seen, or remembered the Saltimbanques.

A photograph of Wilson in costume as *The Lion Tamer* reveals another connection of images. Wilson is dressed in a costume that resembles Picasso's harlequins, including a bicorn hat.

Q: Did Stein identify the lines of *Listen to Me* as spoken by herself, or by Alice, or by the other members of her salon?
No. Stein left the lines of *Listen to Me* open to interpretation, in the same way Stein left the punctuation of the text open to interpretation.

Q: Why assign these historical characters to the lines?
Stein identifies "characters." The text, read aloud in rehearsal, pooled into recognizable "characters." There was an author's voice owning the telling of the story. (*I will tell in words of one syllable*). There was an intimate voice helping to clarify the author's voice and once understanding, enthusiastically enjoying the words of the author (*There are never five characters in listen to me. Why is that).* There seems to be an intimacy between these two voices and they are embodied in the production as Gertrude and Alice.

There is a voice in *Listen to Me* observing the creation of the play (*They giggle*) and there was a voice offering suggestions of how to reword those descriptions. Hemingway observed Stein and Alice and wrote about them in his notebooks. Hemingway's relationship with F. Scott Fitzgerald, who also observed Stein and Toklas, was a complex friendly rivalry, and every time our Hemingway describes something, our Fitzgerald suggests another way to word it. In reality, Hemingway was in Key West in March of 1936. In March of 1936, Fitzgerald was a fall down drunk in Baltimore, Maryland, when *Esquire* magazine published his revelatory self-analysis, *The Crack-Up*. Hemingway and Stein were both aware of Fitzgerald's state in March of 1936. Hemingway wrote to him, and Stein would later write a blurb for the *Crack-up* book of essays. Fitzgerald was forty in 1936 and the line : *Funny I am forty now*, is assigned to him.

Q: Picasso? Dora Maar?
Picasso was in Paris in 1936. He had recently announced he was giving up painting for writing. Stein attended a reading of his play, which she did not enjoy and thought he was stepping into her territory: *...this writing was never his writing. After all the egoism of a painter is not at all the egoism of a writer, there is nothing to say about it, it is not. No.*

At the beginning of 1936 Picasso added Dora Maar as another of his mistresses, but with the important difference that Dora Maar, a pioneer of surrealist photography, was an acknowledged artist in her own right. The flirty conversations *(well, well, who is a genius/ well well what is a genius*) assigned themselves to this couple.

The section "suddenly there is a war" is projected as Stein's awareness of what was going on in Spain in 1936, which she would have learned, in part, from Picasso. Picasso takes over the voice of Sweet William for "suddenly there is war."

Q: Who are Sweet William and Lillian?
Sweet William and his Lillian were nicknames Stein gave to Lord and Lady Abdy, who hosted her visit to England in February 1936. Stein referred to *Listen to Me* as a play with Sweet William and his Lillian.

In Stein's text, Sweet William is a genius who advocates for words of many syllables, in contrast to Stein's preference for one syllable. He is looking for his beloved. Sweet William can be understood as William Shakespeare chasing after his muse. The back and forth of: *Sweet William prepared verdure / Sweet William prepared pools /Verdure two syllables /Pools one* is an opportunity to dramatize that Stein is challenging Shakespeare's primacy as playwright.

Q: Josephine Baker?
Baker was in Paris in 1936 and a salon member. *Listen to Me's* "French poem" immediately suggested itself as spoken in her voice, as did the third act's jazzy summing up.

Q: What's with the multiple Shakespeares chasing Lillian?
All the geniuses chase Shakespeare's muse.

Surreal choruses of multiple characters featured in the spectacles Stein saw as a child. Stein wrote that (along with Sweet William and the *Lion Tamer*) she was trying to make *Listen to Me* "something old-fashioned ... like my memories of the Kiralfy brothers." Kiralfy Brothers spectacles toured annually to San Francisco when Stein was a child in Oakland, just across the Bay. The plots of Kirafly spectacles were excuses for visual display. In 1886, the San *Francisco Examiner* wrote about Kiralfy's *Enchantment*: "What there is of alleged drama is only rubbish which everyone gives up trying to understand after the first act."

Q: Is this text being performed what Stein wrote?
Yes. No words are changed. We are performing the Prologue, Act I and most of Act 3. There is more to the play, including nine Act 5's. All in time...

Poster for the Kiralfy Brothers spectacle *Enchantment*
Picasso's painting *The Family of Saltimbanques*
Francis Wilson in costume for *The Lion Tamer*