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PERFORMING ARTS RESOURCES
VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT

A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective

Essays Dedicated to
Brooks McNamara

Edited by
Stephen Johnson

Published by the Theatre Library Association

A Queer Victorian Marriage: Henry Blake Fuller's *At Saint Judas's* and the "Tyranny" of the Archival Document

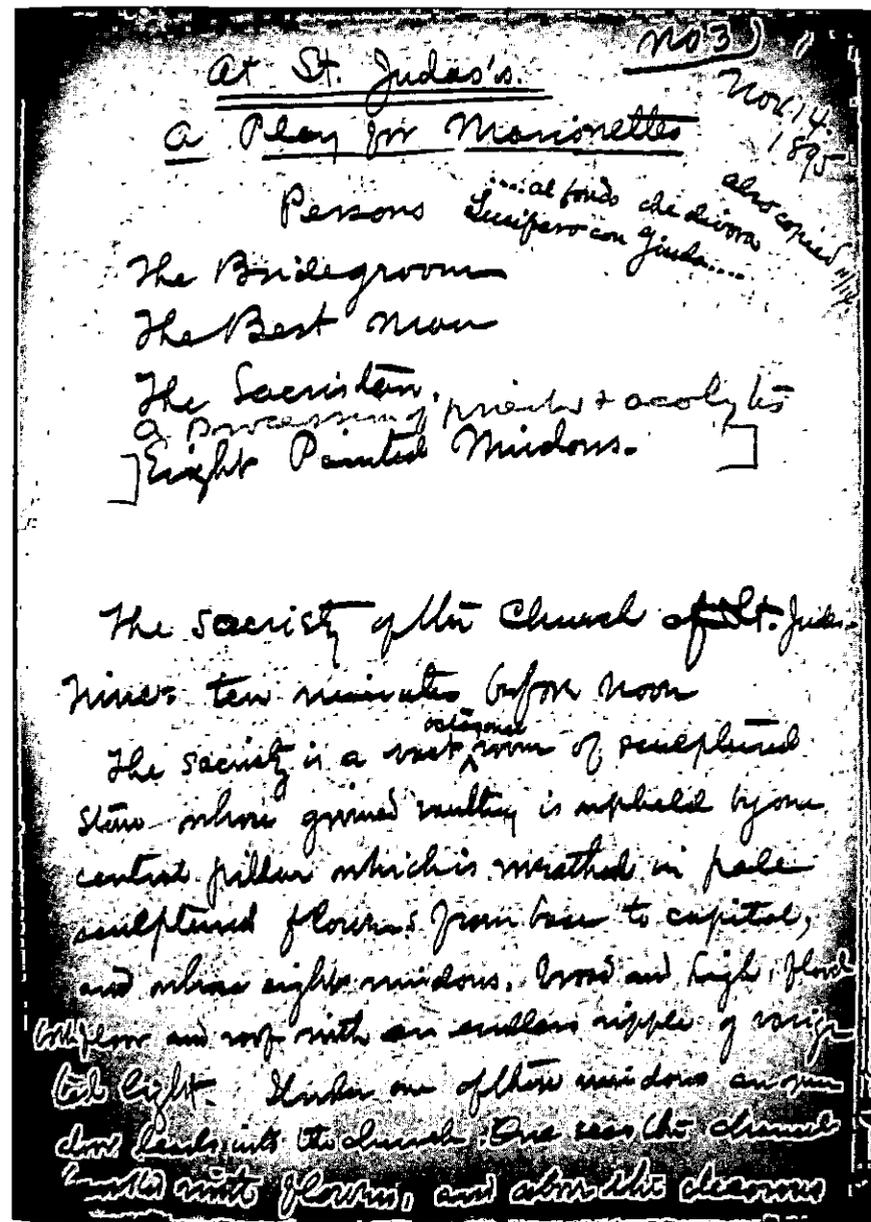
ERIC COLLEARY

"Who wants to be definitely classified and pigeon-holed?
Nobody in our age."

—Henry Blake Fuller, 1896¹

Henry Blake Fuller died on July 29, 1929 at the age of seventy-two. At the height of his career as a novelist in the 1890s, he was considered the most talented writer in the emerging genre of American realism—a gifted man who would surely be remembered for his contributions to literature. However, Fuller died in debt, struggling for over twenty years to find publishers who would take interest in his work. His death went largely unnoticed outside his circle of friends and his native city of Chicago.² A self-proclaimed bachelor from a young age, Fuller's estate was left in the hands of his two nieces who sold whatever could fetch a high enough price to pay off their uncle's debts. The large bulk of Fuller's papers were ultimately purchased by Chicago's Newberry Library for preservation and, his nieces hoped, would secure their uncle's place in history.

Yet you will be hard-pressed to find Fuller's name on any syllabus surveying the history of American literature. Within the last decade, however, a modest but growing number of scholars primarily working in LGBT studies have turned their attention to Fuller. In 1896, after a roller coaster of career successes and failures, Fuller published an anthology of twelve play-lets titled *The Puppet Booth*, drawing inspiration from European symbolists like Maurice Maeterlinck and Henrik Ibsen. One of these plays, *At Saint Judas's*, concerns a Bridegroom who, minutes before his wedding, discovers that his Best Man has tried numerous times to sabotage the engagement. The Bridegroom becomes enraged, insisting that the Best Man kill himself. What happens next in the play is a bit of a mystery. Fuller's detailed descriptions give way to sudden brevity—all that can be certainly stated is that the play ends



Manuscript title page of Henry Blake Fuller's "At Saint Judas's" (1896). Photo Courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.

with the Bridegroom exchanging vows with his Bride, while a dead body lies in a pool of blood in the church's sacristy.

Recent scholars have heralded *At Saint Judas's* as the earliest American play to have a central gay theme.³ In 2000, such proclamations led to Henry Blake Fuller's posthumous induction into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame, even though Fuller took great pains to guard his personal privacy during his life and never openly discussed his sexuality. The Newberry Library accepted the award on his behalf, and have archived it in his papers alongside the writer's worn Remington portable typewriter.⁴

What evidence is there to justify claims that *At Saint Judas's* is a "gay play," and what, if any, statement is Fuller making about homosexuality at this particular moment? Hoping Fuller's manuscript at the Newberry Library offered some insight, I made my way to Chicago for a week of research. The result, as I will explain, led to more questions than answers but also a greater appreciation for what the 'tyrannical document' can offer to scholars of theatre and sexuality studies.

Before discussing the manuscript itself, however, a more detailed description of the play may be necessary in order to understand the questions that stem from it. In the sacristy of the church of St. Judas, the Bridegroom exalts in the excitement of his impending nuptials, while his Best Man reacts with constrained anxiety. We learn, through the Bridegroom's nostalgic reminiscences, that the two men are close. As soldiers, they fought together in the deserts of Africa where both, at different times, saved each other's life. In the time since, the two men have shared everything from clothes to each other's confidences. Except, we learn, the Bridegroom was, for whatever reason, reluctant to inform the Best Man of his engagement. Indeed, the Best Man discovers the Bridegroom's intentions because the two men share the same bed, and the Bridegroom spoke of the marriage in his sleep.⁵

As the Bridegroom continues to dress, he recounts the difficulties he experienced in the weeks leading up to the ceremony. An unknown person has attempted to sabotage the wedding by spreading false rumors. The Bridegroom has been accused of being a less-than-honorable soldier, an excessive gambler who cheats at his games, and a man who has engaged in undefined premarital promiscuities. "I have indeed lived freely," the Bridegroom mentions, "but who shall say that I have seriously overpassed the bounds?"⁶

Each accusation the Bridegroom describes is punctuated by one of eight stained glass windows whose figures come to life as if performing a non-literal representation of the accusation being described. For example, as the Bridegroom describes being accused of promiscuity, a window depicting "a band of chaste young damsels" comes to life.⁷ The damsels, who had been standing tall among a field of lilies, blush and hide their faces among the flowers.

Suddenly, a clock strikes noon and the Sacristan enters to announce that the Bride has not come, and rumors are circulating in the church that she will not arrive at all. With the Sacristan's exit, the Best Man, who has largely been silent through the Bridegroom's remembrances, explains that he too does not expect the Bride to come—that congregants in the church "say that

she has sinned, and sinned—with me."⁸ Insisting that his Bride will appear, the Bridegroom is directly confronted by his Best Man:

I am here and she will never be. You may wait, but you shall wait in vain. (*He places his hand upon the other's shoulder.*) If she were to come, I should not let her have you. She shall not have you. Nobody shall have you. . . . Our friendship has been too long, too close, too intimate. It shall not be destroyed; it shall not be broken. No one shall come between us.⁹

With this pronouncement, the Bridegroom realizes it was his Best Man who had been trying to sabotage the wedding. While insisting that he will kill the Best Man with his own hands, a procession of wheels and ringing chimes announce the arrival of the Bride to the church. The Best Man attempts to physically place his body between the Bridegroom and the path to the altar. The Bridegroom, furious, exclaims "Stand aside. I hate you; I detest you; I despise you; I loathe you." The Best Man, incredulous, responds "You loathe me? I, who have done so much. . . ." "You are not fit to live," proclaims the Bridegroom. "You are not fit to die. But die you shall. I shall not kill you. You shall kill yourself. You shall do it now, and I shall see you do it. You have no other road to redemption."¹⁰

What happens next is a bit of a mystery, and it is worth quoting in full. The final stage directions read as follows:

The EIGHTH WINDOW. The Angelic Host trumpeting from the clouds, while Lucifer plunges headlong toward the Pit: the wonder is that he can fall so long, so fast, so far.

When the BRIDEGROOM opens the door into the church, the BRIDE is seen coming up the aisle, while the choirboys and the organ unite in a resounding Gloria. Upon the floor of the sacristy lies the body of a man in a pool of blood. As the BRIDE and the BRIDEGROOM meet before the altar rail, the EIGHT WINDOWS, dappling the floor of the sacristy with a thousand varied splotches of color—(but there is one, broader and brighter than them all)—shudder back convulsively to their pristine selves.¹¹

While embodying many traditional markers of a resolved ending, Fuller's text raises several questions. After describing seven previous windows depicting archetypal figures (knights, damsels, acolytes, etc.), why does Fuller choose to specifically reference Lucifer? Is the Best Man meant to be reflected in the figure of Lucifer's fall? Or the Bridegroom? What can we make of the splotches of color—"one broader and brighter than them all"—shuddering back convulsively to their pristine selves? After being so descriptive of events throughout the rest of the play, why doesn't Fuller describe the death that happens here? And is it significant that the Bridegroom and the Bride are named specifically in this last passage, yet the dead body on the floor is not specifically identified as the Best Man's?

Armed with many interpretations of this play,¹² but still no closer to understanding how *At Saint Judas's* could be affirmatively claimed as a "gay play" or what Fuller was trying to accomplish by writing it, I headed to the

Newberry Library of Chicago, home to the largest single collection of Henry Blake Fuller's papers, including the bulk of his original manuscripts.

The crumbling, hand-written manuscript revealed many surprises compared to its published counterpart. The first variation I noticed was the title, which reads "*At Saint Judas's: A Play for Marionettes*." In fact, all twelve of the plays include "A Play for Marionettes" in their title, which was removed in each instance for the published manuscript. Fuller does not suggest how the marionettes are meant to be used. In the case of *At Saint Judas's*, are all of the characters meant to be portrayed with puppets or just the windows? How would the use of marionettes change the way an audience would relate to the play, particularly if they were used to represent the Bridegroom and Best Man? Apart from the title of the anthology—*The Puppet Booth*—why did Fuller remove the reference to puppetry? Though some contemporary scholars have labeled *At Saint Judas's* as a closet drama, meant to be read and not performed, the title at the very least suggests that Fuller considered the play to be performable.¹³

Just under the title, written at an angle in a space off to the side, is a short epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* in the original Italian. The epigraph is included in the published version along with an English language translation by Longfellow: ". . . in the abyss which swallows up Judas with Lucifer." This caught my eye mainly because it was written in darker ink, squeezed in as if an afterthought. The line clearly relates to the depiction of Lucifer falling into the pit described in the last window of the play, when the dead body appears with no explanation.

In this particular scene from the *Inferno*, Dante described the circle of hell reserved for those who betray the ones who care for them. Here, Lucifer, the archangel, turned his back on God and was banished from heaven, Brutus and Cassius whose betrayal led to the assassination of Julius Caesar, and Judas Iscariot, whose kiss betrayed Jesus to the Romans. By including this epigraph, the allusion to Judas in the title of the play, and the depiction of the fall of Lucifer in the final window (which is described in place of whatever murder/suicide happens in the sacristy), Fuller seems to be drawing a parallel with the relationship of the Bridegroom and Best Man. Yet Fuller makes it seem equally plausible that the Best Man could be either the betrayer or the betrayed. The Best Man's perceived death at the end is frequently read as following in the Victorian tradition of killing the sexual/moral deviate, and Fuller seems to be playing into this tradition while also possibly—if not subtly—turning it on its ear by not actually depicting the death, nor identifying the dead body as belonging to the Best Man. Thus, as Christ was betrayed by Judas and then crucified, the Best Man could be seen as a sacrificed man, a Christ-like figure, who, possibly, dies following the Bridegroom's venomous betrayal of love.

I want to stress that Fuller's manuscripts—published and unpublished—do not favor one of these readings over another. What I am arguing is that Fuller seems to be intentionally ambiguous, allowing the reader/audience to find their own hero and villain within the story. This intentional ambiguity is made all the more apparent when reviewing the final scene of Fuller's handwritten manuscript.

Published Edition:

When the BRIDEGROOM opens the door to the church, the BRIDE is seen coming up the aisle, while the choir-boys and the organ unite in a resounding *Gloria*. Upon the floor of the sacristy lies the body of a man in a pool of blood. As the BRIDE and the BRIDEGROOM meet before the altar rail, the Eight Windows, dappling the floor of the sacristy with a thousand varied splotches of color—(but there is one, broader and brighter than them all)—shudder back convulsively to their pristine selves.

Manuscript Edition:

When the Bridegroom opens the door within the church, the bride is seen coming up the aisle, while the choir boys and the organ unite in a resounding *Gloria*. Upon the floor of the sacristy lies the body of the best man, in a pool of blood. As the bride reaches the alter rail, the Eight Windows, dappling the floor of the sacristy with a thousand splashes of color, shudders back to their proper selves.

There are three major differences between these two versions. First, in the original manuscript, no mention is made that the Bridegroom meets the Bride at the altar. Second, the "splotch" of color "broader and brighter than them all" was added to the published text. Finally, the unnamed body described in the published text is identified specifically as the body of the Best Man in the original manuscript. While the two manuscripts offer significantly different endings, paradoxically, what remains clear is Fuller's lack of clarity in both manuscripts. Indeed, by not identifying the dead body in the published edition, Fuller seems to be intentionally making it difficult for the reader/audience to say "Ah, this is what happened. This is what this play is about." Fuller is consistent with his obfuscation throughout the play—always stopping just short of offering a moral judgment for or against the Best Man's professed love, just short of creating a conclusive villain out of either the Best Man or the Bridegroom, just short of depicting the play's climactic death scene. *At Saint Judas's* seems to offer imagery—through the windows, through the allusions to Judas and Lucifer—which allows the reader/audience to draw their own conclusions, as evidenced by the profusion of contradictory critical and academic studies of the work.

It seems my visit to the archive to see if Fuller's manuscript offered any clarity into a play that has become so important to LGBT performance studies, leads me to the conclusion that the play is intentionally unclear. If it seems like I've led you through an archival mystery only to bring you to a rather anti-climactic ending, then perhaps it is because of the way we think of approaching archival research. Can *At Saint Judas's* be classified as a "gay play" when it seems Fuller is intentionally resisting classification? What is the motivation behind the desire for some scholars to claim this play as gay? Why is it that the relationships depicted in this play are difficult to identify? Because human sexuality, in all of its various constructions, will always push against terms like "gay" and "homosexual" which create the illusion that we know what these terms mean. Ultimately, if the play resists such a classification, it is not because of the tyranny of the document that withholds the

necessary details, but rather because of the tyranny of the scholar who insists on such an interpretation.

Failing to find clarity in a document's meaning should be a warning sign for the scholar to stop and ask "what am I implicitly expecting of this document?" Rather than asking how this play fits into a teleological narrative of gay American literature and drama, we can ask, for example, how this play articulates different ways of thinking about love, loyalty and brotherhood in Victorian America. Thus, the ambiguity of *At Saint Judas's* becomes one of its most interesting attributes—a queer play in the truest sense of the word.

ENDNOTES

¹ Quoted in "Books for the Week." *Chicago Evening Post*, May 23, 1896.

² One friend—Professor Robert Morss Lovett—wrote after Fuller's death that his passing was no great loss for Chicago literature, as Fuller had failed to contribute to the innovations in writing he had developed in his early novels. See Kenneth Scambray, *A Varied Harvest: The Life and Works of Henry Blake Fuller* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1987), 160.

³ See, for example, Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 111; Joseph Dimuro, "The Salient Angle: Revising the Queer Case of Henry Blake Fuller's *Bertram Cope's Year*." *Textual Cultures* 2 (Spring 2007): 147; Ken Furtado and Nancy Hellner, *Gay and Lesbian American Plays: an Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 57; Terry Helbing, *Gay Theatre Alliance Directory of Gay Plays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), 12; Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 53; Marc Stein, *LGBT Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), "Theatre and Performance," 181.

⁴ The responsibility of an archive to carry on the legacy of an individual whose papers they maintain, and how they treat matters such as the individual's sexuality, is the subject of another paper entirely. I mention the Newberry's actions here, however, to stress that extent to which Fuller and his work have been claimed by contemporary LGBT scholars.

⁵ "BEST MAN: How did you tell me? In your sleep—your own pillow close to mine." In Henry Blake Fuller, *The Puppet Booth: Twelve Plays* (New York: Century Co, 1896), 89. This line can, and has, been read by some scholars as confirmation that the two men's relationship was sexual. It should be noted, however, that it was not uncommon for bachelors who were friends to share a bed during the Victorian period, without giving the impression that the relationship was necessarily sexual. The line is suggestive, yes—particularly through contemporary eyes—but I wish to stress that Fuller seems to emphasize themes of love and loyalty in this play, rather than sex. For scholarship on same-sex affection in the Victorian period: Axel Nissen, *The Romantic Friendship Reader* (Boston: Northeastern, 2003); and Carolyn Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁶ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 92.

⁷ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 91.

⁸ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 95.

⁹ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 96.

¹⁰ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 98.

¹¹ Fuller, *Puppet Booth*, 98–99.

¹² A survey of scholarship on *At Saint Judas's* suggests few scholars allude to the play's ambiguity. Yet, reading these scholars together, there appears to be disagreement about what actually happens in the play. In *Out on Stage*, Alan Sinfield suggests the Best Man is the Judas of the story, and therefore must kill himself; Sinfield, *Out on Stage* 53. Ken Furtado more or less agrees in his brief synopsis in *Gay and Lesbian American Plays*, adding that the Best Man is forced into suicide specifically by the Bridegroom; Furtado and Hellner,

Gay and Lesbian American Plays, 57. Laurence Senelick's *Lovesick*, which includes Fuller's play in its entirety alongside other "modernist plays of same-sex love," acknowledges the ambiguity of the ending only so far that it is unclear who struck the deadly blow that killed the Best Man—not that the dead body is unidentified or the significance of the window is unexplained; Laurence Senelick, *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-sex Love, 1894–1925* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63. Most bizarrely, Michael Bronski's *Culture Clash* claims the play is "about a groom who discovers, minutes before the wedding, that he is really in love with his best man"; Bronski, *Culture Clash*, 111.

¹³ Correspondence held by the Newberry Library between Fuller and *Puppet Booth* publisher, Century Co. indicate that Fuller had expressly requested that he maintain the sole right to grant permission for the plays to be performed, and that he would be entitled to 100% of royalties related to its performance. That *At Saint Judas's* was never performed in Fuller's lifetime should not indicate that it wasn't necessarily meant to be.