



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

**OPERA AFTER POETRY**  
**ENLIGHTENMENT *DRAMMA PER MUSICA* AMID THE ARTS**

**KATHARINA ANNE CRAWFORD CLAUSIUS**  
ST JOHN'S COLLEGE  
MAY 2017

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



For Mammy, Daddy, Nicholai  
and for Eva Wilfling & Michael Crawford



## CONTENTS

List of Figures	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
 Introduction	 1
 Part 1 LYRICAL “POÉSIE”	
<hr/>	
Chapter 1 A Museum of the Muses	9
Chapter 2 Verisimilar Poetics	35
 Part 2 THE POET’S PROSE	
<hr/>	
Chapter 3 Adventures in Télémacomania	65
Chapter 4 “Operatic” Racine after Prose Poetry	93
 Part 3 PAINTINGS UNSEEN	
<hr/>	
Chapter 5 Imagi(ni)ng the Prose Epic	127
Chapter 6 <i>Idomeneo</i> ’s Operatic Canvas	159
 Conclusion	 201
 Bibliography	 211



## LIST OF FIGURES

- 1.1 Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Système figuré des connoissances humaines," *Encyclopédie des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers* (1751)
- 2.1 Charles Paillasson, "Écritures" Plate II, *Encyclopédie* (1772)
- 2.2 Louis-Jacques Goussier, "Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes: Alphabet Arabe" Plate III, *Encyclopédie* (1772)
- 2.3 Louis-Jacques Goussier, "Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes: Alphabet Cophite ou Egiptien" Plate VII, *Encyclopédie* (1772)
- 2.4 Unknown, "Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes: Alphabet Bengale" Plate XVIII, *Encyclopédie* (1772)
- 3.1 Angelica Kauffmann, *Telemachus and the Nymphs of Calypso*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1782)
- 3.2 M. Poisson, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses*, (1769)
- 3.3 Hyacinthe Rigaud, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses, depuis l'origine de la poésie françoise* (1784)
- 3.4 M. Poisson, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses* (1771)
- 3.5 Attributed to M. Poisson, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses* (1775)
- 5.1 Angelica Kauffmann, *Calypso Mourning Over the Departure of Ulysses*, The William Benton Museum of Art (c. 1779)
- 5.2 Bartolomeo Pinelli, *Telemachus Relates his Adventures to the Nymph Calypso*, Art Institute of Chicago (early 19<sup>th</sup> century)
- 5.3 Angelica Kauffmann, *The Sorrow of Telemachus*, Metropolitan Museum of Art (1783)
- 5.4 Attributed to Lorenzo Quaglio, Stage design: Interior of a Temple (date unknown)
- 6.1 After Claude Lefèbvre, *Portrait de Louis XIV*, Palace of Versailles (after 1670)
- 6.2 Claude Joseph Vernet, *Storm*, Private collection (1768)
- 6.3 François de Poilly after Nicolas Poussin, *Esther devant Assuérus*, British Museum (after 1655)



## PREFACE

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Music. An earlier version of the research presented in Chapter 3 “Adventures in Télémacomania” is forthcoming in *The Opera Quarterly* 32/1 (Winter 2016): 1-33. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would really not have been possible without my supervisors, Professor Nicholas Cook and Professor Peter Dayan, who generously adopted me in unusual circumstances, had an unwarranted degree of confidence in me, and opened up many opportunities along the way. I am deeply grateful to both of them.

I am also indebted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Cambridge Trusts, and St John's College for generously funding this research.

My thesis would have been a lonely business without my cohort, who turned out to be the most encouraging, generous, and energetic group of friends to ever put up with a non-Spanish speaker. Con mucho cariño y agradecimiento, Ana, Vera, José Manuel! A long-distance degree is only possible with some very patient friends back home, and I am eternally grateful to Caroline and Jade for energizing Skype dates, overseas visits, and for the warmest welcomes on my trips home.

That the last four years have been a happy succession of sunny afternoons on the Cam, geeky rowing chats, and cake tastings is due entirely to Lance Badman, to whom I owe my sanity, the most sensible parts of this thesis, and a love for sculling that will keep me busy until I'm Masters J category. Thank you for supervising the nicest parts of my life in Cambridge as well as this research.

Above all, I am supremely lucky to have a family that has been actively encouraging this project for some twenty-odd years by ensuring my whole life has been spent in the company of the best art, music, and conversation. For fuelling my appetite for the arts and for many a joyful hour spent laughing over sherry and Heiße Liebe, I owe Michael Crawford and Eva Wilfling my love and admiration.

To my parents and to my lovely brother – an esoteric project that took me to another continent for four years and was the cause of much complaining seems very poor thanks for your inexhaustible support, advice, and understanding. I can only lean on Anatole France and say “alas, I have at my service neither edifying sermons, nor well-organized treatises, nor fine paintings, nor perfectly proportioned sculptures, nor verses marching along in regular meter.” I hope this dissertation will suffice instead – I dedicate it to you with all my deepest love.



## INTRODUCTION

Rosencrantz: What is your line?

Player: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, dénouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion...clowns, if you like, murderers – we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers – set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins – flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

R: (*Doubtfully*) Well, I don't know...

P: It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.

R: What are they?

P: Indifferent.<sup>1</sup>

The formulaic “line” of tragedy and the indifference of times are two tropes that have special resonance with the central topic of this thesis: Italian tragic opera in the Enlightenment, most commonly called *dramma per musica* by its practitioners. For all its immense popularity in the eighteenth century, *dramma per musica* has more recently been described in opposition to its most immediate “times” and to the “tastes” of its audiences; tragic opera, so the argument goes, carried an antiquated set of aesthetic principles and an out-dated political framework into a period of reform and revolution that simply became indifferent to its style. The genre's seventeenth-century roots in French neoclassical theatre are largely to blame for this perceived clash: aesthetically, tragic opera relies on source texts steeped in the strict Aristotelian tradition of spoken theatre – the world of Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine – and politically, *dramma per musica* inherits the imprint of neoclassical theatre's main patron, Louis XIV, who was the exemplar for a system of absolute monarchy that the Enlightenment boldly resisted. In short, recent studies of eighteenth-century tragic opera have created a kind of a murder story in which the aesthetic and political ideals of the Enlightenment are made responsible for the demise of *dramma per musica*, which had lingered beyond its expiry date.

The premise of my thesis is as follows: reports of the death (or failure, or out-datedness) of tragic opera at the hands of the Enlightenment have been grossly exaggerated. The source of this exaggeration is both historical and contemporary: on the one hand, the Enlightenment's own aesthetic language is deeply theatrical and often implicitly operatic but builds music into its debates as a latent rather than explicit participant; on the other hand,

---

<sup>1</sup> Act 1. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 18.

opera historiography perpetuates this impression of opera's separation by isolating *dramma per musica* from its sister arts (literature and the visual arts) and precluding the possibility of its contributions to the Enlightenment's broader aesthetic mandate. One of the main "reports" responsible for overstating the demise of *dramma per musica* comes from Charles Rosen, who makes a startling reference to "the failure (or, if you like, the non-existence)" of Enlightenment tragic opera in his renowned book on *The Classical Style*.<sup>2</sup> Not unlike Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz (or is he Guildenstern?), Rosen has doubts about a theatrical tradition whose formulaic plot patterns and stilted structures seem to contradict the kind of dramatic innovations being forged by eighteenth-century librettists and composers. Several decades on, Rosen's narrative has set a widespread trend in opera scholarship. Even the most recent scholarship adopts some of the binarisms Rosen's argument proposes. For instance, through a series of examples in his book *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics*, Stephen Rumph shows how late eighteenth-century composers deliberately evoked an "archaic" mode by interposing tropes associated with the "learned" Baroque style of seventeenth-century music, especially contrapuntal textures and gestures from *dramma per musica*.<sup>3</sup> Rumph's argument shares two suppositions with Rosen: first, that neoclassicism represented a mode of discourse that was stable and distinctive enough to stand apart from its Enlightenment context in order to oppose the era's dominant features; second, that the "Classical style's" mode of reference to the seventeenth-century *stile antico* was always a critical (or at least parodic) one. Rumph echoes Rosen's argument particularly closely when he claims that "neoclassical rhetoric and Enlightenment poetics belong to distinct historical moments and enshrine largely antithetical social and intellectual ideals."<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between the formulae of *dramma per musica* and the Enlightenment's aesthetic mandate is the starting point for this project, which sets out to rethink the notion that tragic opera's times were "indifferent" to its conventions or incompatible with its reformist tendencies. Briefly, my argument is that the Enlightenment's theatrical poetics was not simply built on an outright refutation of neoclassical idioms but rather shares with *dramma per musica* a firm determination to reform the foundational principles of tragic theatre. Moreover, I contend that *dramma per musica* actively collaborated on this venture with its sister arts through an exchange of ideas with some of the Enlightenment's most prominent *littérateurs* and artists. If *dramma per musica* has been seen

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Expanded Edition* (London: Faber, 1997), 164.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Rumph, *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Rumph, *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics*, 173.

as an outlier in the eighteenth century's aesthetic debates, this is partly due to scholarship's tendency to compartmentalize itself into areas of specialization. My strategy for bringing *dramma per musica* into closer proximity to its times is thus to tackle the issue of eighteenth-century tragedy from three perspectives simultaneously: opera's relationship to its seventeenth-century models, the interceding movement to reform neoclassical theatre that was initiated by the Enlightenment's literary critics, and the response of the visual arts to these turbulent aesthetic debates.

In order to convey a broader sense of *dramma per musica*'s participation in the Enlightenment's program to reform neoclassical tragedy, I have chosen to devote approximately equal space to each of the "arts" rather than restrict the scope of my discussion too narrowly to tragic opera. Indeed, the argument I present here hinges on the premise that firm distinctions among the era's literary discussions, operatic culture, and artistic practice run contrary to the thoroughly synthetic perspective that the Enlightenment itself espoused. From this perspective, *dramma per musica* is not so much the leading actor of this thesis as a cast member in dialogue with several others and occasionally exiting the stage to make way for one of its fellow players. This project therefore undertakes a detailed parallel analysis of a few exemplary operatic, literary, and visual works rather than a comprehensive evaluation of a large segment of repertoire. There are two main reasons for this: first, because an anthological approach would inevitably incline to a general overview that distils the specific features of individual works into the kind of formulae I aim to contest; and second, I am aiming at a comparative method that sets out to reintegrate *dramma per musica* with other facets of the Enlightenment arts, including literature and the visual arts. With this multi-media context in mind, I have conceived of my project as a kind of "Museum of the Muses" that puts different objects into close proximity in order to tease out their connections (and differences) and thereby develop a relational view of the Enlightenment's aesthetic discussions. I discuss this museum framework in more detail in Chapter 1.

The thesis is divided into three parts comprising two chapters each; the three parts each represent a distinct "room" in my museum. The first part gives an overview of my topic, including its historical and theoretical parameters, and sets up the argument's eighteenth-century backdrop; the second and third parts put *dramma per musica* into the context of the Enlightenment's literary discussions and visual artistic practice, respectively.

Part 1, "Lyrical Poésie," sets up the primary themes of the exhibit and situates them in the Enlightenment's literary-aesthetic contexts. Chapter 1 functions as an introductory antechamber that contextualizes the project's museum concept within existing scholarship and defines the main terms and parameters of my argument. Chapter 2 establishes Diderot and

d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* as a main reference point for the theories of literature, definitions of genre, and musical debates that my thesis sets out to synthesize. I cite specific articles from Diderot and d'Alembert's project in order to probe the *encyclopédistes'* notion of "la Poésie" as a multi-media poetics that relies on two foundational principles: theatrical verisimilitude and operatic lyricism. I pay particular attention to the plates included in the dictionary in order to deduce the aesthetic as well as the pedagogical principles underlying the *Encyclopédie*, which firmly relies on both textual description and visual props. Building on the definitions and mandate that frame the *Encyclopédie* project, I argue that the Enlightenment's aesthetic priorities are explicitly theatrical and even operatic in a way that invites us to consider *dramma per musica* as an integral part of an ongoing movement to reform theatrical conventions.

Part 2, "The Poet's Prose," tackles the issue of theatrical reform from the perspective of the literary arts. Chapter 3 focuses on the catalyst for the most contentious model of the reform movement: François Fénelon's novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699), which gave rise to a vicious debate over the issue of "prose poetry." Literary critic and playwright Antoine Houdar de la Motte used the novel as a model for a modernised version of seventeenth-century neoclassical tragedy that dispensed with elaborate language and strict adherence to Aristotelian convention. De la Motte's controversial mandate shares its origins in seventeenth-century spoken tragedy with *dramma per musica*, which subsequently absorbed numerous hallmarks of "prose poetry" and developed de la Motte's literary theory into a vibrant theatrical practice. Chapter 4 analyses Cigna-Santi and Mozart's opera *Mitridate, re di Ponto* (1770) as an exemplar for *dramma per musica's* close relationship to neoclassical tragedy and for opera's commitment to the Enlightenment's revisionist impulse. I show that *Mitridate* undertakes targeted revisions to the original Racinian drama on which it is based, and moreover that these modifications reflect not so much a tragic theatre in decline as a genre in flux and experimenting with the main principles of de la Motte's proposed genre of "prose tragedy."

Part 3, "Paintings Unseen," turns from the literary debates surrounding Fénelon's novel to focus on its impact on the visual arts and to explore opera's interaction with the paintings that dramatize *Télémaque's* most famous scenes on canvas. Fénelon's epic, I show, is largely composed of a series of evocative tableaux. In Chapter 5, I document the enormous artistic response to Fénelon's novel and analyze two important visual works of art (*Calypso Mourning Over the Departure of Ulysses* by Angelica Kauffmann and *Telemachus Relates his Adventures to the Nymph Calypso* by Bartolomeo Pinelli) in order to show the ways in which *Télémaque's* vivid pictorial style easily translates to canvas. I then turn to one of the novel's

most important tableaux, which became the basis for the most famous operatic adaptation of the novel – Varesco and Mozart’s *Idomeneo* (1781). Chapter 6 analyses the opera in more detail; first, I demonstrate that *Idomeneo*’s unusual composition incorporates strategies from the artistic renditions of Fénelon’s epic; second, I contextualize Mozart and Varesco’s aesthetic innovations through an allegorical text by Diderot entitled *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* (1772). I argue that Diderot undertakes a challenge in prose similar to the one *Idomeneo* sets itself in music: to risk an unprecedented blending of narrative and visual media towards a synthetic and collaborative exchange among the Enlightenment arts in the shadow of entrenched conventions and past styles.

By situating *dramma per musica* alongside parallel movements in the Enlightenment’s literary and artistic spheres and demonstrating a widespread aesthetic exchange among the arts, I contest both the notion that operatic tragedy in the eighteenth century was simply a formulaic throwback to an antiquated tradition and the assumption that the Enlightenment remained “indifferent” to opera’s reformist innovations. My aim is to show that operatic neoclassicism is anything but introverted; rather, it borrows innovations from the other arts and synthesizes different media (visual, aural, literary, choreographic) in a way that fulfils the ambitious mandate of the Enlightenment’s theatrical poetics. This project thus presents a historical argument for *dramma per musica* as a genre actively participating in and contributing to the Enlightenment’s most important aesthetic debates. It also represents a methodological demonstration of the kind of comparative, multi-media analysis that opens new interpretive possibilities for a genre that otherwise gets consigned to the archive as an isolated artefact of antiquity rather than being contextualized alongside its sister arts.



**PART 1**  
**LYRICAL “POÉSIE”**

*“La principale règle est de plaire et de toucher.  
Toutes les autres ne sont faites que pour parvenir à cette première.”*

[“The first rule is to please and to move people.  
All the other rules are only there to achieve this first one.”]

Jean Racine, Preface to *Bérénice*



## CHAPTER 1

### A MUSEUM OF THE MUSES

In the spirit of the Enlightenment's flamboyant literary provocateurs, Charles Rosen brings up the topic of "serious" opera with a vexingly expansive statement about "the problem of the failure (or, if you like, the non-existence) of eighteenth-century tragedy."<sup>5</sup> His statement carries two quite separate claims – the failure of tragedy and its non-existence – that each demand a different response. The titanic accumulation of pamphlets, treatises, letters, and volumes produced over the course of the eighteenth century on the subject of Enlightenment tragedy – in its written, spoken, and sung forms – patently contradicts the supposed "non-existence" of a genre that, if nothing else, provoked persistent and noisy controversy. By the same token, the mountainous volume of literature debating and defining the parameters of tragic theatre belies an urgent concern for its success; these prolonged methodological debates suggest a genre in flux – perhaps even endangered – but certainly not already "failed."

This idea of a tragic genre in flux represents the first starting point of this project. The second arises from the way Rosen formulates his argument (which is little more than a parenthetical clause and only an argument by sheer force of its brevity). His formulation involves a slippery correspondence between serious *opera* – the subject of his chapter – and tragedy in general, which is to say spoken tragedy: "Undeniably, respect for the high art of tragedy and a failure to produce anything above mediocre examples of it are both characteristic of the period. The evidence for the century's incapacity for tragic art appears to be overwhelming," Rosen broadly claims of both the Enlightenment's "musicians" and "poets."<sup>6</sup> Serious opera, he seems to imply, was a non-starter in an age that presided over the death of literary tragedy. In other words, Rosen's startling claim about the dearth of Enlightenment tragedy builds on the equally striking premise that any discussion of tragic opera in the eighteenth century must inevitably begin with the broader context of spoken tragic theatre. Oddly, neither spoken tragedy nor its volatile presence throughout the Enlightenment figures in Rosen's analysis, and even more recent scholarship continues to keep *opera seria* (or rather *dramma per musica*, as it was known in the eighteenth century) quite separate from parallel movements in literature. Against this trend, Reinhard Strohm specifically advocates for a rapprochement between these two areas in his seminal study of *dramma per musica*. The literary and the musical elements of eighteenth-century operas, he notes, "have been investigated quite separately by literary historians on the one hand, and by

---

<sup>5</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 166.

music historians on the other”<sup>7</sup> at the expense of a more synthesized evaluation of the genre. One obvious explanation for this partitioning is that *dramma per musica*’s most immediate literary roots fall outside the linguistic and historical contexts associated with Italian opera of the Enlightenment period: the genre’s libretti borrow heavily from *French* neoclassical tragic theatre of the *seventeenth* century. Strohm’s book includes one of the few sustained discussions of *dramma per musica*’s links to French neoclassicism, and he offers this comparative approach as an antidote to the disciplinary segregation that has bolstered the presumption of this repertoire’s inadequacy. Rosen’s verdict of “failure,” therefore, is the result of an overly specialized type of scholarship. As Strohm puts it, “the failure is not only one of failing to recognize artistic merit where it exists [...] but also one of misjudging the theatrical and dramatic feasibility of the genre as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, a more balanced perspective on *dramma per musica* includes the seventeenth-century literary backdrop, influences, and subsequent debates underpinning its libretti. Having insisted on opera’s debt to its literary roots, however, Strohm’s study restricts itself to a relatively defined chronology and scope, focusing on opera’s relationship to its immediate neoclassical models – primarily tragic plays by Racine and Corneille – in the early part of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Strangely, Strohm’s call for a more literary approach to Enlightenment tragic opera has mostly gone unheeded even while opera scholarship continues to expand its perimeters to include larger sociological and political contexts. One recent exception to this kind of disciplinary segregation is Tili Boon Cuillé’s monograph on musical tableaux in eighteenth-century French literature. Cuillé, like Strohm, argues that “in the course of the eighteenth century, the ‘fields’ of literary and musical studies became increasingly distinct,” with the result that “opera debates have become the subject of a different discipline from the topic of their discussion.”<sup>10</sup>

For its part, Strohm’s study establishes compelling parameters for reunifying *dramma per musica* with its literary dimensions. In a way, though, some of these parameters almost consolidate the type of “failure” that Rosen criticizes: by emphasizing the genre’s progress in the early part of the century and concentrating on its ties to seventeenth-century theatre, Strohm reinforces the sense that *dramma per musica*’s most prominent feature is a type of

---

<sup>7</sup> Reinhard Strohm, *Dramma per Musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 121.

<sup>8</sup> Strohm, *Dramma per Musica*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Strohm also gives a historical overview of *dramma per musica* and its conventions of composition, production, and distribution. I will not, therefore, cover these preliminary topics here.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, in contrast to Strohm’s musical focus, Cuillé approaches her subject from a literary perspective and does not address specific operas in any detail. Tili Boon Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes: Musical Tableaux in Eighteenth-Century French Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), xi-xii.

retrospection that looks backward towards a “Baroque” style rather than forward towards the “Classical style” as Rosen defines it.<sup>11</sup> By planting the genre’s literary references so firmly in the French seventeenth century, Strohm inadvertently forecloses on a longer and deeper interaction between spoken tragedy and sung tragedy, even while he develops a strong case for opera’s constant determination to “reform” and survive.<sup>12</sup> Even scholarship that explicitly probes opera’s wider eighteenth-century contexts tends to define the genre in opposition to the aesthetic and political principles of the Enlightenment. Martha Feldman, for instance, explores *dramma per musica* from a political perspective and argues that although composers and librettists adapted to changing ideologies, the genre was fundamentally a “lament for a lost past” rooted in a political absolutism that was increasingly at odds with the Enlightenment’s bourgeois priorities.<sup>13</sup> From multiple directions, then, scholarship’s account of *dramma per musica* frames it as a type of theatre disengaged from its immediate cultural context. In Rosen’s words, “it is not [...] the success of eighteenth-century [operatic] tragedy on its own terms that is being challenged, but its claims to transcend those terms and to break out of its localization in historical time,”<sup>14</sup> that is to say its pre-Enlightenment aesthetic and political heritage. This logic, however, has a fallacious premise in that Rosen more or less insists that the Enlightenment marks an abrupt and conclusive departure from the artistic culture that preceded it. Seventeenth-century neoclassicism for Rosen and, in a broader sense, for Feldman, estranges *dramma per musica* from its Enlightenment setting.

In stark contrast, Strohm’s invitation to reunite opera with literature insists on two types of contiguity: an inextricable link between two arts engaging with common principles, and a fluid sense of the progress of this collaborative aesthetic across generic and stylistic categories. Opera historiography thus need not wrestle with a genre that seems to glance backwards to the poetry and theatrical theories of a bygone era. As Strohm puts it, “*dramma per musica* reached the nineteenth century alive because it had always been a reform genre,”<sup>15</sup> one as capable of absorbing new ideas as it was of preserving conventions. Perhaps the survival of *dramma per musica* into the late eighteenth century and beyond is not entirely due to its resilience but also to its active involvement in the Enlightenment’s evolving literary traditions and – most especially – its spirited aesthetic debates. As a counterclaim to Rosen’s

---

<sup>11</sup> For Rosen, the hallmark of the “Classical style” is a capacity for prolonged dramatic development, something he argues is absent from *opera seria*, which instead satisfies itself with “dramatic juxtaposition.” Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 168-169.

<sup>12</sup> Strohm, *Dramma per Musica*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 167.

<sup>15</sup> Strohm, *Dramma per Musica*, 29.

restrictive view of the genre, I will show that tragic opera succeeds not just on “its own terms” but also on the Enlightenment’s terms: the literary, aesthetic, and ultimately political terms of its most vocal and creative aesthetic practitioners, whose relationship to neoclassical theatre is both persistent and constructive. By resituating *dramma per musica* of the later eighteenth century alongside the French Enlightenment’s campaigns to revitalize and reform this older theatrical style, I argue for tragic opera as a resonant and adventurous force – a full participant in the Enlightenment’s aesthetic innovations rather than the almost caricatured anachronism that Rosen and others depict.<sup>16</sup> As Strohm points out, *dramma per musica* would not have persisted into the nineteenth century had it represented nothing more than a stagnant doctrine; rather, the “elasticity of the genre was its lifeline.”<sup>17</sup>

Strohm’s formulation here explicitly contradicts Rosen, who describes *opera seria* as a “method of *construction*” robust enough to resist a changing aesthetic but not immune to demolition by the most successful practitioners of the versatile “Classical *style*.” Acting as Rosen’s metonymy for the Enlightenment, Mozart apparently repudiates seventeenth-century neoclassical “construction” in favour of the Enlightenment’s Classical “style.” Mozart, Rosen decisively concludes, “destroyed neoclassicism in opera.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, argues Rosen, Mozart’s own *drammi per musica* stand as testaments to the fundamental incompatibility between neoclassical tragedy and Enlightenment opera. From his decisive position at the end of the eighteenth century, Rosen’s mythic Mozart reflects a century of tragedy’s dissolution. In a way, Rosen imagines a tragic dénouement for seventeenth-century neoclassicism; victim of its own intransigence, the battle-worn sovereign of the stage slips into obscurity thanks to new legislation. Crucially, however, where Rosen posits a firm opposition between (Baroque) “construction” and (Classical) “style,” the Enlightenment’s *littérateurs* happily integrated these two concepts. Neither the Enlightenment’s own aesthetic thinkers nor Mozart’s corpus of *drammi per musica* corroborates the destruction of tragedy as Rosen envisions it. Rather, many of the century’s most renowned aesthetic theorists imagined a much more fluid interaction between the genre’s various frameworks and its realization on stage. In the context of these contemporaneous writings, the persistence and efficacy of *dramma per musica* suddenly emerges as far more “elastic” (to use Strohm’s word) than immovably established.

---

<sup>16</sup> By “Enlightenment,” I refer specifically to the French Enlightenment. Please see page 22 for more on this. My focus on the literary-aesthetic discussions in France during the eighteenth century arises from *dramma per musica*’s heavy reliance on French plays and the Aristotelian theory of tragedy developed by France’s most prominent playwrights in the seventeenth century.

<sup>17</sup> Strohm, *Dramma per Musica*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 176.

## THE MUSES UNDER “LA POÉSIE”

*Dramma per musica*’s synthesis of neoclassical construction and classical style finds a prominent analogue in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers*, perhaps the Enlightenment’s single most iconic project as well as a symbolic and real repository of eighteenth-century knowledge. Already the composition of the dictionary manages to practice art even as it gives technical accounts of artistic methods; its 17 volumes of text are accompanied by 11 volumes of plates, making the project as much a gallery of fine engravings as a resource for theoretical learning. The taxonomy of knowledge that Diderot and d’Alembert present in the form of a diagram-tree in their introductory discourse encapsulates the project’s dual commitment to explanation and illustration (see Figure 1.1). Moreover, even within this “Système figuré des connoissances humaines,” the key terms that provide the framework for the division of all the arts, sciences, and crafts into distinct branches themselves have double connotations. The umbrella term for all of literature, music, and the visual arts – “La Poésie” – is particularly difficult to interpret; the term translates as “poetry,” that is to say a style of literature based on principles of versification, but the word also means “poetics,” meaning the theory and rules underlying the art of poetry.<sup>19</sup> In a sense, “La Poésie” combines the two concepts that Rosen posits as opposites, namely a particular “style” (e.g. poetry) and a specific “construction” of text (poetics). By grouping the arts together under this ambiguous category, Diderot’s “Système figuré” thus strongly implies that literature, music, and the visual arts represent different iterations of the same fundamental *construction* and also share the same basic *style*. Combining the concepts of “poetry” and “poetics” into a single overarching term – “la Poésie” – highlights the extent to which the *encyclopedistes* were unwilling to divide the fields of knowledge or distinguish between the *theory* (or principles of “construction”) directing artistic practice and the *genres* (or “styles”) within that practice.

Diderot was well aware that his classification system relies on an unusually broad notion of “Poésie.” He tackles this problem of definition directly in his editorial “Prospectus,” admitting to a radically non-specific sense of the term:

NOUS N’ENTENDONS ICI *par Poësie* que ce qui est Fiction. Comme il peut y avoir Versification sans Poësie, & Poësie sans Versification, nous avons crû devoir regarder

---

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defines “la poésie” as a general category that includes all different genres of poetry as well as signifying “l’art de faire des vers,” that is to say “poetics.” The word “poétique,” in contrast, is used exclusively as an adjective to mean “Qui concerne la Poësie, qui appartient à la Poësie, qui est propre & particulier à la Poësie” (“That which concerns Poetry, that belongs to Poetry, that is particular and exclusive to Poetry”). *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Paris: Veuve de Bernard Brunet, 1762), 405.

ENTENDEMENT.



la *Versification* comme une qualité du stile, & la renvoyer à l'Art Oratoire. En revanche, nous rapporterons la *Musique*, la *Peinture*, la *Sculpture*, la *Gravure*, &c. à la Poésie; car il n'est pas moins vrai de dire du Peintre qu'il est un Poète, que du Poète qu'il est un Peintre; & du Sculpteur ou Graveur qu'il est un Peintre en relief ou en creux, que du Musicien qu'il est un Peintre par les sons.

[By "Poetry," we mean simply that which is Fiction. Since there can be Versification without Poetry, & Poetry without Versification, we believed we ought to consider *Versification* as a quality of style, & to consign it to Oratory. On the other hand, we deliver *Music*, *Painting*, *Sculpture*, and *Engraving*, etc. to Poetry; because it is no less true to say of the Painter that he is a Poet, than to say that the Poet is a Painter; & of the Sculptor or Engraver that he is a Painter in three-dimensions, of the Musician that he is a Painter in sound.]<sup>20</sup>

In other words, literature, music, and the visual arts are all "fictional" disciplines and therefore share a common project even if they work through different media. Even more than this, by nominating "la Poésie" as the overarching category of all art, Diderot states an ideological proposition: that there is no "style" native to any single medium just as there is no construction or "poetics" unique to any single artistic discipline.

"La Poésie" therefore serves as a thoroughly elastic concept, one that does not refer to a particular style or genre but instead (and more ambitiously) describes the free interaction of comparable styles and genres. It is difficult to envision how Rosen's stark division of styles would be accommodated by this radically synthetic view of the arts and their sub-genres. Even visually, the "Système figuré" manages to project its categories in an almost perfectly *lateral* arrangement. Wherever possible, the tree of knowledge sprouts horizontally into parallel branches, so that there is no sense of hierarchy among the faculties of "memory," "reason," and "imagination," for instance. (Only very occasionally does the vertical axis intrude almost surreptitiously in the ordering of the dramatic arts, for example, where tragedy occupies its usual place at the head of the list.) This visible interlacing of the offshoots of each category visually enacts the *Encyclopédie*'s aesthetic of cooperation among the arts.

Following from this continuous spectrum of disciplines, Diderot pursues a second proposition that again dictates a very particular approach to the accumulation of knowledge and, by extension, to the study of the arts. To be sure, Diderot explains, the mandate of the monumental *Encyclopédie* project is explicative, but its explanations rely on a commitment to *rapprochement*:

---

<sup>20</sup> The italicized words indicate the headwords of articles included in the *Encyclopédie*. Denis Diderot, "Prospectus," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, 1-9 (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project Spring 2013 Edition, ed. Robert Morrissey), <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>, 8. All citations from the *Encyclopédie* are from this edition. Translations are my own.

En réduisant sous la forme de Dictionnaire tout ce qui concerne les Sciences & les Arts, il s'agissoit encore de faire sentir les secours mutuels qu'ils se prêtent; d'user de ces secours pour en rendre les principes plus sûrs & leurs conséquences plus claires; d'indiquer les liaisons éloignées ou prochaines des êtres qui composent la Nature, & qui ont occupé les hommes; de montrer par l'entrelacement des racines & par celui des branches, l'impossibilité de bien connoître quelques parties de ce tout, sans remonter ou descendre à beaucoup d'autres; de former un tableau général des efforts de l'esprit humain dans tous les genres & dans tous les siècles.

[Reducing all that concerns the Sciences and the Arts into Dictionary form was also a matter of recognizing the mutual support to which they lend themselves; of using this support to render principles more sure and their consequences clearer; to show the remote and close connections between the beings that make up Nature, and that have preoccupied men; of showing – through their interlacing roots and branches – the impossibility of fully knowing certain parts of this whole without climbing or descending many other branches; of assembling a general picture of all human effort in all genres and across all centuries.]<sup>21</sup>

This passage presents in words the same “remote and close connections” depicted visually by the unifying brackets and staggered subgroupings of the “Système figuré.” “Support,” “mutual,” “connections,” “interlacing,” “parts of this whole,” “assembling” – the lexicon of Diderot’s mandate insists on knowledge as an activity of synthesis, of building a broader context on the correlation of terms. Paradoxically, then, the *Encyclopédie* describes itself in antithesis to basic principles of the encyclopaedia genre: its systematic categorization resists blunt distinctions and deconstructs its own basis, constantly discovering the intricacies underlying the assembled whole.

This holistic instinct is also why Diderot praises the dictionary’s throng of contributors for ensuring that the project is built on multiple methods and even contrasting approaches. Where the subjects of the *Encyclopédie* blossom by rooting themselves in shared terrain, above all the project’s descriptive writing must not render these connections monotonous:

Les différentes mains que nous avons employées ont apposé à chaque article, comme le sceau de leur style particulier [...]. Chaque chose a son coloris, & ce seroit confondre les genres que de les réduire à une certaine uniformité.

[The different hands that we have used have attached themselves to each article, like a seal of their own unique style [...]. Everything has its own colour, & reducing genres to a certain uniformity would just muddle them.]<sup>22</sup>

Different hands and different styles in this instance are not so much markers of individuality for its own sake as a commitment to preserve the vivacity of the *Encyclopédie*’s diverse topics. Whatever “uniformity” or synthesis emerges out of the dictionary’s wide-ranging scope emerges organically out of the topics themselves and its authors’ collective

---

<sup>21</sup> Diderot, “Prospectus,” 1.

<sup>22</sup> Diderot, “Prospectus,” 3.

determination to assert their command of the widest scope of knowledge rather than artificially through a heavy-handed editorial process. The “Poésie” of the *Encyclopédie* – that is to say, both its style and its construction – thus arises from a process of fusion and fluidity: its imprecisions, contradictions, and overlappings are not necessarily signs of its failure. As Diderot boldly states, “reducing” the fields of arts, science, and crafts to dictionary form here represents not a distillation of facts but a proliferation of interconnections. When it comes to “la Poésie,” then, Diderot’s third bold proposition is that we cannot know any *one* art without knowing *all* the arts.

This inter-medial angle proposes an appealingly cooperative model of the arts that is especially applicable in the context of opera, which performs the very synthesis of poetry, music, and visual display that Diderot tries to exhort. The *Encyclopédie*’s emphasis on “la Poésie” as an inclusive gesture again contradicts Rosen’s tendency to pit literature against *dramma per musica*. Tragic opera, Rosen implies, lets down its seventeenth-century source texts and is in turn let down by the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with theatrical theory: “with the wreck of its aspirations to emulate classical tragedy, *opera seria* gave up even the attempt to find a musical and dramatic equivalent for the great baroque plays.”<sup>23</sup> At its crux, Rosen’s position maintains that the persistent and often heated literary discussions surrounding tragedy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represent a hostile influence on opera’s dramatic liveliness. Neoclassicism was too engrossed in theory to give opera sufficient space for drama, Rosen stresses: the neoclassical “desire for theoretical coherence [...] led paradoxically at moments to an incoherence within the artistic langue, forced into contradiction with itself in order to conform to something exterior.”<sup>24</sup> According to Rosen, literature’s “poetics” (its construction) forestalls opera’s “poetry” (its dramatic style) – quite against the Enlightenment’s own concept of a “Poésie” that makes an alloy of both these elements.

If throwing the full weight of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* at Rosen’s incomplete evaluation of *dramma per musica* seems unduly aggressive – or even unreasonable, given the sheer breadth of the dictionary compared to Rosen’s focused study – the very range of the *Encyclopédie* and its inclusive composition (with over 130 contributing authors) makes it an indispensable anthology of Enlightenment thought on the crucial issues Rosen introduces. In view of the rather ignominious fate to which Rosen consigns what was after all the undisputed leading genre of theatrical culture throughout the eighteenth century and given the broad aesthetic separations he implies, it makes sense to appeal to the period’s

---

<sup>23</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 71.

most comprehensive and inclusive bank of knowledge to probe the issue. Of course, the *Encyclopédie* by no means gives a decisive verdict on the matter of situating *dramma per musica* amid its sister arts in the Enlightenment. Indeed, the dictionary seldom offers a single account on any subject thanks to its scattered contributors, whose opinions also vacillated over the years the project was in production. As a document full of the contradictions, ambiguities, and evolving dispositions of its era, the *Encyclopédie* offers an unfixed but all the more valuable picture of the arts in flux.

It is from the movable “picture” epitomized by the *Encyclopédie* that I model my response to Rosen’s critique. Diderot’s dictionary provides both a mandate and a format for this response. Extrapolating from the project’s broad impulse to plumb the connections among fields of knowledge, my study focuses on the parallels between *dramma per musica* and its literary and artistic contexts. The *Encyclopédie*’s policy to articulate these connections textually *and* via engraved plates is particularly apt for this topic, and in the same way I try to offer a visual component to complement my textual account wherever possible. The engravings, paintings, and sketches that appear alongside this project’s literary and musical excerpts imitate the *Encyclopédie*’s layout but also, more importantly, try to capture the spirit of its composition. In many ways, Diderot and d’Alembert’s initiative espouses the strategies of a visual work of art. First, the challenge it sets itself is representational; the categorization it performs is a type of artistic imitation, a still life, even. Second, key terms, prominent artists, and influential theorists converge on its pages; these various interrelated strands of inquiry meet to form the basis of the investigation I pursue here. Finally, plates, diagrams, descriptions, graphs, and lists are spread out over the *Encyclopédie*’s tomes as though across an exhibition space; these “objets d’art” are on display alongside one another, congregating sometimes in harmony and sometimes in antipathy. My project likewise curates a collection that assembles items from different corners of the Enlightenment – fragments of literary debate, operatic case studies, and emblematic paintings – on the supposition that such a gallery will furnish a more three-dimensional space of comparison, juxtaposition, and synthesis.

The inspiration for the layout of my museum is also partially contemporary and models itself on a successful exhibit put on by the *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien* in 2010. The exhibition, called “Vermeer: The Art of Painting,” focused on one single painting by Vermeer alongside objects that illuminated its composition and historical milieu. In a sense, Vermeer was relatively absent from the exhibit, which aimed to draw a “panorama” for the

painting by approaching it indirectly through related “props.”<sup>25</sup> In building a “Museum of the Muses,” I likewise use *dramma per musica* as the main feature at the centre of an interpretive network; opera is the lens through which I propose to look at a variety of different materials and is thus not necessarily always in the foreground of the museum space. I aim to provide an Enlightenment-inspired response to musicology’s tendency to taper its discussions away from the thoroughly multi-media “Poésie” that the eighteenth century’s most prominent thinkers envisioned. The ambition of my exhibit is twofold: to open up a space in which the Enlightenment arts might interact more freely outside of their usual disciplinary parameters and to avoid arranging the items in such a way as to predetermine the direction of their influence.

The two operas that act as the centrepieces of this particular “Museum of the Muses” are *Mitridate, re di Ponto* (by Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi and Mozart, 1770) and *Idomeneo* (by Giambattista Varesco and Mozart, 1781), two works that have inspired only sporadic scholarly attention and linger at the periphery of Mozart scholarship.<sup>26</sup> That both these works have Mozart in common is partly incidental and partly strategic. Three factors motivate this choice of repertoire:

1. Chronology: These two *drammi per musica* represent a climactic point in the Enlightenment’s poetic revisionism. Following half a century of paper wars and polemical treatises, the *littérateurs* invested in dragging tragic form away from its seventeenth-century conventions had largely reached an impasse by the 1770s. Opera and the visual arts subsequently represented two alternative media capable of providing the third-party mediation that literature’s divided factions desperately needed. *Mitridate* and *Idomeneo* thus exemplify an operatic genre actively filling the silence into which literature had lapsed, emerging in this “post-poetry” space with its own solutions to tragic theory’s most urgent dilemmas.
2. Context: The movement to reform tragedy in the early Enlightenment pivoted on two source texts – a tragic play by Jean Racine and an epic novel by François Fénelon. Notoriety ensured that both these literary works bloomed into cultural phenomena

---

<sup>25</sup> The exhibit was curated by Sabine Pénot and Elke Oberthaler. An abstract for the exhibition is found online at <https://www.khm.at/en/visit/exhibitions/2010/vermeer-the-art-of-painting/>.

<sup>26</sup> Julian Rushton’s handbook on *Idomeneo* remains one of the only books dedicated to the opera and mostly covers the fundamentals of the work (including its plot and performance history). Philipp Adlung’s monograph on *Mitridate* is the only one published to date and the scholarly literature on *Mitridate* remains quite small. Julian Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Philipp Adlung, *Mozarts Opera seria Mitridate, re di Ponto* (Eisenach: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1996).

over the course of the eighteenth century and were set numerous times as *drammi per musica*. While the majority of these operas only take vague inspiration from the original texts, however, the two Mozart operas cultivate an unusually close relationship with their literary sources. Indeed, Mozart was the only composer to tackle both Racine and Fénelon's texts so directly and in such a short span of time. Thus *Mitridate* and *Idomeneo* are ideal candidates for my museum, with its focus on opera's contribution to the Enlightenment's poetics of tragedy.

3. Scholarly continuity: For Rosen, Mozart epitomizes the "Enlightenment style," and so his supposed failure in the genre of *dramma per musica* confirms Rosen's thesis that tragic opera was profoundly at odds with the dramatic discourse of the era. At the same time, Mozart falls outside the historical scope of those studies dedicated specifically to *dramma per musica* in the eighteenth century, including Strohm and Feldman's research.<sup>27</sup> This repertoire thus offers an opportunity to respond to some of the stylistic and political claims made on behalf of *dramma per musica*, to counteract the assumption that the genre remained stagnant over the course of the entire century, and to extend the scope of Strohm's seminal study beyond the early Enlightenment.

The idea of an eighteenth-century operatic museum is not without antecedents. Indeed, in his work on operatic culture in fin-de-siècle Paris, William Gibbons has built on Lydia Goehr's *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* to argue that Mozart and his contemporaries became the prize subjects of an altogether different type of collection, one whose aims were financial as well as didactic.<sup>28</sup> Eighteenth-century operas, Gibbons documents, featured prominently in the late nineteenth century as the opera industry amassed works by Mozart, Gluck, and Rameau. Keen to forge its identity on national and linguistic grounds, French opera was determined to conscript the Enlightenment's most successful composers for its cause (regardless of the composers' own national identities). The result, Gibbons convincingly shows, was more than a pattern of appropriation and canon-formation; late nineteenth-century Paris, he argues, cultivated a unique "physical and conceptual space," an "Operatic Museum [...] in which works from multiple time periods could coexist to create an

---

<sup>27</sup> Feldman mentions Mozart a few times in passing and discusses his *Lucio Silla* only briefly. Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 52-63.

<sup>28</sup> William Gibbons, *Building the Operatic Museum: Eighteenth-Century Opera in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013). Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

overarching historical narrative.”<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, the analogy of the “museum” – so frequently evoked for its static, posed, and monumental attributes – facilitates the congregation of disparate historical artefacts.<sup>30</sup> For Gibbons, the Parisian “Operatic Museum’s” construction of a cultural heritage represents a fascinating episode in history. But what of the museum as a type of musicology?

From a historical phenomenon, the idea of an operatic museum easily translates into a scholarly activity: a curatorial undertaking to assemble objects for commentary within an argumentative framework. The juxtapositions characterizing the museum constitute not only a promising *topic* for historical investigation but also a valuable historiographical framework – a way of *writing* music history. Scholarship distinguishes itself as a site where materials, concepts, and moments converge, and the study I present here advocates for – and practices – the flexible historiography such an “exhibit” makes possible. Moreover, the Enlightenment’s passion for collating knowledge would seem to mark it as a promising area for this type of scholarly museology.<sup>31</sup> Despite its keen interest in operatic drama, however, research on Enlightenment *dramma per musica* continues to prioritize principles of linear evolution and influence and to draw rigid geographical and temporal distinctions. The historical narrative that emerges from this very contained scholarship can sometimes neglect broader interdisciplinary exchanges and easily turns into the false historicism that Strohm criticizes:

Historians and critics of opera are perhaps too convinced that opera needs and has its own history, structures and theory. A theory, or a “poetics”, of opera-writing has never really existed, and the zeal of modern scholars to reconstruct such a poetics for the works of the past seems to reflect the loss of contact with that past itself.<sup>32</sup>

In the case of eighteenth-century *dramma per musica*, the important exchange between literary and musical theatrical traditions, between seventeenth-century neoclassicism and Enlightenment operatic culture, between drama as a function of structure and as a performative interaction, becomes eclipsed. I thus propose a museum of eighteenth-century *drammi per musica* that, in lieu of recreating and memorializing the Enlightenment, partakes in its spirit of inquiry and critique by convening two of its exemplary works outside their most immediate chronological, biographical, and geographical contexts. As Luisa Calè and Adriana Craciun put it, “the Enlightenment may well be the age of the encyclopedia, the system, and

---

<sup>29</sup> Gibbons, *Building the Operatic Museum*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Cook explores the dynamics of juxtaposition and collage that underpin museology in his “Uncanny Moments: Juxtaposition and the Collage Principle in Music,” in *Approaches to Musical Meaning in Music*, 107-134, ed. Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the eighteenth century saw the founding of many of Europe’s greatest public galleries, including the British Museum (1753), the Hermitage (1764), and the Louvre (1793).

<sup>32</sup> Strohm, *Dramma per Musica*, 165.

the museum, but as conjectural forms of ‘imperfect knowledge,’ not as we know them today. Disorder lurks at the heart of these forms, sites, and practices.”<sup>33</sup> Investigating Enlightenment opera as a dynamic concept that bridges the literary, the musical, and the staged, my thesis performs a historiography that privileges the collision of materials, fluid comparisons, and indirect narratives— in other words, a historiography that permits itself a “Poésie” that is as chaotic as it is linear.

## SETTING UP THE EXHIBIT: “OPERA AFTER POETRY”

Like any museum, my exhibit requires some signs for the purposes of orientation. The rest of this chapter provides a few definitions that clarify the overarching themes of the exhibit and then provides two methodological placards that put these key ideas into context and set us up to explore the first real “room” of the museum in Chapter 2. Like any museum display, this assembly makes no claim to comprehensiveness: the “objects” hosted in what follows together communicate the theme of the display – “Opera after Poetry” – but are representative more than exceptional works. Each chapter that follows represents a type of display case containing a selection of “artifacts” – texts, musical excerpts, paintings – brought into proximity by their mutual stake in “Opera after Poetry.” Moreover, although I design the layout of my exhibition with the *Encyclopédie* in mind, I pursue comparisons among its objects with an emphasis on detailed interpretation; this is not a comprehensive project on the scale of Diderot and d’Alembert’s ambitious undertaking but rather a focused study that aims to develop intricacies within broad trends.

In the first place, therefore, I offer some signposts to help map the passage I intend to take through the various exhibition spaces of *Opera after Poetry: Enlightenment Drama per Musica amid the Arts*.

### 1. ENLIGHTENMENT

The most pressing clarification has to do with the term “Enlightenment.” Firstly, which Enlightenment? In brief, the historical interval I consider spans the period 1699-1781, so I use the term as a chronological marker. More than this, however, the documents I assemble represent strong articulations of an Enlightenment spirit of inquiry dedicated to reforming and renewing pre-Enlightenment principles of art – most especially principles of tragic theatre. My argument, in sum, is that some of the genres and ideas most firmly associated with “Baroque” art of the seventeenth century are by no means anathema to the Enlightenment’s aesthetic priorities but actually fuel its innovations. In other words, I plan

---

<sup>33</sup> Luisa Calè and Adriana Craciun, “The Disorder of Things,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45/1 (2011): 1-13, 3.

to show an Enlightenment that is thoroughly preoccupied with – and often sympathetic to – pre-Enlightenment conventions, above all seventeenth-century tragic theatre and its Aristotelian foundations. Secondly, whose Enlightenment? Here, the answer is a bit less categorical. This project aims to bridge two related corners of Enlightenment theatre – French spoken tragedy and its theorisation on the one hand, and Italian *dramma per musica* (composed, moreover, by non-Italians), on the other hand.<sup>34</sup> Since the operatic repertoire I consider comes from later in the eighteenth century and derives its subjects and its dramatic form from French Aristotelian theatre, my argument hinges most strongly on the *Lumières* and the *philosophes* who fervently articulated its aims. By prioritizing the areas of confluence among different veins of Enlightenment thought, my aim is again to espouse the comparative mandate of the *Encyclopédie*.

## 2. OPERA – DRAMMA PER MUSICA

My case studies avoid prioritizing patterns of influence, generic evolution, and systematic categorisation in favour of a more heterotopic historiography: the exhibit does not offer a retrospective of art in the Enlightenment but rather introduces a handful of interrelated examples in order to challenge the scope of histories that presume on behalf of *dramma per musica*'s composers and librettists a pattern of isolation from the sister arts and an indifference to broader aesthetic trends. The operatic repertoire I consider here picks up from where Strohm leaves off in order to extend his argument in two ways. First, I show that the reformist trends that Strohm ascribes to the first generation of post-Arcadian librettists (notably Apostolo Zeno and Antonio Salvi) in fact persist well into the later eighteenth century. Second, I argue that *dramma per musica* is not only intertwined with its literary source texts but also – and perhaps more interestingly – with the methodological debates surrounding those same plays, debates that unfolded throughout the Enlightenment into the 1770s and 1780s. My two main operatic examples highlight *dramma per musica*'s proximity to these literary discussions; each opera fosters a direct relationship with the source texts fuelling the polemical paper wars surrounding the French tragic tradition. These *drammi per musica* absorb the poems and poetic principles at the root of the *philosophes*' most vehement arguments and in turn become full participants in the Enlightenment's turbulent aesthetic mandate.

---

<sup>34</sup> Here, my study differs from Cuillé's in two respects: in the first place, I offer a close reading of specific musical examples alongside the literary texts that furnish the aesthetic contexts I describe; in the second place, my project emphasizes the broader European exchange at the heart of the Enlightenment's theory of tragedy. Cuillé, in contrast, focuses more directly on French authors. See Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes*.

As a short footnote to this sign, I will point out that French tragic opera – or *tragédie lyrique* – undoubtedly also engaged with these same literary questions. My focus on *dramma per musica* arises as a response both to Strohm and Rosen’s earlier studies and a methodological determination to resist delimiting Enlightenment aesthetics by language and geography.

### 3. POETRY (OR RATHER, POÉSIE)

For Strohm, the history of *dramma per musica* is incomplete without a double attention to musical works and their literary context. Moreover, as *theatre* this musical repertoire is only coherent alongside the tragic poetry that inspires its libretti. Whereas these seventeenth-century French neoclassical plays represent opera’s most immediate literary backdrop, I extend this focus on “poetry” to include the reform initiatives aimed at revitalizing neoclassicism’s literary conventions for a new Enlightenment aesthetic. Here, the process of “contextualisation” is taken literally to involve “weaving together” three types of “text:” the seventeenth-century tragedies that act as source texts to much of the *dramma per musica* tradition; the theoretical discussions surrounding these plays that exploded in the early eighteenth century; and finally the operatic *libretti* that, together with Mozart’s musical settings, contribute another layer to a thoroughly composite theatrical tradition. In this context, then, “poetry” covers not only the poems themselves but also the poetic principles underpinning them and the broader literary-artistic debates thrusting them into parallel genres.

### 4. “AFTER”

This preposition necessitates a short sign of its own to underline its various functions. In the first place, it acts as a chronological marker: the operas under consideration here premiered *in the wake of* a period of literary turmoil that had largely reached an impasse by the 1770s, at which point *dramma per musica* began to absorb the terms of these arguments and formulate its own response to the problem of tragedy. In the second place, opera “after” poetry expresses a direction of influence: *dramma per musica* taking its cues from poetry’s preoccupations, priorities, and difficulties. Finally, this preposition articulates a shift in the conception of poetry from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. Thanks to vehement demands for poetic reform in the early Enlightenment, poetry *as it was imagined* by the French neoclassicists was no longer axiomatic. “After” poetry, then, describes a genre in flux – a period of “post-tragedy” in which conventional styles were violently recalibrated but never fully eradicated.

## 5. ARTS

Which arts? – The arts of “imagination” according to the *Encyclopédie*, namely literature, music, and the visual arts. As with the *Encyclopédie*, my examples taken from painting and engraving are both supplementary and integral to a project that does not concentrate on the visual arts but that can only be executed with them nearer the centre than the periphery. The project of rebuilding tragedy in the Enlightenment is fundamentally rooted not in literature, music, or art but rather in the *stage*, where poetry, song, and visual display are each constitutive forces with a say in the type and form of “Poésie” they will perform together.

This exhibit is a restoration project on two counts: to restore *dramma per musica* to its literary and visual contexts and to restore the Enlightenment’s multi-media aesthetics to *dramma per musica*, which left behind the seventeenth century’s rigid theatrical practices in order to absorb innovations from its sister arts. “Opera after Poetry” aims to recast the supposed demise of tragedy and the comparative isolation of *dramma per musica* in the Enlightenment as a broadening of theatre’s scope and ambitions with music and the visual arts as its close accomplices.

### METHODOLOGY PLACARD 1: IN LIEU OF POETICS, DRAMATURGY

In place of a comparative analysis of the interaction among the arts in *dramma per musica*, recent musicology has wrestled with the genre from a narrower perspective, focusing on the local collaboration between libretto and music and between score and performance. Perhaps because of its close association with the literary world, the term “poetics” rarely arises in opera scholarship. Instead, the related concept of “dramaturgy” tries to describe the same combination of theatrical theory and practice. Where the “Poésie” defined by the *Encyclopédie* deliberately conflates these two aspects of tragedy and encompasses not only literature but its sister arts as well, the concept of dramaturgy lends itself to various different usages. As Carl Dahlhaus puts it, “‘dramaturgy’ is one of those vogue words to which frequent use lends the appearance of being increasingly well understood, whereas the wear and tear to which it is subjected actually makes it even harder to understand.”<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary opera scholarship regularly evokes the concept of operatic dramaturgy but rarely tackles the problem of definition that Dahlhaus laments, and arguably, it is

---

<sup>35</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, “What is a Musical Drama?” trans. Mary Whittall, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1/2 (1989): 95-111, 95.

precisely because dramaturgy plays such a fundamental role in the field of opera studies that it is so often subjected to imprecise meanings. This terminological ambiguity is not an impasse, of course; the *Encyclopédie* proposes equally vague keywords that nevertheless accurately capture concepts that are ungainly in breadth as well as stubbornly fluid. Beyond its semantic flexibility, however, the issue of dramaturgy reflects a methodological problem: the field of opera studies practices a historiography that recognizes it must negotiate opera's various components – staged, visual, textual, musical – but remains circumscribed in its scope, preferring to gaze inwards at opera's internal dynamics rather than look further afield towards opera's sister disciplines.

Indeed, Alessandra Campana's work on the problem of genre in *dramma per musica* – one of the only studies to tackle the issue of "poetics" directly – concludes that there is a fundamental incompatibility between music and spoken theatre. Poetics (i.e. the theory of theatre), she maintains, is always articulated in a written format and cannot, therefore, adequately describe opera's performative side:

Genre theory, elaborated initially in the context of literary studies, is concerned with genres primarily as practices of textualization. [...] As a mix of orality and writing, opera brings to the fore how textuality is the very boundary and limitation of genre theory. Itself another praxis of writing, genre theory in turn cannot conceive of anything outside itself. But performance is not reducible to a text.<sup>36</sup>

Literature's theory of theatre, in Campana's view, is hostile to music's "orality" and "performance" because of its textual medium. Even more seriously, Campana takes this argument one step further, bundling spoken theatre in with the literary medium that is supposedly blind to the all-important performance side of *dramma per musica*: "opera as a genre is the staging of an encounter between music and theatre, an encounter that demands that the borders between the two arts are continually redefined."<sup>37</sup> There are two problems with Campana's statement. First, the idea that music and theatre are separable elements of opera is surely debatable (indeed, has been debated at length). Second, the notion that music and theatre each have definable (let alone redefinable) borders belies the deep interconnections between two traditions that largely share theoretical principles and performance practices. Aside from her rather condescending view of writing's capacity to engage with those aspects that fall outside its strict medium (imagine if writing could only venture to talk about itself!), Campana's argument also sets opera in resolute opposition to its two closest allies: the textual medium that is indisputably a core component of the genre, and the Aristotelian poetics that represent spoken and operatic theatre's shared framework.

---

<sup>36</sup> Alessandra Campana, "Genre and Poetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till, 202-224 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 220.

<sup>37</sup> Campana, "Genre and Poetics," 203.

For some scholars, the concept of “dramaturgy” bridges the textual and the performative facets of opera more successfully than “poetics” is able to do. Mary Luckhurst, for example, distinguishes between the “internal” and “external” manifestations of dramaturgy:

*Dramaturgy* relates to the internal structures of a play text and is concerned with the arrangement of formal elements by the playwright – plot, construction of narrative, character, time-frame and stage action. Conversely, dramaturgy can also refer to external elements relating to staging, the overall artistic concept behind the staging, the politics of performance, and the calculated manipulation of audience response.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike “poetics,” with its etymology firmly fixed on “poetry,” dramaturgy as Luckhurst defines it immediately appeases those musicologists who are anxious that opera not bind itself to a literary paradigm that might appear to exclude music and its performance. Spoken theatre contends with just two dramaturgical parameters – the text and its presentation onstage – whereas opera’s triumvirate of music, text, and stage action makes musicology’s task less straightforward. As Marco Beghelli puts it, “opera could be called a trinitarian text: a syncretic product resulting from the confluence of three distinct texts, verbal, musical and visual, technically known as the libretto, the score and the *mise en scène* or staging.”<sup>39</sup>

As much as the concept of dramaturgy nominally confronts “drama” directly, however, its application in opera scholarship remains polarized between its theoretical and its performance-focused sides. In scholarly practice, dramaturgy’s internal and external facets – “drama *as* music” and “music *as* drama” – do not sit easily side by side but instead give rise to a methodological gulf. Reluctant to look outside opera’s most immediate components (its libretto and its score), opera studies has often been preoccupied with drama as an internal force rather than one resonating with parallel genres and media. Two opposing theories of dramaturgy agree on the importance of locating the source of drama in opera but dispute whether drama arises from a collaborative or a competitive interaction between music and theatre. Moreover, the concept of theatre remains perpetually elusive and impossible to define and arrives in numerous guises – “action,” “staging,” and “performance” have each been posited as music’s counterpart in the creation of drama.

Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker’s influential article “Dismembering Mozart” best captures the crux of this debate. Dismantling the easy coupling of music and drama that Dahlhaus (and later, Rosen) reinforces, they argue that, on the contrary, “it is not the singular self, the perfect unity of action and music that exists; rather, a dialogue is conducted between

---

<sup>38</sup> Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> Marco Beghelli, “The Dramaturgy of the Operas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. Emanuele Senici, 85-103 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85.

action and music, a conversation with the most lively and life-giving disagreements.”<sup>40</sup> This pointed critique of the “assumption [...] that, *ideally*, the music will correspond precisely to verbal or staged events, and unfold in parallel to text and action”<sup>41</sup> takes aim at Rosen’s thesis in *The Classical Style*, which argues vehemently that opera is only successful when its musical style enjoys a seamless relationship with its dramatic subject. Without contesting the notion that music and drama each have specific requirements, Rosen insists that action acquires meaning *through* music and music *through* action, or as he puts it “the intrigue and the musical forms are indissoluble.”<sup>42</sup> For Rosen, the idioms and aesthetic impulses that constitute the “Classical style” are synonymous with their dramaturgical possibilities; by extension, he argues, such possibilities are not limitless because “it is not true that every language is equally apt for every form.”<sup>43</sup> Following this logic, the failure of *dramma per musica* is that it espouses a musical language ill-equipped for the demands of the Enlightenment’s dramatic style. Between Rosen’s belief in coordination and Abbate and Parker’s praise of discontinuity, then, lie two visions of operatic dramaturgy, which is perceived to arise either from the cooperative or the disruptive relationship between score and libretto. In fact, as Nicholas Cook argues, opposition itself is not a stable dynamic; the difference between cooperation and antagonism among (in this case) opera’s constituent media is “rarely as neatly demarcated as [...] theory might suggest: complementation constantly teeters on the verge of contest.”<sup>44</sup>

Abbate and Parker confess that their prioritization of rupture and friction has a strong ideological motivation: to suppress concepts of cohesion and unity that they associate with a reactionary aestheticisation of opera’s internal textures. Their scepticism has been echoed by numerous other scholars. Laurel Zeiss, for instance, proposes a model describing operatic dramaturgy as a “counterpoint” among the work’s various components or “texts.”<sup>45</sup> With a less polemical tone, David J. Levin’s aptly titled *Unsettling Opera* testifies to the continued prevalence of the postmodern perspective promoted by Abbate and Parker. Inheriting their

---

<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, “Dismembering Mozart,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2/2 (1990): 187-195, 195.

<sup>41</sup> Abbate and Parker, “Dismembering Mozart,” 188.

<sup>42</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 301-2.

<sup>43</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 180.

<sup>44</sup> The type of “complementation” that Cook proposes has a particular characteristic that avoids the polarized accounts represented by Rosen and Abbate/Parker, namely a “gapped text – the text that leaves space for the medium with which it is to cohabit.” Rather than have to posit a cooperative or disruptive relationship between score and libretto in the case of opera, for instance, Cook’s “complementation” allows for an interaction in which each medium “seeks out in advance the terrain that may be disputed between media, and as far as possible eliminates it.” Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 120-1.

<sup>45</sup> Laurel Zeiss, “The Dramaturgy of Opera,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till, 179-201 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 197.

concern for the “incongruities” and “contradictions” of opera, Levin argues that the best productions discover the eccentricities – the “unsettling” qualities – that account for opera’s dramatic appeal.<sup>46</sup> From the perspective of music analysis, James Webster is also vocal in articulating discontent with the conventional assumption that text and music or action and music necessarily collaborate at all. In stark contrast to Rosen’s premise that musical style and drama are inextricable, James Webster insists on the autonomy of opera’s components through the concept of “multivalence,” which

holds that the various “domains” of an opera (text, action, music, etc.; as well as, within the music, tonality, motives, instrumentation, etc.) are not necessarily congruent and may even be incompatible; and that the resulting complexity or lack of integration is often a primary source of their aesthetic effect.<sup>47</sup>

By presupposing an independence among music’s discrete elements, Webster sees dramaturgy as the product of a series of juxtapositions within the texture of opera.

The relative interdependence or independence of opera’s components thus marks the conceptual difference between dramaturgy-as-coherence and dramaturgy-as-discontinuity. A flexible approach to “musical drama” would accommodate both of these models, yet in practice they seem to inspire incompatible methodologies. Rosen’s approach entails a strong confidence in a stable, unified periodization of compositional style, while Webster’s aria analyses look no further than internal structures and fail to convey the important ways dramaturgy is largely inherited and constrained by generic practice. Multivalence privileges the vertical, moment-to-moment events taking place among opera’s various layers, and its attention to dissent and discontinuity marginalizes the generic contexts and (often cooperative) interdisciplinary discussions that inform dramaturgy.

Recognizing the value of integrating dramaturgy’s internal structures with such contexts, opera scholarship inevitably looks to performance studies for its attention to contemporaneous practices, multi-media dynamics, and reception. Recently in the field of eighteenth-century research, John A. Rice’s *Mozart on the Stage* develops a “synchronic study” of Mozart’s operatic oeuvre, one that curtails the obvious differences between works in order to expose their common cultural-artistic context; issues of genre, geography, and chronology all take a back seat to a thematic study of Mozart’s operas as the products of “a single extraordinary mind and a single pan-European operatic culture.”<sup>48</sup> Rice formulates his interest in the “process” of operatic production as a constant mediation among *people*

---

<sup>46</sup> David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xii.

<sup>47</sup> James Webster, “Mozart’s Operas and the Myth of Musical Unity,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2/2 (1990): 197-218, 198. Webster reiterates this point (almost verbatim) in “The Analysis of Mozart’s Arias,” in *Mozart Studies*, ed. Cliff Eisen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 103-4.

<sup>48</sup> John A. Rice, *Mozart on the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xiii.

(including the composer, patron, librettist, performer, set designer, and audience); the “dramaturgical biography” he writes in this sense moves outward from Mozart’s private fascination with the theatre to audience reception and the dissemination of his works. Rice thus traces dramaturgy from the composer’s *internal* conception of the work to its *external* performance, locating a type of historical continuity in the staging strategies and plot archetypes common to all of Mozart’s operatic works. Such contextual evidence also underscores the pragmatic considerations of operatic production (for instance the dimensions of stage areas and their acoustics) that inform other aspects of theatrical poetics. While Rice builds a localized context for operas by documenting production details and reception history, Kristi Brown-Montesano has stressed opera’s broad “accumulation, [its] *continuing history*,” a perspective that she borrows from Richard Taruskin, who contends that an opera’s “meaning for us is mediated by all that has been thought and said about it since opening night.”<sup>49</sup> With its focus on modern opera productions, Levin’s research seems to corroborate Montesano’s perspective; dramaturgy, Levin documents, is a ceaseless process of evolution and reform as contemporary performance practice tries to discover new points of relevance in canonical works. As Levin’s work emphasizes, however, on one level even the most avant-garde opera productions help to reinstall the same group of works that have been on permanent display thanks to business models developed in the nineteenth century.

In a way, then, opera scholarship’s recent interest in dramaturgy – an eighteenth-century concept – is a way to acknowledge the operatic canon as a historical *fait accompli* while revisiting the works themselves through contemporary concerns, especially performance and intertextuality.

## **METHODOLOGY PLACARD 2: POSTMODERN ENLIGHTENMENT?**

Even given the renewed interest in staging and stage spaces, however, eighteenth-century opera studies continues to practice a deep ambivalence towards a more postmodern appreciation for the inextricability of text and performance, of historical documentation and interpretation – an ironic state of affairs, given the Enlightenment’s penchant for criticism and radical reform. Researchers are happy to document opera as a visual and literary production by looking at set design sketches, by excavating references to costume patterns in the correspondence between the composer and his affiliates, and by analysing the composer-

---

<sup>49</sup> Kristi Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart’s Operas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), xvii. Taruskin’s comment refers in particular to *Don Giovanni*. Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 267. Edmund J. Goehring discusses this issue in his review of Brown-Montesano’s book, “Reviews of Recent Mozart Scholarship,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61/3 (2008): 609-615, 612.

librettist relationship and their editing process. However, the prospect of extending these discussions beyond the strict confines of opera production seems to induce anxiety on four counts. First, the operatic repertoire of the eighteenth century is so vast that to incorporate peripheral issues seems impractical and premature (until a sufficient portion of these works have been rediscovered). Second, thanks to its immense popularity and persistence over two centuries, *dramma per musica* radiates a certain independence and robustness that might discourage comparisons with the other arts: it is seen as a tradition of its own rather than a contributor to a broader context. Third, just as literary scholars and art historians often hesitate to accept music as part of their purview, likewise musicology is perhaps reluctant to claim proficiency in these parallel fields. And finally, full cooperation among the arts – and their experts – inevitably comes up against mutual suspicion between disciplines wary of being eclipsed by another medium.

This wariness manifests itself not only in a degree of competition among the arts – a competition that goes back to antiquity – but also in scholarship’s ambivalence towards its own medium of writing. Not surprisingly, given the field’s relative conservatism, musicology specializing in eighteenth-century repertoire continues to wrestle with this predicament. In her now infamous article on *Don Giovanni*, Abbate seems to regret musicology’s literary format when she claims that “loquacity is our professional deformation.”<sup>50</sup> This odd separation of medium and message finds a vehement critic in Lawrence Kramer, for whom language is a precondition for history, interpretation, and context; the “ekphrastic fear” of “muting music with words,”<sup>51</sup> as Kramer terms it, falsely presumes that there is something separable from “loquacity” that must be defended against “deformation.” Karol Berger, in his response to Abbate, likewise retorts that “there is no such thing as pure experience, uncontaminated by interpretation [...] We cannot help it: We are hermeneutic creatures through and through.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, eighteenth-century musicology is increasingly cognizant of a level of meta-scholarship that admits writing as a valuable activity in and of itself. Brown-Montesano, for example, describes the chapters of her book as “not only thoughtful proposals for performance [...], but also abbreviated performances themselves.”<sup>53</sup> This attention to the metalanguage of research is a compelling way to integrate the textual and performative aspects of opera in scholarship.

---

<sup>50</sup> Carolyn Abbate, “Music - Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004): 505-536, 510.

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>52</sup> Karol Berger, “Musicology According to *Don Giovanni*, or: Should We Get Drastic?” *The Journal of Musicology* 22/3 (2005): 490-501, 497.

<sup>53</sup> Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart’s Operas*, xviii.

However, a recurring complaint about this performative view of opera studies is that it espouses a methodology at odds with the field's historical bent. Peter Williams raises a common objection when he accuses Kramer's brand of "postmodern" or "cultural" musicology of being "quite ahistorical."<sup>54</sup> Williams is not alone in his protestation, but counterarguments from musicologists and historians have proliferated over the past two decades. Gertrude Himmelfarb eloquently captures the crux of the "ahistorical" logic that increasingly informs historiography:

For postmodernism generally, there is no distinction between history and philosophy or between history and literature. [...] What the traditional historian sees as an event that actually occurred in the past, the postmodernist sees as a "text" that exists only in the present – a text to be parsed, glossed, construed, interpreted by the historian, much as a poem or novel is by the critic. And, like any literary text, the historical text is indeterminate and contradictory, paradoxical and ironic, so that it can be "textualized," "contextualized," "recontextualized" and "intertextualized" at will – the "text" being little more than a "pretext" for the creative historian.<sup>55</sup>

Himmelfarb might credit postmodernism with inventing a historiography that is comfortable with its own incompleteness, contemporaneity, and internal contradictions, but these are precisely the conditions that Diderot and d'Alembert also encourage in the *Encyclopédie*. In place of inter-medial angst, the *Encyclopédie* offers itself as a conscious – and stridently unapologetic – mixture of texts, images, and performances. In other words, the *Encyclopédie* conceives of itself as a historical document that is continually in progress even as it tries to encapsulate the knowledge of an era, as a text that is explicative but that also demands interpretation, and as an undertaking that acquires its didactic potency by appealing to every possible medium (textual, visual, and sonic).

But describing the *Encyclopédie*'s poetics as "postmodern" is not simply a way to appropriate its success in the name of a theoretical paradigm that is familiar and comfortable to us. Rather, emphasizing the project's prosperity both within and outside of its time is a way of confirming the dictionary's underlying premise – that knowledge and its contexts are mutable and indefinite and therefore all the more worth documenting. For opera studies in particular, the *Encyclopédie* presents a double opportunity: to discover *dramma per musica*'s contribution to the Enlightenment's broader aesthetic program by reading this repertoire through the ideas and methods of the *Encyclopédie*; and to prompt eighteenth-century opera scholarship's historical approach to take into account the kind of inter-medial collaboration that underlies both *dramma per musica* and the Enlightenment's poetics of tragedy. Poetics, after all, is at root a relational dynamic, as literary theorist Gérard Genette emphasizes:

---

<sup>54</sup> Peter Williams, "Peripheral Visions?" *The Musical Times* 145/1886 (2004): 51-67, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling it as you like it: postmodernist history and the flight from fact," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins, 158-174 (London: Routledge, 1997), 162.

The subject of poetics [...] is not the text considered in its singularity [...] The] subject of poetics is transtextuality, or the textual transcendence of the text, which I have already defined roughly as ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.’<sup>56</sup>

Not all these relationships are equally conspicuous, and Genette goes on to explain the various degrees of intertextual relationships, which together demonstrate that all texts are palimpsests of some sort or other.

This is certainly the case among the various media in the *Encyclopédie*. Where Diderot and d’Alembert’s project successfully builds on the obvious collaboration of text and image, the auditory realm is far less central but by no means absent. In the article on *dramma per musica*, for instance, *encyclopédiste* Friedrich Melchior Baron von Grimm goes to great lengths to capture this oral/aural dimension in text. Inventing a fictitious opera set in Rome and depicting an “oppressed people degraded under the reign of an odious tyrant,”<sup>57</sup> Grimm writes out a chorus complete with a refrain-like repetition and even a two-part dialogue effect:

Qu’il soit traîné, qu’il soit traîné!... ordonne, ordonne, nous te le demandons tous... Il a mis le poignard dans le sein de tous. Qu’il soit traîné!... Il n’a épargné ni âge, ni sexe; ni ses parents, ni ses amis. Qu’il soit traîné!... Il a dépouillé les temples. Qu’il soit traîné!... Il a violé les testaments. Qu’il soit traîné!... Il a ruiné les familles. Qu’il soit traîné!...

[Let him be dragged, let him be dragged!...command it, command it, we implore you...He put the knife into each of our breasts. Let him be dragged!...He did not spare the aged, nor the women, nor his parents, nor his friends. Let him be dragged!...He stripped the temples. Let him be dragged!...He violated confidences. Let him be dragged!...He ruined families. Let him be dragged!... ]<sup>58</sup>

With exaggerated punctuation, Grimm tries valiantly to make the chorus “sound” the aggression of the Roman people. Inevitably though, although the passage (which goes on for some 550 words) gives a vivid sense of the frenzied tone, wild vehemence, and even the rhythm and repetitive melodic fragmentation that would accompany this hypothetical chorus, the “music” in some ways eludes Grimm’s rhetorical powers. It is as though Grimm’s imaginary opera leaves its imprint on an article that records music’s absence as much as it captures its presence.

The first room in my “Museum of the Muses” will explore in more depth the contradiction Grimm faces in writing an article on opera that only captures the impression of its performative energy. As we will see, the *Encyclopédie* establishes a modern definition of

---

<sup>56</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Un peuple opprimé, avili sous le regne d’un odieux tyran.” Friedrich Melchior Baron von Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 12:823-12:836, 12:832.

<sup>58</sup> Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” 12:833.

theatrical poetics that explicitly invokes music as a central force for reform and that also looks to *dramma per musica* to hold together the multi-media components that make up its intertextual poetics. The *Encyclopédie* is thus the ideal place to start for our tour of tragic opera's special role in the Enlightenment's aesthetic discussions.

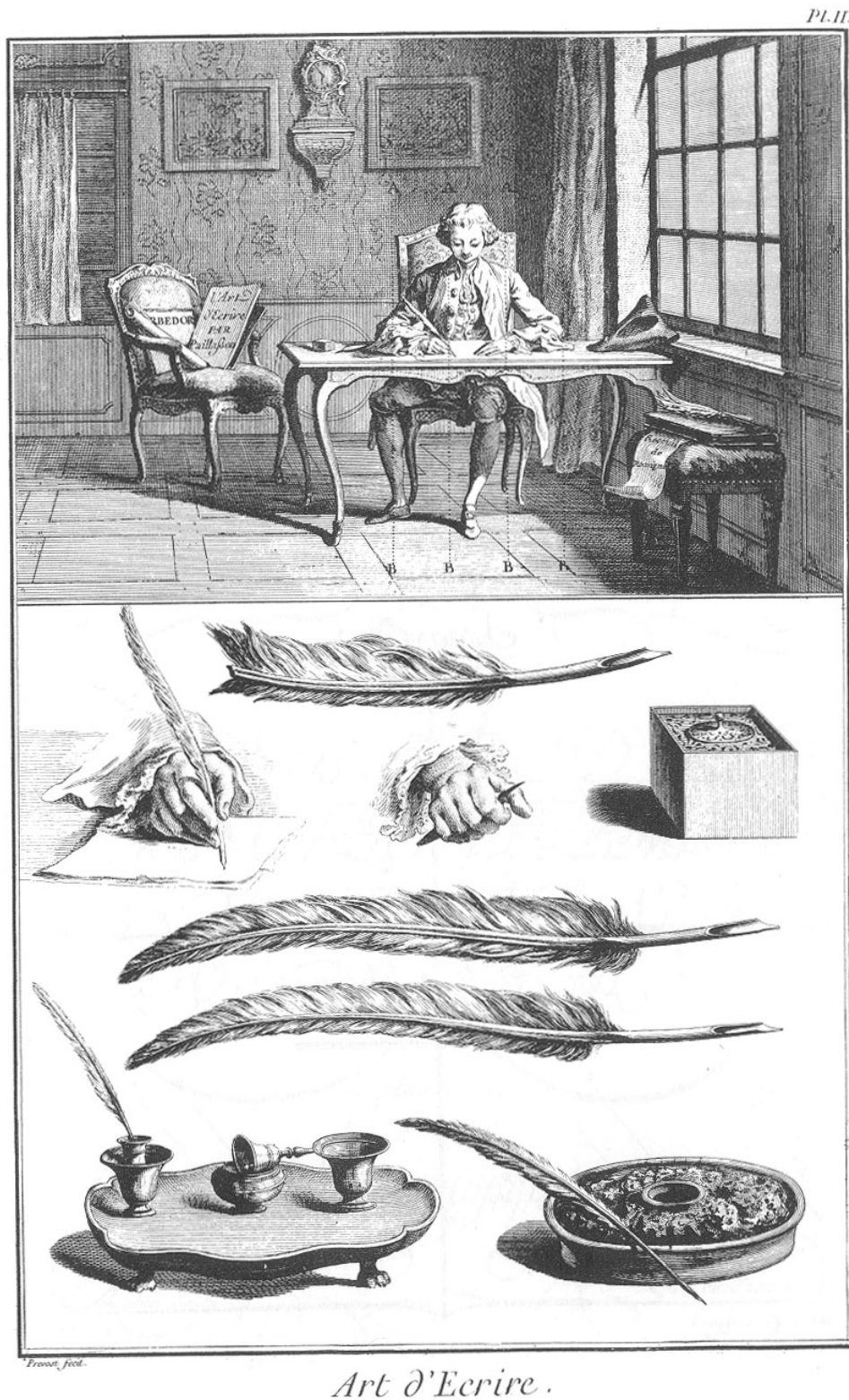
## CHAPTER 2 VERISIMILAR POETICS

Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* is an obvious first stop for a project interested in the poetics of tragic opera in the Enlightenment. In many ways, Genette's image of a palimpsest is a particularly apt description of the way music interacts with its sister arts in the *Encyclopédie* and more broadly throughout the Enlightenment. The theme of this first stop in the "Museum of the Muses" is thus the *Encyclopédie*'s poetics as a two-way palimpsest: Enlightenment poetics making its mark on operatic culture and reciprocally, music impressing itself on Enlightenment poetics. A closer examination of a few exemplary articles and plates from the *Encyclopédie* shows a multi-media mandate that builds on seventeenth-century theatrical principles and that establishes a relationship to music that is in turn explicit and ambiguous. This first room in our museum sets up the broader literary-aesthetic context in which *dramma per musica* emerges as both an active participant and something of an outlier. As a preface to the case studies I present in subsequent chapters, the *Encyclopédie* provides a compelling framework for synthesizing the textual, visual, and musical facets of opera along the lines Strohm recommends; it also gives the Enlightenment's textual perspective on the notions of "construction" and "style" that Rosen derives retrospectively from his exclusively musical sources. To guide us through the *Encyclopédie*'s nearly overwhelming breadth, I have enlisted the help of a more contemporary voice, that of Roland Barthes, whose reflections serve to highlight the ambition and controversy of a project with reverberations far beyond its Enlightenment context. The aim of this first room is therefore to probe a bit deeper into the *Encyclopédie*'s aesthetic agenda and its convoluted understanding of the three key concepts of this project, namely "la Poésie" as multi-media "construction" (which I will call "poetics"), "la Poésie" as a "style" built on theatrical concepts, and operatic tragedy's place within this notion of "la Poésie."

### ART AND/AGAINST LETTERS: THE ENCYCLOPÉDISTES' POETICS

In keeping with the broadly inclusive breadth of "la Poésie" illustrated in the *Encyclopédie*'s *Système figuré*, the poetics underlying Diderot and d'Alembert's monumental project is most easily summarized as a formidable synthesis of the written and the visual, and the dictionary's curatorial principle is nowhere more tangible than in the series of plates comprising the section on "Écritures." There, the "Art of writing," bountifully illustrated with sixteen plates, seems to epitomize a compendium keen to exceed its own textuality. The exquisite engravings by *maître écrivain* Charles Paillasson playfully illustrate the fluidity of art and letters, of an "Art d'Écrire:" writing as an art and art depicting writing (Figure 2.1). Paillasson makes the

reciprocity between writing and drawing look effortless, and the subject of his plate is a picture of perfect contentment.



**Figure 2.1** Charles Paillasson, “Écritures” Plate II, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1772)<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> “Écritures,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 19:21:1-19:22:1, 19:21:1. The author of the article is unknown.

To judge from the eleven volumes of plates accompanying the texts of the encyclopaedia, Diderot and d'Alembert's conception of the project practices exactly this kind of seamless merger between pictorial and textual expression that Paillasson's plate exemplifies. The two editors evidently put prodigious effort into procuring images expressly tailored to the *Encyclopédie's* accompanying articles. We might describe the *Encyclopédie's* style as a deeply collaborative one that builds on an overtly multi-media "poetics" in which images and texts complement one another. In a sense, with its unparalleled scope and impressive list of participants, the *Encyclopédie* renegotiates the limits of conventional scholarly practice to incorporate non-textual materials as an integral part of its project.

Catalogue, categorization, and classification are integral to the *Encyclopédie* and yet its authors rely on the organic synthesis of literary and non-literary media in order to make the content more available to its non-specialist readership. This symbiosis of text and image was by no means an invention of Diderot and d'Alembert's expansive and celebrated project, but the reciprocal tension it sets up between literary and pictorial definition reflects a bold and even controversial mandate with far-reaching implications. Even contemporary thinkers have discovered a perennial relevance in the dictionary's synthesis of didactic and artistic frameworks. In his essay from 1972 "Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*," Roland Barthes evaluates the *Encyclopédie's* timeless achievement as the "risk of reason" of a project that never "fails to vibrate well beyond its demonstrative intent."<sup>60</sup> This encyclopaedia is no mundane compilation of (now out-dated) knowledge but a work straddling at least two disparate worlds: the realm of text and the realm of image. For Barthes, this multi-media discourse is more than pedagogical; it aspires to support a mandate of almost epic breadth and invests in the dynamics that emerge from the collaboration/collision of the art of writing with the pictorial arts.

As Barthes observes, Paillasson's plate resounds beyond the explanatory article it illustrates in several ways. "Three things are necessary for writing: a beautiful day, a solid table, and a comfortable chair,"<sup>61</sup> the anonymous author of "Écritures" informs us, and Paillasson dutifully equips the accompanying plate with corresponding props and temporal markers – the writer caught mid-sentence in the morning light, his hat casually cast aside. If

---

<sup>60</sup> "Ce *risque* de la raison," "On peut dire qu'il n'y a pas une planche de l'*Encyclopédie* qui ne vibre bien au-delà de son propos démonstratif." Roland Barthes, "Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie* (1972)," in *Œuvres complètes IV: Livres, Textes, Entretiens 1972-1976*, 41-54, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 53, 50. Translation from Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," trans. Richard Howard, in *New Critical Essays*, 23-39 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 37, 35. Emphases throughout are original unless specified.

<sup>61</sup> "Trois choses sont nécessaires pour écrire; un beau jour, une table solide, & un siège commode." Anonymous, "Écritures," 19:21:1.

the artist captures his subject naturally, *in medias res*, however, the plate's apparent verisimilitude also contains several degrees of meta-textual (and meta-visual) depth.

There is the (auto)biographical depth of the sheaf proudly propped up on the adjacent chair, which states: "l'Art d'Écrire PAR Paillasson." With this declaration, the artist's signature moves from its conventional corner and publishes itself in full view. This series of plates, Paillasson seems to imply, is no single, modest contribution to an encyclopaedia in progress but a work complete in itself and already in circulation (at least within the narrative of the image). Thanks to the engraving's *mise en abyme*, the writer seated at the desk gains a degree of individuality; the contents of his study personalize him so that he is no longer a stock figure but a man whose reading material includes Paillasson's own treatise. He is, presumably, a follower of Paillasson and a fellow pupil of the *Encyclopédie*. Is "l'Art d'Écrire" perhaps even a self-portrait? Certainly the particulars of the plate, above all those poised, competent hands holding the pen, lend the scene a personality – an intimacy even.

There is also a pedagogical and historical depth in the documents laid out over Paillasson's prototypical study, documents testifying to a literary lineage rendered conspicuously visible. In the foreground a second document, "Recueil de Rossignol," pokes out from under a book – a reference to Paillsson's tutor, Louis Rossignol, and a celebration of a long and prestigious pedigree of *écrivains*.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, resting symbolically in the background of the unoccupied chair, a text by Louis Barbedor<sup>63</sup> acknowledges Paillasson's seventeenth-century predecessor, whose partially obscured treatise is palpably in the process of being superseded by Paillasson's newer, more prominent text. Clearly then, underpinning the "Art d'Écrire" is a long line of treatises on the subject of writing, and by visually inserting his own curriculum vitae into the history of his métier, Paillasson recognizes his task – and of course that of the *Encyclopédie* – as an accumulation of knowledge and praxis rather than an originary project. The treatises of his predecessors constitute a distinct part of his current contribution to a long-standing tradition.

There is, finally, a mechanical depth that buttresses the plate's explanatory authority; the bottom half of the plate discloses this mechanism, which combines the technological (the *stilus*) and the physiological (the *manus*). By setting pen and hand side by side, Paillasson exposes writing as a task torn between the subjective human agent and his standardized tools.

---

<sup>62</sup> Rossignol (1694-1739) was named "maître à écrire" in 1715 by the future duc d'Orléans. His only publications were posthumous, yet Paillasson held him in the highest esteem. See Claude Mediavilla, *Histoire de la Calligraphie Française*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), 265-268.

<sup>63</sup> Barbedor (1589-1670) was the preeminent calligrapher of his time and published a *Traité de l'art d'écrire* in Paris in 1655. Alexander Nesbitt, *The History and Technique of Lettering* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1950), 105. My thanks to Michael Crawford for deciphering this name from its hazy appearance in Paillasson's engraving.

Writing, Paillasson seems to suggest, revolves around an artistic hand, and by extension, so too does the *Encyclopédie*. Implicitly, Diderot and d'Alembert's undertaking aligns itself with a kind of scientific objectivity, yet its plates in many ways epitomize what Barthes sees as the *Encyclopédie*'s humanist creativity: the "Encyclopedic object is [...] subjugated [...] for a very simple and constant reason: it is on each occasion *signed* by man."<sup>64</sup> The beauty of Paillasson's sketches somehow exceeds their didactic purpose, and thus the lesson of his engraving is that visual pleasure in no way undermines explanatory function. Even more importantly, the plate gives face to the author-artist *practicing* the "art of writing." The art of writing is above all an ongoing activity and not simply an inert textual document.

Indeed, Paillasson treats his illustration as a visual manual in a double sense, both as the illustrative supplement to the dictionary's article and, more literally, as the residual mark of a manual process. It becomes impossible to overlook the "hands" responsible for the imaginative energy behind the article's content. The prominence of the elegantly drawn hands becomes a strong metonymy for the topic of writing and, as Barthes observes, for the *Encyclopédie* as a whole:

On peut même préciser davantage à quoi se réduit l'homme de l'image encyclopédique, quelle est, en quelque sorte, l'essence même de son humanité: ce sont ses mains. [...] ces mains sont sans doute le symbole d'un monde artisanal.

[We can even specify more clearly what the man of the Encyclopedic image is reduced to – what is, in some sense, the very essence of his humanity: his hands. [...] these hands are doubtless the symbol of an artisanal world.]<sup>65</sup>

Concentrated to his most symbolic appendage, the artisan remains prominently at the centre of the *Encyclopédie*. At the same time, he is anything but an immovable fulcrum. The humanity – l'*humain* – that Barthes perceives is on the contrary a thoroughly intermediate one. Even Paillasson's visual dissection of the "art of writing" depicts a craft caught between two instruments (hand and stylus), between the purely organic and the mechanized. The *maître écrivain* is an artisan whose trade is not easily categorized; his labour is manual in one sense but undeniably skilled and delicate. He is neither a simple worker nor a man of leisure, but rather a figure whose expertise defies classification. This also means that the poetics he cultivates is bipartisan and not without risk: a manual poetics that stretches across worlds, occupying the chasm between them. "There is a *depth*," Barthes insists, that "leads to what we

---

<sup>64</sup> "L'objet encyclopédique est au contraire assujéti [...] pour une raison très simple et constante: c'est qu'il est à chaque fois *signé* par l'homme." Barthes, "Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*," 44-45. Translated in Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," 28.

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, "Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*," 45. Translated in Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*," 28.

must call the Poetics of the Encyclopedic image,”<sup>66</sup> and at the bottom of this depth lies the human subject:

C’est la gageure de l’*Encyclopédie* (dans ses planches) d’être à la fois une œuvre didactique, fondée en conséquence sur une exigence sévère d’objectivité (de “réalité”) et une œuvre poétique, dans laquelle le réel est sans cesse débordé par *autre chose* [...]. Par des moyens purement graphiques qui ne recourent jamais à l’alibi noble de *l’art*, le dessin encyclopédique fait éclater le monde exact qu’il se donne au départ.

[It is the *Encyclopedia*’s wager (in its plates) to be both a didactic work, based consequently on a severe demand for objectivity (for “reality”), and a poetic work in which the real is constantly overcome by *some other thing* [...]. By purely graphic means, which never resort to the noble alibi of *art*, Encyclopedic drawing explodes the exact world it takes as its subject.]<sup>67</sup>

From the friction of the written and the visual, the plates of the *Encyclopédie* stretch their didactic function, burst the boundaries (“déborde”) of the “real,” and synthesize the didactic and the poetic with their “artisanal” method. The skilled artisan bridges the realms of aesthetic theory and practice.

From this perspective, the *Encyclopédie*’s poetics is as politically fluid as it is aesthetically inclusive. Its wager is to bring the artisan’s craft to bear on the domain of the educated, to proclaim the insufficiency of the *littérateur*’s written domain and insist upon the equal part of the image. The in-between status of the artisan’s discourse holds a strong appeal for Barthes on a semantic level as well; his characteristic mode of analysis is well-suited to unpeeling this layered discourse and discovering its underlying values, connotations, and ideologies. This type of layered meaning arises quite fluidly from the text-image exchange, and Barthes happily sets about teasing out the plates’ figurative significance with a mode of analysis calibrated to discover symbolic structures. This again is a characteristic that the *Encyclopédie* seems eager to pursue to an ambitious and controversial extent. Indeed, although the *Encyclopédie*’s mandate of intelligibility succeeds thanks to its two principal media, it also puts additional demands on its reader. Arguably, Diderot and d’Alembert recognize the challenge posed by their own endeavour, as the same plates they commission to fill in the encyclopaedic world end up “exploding” the project even beyond its immediate didactic ambition. The combination of texts and images requires readers to adopt a versatile form of literacy that is equally textual and visual. It also asks them to accommodate a lexicography that is unusually slippery. An intermedial poetics of writing only succeeds alongside an audacious poetics of *reading*. An aestheticization of the text, a textualisation of

---

<sup>66</sup> “Il y a une *profondeur* [...] qu’il faut bien appeler la Poétique de l’image encyclopédique.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*,” 50. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 34.

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*,” 52. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 37.

the image – when writing falls under the scope of the artisan, its poetics suddenly demands of its reader a literacy of an in-between language. The *Encyclopédie*'s poetics rests on a specific kind of “écriture,” to be sure, but also on a special kind of readership.

According to Barthes, this problem of legibility is solved through a very particular type of reading. In his view, the project of the *Encyclopédie* becomes coherent through metaphor, that is to say, reading that is alive to “a displacement on the level of perception”<sup>68</sup> and that dispenses with the linearity of writing in order to admit the “privilege of the image [...] to compel [...] reading to have no specific meaning.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, a type of reading that “sees” imagery is a mode of perception with the power to suture the *Encyclopédie*'s two worlds, or so he concludes from the *Encyclopédie*'s plates: “In a word, the fracture of the world is impossible: a glance suffices – ours – for the world to be eternally complete.”<sup>70</sup> Implicitly, his argument points to metaphor (which is a *figure* of speech) as the most obvious language to describe the *Encyclopédie*'s plates – in other words, its *figurative* component. Indeed, perhaps the *Encyclopédie* seems to encourage not one single mode of reading that covers two media, but rather two different, simultaneous types of literacy.

Lorraine Piroux perceives two complementary dispositions towards reading and textuality among the *philosophes*, including many of Diderot and d'Alembert's collaborators. The first disposition prioritizes legibility – the textual legibility that is the purview of the educated intellectual. The *Encyclopédie*, Piroux points out, makes obvious use of “systematic and rigorous definitions, [...] the translation of unruly professional speech into clear philosophical language.”<sup>71</sup> The archetypal dictionary entry promises to translate specialist knowledge into a haven of familiarity, which is precisely what Paillason captures when he sets the “Art of Writing” in a tranquilly domestic scene. We might describe Diderot and d'Alembert's goal of accessibility as conforming to a very conventional pedagogy, one in which style is synonymous with clarity. Legibility, accessibility, and clarity do not, however, do full justice to the *Encyclopédie*'s multi-media composition, which is more exciting and more complicated than transparently didactic. A second, contrasting textual disposition thus coexists alongside the first – the visual legibility of the craftsman.

---

<sup>68</sup> “Un déplacement du niveau de perception.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*,” 51. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 36.

<sup>69</sup> “Le privilège de l'image, opposée en cela à l'écriture, qui est linéaire, c'est de n'obliger à aucun sens de lecture.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*,” 49. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 33-4.

<sup>70</sup> “En un mot, la fracture du monde est impossible: il suffit d'un regard – le nôtre – pour que le monde soit éternellement plein.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l'*Encyclopédie*,” 54. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 39.

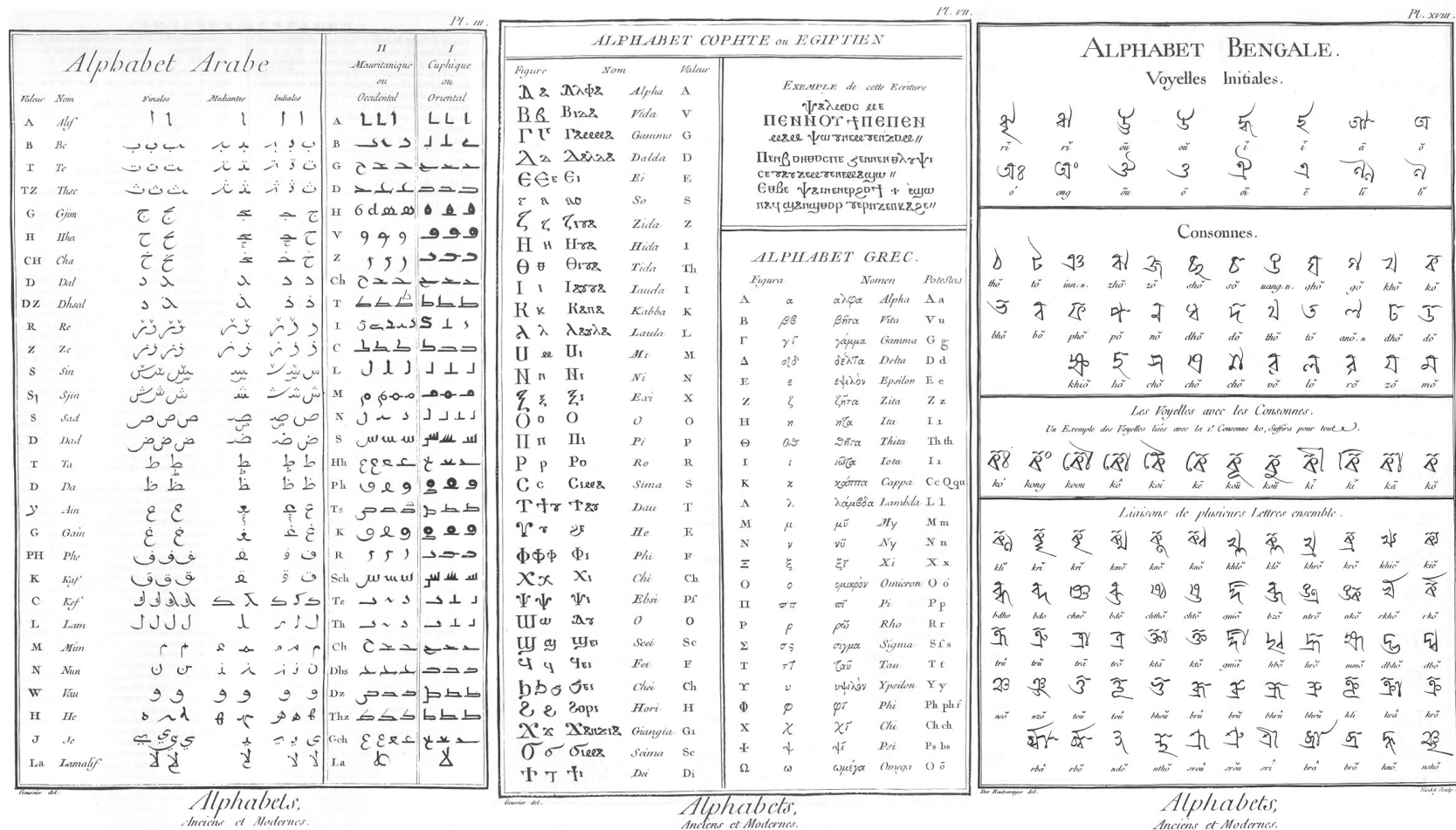
<sup>71</sup> Lorraine Piroux, “The Encyclopedist and the Peruvian Princess: The Poetics of Illegibility in French Enlightenment Book Culture,” *PMLA* 121/1 (2006): 107-123, 108.

This second approach to learning hinges on a failure of recognition – in Piroux’s terms, “a poetics of illegibility” stimulated by the *philosophes*’ fascination with unfamiliar scripts from far-flung corners of the Enlightenment world. There is nothing disadvantageous about this illegibility, however; it complements textual literacy to expose the depth and dimensionality of the *Encyclopédie*’s poetics. The pictorial, hieroglyphic, or non-alphabetic languages of the Aztecs, Egyptians, and Arabic peoples addressed a “blind spot” in Eurocentric literacy, namely its propensity to “see directly through” writing.<sup>72</sup> In the *Encyclopédie*, an astonishing twenty-five plates are dedicated to “Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes,” and notwithstanding the impressive effort to tabulate the alphabetic equivalences across numerous scripts (see Figures 2.2-2.4), their visual impact presents an alternative approach to text, one that is less concentrated on deciphering meaning and more interested in orthographic presentation. The engravings aim to translate these languages into familiar alphabets, but in the process of domesticating the foreign, the plate also highlights the material presence of the unfamiliar scripts and renders the strange characters all the more visible; its European readers find themselves “illiterate” with regard to these letters, which they cannot fully *read* for their content but rather *see* for their figurative composition. In this context, the difference between text and image and between reading and seeing becomes blurred. As Piroux remarks, with semantic content suddenly unavailable to the average reader, “the encyclopedist envisioned the possibility of an aesthetic – a materialist – conception of texts.”<sup>73</sup> Looking back once again at Paillasson’s “Art d’Écrire,” we see that the engraver seems acutely aware of his own medium (or rather, the clash of his two media). Paillasson pens a document that is not only informative but also beautiful; he manipulates the fact of the engraving’s materiality towards a pedagogy that makes sense in visual terms as much as in literal ones. The *Encyclopédie* demands a type of reading that also “sees” beyond the literary content of the text: this method of reading is one that synthesizes disparate materials (textual and visual), that is unafraid of the overlap between dictionary and gallery, that is open to the proliferation of meaning and confident in the coexistence of multiple textualities (explicative, metaphoric, literate, illiterate). This form of reading practices “poetics” in as generous a way as the project’s all-encompassing notion of “la Poésie” would seem to mandate. Barthes’s metaphor-driven style of criticism thus harmonizes well with Piroux’s more historical perspective; both agree that one of the *Encyclopédie*’s most significant features is its exploration of a “Poésie” in which text is illustrative in all senses of

---

<sup>72</sup> Piroux, “The Encyclopedist and the Peruvian Princess,” 115.

<sup>73</sup> Piroux, “The Encyclopedist and the Peruvian Princess,” 112.



**Figures 2.2-4** Louis-Jacques Goussier (2.2-2.3) and unknown (2.4), “Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes,” Plates III, VII, XVIII, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1772)<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> “Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 19:20:1-19:21:1, 19:20:2, 19:20:5, 19:20:10. The *Encyclopédie* cites Michel-Ange-André Le Roux Deshauterayes (1724-1795) as the primary author of the article and artist for the plates.

the word since its pedagogical success largely hinges on a fluid interaction between text and image.

### THE ENCYCLOPÉDISTES' STYLE: VERISIMILITUDE

For the *encyclopédistes*, the overlap between pictorial texts and textual images constituted a method ideally suited to the dictionary's mandate, but the newfound visibility of text also complicated their attempts to categorize literary genres according to *style*. As Piroux documents, the interest in the hieroglyphic quality of foreign scripts inspired several prominent *philosophes* to make an argument for the universality of visual effects in discourse; for instance, according to Étienne Bonnot de Condillac "stylistic figures and metaphors in Western discourse were none other than leftover traces of some earlier pictorial stage of writing."<sup>75</sup> As Jaucourt immediately perceived, embracing figures of speech (including metaphor) as fundamental components of language posed problems when it came to trying to differentiate literary genres according to their stylistic features. All that remained was a spectrum of degrees of pictorialism in text across which one could locate specific types of discourse or genres:

Bien des métaphores qui passeroient pour des figures trop hardies dans le *style* oratoire le plus élevé, sont reçues en poésie [...]; la Rhétorique qui veut persuader notre raison, doit toujours conserver un air de modération & de sincérité.

[Many metaphors that would seem to be overly bold figures of speech even in the most elevated oratorical *style* are admissible in poetry [...]; rhetoric that aims to persuade our reason must always maintain an air of moderation and of sincerity.]<sup>76</sup>

In this passage, Jaucourt tries to tease out differences among literary styles and focuses in on "figures of speech" in relation to two modes of discourse in particular: the domain of poetry, which he claims makes freer use of metaphor, and rhetorical prose, which eschews elaborate imagery in favour of a more grounded, transparent discourse. This ambitious attempt to distinguish between poetry and prose is itself an important debate that we will come to in Chapter 3. Further along in the article on "Poésie du style," Jaucourt quickly qualifies this contrast between poetry and rhetorical prose. The best poets, he points out, make maximum use of the *exchange* between literal and figurative language: in the hands of the great Racine, for instance, even the most "trivial thought" becomes "an eloquent discourse that astounds

---

<sup>75</sup> Piroux, "The Encyclopedist and the Peruvian Princess," 112. Piroux specifically cites Jaucourt's article on "Écriture" (5:360) alongside Condillac's seminal *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746).

<sup>76</sup> Louis de Jaucourt, "Style, Poésie du," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 15:554-15:556, 15:555.

us.”<sup>77</sup> In keeping with Diderot’s insistence on “la Poésie” as an umbrella term for all the arts, then, the *Encyclopédie*’s contributors pursued the breadth of this concept on a more local level, where “la Poésie” comes to signify a style of pictorial text that is ubiquitous across all types of writing. In other words, the multi-media construction of the *Encyclopédie* had a corresponding impact on the notion of style that is unpacked within its articles.

Of all the project’s many collaborators, Jaucourt above all had to wrestle with this second, stylistic aspect of Diderot’s vague concept of “la Poésie” in two ways: first, his seventeen thousand articles (which represent roughly twenty-five percent of the entire project’s content) include most of the entries on literature; and second, Jaucourt was forced to tackle the topic directly in the article on the subject of “la Poésie du style.” In response to the first challenge, Jaucourt simply circumvented the need to define particular genres of writing according to their visual effect (i.e. their use of figures of speech such as metaphor) by remaining unwilling – and to an extent, unable – to categorize too stringently between types of language; he associates pictorial text sometimes with versified poetry, sometimes with prose discourse, sometimes with the “natural” origins of language, sometimes with the artifice of overly constructed rhetoric. Even though his article on “la Poésie du style” suggests that the pictorial quality of text is not by itself a criterion for classifying different genres of literature, he nevertheless claims that the imagistic quality of writing is a crucial component of style:

STYLE, POÉSIE DU: [...] Cette partie de la Poésie la plus importante, est en même tems la plus difficile: c’est pour inventer des images qui peignent bien ce que le poète veut dire; c’est pour trouver les expressions propres à leur donner l’être, qu’il a besoin d’un feu divin, & non pas pour rimer.

[POETICS OF STYLE: [...] This crucial aspect of Poetics is at the same time the most difficult: it is to invent images that capture what the poet wishes to say; to find the right expressions to give them life, and not to find rhymes, that the poet needs a divine fire.]<sup>78</sup>

To complicate matters, Jaucourt – taking his cue from Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Système figuré* – leaves it unclear whether he defines “la Poésie” as “poetry” or “poetics” or a combination of both. His reference to “poet” is also non-specific, since the *encyclopédistes*

---

<sup>77</sup> “La pensée de triviale [...] devient dans ses vers un discours éloquent qui nous frappe.” Jaucourt, “Style, Poésie du,” 15:555.

<sup>78</sup> This passage is from Jaucourt’s article for the *Encyclopédie* but is actually plagiarized verbatim from Jean-Baptiste Dubos’s treatise of several decades earlier. Jaucourt made a habit of copying passages of Dubos into many of his contributions to the *Encyclopédie*. See Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, Première Partie* (Paris: Jean Mariette, 1719), 271. Jaucourt, “Style, Poésie du,” 15:554.

use this word to mean “writer.” Regardless, Jaucourt adamantly insists that finding the right image to suit the idea is not just a difficult task, but one that demands divine inspiration.

Beyond the practical problem this poses for Jaucourt and his colleagues, who had to classify and define different topics for the *Encyclopédie*, this preoccupation with the visual-symbolic order of discourse relates to a broader debate surrounding the function of imagery in versified and non-versified texts. If imagery and metaphor are not limited to any particular genre and can be features of *any* text – whether in verse or in prose – then what determines their appropriate usage? Jaucourt’s answer, in short, is *verisimilitude*, a concept that was much debated especially among seventeenth-century tragedians. The concept of “la vraisemblable” was wrangled over for decades by France’s most illustrious writers and playwrights, including Racine, Corneille, and Nicolas Boileau. Corneille, in his 1660 “Discours de la tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable ou le nécessaire” (“Essay on Tragedy and the Means of Treating it According to Verisimilitude or ‘the Necessary’”), defines the concept with difficulty: “In order to define ‘le vraisemblable,’ I will dare to say that it is *something manifestly possible according to the rules of propriety* [la bienséance], *and that it is neither manifestly true nor manifestly false.*”<sup>79</sup> Jaucourt’s injunction that the use of metaphor should always “[preserve] an air of moderation and sincerity” echoes this crucial – albeit ambiguous – principle of neoclassical tragedy. What distinguishes one mode of discourse from another, he argues, is the balance each strikes between the degree (and perhaps type) of pictorialism and the mode of discourse. Poetry is not inherently more visual or prose less so, but both must strive for verisimilitude within their respective discourses. Discourse of any kind, he points out, might benefit from a language indebted to images (and the imaginary), but it has an obligation to *appear* credible, realistic.

Crucially, then, *verisimilitude* represents the fundamental principle of Jaucourt’s “poetics of style” and applies equally to poetry and to prose: he refers to all writers as “poets” and asserts that “the first rule that the poet must adhere to when working with his chosen topics, is not to include anything that would run against *verisimilitude*.”<sup>80</sup> The idea that language is approximately true rather than categorically so rescues Jaucourt from having to disentangle the issue of figurative tropes and their appropriate genre one way or the other. The fact that Jaucourt turns to a pillar of neoclassical dramatic theory to help him negotiate the

---

<sup>79</sup> Italics in original. “J’ose dire, pour définir le vraisemblable, que c’est *une chose manifestement possible dans la bienséance, et qui n’est ni manifestement vraie ni manifestement fausse.*” Pierre Corneille, *Trois Discours sur le poème dramatique*, ed. Louis Forestier (Paris: Société d’Édition d’Enseignement Supérieur, 1963), 113.

<sup>80</sup> “La première règle que doit observer le poète, en traitant les sujets qu’il a choisis, est de n’y rien insérer qui soit contre la *vraisemblance*.” Jaucourt, “Vraisemblance,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 17:484.

*Encyclopédie*'s innovative theory of language is significant. Above all, it shows the extent to which seventeenth-century theatrical principles continued to exert considerable authority over the Enlightenment's *philosophes* even as they set about antagonizing neoclassicism's basic rules. It is easy to historicize the *Encyclopédie*'s pretensions to document the "arts, sciences, and professions" as epitomizing progressive Enlightenment ideals, yet the echo of the previous century's literary debates continue to direct the *philosophes* in their quest to define a "Poésie" suited to the new century.

For the *Encyclopédie*, however, the concept of verisimilitude brings with it its own considerations and an approach to language that is strikingly different from that of neoclassicism's tragic playwrights but that proved enticing to the era's librettists and composers. By "discovering" the figurative basis of language through parallel, foreign scripts, the *Encyclopédie* challenges the scope of "la vraisemblable" as it was applied in the seventeenth century and arguably even poses a threat to the verisimilitude of its own parameters, in particular its pretension to reproduce knowledge comprehensively and completely. Its images, on the one hand, can only partially decipher the foreign texts and, on the other hand, invite a depth of observation that, at its best, exceeds the dictionary's pedagogical purpose. Paillasson's "Art d'Écrire," for example, registers the details supplied by the accompanying article, but the plate's composition contributes well beyond the written explanation. Figuration seems to be part of the *explanatory* process (of the art of writing, of the origins of language, of the poetics of style), but eventually – like the *Encyclopédie* itself – its logic spills over the closed system of self-referencing into an *exploratory* process instead. Diderot and d'Alembert's dictionary establishes a poetics for itself, and this poetics daringly stretches its own framework, its authorship, and its readers. A project like the *Encyclopédie* necessarily risks overstepping the bounds of verisimilitude in search of accessibility, artistic inspiration, and intellectual progress. The problem of verisimilitude had preoccupied first the French neoclassical playwrights in the seventeenth century, then the *Encyclopédie*'s distinguished contributors, and remained contentious thereafter, even haunting Barthes in his project to re-present canonical knowledge in a new, explicitly intermedial way. Just as many of the encyclopaedia's articles harbour vestiges of the previous century's heated paper wars, so too do these same disputes persist even in today's contemporary literary criticism, ever urgent and unresolved. However "raisonné" in style, the *Encyclopédie* documents – and also anticipates – the uneasy relationship between convention and innovation that makes of poetics a demanding and often treacherous topic. From the seventeenth-century "Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes" through to the twentieth-century debate surrounding "la nouvelle critique," the *Encyclopédie* remains a useful touchstone in the long, epic conversation

surrounding poetics and the ever-controversial rapprochement of old and new discourses within a pedagogical and cultural framework. In this sense, the *Encyclopédie* neither invented its theoretical problems nor solved them definitively, and it is worth taking a moment in our museum tour to consider some of the contemporary resonances of the collision between neoclassical principles and the kind of multi-media poetics that set out to reconfigure their application.

Barthes's unassuming, slim monograph entitled simply *Sur Racine* (1963) is perhaps the most sensational example of such a collision. Few academic texts can boast the influence or notoriety – indeed, a quarter of a century's worth of vitriol – of Barthes's study. The book is completely unremarkable in its format, providing commentary on each Racine tragedy in chronological order and framing this comprehensive overview with essays tackling the themes and tropes of Racine's opus – it is, in some ways, a miniature *Encyclopédie* of Racine's œuvre. Less conventional by far, however, are Barthes's analytical methods and vivid descriptive language, which contemplate Racine's tragic plays through an unorthodox mixture of psychological and structural metaphors. In many ways, Barthes's writing practices the kind of fusion of text and image that the *Encyclopédie* tries to synthesize, but his unconventional approach to the world of neoclassical tragedy had incendiary consequences. What irked Barthes's critics above all was his evocative and metaphorical language, which paints a picture instead of following a linear line of argument:

Le soleil fait un extérieur pur, net, dépeuplé; la vie est dans l'ombre [...]. Même hors la maison, il n'y a pas de vrai souffle: c'est le maquis, le desert, un espace inorganisé. L'habitat racinien ne connaît qu'un seul rêve de fuite: la mer, les vaisseaux: dans *Iphigénie*, tout un peuple reste prisonnier de la tragédie parce que le vent ne se lève pas.

[The sun produces a landscape that is pure, distinct, depopulated; life is without shade [...]. Even outside the house, there is no real breath of air: there is the scrub, the desert, an unorganized space. The Racinian habitat knows only one dream of flight: the sea, the ships. In *Iphigénie*, a whole people remains imprisoned by the tragedy because the wind fails to rise.]<sup>81</sup>

The genre's tragic setting becomes an almost animate participant in the drama onstage. Barthes's vision of tragedy is meta-theatrical and blurs the boundaries between visual and textual interpretation – it is, in a word, “poétique.” Provocative and imaginative, Barthes's perspective reconfigures the rules of literary commentary and challenges conventional accounts of seventeenth-century dramaturgy; indeed, his analysis deliberately avoids presenting interpretations that are “verisimilar” in terms of reflecting the plays' historical

---

<sup>81</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine*, in *Œuvres complètes II: livres, textes, entretiens 1962-1967*, 53-194, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 49. Translation in Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 3.

context or commenting on the particularities of their construction vis-à-vis neoclassical principles. For some, Barthes's interpretation of Racine amounted to a flowery series of generalizations with a flagrant disregard for the specifics of plot and genre. At the time of *Sur Racine*'s publication, Barthes's resolute scrutiny of symbolism, archetypes, and latent tropes quickly drew the focus of admirers and detractors alike, for whom the book represented either an exciting methodological breakthrough or a vicious attack on scholarly process. At stake in this polemical discussion around Barthes's "nouvelle critique" were the responsibilities and principles of literary criticism in relation to its valued literary objects (in this case, Racine's neoclassical dramas). Barthes's contemporaries were polemical in their approval or repudiation of his curatorial method.

Having risked a reconfiguration of the conditions of poetic interpretation – and, above all, by working outside conventional systems of reference based on history and biography – Barthes was accused of forsaking the historical context within which Racine's *œuvre* is intelligible and of mismanaging the all-important balance between metaphor and verisimilitude. To hostile critics like Raymond Picard, a scholarly approach to neoclassical theatre needed to acknowledge the principle of verisimilitude as a historical fact and also as an analytical obligation, indeed as the root of academic credibility. Barthes's analysis, Picard argued, was not "true" to his neoclassical materials in that it denied their historical context a central role in academic commentary. For Picard, the academy's foremost Racine expert, Barthes's penchant for metaphorical interpretation, psychological language, and apparent generalizations constituted a dangerous kind of pretense. Barthes's discourse, he rules, is a form of fraud:

M. Barthes, condamné à ne pas parler des choses, est voué, on a déjà pu le constater, à une sorte de crise métaphorique – avec toute l'indécision que cela comporte, la relation entre l'objet et la métaphore qui le qualifie étant multiple et floue.

[As we can clearly see, Mr. Barthes, who is condemned never to speak of actual things, is doomed to a sort of metaphoric crisis – with all the indecision that this involves, since the relationship between the object and the metaphor that qualifies it is myriad and blurry.]<sup>82</sup>

Barthes sees metaphors rather than "speaking of actual things," Picard protests. Predictably, Barthes's interrogation of the framework within which intelligibility and academic "reason" allegedly operate rendered him susceptible to alarmist charges of irrationality and irresponsible research.

To a large extent, the magnitude of Barthes's supposed radicalism was exaggerated by his critics. Zealous endorsements for Barthes's new approach came from colleagues like

---

<sup>82</sup> Raymond Picard, *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture?* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1965), 25.

Serge Doubrovsky, who had little time for the savage detractors of “la nouvelle critique:” “I can see,” he writes, “sprouting beneath the pomp of academic caps, the donkey ears of obscurantism.”<sup>83</sup> Doubrovsky bluntly exposes Picard’s position as little more than hyperbole:

Une *critique de la critique*, voilà précisément ce dont on aurait besoin. Au lieu de cela, Picard fait un procès, dans le grand style, avec jeu complet de manchettes: il condamne par amalgame, il se prend pour le bon sens, la droite raison, l’Université et presque pour la France, dont Roland Barthes [...] aurait terni la réputation.

[A *criticism of criticism* is precisely what we need. But instead of that Picard has instituted a trial, on the grandest scale and with a maximum of pomp and circumstance; his verdict is a blanket affair; he sets himself up as Common Sense in person, as Reason, as the University, and almost as France itself, whose reputation Roland Barthes has apparently tarnished.]<sup>84</sup>

For all his support, Doubrovsky’s comments did little to quash the angry frenzy of Barthes’s critics. The interpretive model of *Sur Racine* was most easily dismissed as a crude parody of the academic establishment, the book’s demonstrative value repressed by caricature.<sup>85</sup> Picard’s judgement was categorical: “Mr. Barthes has invented an ideological impressionism that is basically dogmatic.”<sup>86</sup>

If Picard’s ferocity seems incommensurate with the defined scope and unapologetic style of *Sur Racine*, in some ways Barthes’s project opens itself to exactly such emphatic responses. His introductory proposition to the reader immediately polarizes his analysis from within: “Let us test on Racine, by virtue of his very silence, all the languages our century

---

<sup>83</sup> “Je vois pointer, sous le bircome académique, l’oreille de l’obscurantisme.” Doubrovsky had published a monograph on Corneille the same year *Sur Racine* was published in 1963. Serge Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi la nouvelle Critique: critique et objectivité* (Paris: Mercure, 1966), 22. Translation in Serge Doubrovsky, *The New Criticism in France*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 78. Doubrovsky was not the only critic to leap to Barthes’s defense. See also Jean-Paul Weber, *Néo-critique et paléo-critique ou Contre Picard* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1966).

<sup>84</sup> Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi la nouvelle critique?*, xv. Translation in Doubrovsky, *The New Criticism in France*, 47.

<sup>85</sup> Some critics, lacking Picard’s expertise, did not dignify *Sur Racine* even with detailed refutations. At the opposite extreme, René Pommier – still incensed more than two decades later – produced an enormous tome dedicated exclusively to castigating *Sur Racine* in hyperbolic terms. Less qualified than Picard (though certainly no less acrimonious), Pommier leaves the reader in no doubt as to his assessment. The dust jacket of his study immediately declares his desire to “convaincre tous les lecteurs qui ne sont pas allergiques à la logique, que ce livre [de Barthes] n’est qu’un stupéfiant tissu de stupidités, dont les trois caractères principaux sont une complète inintelligence des textes, une continuelle incohérence et une constante extravagance” [to “convince all those readers who are not allergic to logic that this book [by Barthes] is but a stupefying fabric of stupidities whose three main characteristics are a complete lack of intelligence toward the texts, a continuous incoherence and an unremitting extravagance.”] The sheer length of Pommier’s book (some four hundred pages to Barthes’s one hundred and fifty) demonstrates that considerable effort was required to pick apart Barthes’s monograph. (Obscurantism, indeed!) René Pommier, *Le “Sur Racine” de Roland Barthes* (Paris: Eurédit, 1988).

<sup>86</sup> “M. Barthes a inventé un impressionnisme idéologique qui est d’essence dogmatique.” Picard, *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture*, 76.

suggests.”<sup>87</sup> There is a sense here that criticism is split between two temporal poles, the interpretive present (the “languages of our century”) and the documentary past (in this case, Racine’s tragedies). Barthes’s proposal, moreover, sits uncertainly between two very different conceptions of their relationship: does literary criticism usurp the utterances of its silenced inspiration, or does it rather excite a predecessor to express new relevance? Does *Sur Racine*’s critical poetics distort one of the most fundamental features of its subject or does it represent an updated take on verisimilitude? Both, of course, and this combination is anything but a radical invention of contemporary criticism. Already in the *Encyclopédie*, Jaucourt was busy renegotiating the parameters of literary genres and the role of verisimilitude in defining them through pedagogical discourse.

At least in the case of *Sur Racine*, Barthes was explicit about the challenge he was undertaking: to redefine fundamental concepts like “verisimilitude” towards a contemporary engagement with Racine’s theatre. In his published response to Picard’s accusations, Barthes argues that scholarly “verisimilitude” is too often “very fond of ‘evident truths.’”<sup>88</sup> Chief among these is the tautological sentiment that “Racine is Racine,” a stance that Barthes had denounced as profoundly anti-intellectual several years earlier: “Racine himself, Racine degree zero, doesn’t exist. There are only Racine-adjectives.”<sup>89</sup> Certainly, *Sur Racine* demythologizes the academic posture from which we purport to deduce historical, biographical, and textual meaning and demolishes frameworks that mandate the limits of interpretation. Yet this intervention does not encourage iconoclasm or disregard the concept of “verisimilitude” altogether; as Barthes puts it, Racine’s “genius” is to “remain eternally within the field of any critical language.”<sup>90</sup> By extension, the function “la nouvelle critique” assigns itself is to imagine new “Racine-adjectives” by seeing through apparently self-evident verisimilarities to alternative angles. From this perspective, Barthes’s methodology is not a foreign imposition that seeks to erase Racine or speak on his behalf; rather, it is committed to adopting Jaucourt’s recommendation to let its commentary “conserver l’air de” (“give the

---

<sup>87</sup> “Essayons sur Racine, en vertu de son silence même, tous les langages que notre siècle nous suggère.” Barthes, *Sur Racine*, 55. Translation in Barthes, *On Racine*, x.

<sup>88</sup> “Le vraisemblable critique aime beaucoup les ‘évidences.’” Published in 1966, Barthes’s seminal *Critique et Vérité* is in fact a specific response to the Picard debate. Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité*, in *Œuvres complètes II: Livres, Textes, Entretiens 1962-1967*, 759-801, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 763. Translation in Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Continuum, 2007), 4.

<sup>89</sup> “Racine tout seul, le degré zéro de Racine, ça n’existe pas. Il n’y a que des Racine-adjectifs.” Roland Barthes, “Racine est Racine,” in *Mythologies*, in *Œuvres complètes I: Livres, Textes, Entretiens 1942-1961*, 745-746, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), 746. Translation in Roland Barthes, “Racine is Racine,” in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>90</sup> “Son génie [...] lui permet de se maintenir éternellement dans le champ de n’importe quel langage critique.” Barthes, *Sur Racine*, 54-55. Translation in Barthes, *On Racine*, ix.

impression of”) Racine.<sup>91</sup>

Far from being indifferent to the notion of the verisimilar, then, Barthes’s “nouvelle critique” restores to it the inherent instability that prompted so much discussion already in the seventeenth century and that motivated a new degree of experimentation at the hands of the *encyclopédistes*. Barthes’s approach to textual analysis involves a deep awareness of the principle that so preoccupied Racine and his contemporaries, and his take on the issue is much like Corneille’s: “le vraisemblable” is art that is not so much “true” as “possible.” Jonathan Culler explains this as the structuralist sensitivity to “vraisemblablisation,” which opens the concept of verisimilitude to encompass several distinct “levels” that operate as “[sources] of meaning and coherence.”<sup>92</sup> Historical detail, cultural context, and generic chronology can constitute levels of “meaning,” he argues, but each of these represents a variant of verisimilitude’s basic gesture, which is *intertextual*: “To characterize the various levels of the *vraisemblable* is to define the ways in which a work can be traversed by or brought into contact with other texts.”<sup>93</sup> This means, of course, bringing a text into context with other scripts and with a type of illiteracy, in the case of the *Encyclopédie*.

Barthes’s attempt to put verisimilitude’s inherent intertextuality at the foreground of literary interpretation is precisely what riled Picard, for whom reducing Racine’s œuvre to a series of metaphors violates *textual* specificity. For instance, he charges Barthes’s analysis of “l’ombre” (a recurring theme in Racinian tragedy) with indulging in a kind of visual reading that is too arbitrary and generalized to be useful.<sup>94</sup> Barthes’s retort, however, is simply that “specificity” is the “last will and testament of [an] old criticism,” which repeatedly iterates a “proposition [...] that has] the unattackable virtue of a tautology: *literature is literature*.”<sup>95</sup> The goal of literary criticism, he argues, is not to hover close to Racine’s corpus, refereeing the minor textual similarities and differences between plays, but rather to consider itself an equal player in the intertextual game that looks beyond what *is* “literature” to perceive what is *possibly* literature, including and especially imagery and metaphor. In brief, then, Picard espouses a straightforward poetics of legibility that believes in (and proselytizes) a scholarly discourse at the service of its subject matter, whereas Barthes appeals to a type of visual or painterly (il)literacy that wants to expand this particular infrastructure in order to develop

---

<sup>91</sup> Jaucourt, “Style, Poésie du,” 15:555.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1975), 138.

<sup>93</sup> Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 140.

<sup>94</sup> Picard, *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> “La ‘spécificité’” is “une dernière proposition qui semble détenir la grande pensée testamentaire de l’ancienne critique,” and “cette proposition a évidemment la vertu inattaquable d’une tautologie: *la littérature, c’est la littérature*.” Barthes, *Critique et Vérité*, 775. Translation in Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 13.

intertextual dynamics with a much broader conception of “text,” verisimilitude, and “Poésie.”

Engaging with the visual dimension of these dynamics thus becomes integral to the poetics of Barthes’s criticism, which in many ways shares the multi-media platform epitomized by Paillasson’s plates and by the *Encyclopédie* as a whole.<sup>96</sup> Where “l’Art d’Écrire” deepens its visual medium by depicting a textual library strewn across the study, Barthes’s prose develops a vivid imagery capable of reconciling the flattening medium of textual analysis with the emphatically three-dimensional arena of Racinian theatre. For instance, rather than read tragedy’s unity of place through its lexical markers, seeking out references within a play’s verses, Barthes phrases the exigencies of this convention in an almost exaggeratedly visual way. His description looks beyond textual mechanics, beyond even the scenic terms of the theatre (sets, scenery, mise-en-scène), to the hypothetical topographies that lie adjacent to the boundaries of the stage:

Les grands lieux tragiques sont des terres arides, resserrées entre la mer et le désert, l’ombre et le soleil portés à l’état absolu.

[The great tragic sites are arid lands, squeezed between the sea and the desert, shade and sun raised to the absolute state.]<sup>97</sup>

Literally speaking, Racinian tragedy stages no “arid lands,” no “sun raised to the absolute state,” yet metaphorically the plays abound with them: in the barren proximity of the palace’s rooms, in the stifling intimacy of its characters, in their futile agonies over “le devoir” (“duty”). *Sur Racine* argues eloquently for a criticism that does not simply follow traditional historiography but pursues, even hypothesizes, contexts of new depths, new extents, new volumes alongside and beyond the conventional limits of textual analysis.

Thus, the wager of the *Encyclopédie* is also Barthes’s own, namely to delve into a type of pedagogy that is partly demonstrative and partly explicative by locating information within texts but also among and beyond them: an archive that recognizes knowledge as mediated, inescapably intertextual, and deeply visual. In many ways, “l’Art d’Écrire” captures both sides of the conceptual divide keeping Picard and Barthes in opposition. As we saw, the plate stages a wholly polished scene in the top half, while underneath the mechanism of its construction is dissected and made visible: the human agent and his style remain fully present – a theatre and its backstage both in view. A Picardian perspective might find Paillasson’s domestic scene – with its contained historical situation, sensible choreography, and

---

<sup>96</sup> Jonathan Culler associates this with the structuralist emphasis on context: “*Vraisemblabilisation* stresses the importance of cultural models of the *vraisemblable* as sources of meaning and coherence. [...] The *vraisemblable* is thus the basis of the important structuralist concept of *intertextualité*.” Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 138-139.

<sup>97</sup> Barthes, *Sur Racine*, 59. Translation in Barthes, *On Racine*, 3.

demonstrative relationship to the written article – entirely sufficient; situation, context, and characters are all provided in a convincing (“vraisemblable”) scene. By contrast, according to Barthes’s approach, this “historical” stage would always coexist both with innumerable other texts (by Rossignol, by Barbedor) and with criticism’s “now,” and so the time of the drama would sit alongside the time of the commentary. In “la nouvelle critique,” the veracity of the historical moment is never self-sufficient but is a composition assembled through human labour and imagination: *manus* and *stilus*. Picardian verisimilitude, Barthes scoffs, would “talk of a book with ‘objectivity,’ ‘good taste’ and ‘clarity.’”<sup>98</sup> What emerges from this oppressive academicism is dead to the movement, the partiality, the charisma of the (inter)text. Barthes parodies what he feels is Picard’s tautological proposition: “On the subject of literature, say that is it literature.”<sup>99</sup> The antidote to this tautology is a fanciful reimagining of literature’s dimensions, so that the verisimilar stretches beyond its seventeenth-century significance and the intertextual is broad enough to encompass para-textual media.

Thus, Barthes might be describing his own critical method when he says of the *Encyclopédie* that its illustrations add the “more gratuitous justification [...] of an aesthetic or oneiric order.”<sup>100</sup> Even more significantly, he attributes the success of its pedagogy not only to its play on text and image but also to a certain musical quality in its internal dynamics: the *Encyclopédie*’s “great gift,” he says, is to “vary (in the musical sense of the term) the level on which one and the same object can be perceived.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover, with one facetious adjective, Barthes captures the heart of the debate surrounding “la nouvelle critique,” namely the notion of what is “gratuitous.” As we have seen, it would be preposterous to describe the *Encyclopédie*’s eleven volumes of plates as somehow extraneous to its seventeen volumes of articles, or to minimize the importance of the foreign scripts that propelled the *encyclopédistes* to a new conception of literacy. Yet Picard was content to formulate accusations of “metaphorical blurriness” in Barthes’s work as though imagery and analogy are anathema to scholarly discourse. From Barthes’s perspective, the principles of metaphor and style only become contentious to those willing to believe they are *dispensable* or even separable from language. Again, this debate has a long history far predating Barthes’s

---

<sup>98</sup> “Tel est le vraisemblable critique en 1965: il faut parler d’un livre avec ‘objectivité,’ ‘goût,’ et ‘clarté.’” Barthes, *Critique et Vérité*, 774. Translation in Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> “La littérature, c’est la littérature.” Barthes, *Critique et Vérité*, 775. Translation in Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 14.

<sup>100</sup> “Une justification plus gratuite, d’ordre esthétique ou onirique.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*,” 41. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 23.

<sup>101</sup> “C’est l’une des grandes richesses de l’*Encyclopédie* que de varier (au sens musical du terme) le niveau auquel un même objet peut être perçu.” Barthes, “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*,” 51. Translation in Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” 36.

monograph (as he was only too aware). The “civil war among the critics,”<sup>102</sup> as one TLS reviewer dubbed it, harks back at least as far as the seventeenth century and the fractious “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,” which likewise saw the academy splintered across ideological lines when disputing the relationship of contemporary verse to its classical antecedents. As Douglas Lane Patey explains, “what was at stake” in the “Querelle” was a “redefinition of disciplines – a remapping of the intellectual terrain – comprised especially in its reinterpretation of the division between the ‘arts’ and the ‘sciences.’”<sup>103</sup> Agitating the *Académie française*, it seems, is not so much an exception as a tradition, one that Barthes admittedly cultivated with enthusiasm.

The tug of war for and against “la nouvelle critique” is, therefore, out of date twice over: firstly because the debate had, in a way, already happened before; and secondly, because (at least in Doubrovsky’s estimation), polarizing debates only ever trail behind the event being contested, so that the supposed scandal of “la nouvelle critique” in fact signalled its permanent inclusion in the intellectual repertoire. As soon as “la nouvelle critique” was here to be discussed, it was also here to stay:

Une chose paraît fort claire: le débat “pour ou contre” la nouvelle critique est *déjà périmé*, comme les débats “pour ou contre” le jazz, l’art abstrait, la musique sérielle, le nouveau roman.

[One thing is perfectly clear: the debate “for or against” the new criticism is *already out of date*, in exactly the same way as arguments “for or against” jazz, abstract art, serial music, or the “new novel.”]<sup>104</sup>

Diderot and d’Alembert, as well, were presumably aware that for all its competence, verve, and breadth, the *Encyclopédie* had already become history by making history and was out of date almost before its first publication. The cyclicity of aesthetic theory’s biggest triumphs and debates is not simply a lesson in art’s inherent redundancy (ahistoricity, even). Rather this perpetual cycling testifies to discussions that are always partly out of time, out of order, and

---

<sup>102</sup> John George Weightman, “Civil War among the Critics,” *Times Literary Supplement* (3 Feb., 1966), 83.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas Lane Patey, “‘Aesthetics’ and the Rise of Lyric in the Eighteenth Century,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33/3 (1993): 587-608, 595. Cuillé also points out the important political dimension of both the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” and later the “Querelle des bouffons.” Both debates, she argues, saw the French academy reject artifice and decadence, but whereas the seventeenth-century *littérateurs* assumed that their mandate would be emulated across Europe, by the mid-eighteenth century and the “Querelle des bouffons,” the “proponents of French opera were obliged to concede that Italian opera, not French, was the direct descendant of their classical forebears.” The result of having to admit the advantages of a more international cultural exchange, Cuillé rightly points out, was that “aesthetic inquiry was [...] considered to have serious political implications.” Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes*, xvii.

<sup>104</sup> Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi la Nouvelle Critique*, xv. Translation in Doubrovsky, *The New Criticism in France*, 47. Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes*, xvii.

out of synch with their historical contexts. The “Querelle” that keeps resurfacing from the seventeenth century onwards also confirms the inextricability of “times,” which are never so free as to become “indifferent” to past conventions or new methods.

## THE LYRICAL IMPULSE AND OPERA

In 1674, Nicolas Boileau published a penetrating and comprehensive treatise on *L’Art Poétique* (*The Art of Poetry*). The text, which prescribes a close adherence to classical principles of Aristotelian poetics, became a key document for “les Anciens” in the dispute over whether literary practice – above all tragic theatre – ought to model itself on classical sources or feel free to pursue theatrical reform and “modernize” poetic conventions.<sup>105</sup> Boileau’s treatise is itself a feat of traditional neoclassical poetry in the signature style of the great French tragedians; composed of some 1100 lines of neoclassical Alexandrine verse, Boileau’s text advocated for a strict adherence to neoclassical principles like verisimilitude. He styled his project as a didactic poem that follows the rules it champions. In a way, then, *L’Art Poétique* set the tone for the way in which poetic theory remained inextricably linked to the conventions and style of neoclassical tragic theatre from the seventeenth century onwards. If the *encyclopédistes* subsequently set about defining a more inclusive theory of “la Poésie” and a strikingly different approach to its praxis (prose explanations married with illustrations), the keystone of Boileau’s poetics – “la vraisemblable” – remained a prominent part of the Enlightenment’s new take on the “Ancients vs. Moderns” debate.

The *Encyclopédie* was not, therefore, interested in erasing neoclassicism’s residual influence but instead allowed the “ancient” to grow into the “modern.” Having experimented with a similar wager in *Sur Racine*, Barthes is eloquent on the value of this poetics of the in-between:

Une théorie du “dérapage” est nécessaire *précisément aujourd’hui*. Pourquoi? Parce que nous sommes dans ce moment historique de notre culture où le récit ne peut encore abandonner une certaine lisibilité, une certaine conformité à la pseudo-logique narrative que la culture a mise en nous et où, par conséquent, les seules innovations possibles consistent non à détruire l’histoire, l’anecdote, mais à la dévier: à faire déraiper le code tout en ayant l’air de le respecter.

[A theory of “slippage” is necessary *precisely today*. Why? Because we occupy that historical moment in our culture in which narrative cannot yet abandon a degree of readability, a certain conformity to the pseudo-logical narrative that culture has imparted to us; and a moment in which, as a consequence, the only innovation that remains possible consists not of destroying history, anecdote, but of diverting it: to make the code slip while giving the impression of respecting it.]<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Art poétique*, ed. Sylvain Menant (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1998).

<sup>106</sup> Barthes, “Le Retour du poéticien,” 146.

The conventions of yesteryear need not impede today's innovations, Barthes points out, and although his comments were written in 1972, his "aujourd'hui" reflects his Enlightenment predecessors in their determination to reform tragic theatre and also our recurring contemporary attempts to define and redefine the parameters of critical poetics.

In their summary of today's current critical-aesthetic climate, for instance, Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus comment wryly on the difficulty of confronting a period of "post-theory" (for instance, post-neoclassical poetics) as "an undertaking (without, necessarily, any of an undertaker's duties)."<sup>107</sup> Their diagnosis captures precisely the challenge that the *Encyclopédie* had to confront, namely to build on a post-neoclassical theoretical landscape without destroying the foundations of poetic theory that were laid in the previous century. In a sense, the *Encyclopédie* assumes that neoclassical poetics are, if not new, at least renewable – that is to say, capable of "slipping" into a "Poésie" that mediates among different types of texts, that rethinks tragic conventions, that institutes poetic reform, and that renovates cultural expressions such as *dramma per musica*. In renouncing a conventional, monolithic approach to poetics, contributors like Jaucourt often resort to ambiguous terminology (chief among which is "la Poésie"), but this strategy in itself constitutes a way to "slip" away from neoclassicism's strict poetics without forsaking its Aristotelian framework completely. Indeed, one of the most significant innovations of the *encyclopédistes'* vision of "la Poésie" was to expand on the seventeenth century's very narrow preoccupation with Aristotle's theory of tragedy and to engage more directly with other poetic domains. Specifically, underlying the *encyclopédistes'* explicit engagement with principles from *dramatic* poetry (i.e. tragic theatre) is a much more subtle investment in a second, parallel domain of Aristotelian poetics, namely *lyrical* poetry.

Indeed, Jaucourt singles out lyric poetry for its unusual capacity to strike a balanced and pleasant discourse appropriate to its subject – in other words, for exemplifying a style that is verisimilar in the eighteenth century's expansive meaning of the term. In his article on the genre, he emphatically links "la poésie lyrique" with music, and then concludes with the following remark: "It is especially to the lyric poets that is given the task to instruct with dignity and agreeableness. Dramatic and fabular *poetry* rarely bring together these two advantages."<sup>108</sup> The *encyclopédistes* thus envisaged a poetics that was not only built on the

---

<sup>107</sup> Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "Introduction: Post-Theory?," in *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, 7-21 (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 9.

<sup>108</sup> "C'est particulièrement aux poètes lyriques qu'il est donné d'instruire avec dignité & avec agrément. La *poésie* dramatique & fabulaire réunissent plus rarement ces deux avantages." Jaucourt, "Poésie lyrique," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 12:839.

fluid exchange of text and image but that was also open to an explicitly lyrical disposition that they associated with text set to music, that is to say opera. After all, Diderot's conception of "la Poésie" encompasses not only written genres and the visual arts but all of music as well. In the *Encyclopédie*, the textual and the visual register play off one another, to be sure, but these two media are not the full extent of the project's poetics. From the "Système figuré des connoissances humaines," where opera and the madrigal appear as sub-categories of "la Poésie," to countless casual references in the numerous articles on poetics and poetry, music is an unassuming but constant presence throughout the *Encyclopédie*. For instance, according to Jaucourt's colleague Jean-François Marmontel, the success of literary criticism – which the *Encyclopédie* in effect practices on a large scale in its countless entries on textual genres and styles – depends on its ability to make room for a more multi-media, synesthetic mode of reason able to "render the ear arbiter of colours, and the eye arbiter of harmony."<sup>109</sup>

Far from espousing a distinction among textual, visual, and aural media, Diderot and d'Alembert's project confidently blends all three together, and in the process undercuts the Aristotelian separation of dramatic and lyrical poetry. This amalgamation is nowhere clearer than in the articles on lyric poetry, where it becomes plain that against classical definitions of the term and in contrast to our modern concepts of genre, "la poésie lyrique" for the *encyclopédistes* represented an exemplary genre for the synthesis of artistic media towards a modernized interpretation of neoclassical theatre. Throughout the *Encyclopédie*, lyric poetry is synonymous with music, or to be more precise, with opera – specifically, tragic opera. The anonymous author of the entry on "Lyrique" hints at this: "Lyric poetry and music must have an intimate rapport between them."<sup>110</sup> Even more explicit, however, is Grimm's article on the "poème lyrique," which in fact constitutes the *Encyclopédie*'s entry on tragic opera of the eighteenth century.<sup>111</sup> As becomes clear in the course of his article, Grimm understands "poème lyrique" not as a style or genre of poetry but as a collaborative art form that "resulted

---

<sup>109</sup> "Rendre l'oreille arbitre des couleurs, & l'oeil juge de l'harmonie." Jean-François Marmontel, "Critique," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 4:490-4:497, 4:495.

<sup>110</sup> "La poésie lyrique & la musique doivent avoir entre elles un rapport intime." Anonymous, "Lyrique," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 9:780.

<sup>111</sup> Grimm, "Poème lyrique," 12:823-12:836. Grimm's role in the "Qdes bouffons" as an advocate for Italian opera is described in detail in Cynthia Verba's *Music and the French Enlightenment: Rameau and the Philosophes in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Since my focus in this study is Italian tragic opera's links to French neoclassicism, I have not pursued a sustained discussion of the "Querelle des bouffons," which contemplated *opera buffa* and French *tragédie lyrique*. However, the terms of the "Querelle" in many instances echo the aesthetic trends surrounding the tradition of Italian tragic opera that I discuss here. For more on this and the debate surrounding French opera, see David Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau: Music, Confrontation, Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. 209-230 and Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes*.

from the union of Poetry with Music.”<sup>112</sup> The rest of the article discusses Italian and French tragic opera in turn and covers the different components of the genre (aria, chorus, duet, etc.) but does not consider any other, non-operatic forms of lyric poetry. Lyric poetry, in other words, is not only synonymous with music and theatrical song, but also – and more specifically – with tragic opera.

In his lengthy description of the genre, Grimm firmly positions music as the real “poetic” force that lends the librettist’s textual medium a passion and a poignancy that push past neoclassicism’s refined style: “The music will instantly transform these [...] short lines [of an aria] to greater effect than the divine Racine could ever produce with all his magical verses.”<sup>113</sup> Significantly, Grimm advocates lyric poetry as the answer to the problem of marrying the conventions of seventeenth-century drama with the Enlightenment’s “Poésie” because the addition of *music* to the collaboration of text and image ensures that the transition from spoken tragedy to opera is not one of deterioration or even of compromise but of “slippage;” even the “divine Racine” can be reconciled with his new Enlightenment adaptations without suffering diminishment. As Grimm puts it, “the unification of this art [of lyric poetry] – as sublime as it is close to nature – with the dramatic arts gave birth to the spectacle of Opera, the most noble and most brilliant among the modern performance arts.”<sup>114</sup>

Thus, in keeping with the *Encyclopédie*’s broader mandate to describe “la Poésie” as an unfixed and cooperative exchange among all the arts, the smooth equivalences Grimm makes between dramatic poetry and lyric poetry, and between tragedy and opera introduce a third medium to the discussion. Text and image are finally joined by sound, specifically opera. *Dramma per musica*, in other words, encapsulates the thoroughly synthetic poetic energy of the *Encyclopédie* and acts productively on its mandate to adapt neoclassical principles to reflect the period’s modern ambitions.

Significantly, opera’s specific role in the *Encyclopédie*’s model of “la Poésie” is in some ways left undefined. The *encyclopédistes* frequently assume a seamless marriage of dramatic and lyrical poetics but leave their precise interaction ambiguous, referring vaguely to the perfect union of poetry and music without specifying the parameters and manifestations of this union. Jaucourt, for instance, explains that “*lyric poetry* and Music must have an intimate

---

<sup>112</sup> “Nous tâcherons de savoir quelle sorte de *poème* a dû résulter de la réunion de la Poésie avec la Musique.” Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” 12:824.

<sup>113</sup> “Mais avec ces [...] petits vers la musique fera en un instant plus d’effet que le divin Racine n’en pourra jamais produire avec toute la magie de la poésie.” Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” 12:827.

<sup>114</sup> “La réunion de cet art [lyrique], aussi sublime que voisin de la nature, avec l’art dramatique, a donné naissance au spectacle de l’Opéra, le plus noble & le plus brillant d’entre les spectacles modernes.” Grimm, “Poème lyrique,” 12:824.

relationship” but neither gives examples of this relationship nor defines its limits.<sup>115</sup> It is as though music is so ubiquitous to the other “arts of the imagination” making up “la Poésie” that it becomes in some way inaudible amid the project’s numerous other clamorous topics. The limitations of the *Encyclopédie*’s format – which successfully blends text and image but has more difficulty including sound – at least partially account for music’s position at the periphery. A case in point is the plate depicting the Bengali alphabet for the article on “Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes.” While the artist (presumably Michel-Ange-André le Roux Deshauterayes) pays careful attention to the orthographic details of the Bengali script and accomplishes a recognizable version of the alphabet, the visual presentation of the letters does not take into account their crucial phonetic dimension.<sup>116</sup> In spite of their careful efforts to reproduce the foreign scripts accurately, the authors of the article only manage to capture their subject in two dimensions and inadvertently overlook the third, oral/aural element. Insofar as the *Encyclopédie* endeavoured to collate and synthesize knowledge by espousing a fluid interaction among the arts, the project thus remained susceptible to relegating the “lyrical” side of its poetics to the periphery, if only because its contributors were *littérateurs* and its medium was primarily textual/visual rather than performative in a way that would more easily accommodate opera’s unique contribution. Unwittingly, then, the Enlightenment in some ways inaugurated a degree of separation between *dramma per musica* and its immediate poetic context. Recent opera historiography has aggravated this separation by reversing the *Encyclopédie*’s bias and preoccupying itself with *dramma per musica* as a lyrical genre and neglecting its broader resonances and influences.

If the *encyclopédistes* were on occasion unable to fully integrate lyricism alongside textual legibility and visual metaphor, however, “lyric poetry” – that is to say *dramma per musica* – nevertheless remained at the centre of the aesthetic debates taking place in the *Encyclopédie*’s pages. Above all, the discussion over the relationship between “ancient” and “modern” poetics by no means limited itself to textual genres but spilled over into parallel realms. Eventually, the questions swirling around the reform of neoclassical theatre demanded a practical stage on which to test proposed solutions. *Dramma per musica*, with its roots in seventeenth-century tragedy, was ideally placed to serve as just such a stage. Paradoxically then, the very “outmodedness” of this form of “lyrical poetry” was best suited to participating in one of the Enlightenment’s most significant aesthetic debates.

---

<sup>115</sup> Jaucourt, “Poésie lyrique,” 12:839.

<sup>116</sup> My thanks to Matthew Pritchard for pointing this detail out to me.

The next room in our “museum of the muses” thus moves away from the immediate context of the *Encyclopédie*, which constantly hints at opera’s role in the movement to revitalize tragic theatre but stops short of giving a full account of its contributions. First, we will trace the origins of the *encyclopédistes*’ reassessment of “la Poésie” as a flexible, multi-media affair and probe its impact on *dramma per musica* specifically by looking back to the turn of the eighteenth century and an infamous novel published in 1699 that prompted frenzied reactions in literary, artistic, and operatic circles for decades thereafter. Following this final literature-oriented chapter, we will turn to an operatic case study that aims to supply the “lyrical” perspective that gives a practical form to the *Encyclopédie*’s engaging approach to aesthetic theory, making sense of some of its fluid terminology and justifying *dramma per musica*’s presence alongside its sister arts as one of the Enlightenment’s most important aesthetic innovators.



**PART 2**  
**THE POET'S PROSE**

*“J'avouë que le genre [tragique] fleuri a ses graces; mais [...] le genre fleuri n'atteint jamais au sublime.”*

[“I confess that the flowery genre of tragedy has its charms; but [...] a flowery genre never arrives at the sublime.”]

François Fénelon, *Lettre écrite à l'Académie française*



### CHAPTER 3

#### ADVENTURES IN TÉLÉMACOMANIA

The “adventure” of this chapter is a cultural phenomenon with an altogether improbable protagonist. In 1699, the archbishop and royal tutor François Fénelon found himself dragged into a fraught controversy with the (unauthorized) publication of his epic novel, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. On the face of it, Fénelon’s book was an unlikely catalyst for savage invective and did not seem to warrant the hyperbolic paper wars that lasted for several decades following its circulation. Conceived as an allegorical textbook for the 7-year old grandson of Louis XIV (titled the Duc de Bourgogne), Fénelon’s private, pedagogical novel develops a seemingly straightforward mandate: his evocative prose recounts the lessons of Telemachus as he travels the ancient world in pursuit of his father, Ulysses, guided by a tutor who instructs him in the virtues of peaceful and enlightened kingship. The book sets itself up as a kind of didactic *mise en abyme*, a way for Fénelon to guide his young protégé vicariously through the exploits of the novel’s Homeric characters. The classical framework of Fénelon’s allegorical text and his educative mandate would seem a relatively safe basis for an intimate tutorial with the king’s grandson.

Yet even before the book was first published – without Fénelon’s permission – at the turn of the eighteenth century, its author was summarily dismissed from his post and banished from Versailles for his perceived critique of the absolutist monarchy of his employer and sovereign, Louis XIV. Fénelon’s literary format was no doubt to blame, since it invited dangerous comparisons between figures appearing in the novel and his real-life patrons. As Mary D. Sheriff points out, Louis XIV was the most obvious victim of such comparisons, since the novel presented itself as a kind of *roman à clef* in which negative examples of kingship, even within the text’s didactic context, were quickly perceived as a more directed critique; as she explains, “*le roi soleil* was most often compared [by readers] to Idomeneus, who served as a negative moral exemplar at several points in the story.”<sup>117</sup> Idomeneus, the king who sacrificed his son’s life in order to keep a hasty vow with a pagan god, was consequently banished from his kingdom and would be a thoroughly unflattering avatar for any monarch.

On top of this political quagmire, the book’s measured morals and sympathetic figures are never altogether straightforward; disguises and ambivalent characters muddy the aphorisms and moments of enlightenment that see the young prince progress along his journey. The tutor guiding Telemachus, for instance, is not the old man he appears to be but

---

<sup>117</sup> Mary D. Sheriff, “Painting in the French Regency,” in *Fénelon in the Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations, and Variations*, 281-311, ed. Christoph Schmitt-Maaß, Stefanie Stockhorst, Doohwan Ahn (New York: Rodopi, 2014), 282-283.

the goddess Minerva in disguise. Symbolically, wisdom herself guides the prospective king through temptations and dangers, but there is a deep uncertainty about her role as well in that her assumed name – Mentor – comes uncomfortably close to “menteur” (literally “liar”), casting a shadow of doubt over her teachings.<sup>118</sup> As Nicolas Gueudeville complained in 1700, Minerva sets a poor example for a future ruler of France: “If ever a Telemachus were to reign under the auspices and according to the advice of this severe goddess, fantasy, chimera and fanaticism would be on the Throne.”<sup>119</sup> It is as though Fénelon, himself Minerva’s real-life counterpart, inscribed his own ambivalence about the novel into its characters.

*Télémaque*’s tumultuous reception and immediate notoriety was quickly followed within a few years by unprecedented renown: the novel had appeared in some sixteen editions in its first year alone,<sup>120</sup> episodes from its pages had been adapted as a tragic drama twice (by François Paulin in 1700 and Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon in 1705), and the story was set as an opera by Antoine Danchet and André Campra in 1712. Fenelon’s contemporaries quickly forgot the novel’s original didactic function and were soon absorbed in the book’s controversial blending of literary traditions. The novel takes its subject and design from classical epic, but Fénelon writes it in *prose* rather than *verse*, and this marriage of an elevated genre with non-versified discourse caused something of a scandal. The initial political uproar surrounding the text was thus quickly overshadowed by the challenges posed by its hybrid style as well as the possibilities for adaptation that this style offered. Unsurprisingly, the character of Idomeneus proved an especially popular subject for adaptation, especially after the most controversial political implications of the novel were made redundant in 1715 by the deaths of both Louis XIV and Fénelon. By the time an official edition of *Télémaque* was sanctioned in 1717 by the author’s family, the novel had given rise to a movement with a sardonic – but very catchy – epithet: “Télémacomania.”

The term was coined by a less-than-enthusiastic early reviewer: in 1700, Pierre Valentin Faydit painstakingly excoriated the novel over the course of a 350-page tome. The fact that Faydit produced and published this exhaustive critique within a year of *Télémaque*’s appearance attests to the novel’s instant reverberations – although in Faydit’s case, speed was also a symptom of an unusual type of efficiency, since he did not actually trouble himself to

---

<sup>118</sup> Fabienne Moore, among others, has noted this semantic ellipsis in *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment: Delimiting Genre* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 50.

<sup>119</sup> “Si jamais un Télémaque regnoit, sous les auspices & par les conseils de cette sévère Déesse, la vision, la chymere, & le fanatisme seroient sur le Trône.” Nicolas Gueudeville, *Critique Generale des Aventures de Telemaque* (Cologne: Heretiers de Pierre Marteau, 1700), 11.

<sup>120</sup> Sheriff, “Painting in the French Regency,” 283. Jacques Le Brun documents that by 1912 the novel had been published in 550 editions and 170 translations. Jacques Le Brun, “*Les Aventures de Télémaque*: Destins d’un Best-Seller,” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 133-146, 133.

read the novel beyond the first couple of chapters: “I have only read the first two books of *Télémaque* [...since] my patience was not up to the painful test that I anticipated suffering were I to undertake to read all four volumes.”<sup>121</sup> His spirited disquisition, however, did nothing to quash the momentum of the literary phenomenon he diagnosed as a frenzied mania: “I have called [my pamphlet] Telemaco-mania in order to describe the injustice of the enthusiasm and fury with which people are running to read the novel as though it were something of great beauty”<sup>122</sup> he complained, before boasting of his own indifference to the book. In a way, this kind of uninformed fascination with *Télémaque* typifies the Enlightenment’s reaction to the novel; its pedagogical style prompted spirited opinions and far-flung adaptation rather than systematic literary analysis. Indeed, Faydit’s hefty volume was by no means the only substantial critique published in the wake of Fénelon’s text. Gueudeville vented in equal measure his own indignation at the novel’s popularity and his smug immunity to its apparent charms: “Everyone admires *Télémaque* and I, who find nothing worthy of admiration, do myself justice with my bad taste and admire my own stupidity.”<sup>123</sup>

Faydit largely quibbles about the novel’s minor anachronisms and supposed “errors” in historical and religious details, and most of his pamphlet reads as a compendium of tedious corrections (for instance, that Fénelon mistakenly refers to an ancient city by the name of its province). These trivial complaints, however, belie the weighty question underlying Faydit’s somewhat hysterical protestations: is the novel’s language appropriate to its educative mandate? Faydit’s attention may have only lasted through the novel’s opening chapters, but he discovered therein a disturbing conflict between the sensuous imagery of Fénelon’s writing and the abstemious lesson he conveys via the story of Telemachus’s encounter with the beguiling nymph Calypso, who tries to persuade the young prince to abandon his journey and remain on her island by showing him the joys of her domain (and the seductive powers of her fellow nymphs). For Faydit, Fénelon violated the pedagogical value of his text by injecting his prose with details bordering on a kind of literary hedonism, or at least revelling in a kind

---

<sup>121</sup> The novel in its entirety numbers 28 chapters, so Faydit’s analysis hardly represents a meticulous study. “Je vous ay averti ci-dessus [...] que je n’avois lu que les deux premiers Livres du Telemaque, & que ma patience n’a pas été à l’épreuve de la peine que je me suis figuré que j’aurois, si j’entreprendois de lire les quatre Tomes.” Pierre Valentin Faydit, *La Telemacomanie, ou La Censure et critique du roman intitulé, Les Aventures de Telemaque Fils d’Ulysse, ou suite du quatrième Livre de l’Odyssée d’Homere* (Paris: Pierre Philaethe, 1700), 66.

<sup>122</sup> “Je l’ai intitulé Telemaco-manie, pour marquer l’injustice de la passion, & de la fureur avec laquelle on court à la lecture du Roman de Telemaque, comme à quelque chose de fort beau.” Faydit, “La Telemacomanie,” 5.

<sup>123</sup> “Tout le monde admire Telemaque, & moi qui n’y trouve rien qui soit digne d’admiration, je me rends justice sur mon mauvais gout & j’admire ma stupidité.” Nicolas de Gueudeville, *Critique Generale des Aventures de Telemaque*, 7.

of florid imagery more befitting poetry. In his own vitriolic critique of the novel, Gueudeville articulated similar protestations (often in equally frantic language): “Why create an imaginary world in order to teach the boy to rule in our own world?”<sup>124</sup>

The question surrounding Fénelon’s sensual language quickly gave rise to a broader ideological debate surrounding the relative value of two apparently incompatible types of discourse: prose and verse, which subsequently became two antagonists in a vitriolic drama featuring some of the Enlightenment’s most prominent thinkers and literature’s most fundamental aesthetic principles. The powerful allure of Fénelon’s vivid prose not only instigated lively debate and guaranteed the novel a captive audience for over a century, it also redirected the Enlightenment’s artistic priorities by breaching generic and disciplinary boundaries. Literary scholarship has recently become more familiar with *Télémacomania* thanks to Fabienne Moore’s compelling research, which documents *Télémaque*’s unexpected impact on several generations of *littérateurs* and their attempts to renovate seventeenth-century poetics for the Enlightenment’s new priorities.<sup>125</sup> The novel’s legacy, however, stretched far beyond its immediate circle of literary critics and admirers to inspire responses from the other arts. *Télémaque*’s far-flung reverberations include paintings and etchings, specialized periodicals, and also operatic settings. Having immediately provoked both panicked and exuberant reactions at the turn of the century, *Télémaque*’s stamina easily withstood the vicissitudes of notoriety and fame well into the nineteenth century and accumulated an enormous group of followers spanning various disciplines. Thus, the inventory of *Télémaque*-inspired poems, paintings, and compositions is inexhaustible.

Building on the rich literary context Moore unpacks, in this chapter I draw on a few representative artefacts of the *Télémacomania* phenomenon in order to concentrate on one particular corner of the uproar surrounding the novel, namely the vigorous debate surrounding the idea of “prose poetry” and its special relevance to the Enlightenment’s attempts to revitalize seventeenth-century tragic theatre. *Télémaque*’s overtly sensual style, which defies the confines of its novelistic genre, strongly evokes the vivid textual, visual, and aural details of theatre; this sensual bent initially offended critics who felt that Fénelon’s descriptive prose was at odds with the novel’s didactic pretences. Eventually, however, the novel’s theatrical style became the inspiration for new approaches to the verse structure and style of neoclassical tragedy. Poised on the cusp of a new century and caught between the strict literary legacy it inherits from the seventeenth century and the versatile and multi-media poetics of its Enlightenment context, *Télémaque* came to represent a fulcrum between the old

---

<sup>124</sup> “Pourquoi créer un monde imaginaire pour apprendre à regner dans le nôtre?” Gueudeville, *Critique Generale des Aventures de Telemaque*, 16.

<sup>125</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*.

and the new for its most imaginative critics, including of course the composers and librettists who followed in its wake.

### SENSIBLE READING

If *Télémaque*'s bold mixture of genres opened up new opportunities according to some critics, Faydit and others were wary of its appeal to the senses via textual, visual, and auditory description. Denouncing the novel's dangerously suggestive imagery, Faydit accuses Fénelon of denying his readers the lesson in temperance that is Telemachus's first trial. In order to capture his protagonist's agony at having to resist Calypso's beautiful nymph Eucharis, Fénelon describes her allure in vivid terms:

[Télémaque] regardoit ses beaux cheveux noüez, les habits flotans, & sa noble demarche. Il auroit voulu baiser les traces de ses pas. Lors même qu'il l'a perdit de vûë, il prêtoit encore l'oreille, s'imaginant entendre sa voix, quoiqu'absente; il la voyoit, elle étoit peinte & comme vivante devant ses yeux.

[He marked her fine braided hair, her flowing robe, and noble carriage. He would have thought himself happy, could he have kissed her footsteps. After he had lost sight of her, he listened attentively, fancying he heard her voice. Though absent, he saw her: she was still present to his imagination.]<sup>126</sup>

With his poignant reference to Eucharis's absence, Fénelon practically insists that the reader occupy Telemachus's place and inhabit his remorseless dilemma as well as his acute desire. For Faydit, this drawn-out contest between temptation and duty is so vivid as to undermine the didactic message of the story: "One look from Eucharis, one glance from the beautiful Nymph, one arrow from Cupid's bow ruins everything and makes [Telemachus] forget all the wise lessons Minerva gave him."<sup>127</sup> Of course, Faydit's concern is not for Telemachus but rather for Fénelon's helpless audience, which he worries is held captive by his evocative scenes rather than by the tale's moral. Of the many visual representations of this episode in the novel, Angelica Kauffmann's painting *Telemachus and the Nymphs of Calypso* (1782) precisely captures the conundrum that the novel finds itself in (see Figure 3.1). On one side of the canvas, Telemachus plunges a hand into the forbidden fruit that Calypso's nymphs offer him, his eyes completely bedazzled by the garlanded females before him. To the other side, Mentor gazes at him reproachfully, unable to prevent his pupil's seduction by all the sensuous offerings surrounding him. As Faydit puts it, the novel "inspires images of vice and

---

<sup>126</sup> François Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Telemaque, fils d'Ulysse* (Paris: F. Delaulne, 1717), 138. Translation in François Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, trans. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92-93.

<sup>127</sup> "Un regard d'Eucharis, une œillade d'une belle Nymphé, une fleche de Cupidon, gâte tout, & fait oublier toutes les leçons de sagesse que Minerve luy avoit données." Faydit, "La Telemacomanie," 21.



**Figure 3.1** Angelica Kauffmann, *Telemachus and the Nymphs of Calypso*, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1782)

libertinage”<sup>128</sup> without being fully able to contain their dissemination or to control their effects.

The issue of the novel’s basis in ancient mythology only compounded the controversy surrounding Fénelon’s descriptive style. Irritated by Fénelon’s pretence of completing an abandoned storyline from Homer’s *Odyssey*, Faydit dismisses the whole endeavour as untrue to both history and to myth; with its countless anachronisms and errors, he argues, *Télémaque* is an inaccurate text that commits an injustice to its Homeric roots. In his vehement defence of the novel’s classical roots, however, Faydit misreads the fundamental exercise Fénelon sets himself, which is precisely to exhibit literature’s oldest tropes in a new format. What Faydit perceived as a reckless and inaccurate indulgence in the dramatic world of epic myth actually represented a diligent and thoughtful strategy on Fénelon’s part, one that he clarified shortly before his death in a treatise on the future of literature.

At the invitation of the Académie française in 1713, the novelist wrote an extended letter outlining his ideas for subsequent undertakings by the institution. Acutely aware of his precarious historical position at the tail end of the seventeenth century, Fénelon was forced to contemplate carefully literature’s future in the shadow of the French court’s neoclassical luminaries – Racine and Corneille – and the tragic theatre they famously cultivated to its apex. Against the ever-polarized debates between loyalists to convention and advocates for change, Fénelon attempted to strike a compromise – change based on a close study of convention:

L’émulation des Modernes seroit dangereuse, si elle se tournoit à mépriser les Anciens, & à négliger de les étudier. Le vrai moyen de les vaincre, est de profiter de tout ce qu’ils ont d’exquis, & de tâcher de suivre encore plus qu’eux leurs idées sur l’imitation de la belle nature.

[Imitating the Moderns would be dangerous if it hinged on rejecting the Ancients and on neglecting to study them. The real way to surpass them is to profit by all that they have that is exquisite and to strive to follow their ideas about imitating nature’s beauty even more than they did.]<sup>129</sup>

With this firm recommendation that literature’s “Moderns” strive to beat the “Ancients” at their own game, Fénelon emphatically argues for a bold shift in literary style without forsaking the fundamental principles of his neoclassical antecedents.

This blunt petition to reinvent the conventions of spoken tragedy resonated especially loudly with one of Fénelon’s more fervent younger colleagues, critic and playwright Antoine Houdar de la Motte, and the two writers together developed a radical mandate for revitalizing

---

<sup>128</sup> “Les images du vice & du libertinage, que ce Roman inspire.” Faydit, “La Telemacomanie,” 21.

<sup>129</sup> François Fénelon, *Lettre écrite à l’Académie française: sur l’éloquence, la poésie, l’histoire, etc.*, ed. M.L. Feugère (Paris: Jules Delalain et Fils, 1886), 74.

neoclassicism's more entrenched conventions over a brief period of correspondence that lasted from about 1713 to 1714.<sup>130</sup> Initially, de la Motte was overwhelmed by the task at hand and pleaded with Fénelon to outline his vision for rectifying the stilted and increasingly outdated poetic style of Racine and Corneille in more detail: "I can clearly see numerous faults," he writes to his mentor, "above all a monotony in our Alexandrine verses, which are a bit tiresome; but I do not see the remedy."<sup>131</sup> Faced with replacing the seventeenth century's revered versification system, de la Motte initially seemed to balk at the prospect of finding alternatives to the dodecasyllabic lines, rhyming couplets, and ornate turns of phrase that governed the poetic discourse of France's most celebrated tragedians. Fénelon's reply was unequivocal: the future of literature lay in recalibrating these oppressive rules that denied the French language its full versatility. The project of reform, he makes clear to de la Motte, begins with an unflinching assessment of this clash between the possibilities of poetic discourse and the constraints of an overly-narrow definition of versification:

Le françois n'admet presque aucune inversion de phrase; il procède toujours méthodiquement par un nominatif, par un verbe, et par son régime. La rime gêne plus qu'elle n'orne les vers. Elle les charge d'épithètes; elle rend souvent la diction forcée, et pleine d'une vaine parure. En allongeant les discours, elles les affoiblit. [...] Il faut avouer que la sévérité de nos règles a rendu notre versification presque impossible.

[The French language does not lend itself to word inversions; it always proceeds methodically with a subject, a verb, and its object. Rhyme disturbs the verses more than it adorns them. It inflects them with epithets; it often renders the diction forced and full of vain ornament. By extending speeches, it weakens them. [...] It must be admitted that the rigidity of our rules has made our versification almost impossible.]<sup>132</sup>

With this invitation, de la Motte needed no further encouragement, and he immediately adopted *Télémaque* as the exemplar for a radical reinterpretation of seventeenth-century literature. With his epic novel in prose, Fénelon, he reasoned, had clearly established a remedy to neoclassicism's rigid Aristotelian unities (of time, place, and action), its unnatural Alexandrine verses, and its often-stilted tone.

Moreover, as de la Motte was undoubtedly aware, Fénelon's brazen critique of neoclassical theatre's most prominent stylistic features was a progressive gesture rather than a confrontational one. Racinian and Cornelian neoclassicism was itself perpetually under

---

<sup>130</sup> De la Motte's letters to Fénelon suggest that their correspondence likely dates back earlier than 1713. At the very least, Fénelon was aware of de la Motte's work before the two writers began to exchange letters.

<sup>131</sup> "J'y sens bien quelques défauts, et surtout dans nos vers alexandrins une monotonie un peu fatigante; mais je n'en entrevois pas les remèdes." Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 26 January 1714, in *Chefs-d'Œuvres Littéraires de Fénelon: Correspondances*, editor unknown (Paris: Lefèvre, 1839), 724.

<sup>132</sup> Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 26 January 1714, 725.

scrutiny and the subject of repeated debate throughout the later seventeenth century. Indeed, the very premise of launching a critique of “neoclassicism” immediately begs the question “which neoclassicism?” or at the very least, “whose neoclassicism?” Racine and Corneille were frequently at odds with one another over their respective evaluations of the relative significance of the Aristotelian unities, for instance.<sup>133</sup> From this perspective, Fénelon’s *Lettre à l’Académie* simply joins the long tradition set by Racine, Corneille, and Boileau of publishing justificatory treatises in which they offer their own gloss on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Fénelon’s appeal for flexibility as a principle of writing even echoes Corneille’s claim some seventy years previous that aesthetic license is the poet’s right and obligation:

J’aime à suivre les règles, mais, loin de me rendre leur esclave, je les élargis et resserre selon le besoin qu’en a mon sujet [...]. Savoir les règles, et entendre le secret de les apprivoiser adroitement avec notre théâtre, ce sont deux sciences bien différentes.

[I like to follow the rules; but rather than make myself their servant, I expand and tighten them according to my subject’s needs [...]. Knowing the rules and understanding the secret of expertly taming them to suit our theatre, these are two very different sciences.]<sup>134</sup>

The art of versification, according to Corneille, hinges on the constant reinterpretation of poetic theory. From this perspective, Fénelon’s recommendation to the Académie to pursue a “modern” style of theatre with close reference to its rich tradition was not in defiance of neoclassicism as much as a variation of its very mandate. As it turned out, however, de la Motte’s version of “taming the rules” was a bit more extreme than either of his predecessors’. Determined to rethink neoclassical theatre’s austere style, de la Motte’s revisionist agenda quickly stripped tragedy of its most defining characteristic and versification of its most basic prerequisite: verse form.

---

<sup>133</sup> On this topic, see Richard E. Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

<sup>134</sup> From the 1634 dedication to *La Suivante*. Pierre Corneille, *Pierre Corneille: Théâtre complet, Éditions du Tricentenaire*, Vol. 1, ed. Alain Niderst (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 1984), 388. As for justifying instances of poetic license, Corneille later declared the poet exempt from having to condescend to his audience: “Je ne m’étendrai point à vous spécifier quelles règles j’y ai observés; ceux qui s’y connaissent s’en apercevront aisément, et de pareils discours ne font qu’importuner les savants, embarrasser les faibles et étourdir les ignorants.” (“I will not push myself to specify to you which rules I have observed: those who are acquainted with them will easily perceive them, and such explanations merely irritate the knowledgeable, embarrass the feeble, and daze the ignorant.”) It is with this dismissive assertion that Corneille introduced the first volume of his collected works, published in 1644 in Rouen and Paris. Corneille, *Pierre Corneille: Théâtre complet*, Vol. 1, 45.

## TRAGIC PROSE

De la Motte's somewhat drastic solution to the crisis in French tragedy arose from a logical extension of Fénelon's action points. The neoclassical doctrine of unities, Alexandrine verses, and formal tone, de la Motte argues, practice a powerful deception on its eighteenth-century followers, who are too easily convinced that the value of tragedy lies in the (by then antiquated) rigid poetic style that merely adorns Corneille and Racine's effortless genius:

Pourquoi donc nous paroîtroient-elles [les tragédies de Racine] moins belles [en prose]? Pourquoi les estimerions-nous moins? C'est sans doute que nous ne sentons pas assez leur vrai mérite; & que nous apprétions trop le mérite accessoire de la versification.

[Why, therefore, would [Racine's tragedies] appear less beautiful to us [in prose]? Why would we esteem them less? Doubtless we do not adequately realize their true merit; and we appreciate the secondary merit of versification too much.]<sup>135</sup>

Not every writer is gifted in versification, reasons de la Motte, and the most obvious way to allow character development and clarity of expression to prevail over elaborate figures of speech is to open the genre of tragedy to prose. In order to silence poetry's more distracting mannerisms, de la Motte aspired to relocate tragedy to an altogether unfamiliar type of discourse. This bold proposal enraged some of his contemporaries – above all Voltaire – not only because of the radical marriage between two disparate literary worlds but also thanks to de la Motte's less-than-deferential experimentation with a relatively minor tragic play by Racine. The play in question, Racine's *Mithridate* (1673), was not the likeliest of candidates for a public dispute, or even for careful scrutiny from two of the Enlightenment's most prominent critics; once popular with Louis XIV, it was quickly overshadowed by Racine's most famous works, including *Phèdre* and *Andromaque*. On this occasion, however, *Mithridate* caught Voltaire's attention for a different reason: de la Motte published a creative "translation" of Racine's exquisite Alexandrine poetry into unadorned, unmetered prose, and Voltaire was so aggravated by this vandalization that he declared de la Motte's version simply "unreadable."<sup>136</sup> In all fairness, Voltaire's assessment is not unjust given that de la Motte's *Mithridate* experiment does not make the most compelling case for the genre of prose tragedy; where Fénelon succeeded in writing in prose what was conventionally a versified genre (the epic) by developing an innovative prose style, de la Motte was less creative with his language and therefore less successful. The rancorous exchange that ensued from

---

<sup>135</sup> Antoine Houdar de la Motte, "Comparaison de la première Scène de Mitridate, avec la même Scène réduite en prose," in *Œuvres de Mousieur Houdar de la Motte, l'un des Quarante de l'Académie Française*, Tome 4, 397-420 (Paris: Prault l'aîné, 1754), 408.

<sup>136</sup> "Personne ne peut la lire." Voltaire, "Préface d'*Œdipe*," in *Théâtre complet de Mr. de Voltaire*, Tome 1, xix-xxxix, ed. Voltaire (Lausanne: Franc, Grasset, et Comp., 1772), xxxv.

Voltaire's and de la Motte's altercation set the terms of a polarizing discussion that persisted for several decades.

*Mithridate*'s historical plot is unremarkable, recounting the final day of King Mithridates of Pontus, arch-enemy of Rome and brilliant military tactician, whose defeat tempts his two sons into rivalrous treachery as each positions himself to succeed his father. Perhaps the play's unexceptional plot struck de la Motte as an ideal test case to reconcile the neoclassical institution (most especially its rigid versification) with a more straightforward, verisimilar style better able to convey moral teaching without the distractions of florid language and arbitrary plot strictures. Having taken the audacious step of stripping the verses from Racine's play, however, de la Motte's sense of prose is surprisingly unadventurous. Rather than exercise all of the stylistic tools available for prose writing, de la Motte undertakes an overly direct process of translation that involves exchanging Racine's metered phrasing and rhyming lines for a rearranged word order and the occasional synonym:

On nous faisait, Arbate, un fidèle rapport.  
Rome en effet triomphe, et Mithridate est mort.  
Les Romains vers l'Euphrate ont attaqué mon Père,  
Et trompé dans la nuit sa prudence ordinaire.<sup>137</sup>

On nous faisoit, Arbate, un récit fidelle.  
Rome triomphe en effet; & Mithridate est mort.  
Les Romains ont attaqué mon pere vers l'Euphrate; & ils ont trompé dans la nuit sa prudence ordinaire.<sup>138</sup>

[Arbate, we were given a faithful report. Effectively, Rome triumphs and Mithridate is dead. The Romans attacked my father near the Euphrates, deceiving his customary caution in the night.]

What is most striking about de la Motte's attempt is the persistence of Racine's Alexandrine verses even through this distorted version. The second sentence ("Rome triomphe en effet; & Mithridate est mort") even still sounds the iconic twelve syllables of Alexandrine meter, and in spite of the new visual arrangement on the page, it is difficult not to hear the strong rhyme between "père" and "ordinaire." Moreover, de la Motte replaces the visual impact of the poetry's typesetting with page after page of block prose without including paragraph breaks to structure his new text. It is small wonder that Voltaire was unconvinced that prose could promise a real alternative to the structural and poetic nuance of Racine's original:

Monsieur *de la Motte* prétend, qu'au moins une scène de tragédie mise en prose ne perd rien de sa grace ni de sa force. Pour le prouver il tourne en prose la première scène de *Mithridate*, & personne ne peut la lire. [...] Réduisez les vers en prose, il n'y a plus ni mérite ni plaisir.

[Mr. de Lamotte makes out that a tragic scene translated into prose loses none of its grace or its strength. In order to prove this, he turns the first scene of *Mithridate* into

<sup>137</sup> Jean Racine, *Mithridate*, ed. Étienne Leterrier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 15, v. 1-4.

<sup>138</sup> I have preserved the precise layout of de la Motte's text, including the line breaks, as printed in "Comparaison de la première Scène de Mitridate, avec la même Scène réduite en prose," 398.

prose, and renders it unreadable. [...] There is neither merit nor pleasure in reducing verses to prose.]<sup>139</sup>

Voltaire's invective against prose tragedy is largely understandable given the relatively weak example de la Motte produces for his cause. However, even if de la Motte's version of *Mithridate* failed to impress his contemporaries, his argument nevertheless garnered considerable support.

As Moore points out, the value of de la Motte's experiment lies less in his practical execution than in its theoretical significance – a distinction Voltaire failed to appreciate: "The interest of these exercises is not artistic but theoretical: to engage the reader in a critical comparison between verse and prose to the advantage of the latter. By choosing poetic genres unthinkable without versification (tragedy and the ode), he strove to debunk verse as art to reveal that it was but an artifice."<sup>140</sup> For his part, de la Motte was fairly delighted at having aroused such a vehement reaction from his illustrious compatriot: "I am delighted, sir, to see you so alarmed by what I have been able to say,"<sup>141</sup> he flippantly remarks in his open letter addressed to Voltaire that was published in 1730. Presumably the source of de la Motte's delight was not the ire he had provoked but rather that Voltaire, with his response, had initiated a discussion that implicitly ratified the idea that versification should be open to questioning and reworking.

If the genre of prose tragedy did not immediately catch on, the idea of prose tragedy nevertheless persisted for several decades. A younger generation of writers soon found themselves caught up in the Voltaire-de la Motte dispute. Paul-Jérémie Bitaubé, who was not even quite born when Voltaire and de la Motte argued in 1730, wrote a kind of sequel to Voltaire's famous invective in the form of a witty dialogue between a journalist and an author who discuss the translation of *Mithridate* and the proposition that tragedy in prose may replace neoclassical verse style. Like Voltaire, neither of Bitaubé's interlocutors is convinced of the viability of de la Motte's prose tragedy and both rebuke him for violating a celebrated play by Racine. Ironically, however, in spite of his clear sympathy for Voltaire's position, the dialogue format of Bitaubé's treatise almost amplifies the almost imperceptible concession that Voltaire gave to de la Motte three decades earlier: what was once a small argument between two *philosophes* subsequently became the subject of extended debate for a new

---

<sup>139</sup> Voltaire, "Préface d'*Œdipe*," xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>140</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 70.

<sup>141</sup> "Je suis ravi, Monsieur, de vous voir si alarmé de ce que j'ai pu dire." Antoine Houdar de la Motte, "Suite de Réflexions sur la Tragédie, où l'on répond à M. de Voltaire," in *Œuvres de Monsieur Houdar de la Motte, l'un des Quarante de l'Académie Française*, Tome 4, 421-464 (Paris: Prault l'aîné, 1754), 423.

generation of writers. De la Motte may have “defended his thesis badly” as Bitaubé accuses, yet that very thesis is still under discussion:

Le Journaliste: La Motte soutient mal sa these; car il fit une tragédie en prose, qui étoit sans intérêt, & qui péchoit plus par le fond que par la forme. Il fit plus mal encore: il mit en prose une scène de Racine, du plus harmonieux de nos Poètes, du Poète par excellence: c’est comme si immédiatement après un môt très-succulent on nous le présentoit moins assaisonné, & qu’on nous dît que c’est le meme môt.

L’Auteur: quoique je pense qu’il soit possible d’écrire en prose une tragédie intéressante, je suis bien éloigné de porter une main sacrilège [sic] aux autels justement érigés à la mémoire des Corneille, des Racine.

[The Journalist: La Motte defends his thesis badly, because he writes a tragedy in prose that is without any interest and that sins more in its content than in its form. He does even worse: he renders in prose a scene by Racine, the most harmonious of our poets, the poet *par excellence*. It is as though immediately following a succulent word he presents us with one that is less seasoned and tells us that it is the same word.]<sup>142</sup>

The Writer: Although I believe it is possible to write an interesting tragedy in prose, I am far from raising a sacrilegious hand against the altars justly erected to the memory of Corneille and Racine.]<sup>143</sup>

While Bitaubé’s “auteur” seems slightly more persuaded by the theoretical potential of prose tragedy, France’s luminary playwrights represent a source of apprehension and remain the main obstruction to the project of moving beyond neoclassicism.

Adapting an existing, revered work of poetry perhaps seems an unusual way to exhibit the virtues of tragedy in prose, but de la Motte’s strategy was in fact exceptionally astute. By returning to neoclassical material, de la Motte was able to exhibit the most contentious features of his new genre via the long-established and respected practice of translating foreign-language poetry into French prose. Such prose translations of poetry were widely circulated and may have also stimulated the movement to establish prose tragedy as a legitimate literary genre in its own right. As Moore explains, “prose translations of classical and foreign poetry propelled the dissociation of poetry from versification, hence the gradual awareness that poetry did and could exist without the ornament of verse.”<sup>144</sup> De la Motte’s revolution, then, sparked immediate vitriol but its broader impact was to gradually persuade his more distinguished colleagues of the viability of prose poetry. The literary articles written for Diderot and d’Alembert’s compendium document the confusion, ambivalence, and

---

<sup>142</sup> Paul-Jérémie Bitaubé, “Dialogue entre l’auteur et un journaliste,” in *Guillaume de Nassau, ou La Fondation des provinces-unies*, i-xvii (Paris: Prault, 1775), viii. I am indebted to Fabienne Moore’s book *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment: Delimiting Genre* for drawing my attention to this dialogue.

<sup>143</sup> Bitaubé, “Dialogue entre l’auteur et un journaliste,” viii.

<sup>144</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 26.

eventual conviction of de la Motte's target audience. Above all, the *Encyclopédie*'s articles testify to a genre that defies categorization and polarizes the experts thanks to the immediate self-contradiction in its very name: "prose poetry."

### PROSE-POETRY: OXYMORON OR COMPOSITE GENRE?

In many ways, the *Encyclopédie* encapsulates the mixed and often incoherent response to de la Motte's reform movement. On the one hand, a brief article dedicated specifically to "Poème en prose" emphatically authenticates de la Motte's speculative genre. In it, Jaucourt lauds "the esteemed author of *Télémaque*" for his "happy invention:" a "genre of work in which one finds the fiction and the style of poetry."<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, even Jaucourt's firm endorsement did not represent the final word on the subject for his fellow contributors; the anonymous author of the article on "Prose" remarks pointedly that "Mr. de la Mothe's claim [that poetry and prose be compatible] was based on ill-founded paradoxes" that have "been shown to be false."<sup>146</sup> Prose, the author argues, is fundamentally opposed to poetry to the extent that "what embellishes the one disfigures the other."<sup>147</sup> Among the *encyclopédistes*, then, there was little consensus but rather a pervading uncertainty regarding the status of de la Motte's radical genre. Jaucourt himself seems to compartmentalize "prose poetry" as a curiosity rather than as an established sub-group of literature's standard genre categories; in his piece on didactic poetry, Jaucourt vaguely refers to a spectrum of discourse spanning poetry and prose while his article on dramatic poetry fails to bring up the topic of prose tragedy at all.<sup>148</sup> Prose poetry was by no means the only subject on which Diderot and d'Alembert's writers failed to present a homogeneous front,<sup>149</sup> yet as Moore argues, the uncertainty surrounding de la Motte's project was if nothing else an increasingly urgent symptom of the fissure dividing the poetic establishment from its intrepid and forward-thinking practitioners. As Moore puts it, "I read these contradictions as emblematic of half a century of disagreements roused by *Télémaque*, but also as symptoms of the Encyclopedists'

---

<sup>145</sup> "L'estimable auteur de *Télémaque*" has presented "une invention fort heureuse," namely a "genre d'ouvrage où l'on retrouve la fiction & le style de la poésie." Louis de Jaucourt, "Poème en Prose," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 12:836-12:837, 12:836.

<sup>146</sup> "La prétention de M. de la Mothe a eu le sort des paradoxes mal fondés, on en a montré le faux, & l'on a continué à faire de beaux vers & à les admirer." Anonymous, "Prose," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 13:494.

<sup>147</sup> "D'ailleurs l'éloquence & la poésie ont chacune leur harmonie, mais si opposées que ce qui embellit l'une défigure l'autre." Anonymous, "Prose," 13:494.

<sup>148</sup> Louis de Jaucourt, "Poème dramatique" and "Poème didactique," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 12:815 and 12:813-12:815.

<sup>149</sup> As Frank A. Kafker points out, "The contributors were of varied occupations and ideology; and the editors [...] did not try to impose conformity of viewpoint." Frank A. Kafker, "Some Observations on Five Interpretations of the *Encyclopédie*" *Diderot Studies* 23 (1988): 85-100, 85.

difficulty in extricating themselves from conventional definitions that an evolving literature had outgrown.”<sup>150</sup> In his comprehensive study of the *Encyclopédie*’s literary theories, Pierre M. de Saint Victor comes to the same conclusion: “In short, the *encyclopédistes* confusedly felt the need for overhauling poetry without, however, being capable of effectuating the necessary changes themselves.”<sup>151</sup> The *encyclopédistes*’ conundrum therefore mirrored de la Motte’s own; the poetic principles that made sense in theory were stubbornly difficult to put into practice, and this chasm between concept and application endangered the whole project.

From the 1750s onward, de la Motte’s eccentric agenda increasingly found traction among mainstream literary criticism. Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s pamphlet on “l’art dramatique” is emblematic of this shift in expert opinion. His castigation of tragic versification is every bit as stinging as Faydit’s excoriating review of *Télémaque* had been decades earlier: “What a deluge of flat tragedies, which have a pretentious air because they bear this imposing label and they are in verse!”<sup>152</sup> Reiterating de la Motte’s arguments as established facts, Mercier in many instances defines his predecessor’s terms and clarifies the parameters of his evidence. For instance, where de la Motte happily constructs his entire project on the presumed opposition of poetry and prose, Mercier meticulously provides definitions for the crucial concepts underlying such oppositions. Regarding poetry, for instance, Mercier rhetorically asks if “poetry (that is to say a language filled with images and feelings) reside in the number of syllables, the placement of hemistich, and rime?” before he concludes with emphasis: “The opposite has been proven.”<sup>153</sup> The opposite, Mercier goes on to explain, is a poetry defined by the content rather than the configuration of its language: “If the author of drama writes with force, with truth, with warmth, he will be a poet regardless if he writes in prose,” and prose – Mercier insists – is not merely the equal of poetry but actually better serves the “audacious freedom of the writer.”<sup>154</sup> Beyond the more local project to reenergize an esteemed literary tradition that de la Motte founded, Mercier is already extrapolating an even broader and ambitious project to secure the very vocation of writing.

---

<sup>150</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 93.

<sup>151</sup> “Bref, les encyclopédistes sentent confusément le besoin d’un renouvellement de la poésie sans être cependant capables de procéder eux-mêmes aux changements nécessaires.” Pierre M. de Saint Victor, *Les Théories littéraires de l’Encyclopédie* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Indiana Department of French and Italian, 1964), 132.

<sup>152</sup> “Quel déluge de plates tragédies, qui ont un air de prétention, parce qu’elles portent ce nom imposant & qu’elles sont en vers!” Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du Théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l’art dramatique* (Amsterdam: E. van Harreveld, 1773), 298.

<sup>153</sup> “La poésie (c’est-à-dire un langage rempli d’images & de sentimens) réside-t-elle dans le nombre des syllables, le repos des hémistiches & la rime ? Le contraire a été prouvé.” Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 296.

<sup>154</sup> “S’il [l’auteur dramatique] écrit avec énergie, avec vérité, avec chaleur, il sera poète, quoique’écrivant en prose,” and will better serve “la liberté audacieuse de l’écrivain.” Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 297-298.

Although for Mercier, the prose poetry battle was won in the sense that de la Motte had irreversibly undermined the hierarchical distribution of literary characteristics across genres, his anxiety for the “audacity” of the prose poetry movement belies the one disappointment of the revisionist movement: that its fundamentally synthetic gesture to ground literature’s disparate styles in shared priorities if anything opened a deeper chasm between poetry and prose. Far from inspiring a new awareness of the basic compatibilities across the prose-poetry spectrum, de la Motte’s legacy instead galvanized the sort of polarized thinking that he so determinedly rebuffed. The emergence of two competing periodicals – one dedicated to promoting newly-composed poetry, the other to prose – is emblematic of this ongoing divide between the two “disciplines” of writing. Moore’s foundational research on these two publications, the *Almanach des Muses* (established in 1764) and the *Almanach des Prosateurs* (first published in 1801), shows that in spite of de la Motte’s efforts to reconcile these two domains of literature, eventually “poetry seemed to lose its density” and was simply superseded “philosophically and aesthetically” by prose.<sup>155</sup> Both periodicals emphatically testify to the pervading hostilities that kept two genres competing rather than collaborating across the century.

Purporting to be “a sort of poetic library that is infinitely superior to all other collections,”<sup>156</sup> the *Almanach des Muses* established an immensely popular format that saw the publication last well over seventy years into the 1830s and inspired numerous other similar projects. Voltaire’s ubiquitous presence across the journal’s many volumes – via contributions, dedications, correspondence, and countless references to his works – sets the *Almanach* squarely against the lobbyists for reform. Moreover, as much as the magazine’s founding editor, Claude-Sixte Sautereau de Marsy, proclaimed his determination to promote the most contemporary authors and forefront current poetic trends, most editions belie a strong nostalgia for the ever-imposing canon of seventeenth-century writers. The frontispiece of the 1769 issue, for instance, states the publishing house and gives a peculiarly specific address: the Delalain Librairie is not simply found on the “Rue de la Comédie française” but immediately “next door to” the renowned theatre of Molière, Corneille, and Racine (see Figure 3.2). This oddly specific location – which was not repeated on every issue – in part performed a practical function, since prospective contributors were asked to deliver submissions in person to Delalain’s offices.

<sup>155</sup> Fabienne Moore, “*Almanach des Muses* vs. *Almanach des Prosateurs*: The Economics of Poetry and Prose at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” *Dalhousie French Studies* 67 (2004): 17-35, 17.

<sup>156</sup> This is reference to the proliferation of publications dedicated to collecting poetry that sprung up in the mid-eighteenth century. “Une espece de BIBLIOTHEQUE POETIQUE infiniment supérieure à tous les autres Recueils.” Anonymous (but presumably by editor Claude-Sixte Sautereau de Marsy), “Avertissement,” in *Almanach des Muses* 3 (1766), v.



**Figure 3.2** M. Poisson, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses*, with address  
 “Published by Delalain, Bookseller, Road of and next door to the  
 Comédie française” (1769)



**Figure 3.3** Hyacinthe Rigaud, Frontispiece depicting Nicolas Boileau-  
 Despréaux, *Almanach des Muses, depuis l'origine de la poésie française*  
 (1784)

Aside from operating as a landmark for navigation, however, the mention of the Comédie française symbolically places the publication adjacent to France's rich theatrical history; it is as though through its very geography, the *Almanach* insists on its proximity to the seventeenth century's great poets. Sautereau de Marsy's other projects were even more emphatic about their nostalgic mandate; the *Almanach des Muses, depuis l'origine de la poésie françoise*, founded in 1777 and also published by Delalain, featured an engraving of one of France's revered poets in every issue (see, for example, Figure 3.3). The fact that this frontispiece – and no doubt others in the series – was actually copied from an old edition of the complete works of Boileau merely adds to the sense that this *Almanach*, too, conceived of the century's most modern poetry primarily as an extension of the tradition that preceded it.<sup>157</sup>

Founded by the same small cadre of enthusiasts and distributed by the same publisher in near-indistinguishable formats, these journals largely replicate arguments from earlier in the century and rehearse a style of poetry belonging to a previous era. It is small wonder, then, that some critics eventually cried foul and proposed a new direction for the debate on poetics, one that was arguably more native to the Enlightenment. In practice, the editors of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* tactfully professed a non-antagonistic stance but their mandate nevertheless laid out a pointed opposition to the now long-established *Almanach des Muses*. The preface to the journal's first volume reads like a manifesto for prose:

La Prose a aussi son mérite. [...] Ce n'est pas que notre Almanach prétende à aucune rivalité avec l'autre; ce qui seroit une témérité. Mais pourquoi ne varieroit-on pas les plaisirs du Public? La Prose n'est-elle pas sœur de la Poésie, et nos meilleurs versificateurs ne font-ils pas quelquefois de la Prose? C'est pour réunir et conserver cette portion intéressante de notre richesse Littéraire, que nous avons songé à former l'Almanach des Prosateurs.

[Prose also has merit. [...] It is not that our Almanac claims any rivalry with the other; this would be an effrontery. But why not vary the public's pleasures? Is not Prose the sister of Poetry, and do our best poets not sometimes write Prose? It is to gather and preserve this interesting part of our Literary wealth that we have thought to found the *Almanach des Prosateurs*.]<sup>158</sup>

The editors' pacifying tone might have appeased some of their colleagues if the overriding temperament of the publication had been less sardonic. While the *Almanach des Prosateur's* mandate was every bit as resolute as its rival's, its contributors deployed a much more light-hearted style of writing. Even the magazine's subtitle – “Recueil de pieces fugitives, en

<sup>157</sup> The bust of Boileau that appears in the *Almanach* was originally published in 1740 as the frontispiece of a collection of Boileau's works. See *Les Œuvres de M. Boileau Despreaux avec des éclaircissemens historiques*, Tome Premier, ed. Saint-Surin (Paris: Alix, 1740). The editors of the *Almanach* presumably inserted the bust into a newly designed frame for the purposes of the new publication, as Rigaud died in 1743 well before the *Almanach's* inaugural issue.

<sup>158</sup> CC. Fr. N. and P.B. Lamare, eds., “Préface,” in *Almanach des Prosateurs* 1 (1801): v-vii, vi-vii.

prose” (“Collection of fugitive works in prose”) – humorously situates prose as the persecuted victim of poetry’s tyrannical order. The journal’s numerous satirical contributions most frequently poke fun at stodgy poetic forms, most especially neoclassical tragedy. Emboldened by de la Motte’s radical interrogation of tragedy’s most basic characteristic (its verse form), literary critics began to extend his argument to other features of tragedy, including its predictable plot patterns and archetypal characters.

One contributor’s “Recipe for How to Make a Tragedy” offers a humorous attack on the conservative stalwarts’ most prized poetic genre:

**Recette pour faire une tragédie moderne**

Prenez une vierge d’Asie, d’Afrique, ou de Grece, pour le moins fille de Roi, ou nièce d’empereur.

Prenez pour lui servir de confidente, une Miss âgée, toujours prête à palpiter de pitié ou de terreur, pendant que l’héroïne meurt & renaît comme la sensitive.

Prenez un Héros qu’on a cru enterré depuis dix ans & plus, mais à qui il reste assez de vie pour gronder & rugir.

Prenez une horrible vieille brute qui mérite d’être rouée, & appelez-le tyran dix fois par acte.

Prenez un pontife de sang froid, & un guerrier d’un sang bouillant, & qu’ils fassent tour-à-tour du bruit & des complots.

Jetez ensuite dans la pièce des soldats & des esclaves autant que de raison; qu’ils marchent, qu’ils s’arrêtent, qu’ils combattent & aboyent à plaisir.

Après quoi faites bouillir ensemble toutes ces parties séparées, & assaisonnez-les de oh! de pamoisons & de terreurs.

Versez-y, pendant qu’elles bouillent, une puissante infusion de rage, d’horreurs, d’illusions, & d’amour, et complétez le dénouement avec la démence & le meurtre.

Que votre princesse, en dépit du poignard qui l’aura tuée, lance des œillades, & se donne des airs dans un épilogue railleur: faites-lui prouver que les scènes de vertu qu’elle vient de jouer ne sont que vapeur & fumée, & la morale de la pièce un pur jeu: faites-la discourir sur les folies, dont notre terre est fouillée, & conclure sagement que celle d’écrire des pièces de théâtre, est la pire de toutes.

Servez ensuite au public ce salmis complet; & vantez-le dans les papiers-nouvelles, comme un ragoût des plus délicats.

**[Recipe for Making a Modern Tragedy]**

Take a virgin from Asia, Africa, or Greece, at the very least a king’s daughter or an emperor’s niece.

Take an aged missus to serve her as confidante and to be ever ready to shake with pity or with terror while the heroine dies and is reborn even more delicate.

Take a hero who was believed dead and buried for ten years and more but who has just enough life in him to growl and roar.

Take a horrible old brute who deserves to be put to death and call him ‘tyrant’ ten times per Act.

Take a cold-blooded ruler and a hot-blooded warrior and have them take turns making disturbances and plots.

Throw into the play some soldiers and slaves as far as reason permits; have them march, stop marching, fight, and howl at your pleasure.

After this, boil all these separate parties up and season with ‘ohs!’, swoons and panics.

While it is boiling, add in a potent infusion of rage, horror, illusion, and love, and finish it all off with insanity and murder.

Have your princess, in spite of the sword that will have killed her, flutter her eyelashes and give herself airs in a scoffing epilogue: have her demonstrate that the scenes of virtue that she has just acted out are but vapour and smoke and that the play's moral is but a joke; have her give a disquisition on the follies that cover the earth and conclude wisely that writing plays for the theatre is the worst folly of all.

Serve this stew in its entirety to the public and extol it in the newspapers as the finest ragout.<sup>159</sup>

As with all good satire, the author's preposterous formula plays on recognizable tropes and plugs into a now infamous rivalry in order to elicit amused support from his sympathetic readers. The submission was so popular that it inspired a sequel several years later that offered readers a "Recipe for Making an Epic Poem."<sup>160</sup> If the editors of the *Almanach* did not set out to undermine its companion publication dedicated to poetry, its contributors and readership nonetheless fulfilled this mandate and established a markedly fresh approach to poetics in the process.

## LISTENING FOR POETIC JUSTICE

Whereas the legacy of Fénelon's *Télémaque* is quantifiable in terms of the numbers of published editions, adaptations, and translations into other media, the impact of de la Motte's revisionist project – while no less noisy – is neither easily measured nor even fully decipherable through all the circular dissensus that carried it through the entire Enlightenment period. What did the eighteenth century learn from prose poetry, in the end? In certain respects, the main tenet of his theory – a more flexible approach to the categorization of literary genres – went mostly unheeded, and the new genre of prose poetry languished between bickering factions.<sup>161</sup> If de la Motte's contemporaries were unwilling to fully absorb the lessons of prose poetry, however, Télémacomania had become inextricably embroiled in the terms of a debate that touched all of the Enlightenment's artistic spheres and penetrated deep into the following century as well. For Moore, the Enlightenment *littérateur's* willingness to "pry open the poetic domain via prose"<sup>162</sup> contradicts two standard assumptions in literary historiography, namely that "prose poems were the creation of nineteenth-century

---

<sup>159</sup> M. Hayley, "Recette pour faire une tragédie moderne," *Almanach des Prosateurs* 1 (1801): 261-262.

<sup>160</sup> M. Michaud, "Recette pour composer un poème épique," *Almanach des Prosateurs* 7 (1808): 146-148.

<sup>161</sup> Having prompted such widespread debate, it is somewhat surprising that *Télémaque* did not incite much interest as a *novel*; the discussions surrounding its style and genre instead concentrate on the collision between its epic subject and non-versified language.

<sup>162</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 3.

Romanticism, and that Romanticism liberated poetic expression.”<sup>163</sup> On the contrary, Moore claims, the foundations for nineteenth-century poetics are firmly rooted in the Enlightenment’s intrepid re-evaluation of its poetic priorities and allegiances. From Moore’s perspective, the literary turmoil prompted by de la Motte’s proposals simply represents the preliminary phase of aesthetic innovations that were fully realized in the nineteenth century. Moore’s thesis draws compelling links between two centuries whose aesthetic aims are more often contrasted rather than discussed in conjunction. Against conventional historical narratives that insist on the turn of the century as a symbolic and decisive break in aesthetic theory,<sup>164</sup> Moore demonstrates that the poetics of the Enlightenment period traversed the perimeter of the eighteenth century with significant and widespread effects.

By looking ahead to the nineteenth century’s literary program, however, Moore partially overlooks the solutions that the Enlightenment proposed to its own initiatives. De la Motte’s contribution to poetic theory certainly extended well beyond his own century, but the substance of his arguments also penetrates deeper into the Enlightenment project than Moore perhaps allows. If de la Motte’s main innovation was to devise prose poetry, this new genre not only represented a venture pointing towards the future of literature but also an instrument aimed at the more immediate success of Enlightenment theatre, specifically tragic theatre and beyond that, tragic opera. Above all, de la Motte’s poetics circle back to literature *on the stage*, which is to say literature choreographed, animated by images, and also set to music. In some ways, however, the literary feud over prose vs. poetry gradually drifted away from the crucial theatrical framework of de la Motte’s ideas and omitted the visual and musical resonances of Télémacomania, so that by the time the inaugural issue of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* was published in the early nineteenth century, the issue of prose poetry had become a purely literary debate.

The early volumes of the *Almanach des Muses* had the advantage of closer historical proximity to de la Motte’s publications, and engaged much more actively with poetry’s wider resonances as a dramatic art form. Music is everywhere in these issues, making both explicit and implicit appearances that constantly reaffirm the Enlightenment’s habit of conflating poetry and music into the overarching category of “la poésie lyrique.” Almost every one of the *Almanach*’s frontispiece engravings proudly displays the lyre as an unmistakable symbol of poetry’s double life as both written and oral genre (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5). In each case, the rays of light emanating from the instrument convey an almost spiritual revival, as though each volume discovers a lost relic of superb beauty and mounts it for display in full view of

<sup>163</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 1.

<sup>164</sup> Goehr, for instance, stresses the year 1800 as marking the emergence of the concept of the musical work. See Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*.

its admiring readers. The editors of the *Almanach* further cemented this imagery by publishing admirably inclusive collections that often included short musical pieces; these songs appeared in full score alongside sonnets and other rhymed works (such as fables, dialogues, letters, anecdotes, short pieces of fictions, and much else besides). Finally, each volume concluded with a comprehensive bibliography of poetic works that had been published, performed, and circulated in the past year. The editor's scope is impressive and includes the widest range of new literature that would be of interest to the readership. A large section is devoted to theatrical works, including plays written in prose; each production is listed with its genre, a plot synopsis, and a note differentiating those works that had appeared onstage from those that remained as yet unperformed. Most significantly, these musical works are not separated into a distinct section but appear underneath literary categories. Chansons are listed under the "poems" category, while the most recent operas appear in the "French theatre" section alongside the nation's newest comedies and tragic plays. "La Poésie" is, in other words, synonymous with "la poésie lyrique" in these volumes.

Where the *Almanach des Muses* laid implicit claim to music through its "natural" association with poetry, the advocates for prose – who were loath to relinquish music to conservatism without an argument – evoked musical metaphors in order to harness the aural arts for their more progressive agenda. Unwilling even to discuss theatrical reform without reference to the musical arts, Mercier borrows timeworn tropes from his opponents to suggest that music and theatre are bound together by their deepest principles – nature, gracefulness, expression – as well as by their shared hurdle, namely artifice:

Et pour la récitation naturelle, combien la prose est préférable! Nous avons une ressource tout à la fois facile & gracieuse, c'est de lui donner plus de force & plus d'harmonie, c'est de créer une prosodie nombreuse, qui remplace le vers & débarrasse l'oreille de la chûte réglée des mêmes hémistiches. Le style de nos tragédies est trop compassé, comme notre musique est trop sçavante. Qu'on nous rende l'expression simple, animée, ainsi que la musique de la nature, & que l'on bannisse les termes empoulés, & les modulations artificielles, je parle pour un double concours d'auditeurs.

[As for natural recitation, oh how prose is preferable! Here we have a resource that is both simple and graceful, that lends it greater strength and more harmony, that creates a more abundant prosody, that replaces verse and rids the ear of the trap ruled by selfsame hemistiches. The style of our tragedies is too prim, just as our music is too learned. Let us make expression simple, animated, just as is the music of nature, and let us banish bombastic terms and artificial inflection. I speak on behalf of a double crowd of spectators.]<sup>165</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, ft. a, 303.

By appealing to theatre and music side by side, Mercier in fact appropriates the tacit argument made by the *Almanach des Muses* and speaks not on behalf of two distinct branches of theatre (tragic and musical) but on behalf of a “double crowd” for whom poetry, prose, and music represent mutually compatible – even inextricable – components of literature on the stage. Indeed, everywhere in his treatise, he defines theatre by reference to the other arts rather than along exclusively literary terms. “Theatre is a tableau,”<sup>166</sup> he boldly declares in the tract’s very first sentence, deliberately evoking Diderot’s reliance on this versatile term to define the stage as a type of painting and also, more figuratively, as a form of representation that is both spoken and written.<sup>167</sup> Theatre, thus defined through Diderot’s notion of “tableau,” is staunchly visual, literary, and aural in a way that is often obscured by the tradition of polemics accompanying it. As Michael Fried summarizes, “Diderot contended that the stage conventions of the classical theater produced artificial, inexpressive, and undramatic groupings of figures, groupings that were the antithesis of what the concept of the *tableau* meant to him.”<sup>168</sup> Somehow, music – even more than the visual arts – is always too deeply embedded in the central poetic debates to merit separate discussion, emerging thanks to a passing metaphor, a casual reference, or a short song score tacked onto the end of an *Almanach* volume, but rarely subject to deeper inquiry. One notable exception to this tendency to take for granted music’s role in poetic theory arose in de la Motte’s exchange with Voltaire. As an occasional librettist in his early years,<sup>169</sup> de la Motte’s thoughts on tragic form eventually converged on opera, and he remarks in his preface to the play *Romulus* that opera’s exemption from the Aristotelian unities might be imported to spoken theatre: “The Opera could even have rectified the defects that Tragedy also has.”<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> “Le Spectacle est un tableau.” Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1.

<sup>167</sup> The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defines “tableau” in both these senses, as an “ouvrage de peinture” (a “work of painting”) and also as a “représentation naturelle & vive d’une chose, soit de vive voix, soit par écrit” (a “natural and live representation of something, either orally or in writing”). See “Tableau,” in *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 792. Diderot’s innovative use of the term and its subsequent use in theatrical theories of the eighteenth century are documented at length by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. 79, 89, and 96. More recently, Cuillé has traced the evolution of the concept of the “tableau” in French literature of the eighteenth century; her discussion also sets Diderot’s theatrical theory alongside Rousseau’s influential writings. See Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes*.

<sup>168</sup> Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 79.

<sup>169</sup> Most of these libretti predate de la Motte’s theory of prose poetry by some years, and the single *tragédie lyrique* (in verse) that he did complete later in his career has not been performed in recent times: the work was titled *Scanderberg* (1735), a collaboration with Jean-Louis-Ignace de La Serre with music by François Francœur and François Rebel. De la Motte’s other composer collaborators include André Cardinal Destouches, Pascal Collasse and Antoine Dauvergne, and Marin Marais.

<sup>170</sup> “L’Opera [...] eût pû de meme réparer dans la Tragedie les défauts qu’elle a d’ailleurs.” Antoine Houdar de la Motte, “Second Discours a l’occasion de la Tragedie de Romulus (1722),” in *Œuvres de Monsieur Houdar de la Motte*, Tome 4, 135-190 (Paris: Prault, 1754), 189.



**Figure 3.4** M. Poisson, Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses* (1771)



**Figure 3.5** Unknown (presumably M. Poisson), Frontispiece, *Almanach des Muses* (1775)

As usual, de la Motte's argument misfired badly, and Voltaire's refutation was savage and nearly dissolved into the kind of parody that would later fuel the *Almanach des Prosateurs*:

Monsieur de la Motte [...] prétend, qu'on peut fort bien s'en passer [des trois unités] dans nos tragédies, parce qu'elles sont négligées dans nos opéras: c'est, ce me semble, vouloir réformer un gouvernement régulier sur l'exemple d'une anarchie.

L'opéra est un spectacle aussi bizarre que magnifique, où les yeux & les oreilles sont plus satisfaits que l'esprit, où l'asservissement à la musique rend nécessaires les fautes les plus ridicules, où il faut chanter des *ariettes* dans la destruction d'une ville, & danser autour d'un tombeau [...].

[M. de la Motte pretends that we can easily dispense with the three unities in our Tragedies because these are ignored in our Operas. This seems to me to want to reform a steady government by the example of anarchy.

The Opera is a Spectacle that is as bizarre as it is magnificent, where the eyes and the ears are more satisfied than the spirit, where enslavement to music makes necessary the most ridiculous faults, where one sings *ariettas* amid the destruction of a city and dances around a grave [...].<sup>171</sup>

If Voltaire in this instance refuted the idea that opera might represent a promising forum for recalibrating the rules of tragedy without abandoning them completely, however, he was perhaps less disenchanted with the proposal than with its author.

Indeed, Voltaire's surprisingly generous account of de la Motte's career in his *Catalogue des écrivains français* records his accomplishments as primarily musical. De la Motte, documents Voltaire, was a versatile writer who won fame thanks to his tragedy *Inès de Castro* and his "very nice operas."<sup>172</sup> Overall, the catalogue depicts de la Motte as a polymath who spread his success across various literary genres, including the ode, prose works, and various philosophical writings. Following this short biography, Voltaire offers a brief tribute to de la Motte's agreeable personality<sup>173</sup> and then plunges into a lengthy exploration of a scurrilous rumour that had purported to identify de la Motte as the author of some scandalous couplets. Voltaire preoccupies himself with the details of this affair for most of the (unusually long) entry and leaves out the contentious genre of prose poetry completely.

If Voltaire felt that de la Motte's contributions to poetic theory paled in comparison to his operatic output, however, he took up a very different position in relation to de la Motte's

---

<sup>171</sup> Voltaire, "Préface d'*Œdipe*," xxviii-xxix.

<sup>172</sup> "La Motte-Houdart (Antoine) né à Paris en 1672, célèbre par sa tragédie d'*Inès de Castro* [...] par de très-jolis opera [...]" ("La Motte-Houdart (Antoine), born in Paris in 1672, famous for his tragedy *Inès de Castro* [...] and] his very nice operas"). Voltaire, "La Motte-Houdart (Antoine)," in *Ecrivains sous Louis XIV: Catalogue, Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, Tome 20 "Siècle de Louis XIV," 49-195 (Kehl: Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire Typographique, 1784), 134.

<sup>173</sup> Voltaire praises him as a "homme de mœurs si douces, & de qui jamais personne n'eut à se plaindre [...]" (a "man of such delicate mores and of whom no-one ever had cause for complaint"). Voltaire, "La Motte-Houdart (Antoine)," in *Ecrivains sous Louis XIV: Catalogue*, 135.

renowned contemporary and fellow member of the *Académie française*, Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who demonstrated the possibility of a consensus position.

In contrast to his entry on de la Motte, Voltaire extols Dubos for his theoretical work, and above all for his highly influential treatise on the relationship among poetry, music, and the visual arts. Dubos managed to extract an remarkable degree of admiration from Voltaire given that his tract, published in 1719, espouses a strikingly similar thesis to de la Motte, and – even worse – represents the perspective of a politician and historian who had little in the way of practical experience in the arts. Miraculously, Voltaire was anything but parsimonious in his praise for the work:

Tous les artistes lisent avec fruit les *Réflexions sur la poësie, la peinture & la musique*. C'est le livre le plus utile qu'on ait jamais écrit sur ces matières chez aucune des nations de l'Europe. Ce qui fait la bonté de cet ouvrage, c'est qu'il [y a ...] beaucoup de réflexions vraies, nouvelles & profondes. [...] l'auteur pense & fait penser. Il ne savait pourtant pas la musique; il n'avait jamais pu faire de vers, & n'avait pas un tableau, mais il avait beaucoup lu, vu, entendu & réfléchi.

[All artists can constructively read the *Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music*. It is the most useful book ever written on these issues by any European nation. The merit of this work is that it offers many true, innovative, and profound observations. [...] The author is thoughtful and makes ones think. He did not, however, know music; he had never been able to write poetry, and he had never painted, but he had read, seen, listened, and thought a great deal.]<sup>174</sup>

Despite the caveat that Dubos knew little about music, the Voltaire of the *Catalogue* was considerably more enthusiastic about the prospect of including opera in an updated theory of poetics.

For Dubos, the question of theatre and its future prospects did not revolve around either/or recommendations; neither was he satisfied with de la Motte's conclusion that different types of poetry might collaborate to reinvent theatrical convention. Already in its title, Dubos's treatise announces its ambitious scope as well as its daring conclusion: namely, that literary reform cannot afford to skulk around its own narrow parameters but must from the outset spring from a comparative framework. Literature can only "reflect" on its future by examining how its sister arts reflect or deflect its core principles. Moreover, from its tacit, indistinct position in the sidelines, music emerges as a primary vehicle for poetic renewal. After all the sparring between prose and poetry, between "les Anciens" and "les Modernes," music for Dubos represents a kind of sympathetic arbiter – the third medium and the compromise that eluded Voltaire and de la Motte:

---

<sup>174</sup> Voltaire wrote separate catalogues covering French composers, painters, and architects, but none of lists are remotely comprehensive and only include a handful of names. Voltaire, "L'abbé du Bos," in *Ecrivains sous Louis XIV: Catalogue*, 63-64.

Il nous reste à parler de la Musique comme du troisième des moyens que les hommes ont inventez pour donner une nouvelle force à la Poésie & pour la mettre en état de faire sur nous une plus grande impression. Ainsi que le Peintre imite les traits & les couleurs de la nature, de même le Musicien imite les tons, les accens, les soupirs.

[It only remains to discuss Music as the third medium that we have invented to lend Poetry a new energy and to put it in a position to make an even bigger impression on us. Just as the Painter imitates the features and colours of nature, likewise the Musician imitates its sounds, accents, sighs.]<sup>175</sup>

Music, Dubos goes on to argue, shares its foundational principles with the other arts, above all verisimilitude and its choice of subject matter. Poetry, by this same logic, is not caught between verse and prose but includes a third component on which to tailor and outfit theatre for the new century, namely music. Perhaps it was this appeal to keystones of neoclassical tragedy – verisimilitude, decorum, and naturalness – that persuaded Voltaire that music was not anathema to tragic theatre.

Dubos's treatise then, represents a rare point of theoretical convergence between de la Motte and Voltaire, who otherwise could agree on little more than the value of a practical theory of tragedy. Even Jaucourt, who across his countless articles for the *Encyclopédie* aired conflicting and often contradictory positions vis-à-vis poetry for the stage, remained consistent in his admiration for Dubos – to the extent that most of his articles plagiarize extended passages directly from the *Réflexions critiques*. In a sense, Dubos realized on a broader scale the old Aristotelian dictum that he paraphrased in his *Critique*: “a verisimilar truth is a truth made possible by the circumstances one creates for it.”<sup>176</sup> Just as Corneille and Racine more than once made the most preposterous plot device appear reasonable, likewise Dubos establishes a context in which even de la Motte's far-flung expectations seem possible and Voltaire's fears can be appeased. As Moore points out, eventually the theoretical deadlock between the staunch neoclassicists and the reformists itself became the grounds for an Enlightenment poetics:

Enlightenment authors appeared fascinated by métissage [cultural mix], as well as revolted. Modernity resides in this vital (con)fusion, the emblem of which we discover in prose poems. Willy-nilly, hybridity became the reality of modernity in the eighteenth century in art as in life.<sup>177</sup>

Where literature simply had to absorb this stalemate, however, music's peripheral involvement in the debate afforded more flexibility to experiment with new strategies to “lend Poetry a new energy,” as Dubos put it.

---

<sup>175</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 656.

<sup>176</sup> “Un fait vraisemblable est un fait possible dans les circonstances où on le fait arriver.” Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 226.

<sup>177</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 12-13.

As the most prominent and sustained reworking of the neoclassical tradition in the eighteenth century, the operatic stage was in many ways the most obvious – and most overlooked – platform for the kind of adaptation and innovation de la Motte envisioned. While de la Motte argued for the theoretical viability of prose tragedy on the back of *Télémaque*, the operatic stage was actively absorbing and experimenting with his key ideas, especially a less compounded application of the Aristotelian unities, a bolder approach to character portrayal, and an explicitly visual interpretation of versification. As an extension of the poetic world, the very premise of “la poésie lyrique” was to adapt the *chefs-d’œuvre* of France’s neoclassical playwrights to meet the requirements of the operatic world. Even more than its French counterpart (the *tragédie lyrique*), the Italian version of tragic opera inevitably had to renounce neoclassical versification by virtue of translating Racine and Corneille’s plays into another language. The world of *dramma per musica* actively appropriated the texts at the core of the prose poetry movement – Fénelon’s *Télémaque* and Racine’s *Mithridate* – so that by the time the Voltaire-de la Motte debate had exhausted itself in the 1770s, the operatic stage had developed its own body of works in response to the dispute.

De la Motte’s ambitious mandate to recast the relationship between the principles of conventional tragedy and its breadth of praxis was ideally suited to an audacious operatic forum prepared to absorb, rethink, and invent the stage anew. Voltaire remained unconvinced: “As for prose poems,” he would rant, “I cannot say what this monster is. I see only an inability to write in verse; it is as though somebody proposed to me a concert without instruments.”<sup>178</sup> For de la Motte, Jaucourt and many others, what defined a modern, Enlightened poetics is precisely the radical proposal that literature confidently purge itself of its most cherished hallmarks in order to extend its range. As Dubos concludes, “there are beautiful poems without verses just as there are beautiful verses without poetry and beautiful paintings without the richest colours.”<sup>179</sup> Poetry without verses, beautiful paintings “without the richest colours,” and a “concert without instruments” – such was de la Motte’s promise for revitalizing a tragic theatre primed for experimentation, argumentation, and a kind of adventure most at home on the operatic stage.

---

<sup>178</sup> “Pour les poèmes en prose, je ne sais ce que c’est que ce monstre. Je n’y vois que l’impuissance de faire des vers; j’aimerais autant qu’on me proposât un concert sans instruments.” Voltaire, “Épopée,” in *Œuvres de Voltaire* Tome 4, 129-180, ed. M. Palissot (Paris: Stoupe & Serviere, 1792), 153.

<sup>179</sup> “Il est de beaux Poèmes sans vers, comme il est de beaux vers sans Poésie, & de beaux tableaux sans un riche coloris.” Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 680.

## CHAPTER 4

### “OPERATIC” RACINE AFTER PROSE POETRY

While the *encyclopédistes* were left grappling with the theoretical viability of de la Motte’s audacious genre of prose tragedy, the Enlightenment operatic stage in contrast proceeded to absorb the debate into its evolving praxis. Racine’s *Mithridate* in particular enjoyed an unexpected afterlife well into the nineteenth century thanks to librettists and composers applying principles of spoken tragic theatre to the parallel genre of *dramma per musica*. In spite of its relatively insignificant place in Racine’s *œuvre*, de la Motte inadvertently secured for *Mithridate* a wider resonance that penetrated the Enlightenment’s most lively discussions, most especially the operatic stage. Quite aside from *Mithridate*’s newfound literary notoriety as the exemplar for de la Motte’s campaign, then, the play also imported its lingering and contentious context to the domain of opera.

This chapter takes Racine’s vexed play as an exemplar for an operatic stage saturated not only with the anguished heroes and elevated morals of the neoclassical tragedies that inspired the century’s most illustrious librettists but also, and perhaps more interestingly, with the polemics that escorted these plays into the eighteenth century. Whether as a point of reference or divergence, neoclassicism’s Aristotelian framework remained inextricable from theatrical practice. Metastasio’s complicated reaction to Aristotle’s *Poetics* encapsulates the difficult process of integration and adaptation that confronted the Enlightenment’s dramatists. Not quite a translation of Aristotle and not quite an independent treatise, Metastasio’s *Estratto dell’arte poetica d’Aristotile* (c. 1772) – like the vast repertoire of *dramma per musica* – ends up giving a new gloss to an ancient and well-established tradition. As Piero Weiss documents, Metastasio confessed to Algarotti that his translation of Aristotle was fraught with obstacles, most especially the overwhelming accumulation of commentaries and critiques attached to the text:

Si è dunque e immaginata e fervidamente intrapresa la traduzione della Poetica d’Aristotele: ma sul bel principio dell’opera ci siamo trovati intricati in un gineprajo da non uscirne sì di leggieri.

[I therefore imagined and fervently undertook a translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: but right at the start of this great project, I found myself entangled in a prickly thicket that was not so easy to escape.]<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>180</sup> Pietro Metastasio, Letter to Algarotti, 16 September 1747, in *Opere Postume del Signor Abate Pietro Metastasio*, Vol. 1, 236-246, ed. Conte d’Ayala (Vienna: Alberti, 1795), 244. Weiss discusses Metastasio’s project at length and also contextualizes the *Estratto* amid editions of Aristotle’s *Poetics* throughout the Enlightenment. See Piero Weiss, “Metastasio, Aristotle, and the *Opera Seria*,” *The Journal of Musicology* 1/4 (1982): 385-394, esp. 385-6.

Ultimately, Metastasio penned an “abstract” of the *Poetics*, defining his life’s work (and the entire *dramma per musica* tradition) as a kind of thoughtful commentary on (neo)classical dramaturgy. With its exacting application of Aristotelian principles, neoclassical theatre thus presented both a problem and its solution: having narrowly defined the parameters of theatrical possibility, the tragedies by Racine and Corneille also represented a corpus of works ripe for study and primed for renovation. Thanks in part to de la Motte’s adventurous rephrasing of plays like *Mithridate*, neoclassicism was rediscovered several times over by the Enlightenment’s preeminent theorists and subsequently into modern times – not as a treasury of untouchable masterworks by France’s most luminary playwrights, but rather as a collection of workable remnants increasingly available for translation, adaptation, and experimentation.

Beginning with Antonio Caldara and Lorenzo Morari’s *Farnace* (Venice, 1703), versions of the Mithridates legend appeared regularly on the operatic stage; Apostolo Zeno’s *Mitridate* was wildly popular and produced settings by Caldara (1728), Gai (1730), Porpora (1730), Sarti (1765), and Tarchi (1785), among others.<sup>181</sup> Ostensibly, Racine’s influence towers over several generations of librettists and composers and yet the playwright is also oddly remote from this repertoire. For both Morari and Zeno, Racine’s tragedy supplies a plot setting and the occasional character name, but neither librettist adapts the play as much as borrows loosely from its epic-historical world. Indeed, most of the operatic versions of *Mithridate* scarcely resemble Racine’s version except in the broadest sense. By the 1720s, it seems, Racine and Corneille’s influence was in some ways superseded by those eighteenth-century critics invested in modernizing neoclassicism’s mandate. Zeno himself attributes his *Mitridate* not to Racine’s influence but rather to de la Motte, whose newly-composed plays imported the tragic framework and Alexandrine verses of the seventeenth century into a new era and a new medium.<sup>182</sup> As Zeno concedes in the *argomento* that prefaces the libretto, “A modern French tragedy by Mr. de la Motte, entitled *Inès de Castro*, has contributed a great deal to certain scenes.”<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>181</sup> Alain Niderst gives a fairly complete list of operatic settings of the Mithridates myth, including versions by Caldara (1703 and 1728), Scarlatti (1707), Vinci (1724), and Vivaldi (1727). Many of these works do not survive in their entirety and most are no longer performed. See Alain Niderst, “Mithridate opera?” in *Actes du 29e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, “La Rochefoucault, Mithridate, Frères et sœurs, Les Muses sœurs,” 125-136, ed. Claire Carlin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998).

<sup>182</sup> In truth, de la Motte’s plays are rather mediocre, hollow facsimiles of neoclassical style, and so it is puzzling that Zeno would turn to de la Motte’s derivative samples rather than work directly with the source texts.

<sup>183</sup> “Ad alcune scene [...] ha molto contribuito una moderna Tragedia francese del Sig. de la Motte [*Inès de Castro*].” Apostolo Zeno, “Argomento: *Mitridate*” in *Poesie drammatiche di Apostolo Zeno*, Vol. 5, 97-9, ed. unknown (Venice: Giambattista Pasquali, 1744), 99. *Inès de Castro* was one of de la Motte’s most famous dramas and premiered in 1723.

Despite his admiration for de la Motte's rendition of neoclassical tragic drama, Zeno completely circumvents the close imitation of Racine that underlies de la Motte's theory of theatrical renewal and seems indifferent to (or more likely oblivious of) the raging quarrel surrounding prose poetry. Racine is barely recognizable in Zeno's *Mitridate*, and likewise the numerous versions of Morari's *Farnace* that populated the Enlightenment stage borrowed a diffuse *idea* of neoclassical tragedy rather than specific plot configurations, characters, or dramatic devices. For many librettists and composers of *dramma per musica*, neoclassicism was as much a motif open to the loosest adaptation as it was an inheritance to be curated, restored, or else firmly jettisoned. In a way, de la Motte's method of grappling directly with neoclassicism's antiquated verses did not persuade most of his musical counterparts, who absorbed his bold arguments for reform but eclipsed the specificity of the texts at the centre of his project, diluting them to a vague, formulaic atmosphere. In spite of its huge popularity as an operatic subject, then, Racine's tragedy is conspicuously absent in much of the *Mitridate* repertoire. One notable exception to this trend, however, is Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi's *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, set by Quirino Gasparini in 1767 and, more famously, by Mozart in 1770.

In stark contrast to earlier operatic versions of the Mithridates tale, Cigna-Santi's libretto rigidly adheres to Racine's verses, translating them verbatim through large sections and preserving the plot organization almost exactly.<sup>184</sup> The few departures that Cigna-Santi does introduce therefore stand out as deliberate structural modifications reflecting a new – and distinctly de la Mottean – approach to the Aristotelian parameters of neoclassical theatre. While the libretto is not a prose poem in a literal sense, Cigna-Santi's targeted revisions nevertheless espouse many of the attributes de la Motte theorizes as hallmarks of prose tragedy, namely a less compounded application of the Aristotelian unities (of time, place, and action) and a more direct approach to character portrayal. *Mitridate* proves to be a compelling case study for the exchange (both direct and indirect) among opera, its French neoclassical source texts, and the Enlightenment's lively deliberations over a theory of tragedy. Adopting a much more direct relationship to his seventeenth-century predecessor, Cigna-Santi cultivates a genre capable of translating the subtle imagery and delicate discourse of Racine's tragedy to a new *lingua italiana* and to the multi-media scale of operatic theatre. Not content to perpetuate Racinian neoclassicism as a mythical echo of past cultural achievements, Cigna-Santi instead offers a systematic, meticulous response to the challenges of a play rife with

---

<sup>184</sup> Carolyn Gianturco contends that Cigna-Santi may have worked with an Italian translation of *Mithridate* by Giuseppe Parini. However, Philipp Adlung suggests that this connection is less certain than previously assumed. See Carolyn Gianturco, *Mozart's Early Operas* (London: Batsford, 1981), 82 and Adlung, *Mozart's Opera Seria Mitridate, re di Ponto*, esp. 35-43.

numerous layers and also an unusual approach to the Aristotelian unities. Mozart, more than Gasparini, actively contributes to the librettist's more daring dramaturgical decisions. Cigna-Santi's *Mitridate* libretto, in other words, affords unprecedented access to the cumulative texture of several stages of production, dissent, and synthesis.

No doubt because of Cigna-Santi's deliberate duplication of the main features of Racine's *Mithridate*, which premiered at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1673, Cigna-Santi and Mozart's opera has largely been read in direct and unflattering comparison to the original play. Although Mozart's version of the opera enjoyed a modest success at its Milanese premiere, it has subsequently drawn ambivalent commentary and only sporadic revivals. The strikingly abstract production by Günter Krämer in 2006 for the Salzburger Festspiele marks a high point in the opera's recent history, but Mozart's biography seems to preoccupy many critics, who deny that the inexperienced fourteen-year old composer injected the opera with any dramatic complexity. Stanley Sadie, for instance, bluntly dismisses any deep interpretation of the opera: "anyone discovering subtleties of characterization is deluding himself; Mozart's youthful work will not bear interpretation in such terms."<sup>185</sup> Other commentators scornfully deride Cigna-Santi and Mozart's piece as a feeble, inadequate successor to the great theatre of Racine. Without undertaking any detailed comparison between the spoken and operatic versions of *Mit(h)ridate*, Rosen claims that "the tragedies of Racine are a mute presence [in Mozart's *Mitridate*], but their presence is above all a reproach."<sup>186</sup> A.C. Keys is similarly dismissive when he argues that the opera does the "greatest violence [...] to the strict economy of Racinian tragedy."<sup>187</sup> Equally harshly, Charles Mazouer concludes that "essentially, the Racinian tragedy finds itself betrayed by the opera."<sup>188</sup> In spite of their merciless tone, these critics identify the main feature that sets Cigna-Santi's *Mitridate* apart from countless other Mithridates operas, that is, its unusual proximity to Racine's tragic play.

However, each of these assessments relies on the same bizarre illogic, namely that Cigna-Santi and Mozart's *Mitridate* is somehow both derivative and simultaneously fails to imitate its neoclassical model closely enough. The root of this confusion is twofold: in the first place, Rosen and Keys hold Racine's *Mithridate* up as the epitome of neoclassical style, whereas the play in many ways takes a notoriously eccentric view of tragic conventions (which were themselves subject to furious and prolonged debate throughout the seventeenth

---

<sup>185</sup> Stanley Sadie, "A Note on Mozart's First Serious Opera," *The Musical Times* 113/1547 (1972): 41-42, 41.

<sup>186</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 179.

<sup>187</sup> A.C. Keys, "Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas" *Music & Letters* 59/1 (1978): 1-9, 4.

<sup>188</sup> "Pour l'essentiel, la tragédie racinienne se voit trahie par l'opéra." Charles Mazouer, "Mozart et la tragédie française," *Studi Francesi* 51/1 (2009): 112-119, 115.

century); secondly, even a close comparative reading of the opera must account for an entire century of analysis, debate, and reinterpretation separating the two works. Rather than juxtapose Racine's play and Cigna-Santi's *Mitridate* as exemplars of two distinct theatrical traditions, I propose to read these two works in light of the century of intervening debate in order to dissipate two suppositions: first, that neoclassical tragedy and *dramma per musica* each blandly perpetuate a rigid set of formal conventions that forestall the kind of adventurous experimentation theorized by de la Motte and others; second, that the interaction between seventeenth-century tragic theatre and eighteenth-century opera is somehow not mediated by these vibrant literary discussions.

In what follows, I take up Sadie, Rosen, and Key's challenge not simply to rehabilitate a relatively obscure opera, but rather in order to show the extent to which *dramma per musica* wrestles with a volatile neoclassical tradition and its vexed afterlife in the eighteenth century. Through the lens of opera, Racinian neoclassicism assumes a new and unexpectedly prickly role, posing a challenge not only to seventeenth-century theatrical priorities but also to *dramma per musica*'s own generic possibilities. For some of *dramma per musica*'s librettists and composers at least, the mythic, untouchable figure of Racine yields a pliable and profoundly experimental source of material. To return to Barthes's famously statement, "Racine himself, Racine degree zero, doesn't exist. There are only Racine-adjectives. [...] In short, Racine is always something besides Racine."<sup>189</sup> Tempting as it is to discuss it as a stable, monolithic movement, neoclassicism too is always "something besides." The task of this chapter is to show that "operatic" neoclassicism does not betray "Racinian" neoclassicism but rather builds on its "degree zero" in a new direction. The "Racine-adjectives" proposed by Rosen and Keys are, I argue, not the only descriptors for Cigna-Santi and Mozart's version of neoclassicism.

### **"REPROACHFUL" RACINE**

Rosen's notion of a flawless *Mithridate* casting its reproachful shadow over Cigna-Santi and Mozart's work is awkward for two reasons. First, Racine's tragedy is anything but a celebrated, canonical work; if anything, recent appraisals of the play have been more deeply ambivalent even than the critiques levied against the opera. Second, even within Racinian neoclassicism, the playwright's *œuvre* is so diverse and variable that each play denotes a distinct interpretation of Aristotelian tragic form. This is especially true of *Mithridate*, where structure, pacing, and character development unfold in an eccentric format. Far from

---

<sup>189</sup> "Racine tout seul, le degré zero de Racine, ça n'existe pas. Il n'y a que des Racine-adjectifs. [...] Bref, Racine est toujours quelque chose d'autre que Racine." Barthes, "Racine c'est Racine," 60-61. Translation in Barthes, "Racine Is Racine," 91.

disappointing a celebrated, archetypal tragedy, then, Cigna-Santi and Mozart's *Mitridate* tackles a contested and in many ways atypical example of Racinian theatre.

Reputed to have been Louis XIV's favourite of Racine's plays at the time of its opening (in 1673, the same year that marked the playwright's admission to the *Académie française*), *Mithridate* has more recently met with significantly less enthusiasm from critics. As John Campbell documents, commentators have dismissed *Mithridate* as "the least of [Racine's] masterpieces" and "the least tragic of Racine's tragedies."<sup>190</sup> Donna Kuizenga, in her "reconsideration" of the play, calls it "one of the problem plays [that] makes many lovers of *Phèdre* vaguely uncomfortable, all the more so because it cannot be dismissed as an early effort."<sup>191</sup> Racine's *Mithridate* hardly fits the profile of a classic *chef-d'œuvre* casting a shadow of "reproach" over Cigna-Santi and Mozart's efforts. Paradoxically though, Racine's "problem play" becomes a paragon of neoclassical refinement in Rosen's and Keys's commentary. Given the play's complicated reception, the implicit argument that Racinian neoclassicism is irreproachable makes little sense and reduces a challenging play to its most general and banal features.

A more constructive commentary comes from Barthes in *Sur Racine*, where he suggests that *Mithridate* represents a kind of limiting case for neoclassical tragedy; *Mithridate*, in his view, pushes tragic convention further than the genre itself, and as a result "the tragedy slips into opera: *Mithridate* is a *rectified* tragedy."<sup>192</sup> For Barthes, Racine's enigmatic drama finds its logical consequence in the operatic adaptations that revisited, amended, and enlivened the outdated problems of an older generation of theatre. Cigna-Santi's libretto in many ways sets out to answer Racine's play by introducing a few specific revisions, including the very "rectified" ending that Barthes recognizes as a distinctly operatic convention. Cigna-Santi's version directly translates most of Racine's drama (see Table 1) but drastically modifies the tone of the original tragedy by rewriting the dénouement. While the opera's genesis may have involved intermediary versions of the piece (including Gasparini's 1767 setting of Cigna-Santi's libretto), Racine's text is clearly recognizable. The extent to which Mozart relied on Gasparini's version of *Mitridate* remains uncertain; Harrison James Wignall argues that Mozart only became aware of Gasparini's opera through tenor Guglielmo

---

<sup>190</sup> John Campbell, "Tragedy and Time in Racine's *Mithridate*," *The Modern Language Review* 92/3 (1997): 590-598, esp. 590.

<sup>191</sup> Donna Kuizenga, "*Mithridate*: A Reconsideration," *The French Review* 52/2 (1978): 280-285, 280.

<sup>192</sup> "La tragédie [de *Mithridate*] s'esquive en opera. *Mithridate* est une tragédie *rectifiée*." Barthes, *Sur Racine*, 108.

d'Ettore, who had also performed in the 1767 production.<sup>193</sup> According to Wignall, Mozart likely turned to Gasparini in order to satisfy d'Ettore's repeated demands for revisions without, however, imitating Gasparini too closely. By the same token, it is unlikely that Mozart met Cigna-Santi or had the opportunity to request revisions. Aside from minor changes made to accommodate d'Ettore's lack of stamina, Mozart's only revisions involve omitting small sections of recitative in order to condense the action and avoid redundant lines. Mozart's contribution to the collaboration, however, is far from insignificant, as his setting in many ways emphasizes Cigna-Santi's most daring revisions to Racine's original. As Daniel Hertz documents, Mozart's library included the complete works of Racine, and so the composer was intimately familiar with Cigna-Santi's source text and with neoclassicism's principles and conventions.<sup>194</sup>

Both Racine's play and Cigna-Santi and Mozart's opera elaborate on classical accounts of the historical King Mithridates VI of Pontus, who turned the fine line between life and death into a cunning military strategy. According to his classical biographers, the historical Mithridates practiced an extreme form of self-preservation, habitually drinking a toxic cocktail as a prophylactic against assassination. When, after his ignominious defeat in battle in 63 BC, he tried to commit suicide by ingesting poison, Mithridates discovered that the poison was no longer fatal to him. According to traditional accounts, the king finally perished by the sword of a comrade, having been forced to delegate his own suicide in order to break his complicated alliance with a substance both lethal and strategic. Racine's tragedy revolves almost entirely around the king's presumed death and, eventually, his real demise. A web of minor subplots furnishes the play with the requisite filial dilemmas and love triangles. Hearing rumours of Mithridate's suicide after an unsuccessful military campaign, the eldest son Pharnace immediately lays claim to Monime (his father's intended wife) and plots to join forces with the invading Romans. Mithridate's preferred younger son, Xipharès, is left to defend his father's kingdom and bride while concealing the secret love that he shares with Monime. Mithridate unexpectedly returns alive, having feigned his own death as a test of his sons' loyalties; he quickly condemns Pharnace to death for his treachery, but not before the older brother betrays his sibling's illicit love. In his despair, the king considers putting both Xipharès and Monime to death. The Romans attack the palace and, rather than face defeat, Mithridate commits suicide (first by ingesting poison and then, failing that, by piercing

---

<sup>193</sup> Harrison James Wignall, "Guglielmo d'Ettore: Mozart's First Mitridate," *The Opera Quarterly* 10/3 (1994): 93-112 and "The Genesis of *Se di lauri*: Mozart's Drafts and Final Version of Guglielmo d'Ettore's Entrance Aria from *Mitridate*," in *Mozart-Studien V* (1995): 45-99.

<sup>194</sup> Daniel Hertz, "Mozart, his Father, and *Idomeneo*," *The Musical Times* 119/1621 (1978): 228-231, 230.

himself with a sword). The remaining characters vow to keep the king's heroism alive by repelling the Roman invaders.

In the play, the climactic moment of the drama transpires off-stage: believing himself defeated, Mithridate first takes poison and, finding himself immune to its effects, throws himself on his sword just as Xipharès arrives triumphantly, having repelled the invading armies. This entire action is recounted second-hand by the king's confidante, who must rely on the most vivid eloquence to describe the pitiful scene:

[...] *C'en est assez, m'a-t-il dit, cher Arbate.  
Le sang, et la fureur m'emportent trop avant.  
Ne livrons pas surtout Mithridate vivant.  
Aussitôt dans son sein il plonge son épée.  
Mais la mort fuit encore sa grande Âme trompée.  
Ce Héros dans mes bras est tombé tout sanglant,  
Faible, et qui s'irritait contre un trépas si lent.  
Et se plaignant à moi de ce reste de vie,  
Il soulevait encore sa main appesantie,  
Et marquant à mon bras la place de son cœur,  
Semblait d'un coup plus sûr implorer la faveur.*

*[It is enough, he said to me, dear Arbate.  
Blood and fury carry me too far.  
Above all let us not deliver Mithridate alive.  
He immediately plunges his sword in his breast.  
But death again flees his great deceived soul.  
This hero fell into my arms all bloodied,  
Weak and angered by such a slow death.  
And complaining to me about this remaining life,  
He again raised his weary hand,  
And showing my hand where his heart resides,  
Seemed suddenly to beg the favour of a more decisive blow.]*<sup>195</sup>

Racine's tragic hero performs his final, desperate act out of view, his words related to the audience by the play's most insignificant character.

Cigna-Santi's libretto, in contrast, places the key moment of dramatic reversal directly onstage. Farnace himself narrates his gradual transformation as his infidelity gives way to indetermination and, finally, to resolve:<sup>196</sup>

---

<sup>195</sup> Arbate, 5.4.1604-1614. Text references are to act, scene, and line numbers of the following edition: Jean Racine, *Mithridate*, Folioplus Classiques, ed. Georges Forestier, notes and commentary by Étienne Leterrier (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999).

<sup>196</sup> Adlung argues that Cigna-Santi likely adopted this conversion scene from Leopoldo Villati's 1750 libretto. However, Cigna-Santi's Farnace undergoes a "moral conversion" that is "much more significant than in Villati" ("Seine moralische Umkehr wird damit noch deutlicher als bei Villati.") If Cigna-Santi was inspired by this earlier version, Adlung maintains, he gives Farnace's "remorse a magnanimity and majesty [...] that is rather foreign to Villati" ("erst Cigna-Santi Farnaces Reue eine Großmütigkeit und Erhabenheit verleiht, die Villati eher fremd ist"). Adlung, *Mozarts Opera seria* Mitridate, re di Ponto, 38.

Vadasi... Oh ciel,  
 Ma dove spingo l'ardito piè?  
 Ah vi risento; o sacre di natura voci possenti,  
 O fieri rimorsi del mio cor.  
 Empio a tal segno, no, ch'io non son  
 E a questo prezzo a questo  
 Trono, Aspasia, Romani, io vi detesto.

[I must go... O heaven,  
 But where shall I direct my bold steps?  
 Ah, I hear you o sacred, powerful voices of nature,  
 O proud remorse of my heart.  
 No, I am not wicked to this extent,  
 And at this price,  
 Throne, Aspasia, Romans, I detest you.]<sup>197</sup>

Mozart's accompanied recitative (see Example 1) maximizes both the immediacy and the poignancy of the scene through a particularly evocative text setting. Farnace's transformation does not just arrive but unfolds dramatically, his exclamations punctuated by rapid scale figures, and the climactic final line culminating with a jarring tritone on "Romani" (m. 17).

Even the vacillating tempo markings (alternating *allegro* and *andante* sections) convey the acute contest between ambition and virtue wrenching Farnace out of his old perfidy.<sup>198</sup> If Cigna-Santi's libretto proposes Farnace's *scena* as a focal point of the opera, Mozart's musical setting actively cultivates his colleague's dramaturgical vision. This crucial amendment to Racine's play transpires thanks to both the opera's text and its score. The aria that follows, "Già dagli occhi," occupies a significant portion of the final act – indeed, of the entire opera – and completely eclipses the brief, musically bland recitative that depicts Mitridate's final moments immediately afterwards. When, as in the play, Mitridate subsequently expires, his departure is completely overshadowed by the prodigal son's poignant epiphany. Mitridate's death fulfils the tragedy's inevitable ending, but his son's transformation "rectifies" the opera away from the vicious cycle of plotting, murder, and revenge that Racine's characters are left to repeat in perpetuity. Mitridate's demise is still dignified and poignant, but the opera's attention is noticeably elsewhere.

<sup>197</sup> Farnace, Act 3, scene 9.

<sup>198</sup> For Adlung, a "*Chiaroscuro-effect*" ("*Chiaroscuro-Effekt*") permeates the entire work, beginning with the overture's first section, which features arpeggiated figures in alternating bars of *forte* and *piano*. Adlung, *Mozarts Opera seria Mitridate*, re di Ponto, 51.

RACINE'S <i>MITHRIDATE</i> (1673)		CIGNA-SANTI AND MOZART'S <i>MITRIDATE, RE DI PONTO</i> (1770)	
<b>Mithridate, king of Pontus</b>	Arbate, Mitridate's confidant	Mitridate, king of Pontus	<b>Ismene, Farnace's betrothed</b>
<b>Xipharès, Mitridate's younger son</b>	Phædime, Monime's confidant	Sifare, Mitridate's younger son	Arbate, Governor of Nymphæa
<b>Pharnace, Mitridate's elder son</b>	Arcas, servant	Farnace, Mitridate's elder son	<b>Marzio, Farnace's Roman ally</b>
<b>Monime, Mitridate's betrothed</b>		Aspasia, Mitridate's betrothed	
~ <b>Bold type denotes the most significant differences between the plots</b> ~			
<b>ACT 1</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Xipharès declares his father dead</b>, confesses his fraternal rivalry to Arbate</li> <li>2. Monime asks Xipharès for protection against the advances of Pharnace; he confesses his love for her</li> <li>3. Xipharès and Monime condemn Pharnace as a Roman sympathizer</li> <li>4. Phædime announces Mitridate's unexpected arrival</li> <li>5. Pharnace and Xipharès agree to a pact of silence</li> </ol>	<b>ACT 1</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Arbate offers Sifare the keys to Nymphæa; Sifare describes his rivalry with Farnace</li> <li>2. Same as Racine's 1.2</li> <li>3. Sifare feels the contest between duty and love</li> <li>4. Aspasia condemns Farnace as a traitor</li> <li>5. Sifare defends Aspasia; Farnace realizes they are hiding an illicit love</li> <li>6. Arbate announces Mitridate's unexpected arrival</li> <li>7. Aspasia bids Sifare farewell</li> <li>8. <b>Sifare agrees to conceal his brother's disloyalty</b></li> <li>9. <b>Farnace consults with Marzio, his Roman collaborator</b></li> <li>10. Mitridate returns from battle; Ismene consoles him</li> <li>11. Both brothers profess to be overjoyed; Ismene worries that Farnace no longer loves her</li> <li>12. Mitridate interrogates Arbate and discovers Farnace's perfidy</li> <li>13. Mitridate expresses relief that his favored son, Sifare, has remained loyal but vows to punish Farnace</li> </ol>
<b>ACT 2</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monime tells Phædime of Xipharès's love</li> <li>2. Mithridate returns from battle</li> <li>3. Mithridate tells Arbate to report on his sons' loyalty; Arbate declares Pharnace a traitor but attests to Xipharès's loyalty</li> <li>4. Out of duty, Monime agrees to honour her promise to marry Mithridate</li> <li>5. Unaware of their mutual love, Mithridate orders Xipharès to protect Monime against Pharnace</li> <li>6. Monime confesses to Xipharès that she returns his love; the couple agree to banish their affection and comply with Mithridate's will</li> </ol>	<b>ACT 2</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ismene confronts Farnace, who spurns her</li> <li>2. Mitridate comforts Ismene</li> <li>3. Aspasia agrees to marry Mithridate, who mistakenly thinks that Farnace has stolen her affections</li> <li>4. Mitridate praises Sifare for his loyalty and rages against Farnace</li> <li>5. Aspasia confesses her love to Sifare</li> <li>6. Arbate summons everyone to Mitridate's camp</li> <li>7. Aspasia and Sifare lament their situation and agree to forget one another</li> <li>8. Aspasia struggles between duty and love</li> <li>9. Mitridate suspects Farnace of courting the Romans</li> <li>10. Mitridate outlines his military strategy; Farnace advocates for</li> </ol>
<b>ACT 3</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mithridate outlines his military strategy to defeat the Romans; Pharnace advocates for an alliance with their enemy</li> <li>2. Mithridate has Pharnace arrested; Pharnace betrays Xipharès to their father</li> <li>3. Mithridate reassures Xipharès of his confidence</li> <li>4. Alone, Mithridate decides on a ruse to test Xipharès's loyalty</li> <li>5. Mithridate tricks Monime into confessing her love for</li> </ol>		

<p><b>ACT 4</b> Scene</p>	<p>Xipharès</p> <p>6. In private, Mithridate renounces his son</p> <p>1. Monime worries that she ought not to have confessed to loving Xipharès</p> <p>2. Xipharès and Monime discover the ruse; Xipharès is persuaded to flee</p> <p>3. The king approaches; Xipharès leaves</p> <p>4. Monime confronts Mithridate</p> <p>5. Mithridate debates whether to put them both to death</p> <p>6. Arbate tells Mithridate that Pharnace has escaped and defected to the Romans</p> <p>7. Arcas announces that the Romans have surrounded the city</p>		<p>peace with the Romans</p> <p>11. Farnace summons Marzio; Mitridate banishes Farnace to the dungeon</p> <p>12. Ismene pleads with Mitridate to forgive Farnace</p> <p>13. Farnace admits his guilt but betrays Sifare to their father</p> <p>14. <b>Hidden, Sifare witnesses</b> his father trick Aspasia into confessing to their love; Mitridate rages</p> <p>15. <b>Aspasia pleads with Sifare to draw his sword and kill her; they agree to die together</b></p>
<p><b>ACT 5</b> Scene</p>	<p>1. Supposing Xipharès dead, Monime tries to hang herself but fails</p> <p>2. Arcas enters, bearing a cup of poison that Mithridate has ordered for Monime</p> <p>3. Arbate saves Monime at the last minute</p> <p>4. Arbate describes the battle: believing himself defeated, Mithridate has drunk poison and stabbed himself; Xipharès meanwhile has defeated the Romans</p> <p>5. Mithridate is carried in to reconcile with Xipharès and Monime; he dies and the couple vow revenge against Pharnace and the Romans</p>	<p><b>ACT 3</b> Scene</p>	<p>1. Aspasia has tried and failed to hang herself; Ismene pleads with Mitridate to show mercy</p> <p>2. Mitridate agrees to spare Sifare if Aspasia will repent; she refuses, preferring death</p> <p>3. Arbate announces that the Romans have surrounded the city</p> <p>4. A Moor brings Aspasia a cup of poison</p> <p>5. <b>Sifare bursts in</b> just in time to save Aspasia (Ismene having released him); he charges off to battle alongside his father</p> <p>6. Sifare expresses his commitment to duty above love</p> <p>7. Farnace is being held in the dungeon</p> <p>8. <b>Marzio comes to rescue Farnace, promising him a kingdom in exchange for his loyalty</b></p> <p>9. <b>Farnace realizes his father's life will not be spared; he rejects Marzio and vows loyalty to Mitridate</b></p> <p>10. Wounded, Mitridate is carried onstage; he describes the battle scene</p> <p>11. Mitridate gives Aspasia to Sifare</p> <p>12. <b>Ismene announces that Farnace has repelled the Roman invasion; he is reconciled with his father;</b> Mitridate dies and all vow to resist Rome</p>

**Table 1.** Plot comparison of Racine's *Mithridate* (1673) and Cigna-Santi and Mozart's *Mitridate* (1770)

Allegro Andante

*Violino I*  
*Violino II*  
*Viola*  
*FARNACE*  
*Violoncello e Basso*  
*Continuo (Cembalo)*

Va-da-si... Oh ciel, ma do-ve spin-go l'ar-di-to

*5 Viol. I*  
*Viol. II*  
*Va.*  
*Farnace*  
*Vc. e B.*

pie! Ah vi ri - sen-to o sa-cra di na - tu-ra vo-ci pos-sen-ti, o fie-ri ri-mor-si del mio

9 Allegro

cor. Empio a tal segno, no, ch'io non son,

14 Andante

e a questo prezzo, a que-sto trono, Aspasia, Roma-ni, io vi de-tes-to.

Example 1. *Mitridate* Act 3, scene 9 "Vadasi... Oh ciel" bb. 1-19

Of course, there is a generic as well as a performance context for the opera's revised ending. Cigna-Santi's text had to negotiate a process of translation that bridged not only two languages but also the constraints of distinct genres; most obviously, Racine's play cannot fully satisfy *dramma per musica*'s requirement for a *lieto fine* (happy ending).<sup>199</sup> Mozart, for his part, had to acquiesce to singers' exigencies with only limited influence over the libretto. Tenor d'Ettore, who created the role of Mitridate, repeatedly demanded revisions to his arias; as Wignall documents, the singer was in ill health and eager to reprise the arias he had sung three years earlier in Gasparini's production.<sup>200</sup> From several perspectives, then, *Mitridate*'s new ending negotiates the generic and practical concerns associated with an operatic tradition entrenched in its own conventions and restrictions.

Many of Racine's eighteenth-century successors seized the opportunity to redirect the original Racinian ending towards a quite different tone. As Feldman documents, a 1796 setting of Sografi's libretto *La morte di Mitridate*, with music composed by Nasolini, features the conventional sympathetic depiction of Mithridate's death.<sup>201</sup> But just one year later, in 1797, Sografi's libretto, now set to music by Zingarelli, introduced a radically different conclusion. Mithridate, now depicted as a tyrannical ruler, perishes "miserably, afflicted by shades of hell to the glee of the populace," who sing praises to the Roman invaders as the curtain falls.<sup>202</sup> This new, republican moral, Feldman argues, suited the opera's premiere in "revolutionary" Venice.<sup>203</sup> From the broader perspective of genre, Feldman points out that *dramma per musica* frequently had to invent new conclusions in order to uphold the new political reality of a century whose republican sympathies would increasingly struggle against tragedy's absolutist themes:

At its moment of occurring, opera seria was already a lament for a lost past, reproducing itself as a desire to recapture that past in all its present glory. More specifically, [...] opera seria [...] heralds a crisis, since the very context of the bourgeois commercial theaters in which it was given constitutes from the outset a negation of its absolutist claims.<sup>204</sup>

*Dramma per musica* must contend with its own out-dated ideological framework, Feldman argues. In the case of *Mithridate*, the king's death inevitably signals the end of his story, but its significance fluctuates across each telling of the tale. The Mithridates legend, it seems,

---

<sup>199</sup> In part, Adlung says, the "inclusion of these new scenes is a concession to opera seria" ("Die Einfügung dieser neuen Szenen ist ein Zugeständnis an die Opera seria"). Adlung, *Mozarts Opera seria* Mitridate, re di Ponto, 103.

<sup>200</sup> Wignall, "Guglielmo d'Ettore: Mozart's First Mitridate," 93.

<sup>201</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 415-6.

<sup>202</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 430.

<sup>203</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 425.

<sup>204</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 33.

easily absorbs various contemporaneous political climates, and Racine's plot structure lends itself especially well to subtle adaptation.

In Cigna-Santi's case, however, the revisions are not only related to the genre's political "mythopoetics,"<sup>205</sup> as Feldman terms them. Rather, *Mitridate* fends off an equally aggressive shadow from the past, namely the myth of a rigid and invariable neoclassicism exerting its stylistic absolutism on its inadequate successors. Feldman frames conventions like the *lieto fine* as concessions to a changing political climate and the emerging obsolescence of a genre, concessions that Keys describes as doing the "greatest violence to the strict economy" of Racine's style. However, it is equally possible to evaluate works like *Mitridate* as constructive responses to the evolving poetics of tragic theatre. In other words, the comparison between neoclassical theatre and Enlightenment *dramma per musica* can venture beyond the supposedly pristine "economy" of Racine's style to consider its controversies as well as its afterlife following Télémacomania.

While Cigna-Santi's relationship to Fénelon and de la Motte is difficult to ascertain, Mozart was well acquainted with both men's work. Leopold Mozart famously made a pilgrimage to Fénelon's grave, expressing his deep admiration for the Abbé in a letter to Johann Lorenz Hagenauer, the family's landlord in Salzburg: "In Cambrai I saw the tomb of the great Fénelon and his marble bust. He has made himself immortal by his 'Télémaque.'" <sup>206</sup> By 1770, Mozart *filis* was also absorbed in Fénelon's novel, writing to Nannerl from Bologna and in the midst of final preparations for *Mitridate*'s premiere, "I am just now reading 'Télémaque' and am already at the second part." <sup>207</sup> Mozart evidently inherited his father's esteem for Fénelon, and so the groundwork for *Idomeneo* was already in place even before the teenage composer finished his first *dramma per musica*. De la Motte also found a place in the composer's repertoire; between 1777-8, Mozart composed a *lied* (K. 308/295b) based on a short poem by de la Motte entitled "Dans un lieu solitaire." Given his familiarity with the *littérateurs* debating tragedy's future, it is small wonder that Mozart, together with Cigna-Santi, undertook a subtle reworking of Racine's play that satisfies generic convention, to be sure, but that also contributes yet another layer to the strata of tragedy's changing style. In particular, the opera's revised ending represents a bold reinvention of an eccentric and

---

<sup>205</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 241.

<sup>206</sup> "Habe [...] in Cambray das Grabmal des grossen Fénelons, und seine marmorne Brustbild-Säule betrachtet, der sich durch seinen Telemach [...] unsterblich gemacht hat." Leopold Mozart, Letter to Lorenz Hagenauer (Paris, 16 May 1766), in *Mozart Briefe und Dokumente*, Online-Edition. Salzburg: Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum, Bibliotheca Mozartiana, Online Edition, <http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/letter.php?mid=1146&cat=>. All the following citations from the Mozart family letters are from this online facsimile edition.

<sup>207</sup> "Izt lese ich jetzt den telemach, ich bin schon in zweyten theil." Wolfgang Mozart, Letter to Nannerl (Bologna, 8 September 1770), in *Mozart Briefe und Dokumente*, Online-Edition.

problematic play, one that no doubt attracted de la Motte's attention because of its audacious and unapologetic approach to neoclassicism's basic principles. The opera's innovations, in other words, are motivated by more than either a passive admiration for what Keys describes as neoclassical restraint or the evolving political context that Feldman identifies. Rather, *Mitridate* adopts Racine's own intrepid attitude towards testing the versatility of tragedy's most basic rules. A closer analysis of Racine's play reveals the extent to which the play in some ways laid the ground for reform with an eccentric dramatic structure.

#### **"ECONOMICAL" RACINE**

From Louis XIV's admiration for the play to the more recent ambivalent responses to its idiosyncratic style, Racine's *Mithridate* seems to present something of a conundrum. Beginning with the play's opening couplet, Racine undertakes a series of dramaturgical decisions aimed at amplifying neoclassicism's strict interpretation of Aristotle's directives regarding the unities of action and of time. Ultimately, the degree to which Racine compounds the play's time, action, and (to a lesser extent) place sets *Mithridate* apart: to some, as a distinguished exemplar of Aristotelian tragedy; to others, as an awkward, almost incoherent, application of the genre's conventions. At the root of *Mithridate*'s fascination is an unusually circular structure. The technique Racine explores in *Mithridate* is in some ways hyper-Aristotelian in a way that likely appealed to de la Motte as the ideal grounds on which to begin restyling the legacy of seventeenth-century tragedy. Keys's notion of a stylistic "economy" in *Mithridate* is not entirely inappropriate, but the play is economical to a problematic extreme, and Cigna-Santi inherits not a tidy, evenly paced model but rather a play that practically defies adaptation because its character delineation, plot structure, and dramatic pacing are so completely entangled. Stylistic economy is not a straightforward quality but rather an awkward strategy in *Mithridate*.

Racine adamantly maintains in his introduction to the play that its historical subject is drawn from a meticulous study of classical sources (Plutarch, Dion Cassius, Appian, and Florus), but the play's dramatic structure – and its titular character – are anything but straightforward.<sup>208</sup> The dark irony of the historical Mithridates – whose final, futile gesture was so at odds with his life of military brilliance – entranced first classical historians and subsequently dramatists for several centuries. (An entire etymology has grown around the king's name: mithridization, mithridatism, mithridatic, and so on.) For seventeenth-century neoclassical playwrights, there was something quintessentially tragic in the image of a heroic

---

<sup>208</sup> Jean Racine, *Œuvres Complètes - Théâtre, Poésies*, Vol. 1, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, 1950).

king realizing his powerlessness even to summon death. Racine captures the bitter paradox of a hero sabotaged by his own plotting:

D'abord il a tenté les atteintes mortelles  
Des Poisons que lui-même a crus les plus fidèles.  
Il les a trouvés tous sans force et sans vertu.  
*Vain secours*, a-t-il dit, *que j'ai trop combattu!*

[First he tried the deadly attacks  
Of the poisons he believed most loyal.  
He found they had neither power nor virtue.  
*Futile rescue*, he said, *I have battled too long!*]<sup>209</sup>

The tragedy of a fallen king, the irony of anagnorisis (the crucial moment of recognition) that comes too late, the theatrical conceit of having such an important moment recounted at second hand – all these narrative strategies sit comfortably within the conventions of seventeenth-century French neoclassical tragedy. If the uncertain boundary between life and death makes Mithridates such a captivating theatrical figure, however, his story translates into a disorientatingly symmetrical plot.

Indeed, the play's opening line immediately jettisons any expectation that the plot will pursue any kind of historical, chronological ordering of events. In place of an expository scene devised to fill in the plot's main characters and source of intrigue, *Mithridate's* spectators encounter a wholly abrupt scene. The king's son enters and proclaims an astonishing opening couplet, introducing – and eliminating – the play's protagonist in two swift phrases: "On nous faisait, Arbate, un fidèle rapport./Rome en effet triomphe, et Mithridate est mort." ("We were given, Arbate, a faithful report. Rome in effect triumphs, and Mithridate is dead").<sup>210</sup> There is something strikingly blunt – prosaic, even – about announcing the great hero's demise in two quick, unembellished sentences the instant the curtain rises. The audience is thus presented with a contradiction in that the opening scene seems to have already arrived at the play's tragic trajectory: the protagonist lies dead, leaving his family and subjects to grieve for his unfortunate demise. Within the first few seconds, the play's titular character is already palpably absent from the scene, and the ensuing chaos sets in motion the main tragic action that inevitably concludes with Mithridate's real death, coming full circle to end as it began. Racine, we immediately understand, is not interested in drawing a historical narrative as much as devising a riveting, if somewhat contrived, dramatic action. The unity of action in *Mitridate* is not so much a stylistic feature as an organizational strategy that overtakes all other aspects of the drama. The death (first feigned and eventually real) of the protagonist occupies every moment of Racine's play, functioning as *élément*

---

<sup>209</sup> These lines are spoken by the character Arbate, 5.4.1575-78.

<sup>210</sup> Xipharès, 1.1.1-2.

*déclencheur* (or “trigger event”), dénouement, and everything in between: in other words, the main event of the tragedy becomes its entire action.

As Racine famously declared in both the 1673 and expanded 1676 prefaces to the play, “[Mithridate’s] death [...] is the action of my tragedy.”<sup>211</sup> Indeed, the play is so tightly wound around this event that even Racine began to question if the resulting scenario actually violated his mandate of dramatic “economy.” Recognizing the risk of writing not *one* but *two* deaths for his protagonist and of repeating what by definition should be an unrepeatable moment, Racine defines the king’s death(s) as the work’s main subject and then hastily reemphasizes the aesthetic of economy, as though aware that Mithridate’s double death would seem to test his own directive:

On ne peut prendre trop de précaution pour ne rien mettre sur le théâtre qui ne soit très nécessaire. Et les plus belles scènes sont en danger d’ennuyer du moment qu’on les peut séparer de l’action, et qu’elles l’interrompent au lieu de la conduire vers sa fin.

[One cannot be too careful to put only what is completely necessary on stage. And the most beautiful scenes risk boring the audience the moment they can be separated from the action, interrupting it instead of leading it to its conclusion.]<sup>212</sup>

As Mithridate’s story shows, however, even the most careful precaution occasionally backfires. The king’s *hamartia* (or tragic error) is to try to cheat death, and for his critics, Racine replicates this same “error” in the tragedy’s structure, deferring the end and putting the play’s trajectory on hold in favour of a circular logic. From this perspective, Keys’s “economical” Racine is actually also redundant, repetitive, even convoluted.

The opening couplet announcing Mithridate’s death exaggerates the imminence of the tragedy’s inevitable dénouement – the king’s tragic death is so imminent it has in a sense already happened as the curtain rises on the first scene. Already in the first couplet, we read a synopsis of the entire tragic action: the hero’s incomplete demise, the triumph of a foreign threat, and the conspiracy embedded in the “faithful report” of the king’s death that turns out to be wholly unreliable.<sup>213</sup> Racine’s dramatic energy is so focused on Mithridate’s character profile that it inevitably encompasses every aspect of Aristotelian form, including the unity of time. Time in *Mitridate* emerges so closely from the action that the two unities are indistinguishable from one another.

Indeed, Racine’s deliberate confusion of the scenario’s beginning and end looks suspiciously like a narrative tautology in which the plot’s premise and conclusion are

---

<sup>211</sup> “Sa mort [...] est l’action de ma tragédie.” Racine, *Œuvres Complètes*, 602.

<sup>212</sup> Racine, *Œuvres Complètes*, 602. This passage appears in both versions of the preface.

<sup>213</sup> Richard Goodkin points out the irony in the “faithful report” of the king’s death. See Richard Goodkin, “The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History,” *PMLA* 101/2 (1986): 203-217, 204.

identical. The king's habit of ingesting *nearly* fatal doses of a noxious substance inspires a cyclical narrative in which death is imminent but continually postponed. In John Campbell's words, "this is not suspense but a kind of suspension."<sup>214</sup> The play unfolds in a static space: Mithridate's two deaths frame the narrative, enclosing the action so that no transformative movement can take place and the plot has an almost stultifyingly passive underpinning. In a sense, the opening lines discharge the play of its expected duration, making the intervening action unnecessary – a static vacuum. Campbell observes that Racine's plot configuration in *Mithridate* represents a radically exhaustive realization of the unity of time. Whereas, Campbell argues, we might "simply consult 'Time' in our mental *dictionnaire des idées reçues* about seventeenth-century drama, where the term is found with 'Unity' beneath the picture of a straitjacket,"<sup>215</sup> time in *Mithridate* is such a stringent organizing force that it manifests as an abandonment of temporal progress altogether. In other words, Racine asserts the unity of time not just as the framework supporting tragic action but as the action itself, which in this case is static, in Campbell's words the "imitation of inaction."<sup>216</sup> Claudia Brodsky reads Racine's static construction as a literal representation of unity, a way of "[taking] the rules of tragic unity seriously."<sup>217</sup> The unities of action and of time become indistinguishable as Mithridate's cycle of poison and near death mires the conventional tragic trajectory in a static immobility. Temporal suspension is both a denial and an absolutization of temporal unity, a flexible interpretation of classical tragic theory and a rigorous submission to it.

Racine's radically tight focus exemplifies the kind of Aristotelian design that Voltaire insists on, even as it tests his assurance that the three unities guarantee simplicity, beauty, and proportion:

Ces lois observées, non-seulement servent à écarter des défauts, mais aussi amènent de vraies beautés; de même que les règles de la belle architecture exactement suivies composent nécessairement un bâtiment qui plaît à la vue. On voit qu'avec l'unité de tems, d'action & de lieu, il est bien difficile qu'une pièce ne soit pas simple. Aussi voilà le mérite de toutes les pièces de monsieur *Racine*, & celui que demandait *Aristote*.

[Observing these rules not only serves to preclude flaws, but also brings about true beauties; likewise, when the rules of beautiful architecture are followed exactly, they necessarily produce an edifice that pleases the eye. We see that with the unities of time, action, and place it is almost impossible for a piece not to be simple; therein lies the value of all the plays by Mr. *Racine* and that *Aristotle* called for.]<sup>218</sup>

<sup>214</sup> Campbell, "Tragedy and Time in Racine's *Mithridate*," 591.

<sup>215</sup> Campbell, "Tragedy and Time in Racine's *Mithridate*," 590.

<sup>216</sup> Campbell, "Tragedy and Time in Racine's *Mithridate*," 594.

<sup>217</sup> Claudia Brodsky, "'The Impression of Movement:' Jean Racine, Architecte," *Yale French Studies* 76 (1989): 162-181, 174.

<sup>218</sup> Voltaire, "Préface d'*Œdipe*" xxvi-xxvii.

For some audiences at least, *Mithridate* is ungainly and almost thwarts the tragic genre whose principles and conventions – taken to their extreme – conspire against its success. In some ways, the play practices the Aristotelian unities exactly as Voltaire would have them, that is to say inextricably linked and synthesized: the “unity of time joins naturally to the two other unities,” he explains, “so let us hold ourselves therefore, like the great Corneille, to the three unities in which the other rules, that is to say the other beauties, are contained.”<sup>219</sup> Arguably, *Mithridate* demonstrates the limits of Voltaire’s vision for tragedy, and it is at this breaking point that Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s opera arrives to offer a new possibility. It is tempting to see Racine’s kingly protagonist as a metonymy for a theatrical tradition whose entrenched practices pose a particular challenge to those librettists and composers determined to recalibrate the neoclassical tradition for a new Enlightened century. Mithridate’s premature false death – at the beginning of Racine’s story – establishes from the outset the image of an impotent monarch condemned to exist beyond his own expectation of life but without any guaranteed future. So too does Racine’s *Mithridate*, as a literary phenomenon persisting beyond its era, signal the incomplete redundancy of the old neoclassical régime and the uncertain promise of its second, debated life amid innovative librettists, prolific composers, and irascible *philosophes*.

Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s *Mitridate* opera grapples with precisely this challenge, and the solution it proposes shifts the emphasis away from Mithridate’s doomed cycle and away from Voltaire’s insistence on the inextricability of the tragic unities. Displacing the old king’s inevitable fate, *Mitridate* instead features his son’s awakening and a new, less concentrated interpretation of Aristotelian poetics through opera. Avoiding Zeno’s example and the huge liberties he takes with the plot, Cigna-Santi and Mozart reinterpret Racine without jettisoning the play’s key theme or completely abandoning neoclassicism’s fundamental structures. Rather than directly tackling the issues of dramatic time and action as Voltaire would recommend, composer and librettist take a different, altogether de la Mottean approach, concentrating on character depiction and distilling the structural profile of the drama from their shifting personalities. Even with this new method, however, Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s adaptation illuminates rather than obscures the tragedy’s dramaturgical nuances; there is nothing “mute” about the collision of Racine’s original and its operatic successor, which instead discovers new subtleties in the spoken tragedy and delicately makes them audible.

---

<sup>219</sup> “L’unité de temps est jointe naturellement aux deux premières.” “Tenons-nous-en donc, comme le grand Corneille, aux trois unités dans lesquelles les autres règles, c’est-à-dire les autres beautés, se trouvent renfermées.” Voltaire, “Préface d’Œdipe,” xxv-xxvii.

## “MUTED” RACINE: POISONED RELATIONS

Racine’s absolute approach to the unities of action and time in *Mithridate* is felt perhaps most strongly in his depiction of character. The play’s compact style results in opaque characters and an ambiguous moral tone, and the entire drama filters itself through the figure of the tragic king. In contrast, Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s looser adherence to the play’s main “action” makes room for Racine’s secondary characters; the opera casts them in a clear moral framework and fosters their evolution over the course of the drama. Although de la Motte refrains from specifically charging Racine with such a blunder, he nevertheless argues that neoclassicism’s preoccupation with details of versification and structure comes at the cost of more defined characters: “The characters often seem to compose beautiful verses rather than express their feelings.”<sup>220</sup> In a sense, Racine’s tragedy internalizes its dramatic structure to such an extent that its protagonist falls victim to the work’s suffocatingly closed style.

Throughout the plot, the king’s perpetual inaction dampens his heroism and even in the final moments before his death, the audience is left perplexed by his character. When, lying fatally wounded, Mithridate confers his kingdom to Xipharès as a final act of clemency, it is impossible to decipher the tone of his gesture. Mitchell Greenberg emphasizes the “profoundly Christian aura” of Mithridate’s “death by transfiguration,” and argues that the king is finally “[transformed] from despot to king and from king to transcendent father.”<sup>221</sup> In Volker Schröder’s more cynical reading, Mithridate’s mercy is politically motivated; the king performs his monarchical duty (“souverain devoir”) to ensure that the realm remains intact under an undisputed leader.<sup>222</sup> As a middle ground between forgiveness as a spiritual triumph and as a political tactic, H.T. Barnwell contends that the absolution Mithridate offers is too late to be generous. Rather, his gesture is entirely pragmatic, a “payment made to Xipharès for services rendered.”<sup>223</sup> Neither convincingly heroic nor completely parodic, Mithridate’s role in Racine’s tragedy is uncertain. Having habitually ingested and absorbed poison, the king himself becomes a toxic and ambiguous presence, in Christian Biet’s words “a bastard character.”<sup>224</sup>

---

<sup>220</sup> “Les personnages paroissent souvent composer de beaux Vers, plutôt qu’exposer des sentimens.” De la Motte, “Suite de Réflexions sur la Tragédie, où l’on répond à M. de Voltaire,” 452.

<sup>221</sup> Mitchell Greenberg, *Racine: From Ancient Myth to Tragic Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 162-163.

<sup>222</sup> See Volker Schröder, “La Place du roi: guerre et succession dans *Mithridate*,” in *Actes du 29e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, “La Rochefoucault, *Mithridate*, Frères et sœurs, Les Muses sœurs,” 147-158, ed. Claire Carlin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 156.

<sup>223</sup> H.T. Barnwell, “‘Moins roi que pirate:’ Some Remarks on Racine’s *Mithridate* as a Play of Ambiguities,” *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 24 (2002): 179-190, 186.

<sup>224</sup> “Un personnage bâtard.” Biet argues persuasively that Mithridate’s character strongly evokes the comic types of the “vieillard irrité” (“irritated old man”) and the “vieillard amoureux” (“old man in

This interpretation is not far from Racine's own understanding of his Aristotelian directives, since as he explains in his first preface to *Andromaque*, characters ought to straddle moral boundaries rather than personify virtues or vices:

Il ne veut pas [que les personnages] soient extrêmement bons, parce que la punition d'un homme de bien exciterait plutôt l'indignation que la pitié du spectateur; ni qu'ils soient méchants avec excès, parce qu'on n'a point pitié d'un scélérat. Il faut donc qu'ils aient une bonté médiocre, c'est-à-dire une vertu capable de faiblesse.

[The characters should not be excessively good because the punishment of a good man would excite the spectator's indignation rather than pity; neither should the characters be wicked to excess because one has no pity for a villain. They must therefore have a mediocre goodness, that is to say a virtue capable of weakness.]<sup>225</sup>

Racine certainly adheres to this principle throughout *Mithridate*, and as a result, the dénouement presents the king as profoundly Christian, astutely political, a catastrophic failure, and a parodic figure all at once. In *Mithridate*, ambiguity and inaction muddy the integrity of the tragic action and its tragic hero. Biet points out that "*Mithridate*'s ending does not coincide with the reestablishment of a peaceful universe; rather, it opens itself to vengeance and pain."<sup>226</sup> Indeed, the play's sombre final couplet reopens the cycle of violence, invasion, and malevolence: "Ah, Madame! Unissons nos douleurs,/Et par tout l'Univers cherchons-lui des Vengeurs."<sup>227</sup> The promise of conflict and personal vendetta is precisely the play's opening situation, and so the scenario comes full circle, ending as it began with a son proclaiming his father's death. A "peaceful universe" lies beyond the scope of the Mithridates legend, which simply reinscribes its characters in the Racinian cycle of ambivalence. Here again, neoclassicism emerges as a complicated negotiation between poetic convention and its narrative application, and the result is anything but a straightforward, easily imitable model ready for translation to opera.

With relatively modest changes, however, Cigna-Santi and Mozart revisit the immobile dilemma of Racine's tragedy within the new framework of de la Motte's dramatic

---

love"). According to this interpretation, Mithridate's respectability and authority are already lost at the beginning of the play because he returns from battle "mi-senex mi-adulscens, un père qui prend rang comme rival dans l'espace des fils" ("half-young man half-old man, a father who takes his place as a rival in his sons' space"). Christian Biet, "*Mithridate*, ou l'exercice de l'ambiguïté: 'Que pouvait la valeur dans ce trouble funeste?'" in *Actes du 29e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, "La Rochefoucault, *Mithridate*, *Frères et sœurs*, *Les Muses sœurs*," 83-98, ed. Claire Carlin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 90. Jacques Vier goes even further, calling the king's love "un thème essentiellement moliéresque" ("a theme that is basically Moliéresque"). Jacques Vier, *Le Mithridate de Racine* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cèdre, 1958), 31.

<sup>225</sup> Racine, *Œuvres Complètes*, 242.

<sup>226</sup> "La fin de *Mithridate* ne coïncide pas [...] avec le rétablissement d'un univers pacifié; elle s'ouvre sur la vengeance et la douleur." Biet, "*Mithridate*, ou l'exercice de l'ambiguïté," 92.

<sup>227</sup> "O, lady! Let us unite our sorrow,/And across the entire universe let us seek avengers for him." Xipharès, 5. 5. 1709-1710.

theory. Where Racine's characters all suffer the torments of an internal struggle, the opera's figures personify contrasting functions: each character's influence is either toxic or remedial in a plot that juxtaposes antagonists. Francesco Cotticelli and Paologiovanni Maione contend that this type of "shrewd juxtaposition" is typically Metastasian and further, that it accounts for the "outstanding" dramaturgical success of *drammi per musica*.<sup>228</sup> More than this, however, Cigna-Santi and Mozart achieve precisely the kind of progressive drama de la Motte envisions when he mandates that "the poet disappear and allow us to see only the [play's] character."<sup>229</sup>

This shift away from Racine's poetics of internalization is most pronounced in the oppositional relationship Cigna-Santi and Mozart establish between Mitridate's two sons. What separates Racine's Xipharès from his traitorous brother Pharnace is not the desire they share for Mithridate's bride, but the remorse that torments Xipharès. Virtue in the play turns less on actual deeds than on the intensity of the moral debate these actions provoke. In contrast with Racine's version of a son wracked with guilt over his desire, however, the operatic Sifare becomes a figure of nearly irreproachable virtue and a dramatic foil to his renegade brother. Softening the overt declarations of love that Racine's couple exchanges early in the first act, Cigna-Santi's libretto offers a sanitized depiction of Mitridate's favoured son. Sifare no longer declares himself "a thousand times more guilty"<sup>230</sup> than his brother but rather vaguely suggests that he is "less innocent."<sup>231</sup> Whereas Xipharès openly confesses to betrayal on hearing of his father's return ("I know what my crime is"<sup>232</sup>), his operatic counterpart claims to feel no such culpability: "I feel no regrets in my heart."<sup>233</sup> There is no doubt whatsoever in the opera which of Mitridate's sons is the virtuous, rightful heir to the kingdom. As Adlung puts it, "good and evil are opposed in the two brothers."<sup>234</sup> The overt fraternal discord between the Sifare and Farnace of Cigna-Santi and Mozart's adaptation completely overrides the internal paranoia that pervades Racine's staging. The opera even harnesses the play's central motif – Mithridate's poison – towards its new narrative configuration.

---

<sup>228</sup> Francesco Cotticelli and Paologiovanni Maione, "Metastasio: The Dramaturgy of Eighteenth-Century Heroic Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*, 66-84, ed. Anthony R. DelDonna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72.

<sup>229</sup> "Le Poète disparoisse, & ne laisse voir que le Personnage." De la Motte, "Comparaison de la premiere Scène de Mitridate, avec la même Scène réduite en prose," 415.

<sup>230</sup> "Mille fois plus criminel." Xipharès, 1.2.170.

<sup>231</sup> "Meno innocente." Sifare, Act 1, scene 2.

<sup>232</sup> "Je sais quel est mon crime." Xipharès, 1.5.363.

<sup>233</sup> "Io nel mio core rimproveri non sento." Sifare, Act 1, scene 7.

<sup>234</sup> "In den Brüdern stehen sich Gut und Böse gegenüber." Adlung, *Mozarts Opera Seria Mitridate*, rè di Ponto, 94.

In *Mithridate* poison is omnipresent: the play begins and ends with the king self-administering a toxic substance, and poison occupies much of the action in between as well. Upon discovering Monime's love for Xipharès, Mithridate orders a lethal beaker delivered to her and she gladly embraces the chance to end her torment. She only just escapes death by poison when the plot's various deceptions are exposed and the king experiences a change of heart. The tragedy's structure and pacing likewise completely absorb this central image of Mithridates's poison. Strangely, given poison's ubiquitous presence in the tragedy, few commentators have analyzed the play or its characters through this prominent theme.

To begin with, there is an astonishing biographical context for Racine's interest in poison as a tragic topic. Poisonings and witchcraft erupted in a widespread and brutal scandal at the court of Louis XIV and implicated a staggering number of prominent members of court. Racine himself was accused of poisoning his then mistress and lead actress by a vengeful acquaintance, Catherine Monvoisin called "La Voisin."<sup>235</sup> The chaos at court lasted several years (from about 1679-1681), and although Racine was eventually exonerated of any nefarious doing and La Voisin was burned at the stake, the fiasco led to the arrest of 218 prominent members of the French aristocracy and their associates, who were exiled, imprisoned, committed suicide, or were cruelly executed. The "affair of the poisons" exploded several years after *Mithridate* was first performed in 1673, and yet it did not represent Racine's first threatening encounter with poison.

Even before the scandal at court, Racine had been accused of an even more insidious type of contamination. In 1666, Pierre Nicole (a former teacher of Racine's) published a series of letters condemning playwrights and novelists as "poisoners" of public morals. His denunciation of plays and novels as a form of sinful lust felt like a deeply personal affront to Racine:

On doit toujours [...] regarder [la concupiscence] comme le honteux effet du péché; comme une source de poison capable de nous infecter à tous moments, si Dieu n'en arrestoit les mauvaises suites. On ne peut donc nier que les Comedies & les Romans ne soient contraires aux bonnes mœurs, puisqu'ils impriment une idée amable d'une passion vicieuse.

[We must always [...] regard [lust] as the shameful result of sin; as a source of poison capable of infecting us at any moment if God did not forestall the evil consequences. We therefore cannot deny that Comedies and Novels run contrary to good morals, since they impress on us an agreeable idea of a vicious desire.]<sup>236</sup>

---

<sup>235</sup> See Anne Somerset, *The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV* (London: Phoenix, 2003), esp. 235.

<sup>236</sup> "Comedies" in this context refers to theatre generally. Pierre Nicole, *Les Visionnaires ou Seconde partie des lettres sur l'Herésie imaginaire* (Liège: Adolphe Beyers, 1666), 456-457.

Over the span of Racine's career, then, poison emerged as a grievous personal menace and also as an indictment against his very profession. The idea that theatre and poison are identical in their destructive effect resonates strongly with the story of *Mithridate*.

Richard Goodkin briefly isolates a crucial link between the literal and figurative presence of poison in the drama. Through his etymological study of the play, Goodkin unearths what he terms an unconscious "orthonomia" by which "the names of the sons mysteriously coincide with the names of [Mithridate's] deaths."<sup>237</sup> Both the Mithridates of history and of Racine's tragedy surrender to the Roman invasion by taking poison and subsequently throwing themselves on a sword, and Goodkin sees a suggestive symmetry in the two deaths the king suffers and the two sons vying for his throne. Goodkin argues persuasively that such a correlation is embedded in Xipharès and Pharnace's very names: the former evokes the *xiphos* ("sword") by which Mithridate finally kills himself, while the latter incarnates the invasive, perfidious *pharmakon* ("poison") that betrays him.<sup>238</sup> There is evidence in the opera's text to support Goodkin's reading. Sifare's sword is mentioned several times in the libretto and its stage directions, for instance when Aspasia implores Sifare "per pietà stringi l'acciaro" ("for pity's sake, draw your sword").<sup>239</sup> Farnace, on the contrary, is not associated with a physical weapon. Goodkin's analysis does not elaborate on the interpretive possibilities that this "orthonomia" suggests, and yet the metaphorical connection between Pharnace and poison is undeniably compelling. As the play's main antagonist, Pharnace is venomous and patricidal – precisely the embodiment of the poison that is so completely interwoven in Mithridate's life. Failing to defeat his father decisively in battle, Pharnace nevertheless leaves him mortally wounded, caught between life and death like the fickle substance that forever threatens but never finishes his reign.

---

<sup>237</sup> Goodkin attributes this "consonance" between the names and events of the Mithridates tale not to Racine himself but rather to his classical sources, especially Cassius Dio and Appian, both of whom Racine cites as references in the preface to *Mithridate*. Goodkin, "The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History," 203. In terms of Racine's contribution, or knowledge of, this wordplay, Goodkin points out that Xipharès and Pharnace are "never mentioned together in Racine's historical sources," and that their relationship in the play is Racine's own imagination. Solange Guénoun evokes a similar logic in her study of the etymology of Monime's name: "Racine n'invente pas ce nom [...]. Mais ce qu'il *fait dire* à ces noms, telle est son invention" ("Racine did not invent this name [...]. But is it what he makes these names *mean* that is his invention.") Solange Guénoun, "L'invention de Monime: Une leçon de monisme en monarchie dans *Mithridate* de Racine," in *Actes du 29e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, "La Rochefoucault, *Mithridate*, *Frères et sœurs*, *Les Muses sœurs*," 113-123, ed. Claire Carlin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 114.

<sup>238</sup> Goodkin cites the relevant passages from Cassius Dio and Appian, who both refer specifically to Mithridates's sword and poison by these Greek terms. Goodkin, "The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History," 203.

<sup>239</sup> Aspasia, Act 2, scene 15.

In the process of paring down the intricacies of Racine's plot and defining his characters more distinctly, Cigna-Santi might well have excluded this subtle literary device that cements together *Mithridate*'s plot, personalities, and moral disposition. However, far from "muting" the dramatic nuances of Racine's tragedy, the opera makes them distinctly audible in a way that the spoken tragedy cannot do, and Mozart's musical setting is largely responsible for developing the thematic possibilities implied by Racine's imagery. Where Gasparini, in 1767, was content to adapt Cigna-Santi's pamphlet by diligently satisfying the basic generic requirements of *dramma per musica*, the librettist's second collaborator offered a more imaginative contribution to his dramaturgical vision.

The Pharnace of Racine's play evokes an etymological connection to poison that is more intellectual than dramatic. In contrast, Mozart introduces a far more palpable musical elision that transforms the destructive and redundant poison of the tragedy into an agent of transformation and the impetus for the drama's new ending. Cigna-Santi's targeted revisions to the original play already invested the character of Farnace with far more significance than he held as the villain of Racine's tragedy. Mozart's musical setting pushes this agenda even further: a series of dramatic arias culminate in a final *scena* that is so virtuosic and poignant that Mitridate's eldest son gradually overtakes the opera's title character. By the time Mitridate lies dying on stage, Farnace has replaced him, not only as heir to the kingdom, but also as the opera's new protagonist. Farnace's final aria "Già dagli occhi" carries significant dramaturgical weight, depicting the moment of tragic anagnorisis that propels the scenario towards a quite different conclusion than the one Racine imagines. This particular *aria di portamento*, Adlung remarks, also stands out musically for its "special tenderness and warmth,"<sup>240</sup> as well as its sheer length (see Example 2). As a musical climax, the aria totally exceeds the scenario that Cigna-Santi implies with his relatively generic verses ("Already from my eyes, the veil is lifted").<sup>241</sup> More than simply charging the opera's final big scene with musical intensity, however, "Già dagli occhi" fits into a much broader musico-dramatic trajectory that Mozart constructs out of Racine's evasive poison theme and its implicit connection to Pharnace.

Having solidified a new narrative allegiance with the character of Farnace, Mozart introduces a conspicuous musical parallelism with an earlier, equally decisive, moment in the opera. Just prior to Farnace's climactic scene, the opera's third act features Aspasia's gripping "Pallid'ombre...Bevasi:" this depicts her desperate final moments as she contemplates the poison Mithridate has condemned her to drink as punishment for reciprocating Sifare's love.

<sup>240</sup> "Der Gesang ist [...] durchdrungen von einer besonderen Weichheit und Wärme." Adlung, *Mozarts Opera seria* Mitridate, re di Ponto, 105.

<sup>241</sup> "Già dagli occhi, il velo è tolto." Farnace, Act 3, scene 9.

Her aria shares the same texture of pulsating strings, strong emphasis of the E<sup>b</sup> tonic, descending oboe line, and narrow melodic range that later characterize Farnace's "Già dagli occhi" (see Example 3).

Andante <sup>4)</sup>

Oboe I, II <sup>5)</sup>

Corno I, II in Mi<sup>b</sup>/Es

Violino I

Violino II

Viola I, II

FARNACE

Violoncello e Basso <sup>6)</sup>

Già dagli oc - chi il ve - lo è tolto,

5

vi - li af-fet-ti, io v'ab - ban-do-no: son pen-ti-to, e non a-scol-to cheila-

Example 2. *Mitridate* Act III, scene 9, No. 24 "Già dagli occhi" bb. 1-8

Indeed, were it not for the intervening scenes, Farnace's aria would sound like a seamless continuation of Aspasia's. On a musical level, then, the moment of Farnace's conversion strongly evokes Aspasia's near-tragic encounter with poison. This unmistakable parallelism makes the symbolism of Racine's play plainly audible: Farnace is the poison that threatens Mitridate, his bride-to-be, and his kingdom. Mozart's audience, then, vividly hears this crucial scene as a reversal of the previous action. Whereas Aspasia contemplates her death after being unjustly condemned in the opera's climax of suspense, the same music later finds Farnace renouncing his perfidy in the face of his own imminent execution. While this connection between the two scenes is perhaps unexpected, it nevertheless makes symbolic sense on the level of the plot and even strengthens the character development Cigna-Santi's libretto strives for.

Andante

Oboe I

Oboe II

Corno I, II in Es

Violino I

Violino II

Viola I, II

ASPASIA

Violoncello e Basso

30 ob. I, II

om - bre, che scor - ge - te da - gli E - li - si i ma - li

Pal - lid'

**Example 3.** *Mitridate* Act II, scene 4, No. 21 “Pallid’ombre” bb. 25-35

Although the libretto does not explicitly insist on this compelling process of foreshadowing/recollection, Mozart exploits both contrasting imagery and syntactical similarities in the arias’ verses for his musical setting. Drawing on comparable metaphors of obscured truth, the two characters express completely opposing situations: where Farnace rejoices at the “veil” being lifted from his eyes, Aspasia laments the “pallid shadows that behold my woes.”<sup>242</sup> The recitative sections of both arias also follow the characters through contrasting narratives built on nearly identical phrases (both textual and musical). Both characters are poised on the brink of action and address themselves in contemplative soliloquies. Switching from defiance to hesitancy in his pivotal moment of self-recognition, Farnace turns the imperative – “Vadasi” – onto himself, suddenly becoming conscious of his

<sup>242</sup> “Pallid’ombre, che scorgete dagli Elisi i mali miei,” Aspasia, Act 3, scene 4.

(symbolic and literal) next step. Aspasia, too, commands herself to act but lapses into indecision, asking why her hand refuses to discharge the task she has set herself:

Aspasia: “Bevasi.../Ahimè, qual gelo trattien la man?”  
[I must drink.../But alas, what iciness restrains my hand?]<sup>243</sup>

Farnace: “Vadasi.../ Ma dove spingo l’ardito piè?”  
[I must go.../But where shall I direct my bold steps?]<sup>244</sup>

Recognizing the dramatic potential of these two parallel scenes, Mozart ensures that harmonic and textural details resonate across these two passages. Aspasia’s accompanied recitative carries its key (D major), register, and details of orchestration over to Farnace’s “Vadasi” (see Example 4 compared to Example 1).

*Recitativo accompagnato*

**Example 4.** *Mitridate* Act 3, scene 4, No. 21 “Pallid’ombre” bb. 94-97

Given that Aspasia’s *scena* unfolds as an *aria di portamento* followed by an accompanied recitative (the mirror image of Farnace’s scene, where an accompanied recitative introduces his *aria di portamento*), the two recitatives almost blend into one another. The rushing violin scales and falling fourth on Farnace’s “vadasi” sound like a recapitulation of the earlier recitative. In light of Aspasia’s near-fatal encounter with poison a few scenes earlier, it is as though Farnace discovers the curative side of his father’s toxic liquid.

Poison thus lies at the heart of both the play and the opera, but it informs two very different dramaturgical strategies. Where poisonous bad faith paralyzes both time and action in Racine’s play, poison in the opera is concentrated in a single character, Farnace, who

<sup>243</sup> Aspasia, Act 2, scene 4.

<sup>244</sup> Farnace, Act 3, scene 9.

ultimately breaks free from its destructive effects. Grappling with the continuation of his own story, Farnace recognizes the impossibility of directing the next scene of his narrative: willing himself into movement (“Vadasi”), there is finally no obvious destination for him to go (“Ma dove spingo l’ardito piè?”). Breaking out of his father’s cyclical tragedy, the son must actively create the conditions of his new genre. It is difficult not to see Farnace’s success as an allegory for the genre of operatic tragedy, which also must escape the domineering influence of an older generation of theatre.

#### “OPERATIC” RACINE

*Mitridate*’s inventive dramaturgy belies Rosen’s claim that *dramma per musica* generally is “reduced [...] to a succession of static scenes, with all the rigid nobility of Racine and little of his extraordinary and supple inner movement.”<sup>245</sup> On the contrary, Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s opera, criticized for its apparently stilted construction, discovers in Racine a radically confined plot and a protagonist paralyzed by a circular narrative. *Mitridate*’s Racinian roots involve a tragic tradition constantly at odds with itself. The opera by no means fails to convey the unusual dramatic intensity of its French neoclassical precursor. Indeed, while it is easy to lament what inevitably gets lost in the translation from spoken tragedy to *dramma per musica*, it is equally possible to recognize the ways in which the librettist and composer take up Racine’s own mantle and propose new interpretations of basic Aristotelian design. Racine’s presence in the opera can perhaps inspire a comparative framework without compelling an evaluative critique; Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s work neither disappoints nor supersedes the play, rather its most significant moments are all the more coherent with reference to the shifting style of neoclassical theatre.

Against Voltaire’s insistence on the inextricability of tragedy’s three unities, de la Motte envisions affording the playwright the flexibility to conceive of neoclassicism’s key directives separately. In theory, the distinction sounds negligible, but Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s approach to *Mitridate* illustrates its enormous dramaturgical implications. Racine’s play synthesizes its neoclassical tenets to the extent that tragic principles, plot organization, and character portrayal implode. The opera, in contrast, disentangles this Racinian fabric without completely disregarding its Aristotelian design. Cigna-Santi and Mozart’s sharply-defined characters open the door for a tragic action that is more multifaceted, and the resulting dramaturgical structure adheres in principle to the Aristotelian unities but does not literalize them into a single, monolithic tragic subject. Even with a libretto that pays deference to its Racinian source text and a tragic structure adhering to classical principles of form and

---

<sup>245</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 167.

discourse, the operatic *Mitridate* finds new dramaturgical subtlety through the main tenets of de la Motte's controversial theory of tragedy. Where Voltaire fulminated over a hybrid tragic genre reduced to a vulgar discourse and de la Motte imagined an Enlightenment theatre free to innovate on its immediate predecessors, in many ways *Mitridate* shows a vibrant culture of *dramma per musica* practicing the compromise that eluded the two *philosophes*. Cigna-Santi and Mozart's synthesis of neoclassical and Enlightenment tragic theory straddles two genres and two tragic doctrines but still invents its own compelling rendition of a familiar and contested legend. At stake for both the neoclassical and operatic versions of *Mit(h)ridate* is not the viability or failure of their ostensibly tragic form but, more importantly, a tradition of revision and appropriation responding to neoclassicism's passage from its adherents, through its critics, and towards its reinventors. From its seventeenth-century point of departure to the surprising intimacy and eloquence of its new, Enlightenment ending, the operatic *Mitridate* registers the ongoing succession of claims and reclamations of tragic form.

Appearing the year before *Mitridate* was first performed in Milan, a second volume of the *Almanach des Muses* offered a witty poem by one M. Dorat. Over the course of a few stanzas, the poet curses himself for having abandoned his love "Alexandrine" and ardently re-pledges his devotion:

[...]  
 au galop je fuyois tes charmes :  
 au galop je viens les revoir ;  
 je viens te consacrer ma vie :  
 je suis ivre & brûlant d'amour ;  
 arrange-toi, je t'en supplie,  
 pour m'adorer à ton retour.

[At a gallop I fled your charms:  
 At a gallop I return to see them;  
 I come to dedicate my life to you:  
 I am drunk and burning with love;  
 Prepare yourself, I beg you,  
 To adore me on your return.]<sup>246</sup>

In spite of the nostalgic tone with which some Enlightenment authors of the *Almanach des Muses* continued to affirm the primacy of traditional approaches to versification, for Fénelon's operatic successors, the poetics of tragedy offered few sureties. Rather than submit to a now faltering neoclassical style, *dramma per musica* instead forged ahead with its own peculiar blend of generic appropriation and innovation. A definite, conclusive response to *Télémaque* lies beyond Enlightenment opera's main mandate, but works like *Mitridate* take up the novel's challenge to surrender comfortable principles like "economy" and "Aristotelian

---

<sup>246</sup> M. Dorat, "Épître à Alexandrine," in *Almanach des Muses* 2 (1769): 89-91, 91.

unity” in favour of new – and more precarious – criteria like “intertextuality, hybridity, and an ambivalent modernity,” as Moore puts it.<sup>247</sup>

Ultimately, opera perhaps provided the ideal forum for realizing the spirit of “prose poetry,” that is to say a passion for the theatre that cuts across narrow styles and genres to risk reinterpretations (even “rectified endings”). As Moore argues, after *Télémaque*

the attempt to rationalize, organize, and compartmentalize aesthetics (in continuation of Boileau’s 1674 *Art poétique*) proved ultimately impossible, an impossibility that eventually challenged the Enlightenment to rethink poetry and prose according to criteria that transcended classification – imagination, enthusiasm, music, and the sublime – instead of the absolute authority of verse.<sup>248</sup>

“Operatic” Racine, in other words, is in many ways the most probable response to the dilemma of a poetics still partly residing in a previous century but adventuring sideways and forward to parallel genres and new media. If Télémacomania left the Enlightenment’s *littérateurs* contemplating new ways of reconfiguring the conventions of neoclassical theatre through innovations like prose poetry, Fénelon’s novel left a marked impact on the visual arts as well. Our final room in the “Museum of the Muses” will consider *dramma per musica* alongside another of its parallel media, namely painting. Where *dramma per musica*’s composers and librettists incorporated ideas from literary reformists like de la Motte, the genre also absorbed strategies from painters experimenting with post-neoclassical visual techniques. The next room in our museum thus sets a second case study alongside this visual side of Télémacomania in order to show how the exchange between operatic tragedy and its aesthetic context went beyond literary debates to involve the visual-performative dimension of *dramma per musica*.

---

<sup>247</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 25.

<sup>248</sup> Moore, *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment*, 63.



**PART 3**  
**PAINTINGS UNSEEN**

*“Le Spectacle est un mensonge;  
il s’agit de le rapprocher de la plus grande vérité:  
le Spectacle est un tableau.”*

[“The theatre is a lie;  
it is a matter of bringing it as close as possible to the greatest truth:  
the Theatre is a painting.”]

Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du Théâtre*



## CHAPTER 5

### IMAGI(N)ING THE PROSE EPIC

A private pedagogical novel was always an improbable basis for scandal, but Fénelon's *Télémaque* is a dubious exemplar for "tragedy in prose" for an even more conspicuous reason: the novel takes its inspiration from the epic world of Homer's *Odyssey* and has little to do with tragic theatre in either verse or in prose. In fact, the novel's epic genre makes little sense within the Aristotelian framework of neoclassical theatre. Enamoured of or infuriated by Fénelon's literary innovation, eighteenth-century critics quickly plunged into theoretical discussions that were largely indifferent to close analysis of the text. Barely a year after its publication, Fénelon's contemporaries had practically forgotten the novel's original private function and were absorbed in the book's controversial blending of literary traditions. Faydit, as we saw in chapter 3, was content to critique the book in complete ignorance of its full contents.

De la Motte and Voltaire's polemical exchange also exemplifies this kind of disengagement with the particulars of *Télémaque*'s style; the two *philosophes* were so thoroughly preoccupied with Racinian tragedy and its Alexandrine cadences that Fénelon's original text more or less disappears amid their barbed retorts and accusations. If de la Motte and Voltaire's corner of the prose poetry controversy overlooked the main stimulus of their discussion, however, this was partly Fénelon's own doing. Deeply uncomfortable with his newfound notoriety, Fénelon tried to establish the novel as a neutral middle ground, remarking to de la Motte in a letter from 1714 that *Télémaque* was easily absorbed by opposing factions:

Est-il possible que je contente les deux partis des anciens et des modernes, moi qui craignois tant de les fâcher tous deux? [...] Me voilà tenté de croire que je ne suis pas loin du juste milieu, puisque chacun des deux partis me fait l'honneur de supposer que j'entre dans son véritable sentiment.

[Is it possible for me to please both halves of the ancients and the moderns, I who fear to anger either of them? [...] Here I am tempted to believe that I am not far from the happy medium, since each of these two parties does me the honour of supposing that I agree with its own perspective.]<sup>249</sup>

Most of Fénelon's contemporaries took little notice of his mollifying tone, but the debates themselves seem to bear out his observation: the novel's hybrid features, which sparked such disagreement among the French *littérateurs*, were ill suited to settling the argument for or against the hypothetical genre of "prose poetry" firmly one way or the other.

---

<sup>249</sup> Fénelon, Letter to Antoine Houdar de la Motte, 22 November 1714, 733-734.

An obvious explanation for the incongruity between the fixation with and indifference to the novel is that the *Télémacomania* phenomenon simply spread beyond the specific features of the book that catalysed its polemical disputes. Indeed, *Télémaque*'s eighteenth-century adventures far exceeded even the novel's internal epic dimensions: the robust appetite for Fénelon's bestseller quickly consumed not only the literary world but the fine arts as well. In some ways, the Enlightenment's scrutiny of *Télémaque* bypassed the novel's particulars in favour of more elaborate and interdisciplinary interpretations that were as much visual as literary. In this way, while *Télémaque*'s peculiar "poésie du style" may not be able to solve all the problems its Enlightenment critics heaped on it, the novel's unusual style – which is strikingly visual – certainly offers more than one perspective on these debates. In this chapter, I intend to refocus on the way in which two of the novel's most prominent features – its epic genre and its painterly style – recalibrate the terms of the "prose poetry" discussion on altogether different grounds. Generically, the novel is much more an epic narrative than a dramatic tragedy; stylistically, its language is far less preoccupied with matters of versification than with highly evocative visual scenes. *Télémaque*'s scope, in other words, extends into multiple arenas of the literary and visual arts, most notably into the epic genre and into mythological painting. This final stop in our museum – which will take place over the following two chapters – will therefore pursue *Télémacomania*'s influence on the visual arts by setting a second *dramma per musica* by Mozart alongside specific paintings.

There was, then, something of a paradox in *Télémacomania*'s heated debates. On the one hand, Fénelon's epic in prose served as an exemplar for a revitalized type of neoclassical tragedy. On the other hand, it lay at a distance from this tragic genre thanks to its image-laden epic style. De la Motte's vigorous response to Voltaire in the 1730s does little to resolve this tension; thanks to Voltaire's determination to recuperate France's revered tragedian from the hands of de la Motte's misguided interference, the two *littérateurs* fixed exclusively on Racinian drama, with the result that the question of Fénelon's epic genre does not figure in their debate. Several years before his very public and accusatory quarrel with Voltaire, however, de la Motte had already pondered the novel's epic features in his correspondence with Fénelon. In their letters, the epic emerges as a way of tackling neoclassical theatre not from within its entrenched doctrines but rather from an oblique angle. Jean-Paul Sermain untangles the problem of the novel's unique relevance to the question of prose tragedy thus: "Some of the doubts raised about poetry also concern the epic genre – which acts as a kind of third level in the question of the relationship between prose and poetry."<sup>250</sup> Sermain's "third

---

<sup>250</sup> "Une partie des doutes soulevés sur la poésie peut aussi intéresser l'identification épique – qui forme comme un troisième niveau dans la question des relations entre prose et poésie." Jean-Paul

level” nicely encapsulates the role de la Motte and Fénelon give the epic in their correspondence, which articulates a comprehensive critique of neoclassical tragedy and proposes the epic as a fertile basis for its reconfiguration.

The correspondence began in 1713, when, intrigued by de la Motte’s newly completed French translation (in verse) of Homer’s *Iliad*, Fénelon wrote to his younger colleague expressing support for the project. Their ensuing discussion laid the foundation for the militant arguments de la Motte would throw at Voltaire later in the century. In one important sense, though, Fénelon does more in these letters than simply lay the foundation for his younger colleague’s mandate. He also develops the issue against an altogether different backdrop, situating “la Poésie” as a literary tradition stretching back to ancient times rather than borrowed from seventeenth-century French tragedians. Whereas Voltaire later quarrelled with de la Motte’s appropriation of Racine’s *Mithridate* and the possibility of new forms of theatre from the standpoint of neoclassical tragedy and its rigid literary principles, Fénelon had originally conceived of the debate in a parallel arena, namely within the context of the *classical* tradition.

Throughout their correspondence, de la Motte and Fénelon agree on “la Poésie” as a fluid concept, one rooted in ancient Homeric tradition as much as in their immediate French seventeenth-century predecessors. Striving to reconcile the epic poetry of antiquity with the Christian “mœurs” of Enlightenment theatre, their project involves eliding the discrete worlds of epic and tragedy and justifying *Télémaque*’s authority as a point of convergence for reformist discussions. This project, inevitably, is fraught with contention, above all because of the fundamental incompatibility between those pagan aspects of Homer and the Christian education Fénelon owed his royal pupil. Already in his *Lettre à l’Académie*, Fénelon brutally denounced Homer’s mythological grounding in the most unforgiving terms:

J’avoue que les anciens ont un grand désavantage par le défaut de leur religion et par la grossièreté de leur philosophie. Du temps d’Homère, leur religion n’était qu’un tissu monstrueux de fables aussi ridicules que les contes de fées; leur philosophie n’avait rien que de vain et de superstitieux. [...] Les héros d’Homère ne ressemblent point à d’honnêtes gens, et les dieux de ce poète sont fort au-dessous de ces héros mêmes, si indignes de l’idée que nous avons de l’honnête homme. Personne ne voudrait avoir un père aussi vicieux que Jupiter, ni une femme aussi insupportable que Junon [...]. Qui voudrait avoir un ami aussi brutal que Mars, ou un domestique aussi larron que Mercure? Ces dieux semblent inventés tout exprès par l’ennemi du genre humain, pour autoriser tous les crimes, et pour tourner en dérision la divinité.

[I assert that the ancients have a big disadvantage through the failure of their religion and through the crudeness of their philosophy. In Homer’s era, their religion was

---

Sermain, “*Les Aventures de Télémaque*: un titre programme,” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 147-153, 148.

nothing but a monstrous web of fables as ridiculous as fairy tales; their philosophy was nothing but vanity and superstition. [...] Homer's heroes do not resemble honest people, and this poet's gods were even far below these same heroes and thus completely unworthy of our notion of honest people. No one would want a father as vicious as Jupiter, nor a wife as unbearable as Juno [...]. Who would want a friend as brutal as Mars, or a servant as criminal as Mercury? These gods seem to have been deliberately invented by the enemy of the human race in order to authorize all its crimes and to deride the divine.]<sup>251</sup>

In spite of his disdain for Homer's paganism, Fénelon argues that the future of literature – and the future of his royal protégé – relies on a meticulous study of the very classical sources that conflict so violently with his readers' more modern morals.

Ultimately, Fénelon refuses to renounce mythology altogether, instead asserting that moral edification comes from depicting reprehensible images:

J'avoue qu'Agamemnon a une arrogance grossière, et Achille un naturel féroce; mais ces caractères ne sont que trop vrais et que trop fréquents. Il faut les peindre pour corriger les mœurs.

[I confess that Agamemnon has a coarse arrogance and Achilles, a ferocious nature; but these characters are only too realistic and only too common. One must paint them in order to correct mores.]<sup>252</sup>

For all its barbarous gods and flawed heroes, the mythological world captures some ubiquitous truths that merit representation on the stage; art imitates life, Fénelon reminds de la Motte in one letter, and even the most exaggerated vices serve as realistic examples for condemnation.<sup>253</sup> De la Motte largely agreed, but debated the extent to which Homer's characters perform the pedagogical function that would justify departing from the strict tenets of Christian virtue:

Je vous dirai [...] qu'Homère a eu tort de donner à un homme aussi vicieux qu'Achille des qualités si brillantes, qu'on l'admire plus qu'on ne le hait. C'est, à mon avis, tendre un piège à la vertu de ses lecteurs, que de les intéresser pour des méchants.

[I would say [...] that Homer was wrong to give to a man as vicious as Achilles such dazzling qualities so that one admires him more than one hates him. To my mind, this is to tempt the virtue of his readers into a trap by soliciting their interest in evildoers.]<sup>254</sup>

In some ways, de la Motte's anxiety about an unruly, unchristian mythological world echoes Faydit's unsparing critique of Fénelon's sensual imagery, but ultimately de la Motte was easily persuaded of *Télémaque's* ability to present a viable alternative to neoclassical

---

<sup>251</sup> Fénelon, *Lettre à l'Académie française*, 80-81.

<sup>252</sup> Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 22 November 1714, 734.

<sup>253</sup> Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 22 November 1714, 734.

<sup>254</sup> De la Motte, Letter to Fénelon, 15 December 1714, 735.

tragedy's elaborate versification and, simultaneously, to espouse Christian values even through classical epic's heathen world.

For *Télémaque*'s author, then, the project to modernize poetry entails revamping tropes through a direct critique of past models – both classical and neoclassical. As he flatly asserts to de la Motte, “I do not blindly admire everything passed on by the ancients. I find them completely unequal [in quality].”<sup>255</sup> By selectively imitating and combining the most compelling features of verse and prose genres, Fénelon initiated the hybrid genre de la Motte happily championed, yet however hard he tried to synthesize the mythological world of the epic with the neoclassical imperatives of verisimilitude and decorum, this amalgamation of poetries left the question of the novel's genre betwixt and between.

Indeed, while Jaucourt discusses *Télémaque* in relation to the prose poetry movement, he makes no mention of Fénelon in his article on epic poetry for the *Encyclopédie*. He calls particular attention to the complete absence of French epic poetry before Voltaire's *Henriade* was published in 1723: “France has not produced a single *epic poem* until the eighteenth century. None of the great geniuses this nation has produced has yet worked in this genre.”<sup>256</sup> Presumably, Jaucourt neglects to mention Fénelon in his survey of the genre because (in his mind) *Télémaque*'s prose language disqualifies it as a conventional “epic” in the tradition of Homer and Virgil. In contrast, the specifics of epic and tragic categorization are simply of secondary importance in Fénelon's longer conception of a “Poésie” that rediscovers older literary models through a modern critical eye. Ultimately, de la Motte and Fénelon's initial, private dialogue about the priorities of French poetry was cut short by Fénelon's death in 1715, and thus did not persist long enough for the two *littérateurs* to stipulate a formula for renewing seventeenth-century theatre or solve *Télémaque*'s generic ambiguity. Their commitment to incorporating features from the epic nevertheless put a very particular and productive spin on the discussion, namely a strong *visual* framework buttressing their confidence in the compatibility of epic myth and Enlightenment poetics.

## PAINTING *TÉLÉMAQUE*

A query and a casual analogy from de la Motte first gave rise to this visual facet, or “third perspective” as Sermain puts it. After reading his colleague's *Lettre écrite à l'Académie françoise*, de la Motte felt intrigued by Fénelon's argument but remained perplexed by an

---

<sup>255</sup> “Je n'admire point aveuglément tout ce qui vient des anciens. Je les trouve fort inégaux entre eux.” Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 4 May 1714, 730.

<sup>256</sup> “La France n'a point eu de *poème épique* jusqu'au dix-huitième siècle. Aucun des beaux génies qu'elle a produits n'avoit encore travaillé dans ce genre.” Louis de Jaucourt, “Poème épique,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, 12:815-12:823, 12:822.

apparent contradiction between Fénelon's reverence for Homer's style on the one hand, and his ambivalence towards the characters that this style brings to life on the other: "You make Homer into a great painter; but you condemn his gods and his heroes."<sup>257</sup> De la Motte's fleeting visual reference quickly became a sustained analogy underpinning the conversation. Fénelon's answer clarified the conundrum and moreover elaborated on the connection de la Motte made between literary poetics and painting. The classical sources, Fénelon replied, offer a stylistic alternative to their more immediate predecessors but also convey a pagan world doomed to be repudiated by contemporary Christian authors. "Every author paints himself in what he writes without thinking," he explains, as though quoting a proverb.<sup>258</sup> Homer is a product of his era, Fénelon seems to argue, but his epic style is by no means incompatible with the principles of verisimilitude and edification that eighteenth-century literature inherits from neoclassical tragic theatre: "One must adhere to what is real and paint according to nature,"<sup>259</sup> he insists. The rules of seventeenth-century French tragic theatre largely continue to prescribe the parameters of Enlightenment poetry, but the world of epic injects de la Motte and Fénelon's proposed new poetics with an unexpectedly interdisciplinary perspective wherein the poet's style is not confined by any single genre or even by a strictly literary medium. At the intersection of Fénelon's innovative blending of two styles – tragic and epic – lies a typically Enlightened "poésie de style" as Jaucourt defines it, namely a poetry founded on the "invention of images" and the "right expressions to give them life."<sup>260</sup> Underpinning de la Motte and Fénelon's deliberations and lying at the heart of the Télémachomania phenomenon, the epic and the painterly are inextricably bound together.

*Télémaque* insists on this synthesis on practically every page. The novel's opening scene exemplifies Fénelon's visual style; it begins *in medias res*, as epics typically do, with an evocative tableau. As though resuming an extended Homeric tale, the narrator paints a weeping Calypso amid the vivid topography of the Mediterranean:

Calypso ne pouvoit se consoler du départ d'Ulysse. [...] Souvent elle demeurait immobile sur le rivage de la mer qu'elle arrosoit de ses larmes; & elle étoit sans cesse tournée vers le côté où le vaisseau d'Ulysse fendant les ondes avoit disparu à ses yeux.

[Calypso remained inconsolable for the departure of Ulysses. [...] Frequently did she stand motionless on the beach of the sea, which she watered with her tears; and her face

---

<sup>257</sup> "Vous faites Homère un grand peintre; mais vous passez condamnation sur ses dieux et sur ses héros." De la Motte, Letter to Fénelon, 3 November 1714, 732.

<sup>258</sup> "Chacun se peint sans y penser, monsieur, dans ce qu'il écrit." Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 22 November 1714, 733.

<sup>259</sup> "Il faut observer le vrai, et peindre d'après nature." Fénelon, Letter to de la Motte, 22 November 1714, 733.

<sup>260</sup> Jaucourt, "Style, Poésie du," 15:554.

was always turned towards that quarter where the ship of Ulysses, plowing the waves, had disappeared from her eyes.]<sup>261</sup>

The image of Calypso lamenting her lover's departure is one of many scenes in *Télémaque* that inspired Enlightenment artists to translate its drama onto canvas. Indeed, as Sheriff documents, numerous painters were moved to depict episodes from the novel, and *Télémaque*'s encounter with Calypso remained a popular subject for many decades. She suggests two reasons for this: first, because "the priority that Fénelon gives to Calypso renders her a touchstone for the entire work. She is the first moral danger that Telemachus meets and thus becomes the model for all that he must fear in seductive and enchanting women;" second, because the Calypso episode crystallizes the very dilemma between sensuality and edification that Enlightenment theories of painting (and of theatre) had to contend with.<sup>262</sup> This intersection of *Télémacomania*'s vibrant visual culture and the continued debates surrounding the poetics of the Enlightenment arts thus casts de la Motte and Fénelon's discussion in a new light; far from ignoring the novel's literary technicalities, the two philosophers' emphasis on visual analogy and metaphor hits upon one of *Télémaque*'s most prominent and popular features – its imagery.

Jean Raoux (1677-1734) and Nicolas Vleughels (1668-1737) were the first to illustrate scenes from *Télémaque* and painted several oil canvases based on the first seven books of the novel.<sup>263</sup> Subsequently, engravers designed plates for various editions of the text based on drawings by Charles Monnet (1732-1816?), among others. Unlike some of these smaller sketches and etchings designed for illustrated editions of Fénelon's book, the highly-celebrated Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann (1741-1807) painted several independent – and very fine – canvases depicting scenes from the novel, including one inspired by *Télémaque*'s evocative opening scene (see Figure 5.1). The painting remodels Fénelon's scenography slightly, resituating Calypso's private moment of grief so the viewer sees her seated, listless and subdued inside her grotto rather than standing resolute at the shoreline as Fénelon describes. The liberties Kauffmann takes with the novel's description, however, heighten the suspense of the narrative: barely discernible beyond the irregular frame of the stone grotto, a glimpse of the sea highlights Calypso's confinement on her island and the inaccessibility of her lover Ulysses, who disappeared on the horizon in Homer's epic. While Kauffmann's paintings are among the most exquisite responses to the eighteenth century's *Télémacomania* movement, she was by no means alone in her commitment to reinterpreting Fénelon's

---

<sup>261</sup> Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 7. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 3.

<sup>262</sup> Sheriff, "Painting *Télémaque* in the French Regency," 284.

<sup>263</sup> See Sheriff, "Painting *Télémaque* in the French Regency," esp. 289.

expressive descriptions onto canvas. Fénelon's portrait in prose appealed not only across the Enlightenment arts, but also across generations of artists and even into the next century.

Many decades later, Bartolomeo Pinelli (1781-1835) also produced a whole series of intricate drawings of scenes from Fénelon, presumably for an illustrated edition of the novel published in the early nineteenth century (Figure 5.2). The basic elements of Fénelon's setting are immediately recognizable, although the interplay between the stone of Calypso's abode and the water surrounding her island is much more elaborate. Whereas Kauffmann captures Calypso in a moment of solitary contemplation, Pinelli reproduces a much more interactive scene. Surrounded by her attendants, Calypso again sits passively in her grotto, but this time, she listens intently, absorbed by Telemachus's story. Spinning out his narrative for his captive audience, Telemachus points beyond Calypso's island and beyond the picture's frame to the unseen adventures of his epic life.

In both pictures, then, narrative is an intriguing presence: just as Pinelli's Telemachus gestures to an intangible history outside the borders of the canvas, likewise Kauffmann's nymph mourns for a departed lover and, by extension, for the lost narrative that told of her passionate encounter. In both cases, it is as though Homer's *Odyssey* lingers just out of view in the memory of the picture's subjects. If the characters' epic narrative palpably exceeds the confines of these paintings, however, both images simultaneously adopt a monumental style that conveys an obvious confidence in their visual medium. Kauffmann's translucent colours just barely soften the otherwise imposing figure that dominates her composition. Pinelli's image is even more conspicuously substantial, announcing its tangible permanence with a monochromatic palette and statuesque figures that contribute to a tableau-like quality. Even the lighting of the drawing, with the foreground illuminated by an improbable light source and the background cast in shadow, suggests a motionless stage rather than a dynamic scene. Epic narrative and imagery somehow intensify one another's presence in these images. Paradoxically then, while *Télémaque*'s literary debates often neglected the narrative subtleties of Fénelon's novel, the visual arts actively set about capturing the imaginative act of story-telling that defines the narrative mode of epic poetry.

Some of *Télémaque*'s earliest commentators specifically appreciated the novel's unusual proximity to the visual arts. Andrew Michael Ramsay, for instance, whose essay on epic poetry prefaced the first authorized edition of Fénelon's novel in 1717 and accompanied numerous French and English editions thereafter, praises the descriptive power of the text:

**IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT**

**Figure 5.1** Angelica Kauffmann, *Calypso Mourning Over the Departure of Ulysses*, oil on wood panel, The William Benton Museum of Art (c. 1779)

**IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT**

**(<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/17971#addtopc>)**

**Figure 5.2** Bartolomeo Pinelli, *Telemachus Relates his Adventures to the Nymph Calypso*, pen and ink with wash on paper, Art Institute of Chicago (early 19<sup>th</sup> century)

Les images de notre Poete sont aussi parfaits que son stile est harmonieux. Peindre, c'est non seulement décrire les choses, mais en représenter les circonstances, d'une maniere si vive & si touchante, qu'on s'imagine les voir. L'Auteur de *Telemaque* peint les passions avec art. [...] En lisant son Poeme, on ne voit plus que ce qu'il fait voir.

[The images that our Poet creates are as perfect as his style is harmonious. Painting does not consist simply of describing things, but in representing circumstances in a manner so lively and so touching that one imagines one sees them. The Author of *Telemachus* paints the passions with art. [...] When reading his poem, we see only what he makes us see.]<sup>264</sup>

The novel's ability to conjure up images, Ramsay seems to suggest, is profoundly "poetic," and thus in the case of *Télémaque* the distinction between "poetry" and "prose" has nothing to do with rhymes and meter or tragedy and epic but rather with a vivid pictorial logic that steers the reader's attention through a gallery of characters and scenes. Ramsay's visual focus links together the *Encyclopédie*'s articles on "epic poem" and the "poetics of style" in a way that Jaucourt (the author of both entries) himself fails to consider: far from distancing his novel from traditional epic poetry, Ramsay argues, Fénelon's prose opens a visual aesthetic that heightens the text's epic orientation.

Following Ramsay's lead, more recent scholarship also stresses the proximity of Fénelon's epic to painting. Bernard Teyssandier places *Télémaque* amid a vibrant culture of mythological engravings, illustrations, and paintings, some predating Fénelon's novel and others ensuring its prominence well into the nineteenth century.<sup>265</sup> Building on late seventeenth-century pedagogical theory, which he argues practically mandated the intersection of visual and textual "lessons," Teyssandier even suggests that Fénelon designed his vivid descriptions to evoke specific engravings familiar to his young protégé.<sup>266</sup> In many of the novel's passages, Fénelon's conspicuous emphasis on a visual vocabulary focuses his readers on vivid descriptions bordering on ekphrasis.<sup>267</sup> This is precisely the basis for Faydit's and Gueudeville's condemnations of the book. In Sheriff's words, "both authors expressed

---

<sup>264</sup> A. M. Ramsay, "Discours de la poésie épique et de l'excellence du poème de *Télémaque*," in *Les Aventures de Telemaque, fils d'Ulysse*, vii-lviii (Paris: F. Delaulne, 1717), xxxix.

<sup>265</sup> Bernard Teyssandier, "Le Prince à l'école des images: la pédagogie des 'peintures' dans le *Télémaque* de Fénelon," *Littératures classiques* 70 (2009): 201-223.

<sup>266</sup> For details on these paintings and additional references, see Teyssandier, "Le Prince à l'école des images" and Romira Worvill, "From *Prose peinture* to Dramatic *tableau*: Diderot, Fénelon and the Emergence of the Pictorial Aesthetic in France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 151-170, esp. 162.

<sup>267</sup> Strictly speaking, the term "ekphrasis" refers to a vivid rhetorical style that aims to conjure up a visual work of art. In this case, Fénelon's descriptive text does not necessarily evoke a specific painting but rather pushes the boundaries of its textual medium in order to capture a strong visual element. For more details on the classical origins of "ekphrasis," see Ruth Webb, "Ekphrasis," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025773>.

moral outrage precisely because the story dwelled seductively on love and its pleasures, especially in the first books set on Calypso's isle."<sup>268</sup> As Romira Worvill comments, the text's lexicon is overwhelmingly weighted towards the visual: "The verbs voir, apercevoir, découvrir, paraître, remarquer, and expressions involving the use of the word yeux [...] recur almost obsessively throughout the text, constantly directing the reader's gaze."<sup>269</sup> Arguably, the novel's pedagogical function hangs on the graphic impact of the text, and these visual verbs proliferate at didactically crucial moments in Telemachus's travels.

For example, on their first stop after fleeing Calypso's island, Telemachus and Mentor are greeted by King Idomeneus (formerly of Crete), who introduces himself as an archetype of imprudent kingship.<sup>270</sup> Identifying himself as a failed former pupil of Mentor, Idomeneus cautions the young Telemachus against the "impetuosity" and "love of idle amusements"<sup>271</sup> that prevented him from absorbing his pedagogue's lessons and ultimately precipitated his tragic downfall. Fénelon circles back to Idomeneus's cautionary tale several times over the course of the novel. In the most striking of these appearances, Fénelon describes in dramatic prose the fierce storm that precipitates Idomeneus's fatal error, illustrating the scene and repeatedly insisting on its visual impact:

La tempête fut si violente, que le Pilote de son Vaisseau & tous les autres qui étoient expérimentez dans la Navigation, crurent que leur naufrage étoit inevitable. Chacun avoit la mort **devant les yeux**; chacun **voyoit** les abîmes ouverts pour l'engloutir [...]. Idoménée **levant les yeux** & les mains vers le ciel, invoquoit Neptune. O puissant Dieu! [...] si tu me fais **revoir** l'Isle de Crete [...], je t'immolerai la première tête qui se **présentera** à mes **yeux**.

[The storm was so violent that the captain of the ship and all those who were experienced navigators believed that sinking was inevitable. Each man **saw** death before him; each **saw** the abyss open up to devour him [...]. Idomeneus, **raising his eyes** and arms to the skies, pleaded with Neptune: "O thou mighty god, [...if] thou shalt grant me once more **to see** the isle of Crete, I will sacrifice to thee the first person that my **eyes shall behold**."<sup>272</sup>

The act of seeing takes place on four different narrative levels here: the characters within the story perceive the ship's sinking; Idomeneus revisits the scene through its telling; Telemachus

<sup>268</sup> Sheriff, "Painting *Télémaque* in the French Regency," 283.

<sup>269</sup> Worvill, "From Prose *peinture* to Dramatic *tableau*," 160.

<sup>270</sup> "Quel exemple terrible ne suis-je point pour les Rois? Il faudroit me montrer à tous ceux qui régissent dans le monde, pour les instruire par mon exemple." ("What a terrible example am I made to all those who exercise the sovereign power! I ought to be held up as a lesson to all who reign in the world, that they may take warning by my fate.") Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 225.

Translation in François Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 126.

<sup>271</sup> "L'ardeur de la jeunesse & le gout des vains plaisirs." Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 218. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 122.

<sup>272</sup> My emphasis. Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 108-109. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 61-62.

witnesses the tragedy at second hand; and from outside the narrative, Fénelon's readers visualize the action thanks to the narrator's vivid description. Sight is not always just a passive faculty in the novel but often emphatically decisive. The fateful vow that Idomeneus pledges to Neptune hangs on an act of beholding: laying eyes on an unfortunate passer-by (who turns out to be his own child) costs Idomeneus his son and heir, his kingdom, and even his homeland.

Significantly, though, even though Mentor compels Telemachus to scrutinize Idomeneus as a negative example of kingly authority, he never condemns the act of seeing itself. On the contrary, the same sense that brought Idomeneus into disgraced exile offers him a degree of redemption as he recognizes in Telemachus a son worthy of a proud and noble father:

**Voilà** Ulysse lui-même, voilà ses **yeux** pleins de feu, dont **le regard** est si ferme, voilà son **air** d'abord froid & réservé [...], je **reconnois** même ce souris fin [...]. Oüi, vous êtes le fils d'Ulysse, mais vous serez aussi le mien. O mon fils, mon cher fils!

[In you I **behold** Ulysses himself; his **piercing eyes**, and **steadfast look**; his first **appearance** breathing cold reserve [...]. I **recognize** that fine smile [...]. Yes, you are the son of Ulysses, and you shall be mine also. O my son, my dear son.]<sup>273</sup>

Confronted with the spitting image of the father, Idomeneus is moved to adopt the son as his own. Sight thus recognizes, decides, and transforms familial bonds, bringing about some of the novel's most affecting and pivotal moments. Fénelon's reader is left both captivated by these scenes and a bit frustrated by the novel's inability to render its vibrant images fully perceptible. It is perhaps this sense of constantly seeing at second hand that prompted the enormous artistic reaction to the book, which invites a degree of looking that can only be accomplished with paint and canvas.

The interchange between *Télémaque* and painting quickly became a cornerstone of de la Motte's proposed theatrical reforms and even penetrated Jaucourt's thinking. By the time Jaucourt described the genre of prose poetry for the *Encyclopédie*, he borrowed Dubos's words to define it as "a most fortunate invention" that proves "there are beautiful poems without verses just as there are beautiful paintings without the richest colouring."<sup>274</sup> Certainly the novel's visual power contributed to *Télémaque*'s allure not only among literary critics like de la Motte but equally amid the eighteenth century's artistic circles. Télémacomania, in other words, was as much a painterly as a literary phenomenon.

<sup>273</sup> My emphasis. Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 216. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 121.

<sup>274</sup> "C'est une invention fort heureuse," "Il est de beaux poèmes sans vers, comme de beaux tableaux sans le plus riche coloris." This passage is once again copied from Dubos's treatise. See Dubos, *Reflexions*, 679-680. Jaucourt, "Poème en prose," 12:837.

## MYTHS INVISIBLE AND UNHEARD

Significantly, *Télémaque*'s intimate exchange with the visual arts is not nearly as straightforward as the countless and varied illustrations of its scenes would suggest. Not only does the book's visual language repeatedly evoke images that even the most imaginative mind's eye cannot fully realize, but it also draws attention to incomplete and missing parts of its descriptive world. This trend to suppress the senses in some way likely represents a response to Faydit and Gueudeville's moral critique of Fénelon's text, which they felt veered too much into the sensual at the cost of the stern instruction it portends to offer. Fénelon's readers, like the young *Télémaque*, are in danger of finding Calypso more seductive than the lesson of moderation the novel tries to impart. Sensual description thus risked disrupting the text's didactic message as much as it provided the means for communicating the same. As Sheriff explains, caught between necessity and restraint "Fénelon [...] could not achieve his end of showing how dangerous were seduction and pleasure if he did not render them as strongly attractive to the reader."<sup>275</sup> As we will see, the anxiety attached to sensual luxury even in textual form encouraged artists to moderate the pleasure of their canvases by muting one or more senses. Already in the novel's opening lines, for example, Fénelon captures an intriguing contradiction between the arresting picture of Calypso contemplating the sea's vast expanse and the conspicuous absence of her lover's ship. This first passage, in other words, is dominated by a pronounced image and, simultaneously, a palpably *invisible* scene. Fénelon persuades his reader to follow Calypso's line of vision into the horizon only to find it poignantly empty.

In her painted interpretation of Calypso's sorrow, Kauffmann likewise consciously captures Calypso stuck between the seen and unseen – Fénelon's enigmatic character is not gazing directly out to sea but looking blankly towards the imperceptible space dividing her grotto and the outside expanse. Even aside from Calypso's unnerving, indirect gaze, the mimetic basis of Kauffmann's painting seems not altogether certain, as she condenses the sea and its green shoreline into a tiny opening, rendering it in a hazy, almost impressionistic style compared to the exquisitely detailed features of her human subject. The verisimilitude of the scene lies not in any accurate representation of nature or even a faithful realization of Fénelon's written description, but rather in an allusive interiority that is as much palpably unseen as it is conveyed by the painting. Possibly, it is with this elliptical angle – which gestures away but moves back towards the introspective subject – that *Télémaque* pushes its pedagogical agenda: throughout the novel, the boy-prince *Télémaque* is repeatedly confronted

---

<sup>275</sup> Sheriff, "Painting *Télémaque* in the French Regency," 287.

with negative examples of kingship (for instance in the person of Idomeneus) and must internalize each of these lessons.

Thus, both the novel and its subsequent illustrations insist on a visual paradigm in which what is seen is simultaneously invisible, and this paradox is not simply an artistic effect but also a narrative strategy. *Télémaque*'s opening passage establishes a contradictory relationship with its own narrative frame in the sense that Calypso appears, mourning for a past she cannot recapture – in other words, she agonizes in the face of a lost narrative. This scene, then, forms a bridge to the very narrative that Fénelon sets himself to resume: Homer's *Odyssey* leaves Calypso poised in grief and Fénelon takes up this incomplete story. The novel's subtitle makes this perfectly clear: *Les Aventures de Telemaque Fils d'Ulysse, ou suite du quatrième Livre de l'Odyssée d'Homere*. From this perspective, then, the Calypso passage evokes an absent lover, his invisible ship, and a missing narrative, and Fénelon throws his reader into a contradictory world of entangled presences and absences, visibilities and invisibilities, stories told and untold. The notion of narrative exceeding its own perceptible boundaries and thereby absenting itself in some way is a theme that permeates Fénelon's novel and its subsequent adaptations. Moreover, this paradox touches all the components – visual, textual, and also musical – of the book's epic genre, which after all is a literary form renowned for its descriptive energy, recounted aloud and often in song.

This aural aspect of the epic is perhaps not quite as prominent in *Télémaque* as are the visual arts, but sound and music feature in many of the novel's most significant moments. Calypso's special talent, after all, is the persuasive power of song. In the novel's opening scene, Calypso not only succumbs to an empty horizon, she also falls into a mournful silence, her once boisterous domicile now muted by her tears: "Her grotto no longer resounded with her song; her attendant nymphs were afraid to speak to her."<sup>276</sup> Left bereft by her lover, it is as though Calypso loses her most potent ability and with it, the capacity to direct her fate with the irresistible allure of her music. Her silence leaves her in a thoroughly uncertain narrative space; Homer's epic abandons her to an unfinished story, and it is up to Fénelon to fill the gap left by the *Odyssey* and to rectify the tragedy of Calypso's desperate loneliness. Indeed, by stressing the terrible muteness of Calypso's island, Fénelon signals the necessity of his own narrative, which is to paint the arriving ship for which Calypso yearns and so write what Homer left unwritten.

This poignant soundlessness finds its way into the artistic versions of the novel as well. Kauffmann's painting depicts a lonely, isolated Calypso, and even the portrait-like

---

<sup>276</sup> "Sa Grotte ne raisonnoit plus du doux chant de sa voix; les Nymphes qui la servoient, n'osoient lui parler." Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, 1-2. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 3.

format aptly conveys the stultifying atmosphere evoked by Fénelon's description. Sitting alone in her misery, the subject of the picture has neither companion nor interlocutor. Her grotto looks too small even to accommodate a second figure, and the distant shores of the sea give the impression of still seclusion. Kauffmann depicts no agent of noise, and thus the "silence" of the painting is particularly obvious. For both Fénelon and Kauffmann, then, the end of Calypso's story signals a breakdown of text and, with it, of music. To an extent, in each representation of her distress, visual potency begins to replace textual coherence. This is precisely the transformation that takes place in the *Encyclopédie*, which allows the beauty of the foreign scripts it documents to supersede legibility and, in some cases, the fundamental aural cadence of the language with it.

In some of the other paintings of *Télémaque*, epic storytelling likewise does not always sit easily with its traditional oral/aural dimension. In some renditions, epic narrative is so compelling that it has the capacity to overpower the other senses completely. For example, in Pinelli's drawing of Telemachus relating his adventures, Calypso's nymphs lean over their unused instruments, as though forgetting the persuasive sensuality of their music and the seductive temptation that Calypso hopes will keep her young guest from quitting her island. Fénelon's description of this moment emphasizes the engrossing power of Telemachus's story: "All the nymphs leaned forward in silence, forming a kind of semicircle, the better to hear and see."<sup>277</sup> Pinelli's version of the scene vividly captures the all-consuming influence of narrative, which enthralls its audience to the extent that the other arts are momentarily forgotten. Calypso's nymphs are completely entranced by Telemachus's story, and so the musical arts are demonstrably cast aside. Even the visual arts are not immune to the spell cast by Telemachus's story: arguably, Pinelli ignores painting itself by forging a relatively austere scene devoid of colour, dynamic figures, or realistic lighting.

A much more anxious, almost violent, silencing unfolds in an oil painting by Kauffmann dating from a few years after *Calypso Mourning Over the Departure of Ulysses*. Here, it is Telemachus who sits languidly, his eyes downcast and indifferent to the scene in front of him (see Figure 5.3). Unlike Calypso's solitary grief, however, here Kauffmann's protagonist sits surrounded by activity. Directly opposite Telemachus, Calypso gestures commandingly to silence her nymphs, whose song is bringing Ulysses's son to grief over his father's absence. Although there is no episode in the novel corresponding exactly to the scene as Kauffmann arranges it, she improvises on the epic's theme of muting music in the face of an absorbing narrative.

---

<sup>277</sup> "Cependant toutes les Nymphes en silence s'épanchoient pour prêter l'oreille, & faisoient une espece de demi cercle pour mieux écouter & pour mieux voir." Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, 68. Translation in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 47.



**Figure 5.3** Angelica Kauffmann, *The Sorrow of Telemachus*, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art (1783)<sup>278</sup>

<sup>278</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art's online collection records describe the subject of the painting as follows: "Calypso motions her nymphs to be silent when their songs about Telemachus's father Ulysses make him sorrowful." Metropolitan Museum of Art, Online Collection Records "The Sorrow of Telemachus," accessed 12 April 2016, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436809>.

In a sense, Pinelli and Kauffmann each provide a different solution to the conundrum posed by Fénelon's sensual writing. Pinelli, wary of deploying his full arsenal of artistic techniques, avoids layers of shading and lighting effects to avoid distracting from the image's composition. Kauffmann, in contrast, depicts the kind of sensory crisis Faydit warns against; Telemachus is overwhelmed by the nymphs' song and Calypso must signal to them to desist. Carried by music, the epic tale suddenly overcomes its audience. All that remains in the absence of both literary text and song is the image of this moment of eruption. From this perspective, Pinelli is content to tone down certain aspects of his image in order to depict narration in progress, whereas Kauffmann imagines a more competitive interaction among the arts. In Fénelon and Pinelli's vision, the arts make way for one another – music fading away to make the storyteller more audible, drawing foregoing its most subtle shading in order to foreground the central figures. For Kauffmann, in contrast, the arts do not work in tandem with such ease: they exhaust and deplete their audience to the point of collapse.

## LANDSCAPES OF EPIC OPERA

In Fénelon's novel, then, the visual and oral/aural senses often perform their most conspicuous role by their very absence or by issuing a warning against sensuality. Just as *Télémacomania*'s painters undertook to realize the novel's unseen images, executing the scenes that Fénelon could only imagine in prose, so the novel's admirers were also not indifferent to the music dwelling, unheard, in its pages. Operatic versions of the epic in both French and Italian popped up throughout the century, featuring music by prominent composers like Destouches (1714), Scarlatti (1718), Gluck (1765), Gazzaniga (1776), Le Sueur (1796), and Mayr (1797). By far the best known of these *Télémaque* adaptations is Giambattista Varesco and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781), based on the novel's very first operatic setting by Antoine Danchet and André Campra (*Idoménée*, 1712), itself inspired by the tragic play of the same title by Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon from 1705.

Intriguingly, although they tackle the *Télémacomania* phenomenon in *Idomeneo* directly, adapting an episode straight from Fénelon's text, Varesco and Mozart's opera sidesteps the novel's main protagonists: neither Telemachus nor Mentor figures in the libretto. Instead, the opera dramatizes the adventures of Mentor's *other* pupil, King Idomeneus, and his infamous pact with Neptune to sacrifice the first person to greet him on shore. Nevertheless, from the perspective of its poetics of style, the opera captures the generic blending of Fénelon's text, its visual construction, and even the tableaux conveying the alluring contest among the senses. Indeed, the confluence of tragic and epic tropes permeates every aspect of the opera, not least because the work has to contend with the vestiges of at

least two earlier versions representing distinct theatrical traditions (see Table 2): on the one hand, Crébillon's 1705 spoken play, formulated as a typical neoclassical tragedy complete with Alexandrine verses and strict unity of place across its five acts; on the other hand, Danchet and Campra's *tragédie lyrique*, with its elaborate cast of divinities, numerous *divertissement* scenes, and violent ending.<sup>279</sup> The plot's main events – the king's tragic meeting with his son Idamantes, the wrathful power of the gods, and a father's reluctance to perform the promised sacrifice – together produce an opera that incorporates both epic and tragic tropes.<sup>280</sup> Mythological gods and horrifying pagan rituals provoke the kind of ethical quandaries and entangled relationships typical in tragic theatre.

Textually, *Idomeneo*'s relationship to its predecessors follows the pattern set by *Mitridate*: like Cigna-Santi's adaptation of Racine, streamlined character depictions and a decidedly more cheerful ending separate Varesco's libretto from earlier versions of the myth. Unlike *Mitridate*, whose only precursor – Gasparini's 1767 setting of the libretto – seems to have had little or no impact on Mozart, both prior settings of Fénelon's narrative leave a discernable mark on *Idomeneo*, which partly assimilates these features and partly reconfigures them towards a new and distinctive interpretation of *Télémaque*. Even a cursory textual comparison of the various versions of the Idomeneus myth highlights the intricate interplay of genres and theatrical traditions informing Varesco and Mozart's piece.<sup>281</sup> *Idomeneo*'s dramaturgical nuances emerge from the cumulative influence of two distinct stages in the genesis of its backstory in addition to the influence of Fénelon's original novel.

<sup>279</sup> Charles Mazouer points out that Varesco may also have known Antoine Marin Lemierre's play *Idoménée* (1764) but that this intermediary version seems to have had little impact on the opera's libretto. Lemierre's version is very similar to Crébillon's play. Charles Mazouer, "Idomeneo, rè di Creta: Mozart et la tragédie," *Revue belge de Musicologie* 36/38 (1982-4): 133-144, 136.

<sup>280</sup> In the same way that the novel's didactic application facilitated Fénelon's backhanded critique of the monarchy, many commentators have suggested that the Idomeneus tale – specifically its theme of sacrifice – presented an opportunity to stage forbidden biblical stories. Julian Rushton, for instance, argues that Idomeneus's "comparative popularity in the eighteenth century may have something to do with a desire vicariously to stage the story of Jephtha, at a time when biblical subjects were generally banned from the theatre."<sup>280</sup> Charles Mazouer even hypothesizes that Mozart, familiar with Handel's works, may have known his oratorio *Jephtha*. Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, 69. Mazouer, "Idomeneo, rè di Creta: Mozart et la tragédie," esp. 136. See also Martin Mueller, "Escape from D-Minor: Mozart's Encounter with Ancient Tragedy in *Idomeneo*," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 18/1 (2010): 27-53.

<sup>281</sup> A more detailed side-by-side analysis of the three versions is beyond the scope of this chapter, which focuses on *Idomeneo*'s visual features. For a closer comparison between Mozart and Varesco's version and its predecessors, see Daniel Hartz, "The Genesis of *Idomeneo*," in *Mozart's Operas*, 15-35, ed. Thomas Bauman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990). Hartz also examines the features of Danchet's *tragédie lyrique* in greater depth and juxtaposes Mozart and Varesco's treatment of the same subject from this perspective. Where Hartz finds Varesco's libretto a poor successor to Danchet's version, however, I place *Idomeneo* in the broader context of Crébillon and Fénelon's models in order to show the longer trajectory of the myth over the course of multiple remodelings. Mazouer traces the genesis of the Idomeneus myth from Fénelon to Mozart in more detail. See Mazouer, "Idomeneo, rè di Creta: Mozart et la tragédie."

CRÉBILLON'S <i>IDOMÉNÉE</i> (1705)		DANCHET'S <i>IDOMÉNÉE</i> (1712)		VARESCO'S <i>IDOMENEO</i> (1781)	
Idoménée, King of Crete	Égésippe, Palace officer	Idoménée, King of Crete	<b>Neptune</b>	Idomeneo, King of Crete	<b>High priest</b>
Idamante, Idoménée's son	Polyclète, Idamante's confidante	Idamante, Idoménée's son	<b>Venus</b>	Idamante, Idomeneo's son	<b>Voice of the oracle</b>
Érixène, Daughter of Mérion	Ismène, Érixène's confidante	Ilione, Tojan Princess, Priam's daughter	<b>Jealousy</b>	Ilia, daughter of King Priam of Troy	Chorus of Cretans and Trojans
Sophronyme, Idoménée's minister		Electre, Agamemnon's daughter	<b>Protée</b>	Elettra, Princess of Argos	
		Arcas, Idoménée's confidant	<b>Nemesis</b>	Arbace, Idomeneo's confidant	
		Arbas, Idamante's follower	Various groups of Cretans, Trojans, etc.		

~ **Bold type denotes the most significant differences between the various versions** ~

<b>ACT 1</b>	Idoménée is caught in a storm. He confesses his unfortunate vow to Sophronyme and describes the fateful encounter with Idamante. <b>Idoménée is in love with Erixène</b> , but Idamante also loves her and expresses his feelings.	<b>PROLOGUE</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. The Chorus begs for release from slavery and Eole tells them to be calm and obey the King.</b></li> <li><b>2. Venus commands Eole to stir up the sea and summons Love.</b></li> <li><b>3. Chorus proclaims Love's power to enchain hearts.</b></li> </ol>	<b>ACT 1</b> Scene	14. Ilia regrets her situation: captive of Crete and in love with her enemy, Idamante.
		<b>ACT 1</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Ilione reflects on her love for Idamante and names Electre as her rival.</li> <li>7. Idamante sets the Trojan slaves free and proclaims his love to Ilione.</li> <li>8. The Trojans, now released, state that it is impossible to break the chains of Love.</li> <li>9. Electre admonishes Idamante for liberating his enemies.</li> <li>10. Arbas arrives with news of Idoménée's death at sea.</li> <li>11. Electre rages against Idamante's love for Ilione.</li> </ol>		15. Same as Danchet's 1.2 16. Same as Danchet's 1.3 17. Same as Danchet's 1.4 18. Same as Danchet's 1.5 19. Same as Danchet's 1.6 20. Same as Danchet's 2.1 21. Neptune arrives.
<b>ACT 2</b>	Erixème admits to Ismène that she	<b>ACT 2</b> Scene	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Chorus pleads for deliverance from the storm.</li> </ol>		22. <b>Alone, Idomeneo hints at a "cruel oath" and sees Idamante approach. A lengthy intermezzo with chorus follows.</b>

	returns Idamante's love. In a bid to placate the gods, Idoménée pledges to renounce his crown in favour of his son, leaving Idamante to wonder at this strange turn of events.		8. Neptune appears with Idoménée, exposes their pact, and demands his victim. 9. A guilt-ridden Idoménée confesses his hasty oath to Arcas. 10. Idamante stumbles across Idoménée; recognition scene; Idoménée rebuffs Idamante and commands him not to follow him. 11. Electre, still furious, summons Venus. <b>12. Venus appears.</b> <b>13. Venus summons Jealousy.</b> <b>14. Venus commands Jealousy to bring fear to Idoménée's heart.</b>	ACT 2 Scene	1. <b>Idomeneo confesses the full terms of his oath and declares the victim is his son.</b> Arcas suggests sending Idamante away to Argos with Electra. 2. <b>Idomeneo expresses parental affection for Ilia and she proclaims him to be her new father.</b> 3. <b>Idomeneo wonders if Idamante is in love with Ilia and ponders his situation.</b> 4. Electra rejoices at her upcoming departure with Idamante. 5. Electra bids farewell to Crete while the Chorus sings blessings for good weather. 6. Same as Danchet's 3.7 7. The chorus begs Neptune for mercy. Idomeneo offers himself as victim
ACT 3	The storm reappears and Idoménée tells Idamante to flee. Amid farewells, Idoménée discovers that Idamante is competing for the affections of Erixène. <b>He denounces his son as a traitor, but when Idamante tries to throw himself on his own sword, Idoménée discovers he cannot hate his son.</b>	ACT 3 Scene	7. Idoménée bemoans his predicament and blames the cruel gods. Arcas suggests he send Idamante away from danger. Idoménée agrees to send Idamante to Argos with Electre. 8. Idoménée professes his love to Ilione, who rebuffs him. 9. Alone, Idoménée reflects on his cruel fate. 10. Idoménée promises Electre his son's hand. 11. Electre rejoices this turn of events. <b>12. Chorus dances while Electre addresses herself to Hope.</b> 13. Idoménée bids farewell to Idamante but the storm returns. 14. Protée appears from the sea and Idoménée offers himself as a victim.	ACT 3 Scene	13. Same as Danchet's 4.1 14. Ilia and Idamante exchange promises of love. 15. Idamante demands to know how he has offended his father. <b>He, Idomeneo, Ilia, and Electra all express their suffering.</b>
ACT 4	Erixène decides to	ACT 4 Scene	8. Ilione expresses her woes.		

<p><b>ACT 5</b></p>	<p>give herself to Idoménée. Idoménée resolves to die in his son's place and reconciles with Idamante, who discovers his father's intention to kill himself.</p> <p>Idamante begs Idoménée to sacrifice him rather than take his own life. <b>Idamante finally kills himself</b>, to the horror of his father and betrothed.</p>	<p><b>ACT 5</b> Scene</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Ilione finally admits she returns his love but warns him that Idoménée is his rival.</li> <li>10. Idamante is still confused at his father's coldness towards him.</li> <li>11. Idoménée and the chorus implore Neptune to forget his rage.</li> <li>12. Arcas brings news that Idamante has defeated the sea monster.</li> <li>13. Shepherds sing praises to Idamante and <b>Idoménée decides to give cede his throne and Ilione to his son.</b></li> <li>6. Idamante and Ilione celebrate while Electre wishes for death.</li> <li>7. Idamante proclaims that his love is greater than his throne.</li> <li>8. Idoménée commands the people to obey Idamante; Nemesis appears from the underworld.</li> <li>9. Nemesis announces the gods' vengeance and Furies destroy the throne.</li> <li>10. <b>Idoménée, driven mad by the Furies, swiftly sacrifices Idamante but is prevented from killing himself.</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. The Chorus implores Idomeneo to rectify the gods' wrath.</li> <li>17. <b>Arbace, alone, predicts the end of Crete.</b></li> <li>18. <b>The High Priest implores Idomeneo to fulfil his oath. The Chorus, learning of Idamante's fate, condemns Idomeneo for his actions.</b></li> <li>19. Idomeneo pleads to Neptune for mercy.</li> <li>20. Same as Danchet's 4.5</li> <li>21. <b>Idamante, now understanding his father's plight, convinces him to complete the sacrifice. They bid one another a final farewell.</b></li> <li>22. <b>Ilia rushes in and proposes herself as the sacrifice. The voice of the oracle proclaims that Neptune will be appeased if Idomeneo gives his throne to Idamante.</b> All rejoice except Elettra, who wishes for death.</li> <li>23. <b>Idomeneo commands his people to obey Idamante and rejoices at his newfound peace. The Chorus blesses the new royal couple.</b></li> </ol>
---------------------	--	---------------------------	---	--

In *Télémaque*, King Idomeneus plays a pivotal role in Fénelon's novel, reappearing across numerous chapters. The detailed account of his expulsion represents one of many digressions in *Télémaque*'s adventures (which meander through numerous similar episodes and chronicles). However, the novel's telling of the myth is strikingly epic in its narrative complexity, as Fénelon sets it as a *mise-en-abyme*: *Télémaque*, recounting his adventures to Calypso, describes his encounter with a native of Crete, who in turn told him of Idomeneus's banishment from the island. Fénelon's introduction to the king is thus thoroughly circuitous and arrives at fourth hand, since the reader learns the story from Fénelon, via *Télémaque*, via a third party who witnessed the actual events; indeed, there are more *dramatis personae* involved in the telling of Idomeneus's story than actually figure in it. With each of these voices, moreover, the novel extends its geographical span ever further: from Calypso's island, *Télémaque* describes the narrative told to him on the shores of Crete, while Idomeneus's tale itself extends from his fateful vow in the middle of the Aegean to his kingdom on the island of Crete to his subsequent banishment on the coast of Hesperia. Fénelon's insistent framing, complicated temporal layering, ancillary characters, and wide geography all contribute to an indirect and scattered narrative that serves the novel's epic style and signals the importance of the Idomeneus narrative within the novel but in many ways seems ill-suited to representation on the theatrical stage.

Crébillon's spoken tragedy of 1705 takes several liberties with Fénelon's text, expanding the novel's scant plot while curtailing its narrative complexity. In keeping with Racinian tragedy, Crébillon invents a captive princess, Erixène, and an amorous triangle implicating father and son (again, much like *Mithridate*), thereby transforming the scant plot of Fénelon's Idomeneus narrative into an intricate drama of unrequited love, familial strife, and disruption by divine forces. (This sub-plot suits the Metastasian framework of Varesco's libretto, and Erixène – called Ilia in the opera – becomes an indispensable agent in the opera's plot.) Crébillon also reimagines the story's piteous ending. Whereas Fénelon's Idomeneus eventually capitulates to the will of the gods, slaughtering his son in a barbaric panic, Crébillon's version heightens the dark irony of the myth: in keeping with the absolute value neoclassical tragedy places on moral duty and filial love, Idamante dies by his own selfless, heroic hand rather than as his father's helpless victim. As a tragic play, then, Crébillon's *Idoménée* undertakes several transformations to the intrigue and its cast, and these *textual* alterations emphasize the generic move away from epic – with its sprawling, labyrinthine plots, innumerable characters, and circuitous narrations – towards the tightly focused action, defined cast, and prescribed narrative of neoclassical tragedy.

Less than a decade after Crébillon's play, *Idoménée* re-emerged on the operatic stage thanks to a libretto by Danchet, which adopts the structural outlay of Crébillon's tragic play but also reverts back to the elaborate mythological style of Fénelon's novel. To Crébillon's thoroughly neoclassical design, Danchet adds an additional character – Electre, daughter of Agamemnon – who heightens the romantic tensions of the play and thereby strengthens the overall plot design. At the same time, however, Danchet departs from Crébillon's model in two significant ways. First, Danchet writes prominent roles for the large cast of pagan gods that hovered amorphously over the protagonist in Crébillon. In place of the vague supernatural ultimatums and divine interventions that pepper Crébillon's tragedy, Danchet aggressively exhibits the polytheistic backdrop of Fénelon's story in full view of his audience. Second, far from confining itself to the walls of the stifling royal palace that conventionally contains tragedy's moral dilemmas and tortured characters, Danchet unfurls a spacious and varied landscape that strongly evokes Fénelon's expansive and eclectic series of spectacular settings. Beginning with the second act, the opera moves away from the royal palace to the turbulent storm on the shoreline, to the port of Sidonia, and to a countryside setting with Neptune's temple in the distance before the action finally returns to the throne room in the final act. Even the setting for the opera's prologue is modelled on the novel's opening chapter: "Aeolus' caves [...] Through an opening in the cave, we see the sea in the distance."<sup>282</sup> Danchet's interpretation of the Idomeneus myth, in other words, goes beyond Crébillon's textual grasp to reflect Fénelon's palpable visual style and, consequently, makes fuller use of the stage's multi-media possibilities. On top of Fénelon's controversially hybrid novel, then, Varesco and Mozart inherit a myth already bearing the traces of multiple epic and tragic permutations. To some extent, Mozart and his librettist continue this legacy of reformatting the Idomeneus tale according to the demands of different genres like Crébillon's spoken tragedy and Danchet's *tragédie lyrique*.

Like Cigna-Santi's adaptation of Racine, *Idomeneo*'s main textual innovations centre on reversing the plot's tragic ending and on simplifying the intrigue's ethical complexities. In collaboration with the famous scenographer Lorenzo Quaglio (1730-1804), Varesco also developed a lavish series of settings that disregard the unity of place in favour of a dynamic sequence of interior and exterior scenes. The earlier versions of the myth all conclude with disorienting horror as Idamante perishes (either by his own hand or by his father, driven mad by the Furies who descend to exact vengeance). In stark contrast, Varesco's characters are spared the final calamity by a *deus ex machina* and instead all bask in selfless virtue:

---

<sup>282</sup> "Les Antres d'Eole [...] A travers une ouverture de la Caverne, on découvre la Mer dans l'éloignement." Antoine Danchet, *Idoménée, tragédie* (Paris: C. Ballard, 1731), v.

Idomeneo conquers his cowardice and confronts his painful duty, while Idamante and Ilia each offer themselves as the gods' willing victim. In addition to contriving this typical *lieto fine* for the opera, Varesco – again like Cigna-Santi before him – develops a bolder approach to characterization, omitting nuances in the intrigue that distract from the main action. For instance, the elimination of a sordid subplot from the tragic play in which Idoménée vies aggressively for Erixène's affections ensures that Idomeneo's dilemma hinges on his genuine paternal feelings for his son without the stain of rivalrous jealousy that makes Crébillon's Idoménée guilty of envy as well as recklessness. The ethical conundrum in *Idomeneo* is straightforward and hinges solely on the king's calamitous error, which knits together the extravagant set designs – in Aristotelian terms, Varesco firmly prioritizes the unity of action quite against Voltaire's assertion that the unities are inextricable.

If Varesco develops his cast of mythical characters away from Crébillon's model, however, the opera also rethinks some of the fundamental features of Danchet and Campra's *opéra lyrique*. Most obviously, *Idomeneo* adopts a thoroughly ambivalent attitude towards the large cast of gods and goddesses that populates Danchet's drama. Here too, Varesco takes a more targeted approach, largely muting this cacophony of deities in favour of two climactic supernatural interventions: in Act I, scene 7, Neptune emerges from the sea as Idomeneo begs for his life; in Act III, scene 10, a divine voice stays Idamante's execution, to his father's relief. Furthermore, where Danchet takes a flexible approach to the "unity of place," extending the scenography away from the palace before concluding within its walls, Varesco dispenses completely with neoclassicism's restrictions; most of the action takes place well away from the royal court, and Varesco shuns Danchet's tidy, circular retreat back to the palace for the drama's dénouement. Instead, Idamante's near-tragic demise and Idomeneo's miraculous reprieve take place outside "the magnificent temple of Neptune; a statue of the god in the background [while] the priests prepare the sacrifice."<sup>283</sup> Even *Idomeneo*'s opening palace scene hints at more depth and detail than either Crébillon or Danchet's sparse, formulaic descriptions: "Ilia's apartments in the royal palace with a gallery in the background."<sup>284</sup> Paired with Varesco's meticulous descriptions of the characters' entrances, including costume details, the libretto gives a strong sense of the architecture hosting the action on stage.

---

<sup>283</sup> "Veduta esteriore del magnifico tempio di Nettuno; la statua del Dio in fondo. I sacerdoti preparano il sacrificio." Act 3, scene 7. Stage descriptions are all taken from *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, Serie II, Werkgruppe 5, Band 11: *Idomeneo*, ed. Daniel Hertz (Bärenreiter Kassel: Basel, 1972), 451.

<sup>284</sup> "Appartamenti d'Ilia nel palazzo reale, in fondo al prospetto una galleria." *Idomeneo*, Act 1, scene 1.

In spite of Varesco's bold emendations to Danchet's libretto, most recent scholarship takes the *tragédie lyrique* as the most direct – indeed, the only – model for *Idomeneo*. Daniel Hartz, for instance, insists that “Danchet's *Idoménée* offers a natural avenue of approach to *Idomeneo* for it is where the composer and poet began.”<sup>285</sup> This direct lineage, however, belies the collaborators' selective absorption and reconfiguration of Crébillon and leaves Fénelon's pivotal novel out of the opera's scope of reference entirely. Likewise, Julian Rushton casts the opera as a compromise between the Enlightenment's French and Italian operatic traditions, arguing that *Idomeneo* is “neither a *tragédie lyrique* nor, entirely, an *opera seria*, but a hybrid created from the two.”<sup>286</sup> On the contrary, *Idomeneo* is not the passive vessel hosting two incompatible genres but rather an attempt to stage a radically fluid interchange of spoken tragedy, *tragédie lyrique*, *dramma per musica*, and also epic (for Fénelon's novel looms large over these numerous reinterpretations). Neither does the opera simply capitulate to the narrow tastes of its composer, whose thought, as Charles Mazouer would have it, “abhors the tragic.”<sup>287</sup> Rather, the opera undertakes a more comprehensive response to Télémacomania's numerous facets. Together, Varesco and Mozart mediate between Crébillon's tragic style and Danchet's almost hyperbolically mythological version and ultimately settle on an operatic style that is much closer to the spirit of Fénelon's epic than either of their predecessors. Within the bounds of Metastasian praxis, *Idomeneo* formulates a distinct response not only to the challenge of *Télémaque*'s hybrid style but also to its varied reinterpretations, including – first and foremost – the novel's inescapable visual precedent.

## THE OPERATIC STAGE AS CANVAS

By prioritizing continuity of dramatic action over the Aristotelian unity of place and by emphasizing external spectacle over the internalized plots of Corneille and Racine, Varesco rejects the rigidities of neoclassical theatre in favour of an explicitly epic style saturated with visual effects. However, while Varesco's textual alterations – most especially his elaborate settings – initiate this return to Fénelon's epic novel, they by no means direct the opera's dramaturgy alone. On the contrary, the librettist's interpretation lends the myth a more heterogeneous style that makes full use of the stage's multiple media and invites participation by his co-collaborators. The opera's strongly Fénelonian visual impact lies not only in its text

---

<sup>285</sup> Hartz, “The Genesis of *Idomeneo*,” 18. Elsewhere, Hartz argues that *Idomeneo*'s departures from Danchet – most especially the opera's “final redemption through love” – are inspired by Gluckian opera. See page 164 for more detail. See Daniel Hartz, “Mozart, his Father, and *Idomeneo*,” 230.

<sup>286</sup> Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, 82.

<sup>287</sup> “Sa pensée répugne au tragique.” Mazouer, “*Idomeneo, rè di Creta*: Mozart et la tragédie,” 143.

– that is to say Varesco’s libretto – but also in its score: As Mazouer cautions, “Let us not think that Varesco alone was responsible for *Idomeneo*’s myth! [...] The composer is also a dramaturge.”<sup>288</sup> *Idomeneo*’s set design undoubtedly also contributed to the descriptive potency of both text and music. Although the original production sketches by scenographer Quaglio do not survive, many of the artist’s other stage designs give some sense of the scale and grandeur he undoubtedly brought to the production (see Figure 5.4). Indeed, Hertz insists that the “source of Mozart’s insight” for his evocative scoring is “clearly enough the brilliant staging of his collaborators.”<sup>289</sup> Even in the absence of Quaglio’s contribution, the mutual exchange among the arts is conspicuous throughout *Idomeneo*. Indeed, Mozart’s turbulent working relationship with Varesco is well documented in numerous letters to Leopold Mozart, who frequently had to persuade the reluctant librettist to revise the opera’s text according to the composer’s dramaturgical vision, which insisted on brevity for the sake of verisimilitude.<sup>290</sup>

Interestingly, in spite of Varesco’s adventurous approach to the story’s setting and Quaglio’s lavish scenography, the opera strongly emphasizes continuity of action across its numerous stage spaces. Where Varesco permits *Idomeneo* to break completely from the unity of place and Quaglio’s sets (presumably) realized this expansive vision, Mozart’s score finds the cohesive focal point that constantly reinforces the unity of action transecting the drama’s wide and imposing geography. The music’s synthesizing power hinges on its explicit reflection of the myth’s most elemental force: the tempestuous sea surrounding and enclosing the plot’s numerous locations on the Cretan island and its characters. Mozart cements *Idomeneo*’s dramaturgical coherence by showcasing a particularly direct relationship between the work’s libretto, scenography, and orchestral writing. Most conspicuously, the score’s recurring storm motif conveys a visual power that seems to mirror the descriptive strength of Fénelon’s novel.

---

<sup>288</sup> “Gardons-nous de penser que le seul Varesco soit responsable de la fable d’*Idomeneo*! [...] Le musicien est aussi dramaturge.” Mazouer, “*Idomeneo, rè di Creta: Mozart et la tragédie*,” 136.

<sup>289</sup> Certainly, Leopold Mozart specifically mentions Quaglio’s staging plans in his letter dated 22 December 1780. The collaboration among Mozart, Varesco, Quaglio, and ballet master Claude Le Grand was animated and not always amicable. Several scholars have analyzed the limited surviving documentation (in the form of the Mozart family letters), which shows the extent to which Leopold acted as a go-between for Mozart and Varesco. Mozart’s relationship with Quaglio and le Grand, however, remains a matter of speculation. Mozart was pleased to be asked to compose ballet music that was presumably performed between the acts of the opera; while the score for this balletic portion survives, the choreography does not. Hertz implies that Quaglio’s set designs were completed while Mozart was working on *Idomeneo*. Daniel Hertz, “The Genesis of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*,” *The Musical Quarterly* 55/1 (Jan. 1969): 1-19, 11. See also Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, esp. 30-33.

<sup>290</sup> For a detailed account of the composer’s relationship with Varesco, see Hertz, “The Genesis of *Idomeneo*,” esp. 14.



**Figure 5.4** Attributed to Lorenzo Quaglio, Stage design: Interior of a Temple, graphite, pen, black ink, watercolour (date unknown)<sup>291</sup>

<sup>291</sup> Hertz reproduces a sketch of a harbor and ships by Quaglio and speculates that it might reflect the stage design for Mozart's *Idomeneo*. See Hertz, "The Genesis of Mozart's *Idomeneo*," *The Musical Quarterly*, 12 (plate 3).

The opera's orchestration repeatedly sets out to depict the tempest unfolding on stage in a visceral manner, trading compositional subtlety for raw impact and illustrating the violent waves of the recurring storm with a kind of literalness that is rare in Mozart's works. As Idomeneo and his soldiers flounder in the savage sea in Act 1, for instance, the strings furnish the chorus "Pietà! Numi pietà" with a vivid scenography through quite straightforward means: c-minor arpeggiated tremolo figures rise and fall like the swelling waves, while abrupt dynamics create turbulence, and the rising thirty-second note motives mimic the storm's howling winds (see Example 5.1). The tremolo effects, prominent string parts, and driving rhythm erect the kind of typical *tempesta* scene that Clive McClelland defines as a common topical reference used to "depict storms and other natural disasters."<sup>292</sup>

The image displays a musical score for three string instruments: Violino I, Violino II, and Viola. The music is written in C minor, indicated by three flats in the key signature. The time signature is 4/4. The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows measures 1 through 6, and the second system shows measures 7 through 11. The Violino I and II parts feature a prominent arpeggiated tremolo pattern, with dynamic markings of *p* (piano), *crescendo*, and *f* (forte). The Viola part also follows this pattern, with similar dynamic markings. The overall effect is one of intense, swirling motion, characteristic of a storm scene.

**Example 5.1** *Idomeneo* Act 1, scene 7, Chorus (No. 5) "Pietà! Numi pietà" bb. 1-11

In this desperately dramatic moment, Mozart assigns the orchestra an explicitly illustrative function. To an extent, this strategy simply reflects the practical difficulties of engineering a raging sea squall onstage. (Even contemporary performances find it difficult to conjure up such natural devastation within the confines of a conventional stage space and often rely on projection and lighting technology.) Beyond this pragmatic solution to the imperative for verisimilitude, however, the way in which Mozart deploys the orchestra to furnish the action with its lively backdrop reflects the fine arts' response to *Télémacomania*.<sup>293</sup> Over the course

<sup>292</sup> Clive McClelland, "Ombra and Tempesta," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka, 279-300 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 282.

<sup>293</sup> As Mazouer points out, Danchet first took this approach in his version of the opera: "Observons d'abord que Danchet écrit pour un spectacle d'opéra: le livret doit donner à voir des tableaux [...] au detriment de l'intrigue et du dialogue." ("Let us note first of all that Danchet writes for an operatic spectacle: the libretto must depict tableaux [...] to the detriment of the plot and the dialogue.") Mazouer, "*Idomeneo, rè di Creta*: Mozart et la tragédie," 135.

of the opera, this depiction of the elements assumes a narrative significance that not only mimics the scenery onstage but also contributes to its three-dimensional appeal.

Adding to Varesco's subtle amplification of *Télémaque*'s more epic characteristics, Mozart's orchestration refers explicitly to Quaglio's set designs as though trying to emphasize the graphic quality of Fénelon's novel that struck his successors as both alluring and generically innovative. *Idomeneo*'s tonal and motivic scheme denotes more than a broad compositional plan.<sup>294</sup> Rather, Mozart's musical dramaturgy actively choreographs the stage space and its actors in much the same way the Enlightenment's painters do. In addition to imitating the scene unfolding onstage through descriptive musical passages, Varesco and Mozart direct the composition of the stage space in other ways, often manipulating presentness and absence for narrative effect. For example, rather than place the entire chorus onstage for "Pietà! Numi pietà," Varesco and Mozart contrive a more compelling and spatially three-dimensional setup featuring a "distant" and a "close" chorus: a group of sailors sings from behind the scene, while a congregation of citizens simultaneously sings directly from the stage (see Example 5.2). After an initial echo effect, Mozart heightens the separation of these two groups by writing a distinct melodic and rhythmic line for each. The power of the sea is thus rendered all the more eerie and the scene achieves a three-dimensionality that eludes the textual medium of Fénelon's novel.

Such manipulation of the characters populating the stage emerges at various other moments as well. As Hertz points out, *Idomeneo* frequently disregards the conventional character exit that punctuates the ending of typical *dramma per musica* arias: "One scene is often made to merge into the next, and each act is conceived as a long, continuous unfolding," he observes.<sup>295</sup> *Idomeneo*'s agents do not enter and exit as decisively as in *Mitridate* nor are they contained as claustrophobically within the bleak walls of the king's seat of power. Instead, it is as though the characters circulate more ambiguously around an undulating scenery with depth and expanse but always with a clear focal point in the island's dramatic seascape. In other words, *Idomeneo*'s mise-en-scène retains a fundamentally consistent composition even across its varied sceneries. This strong unity of action, which eludes Crébillon's tragedy and to a lesser extent Danchet's version, is built on the musical continuity Mozart constructs through an approach to the conventions of the *dramma per musica* genre that seems idiosyncratic compared to *Mitridate*'s more standard pattern of exit arias.

---

<sup>294</sup> Hertz, for instance, traces tonal unity across the work without considering the visual implications of the stage space in relation to these musical techniques (even though he reproduces a set design by Quaglio, previously thought to be a production sketch for *Idomeneo*). See Daniel Hertz, "Tonality and Motif in *Idomeneo*," *The Musical Times* 115/1575 (1974): 382-386.

<sup>295</sup> Hertz, "Mozart, His Father and *Idomeneo*," 228.

Mozart's explicit orchestration of the seascape in scenes like "Pietà! Numi pietà" thus becomes a persistent motif that not only links together the drama's various locations but also cements the metaphorical relationship between the physical landscapes depicted on the stage and the internal spaces occupied by its conflicted characters. The analogy between Idomeneo's emotional agitation and the turmoil of Neptune's kingdom is everywhere conspicuous through the repeated orchestral references to the storm and the libretto's use of metaphors related to the sea. The King of Crete himself articulates the work's fundamental metaphor in his famous aria "Fuor del mar." "Saved from the sea, I have a sea within me/Which is more terrible than the first."<sup>296</sup>

The musical score is for the chorus in Act 1, scene 7 of Mozart's *Idomeneo*. It includes parts for Tenore I, II; Basso I, II; Tenore; Basso; and Violoncello e Basso. The lyrics are in Italian and French. The music features a crescendo and dynamic markings like p, f, and cresc.

*Coro lontano*  
*Tenore I, II*  
*Basso I, II*  
*Coro vicino*  
*Tenore*  
*Basso*  
*Violoncello e Basso*

Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie - tà!  
 Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie - tà!  
 Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie - tà! A - iu - to oh giu - sti  
 Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie - tà! A -

il ciel, il ma - re, il  
 il  
 Nu - mi! a noi vol - ge - tei lu - mi...  
 iu - to oh giu - sti Nu - mi! a noi vol - ge - tei lu - mi...  
 ven - to ciop - pri - mon di spa - ven - to,  
 ciel, il ma - re, il ven - to ciop - pri - mon di spa - ven - to, il  
 Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie -  
 Pie - tà! Nu - mi, pie -

**Example 5.2** *Idomeneo* Act 1, scene 7, Chorus (No. 5) "Pietà! Numi pietà" bb. 1-16

<sup>296</sup> "Fuor del mar ho un mare in seno/Che dei primo è più funesto." Idomeneo, Act 2, scene 3.

The metaphorical power of the Cretan sea penetrates each new setting and intrudes on each character's private drama. In this way, the plot, the music, and the set design all hinge on a shared imagery. In painterly terms, the opera adopts the ruminating posture of Fénelon's Calypso, constantly looking towards the sea as both the origin and (it is hoped) the key to its internal dilemma. Immediately in the opera's opening scene, Varesco stages something quite like a version of Kauffmann's painting: from within the palace, the sea is the unseen focal point for Ilia's private agony as she expresses love (for Idamante) and mourns her father and brothers, recently perished at sea. Indeed, her entire vision of herself is founded on these hostile waves: "Miserable remnant of this cruel storm, robbed of my father and brothers [...], for what harsher fate have the gods spared [me]?"<sup>297</sup> The opera's ubiquitous storm motifs ensure that the distant seascape remains a constant presence throughout the work, intruding into the stage's changing spaces just as it discreetly encroaches on the privacy of Kauffmann's portrait of Calypso. Ilia's poignant regret at her continued presence, her sorrow at the absence of her kin, and even the evocation of the omnipotent but unseen deities are all familiar tropes from *Télémacomania*'s interpretation in the painterly arts. From the opera's opening passage, these tropes establish Varesco and Mozart's version as more than yet another re-writing of Fénelon's epic, wrapped up in the conventions of standard operatic practice. As a sung drama, *Idomeneo* is also – and insistently – a painting with a defined topography, whose subjects are captured *in medias res* engrossed in the main, overriding action of the three-dimensional canvas that is the stage. In a way, the rich visual history surrounding *Télémaque* makes it impossible not to consider the opera alongside depictions of its most striking episodes. Rather than stop at contextualizing the opera amid this cache of images, however, the last part of our museum tour will instead tackle *Idomeneo* as an integral part of this visual tradition – as a type of painting itself, in other words.

---

<sup>297</sup> "Di tempesta crudel misero avanzo, del genitor, e de' germani priva [...] a qual sorte più rea ti reserbano i Numi?" Ilia, Act 1, scene 1.

## CHAPTER 6

### *IDOMENEO'S OPERATIC CANVAS*

With *Idomeneo* thoroughly immersed in the visual world of *Télémaque* and its offshoots, the final stop in our museum considers the musical topography of Varesco and Mozart's opera in terms of the painterly culture surrounding its main spectacle, namely the natural devastation precipitating King Idomeneus's shipwreck. The "canvas" that Mozart and Varesco begin with is far from blank: along with Fénelon's original novel, Crébillon's play, and Danchet's *tragédie lyrique*, the countless paintings and engravings of Télémacomania add layer upon layer of gesso on top of which Mozart and Varesco start to create their own version of the Idomeneus story. *Idomeneo* is saddled with – or, to put it more optimistically, inspired by – a multi-coloured and multi-layered backdrop. The challenge at the centre of this chapter – to imagine *Idomeneo*, its characters, scenography, and action in terms of painting – has two aims. Its first is to determine the extent to which *Idomeneo* models itself on a visual plane as a means of negotiating its various constituent genres. A second aim is to see how the opera (as a type of animated painting) offers its own particular contribution to the proliferating visual culture attached to Télémacomania.

To this double end, our gallery undertakes two parallel manoeuvres. First, it plots the opera's linear narrative structure on a vertical axis – that is, it contracts the opera's duration in order to "envision" a large section of the work as one single scene that is fully perceptible in a single instant rather than over time. This process, to put it another way, reads *Idomeneo* as a type of ekphrasis, assembling the opera's descriptions in order to (re)constitute the Fénelonian images at its core. Second, this final corner of our gallery looks at the imagery underlying the opera alongside "real" painted reactions to Télémacomania in order to understand the ways in which *Idomeneo* borrows strategies from its visual counterparts and, at the same time, asserts its own perspective. This comparison of opera with the visual arts is more or less inescapable given the opera's literary inspiration, but reading *Idomeneo* through painting also presents certain difficulties; while the opera's dramaturgy in many ways seems to echo the techniques of Fénelon's artists, Mozart and Varesco's work also exceeds the two-dimensional confines of the texts and paintings that preceded it. The goal of establishing points of compatibility between opera and the visual arts is of course not to equate the two media or suggest that they approach the Idomeneus material in the same way. Rather, the comparison will throw into relief the ways in which opera engages with the sister arts using its multiple media (text, image, music, performance) to expand on the dimensions of its literary basis as well as its painted counterparts.

It is with the differences between opera's multi-dimensional space and painting's flat medium in mind that this chapter sets *Idomeneo* beside a painting that is as imaginary as it is real and as textual as it is visual: a shipwreck painted by French artist Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) that Diderot describes in a whimsical essay meditating on the perils of stylistic influence. Guided by Mozart's emphatic depiction of the violent sea storm that is the crux of Idomeneus's tale, this chapter builds a case for the opera's engagement with the visual arts as a means of structural renewal away from *dramma per musica*'s most entrenched habits and towards the kind of generic hybridity at the core of *Télémaque*'s unequalled popularity.

## THE COMPOSITION OF AN OPERA

Before probing *Idomeneo*'s relationship to any specific painting (real or imagined), it is worth asking in what ways this opera – perhaps more than others – is *like* a painting in the first place. To start with, *Idomeneo* is an adaptation of *Télémaque*'s striking tableau of King Idomeneus, in the wreckage of his ship, begging Neptune to spare his life in exchange for a human sacrifice. The aggressively visual lexicon of Fénelon's novel practically cries out for theatrical treatment, but to this visual inheritance, the opera contributes an unusual layout that has solicited much comment without any definitive explanations. Above all, Varesco and Mozart experiment with a type of continuity that defies the conventional structural divisions of *dramma per musica*. In place of defined recitative-aria segments punctuated by character exits, *Idomeneo* instead features open-ended sections that leave the drama's main characters onstage and amidst the action even after lengthy monologue scenes. As Daniel Hertz points out, this technique has no precedent in Mozart's *œuvre*, nor do the later operas imitate this strategy: "Not even in his subsequent operatic masterpieces did Mozart explore so many different ways of blurring the boundaries between recitative and set piece."<sup>298</sup> Julian Rushton attributes the opera's enduring popularity to this special feature, writing that "part of the abiding fascination of *Idomeneo* is the tension between conventional forms and a radical form of continuity."<sup>299</sup> Rushton's monograph hints at various explanations for the opera's fluid configuration, including the mixture of French and Italian traditions at the court of Karl Theodor (the Elector of Bavaria, who commissioned the piece), Mozart's preoccupation with dramatic verisimilitude, and the work's amalgamation of features from *tragédie lyrique* and *dramma per musica*. Rushton, however, leaves the precise effect of the opera's geographical

---

<sup>298</sup> Daniel Hertz, "Attaca subito: Lessons from the Autograph Score of *Idomeneo*," in *Festschrift Wolfgang Rehm zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Dietrich Berke and Harald Heckmann, 83-92 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989), 83.

<sup>299</sup> Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, 8.

setting, the composer's aesthetic priorities, and *Idomeneo*'s mixed genre on its overall design rather vague.

Heartz emphatically attributes the opera's more unusual features to one very particular influence, namely the Gluckian reform movement. In *Idomeneo*'s final act, Heartz claims, Mozart "threw himself most personally into the work, putting himself more than anywhere else into competition with Gluck."<sup>300</sup> Heartz demonstrates compelling similarities between Mozart's *Idomeneo* setting and Gluck's *Iphigénie* operas; even beyond the operas' shared theme of sacrifice and prominent storm scenes, Heartz cites structural and motivic features that suggest Mozart deliberately evoked parallel passages from Gluck's earlier settings.<sup>301</sup> In many respects, *Idomeneo* captures the hallmark traits of Gluckian theatrical reform, above all a recommitment to opera's French literary tradition and the cultivation of a much more continuous musical style. Rushton, too, emphasizes *Idomeneo*'s debt to Gluck's emphasis on chorus scenes, elaborate scenography, and sombre priest scenes.<sup>302</sup> In his monograph on the opera, however, Rushton, seems somewhat hesitant to frame Mozart and Varesco's opera as an explicit response to Gluck. *Idomeneo*, he argues, is "partly explained by German preoccupation with French culture, though not, except marginally, with French music."<sup>303</sup> Certainly Mozart's connection to his French cultural influences are by no means limited to Gluck's reform operas; rather, Mozart and Varesco cultivate a strikingly direct relationship to *Idomeneo*'s source texts rather than simply adopting techniques that had filtered down from an earlier generation of opera reformists. Although Heartz and Rushton agree that the opera's idiosyncrasies reflect a new, and undoubtedly Gluckian, approach to composition, neither scholar notes the way in which these unusual features strongly evoke a type of *pictorial* composition. Indeed, Varesco and Mozart seem to contrive *Idomeneo*'s action as a relatively static image rather than as an evolving progression of events. There are numerous ways they accomplish this effect:

1. Continuity of action: As Heartz and Rushton are quick to point out, *Idomeneo* frequently dispenses with *dramma per musica*'s established formula of granting its main characters a dramatic exit from stage following important recitative-aria numbers. *Idomeneo* – the titular hero of the piece – sings three such numbers over the course of the work (one recitative-aria for each of the opera's three acts), but in

---

<sup>300</sup> Heartz emphasizes the common sacrifice narrative that links the two composers. Heartz, *Mozart's Operas*, 7.

<sup>301</sup> See Heartz, *Mozart's Operas*, esp. 7-8.

<sup>302</sup> Julian Rushton, "Idomeneo, re di Creta," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online (Oxford University Press) <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/O902313>.

<sup>303</sup> Rushton, *Idomeneo*, 1.

every case he remains onstage and only departs in a subsequent scene. Without these departures to punctuate the unfolding drama, *Idomeneo*'s structure gives the impression of one single uninterrupted action rather than a staggered telling of a linear sequence of events. This setup mimics the conditions of painting, where the subject matter and main figures are immediately and permanently visible on the canvas and the action is suspended with its causes and outcomes implicit in the overall composition. Kauffman's *The Sorrow of Telemachus* (Figure 5.3), for instance, captures the moment of the nymphs' silencing, and the viewer understands from Calypso's outstretched hand that the performance that had a moment earlier been underway is now interrupted and will soon lapse into silence. Just as Kauffman's painted figures can neither enter nor exit her scene, but are caught, frozen in the midst of action, likewise *Idomeneo* largely keeps its principal characters onstage, resisting the standard practice of allowing their regular appearances and disappearances to propel the action forward. In effect, the opera rejects the advantages of its capacity to establish a narrative premise and develop it gradually and instead sets up a single main scenario that it then pursues from different angles.

2. Situation-driven plot: Idomeneo's misguided vow to Neptune and his ill-fated encounter with his son, Idamantes, remains the central action of the drama. With this main source of tension established early in the opera, the rest of the work more or less examines the scenario from multiple angles; the driving force behind the drama is mounting suspense rather than any new complexities or plot twists. Like a painting, *Idomeneo* shifts our attention across a carefully arranged scene, focusing on various characters in order to ascertain their response to this main event; this "scanning" of the scene constantly anticipates the climactic moment of Idamantes's sacrifice without actually advancing towards it in any perceptible way. Moreover, the characters remain remarkably consistent in their sentiments, and this emotional invariability contributes to the sense that the whole structure rests on an opening situation that keeps its participants preoccupied without spurring them into action. There are no big conversion scenes in *Idomeneo*: the protagonist is guilt-ridden from the outset and the dénouement is brought about by an external (and highly artificial) *deus ex machina*. As Jean Starobinski rightly explains, the opera is a drama of situation rather than of character:

There is no real conflict *among* the various characters of *Idomeneo*. They do not struggle with each other. [...] No intrigue sets them in opposition. [...] The emotions of the characters do not come from their psychological relations, but from a cosmic hostility. The whole action, developing the consequences of the vow made to Neptune, unfolds under the whims of elemental power.<sup>304</sup>

Under the capricious influence of the divinities looming just out of sight, the opera's subjects are trapped mid-action as though on an immobile canvas with the agitating forces just out of view.

3. Static ensembles: The unusually static interaction among *Idomeneo*'s characters surfaces most prominently in the opera's numerous ensembles. As Rushton points out, the inertia of these sections could not be more dissimilar to the fast-paced, action-packed finales of Mozart's comic operas.<sup>305</sup> *Idomeneo*'s famous quartet, for instance, is far less a discursive piece of theatre than a prolonged moment of introspection featuring four characters caught in the middle of private monologues. Here again, the opera highlights the extent to which it arrests its action and contemplates it indirectly from the perspective of its characters:

Idamante/Ilia: "Let the angry heavens be still."

Elettra: "When will revenge be mine?"

Idomeneo: "For pity's sake, who will end my misery?"<sup>306</sup>

The drama's central characters react emphatically to their circumstance, but these reactions neither solicit a response nor prompt any perceptible effect. Throughout *Idomeneo*, Mozart seemingly adopts the style of a painter over that of a playwright, forgoing the opportunity to develop his characters through multiple different scenarios and separate appearances and instead capturing them time and time again in the same pose, articulating the same sentiments. Dubos draws a very strong distinction between these two approaches – the playwright's, on the one hand, and the painter's, on the other – in his *Reflexions critiques*: unlike the poet, he writes, "it is not the same for the painter, who only paints each of his figures one single time and who knows to use only one trait to express passion on each of

---

<sup>304</sup> Jean Starobinski, "The Promise of *Idomeneo*," trans. Richard Pevear, *The Hudson Review* 55/1 (2002), 15-30, 29.

<sup>305</sup> Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*, 95.

<sup>306</sup> Idamante/Ilia "Serena il ciglio irato." Elettra "Quando vendetta avrò?" Idomeneo "Chi per pietà m'uccide?" Act 3, scene 3, No. 21.

the parts of the face.”<sup>307</sup> From the outset of the opera, Idomeneo’s visage expresses horror, Idamantes’s betrays his confusion, Ilia’s her pained love, and Elettra’s face is frozen in jealous rage; their eventual release from these poses only comes about when Mozart effectively changes the sightlines of the drama. As the mysterious gods suddenly appear to resolve the tension in the opera’s final act, it is as though the frame of the opera’s painting has shifted slightly to reveal a hidden panel just adjacent to the central scene of Idomeneo’s wrecked ship and his piteous reunion on shore.

4. Motivic concision: Mozart’s illustrative orchestration for the Act 1 storm scene exemplifies a broader compositional strategy across the work. The swelling string figurations that symbolise the rolling sea reoccur throughout the score, constantly fixing the audience’s attention on the elemental force precipitating the action. Varesco’s libretto likewise returns compulsively to images of the sea so that the storm is a constant force running through all the characters’ introspective meditations. “Fuor del mar ho un mar in seno,” (“Saved from the sea, I have a raging sea inside me”)<sup>308</sup> Idomeneo famously cries in Act 2. Even the plot design contributes to the compactness that governs the opera. Unlike Cigna-Santi, who invents secondary intrigues to enrich the dramatic profile of *Mitridate*, Varesco simplifies Crébillon’s and Danchet’s versions to omit all distracting sub-plots; in both these earlier iterations of the Idomeneus myth, the king is embroiled in a love triangle, but *Idomeneo* erases all traces of this storyline. The few plot intricacies that remain play only a minor function in the opera’s overall structure; Elettra’s jealous rage, for instance, emerges at regular intervals but has no impact on the evolution of the plot. Having suspended dramatic action in favour of a more fixed composition, *Idomeneo* heightens the contemplative function of its characters even beyond what is typical in *dramma per musica*, forcing them to reflect passively on an action that hinges on supernatural forces that are absent for most of the drama. Dubos capture the crux of this dynamic when he points out that on a painted canvas, the roles of actor and spectator are inextricable:

Quoique tous les spectateurs deviennent des Acteurs dans un tableau, leur action néanmoins ne doit être vive qu’à proportion de l’intérêt qu’ils prennent à l’événement dont on les rend témoins.

---

<sup>307</sup> “Il n’en est pas de même du Peintre qui ne peint qu’une fois chacun de ses personnages, & qui ne scauroit employer qu’un trait pour exprimer une passion sur chacune des parties du visage.” Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 84.

<sup>308</sup> *Idomeneo*, Act 2, scene 3, No. 12.

[Although in a painting all the spectators become Actors, nevertheless their action must be dynamic in proportion to the interest they take in the event that they are witness to.]<sup>309</sup>

Télémacomania's paintings frequently capitalize on the ambiguous double role of their *dramatis personae*. In Kauffmann's *Telemachus and the Nymphs of Calypso* (Figure 3.1), for example, Mentor looks on critically as Telemachus becomes enraptured by Calypso's nymphs. Without interceding in the scene, his expression reflects a distinct and important facet of the action. Just as painting is able to capture individual preoccupations in the expressions of its figures, likewise *Idomeneo* takes pains to afford its characters emotional complexity without undertaking to penetrate their respective spheres too deeply.

5. Descriptive recitative: In addition to *Idomeneo*'s visually-inspired composition, Varesco's verses also reference the setting of the piece with vivid detail. At several points, the opera's characters give accounts of the sea, beach, and overhanging cliffs that would presumably have been visible onstage thanks to Quaglio's designs. Idamante, for instance, offers an evocative description of the sight that greets him just before his fateful encounter with his father:

Spiagge romite, e voi scoscese rupi [...]  
Vedo fra quei avanzi  
di fracassate navi su quel lido  
sconosciuto guerrier.

[Lonely shores, and you rugged cliffs [...]  
I see amid the remains  
of shattered ships on that beach  
an unknown warrior.]<sup>310</sup>

We can just about envisage the dramatic scene through Idamante's vivid vocabulary in this recitative. Indeed, Varesco's libretto frequently undertakes this subtle kind of self-promotion by drawing attention to what were undoubtedly spectacular set designs by Quaglio. Given Mozart's penchant for cutting recitative sections to keep the drama as taut as possible, the many descriptive passages that appear throughout *Idomeneo* testify to his determination to make its visual presence palpable. Even the staging directions in the libretto are unusually explicit.

---

<sup>309</sup> Dubos, *Réflexions Critiques*, 244.

<sup>310</sup> Idamante, Act 1, scene 10.

In Act 3, for example, Varesco issues the following specifications for Idamante's impending sacrifice:

Veduta esteriore del magnifico tempio di Nettuno con vastissimo atrio che la circonda, attraverso del quale si scopre in lontano la spiaggia del mare. L'atrio e le gallerie del tempio sono ripiene d'una moltitudine di popolo, li sacerdoti preparano le cose appartenenti al sacrificio.

[Exterior view of the magnificent temple dedicated to Neptune with a vast atrium surrounding it through which we discover in the distance the shores of the sea. The atrium and the galleries of the temple are filled with a multitude of people, priests preparing things for the sacrifice.]<sup>311</sup>

Two scenes later, the characters' costumes also get described:

Idamante in veste bianca, ghirlanda di fiori in capo, circondato da guardie e da sacerdoti. Moltitudine di mesto popolo e suddetti.

[Idamante in a white robe with a wreath of flowers on his head, surrounded by guards and priests. A multitude of sorrowful people and the aforementioned.]<sup>312</sup>

Quaglio's sets, however remarkable, in no way induced Mozart and Varesco to minimize the illustrative detail of the opera's score and libretto and rely on the production's physical backdrop; on the contrary, each collaborator seems to have intensified the graphic quality of his material.

From its overall construction to its smallest details, then, *Idomeneo* commits to an aesthetic driven not by principles of conventional drama – an evenly-paced action, clear and regular structural divisions, and character development over time – but by the pictorial tendencies of Fénelon's novel. Against generic practice, the opera's spectacular settings govern a stage space containing figures caught, immovable, in a tense instant.

If Mozart and Varesco's approach to the opera is heavily inspired by the techniques of their colleagues in the visual arts, however, *Idomeneo* is also thoroughly *operatic* in the way it deploys the full scope of its multiple media in different configurations. Above all, the opera is acutely aware of the performative options at its disposal and, having established the explicitly visual parameters of its design, negotiates these parameters through a trope that is familiar from so many other iterations of *Télémacomania*: the trope of entangled presences and absences, visibilities and invisibilities, stories told and untold. From the outset of his novel, Fénelon establishes these binaries as an integral part of his narrative frame: as we have seen, the tale opens with the description of Calypso standing on the shore looking out to sea for the

---

<sup>311</sup> *Idomeneo*, Act 3, scene 7.

<sup>312</sup> *Idomeneo*, Act 3, scene 9.

lover that she last saw in Homer's epic. The opera mirrors this narrative strategy, introducing its titular character in a strikingly similar setting: Idomeneo's first appearance finds him on the shore of his isle, anxiously seeking out his as-yet-absent victim. At first glance, then, Idomeneo's first appearance in Mozart and Varesco's opera recalls the iconic scene that first establishes the topography as well as the central act of *seeing* on which Fénelon builds the mythical world of *Télémaque*. At the same time, and like a true mirror image of the novel, however, the opera reverses the direction of Fénelon's original scene; trapped on her island, Calypso's gaze stretches out to sea and into the distance at a companion who is forever gone, whereas Idomeneo instead turns his back on the turbulent sea and looks anxiously towards shore, seeking out the innocent figure whose appearance is imminent. From the outset, *Idomeneo* acknowledges the novel that is its literary inspiration but improvises its own response to *Télémaque*'s style; Idomeneo's wistful glance back to the sea is short-lived, and the shores of his kingdom soon demand his full attention.

### PORTRAIT OF A KING

Idomeneo's entrance in the opera's first act is decidedly inglorious. It also defies operatic convention in favour of an explicitly pictorial framework. Following some conventional prefatory scenes in Act 1, the king finally appears in scene 8; his arrival, however, is not marked by a triumphant march (as it is in *Mitridate*) or by an authoritative aria. Far from pronouncing edicts or parading around his territory, the king surfaces as the helpless – and mute – victim of a savage sea that finds him desperately evoking supernatural help. In Fénelon's text, Idomeneo cries out to Neptune and is granted his salvation in return for a human sacrifice. The opera, in contrast, omits all dialogue and sets the titular hero's first appearance on stage as a strange pantomime. Foregoing text in favour of a purely visual choreography, the libretto specifies that the following mini-drama be played out:

Nettuno comparisce sul mare. Fa cenno ai venti di ritirarsi alle loro spelonche. Il mare poco a poco si calma. IDOMENEO, vendendo il Dio del mare, implora la sua potenza. Nettuno riguardandolo con occhio torvo e minaccevole si tuffa nell'onde e sparisce.

Neptune appears out of the sea and signals to the winds to withdraw back to their caves. [...] Idomeneo, seeing the god of the sea, entreates his aid. Gazing at him grimly and with malevolence, Neptune plunges back into the waves and disappears.<sup>313</sup>

Astonishingly, *the* decisive interaction of the opera thus transpires not in poetic verse – or even in prose – but “silently” without any text whatsoever. Neither of Varesco and Mozart's predecessors conceived of dramatizing the myth's iconic moment in such a bold format;

---

<sup>313</sup> *Idomeneo*, Act 1, scene 8.

Crébillon's play does not include the scene at all, while in Danchet's version, the character of Protée simply speaks. It is therefore striking that Idomeneo enters Varesco and Mozart's opera as the subject of a visual tableau rather than a discursive drama. Even today, most contemporary productions seem unable to absorb this pantomime and contrive plot devices to explain the scene.<sup>314</sup>

Having established the parameters of the plot in terms of visual action, Varesco and Mozart rigorously pursue this pictorial aesthetic. Even with his power of speech restored to him a few bars after the pantomime, Idomeneo's first words bring him only short-lived comfort and compel a new type of visual preoccupation in the form of detailed description. "Ecco ci salvi al fin" ("here we are, safe at last"<sup>315</sup>) he briefly rejoices, as he washes up bedraggled and exhausted on the shores of his kingdom. In place of the familiarity and security that he had hoped would mark his homecoming, however, he discovers that he is filled with dread at the impending fate of his innocent victim and at odds with the tranquillity of the surrounding landscape:

Tranquillo è il mar, aura soave spira  
di dolce calma, e le cerulee sponde  
il biondo Dio indora, ovunque io miro,  
tutto di pace in seri riposa, e gode.  
Io sol, io sol su queste aride spiagge  
d'affanno, e da disagio estenuato  
quella calma, oh Nettuno, in me non provo,  
che al tuo regno impetrai.

[The sea is calm, a gentle breeze blows  
a sweet calm, and the azure waves  
are gilded by the blond god. Wherever I look,  
everything rests peacefully and rejoices.  
I alone, I alone on these barren beaches  
am breathless from distress and exhaustion.  
O Neptune, I do not feel that calm  
that I begged from your kingdom.]<sup>316</sup>

Having found his way back to the borders of his realm, Idomeneo finds neither peace nor safety but describes his scenery in the kind of vivid detail that would be at home in Fénelon's evocative novel. As a first introduction to the king, then, this scene is completely eccentric. Right away, the protagonist of the opera is made the subject of a kind of portrait but is set against a hostile environment. The pastoral scene is not a benign backdrop but a markedly

---

<sup>314</sup> In René Jacobs's 2013 production, for instance, the storm becomes a figment of Idomeneo's nightmares. The king writhes around in bed and wakes as though the whole event were a memory or a fantasy.

<sup>315</sup> Idomeneo, Act 1, scene 8.

<sup>316</sup> Idomeneo, Act 1, scene 9.

inhospitable setting for its occupant, whose spiritual turmoil is irreconcilable with the domain that should be his salvation and his sphere of authority. Varesco and Mozart depict the king not as the supreme sovereign looking out over the lands under his command, but as a survivor dispossessed of his kingdom, at the mercy of a hostile territory, and robbed of the authoritative speech through which to command the stage and its characters.

In spite of its title, then, *Idomeneo* hardly pays its titular king the solemn respect that might be expected of a royal (musical) portrait. Fénelon's unfortunate king drew (controversial) comparisons to Louis XIV in the years after *Télémaque*'s publication, but Varesco and Mozart's depiction of Idomeneo determinedly avoid the kind of grandiose and refined royal portrait that might evoke any specific monarch. By way of contrast, the portrait of Louis XIV by Claude Lefèbvre (c. 1632-1675) captures the monarch in a much more typical pose (see Figure 6.1). Equipped with the regalia of a warrior-king (helmet and crown both laid out in full view), Louis looks directly at his audience, his back turned confidently on the mirror calm sea and the ship (symbol of his military might) visible beyond the luxuriant interior of his palace. Lefèbvre even aligns Louis's outstretched foot to match the position of his gilded seat and its leonine legs, giving the king the magnificent and powerful air of a lion. In stark contrast, Mozart and Varesco's opera denies its protagonist these royal trappings and official posture. Completely engrossed by his moral quandary, Idomeneo does not look nobly out of the operatic "canvas" at his admirers. Instead, his attention is scattered across his surroundings, as he frantically searches for his unwitting victim. In theatrical terms, the scene erects a "fourth wall" that does not simply protect its protagonist from direct contact with the audience but also skews the sightlines of the monologue by putting the king's erratic perspective at the forefront of the opera.<sup>317</sup> If the opera's audience is anxious to meet the royal protagonist of the drama, Idomeneo's monologue captivates our attention not through eloquent self-expression but with distracted glances towards something that neither he nor the audience can yet perceive. This king does not boldly challenge the audience to meet his imposing gaze but rather asks us to follow it into the recesses of a canvas that is concealing a crucial component of the scene. As much as Louis XIV resented the comparison with Fénelon's distraught Idomeneus, Mozart and Varesco's king is unable even to compose himself for his introductory monologue but instead rushes, paranoid, into dark corners to chase after shadows.

---

<sup>317</sup> Fried famously attributes the innovation of the "fourth wall" to Diderot's visual sense of the stage, where "the primary function of the *tableau* as Diderot conceived it was [...] to neutralize [...] visuality, to wall it off from the action taking place on stage, to put it out of mind for the dramatic personae and the audience alike." Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 96.

IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT

(<http://ressources.chateauversailles.fr/Louis-XIV-roi-de-France>)

**Figure 6.1** After Claude Lefèvre, *Portrait de Louis XIV*, oil on canvas, Palace of Versailles (after 1670)<sup>318</sup>

Even after his explicit commentary on his natural surroundings – the calm sea, the barren beaches – Idomeneo continues to forefront a surprisingly oblique perspective. The very first word of the aria that follows his descriptive recitative speaks to Idomeneo’s fixation with sight: “vedrommi” (“I see”) he proclaims, forcing the audience in turn to try to “see” along with him. Having practically commanded himself to the act of seeing, however, Idomeneo’s

---

<sup>318</sup> The original portrait by Lefèvre is currently held at the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art in New Orleans.

vision is once again bizarrely intransitive, since the focus of his gaze is both imperceptible and intangible:

Vedrommi intorno  
l'ombra dolente  
che notte e giorno  
sono innocente  
m'accenerà.

[I see within me  
the sorrowful shadow,  
which night and day  
will highlight:  
“I am innocent.”]<sup>319</sup>

The sight that Idomeneo finds so distracting is internal, obscure – a figment of his imagination. In complete contrast to Lefèbvre’s portrait of Louis XIV, Idomeneo is tormented by the sight of his own soul, and – far from an agent of action – he is a passive spectator to his own plot. The introspective tone of the aria is not its most disorientating force, however; meditative arias are after all common in *dramma per musica*, and even operatic kings are susceptible to the kind of moral agonizing that is the mainstay of seventeenth-century neoclassical tragedy. Moreover, the aria’s musical texture corresponds to the *ombra* style that McClelland identifies as a topic frequently evoked alongside *tempesta* music.<sup>320</sup> The eccentricity of Idomeneo’s first recitative and aria therefore does not lie in the libretto’s imagery nor in the musical detail but rather in the way it repeatedly evokes and then frustrates the faculty of sight, and, moreover, refuses to establish a fixed point of view. The perspective at work in this portrait is constantly shifting with the unsettled gaze of its subject. By scattering Idomeneo’s attention in so many different directions – outwardly at the scene’s natural topography, inwardly at his guilty conscience, and ambiguously around for the figure yet to appear – Varesco manages to situate the act of seeing (in its broadest sense) at the centre of the opera’s action. This approach mimics Fénelon’s strategy of constructing a narrative that evokes imagery in a way that is so nearly tangible but also inaccessible to one or more of the reader’s senses.<sup>321</sup>

Mozart’s musical setting is fully complicit in this play on perspective, which repeatedly anticipates scenes, sounds, and characters without finally delivering them. The binary form of Idomeneo’s aria, for instance, offers Mozart an opportunity to use motivic

---

<sup>319</sup> Idomeneo, Act 1, scene 9.

<sup>320</sup> McClelland offers a parallel list of musical features distinguishing these two topoi. See McClelland, “*Ombra and Tempesta*,” 282.

<sup>321</sup> See my analysis of Fénelon’s striking use of visual terminology in Chapter 5. Throughout *Télémaque*, Fénelon uses evocative imagery to conjure up scenes that are forever just out of “sight” for the reader.

repetition towards an incomplete re-presentation of material from earlier in Act 1. The tranquil pastoral tone of the aria's first stanza gives way to a much more turbulent B section featuring the tremolo strings and swelling "waves" that depicted the sea storm so vividly in the previous scene (see Example 6.1). As Idomeneo elaborates on his inner turmoil on dry land, Mozart thus evokes the sea setting that is responsible for his quandary. According to the libretto, the sea is calm, and presumably Quaglio's set supported this vision of the scene. By inserting storm motifs here, Mozart thus contradicts the physical setting specified by his colleagues and reintroduces a setting that is no longer visible to the opera's characters or to the audience. This reappearance of the storm scene establishes its vivid orchestration as the main musical thread that persists over the course of the opera. Whereas motivic repetition is common across Mozart's operas as a means of achieving thematic unity, here it is part of a bold narrative strategy to controvert "unity" among the work's various components (textual, visual, aural) in favour of a much more unsettled interaction. Within the context of Idomeneo's aria, the storm motif serves to make the king's troubled memories audible – a kind of musical ekphrasis in that the orchestration tries to make "visible" what is invisible. To some degree, then, the opera is able to supply the pictorial and aural facets that lie outside the scope of Fénelon's novel. At the same time, *Idomeneo* does not simply "complete" the novel by filling in these missing components but rather champions its central aesthetic challenge: the opera's three-dimensional spaces perform precisely the kind of complex sensory play that made *Télémaque* both so appealing and so controversial.

Indeed, Mozart and Varesco together forge a virtuosic display of all the possible combinations of sensory presence/absence over the course of the opera. Idomeneo's first appearance onstage sets the blueprint for the rest of the work. His opening recitative and aria establishes a pattern of ebb and flow of what is seen, spoken, and heard – and what is left unseen, unspoken, and unheard, including:

1. Actors without speech (the pantomime between Neptune and Idomeneo)
2. Invisible characters (Idomeneo's absent victim, the deities hiding just out of sight)
3. Speech without speaker (the shadowy voice speaking "sono innocente" – see below)
4. Aural "imagery" (Mozart's orchestral "painting" of the turbulent sea in the aria's B section)

Overriding the framework and focused perspective of a conventional royal portrait, Idomeneo's first recitative and aria develops an intricate mixture of text, music, and set design that avoids segregating opera's media according to pre-determined responsibilities: the

musical score tries to “show” the plot’s scenery as readily as the choreography tries to convey dialogue (in the pantomime) and the libretto specifies visual details.

51 Allegro di molto

The musical score is for the aria "Vedrommi intorno" from Act 1, scene 9 of the opera Idomeneo. It begins at measure 51 with the tempo marking "Allegro di molto". The score is written for a voice and piano. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "rà. Qual spa-ven-to, qual do-lo-re, qual spa-ven-to, qual do-lo-re! Di tor-men-to que-sto". The piano accompaniment features a variety of textures, including arpeggiated figures, chords, and a rhythmic bass line. Dynamic markings include piano (p), forte (f), crescendo, dolce, and simile. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system covering measures 51-63.

**Example 6.1** *Idomeneo* Act 1, scene 9, Aria (No. 6) “Vedrommi intorno” bb. 51-63

The dominant effect of the opera in this scene and throughout is the complex interaction among the senses that surfaces repeatedly in Télémacomania paintings: the capacity of the

senses to overwhelm their subjects, just like Kauffmann's Telemachus, who succumbs to the intensity of the nymphs' song; the inability of the senses to fulfil the sensory desires of their subjects, like Kauffmann's downcast Calypso, whose portrait leaves her isolated, alone, and unable to catch the glimpse of Ulysses she desperately searches for; the ambition of each of the senses to re-present what is palpably absent and even to convey what lies in the domain of another sense altogether. *Idomeneo*'s strategy, in other words, is "pictorial" in that it presents one central action at its critical moment and plays on multiple senses to illuminate this action from different perspectives; the opera's quartet illustrates this most palpably, as the four central characters express contrasting reactions to their shared dilemma (Idamante's impending departure from the island on the order of his father). Likewise, *Idomeneo*'s radical continuity speaks to Varesco and Mozart's commitment to the visual energy of the novel, an energy that remains as lively and elusive as Fénelon's original thanks to the opera's three-dimensional mixture of text, music, and physical staging.

Mozart's musical setting plays a crucial role in this regard, repeatedly extending the visual geography of the physical set by invoking the narrative's natural forces. Moreover, in the spirit of its epic subject, the opera also sets out to depict the story's supernatural forces, which stretch the boundaries of the work in an altogether different way. *Idomeneo*'s "Vedrommi intorno" includes one of the eeriest examples in the opera. Left alone on stage to sing a contemplative monologue, the king's solitude is broken by a spectral voice that is not fully his own. Looking into the shadows, *Idomeneo* claims to hear a plaintive cry emanating from their depths: "sono innocente" ("I am innocent"). For this brief moment – in the middle of his soliloquy – *Idomeneo* becomes the instrument of a strange ventriloquism, articulating the words of an unseen and intangible presence. Although Varesco's libretto embeds this strange phrase in the middle of the stanza, Mozart's setting overtly sets it apart from the aria's overriding musical texture (see Example 6.2, bars 20-24). *Idomeneo* articulates the uncanny cry from the shadows in a sustained, stepwise chromatic motion that contrasts starkly with the more conventional melodic gestures that precede it. The high tessitura and sustained D, shadowed in octaves by the strings, lends the words an ethereal quality that suddenly interrupts *Idomeneo*'s earlier speech pattern. Even the punctuation of the line isolates it from the rest of the phrase; the words "sono innocente" are framed on either side by bar-long rests in the tenor part, so that the line is set apart aurally from the rest of the stanza. Moreover, by placing the phrase's resolution on the second beat of bar 24 (when it could easily resolve on the downbeat), Mozart avoids demarcating a clear metrical pulse and instead gives the phrase a strange timelessness in keeping with *Idomeneo*'s description of a voice transcending "night and day."

**Example 6.2** *Idomeneo* Act 1, scene 9, Aria (No. 6) “Vedrommi intorno” bb. 16-29

With just these two brief words – “sono innocente” – the monologue’s confines somehow accommodate an intrusive second presence complete with its own distinct accent, gloomy style, and atemporal pace. The scene’s two spheres – seen and unseen, external and internal, real and imagined – are thrown briefly into dialogue with one another, and we suddenly perceive that the two voices (Idomeneo’s own and the first-person voice from the shadows) are one and the same: Mozart’s musical texture is able to “show” us two different sides of the protagonist at once, like a type of cubism that fractures its subject in order to adopt two

perspectives that would otherwise be contradictory. It is as though the energy of Idomeneo's monologue is suddenly refracted to illuminate the darkest, least accessible corner of his conscience.

This strange moment in Idomeneo's opening scene is not the only instance of a disembodied voice penetrating the opera's narrative. Indeed, while the brief pantomime and "sono innocente" passage of Act 1 together set the opera's plot in motion, a parallel supernatural event brings the action to its resolution at the end of the drama. Wielding the sacrificial knife at the end of Act 3, Idomeneo is finally on the verge of completing his calamitous vow when a thunderous voice offers a reprieve. This time, however, the voice is thoroughly disembodied and emanates not from the king's mortal mouth but rather from an immortal spectre who sings – invisible – from off stage (see Example 6.3). Varesco's libretto describes it thus: "a deep and serious voice pronounces the following judgment of the heavens."<sup>322</sup> What seems like a straightforward direction in Varesco's brief annotation proved to be an arduous task for Mozart, who struggled to integrate the scene without sacrificing verisimilitude and as a result repeatedly re-wrote the passage to be more concise.<sup>323</sup> Writing to his father from Munich, Mozart documents a somewhat tortured process:

Sagen sie mir, finden Sie nicht, daß die Rede von der unterirdischen Stimme zu lang ist? Ueberlegen Sie es recht. – Stellen Sie sich das Theater vor, die Stimme muss schreckbar seyn – sie muss eindringen – man muss glauben, es sey wirklich so – wie kann sie das bewirken, wenn die Rede zu lang ist, durch welche Länge die Zuhörer immer mehr von dessen Nichtigkeit überzeugt werden? – Wäre im Hamlet die Rede des Geistes nicht so lang, sie würde noch von besserer Wirkung seyn. – Diese Rede hier ist auch ganz leicht abzukürzen, sie gewinnt mehr dadurch, als sie verliert.

[Tell me, do you not find that the speech of the unearthly voice is too long? Think about it. – Imagine yourself at the theatre; the voice must be terrifying. – it must penetrate. One must believe it really exists. How can it do that if the speech is too long, and with its length increasingly convinces the listeners of its artificiality? – If the ghost's speech in Hamlet were not so long, it would be even more effective. – The speech here is also very easy to shorten and it gains more from brevity than it loses.<sup>324</sup>

Two months later, Mozart was still rewriting the passage: "The oracle's speech is also still much too long – I have shortened it," adding anxiously that "Varesco need know nothing about this because everything will be printed as he wrote it."<sup>325</sup> Even with the length

<sup>322</sup> "Una voce profonda e grave pronunzia la seguente sentenza del cielo." *Idomeneo*, Act 3, scene 10.

<sup>323</sup> Excerpt 6.3 is one of three extant versions; the two other renditions include the original, much lengthier scene and an even shorter edition. Mozart did not, it seems, experiment with different musical settings but rather agonized over the ideal length, and so the vocal line and orchestral style are the same across each version of the passage.

<sup>324</sup> Mozart to Leopold, 29 November 1780.

<sup>325</sup> "Der *orackel* spruch ist auch noch viel zu lange – ich habe es abgekürzt - der *varesco* braucht von diesem allem nichts zu wissen, den gedruckt wird alles wie er es geschrieben." Wolfgang to Leopold, 18 January 1781.

finalized, the instrumentation – featuring three trombones that had not been budgeted for in the production – became the subject of dispute. The composer’s dogged perseverance eventually paid off and the finished passage echoes the eeriness of the “sono innocente” line from earlier in the opera with its simple melodic style, and the new orchestration contributes to this effect. The voice’s narrow range and oddly sustained rhythms lend it an unearthly resonance, while the pacing of the whole section creates a sense of untimeliness that matches the dramatic climax of the scene as the mortal world is abruptly shaken by divine intervention. Mozart applies every available technique to heighten the sense that “la voce” (“the Voice”) violently disrupts the fabric of the narrative, altering its course away from the hotly anticipated sacrifice: the melody unfolds in irregular phrase patterns and an ambiguous meter (each time the voice enters, it does so on a different beat of the bar). Likewise, the fragments of speech are offset by rests that frame each pronouncement, giving the whole scene a formality that suits the epic momentum of the opera’s dénouement. The vocal style, orchestral texture, and pacing of the scene are thus strikingly similar to Idomeneo’s brief encounter with the supernatural in “Vedrommi intorno.” In a sense, these two unseen voices – Idomeneo’s tormented soul and the enigmatic figure of Neptune – are inextricably linked and direct the whole opera, instigating the action in Act 1 and finally bringing about its resolution in Act 3. Idomeneo’s eccentric portrait, in other words, spans the entire duration of the opera, and the intervening scenes simply fill out the details of the picture.

Adagio

Clarinetto I, II in Si/B  
Fagotto I, II  
Corno I, II in D/F  
LA VOCE

A I - do - me - ne - o per - do - na il gran tra - scor-so il

9

ciel... ma non al re, lo si - a I - da - man - te... ed I - li - a a lui sia

**Example 6.3** *Idomeneo* Act 3, scene 10, “La Voce” version 28b, bb. 1-17

In anticipation of the disembodied voice's second appearance in the opera's final scenes, Idomeneo's introductory aria "Vedrommi intorno" ends abruptly and inconclusively. Or rather, it does not conclude at all but simply dissolves into the next scene (see Example 6.4). Although Mozart brings about harmonic resolution by reintroducing the tonic key (C major) at the end of the aria, there is neither a thematic recapitulation nor a compellingly conclusive cadence to signal the end of Idomeneo's monologue (and, if Mozart had followed conventional practice, his exit from the stage). Indeed, with the return of the storm motif in the orchestration, it is as though the king winds up back where he started at the outset of the scene – looking around in desperation: "Cieli! Che veggo?" ("Heavens! What do I see?") he cries, as the figure of Idamante emerges, interrupting his monologue and recalling the aria's very first word ("vedrommi").

The musical score for Idomeneo Act 1, scene 9, Aria (No. 6) "Vedrommi intorno" (bb. 108-113) is presented in a standard musical notation format. The score includes a vocal line for Idomeneo, a piano accompaniment, and a basso continuo line. The vocal line begins with a crescendo and a forte (f) dynamic, followed by a piano (p) section. The piano accompaniment also features a crescendo and a forte (f) dynamic. The basso continuo line is marked "Tutti Bassi" and "crescendo". The score ends with a recitativo section marked "Recitativo" and "Cie-li! che veg-go?".

**Example 6.4** *Idomeneo* Act 1, scene 9, Aria (No. 6) "Vedrommi intorno" bb. 108-113

The monologue over, Idomeneo is still present onstage and his gaze is still directed sideways rather than out at his audience. The scene cannot have a decisive resolution because the tension it explores is geographical rather than interpersonal: it is for this reason that Idomeneo is unable to exit, and his presence heightens the pictorial rather than theatrical quality of the opera. It is not any direct conflict with another character that is responsible for his quandary.

Rather it is an inhospitable setting, the result of an ill-advised vow with a deity who is only ever partially present in the opera. More than refusing their protagonist a regal portrait, Mozart and Varesco insert him into a canvas that is as much a landscape as a character study. The main space of this landscape, moreover, is the liminal space separating shore from sea, mortal from divine, tragic from epic. The musical seascape that constantly infringes on the action and the unearthly voices that interrupt the dramatic dialogue testify to the contested arena on which *Idomeneo* erects its tragic-epic style.

Both the novel and the opera thus capture their character poised on a geographical perimeter between sea and shore, in this way establishing the crux of a narrative that pits these two dangerous and unstable territories against one another. For Fénelon's protagonist, there is no sanctuary to be found on Calypso's island; away from the perilous waves responsible for Telemachus's shipwreck (and for his father's long absence in the first place), the nymph's island poses a new and more insidious threat – a hedonism that threatens to divert the young prince away from his duty. Likewise, Idomeneo escapes his watery grave only to face a worse fate on shore as a father forced to commit infanticide. The double threat of water and land that surrounds both the novel's and the opera's main characters is also significant for its symbolic value on a generic level. As Calypso looks out to the empty horizon – out towards the main setting of Homer's *Odyssey* – is it as though Fénelon, too, looks backwards to his predecessor and recognizes not only the roots of his project but also the narrative boundary that he has crossed; like Calypso stranded on her island, so too does Fénelon separate himself definitively from the genre of classical epic with his transgressive prose style. And if, as in the novel, Calypso's piece of land promises some respite from being adrift in the vast sea, it also represents a perilous and uncertain type of isolation for Fénelon the author, one that might easily induce chaos over its mixture of literary styles. If anything Mozart and Varesco escalate this policy, merging multiple operatic genres and reconfiguring even the basic foundations of *dramma per musica*.

## **A DIVIDED EPIC SEASCAPE**

The uncertainty attached to the risk *Idomeneo* takes with the conventions of *dramma per musica* is captured symbolically in the raging sea that permeates its dramatic structure. Where Mozart and Varesco take their general inspiration from the visual techniques of Télémacomania's painters in order to develop a radically post-neoclassical type of tragedy, it was a specific painted seascape that prompted Diderot – one of the century's most eminent theatrical theorists – to write a witty and somewhat baffling essay contemplating the

temptations and the dangers of abandoning a habitual literary style.<sup>326</sup> The essay, titled *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* (*Regrets for my Old Dressing Gown*), has an ambiguous literary context and an even more obscure message but resonates strongly with the aesthetic challenge *Idomeneo* sets itself. Like the opera, Diderot explores the ongoing move to modernize literary aesthetics and anchors his experiment in a vivid description of a shipwreck. Also like *Idomeneo*, which sets out to “paint” a scenario through music and to showcase opera as an alternative to neoclassical spoken theatre, Diderot’s essay tries to capture an image without recourse to the medium of painting itself; it is a project of ekphrasis as much as a treatise on the adaptive capacity of literature. When we set Diderot’s essay – and the Vernet canvas it describes – alongside the opera, it becomes evident that the Enlightenment arts and their practitioners recruited all the media at their disposal to revitalize older, entrenched styles and to question the limits of this process of renewal.

Intertwining literary theory and artistic commentary, Diderot’s quixotic essay was probably written as an introduction to his *Salon de 1769*, a lengthy review of the exhibition put on by the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* in that year.<sup>327</sup> For whatever reason, Diderot’s *Regrets* was finally published as an independent essay in 1772 rather than as an integral part of the *Salon de 1769* and since then has attracted widespread interest but little consensus regarding its enigmatic meaning. The premise of the essay is an amusing anecdote: Grimm (who commissioned Diderot’s *Salon* reviews) allegedly found Diderot one day dressed in a new resplendent robe and rhapsodizing about a painting that he had recently acquired (a shipwreck scene by Vernet, see Figure 6.2). Taken aback by this uncharacteristic display of lavishness, Grimm apparently admonished his colleague against the dangers of an opulent lifestyle. According to the account, Diderot offered a mocking response to this “dressing down” by his old friend and colleague in the form of the *Regrets*.<sup>328</sup> Whether or not

---

<sup>326</sup> Denis Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre ou avis à ceux qui ont plus de gout que de fortune*, ed. Friedrich Dominicus Ring (Publisher unknown, 1772). Much has been written on the subject of Diderot and art, also in relation to his theory of theatre. Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality* remains the seminal monograph on this topic. It is not my purpose here to cover Diderot’s writings on art or on theatre in comprehensive detail but rather to draw on one specific text as an analogy for the aesthetic challenge *Idomeneo* sets itself. Likewise, Worvill has discussed the extent to which Diderot’s notion of dramatic tableau is rooted in the “pictorial aesthetic” of Fénelon’s novel. In some ways, Diderot’s solution to theatrical reform shares many of the strategies exemplified by *Idomeneo*, namely a blending of genres and an attention to visual impact over theatrical plot twists. However, a more sustained comparison of *dramma per musica* and Diderot’s *drame bourgeois* lies beyond the scope of my discussion here.

<sup>327</sup> Diderot wrote a whole series of these reviews, beginning in 1759 when Grimm first commissioned him to review the exhibition, which was already a long-established event.

<sup>328</sup> Perhaps due to the popular appeal of Diderot’s essay, identifying reliable versions of the text is fraught with complications. The version I cite throughout is the first edition published in 1772. Although many sources claim that the essay was first published in the 15 February 1769 issue of Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire*, a circular that he distributed to a limited but distinguished

this light-hearted altercation actually took place, the essay strikes a spontaneous, first-person tone that addresses Grimm directly, tendering a humorous assessment of the intrusive effect of luxury on the humble – but comfortable – life of a philosopher.

At first, Diderot seems to take Grimm's critique to heart as he announces in the essay's title his intent to spin his regret into a parable: "Regrets on my Old Dressing Gown, or Warning to those who have more Taste than Fortune." The text begins with a lyrical lament for the worn dressing gown that he foolishly replaced with a resplendent new robe: "Why did I not keep it? It was made for me; I was made for it," he bemoans in the essay's opening sentence.<sup>329</sup> In the endearing narrative that follows, Diderot purports to describe the fit of vanity that found him deracinated from his familiar surroundings, robbed of his identity, and nearly driven to madness. His confession documents the calamitous consequences of his seemingly innocuous decision to exchange his old dressing gown for something more ostentatious. Having discarded the carefree comfort of his old-fashioned robe, Diderot finds that the modest contents of his studio clash with the finery of the cloth. He thus gradually replaces each of his well-worn possessions with fashionable substitutes: in place of his simple desk, a decorative bureau; a leather chair instead of his customary straw seat; a large mirror suddenly takes up the empty space on his mantelpiece; he strips the "few smoky prints without frames" from the walls of his study and installs new artwork in their place,<sup>330</sup> including the Vernet shipwreck. Having completed his inventory of new furnishings and divulged the full extent of his vanity, Diderot arrives at the "regret" promised in his title. "And thus," he despairs in the climactic turning point of his miniature drama, "the edifying retreat of the philosopher was transformed into the scandalous chambers of a publican."<sup>331</sup> The confessional tone of his essay suddenly turns into an ardent prayer as he jostles himself back to a more rational (less materialist) state of mind:

**Non**, mon Ami, non je ne suis point corrompu. [...] Mon ame ne s'est point endurcie, ma tête ne s'est point relevée. [...] priez pour un ami en peril, dites à dieu: si tu vois

---

readership, I can find no trace of Diderot's essay in this issue (or in any other). The oft-cited anecdote about Grimm's visit to Diderot is translated as an integral part of the essay by Kate Tunstall and Katie Scott, who are unclear about their sources. See Denis Diderot, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown" trans. Kate Tunstall and Katie Scott, *Oxford Art Journal* 39/2 (2016): 175-184.

<sup>329</sup> "Pourquoi ne l'avoir pas gardée? Elle était faite à moi; j'étais fait à elle." Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre*, 7.

<sup>330</sup> "Quelques estampes enfumées, sans bordure." Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 12.

<sup>331</sup> A publican in this context refers to a corrupt tax official. "Et ce fut ainsi, que le réduit édifiant du philosophe se transforma dans le cabinet scandaleux du publicain." Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 20.

**IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT**

**Figure 6.2** Claude Joseph Vernet, *Storm*, oil on canvas, Private collection (1768)

dans tes décrets éternels, que la richesse corrompe le coeur de Denis, n'épargne pas les chefs d'oeuvres, qu'il idolâtre, détruis les & ramene le à sa première pauvreté! Et moi je dirai au ciel de mon côté: o dieu! [...] je t'abandonne tout, reprends tout – **oui!**

[**No**, my friend, no I am not corrupted. [...] My soul is not hardened, my head is not so lofty. [...] pray for a friend in peril and say to God: if You see in Your eternal decrees that wealth corrupts the heart of Denis, do not spare the masterpieces that he idolizes; destroy them and return him to his original poverty! And I, for my part, will say to the heavens: o God! [...] I abandon it all to you, take it all back – **yes!**]<sup>332</sup>

Emphasizing the wholeheartedness of his reversal with the change from the fervent “non” to the exclamatory “oui!” that frame his avowal, Diderot has his readers firmly convinced of his remorse. The philosopher seems to have capitulated to Grimm’s wisdom.

Suddenly, however, Diderot’s profusely contrite tone abruptly evaporates as he remembers the second precious item that provoked Grimm’s stern warning. Having vowed to surrender his life of luxury and begged God for clemency, Diderot adds a surprising caveat: “I abandon it all to you, take it all back – yes! Everything except the Vernet. Oh! Leave me the Vernet; it is not the artist but you yourself [God] who has painted it.”<sup>333</sup> With this about-turn, Diderot’s contrition and his parable dissolve into a rapturous description of the Vernet canvas. Eager as he is to exorcize the countless other vestiges of luxury – an elaborate gold clock, damask tapestries, antique bronzes – the philosopher cannot bring himself to renounce the painting and proceeds to describe it in the most vivid detail, in effect making his readers complicit in his enjoyment of the painting and guilty of the same vanity that he claims to regret so bitterly. The quandary of a writer dispossessed of his comfortable environment and struggling against temptation thus evolves into an eccentric obsession with a painting that, on the face of it, compounds Diderot’s problem by indulging his vanity. Eventually, the essay ends with ardent praise of the artist’s genius and a self-satisfied resolution from Diderot, who seems to have forgotten his dressing gowns and pleads to be left alone with Vernet, insisting that it poses no threat to his rediscovered commitment to Taste over Fortune.

With Diderot’s bizarre confession acting as a kind of caesura at the essay’s mid-point, a dichotomy emerges between the two halves of his tale: on the one hand, the new dressing gown that represents the corruptive influence of opulence; on the other hand, the Vernet painting that somehow functions as its remedy. Although both objects are introduced to the reader as items of “Fortune” that invade Diderot’s comfortable routine, the narrative plots two very different trajectories – where the dressing gown ends in rueful regret, the Vernet triggers a staunch defence from the philosopher. Faced with this split perspective, Diderot’s reader is

---

<sup>332</sup> My emphasis. Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 22-23.

<sup>333</sup> “Je t’abandonne tout, reprends tout – oui! tout excepté le Vernet. Ah! laisse moi le Vernet; ce n’est pas l’artiste, c’est toi [Dieu] qui l’a fait.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 23.

left beguiled by his lyrical exhortation, curious about the Vernet painting that is the centrepiece of the text, and thoroughly perplexed by the message underlying a story that is all the more elusive for its charm and intimacy. If Diderot refuses to provide direct answers or to clarify the didactic message underlying the story, the vivid imagery and vocabulary of his essay at least make it possible to parse his argument and propose some specific interpretations. Rather than offering a straightforward parable on the virtues of Taste over the temptations of Fortune, Diderot develops this opposition into a subtler aesthetic argument that hinges on two different types of Fortune. His precious possessions come to represent two sides of the conundrum that *Idomeneo* also has to negotiate between the stringencies of decorative discourse, on the one hand, and the freedom of something more improvisatory, on the other. In order to unravel this conundrum and decipher Vernet's role in its resolution, it is useful to analyse the symbolic value of the two objects at the centre of Diderot's essay.

#### **DECORATIVE LUXURY: DIDEROT'S DRESSING GOWN**

In some ways, the protagonist of Diderot's tale is his imperious new dressing gown, which battles with the fond memory of his old robe and gradually commands his study, eventually interfering with the literary success over which the worn robe presided. The first half of the *Regrets* establishes a clear distinction between these two garments – worn and new – and assigns each a specific set of values, an aesthetic effect, and even a political ideology (see Table 6.1). It is clear enough from Diderot's tale which gown and which professional, aesthetic, and political spheres he regrets discarding. The polarity is starkly drawn between what is habitual, natural, harmonious, and free on the one hand and what is foreign, artificial, discordant, and oppressive on the other hand. Even clearer is the vehemence with which Diderot renounces his new finery and everything associated with it: he comes to resent its tyrannical elegance and yearns to resume the work that, under its influence, has been organized, filed, and shut away out of sight. Diderot's good "Fortune," in other words, ends up robbing him of his profession. In spite of this lesson in humility, the reader is nevertheless left wondering exactly how to interpret Diderot's analogy. The political-aesthetic vocabulary on which he builds two such contrasting settings points to an argument beyond the simply cautionary tale he purports to offer.

The essay's ambiguous publication history is somewhat helpful here. As Moore documents, the *Regrets* was symbolically appropriated by the adherents of "prose poetry" when it was included in the 1804 issue of the *Almanach des Prosateurs*. In this context, the incursion of Diderot's beautiful scarlet dressing gown on his modest life symbolizes a very particular threat: the decorative allure of "les anciens," with their elevated discourse and

decorative “world of corrupting artifice,” which endangers the simpler “world of liberating prose.”<sup>334</sup> As Moore observes, Diderot establishes a firm distinction between the organic, natural materials of his original surroundings (his straw chair, wooden table, a simple wooden plank as a shelf) and the overly-crafted, ornamented objects of luxury (a leather chair, a fine bureau, and an inlaid armoire) that displace them. Diderot even replaces his plaster casts, given to him by Falconet (the eighteenth-century sculptor), with a bronze Venus, and this above all encapsulates the contest between the “Moderns” and the “Ancients:” “the modern clay broken by antique bronze,”<sup>335</sup> as he puts it. In Moore’s reading, the “old” dressing gown stands for the modern simplicity of Diderot’s customary literary practice, while the scarlet gown has all the trappings of something luxurious and valuable but in fact represents a “stodgy” and old-fashioned world that threatens to stultify Diderot’s modest life – the life of a “modern” *philosophe*. Diderot thus flirts with the idea that neoclassical poetry forces a stilted style, an oppressive technique, and an absolutist ideology on the cultural productions of an era trying to foster an aesthetic rooted in a natural style, a flexible technique, and a politics of freedom. The resplendent robe is a symbol for an art tied to an extravagant and degenerative court culture in contrast to the down-to-earth and modest labour of the solitary, liberated writer in his threadbare gown.

In many ways, Diderot’s politicization of this aesthetic debate prefigures the argumentative strategies of much more contemporary historiographies of eighteenth-century tragedy. This is precisely the narrative that opera scholarship has often adopted in order to cast *dramma per musica* as an elaborate, abstract, out-dated mode that impinges on the flexible “style” of Enlightenment aesthetics. The political critique that Diderot hurls at the exorbitance of the “Ancients” is also – even principally – a professional critique. Under the influence of the new dressing gown, the author’s papers and books get catalogued and carefully shut away behind the doors of an expensive armoire. As a result, Diderot loses his *métier* and becomes an anonymous and silent figure – not unlike the pathetic Idomeneo, who is unrecognizable even to his own son on the shores of his own kingdom. The *Regrets* thus loudly denounces a literary praxis in which the author is more interested in securing his literary legacy and founding a collection in his own honour than freely articulating and circulating ideas cultivated in a space that is poor but entirely sovereign. The active *littérateur* is chaotic – perpetually in the midst of his craft, which is always underway and always incomplete.

---

<sup>334</sup> Moore, “Almanach des Muses vs. Almanach des Prosateurs,” 28.

<sup>335</sup> “L’argile moderne brisée par le bronze antique.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 16.

	Worn Dressing Gown	Ornate Dressing Gown
<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Taste</b> (also, “les modernes”)	<b>Fortune</b> (also, “les anciens”)
<b>Effect</b>	<b>Harmonious:</b> blended in with his surroundings with “the most harmonious indigence.” <sup>673</sup>	<b>Discordant:</b> “Everything is discordant. There is no more togetherness, not more unity, no more beauty.” <sup>674</sup>
<b>Fit</b>	<b>Natural:</b> “It molded to all the folds of my body without hindering it; I was picturesque and handsome.” <sup>675</sup>	<b>Artificial:</b> Far from admiring his new appearance, Diderot bemoans the fabric that is “stiff, starched and mannequins” him. <sup>676</sup>
<b>Political arena</b>	<b>Sovereignty:</b> In his old surroundings and threadbare robe, Diderot was the sovereign of his domain (“I was the absolute master of my old robe” and “the barrel in which I ruled”). He professes to miss the poverty that guaranteed him the “free and firm life of the ragged cynic.” <sup>677</sup>	<b>Oppression:</b> Wearing his new garb, Diderot describes himself as “a slave” who is “ruled by a tyrant.” <sup>679</sup> Having ceded the familiarity of his old domain, he finds himself oppressed and weakened by his new “soft, crawling, effeminate life.” <sup>680</sup> The “imperious scarlet [has] made everything in unison with it.” <sup>681</sup>

<sup>673</sup> “L’indigence la plus harmonieuse.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 8.

<sup>674</sup> “Tout est désaccordé, plus d’ensemble, plus d’unité, plus de beauté.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 12.

<sup>675</sup> “Elle moulait tous les plis de mon corps sans le gêner; j’étois pittoresque & beau.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 7.

<sup>676</sup> “L’autre, roide, empesée, me mamuquine [sic].” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 7.

<sup>677</sup> “J’étais le maître absolu de ma vieille robe de chambre” et “le tonneau où je régnois.” “La vie libre & ferme du cynique déguenillé.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 9, 11.

<b>Literary Praxis</b>	<p><b>Poverty:</b> “Poverty has its freedoms.”<sup>678</sup></p>	<p><b>Opulence:</b> The robe brings upon its wearer “the ravages of luxury” until Diderot complains that “opulence has its obstacles.”<sup>682</sup></p>
	<p>The wear and tear on Diderot’s old gown bears witness to his identity as <i>littérateur</i>: “One could see the services it had rendered me traced in long black lines. These long lines marked the <i>littérateur</i>, the writer, the working man.”<sup>683</sup></p> <p>In the busy writer’s studio, his papers are strewn, half-completed, across his wooden table: “a multitude of pamphlets and papers piled up pell-mell.”<sup>684</sup></p>	<p>Wrapped in his pristine new gown, Diderot becomes <b>anonymous</b> and a stranger to himself: “I now have the air of a rich slacker. No one knows who I am.”<sup>685</sup></p> <p>Diderot’s books and papers also fall victim to this new regime: “Homer, Virgil, Horace, and Cicero relieved the weak fir bending under their weight and have been closed in an inlaid armoire.” “Despite my laziness, the pamphlets and papers put themselves away in a precious bureau.”<sup>686</sup> Categorized and filed away, the materials of Diderot’s literary praxis get retired.</p>

**Table 6.1** Diderot’s contrasting aesthetic worlds in *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* (1772)

<sup>679</sup> “Je suis devenu l’esclave de la nouvelle [robe]” pour “servir sous un tyran.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 9, 11.

<sup>680</sup> “[La] vie molle, rampante, effeminée.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 11.

<sup>681</sup> “L’impérieuse écarlate [a] tout mis à son unisson.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 15.

<sup>678</sup> “La pauvreté a ses franchises.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 10.

<sup>682</sup> “Les ravages du luxe,” “l’opulence a sa gene.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 11, 10.

<sup>683</sup> “On y voyait tracés en longues raies noires les fréquens services, qu’elle m’avoit rendus; ces longues raies annonçoient le Littérateur, l’Ecrivain, l’homme qui travaille.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 8.

<sup>684</sup> “Une foule de brochures & de papiers entassés pêle-mêle.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 17.

<sup>685</sup> “J’ai l’air d’un riche fainéant, on ne sait qui je suis.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 8.

<sup>686</sup> “Homère, Virgile, Horace, Cicéron soulager le foible sapin courbé sous leur masse & se renfermer dans un armoire marqueté.” “En dépit de ma paresse, les brochures & les papiers allèrent se ranger dans les serres d’un bureau précieux.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 16, 17.

By contrast, the man of leisure is tidy but anonymous and taskless – his papers are neatly documented and filed away for display rather than ready for use. Forget literary lineages and preserving convention, Diderot seems to command – what matters is aesthetic experimentation and innovation, which is unruly and irreverent but all the more worthwhile. Adorning oneself in the beautiful but impractical artefacts of yesteryear is a dangerous luxury, and one that is fundamentally incompatible with the active, living literary practice of the Enlightenment philosophe.

Much as this neat bifurcation might have convinced Grimm of his friend's incorruptibility, for Diderot, the opposition between Taste and Fortune, natural expression and atavistic artifice leaves him at an impasse. Having discovered that his old literary habit (in both senses of the term) was so susceptible to the pernicious influence of vanity, the philosopher is at pains to reinvent a praxis for himself that is more resilient. De la Motte's revisionist campaign faced a similar dilemma: denouncing a long tradition of poetic extravagance is easy enough – the difficulty is reconfiguring generic boundaries to establish an alternative discourse capable of resisting the influence of that tradition. Grimm's lesson of the value of Taste over Fortune thus by no means provides Diderot with the means through which to recapture his identity and to rehabilitate his career. With his papers still shut away behind glass, Diderot almost has no choice but to transpose the debate to the field of the visual arts, and so the second part of his *Regrets* turns to Vernet. By approaching the problem through painting, Diderot reassesses the clash between the seventeenth-century's ornamental aesthetic and the Enlightenment's supposedly simplified style and this time, he discovers a visual-theatrical mandate that resolves his aesthetic impasse and reignites his literary practice. Of course, Diderot's strategy to turn to the visual arts mirrors *dramma per musica*'s reformist impulse, which likewise rooted itself in a cooperative exchange among the arts.

#### **VERNET'S FINAL WORD: LYRICAL PAINTING**

If Vernet's canvas was partly responsible for Grimm's friendly chastisement, Diderot adamantly excludes it from the first, "regretful," section of his essay. Indeed, his unexpected passion for the tempest scene occupies a significant portion of his narrative energy, and his enthusiasm emerges as a kind of antidote to the bitterness induced by his luxurious robe. Like his dressing gown, Vernet's storm also makes an impact on Diderot's décor, replacing a Poussin print that was hanging on the philosopher's wall. Unlike his scornful disgust for the gown that enslaved him and destroyed his home, however, Diderot's vivid description of the painting reads like an ardent profession of love. With aggressively imperative verbs, he enjoins his readers to "see" every detail of the scene that he invokes in words:

**Vois** ce phare, **vois** cette tour adjacente, qui s'élèvent à droite; **vois** ce vieil arbre, que les vents ont déchiré. Que cette masse est belle! au dessous de cette masse obscure **vois** ces rochers couverts de verdure; [...] **vois** la terreur, que tu as inspiré à cette femme [...]! **Vois** cette autre mere, fraîchement échappée des eaux avec son époux; ce n'est pour elle qu'elle a tremblé, c'est pour son enfant; **vois** comme elle le serre contre son sein; **vois** comme elle le baise.

[**See** this lighthouse, **see** this adjacent tower, which stand to the right; **see** this old tree that the winds have torn. How beautiful that part is! and above this dark part **see** the rocks covered in greenery; [...] **see** the terror you have inspired in this women [...]! **See** this other mother, recently escaped from the waters with her spouse; it is not on her own behalf that she shakes, it is for her child; **see** how she presses it to her breast; **see** how she kisses it.]<sup>687</sup>

Diderot's literary conceit echoes not only the style of Fénelon's *Télémaque* but also the operatic adaptations that followed it; most obviously, *Idomeneo* practices a strikingly similar effect through Mozart's compositional efforts to render the raging sea "visible" through orchestral sound. Like Fénelon's novel, Diderot's prose is so descriptive that it invites his readers to try to identify an actual canvas matching his graphic description.

Vernet painted so many tempest scenes so that it is hard to be sure which one Diderot might be referring to in his essay.<sup>688</sup> At least half a dozen paintings are near-matches for the description Diderot gives, but the most compelling candidate is the one suggested by Kate Tunstall and Katie Scott in their translated edition of the *Regrets* (Figure 6.2).<sup>689</sup> With its ragged figures, outdoor setting, and preoccupation with the natural ferocity of a sea storm, this painting strongly invokes *Télémaque* and its later adaptations. Indeed, the scene would not be out of place on the stage of *Idomeneo*. At the centre of the canvas (and at the heart of the opera), the liminal space between a perilous sea and an inhospitable shore becomes the setting for a drama that is both tragic (in its human turmoil) and epic (in its scale and magnitude). Moreover, just as *Idomeneo*'s peculiar construction in many ways attempts a type of revisionist tragic theatre that departs from earlier spoken and operatic models, likewise Diderot extolls those aspects of Vernet's style that deviate from other, more conventional types of painting that he cites in the essay.<sup>690</sup> The artist that Diderot proposes as the antithesis to Vernet is especially noteworthy in that it thrusts his whole argument into an explicitly theatrical sphere: the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), whose

<sup>687</sup> My emphasis. Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 25-27.

<sup>688</sup> Whether or not Diderot actually owned the canvas he describes is uncertain. Some editions of his *Regrets* claim that he paid Vernet a sum for the canvas. For more on this question, see Jane B. McLelland, "Changing his Image: Diderot, Vernet and the Old Dressing Gown" *Diderot Studies* 33 (1988): 129-141.

<sup>689</sup> Diderot, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown," trans. Tunstall and Scott, 182.

<sup>690</sup> In the mid eighteenth century, moreover, neoclassicism in painting was not a simply staid throwback to the seventeenth century but a movement that was alive and well in the works of Vernet's direct contemporaries.

classically-inspired canvases are often described as “theatrical” for their dramatic composition and lighting, becomes the symbol for the stringent artistic conventions that Vernet rejects in favour of a more flexible – and, the philosopher implies, more “modern” – style. In short, Vernet brings a “modern” interpretation to an ancient topos.

Poussin’s *Esther devant Assuérus* gets special mention in Diderot’s *Regrets*, which is doubly significant: first, because the composition of the painting adheres to principles of symmetry and proportion, *chiaroscuro*, and subject matter that became tenets of the neoclassical movement in the visual arts (of which Kauffmann’s *Telemachus* paintings are celebrated examples); second, because just as Vernet’s *Storm* bears an uncanny resemblance to *Idomeneo*’s central shipwreck scene, Poussin’s painting could easily depict a scene from a play by Racine, who in fact wrote a tragedy entitled *Esther* in 1689. The juxtaposition Diderot sets up between Vernet and his seventeenth-century predecessor, in other words, encapsulates the fraught transition from Racinian tragedy to *dramma per musica*, from neoclassical doctrine to Télémacomania’s more fluid vision of theatre. To emphasize the aesthetic break between Poussin and Vernet, Diderot claims specifically to have on his wall not Poussin’s original vivid oil painting but rather a monochromatic print copy of *Esther* (see Figure 6.3). Poussin’s presence in the eighteenth century, Diderot makes clear, is shadowy, ghostly even – the afterlife of an art that has survived beyond its time. In stark contrast, Diderot clings to Vernet’s brightly-coloured masterpiece as a precious gift from the artist himself: “I want to keep this testament of his friendship.”<sup>691</sup> Relinquish your pale imitations of a by-gone era, Diderot seems to command his readers: cherish this new generation of art that is upon us. From the perspective of tragic theatre, Diderot’s confidence in Vernet amounts to a declaration in favour of the radical techniques of the revisionist movement, above all its recalibration of the classical unities.

Compared to Poussin’s painting, Vernet’s whole composition trades classical subject matter, rules of symmetry, composition, and dramatic framework for many of the same effects that *Idomeneo* puts into practice. I shall deal with each in turn.

In terms of subject matter, neoclassicism’s preoccupation with lofty figures of historical or mythological significance is conspicuously absent from Vernet’s scene, which is populated by anonymous ragged survivors. The shipwreck is not set in classical times but rather depicts a timeless scenario with figures that could be of any nation, of any standing, and of any era. Poussin’s *Esther*, in contrast, displays the carefully crafted faces of biblical nobility set in the austere architecture of a classical palace. Esther swoons dramatically while

---

<sup>691</sup> “Je veux garder ce temoignage de son amitié.” Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 29.

**IMAGE UNDER COPYRIGHT**

**([http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1664964&partId=1&searchText=esther+devant&object=20898&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1664964&partId=1&searchText=esther+devant&object=20898&page=1))**

**Figure 6.3** François de Poilly after Nicolas Poussin, *Esther devant Assuérus*, engraving, British Museum (after 1655)<sup>692</sup>

---

<sup>692</sup> Poussin's original painting was completed in 1655 and is the mirror image of Poilly's print. I am indebted to Kate Tunstall and Katie Scott's multi-media translation of Diderot's text for drawing my attention to this print version of Poussin's painting. Diderot, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown," trans. Tunstall and Scott, 175-184.

Assuérus presides over the scene from his authoritative throne: both figures are mute, but we imagine them uttering the elevated Alexandrine lines of Racine's noblest heroes. Vernet's subjects are unheroic, bent over, their faces hidden or contorted in distress; Poussin's are rendered with regal precision. The shipwreck victims are anonymous, classless, and innumerable compared to the famous, named figures in *Esther*. Of course, *Idomeneo* borrows its mythological setting directly from Fénelon and largely adheres to tragic convention in its depiction of royal personages. At the same time, however, Varesco and Mozart take considerable pains to insert these archetypal figures into atypical and even wretched contexts. There is little sense that *Idomeneo* restricts itself to the narrow range of elevated discourse that Racine and his contemporaries credited as the foundation of theatrical verisimilitude. Instead, the opera – like Vernet's painting – to some extent mixes dramatic registers by introducing King Idomeneus as a nameless body washed up on some shore.

Although symmetry, a foundational principle of neoclassicism, is not easily abolished, Vernet's *Storm* reinterprets its function in several ways. Poussin's scene is very much constructed architecturally; the columns in the background, the solid marble dais, and the angular pattern of the tiled floor make for a heavy composition dominated by rigid geometry. The stone that makes up every surface of the interior setting feels cold and staid. Vernet's composition is far from haphazard, but its proportions are much less manufactured as he sets out to capture an atmosphere of chaos in the distribution of his figures across the shoreline. Varesco and Mozart play with a similar type of asymmetry by refusing the conventional layout of characters that exit cleanly to make way for a new group of singers. Their depiction of *Idomeneo* has more in common with Varesco's frantic and scruffy sailors than the elegant, poised figures in Poussin's painting. In fact, the opera shares with Vernet's painting a willingness to shatter the clean separation of foreground and background that is so evident in Poussin's style. Nature in *Idomeneo* – and in Vernet – is a wild, agitating participant in the action rather than a passive backdrop. In Poussin, the palatial architecture has an unyielding permanence that provides a static context for the figures that occupy it. To Vernet, in contrast, the natural force of the waves, winds, and sky constitute the main feature of the painting, and his human subjects are rendered at the mercy of the elements. Mozart and Varesco also defy this clear delineation between setting and character, stressing aspects of the landscape through detailed descriptions (in the opera's recitatives, the libretto's stage directions, and the orchestra's repeated evocations of the stormy sea). For Diderot, this kind of aggressive interaction between the human and the environmental makes for a compelling aesthetic:

Si vous voyiez le bel **ensemble** de ce morceau, comme tout y est **harmonieux**; comme les effets s'y enchainent, [...] comme les figures sont disposés, **vraies**, agissantes, **naturelles**, **vivantes**. [...] la **vérité** de ces eaux; ces nuées, ce ciel, cet horizon!

[If you could see the beautiful **unity** of this painting and how everything in it is **harmonious**; how all the effects follow one another seamlessly, [...] how the figures are arranged, **lifelike**, mobile, **natural**, **lively**. [...] how **real** the waters; the clouds, the sky, the horizon!]<sup>693</sup>

Vernet achieves verisimilitude, Diderot seems to argue, because his figures are not carefully arranged in geometrical patterns and because every aspect of the painting – its background, its foreground, its characters, and its setting – actively contributes to one main dramatic action.

As for composition, Vernet's dispersed figures immediately announce the artist's commitment to construct his painting around the natural topography of the scene. The canvas is divided into sea and shore, with the rocky cliffs towering upwards on the right-hand side and the stormy waves stretching out into the distance on the left horizon. Poussin, in contrast, relies on the palace's columns and marble flooring to provide a framework within which the two main figures are carefully arranged to create a V-shape fulcrum in the middle of the canvas, while a small group of onlookers cluster together improbably on one side. Esther's and Assuérus's artificial postures are so carefully constructed that they seem frozen like monumental statues. Even in its print version, the *chiaroscuro* effect of Poussin's original painting is palpable: the faces of the main characters are lit dramatically from directly above, exactly as though they were actors on the stage of a tragic play. Vernet's painting also plays with lighting effects, but the light source is conspicuously the sun breaking through the storm clouds. Poussin's artificial lighting serves to concentrate the scene's dramatic energy on the fainting figure of Esther; Assuérus and his retinue look on with some concern but there is a certain unity of expression across the painting's few characters. In contrast, as Diderot eagerly describes, Vernet grants each of his figures a unique response to the terrifying circumstances; the impact of the drama is therefore scattered across the canvas and reflects on each of its characters independently. This strategy is rather like the way Varesco and Mozart approach the unity of action in *Idomeneo* by shifting perspective to focus on different individual characters' reactions rather than developing the plot line gradually over time.

Turning finally to dramatic framework, the power of Vernet's *Storm* partly relies on its ambiguous parameters; the landscape itself stretches out into the distance, and we see a faint glow in the furthest left side of the sea's horizon, as though the sun were breaking through the darkest clouds. On top of the expansive topography, which everywhere stretches out and upwards to give the impression of monumental natural forces, the postures of Vernet's figures also evoke a supernatural element beyond what is depicted on the canvas. A woman stands with her arms outstretched, gazing upwards as though imploring a deity to

---

<sup>693</sup> My emphasis. Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 30-31.

intercede on her behalf, while a dishevelled man kneels in concentrated prayer. *Idomeneo* uses similar techniques to stretch its dramaturgical boundaries, invoking deities who half-appear at several points and constantly insisting on the island's harsh surroundings. Again, Vernet's whole scene feels desperately precarious, as though the next moment may bring either salvation or chaos. By way of contrast, Poussin's style is much more self-contained; there are no unseen supernatural authorities lurking out of Esther's sight, only the imposing authority of the king ruling before her. Poussin's painting strongly evokes a unity of place that is enclosed and almost suffocating, whereas both Vernet's *Storm* and *Idomeneo* explode with the ferocity of the outdoors and, by extension, of the unconventional. It is almost as though the castle Vernet sequesters in the distant right corner of his painting symbolizes the stuffy palace that is the main stage for Poussin's *Esther*. As Tunstall and Scott put it, "Diderot here implies that Vernet is to Poussin" as "colour, imagination, and modernity" are to the fussy artifice of the "ancients."<sup>694</sup> Again, Vernet shows how the "ancient" can be "modern."

Over the course of the *Regrets*, then, Poussin's and Vernet's paintings come to represent opposing aesthetic strategies. *Esther*'s dramatic impact is constructed methodically through symmetry, linear perspective, and a defined biblical subject matter; the *Storm*, in contrast, displaces the rules of classical proportion, emphasizes a scattered perspective, and refuses to stipulate the context of its scene, which could be mythological, biblical, historical, or contemporary. But Diderot does more than just re-discover in the visual arts the same deadlock between an old aesthetic regime and the Enlightenment's new ideological framework. Vernet's influence, Diderot finds, is thoroughly constructive and conducive to a thriving literary practice; if the dressing gown represents the destructive opulence of "les Anciens," the painting represents the constructive luxury of thinking beyond the conventions and beyond the confines of a strictly textual metier. Vernet's *Storm*, which initially appears as an item of vanity in the philosophe's world, thus ends up convincing him that Fortune can actually lay the foundation for a new kind of Taste, one that looks sideways towards other artists and other media rather than inwards. Vernet, Diderot concludes, represents the luxury of a comparative aesthetic that offers an art for a new generation:

Que cet artiste a d'esprit! [...] comme tout est peint avec legereté, facilité & vigueur! [...] je veux que mon gendre le transmette à ses enfans, ses enfans aux leurs & ceux-ci aux enfans, qui naitront d'eux.

[What spirit this artist has! [...] look how everything is painted with such delicacy, facility, and vigour! [...] I want my son-in-law to give it to his children, and for his children to give it to theirs, and they to their own children.]<sup>695</sup>

<sup>694</sup> Diderot, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown," trans. Tunstall and Scott, ft. 183, ft. 27.

<sup>695</sup> Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 29.

Diderot's own "spirited" style in the *Regrets* makes it clear, however, that the luxury of progress is by no means held in reserve for the future but rather represents a mandate for his immediate use. Indeed, the essay already puts into practice the lessons of Vernet's visual dramaturgy, and even without addressing tragic theatre or opera directly, Diderot indirectly makes a strong case for *dramma per musica*'s role in the Enlightenment's new aesthetic spirit. The mixed genre, inclusive poetics, and lyrical style on display in the *Regrets* acts as a kind of template for a theory of eighteenth-century "style" that, unlike Rosen's definition, admits the struggle between old and new as an integral part of its artistic practice. These three tenets of Diderot's essay – generic blending, flexible poetics, and certain lyrical intimacy – are unmistakably the same principles that *Idomeneo* discovers for itself in the wake of Télémacomania.

That Diderot makes recourse to a lyrical and descriptive account of Vernet's shipwreck in response to an irreconcilable aesthetic opposition is particularly significant in the context of *Idomeneo*, the "poème lyrique" that stages a strikingly similar scene in answer to the unresolved, ongoing debates in the literary arts. Indeed, through the example of Vernet, Diderot advocates for a practical aesthetic "modernism" that shatters the paralyzing effect of the "Ancients" and, moreover, that by no means contradicts *dramma per musica*'s vision of tragic theatre. Quite the opposite: the basis of the modern Taste that Diderot develops actually prioritizes the multi-media principles and revisionist momentum that opera was uniquely able to practice. Within the context of the *Regrets*, the vivid descriptions of Vernet's painting testify to Diderot's newly-flourishing literary project, but equally, the philosopher's switch to a multi-media mode of discourse serves as an analogy for *dramma per musica*'s practical antidote to the prose vs. poetry, "Ancients vs. Moderns" stalemate.

### VERNET'S THREE USES

First, Diderot's interest in painting – or to be more precise, in writing about painting – is both strategic and practical. In terms of his argumentative strategy, evoking the stylistic controversy of Taste and Fortune in the area of the visual arts serves numerous purposes in the *Regrets*: it establishes a comparative framework for his aesthetic vision; it insists on the universal nature of the "Ancients vs. Moderns" question as one that transcends artistic disciplines; and it establishes his own credentials as the heir to a long tradition of French literary-artistic debate; it recruits a powerful ally for his cause by positing Vernet as a successful fellow "modernist." The most obvious manifestation of this "modernism" is the essay's genre, which – like *Idomeneo* – builds on numerous different aesthetic modes without

belonging to any one in particular. The essay is simultaneously a parable, an epistolary text addressed to Grimm, a piece of art criticism, a diary-like meditation, and an ekphrastic text; likewise the opera blends features of traditional neoclassical theatre, Fénelon's epic novel, *tragédie lyrique*, and *dramma per musica*. Diderot's commitment to mixing textual genres and engaging with the visual arts represents an answer to a long-standing argument between the influence of neoclassicism and the Enlightenment's new priorities, and by extension *Idomeneo*'s bold composition and visual effects are not simply a self-contained oddity within a stagnant genre but a tailored response to a discussion that transects all the arts. The "modern" mandate Diderot endorses thus entails a specific practice, one that he undertakes in his essay through the lengthy description of Vernet; the *littérateur*'s craft, just like *dramma per musica*, is only progressive insofar as it marries itself with the sister arts. After all, Vernet's painting – that is, its *esprit*, its *vérité*, its *harmonie* – only exists in Diderot's essay insofar as he renders it *in words*. By putting his evocative prose style towards a strikingly *visual* cause, Diderot indirectly champions prose poetry and its mandate to synthesize the textual, pictorial, and musical arts. Stretching and even over-extending the limits of his literary medium, Diderot imagines a text capable of *painting*. This ambition is not, of course, rooted in a belief in the superiority of painting to the written word but rather speaks to the confidence the philosopher places in the combined power of the senses. As Worvill puts it, "with Diderot the comparison between the stage [...] and the art of painting is not being made at the level of how the words of a play might work in relation to the eye of the mind, but at the level of the combined effect of all the artistic means available to the playwright and the appeal these make to the physical eye."<sup>696</sup> From the perspective of Diderot's essay, what appears initially to be a literary argument disguised as a sartorial conundrum actually extends much further to encompass all the arts, including painting and theatre.

Second, eliding the boundary between prose and poetry and between the visual and the textual, Diderot thus lays claim to the same "modern" aesthetic that the *Encyclopédie* is founded on: a visual poetics and a broadly inclusive notion of "la Poésie." The Aristotelian parameters of poetics defined by Boileau's *Art poétique*, itself a didactic poem written in Alexandrine verse, are firmly replaced by the multi-media poetics inspired by Fénelon's *Télémaque*, a didactic novel whose prose tries hard to appeal to all the senses. In keeping with the *Encyclopédie*'s strategy of setting textual explanation alongside illustrative plates, Diderot's *Regrets* functions in much the same way, offering its readers a lesson in Enlightenment aesthetics by blurring the conventional distinctions between genres and styles. Diderot's rapturous account of Vernet's technique and his claim that the *Storm* is a creation of

---

<sup>696</sup> Worvill, "From Prose *peinture* to Dramatic *tableau*," 152.

God Himself calls to mind Jaucourt's assertion (stolen from Dubos) that at the root of a successful "poetics of style" is a "divine fire" ("un feu divin").<sup>697</sup> The "poetics" in question for Diderot are not exclusive to painting but touch all the arts; if his essay has a moral in the end, it is surely that literary praxis is at its best when practiced flexibly, freely, and in the closest proximity to painting and to theatre – including opera. Reciprocally, by shunning neoclassical doctrine and looking to the sister arts for inspiration, works like *Idomeneo* also put into action a broadly inclusive poetics that refuses to define tragedy exclusively in reference to the narrowest interpretation of Aristotelian principles. Quite against Rosen's claim that *dramma per musica* remained bound to seventeenth-century neoclassical "construction" at the cost of an Enlightenment "style," the culture of Télémacomania in fact yielded prominent exemplars for an operatic poetics in line with the "style" described by Jaucourt and demonstrated by Diderot. Indeed, the dramatic impact Diderot admires in Vernet inspires him to synthesize text and image towards a fluid artistic practice that rejects binaries like construction/style, poet/artisan, ancient/modern, poetry/prose. In this sense, the *Regrets* depicts in words what Paillasson's plate for the *Encyclopédie*'s "L'Art d'écrire" (Figure 2.1) accomplishes visually: a type of self-portrait that aims to inform, to give pleasure, and to promote writing as a practice spanning all the "poetic" arts.

Third, what finally synthesizes all these stylistic strands in the *Regrets* is Diderot's intimate style, or as Moore puts it, the "lyrical mode" that bridges supposedly antagonistic genres (poetry and prose, or "ancient" and "modern").<sup>698</sup> To begin with, Diderot elects to stage the "Ancients" vs. "Moderns" debate in his private study, with his treasured possessions as props and his own *métier* as a testing ground for aesthetic experimentation. Indeed, his disarming narrative style relies on a whole series of techniques from the lyric: apostrophic addresses ("O holy prophet!" and "O, God!"<sup>699</sup>); an indirect style of narration that addresses itself to the reader via Grimm, who acts as Diderot's silent interlocutor; its "succession of imperatives and exclamations;"<sup>700</sup> the timelessness of a story that frames itself as a parable for unspecified future generations.<sup>701</sup> As much as Diderot prioritizes this type of lyricism as a mechanism for synthesizing visual and textual modes of expression, however, he is apparently reluctant to scrutinize music as directly as the visual arts (at least in this particular essay). In this sense, while the *Regrets* in many ways echoes the poetic inclusivity of the *Encyclopédie*, the essay also shares the dictionary's weakness, namely the marginalization of the musical

<sup>697</sup> Jaucourt, "Poésie du style," 15:554. Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 271.

<sup>698</sup> Moore, "Almanach des Muses vs. Almanach des Prosateurs," 28.

<sup>699</sup> "Ah! saint prophète," "O dieu!" Diderot, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe*, 22, 27.

<sup>700</sup> Moore, "Almanach des Muses vs. Almanach des Prosateurs," 28.

<sup>701</sup> For more on the lyric and its features, see Jonathan Culler, "The Language of Lyric," *Thinking Verse* 4/1 (2014): 160-76.

arts as an equally prominent voice in the project. This accounts for opera's somewhat belated participation (towards the end of the Enlightenment) in *Télémacomania's* aesthetic innovations. But it certainly does not substantiate the claim that *dramma per musica* was incompatible with the movement to revitalize theatrical convention. Diderot's *Regrets* indirectly contemplates exactly the aesthetic challenge that the musical arts – especially tragic opera – confront in the period after Fénelon's controversial novel. Caught between the oppressive collection of gilded antique objects and the liberating life of the modern man of letters, Diderot finds himself occupying the same perilously uncertain aesthetic that *dramma per musica* also had to negotiate as it tried to shake off the weight of its ornate, stilted conventions in favour of a more flexible model for tragic theatre. Thanks to its three-dimensional forum and its willingness to engage all the arts simultaneously, *dramma per musica* consummated Diderot's "modern," multi-media gesture in a way that the philosopher himself was unable to attain within his own textual medium.

It is therefore possible to read the *Regrets* not simply as a parodic tale or even an exclusively literary argument but as a summary – a history, an endorsement even – of the emergence of the Enlightenment's unique brand of aesthetics as practiced by its librettists and composers: the synthetic approach to literary, artistic, and musical spheres that *dramma per musica* increasingly made its specialty. "Ancient" ornament and "modern" simplicity aside, Diderot insistently clings to Vernet as though to make permanent the gesture the painting represents – a lateral gesture that reaches across to parallel genres and media as an alternative to the solipsistic paradigm of an art battling its own history in futile perpetuity. The *littérateur* on his own can aspire to fend off Fortune in favour of Taste, but with the help of his painter colleague, he might make a virtue of both. Analogously, as Mozart's early tragic operas can attest, when the genre of *dramma per musica* is conceived alongside literature and painting, it becomes a compelling response to the prospect of tragic theatre after neoclassical poetry. Diderot and his operatic colleagues respond to their shared predicament through a common source – Fénelon's *Télémaque* – and a common adventure – fusing genres, mixing styles, and refusing to specialize too narrowly. If the Enlightenment's operatic response to *Télémacomania* seems to risk the coherence and the immutability of neoclassical convention for a far less secure and more ambiguous aesthetic, this is certainly the strategy Diderot adopts and also the one Fénelon recommends through his long-suffering protagonist. Caught in a near-fatal storm, the character Telemachus at one point faces his impending doom with resignation until his ever-optimistic teacher offers him a glimmer of hope:

L'eau entre de tous côtez; le navire s'enfonce, tous nos rameurs poussent de lamentables cris vers le Ciel. J'embrasse Mentor, & je lui dis: Voici la mort, il faut la

recevoir avec courage. [...] Mourons, Mentor, mourons. C'est une consolation pour moi de mourir avec vous, il seroit inutile de disputer notre vie contre la tempête.

Mentor me répondit: le vrai courage trouve toujours quelque ressource. Ce n'est pas assez d'être prêt à recevoir tranquillement la mort, il faut sans la craindre faire tous les efforts pour la repousser. [...]

Aussitôt il prend une hache, il acheve de couper le mât qui étoit déjà rompu, & qui panchant dans la mer, avoit mis le vaisseau sur le côté; il jette le mat hors du vaisseau, & s'élance dessus au milieu des ondes furieuses; il m'appelle par mon nom, & m'encourage pour le suivre. Tel qu'un grand arbre que tous les vents conjurent attaquent, & qui demeure immobile sur les profondes racines [...] de même Mentor non-seulement ferme & courageux, mais doux & tranquille, sembloit commander aux vents & à la mer. Je le suis. Et qui auroit pû ne le pas suivre encouragé par lui?

[The water then rushed in on all sides and the vessel foundered; while the rowers invoked the gods in most lamentable cries, I [Telemachus] embraced Mentor, saying "Here is death: let us meet it with courage. [...] Let us die, Mentor, let us die. It is a comfort to me that I shall die with you; it would be in vain to attempt to save our lives in such a tempest."

Mentor replied: "True courage always finds some resource. We ought not only to be ready to meet death, when unavoidable, with intrepidity, but likewise to use our utmost efforts to escape it. [...]"

He seized a hatchet, and cut away the mast, which being already broken, and hanging down into the sea, had laid the ship on her side; then pushing it into the sea, he sprang upon it; got amidst the raging waves; thence calling me by name, and encouraging me to follow him. As a huge tree assaulted by the united winds stands firm and steady, [...] thus did Mentor, not only firm and courageous, but gentle and tranquil, seem to command both the winds and waves. I followed him; and who would not have done it, encouraged as I was by him?<sup>702</sup>

Ever ready to meet death with dignity, Telemachus nearly gives his story a premature end. His fate, however, is not to suffer the trite death of countless tragic protagonists but instead to risk surviving in a more expansive, more epic world. Fortunately, Fénelon's Enlightenment colleagues also accepted his invitation to gamble the fate of tragic theatre, electing to follow a novel that threatened pandemonium but also promised a valuable kind of "mania." After all, "qui auroit pû ne le pas suivre encouragé par lui?"

---

<sup>702</sup> Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, 116. Translated in Fénelon, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, 76-77.



## CONCLUSION

L'Auteur: Mon livre vous a-t-il ennuyé?

Le Journaliste: Je voudrais savoir dans quelle classe il doit être rangé. Serez-vous content qu'il ait une existence amphibie? On n'en parlera point, faute de savoir comment il se désigne.

A.: Je serai content s'il rencontre un certain nombre de lecteurs tels que vous, qui s'y intéressent assez pour s'inquiéter du titre qu'il doit recevoir.

J.: Je ne suis point la dupe de tous ces faux-fuyans. Avouez que vous avez voulu faire un poème en prose.

A.: Je vous assure que je ne me suis rien proposé, & que j'ai laissé suivre à mon esprit telle pente qu'il lui plaisoit.

[The Writer: Did my book bore you?

The Journalist: I would like to know what category to put it in. Are you happy for it to have an amphibious existence? Not knowing how to classify it, nobody will ever talk about it.

W.: I will be happy if a few readers like you come across it and are interested enough to worry about what label it should be given.

J.: I am not fooled by all these prevarications. Admit that you intended to write a poem in prose.

W.: I assure you that I set myself no particular task, and that I let myself follow my spirit down whatever path it pleased.]<sup>366</sup>

Written in 1775, some forty years after de la Motte's much-publicized campaign to rethink the parameters of poetry, Bitaubé's humorous dialogue shows that even towards the end of the century, the Enlightenment's *littérateurs* still found themselves reluctant to own up to the mandate of prose poetry and bewildered by the chaos it fostered. As though eager to fit the book into one of Jaucourt's many articles for the *Encyclopédie*, Bitaubé's Journalist demands to know under what genre to categorize the text; his Writer companion repeatedly disappoints him, refusing even to confirm whether or not he conceived of his book as a piece of prose poetry. It is bad publicity, the Journalist insists, to write something that is unclassifiable, but the Writer does nothing to ease his colleague's anxiety and instead offers a vague protestation in defence of his free literary "spirit." "Ok, you were inspired," the

---

<sup>366</sup> The dialogue does not make any specific references that would suggest which author might be represented here. However, the Writer's ambivalence about labeling his novel a "prose poem" does evoke Fénelon, who, in his letters to de la Motte, confessed his dismay at the factions that were wrangling over *Télémaque* and did not himself label the work a "prose poem." Bitaubé, "Dialogue entre l'auteur et un journaliste," 1-2.

Journalist agrees, “but we literary types are not satisfied [...]; we want to give a work a label [...]. In spite of you, people will say that your book is a prose poem.”<sup>367</sup>

Bitaubé’s fictional dialogue bears a striking resemblance to the real correspondence between Fénelon – the writer who was ever hesitant to stand definitively either for or against prose poetry – and de la Motte, the colleague determined to conscript his book towards literary reform. From this perspective, Bitaubé gives what could almost be a reception history of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*, which in spite of its author’s misgivings, achieved notoriety (and subsequent fame) because “literary types” like de la Motte aggressively claimed the work as a prose poem. As Bitaubé was no doubt well aware, however, the case of *Télémacomania* also proved a resounding exception to the Journalist’s grim prediction for the failure of a book conceived outside the boundaries of conventional literary categories; *Télémaque*’s ambiguous genre most emphatically did not consign it to oblivion but instead enticed several generations of writers, artists, and musicians to wrestle with its legacy. The insistence with which Bitaubé’s Journalist demands generic clarity also foreshadows the rigid categorization that even recently has plagued commentary on *Télémacomania*-inspired artworks, most especially *dramma per musica*, which has been described in monolithic terms as a “failed” genre even in the face of operas that actively reshaped the features of neoclassical tragedy by contradicting generic conventions. As much as Rosen’s claims on behalf of “eighteenth-century tragedy” seem vague and overly general, his argument in fact relies on a narrow and linear view of *dramma per musica* that is at odds with the messy, argumentative, changeable series of debates and experiments that make up the Enlightenment’s own approach to the tragic in its numerous forms.

It is clear from the confused and often contradictory accounts of prose poetry within Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* that no single dictionary entry could easily address the aesthetic questions Fénelon’s novel raised, but it is precisely the book’s aptitude for surviving across very different environments and half-fitting into numerous stylistic and generic categories that guaranteed its widespread influence. Thanks to its life in between verse/prose and ancient/modern, Fénelon’s pedagogical text penetrated the Enlightenment’s most important aesthetic discussions, frustrating more than a handful of literary theorists along the way but certainly not “boring” its eighteenth-century audiences. *Télémaque* is indeed thoroughly “amphibious” and boldly occupies two worlds that would represent completely incompatible styles to a less “inspired” writer. If Fénelon found himself regretting the polarized factions that each clung to his text as a kind of exemplar for the “ancient” and

---

<sup>367</sup> “Vous avez été inspiré. Mais en littérature on ne se contente pas [...]; on veut donner un titre à un ouvrage [...]. Malgré vous, on dira que votre livre est un poème en prose.” Bitaubé, “Dialogue entre l’auteur et un journaliste,” 2.

the “modern” styles, this was also the “amphibious” existence that guaranteed *Télémaque* a captive audience not only among “literary types” but across the Enlightenment arts and into the domain of opera. The ambition of Bitaubé’s Writer to interest a few readers “enough to worry” about his book does not nearly describe the success of Fénelon’s controversial novel, which in many ways “worried” his followers into innovating not only literary forms but also pictorial aesthetics and theatrical genres – including opera.

For Rosen, the notion of operatic tragedy’s supposed “failure” hinges on its supposed indifference to – or at least incompatibility with – the eighteenth century’s political and aesthetic shifts. The Télémacomania phenomenon rebuffs this assertion on several grounds. Most obviously, the sheer scope of *Télémaque*’s influence ensured that its controversial politics and radically mixed style would preoccupy each of the Enlightenment arts at some point over the course of the century. Mozart’s *drammi per musica* from the decade 1770-1780 exemplify a theatrical tradition that was not content to propagate from a distance the canonical plays of an outdated tradition but that actively sought out revisionist techniques from contemporaries. By broadly recontextualizing opera amid the literary and artistic debates inspired by Fénelon’s groundbreaking novel, we might reconceive tragic opera’s apparently regressive features as the constructive grounds for a much more “modern” experiment. After all, the Télémacomania movement’s profound interdisciplinarity and its radical reconfiguring of generic boundaries paradoxically hinged on its evocation of antiquated tropes and established generic categories, including tragedy and epic; *dramma per musica* was thus an ideal genre through which to incorporate new aesthetic strategies geared toward reforming neoclassical theatre. If operatic tragedy in some ways struggled against eighteenth-century political and aesthetic principles, this contest between the “ancient” and “modern” actually typified the Enlightenment’s cultural practice. In this way, *dramma per musica*’s seventeenth-century ties are not so much evidence of its redundancy and anachronistic principles as of its willingness to straddle two contrasting aesthetics in a quintessentially Enlightened vein. If *dramma per musica* after Télémacomania embodies the tension between the “ancient” preoccupation with what Rosen calls “construction” and the “modern” commitment to the “poetic style” epitomized and defined by the *Encyclopédie*, this is above all evidence of its full participation in one of the century’s most pivotal debates. In an odd way, then, Rosen’s indictment of eighteenth-century tragic opera is thus correct: as the heir to neoclassicism’s rigid tenets, *dramma per musica* does indeed rub up against the Enlightenment’s sense of its own progress. But it is this very friction that ensured that the genre would become a point of convergence for a revisionist movement that spanned most of the century. The prominent tensions between antiquated poetics and Enlightenment “Poésie” that preoccupy operatic

tragedy thus call into question the clear separation Rosen implies between “Baroque” and “Classical,” “construction” and “style.” The revisionist mandate of *dramma per musica* is precisely to put these oppositions to a more constructive – and less nihilistic – end; in Diderot’s terms, opera’s ambition is to benefit from both Fortune and Taste and to invent a genre that is able to confront its own anachronisms without capitulating to its absolutist origins.

The purpose of this thesis has not, therefore, been to refute the “untimeliness” of *dramma per musica* in the Enlightenment but rather to interpret this feature as a crucial and productive part of the Enlightenment’s aesthetic project to reformulate conventions and stretch generic categories. For Rosen, the downfall of tragic opera lies in its solipsistic framework and its inability to “break out of its localization in historical time.”<sup>368</sup> As he sees it, the genre that succeeded “on its own terms”<sup>369</sup> and in its own time – the age of absolutism – was fundamentally incompatible with the Enlightenment’s new, republican disposition. Where Rosen’s narrow account of *dramma per musica* pits its outdated construction against the genre’s immediate aesthetic context in yet another iteration of the polarization between “ancient” and “modern,” it is equally possible – and far more in line with the Enlightenment’s own terms – to conceive of opera’s neoclassical roots as the very mechanism for its contribution to the Enlightenment’s broader aesthetic aims. If, as Rumph also claims, *dramma per musica* “enshrined the values of absolutist court culture, in which rhetorical mastery represented political authority, rational control, and aristocratic prestige,”<sup>370</sup> it was by no means content to perpetuate this heritage, by no means alone in its struggle against moribund conventions, and by no means indifferent to the strategies pioneered by the literary and visual arts. The political dichotomy implicit in Rumph’s characterization of *dramma per musica* thus denies the genre’s broader aesthetic role in helping to unravel precisely those kinds of partisan disputes that repeatedly preoccupied the Enlightenment’s aesthetic theoreticians.

The charge of reactionism that continues to pursue tragic opera in the eighteenth century thus takes for granted numerous myths that contradict eighteenth-century operatic practice on several counts.

First, Rosen’s account of tragedy in the eighteenth century hinges on a myth of incompatibility, namely that neoclassicism’s brand of Aristotelian theatre is fundamentally inconsistent with the Enlightenment’s aesthetic priorities. The stylistic friction that Rosen presents as evidence of *dramma per musica*’s “failure” is a more widespread phenomenon than he suggests, and one that in no way hampered the evolution or the enormous popularity

---

<sup>368</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 167.

<sup>369</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 167.

<sup>370</sup> Rumph, *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics*, 142.

of the genre. By reinstating opera's deep connections to the Enlightenment's literary and artistic contexts and by insisting on the broad reach of the debate surrounding neoclassical convention, I aim not to reclaim *dramma per musica* for either the "ancient" or the "modern" cause but rather to demonstrate the interdisciplinary reverberations of a genre that was firmly invested in probing this long-standing aesthetic debate alongside the other "poetic" arts. The struggle to reconcile old and new was not an invention of the Enlightenment or even a consequence of its political shifts, but rather represents a long tradition that extends back to the "Querelle des Anciens et Modernes" in the seventeenth century and earlier. To cast *dramma per musica* as an awkward remnant of a defunct era is to contradict both the genre's longevity and the persistence of the aesthetic questions surrounding the style of tragedy. Tragedy's "failure" in the eighteenth century is really a failure of contemporary historiography to reconcile itself to a genre willing to engage with the inconsistencies and internal contradictions of contemporaneous thought – inconsistencies and contradictions that defy our exaggerated sense of the Enlightenment's systematic impulse to order and classify.

The direct association of *dramma per musica* with its absolutist roots thus presumes that the relationship between the genre's Enlightenment practitioners and their seventeenth-century predecessors remained an easy one of influence and imitation. *Dramma per musica* was by no means unique in its fraught negotiations with a defined political heritage and a set of dominant aesthetic principles, and thus operatic practice in the eighteenth century dispels a second misconception: the myth of exceptionalism. The struggle of tragedy (both spoken and operatic) with its own conventions was its most marked feature after (and for that matter even before) Fénelon's *Télémaque*. De la Motte and Voltaire's heated exchange on the issue of tragedy's future categorically demonstrates the extent to which *dramma per musica* inherited its quandary directly from the world of spoken theatre. Likewise in the *Regrets*, Diderot's appeal to the contrast between Poussin and Vernet emphasizes that the same debate took place in the visual arts, and more than once. His essay also makes reference to the notorious seventeenth-century argument that pitted the "Poussinistes" against the "Rubénistes."<sup>371</sup> This half-century long dispute was very much the visual arts' version of the "Ancients vs. Moderns" debate that preoccupied French tragedians of the same period (c. 1670-1720), and the figureheads for the two factions were Poussin, who was known for his mastery of visual "dessin" ("line," or "drawing"), and Rubens, famous for his skill with "couleur" ("colour"). At issue was whether classical form or "modern" colour was more immediately derived from nature – or, to put it in the terms of the "Querelle des Anciens et Modernes" that was raging

---

<sup>371</sup> Diderot mentions numerous artists in the *Regrets* and at one point refers to parallel scenes by Poussin and by Rubens. See *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre*, 15.

among France's literary theorists at the same time, whether prioritizing "dessin" or "couleur" better guaranteed aesthetic verisimilitude. Opera was thus certainly not the only genre trying to redefine its basic principles and fending off the ghost of stilted conventions over the course of the Enlightenment period, nor were these debates confined to the eighteenth century; they in fact had numerous precursors across the literary, visual, and musical arts.

The scope and cyclicity of these debates thus also call into question the myth of isolation that has pursued *dramma per musica* in opera historiography. Just as opera shared its aesthetic challenge with the literary and visual arts, its composers and librettists were eager to incorporate techniques from the sister arts rather than depend on conventional principles developed by playwrights in another era. Cigna-Santi and Mozart's *Mitridate*, for instance, not only cultivates an unusually close relationship to its Racinian material but also integrates specific aspects of the literary debates that pursued the source play into the 1730s. Likewise, *Idomeneo*'s eccentric construction and layout is heavily influenced by the visual culture exemplified and inspired by Fénelon's novel as well as by its *tragédie lyrique* predecessor. From multiple directions – literary, visual, and musical – *dramma per musica* far exceeds the scholarly narrative of isolation that presents Enlightenment tragic opera as disengaged from its immediate aesthetic context; its composers and librettists actively reinterpreted their seventeenth-century source materials with strategies proposed by reformists like de la Motte and his colleagues in the visual arts. As part of a deeply interdisciplinary and multi-media project, tragic opera demands from its interpreters a comparative interpretive approach, one that considers *dramma per musica* alongside rather than against its adjacent arts and that is moreover willing to adopt multiple kinds of legibility – textual, visual, aural – in order to probe the intersections between them.

Whereas the first aim of my project has been to re-embed tragic opera amid the eighteenth century's fervent poetic debates and rehabilitate its seventeenth-century traits as crucial components of the Enlightenment's broader aesthetic project, a parallel objective is to challenge the historiographical divisions that have associated the genre with only a narrow segment of its long and prolific history. If *dramma per musica* grew out of a seventeenth-century courtly tradition of spoken theatre, it flourished over the course of the Enlightenment and persisted into the nineteenth century. The periodization of tragic opera often emphasizes the earlier iterations of the genre, extrapolating the genre's presence in the eighteenth century from these examples alone. This reduction of *dramma per musica*'s lengthy chronology translates to a restricted account of its stylistic profile. Rosen's account of a "Baroque construction" that operates against the "Classical style" reinforces this artificial partitioning, so misrepresenting the expansive reach of a fluid and changeable genre. Feldman at least

recognizes *dramma per musica*'s capacity to reflect changing views of absolutism towards the end of the Enlightenment; in her words, the genre was primed for "mediating feelings about absolute sovereignty."<sup>372</sup> As part of the Télémacomania phenomenon, *dramma per musica*'s politics were not perpetually held captive by the "absolute" aesthetic values of neoclassical spoken tragedy. On the contrary, tragic operas often re-routed conventions through Fénelon's radically *anti*-absolutist novel and through the fraught reformist movement it inspired. It is no coincidence that in both *Mitridate* and *Idomeneo*, the king's rule collapses into a type of tyranny that is resolved only when he cedes the throne to his younger, benevolent and Enlightened heir.

The methodological argument of my thesis is thus twofold. First, I have aimed to demonstrate the advantages of cutting across stylistic periods in order to emphasize the confluences and continuities of aesthetic trends. In order to fully acknowledge *dramma per musica*'s roots in neoclassical spoken theatre, opera scholarship needs to undertake more direct comparisons with the genre's source plays and take into account the fraught debates that pursued these tragedies throughout the eighteenth century. Second, I have advocated for pushing the analysis of tragic opera to engage more directly with parallel movements in the literary and visual arts. The peril of restricting the historiography of *dramma per musica* to its most proximate contexts (the evolution of the genre through reform debates like the "Querelle des bouffons" contemplating opera more directly<sup>373</sup> and the performance contexts of individual works<sup>374</sup>) is that this method inadvertently dissociates opera from its multi-media content. From the perspective of current research, this interdisciplinary, deeply comparative approach to *dramma per musica* serves to rectify the segregation of opera's components that Strohm diagnoses. In some ways, then, this thesis aims to reform the historiographical approach to tragic opera using the same strategies that the genre itself followed in the wake of Télémacomania.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of dissociating *dramma per musica* from the narrowly defined politics and style that Rosen, Rumph, and others describe is to lay the ground for tragic opera's broader participation in the legacy of the Enlightenment as it continues to play out today. A prominent example of Télémacomania's contemporary

---

<sup>372</sup> Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 227.

<sup>373</sup> See, for instance, Renato di Benedetto's lengthy history in "Poetics and Polemics," in *Opera in Theory and Practice: Image and Myth*, 1-65, trans. Kenneth Chalmers, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>374</sup> Wignall's work on *Mitridate*, for instance, concentrates exclusively on Mozart's performers and their influence on the score. See Wignall, "Guglielmo d'Ettore: Mozart's First *Mitridate*" and "The Genesis of 'Se di lauri': Mozart's drafts and final version of Guglielmo d'Ettore's entrance aria from *Mitridate*."

reverberations is the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière (b. 1940), whose influential theory of the politics of aesthetics takes Fénelon's *Télémaque* as its key symbol. The book in which Rancière unpacks his famously radical concept of democracy is increasingly prompting comparative and collaborative research across the humanities, thanks in part to a written style that straddles generic boundaries and engages with visual and poetic domains as aggressively as Fénelon's novel. Like *Télémaque*, Rancière's *Le Maître Ignorant* (1987) describes what he terms the "intellectual adventure" of an eighteenth-century protagonist, Joseph Jacotot, who stumbles upon a revolutionary brand of equality in his dealings with a group of foreign students.<sup>375</sup> Rancière's literary style is a kind of didactic-historical parable that shifts between temporal moments and occupies multiple points of view while simultaneously evoking a stream of consciousness (though whose is not clear). In many ways, the book embraces all the ambiguities, partialities, and postures of lyrical writing as practiced by Diderot in the *Regrets* and by Barthes in *Sur Racine*. With *Télémaque* as his inspiration, then, and the multi-media and generic experiments of Télémacomania as his main method, Rancière has over several decades built a case for the volatile – but critically important – interaction between artistic creativity and political activity. In *Le Maître Ignorant*, Fénelon's novel marks a turning point in aesthetic and political thought, one that Rancière develops into a radically synthetic vision of the theatre as a fundamentally unstable and contentious space for political progress: art and politics, he argues, act as preconditions for one another precisely by threatening one another's boundaries, and the theatre in many ways represents the most obvious site for the collision of the political with the artistic.

Rancière constantly evokes the theatre, both as a metaphor and as a real space for the kind of political-aesthetic practice he prescribes as an antidote to contemporary manifestations of political absolutism. Like his Enlightenment predecessors, however, he consciously laments his inexperience with music: "I am neither a musician nor a music historian," he apologises – "my relationship to music [...] is that of a listener who never learned how the music he enjoys listening to was made."<sup>376</sup> And certainly Rancière overlooks the extent to which music – and opera above all – shares its political and aesthetic struggles with the literary and visual arts that he discusses at length. If *dramma per musica* discovered in Télémacomania a type of multi-media exchange that fuelled its reformist aspirations in the

---

<sup>375</sup> "Une Aventure intellectuelle" is the title of the book's opening chapter. Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant: cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

<sup>376</sup> "Je ne suis ni musicien ni historien de la musique. Mon rapport à la musique — contemporaine ou autre — est celui d'un auditeur qui n'a jamais appris comment était fait ce qu'il a plaisir à entendre." Jacques Rancière, "Autonomie et historicisme: la fausse alternative: Sur les régimes d'historicité de l'art?" in *Penser l'Œuvre musicale au XXe siècle: avec, sans ou contre l'histoire?*, 61-70, ed. Martin Kaltenecker and François Nicolas (Paris: Cdmc, 2006) 61.

Enlightenment, perhaps it is now in a position to reciprocate this influence. The result could be a closer relationship between music scholarship and contemporary criticism, which is increasingly invested in harnessing the combined forces of the arts towards political change and is at last interested in the performative flexibility opera can lend to this mandate.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbate, Carolyn. "...and in Response." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21/2 (2009): 199-201.
- . "Music - Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004): 505-36.
- Abbate, Carolyn and Roger Parker. "Dismembering Mozart." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2/2 (1990): 187-95.
- Adlung, Philipp. *Mozarts Opera Seria Mitridate, re di Ponto*. Eisenach: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1996.
- . "Mozarts Opera Seria Mitridate, rè di Ponto." *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (1997): 357-59.
- Ages, Arnold. "Voltaire on Racine: The Testimony of the Correspondence." *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 78/4 (1968): 289-301.
- Agin, Shane. "The Development of Diderot's 'Salons' and the Shifting Boundary of Representational Language." *Diderot Studies* 30 (2007): 11-29.
- Altieri, Charles. "Taking Lyrics Literally: Teaching Poetry in a Prose Culture." *New Literary History* 32/2 (2001): 259-81.
- Anonymous. "Écritures." In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 19:21:1-19:22:1. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Anonymous. "Lyrique." In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 9:780. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Anonymous. "Prose." In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 13:494-13:495. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Anonymous. "Tableau." In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Paris: Veuve de Bernard Bruet, 1762.
- Baker, Susan Read. *Dissonant Harmonies: Drama and Ideology in Five Neglected Plays of Pierre Corneille*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990.
- Balfour, Ian. "The Gift as Example: Derrida and the Origins of the Eighteenth Century." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40/3 (2007): 467-72.
- Barnwell, H. T. "Enclosure, Closure: A Note on Racine's Tragic Circles." In *Changing Perspectives: Studies on Racine in Honor of John Campbell*, 43-50. Edited by Ronald W. Tobin and Angus J. Kennedy. Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2012.
- . "'Moins Roi Que Pirate': Some Remarks on Racine's *Mithridate* as a Play of Ambiguities." *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 24 (2002): 179-90.
- Barthes, Roland. *Criticism and Truth*. Translated by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman. London: Continuum, 2007.
- . *Critique et Vérité*. In *Œuvres complètes II: livres, textes, entretiens 1962-1967*, 759-801. Edited by Éric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- . "The Discourse of History." *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981): 7-20.
- . "Histoire Ou Littérature?" *Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 2/4-5 (1997): 159-77.

- . *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957.
- . *On Racine*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- . “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*.” In *Œuvres complètes IV: livres, textes, entretiens 1972-1976*, 41-54. Edited by Éric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- . “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*.” In *New Critical Essays*, 23-39. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.
- . “Racine est Racine.” In *Mythologies, Œuvres Complètes I: livres, textes, entretiens 1942-1961*, 745-6. Edited by Éric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- . “Racine Is Racine.” In *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, 59-61. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
- . “Le Retour du poéticien.” In *Œuvres Complètes IV: livres, textes, entretiens 1972-1976*, 144-47. Edited by Éric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- . *Sur Racine*. In *Œuvres complètes II: livres, textes, entretiens 1962-1967*, 53-194. Edited by Éric Marty. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.
- . “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers.” In *A Barthes Reader*, 378-403. Edited by Susan Sontag. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Bauman, Thomas, and Marita P. McClymonds. *Opera and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Beghelli, Marco. “The Dramaturgy of the Operas.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, 85-103. Edited by Emanuele Senici. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Bennington, Geoffrey. “Derrida’s ‘Eighteenth Century.’” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40/3 (2007): 381-93.
- Berger, Karol. “Musicology According to Don Giovanni, Or: Should We Get Drastic?” *The Journal of Musicology* 22/3 (2005): 490-501.
- Berlan, Françoise. “Lexique et affects dans le *Télémaque*: la distance et l’effusion.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 9-24.
- Biet, Christian. “*Mithridate*, ou l’exercice de l’ambiguïté: ‘que pouvait la valeur dans ce trouble funeste?’” In *Actes du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature “La Rouchefoucault, Mithridate, Frères et Sœurs, les Muses Sœurs,”* 83-98. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Billings, Joshua. “Epic and Tragic Music: The Union of the Arts in the Eighteenth Century.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72/1 (2011): 99-117.
- Bingham, Charles and Gert Biesta. *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*. New York: Continuum, 2010.
- Bitaubé, Paul-Jérémie. “Dialogue entre l’auteur et un journaliste.” *Guillaume De Nassau, ou La Fondation des provinces-unies*, i-xvii. Paris: Prault, 1775.
- Boileau-Despréaux, Nicolas. *Art poétique*. Edited by Sylvain Menant. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1998.
- . “Lettre À Brossette (1699).” In *Œuvres De Boileau Despreaux*, 327-29. Edited by Saint-Surin. Paris: J.J. Blaise, 1821.
- . *Les Œuvres de M. Boileau Despreaux avec des éclaircissemens historiques*, Tome Premier. Edited by Saint-Surin. Paris: Alix, 1740.

- Bonzon, A. *La nouvelle Critique et Racine*. Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1970.
- Brèque, Jean-Michel. "De Racine à Mozart." *L'avant-scène opéra* 263 (2011): 80-84.
- Brodsky, Claudia. "'The Impression of Movement:' Jean Racine, Architecte." *Yale French Studies* 76 (1989): 162-81.
- . "Lessing and the Drama of the Theory of Tragedy." *MLN* 98/3 (1983): 426-53.
- Brown, Peter G., and Suzana Ograjenšek. *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Brown-Montesano, Kristi. *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc. *Discours sur le style prononcé à l'académie française*. Edited by A.D. Hatzfeld. Paris: Lecoffre Fils, 1753.
- Burden, Michael. "Establishing a Text, Securing a Reputation: Metastasio's Use of Aristotle." In *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, 177-92. Edited by Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- . "Music: And So to the Movies." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34/4 (2011): 453-60.
- Burnham, Scott. "The Criticism of Analysis and the Analysis of Criticism." *19th-Century Music* 16/1 (1992): 70-6.
- Bury, Emmanuel. "La *Paideia* du *Télémaque*: miroir d'un prince chrétien et lettres profanes." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 75-86.
- Calè, Luisa and Adriana Craciun. "The Disorder of Things." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45/1 (2011): 1-13.
- Callus, Ivan. "Reading Derrida Post-Theoretically." In *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism*, 251-80. Edited by Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2004.
- Campana, Alessandra. "Genre and Poetics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, 202-24. Edited by Nicholas Till. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Campbell, John. "A Marriage Made in Heaven? 'Racine' and 'Love.'" *The Modern Language Review* 101/3 (2006): 682-90.
- . *Questioning Racinian Tragedy*. Chapel Hill, NC: U.N.C. Dept. of Romance Languages, 2005.
- . "Tragedy and Time in Racine's *Mithridate*." *The Modern Language Review* 92/3 (1997): 590-98.
- . "Voltaire's 'Racine': The Paradoxes of a Transformation." *The Modern Language Review* 104/4 (2009): 962-75.
- Cannon, Robert. *Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*. London: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- . *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Charara, Youmna. "Les Aventures de *Télémaque*: exemplum ou poème?" *Presses Universitaires de France 'Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France'* 114 (2014): 260-83.

- Charlton, David. *Opera in the Age of Rousseau: Music, Confrontation, Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Clark, Andrew H. "Diderot's Encyclopedia Poetics." *The Eighteenth Century* 53/1 (2012): 99-111.
- Cohen, Huguette. "Diderot et les limites de la littérature dans les salons." *Diderot Studies* 24 (1991): 25-45.
- Cook, Nicholas. *Analysing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance." *Music Theory Online* 7/2 (2001).
- . "Review of *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* by Lawrence Kramer." *Music & Letters* 85/3 (2004): 415-18.
- . "Theorizing Musical Meaning." *Music Theory Spectrum* 23/2 (2001): 170-95.
- . "Uncanny Moments: Juxtaposition and the Collage Principle in Music." In *Approaches to Musical Meaning in Music*, 107-34. Edited by Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- . "We Are All (Ethno)Musicologists Now." In *The New (Ethno)Musicologies*, 48-70. Edited by Henry Stobart. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008.
- Corneille, Pierre. *Corneille: Œuvres Complètes, Nouvelle édition*. Edited by Georges Couton. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1980.
- . *Pierre Corneille: Théâtre complet*, Éditions du Tricentenaire, Vol. 1. Edited by Alain Niderst. Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1984.
- . *Trois Discours sur le poème dramatique* (1660). Edited by Louis Forestier. Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1963.
- Cotticelli, Francesco and Paologiovanni Maione. "Metastasio: The Dramaturgy of Eighteenth-Century Heroic Opera." In *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*, 66-84. Edited by Anthony R. DelDonna. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Cronk, Nicholas. *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Cuche, François-Xavier. "L'économie du *Télémaque*, l'économie dans le *Télémaque*." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 103-18.
- Cuillé, Tili Boon. *Narartive Interludes: Musical Tableaux in Eighteenth-Century French Texts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Culler, Jonathan. "The Language of Lyric." *Thinking Verse* 4/1 (2014): 160-76.
- . "Lyric, History, and Genre." *New Literary History* 40/4 (2009): 879-99.
- . "Reading Lyric." *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 98-106.
- . *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge, 1975.
- . "Why Lyric?" *PMLA* 123/1 (2008): 201-06.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. "The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera." In *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth*, 73-150. Edited by Giorgio Pestelli and Lorenzo Bianconi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

- . “What Is a Musical Drama?” Translated by Mary Whittall. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1/2 (1989): 95-111.
- Danchet, Antoine. *Idoménée, tragédie*. Paris: C. Ballard, 1731.
- Davis, Oliver. *Jacques Rancière*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
- Dayan, Peter. “The Time for Poetry.” *Oxford Literary Review* 31/1 (2009): 1-14.
- de la Motte, Antoine Houdar. “Comparaison de la premiere Scène de Mitridate, avec la même Scène réduite en prose.” In *Œuvres de Monsieur Houdar de la Motte, l’un des Quarante de l’Académie Française* Tome 4, 397-420. Editor unknown. Paris: Prault, 1754.
- . “Second Discours a l’occasion de la Tragedie de Romulus (1722).” In *Œuvres de Monsieur Houdar de la Motte*, Tome 4, 135-90. Editor unknown. Paris: Prault, 1754.
- . “Suite des Réflexions sur la Tragédie, où l’on répond à M. de Voltaire.” In *Œuvres de Monsieur Houdar de la Motte, l’un des Quarante de l’Académie Française*, Tome 4, 421-64. Editor unknown. Paris: Prault, 1754.
- de Man, Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. “Theory and History of Literature Series” Vol. 33. Edited by Jochen Schulte-Sasse and Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- de Marsy, Claude-Sixte Sautereau. “Avertissement.” *Almanach des Muses* 3 (1766): 3-4.
- Defrenne, Madeleine. “Formes scéniques et création des personnages dans le *Mithridate* de Racine.” In *Racine, théâtre et poésie: Actes du troisième colloque Vinaver, Manchester 1987*, 107-35. Edited by Christine M. Hill. Leeds: Cairns, 1991.
- . “La Substance actorielle dans le monologue central du *Mithridate* de Racine.” In *Ouverture et Dialogue*, 93-106. Edited by Ulrich Döring, Antiopy Lyroutdias, and Rainer Zaiser. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988.
- DelDonna, Anthony, and Pierpaolo Polzonetti, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Che cos’è la poesia? (1988)” In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, 287-91. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Edited by Virginia and Yopie Prins Jackson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- . *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. London: Continuum, 2004.
- . *La Dissémination*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972.
- . “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition (Thanks for the “Humanities,” What Could Take Place Tomorrow).” In *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, 24-57. Edited by Tom Cohen. West Nyack NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Deshauterayes, Michel-Ange-André le Roux. “Caractères et alphabets de langues mortes et vivantes.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 19:20:1-19:21:1. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- di Benedetto, Renato. “Poetics and Polemics.” In *Opera in Theory and Practice: Image and Myth*, 1-65. Translated by Kenneth Chalmers. Edited by Giorgio Pestelli and Lorenzo Bianconi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

- Diderot, Denis. "Prospectus." In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 1-9. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown." Translated by Kate Tunstall and Katie Scott. *Oxford Art Journal* 39/2 (2016): 175-84.
- . *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre ou avis à ceux qui ont plus de goût que de fortune*. Edited by Friedrich Dominicus Ring. Publisher unknown, 1772.
- Dorat, M. "Épître à Alexandrine." *Almanach des Muses* 2 (1769): 89-91.
- Dobrovsky, Serge. *Corneille et la dialectique du héros*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
- . *The New Criticism in France*. Translated by Derek Coltman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.
- . *Pourquoi la nouvelle Critique: critique et objectivité*. Paris: Mercure, 1966.
- Dubos, Jean-Baptiste. *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, Première Partie*. Paris: Jean Mariette, 1719.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Ekstein, Nina. "Mithridate, Displacement, and the Sea." In *Actes Du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature "La Rochefoucauld, Mithridate, Frères et Sœurs, Les Muses Sœurs,"* 103-11. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Emelina, Jean. "L'Espace dans les tragédies romaines de Racine." *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996): 125-38.
- Faydit. *La Telemacomanie, ou La Censure et critique du roman intitulé, Les Aventures de Telemaque Fils d'Ulysse, ou suite du quatrième Livre de l'Odyssée d'Homere*. Paris: Pierre Philaëthe, 1700.
- Feldman, Martha. "Magic Mirrors and the Serial Stage: Thoughts toward a Ritual View." *JAMS* 48/3 (1995): 423-84.
- . "Mozart and his Elders: Opera Serial Arias, 1766-1775." *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (1991): 564-75.
- . *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Fénelon, François de Salignac de la Motte. *Les Aventures de Telemaque, fils d'Ulysse*. Paris: F. Delaulne, 1717.
- . *The Adventures of Telemachus*. Translated by Patrick Riley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- . *Chefs-d'Œuvres Littéraires de Fénelon: Correspondances*. Editor unknown. Paris: Lefèvre, 1839.
- . *Lettre écrite à l'Académie française: sur l'éloquence, la poésie, l'histoire, etc.* Edited by M. L. Feugère. Paris: Jules Delalain et Fils, 1886.
- Fièvre, Paul. "Traitement des Textes: Bérénice, Mithridate, Britannicus de Jean Racine." *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996): 187-216.
- Fleck, Stephen H. "Barthes on Racine: A Different Speech Act Theory." *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 14 (1992): 143-55.

- Forment, Bruno. "Fénelon's Operatic Novel: Audiovisual Topoi in *Télémaque* and their Representation in Opera." In *Fénelon in the Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations, and Variations*, 265-75. Edited by Stefanie Stockhorst, Christoph Schmitt-Maaß, and Doohwan Ahn. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.
- Fort, Bernadette. "Ekphrasis as Art Criticism: Diderot and Fragonard's *Coresus and Callirhoe*." In *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, 58-77. Edited by Peter Wagner. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012.
- . "Intertextuality and Iconoclasm: Diderot's *Salon of 1775*." *Diderot Studies* 30 (2007): 209-45.
- Foster, Hal. "Post-Critical." *October* 139 (2012): 3-8.
- . "Postmodernism in Parallax." *October* 63 (1993): 3-20.
- . "What's the Problem with Critical Art? Review of *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* by Jacques Rancière, trans. by Zakir Paul." *London Review of Books* 35/19 (2013): 14-15.
- Fraigneau, Colin. "Les Enjeux éthiques de l'imitation dans le *Télémaque*: le paradoxe de l'inspiration virgilienne." *Dix-Septième Siècle* 227/2 (2005): 315-32.
- Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1980.
- Fubini, Enrico (ed.). *Music & Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe: A Source Book*. Translated by Lisa Gasbarrone, Wolfgang Freis, Michael Louis Leone. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Chana Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- . "'Vraisemblance' and Motivation." *Narrative* 9/3 (2001): 239-58.
- Gianturco, Carolyn. *Mozart's Early Operas*. London: Batsford, 1981.
- Gibbons, William. *Building the Operatic Museum: Eighteenth-Century Opera in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013.
- Glasow, E. Thomas. "Jungfrau Martha: Mitridate's 'Pallid Shade'?" *The Opera Quarterly* 10/1 (1993): 13-22.
- Godzich, Wlad. "Foreword: The Tiger on the Paper Mat." In *The Resistance to Theory* (by Paul de Man), ix-xviii. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Goehring, Edmund Joseph. "Reviews of Recent Mozart Scholarship." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61/3 (2008): 609-15.
- . *Three Modes of Perception in Mozart: The Philosophical, Pastoral, and Comic in Così Fan Tutte*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Goldhammer, Arthur. "Man in the Mirror: Language, the Enlightenment, and the Postmodern." In *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History*, 31-44. Edited by Daniel Gordon. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Goodkin, Richard E. *Birth Marks: The Tragedy of Primogeniture in Pierre Corneille, Thomas Corneille, and Jean Racine*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

- . “The Death(s) of Mithridate(s): Racine and the Double Play of History.” *PMLA* 101/2 (1986): 203-17.
- . “Editor’s Preface.” *Yale French Studies “Autour de Racine: Studies in Intertextuality”* 76 (1989): iii-v.
- . *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides*. London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Gordon, Daniel. *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Gourgouris, Stathis. “The Lyric in Exile.” *Qui Parle* 14/2 (2004): 145-75.
- . “Poiein: Political Infinitive.” *PMLA* 123/1 (2008): 223-28.
- Greenberg, Mitchell. *Racine: From Ancient Myth to Tragic Modernity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Grenby, M. O. “Introduction.” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34/4 (2011): 425-34.
- Grimm, Friedrich Melchior Baron von. “Poème lyrique.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:823-12:836. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Grosperin, Jean-Philippe. “De l’Art tragique d’évoquer les tempêtes: *Idoménée*.” In *L’Événement climatique et ses représentations*, 323-43. Edited by Jacques Berchtold, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Jean-Paul Sermain. Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2007.
- . “Le Télémaque, ou la nostalgie.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 173-99.
- Guénoun, Solange. “L’Invention de Monime: une leçon de monisme en monarchie dans *Mithridate* de Racine.” In *Actes Du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature “La Rochefoucauld, Mithridate, Frères et Sœurs, Les Muses Sœurs,”* 113-23. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Gueudeville, Nicolas. *Critique Generale des Aventures de Telemaque*. Cologne: Heretiers de Pierre Marteau, 1700.
- Harris, Ellen T. “Mozart’s *Mitridate*: Going Beyond the Text.” In *Historical Musicology: Sources, Methods, Interpretations*, 95-210. Edited by Stephen A. Crist and Roberta Montemorra Marvin. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004.
- Hawcroft, Michael. “Racine and Chauveau: A Poetics of Illustration.” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 61/3 (2007): 280-97.
- Hayes, Julie Candler. “Unconditional Translation: Derrida’s Enlightenment-to-Come.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40/3 (2007): 443-55.
- Hayley, M. “Recette pour faire une tragédie moderne.” In *L’Espri des journaux françois et étrangers*, Tome XII, 261-2. Editor unknown. Paris: Valade, 1786.
- Heartz, Daniel. “Attaca Subito: Lessons from the Autograph Score of *Idomeneo*.” In *Festschrift Wolfgang Rehm Zum 60. Geburtstag*, 83-92. Edited by Dietrich Berke and Harald Heckmann. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989.
- . “The Genesis of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*.” In *Mozart’s Operas*, 15-35. Edited by Thomas Bauman. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.
- . “The Genesis of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*.” *The Musical Quarterly* 55/1 (1969): 1-19.

- , ed. *Idomeneo*. In *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, Serie II, Werkgruppe 5, Band 11. Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1972.
- . “Mozart, His Father and *Idomeneo*.” *The Musical Times* 119/1621 (1978): 228-31.
- . “Mozart’s Tragic Muse.” *Studies in Music from the University of Western Ontario* “Crosscurrents and the mainstream of Italian serious opera 1730-1790” 7/2 (1982): 183-96.
- . “Raaff’s Last Aria: A Mozartian Idyll in the Spirit of Hasse.” *The Musical Quarterly* 60/4 (1974): 517-43.
- . “Tonality and Motif in *Idomeneo*.” *The Musical Times* 115/1575 (1974): 382-86.
- Heller, Wendy. “Phaedra’s Handmaiden: Tragedy as Comedy and Spectacle in Seventeenth-Century Opera.” In *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, 67-84. Edited by Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Hepp, Noémi. “Métamorphose d’une métamorphose: le dévoilement de la déesse protectrice dans *Télémaque* et dans l’*Odyssée*.” *Littératures classiques* 70 (2009): 25-32.
- Herbrechter, Stefan and Ivan Callus. “Introduction: Post-Theory?” In *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism*, 7-21. Edited by Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter. New York: Rodopi, 2004.
- Himmelfarb, Gertrude. “Telling It as You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact.” In *The Postmodern History Reader*, 158-74. Edited by Keith Jenkins. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Howell, Wilbur Samuel. “Introduction.” In *Fénelon’s Dialogues on Eloquence*, 1-53. Edited by Wilbur Samuel Howell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Hunter, Mary. *Mozart’s Operas: A Companion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Hutcheon, Linda. “Interdisciplinary Opera Studies.” *PMLA* 121/3 (2006): 802-10.
- . “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.” *Studies in Comparative Literature* “Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory” 30 (2000): 189-207.
- Jairo Moreno, Gavin Steingo. “Rancière’s Equal Music.” *Contemporary Music Review* 31/5-6 (2012): 487-505.
- Jaucourt, Louis Chevalier de. “Poème Didactique.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:813-12:815. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . “Poème Dramatique.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:815. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . “Poème Épique.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:815-12:823. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . “Poème en Prose.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:836-12:837. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.

- . “Poésie lyrique.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 12:839. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . “Style, Poésie du.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 15:554-15:556. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- . “Vraisemblance.” In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 17:484. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Joyce, Patrick. “History and Post-Modernism.” *Past & Present* 133/1 (1992): 204-09.
- Kafka, Frank A. “Some Observations on Five Interpretations of the *Encyclopédie*.” *Diderot Studies* 23 (1988): 85-100.
- Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: “What Is Enlightenment?”* (1784). Translated by Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.
- Kapp, Volker. “Éloge et instruction dans le *Télémaque*.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 87-101.
- Keefe, Simon P. *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Keller, Luzius. “La Figuration du temps tragique chez Racine.” *Versants* 4 (1983): 47-57.
- Keys, A. C. “Two Eighteenth-Century Racinian Operas.” *Music & Letters* 59/1 (1978): 1-9.
- Kintzler, Catherine. “Temps expérimental du théâtre, temps empirique de l’opéra: la question du spectacle.” *Littératures Classiques* 43 (2001): 117-25.
- Kirschner, Mary A. “Poetic Characterization in *Mithridate*: Xipharès and Pharnace.” *Cahiers du Dix-septième: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3/2 (1989): 17-27.
- Kohan, Walter. “Rancière et l’éducation: forces et limites - philosophiques et politiques - d’un antiprogressisme.” In *La Philosophie Déplacée: Autour De Jacques Rancière*, 429-40. Edited by Patrice Vermeren and Laurence Cornu. Lyon: Éditions Horlieu, 2006.
- Kramer, Lawrence. *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: London: University of California Press, 1995.
- . “Criticizing Criticism, Analyzing Analysis.” *19th-Century Music* 16/1 (1992): 76-79.
- . “Dangerous Liaisons: The Literary Text in Musical Criticism.” *19th-Century Music* 13/2 (1989): 159-67.
- . *Interpreting Music*. Berkeley, CA: London: University of California Press, 2011.
- . “Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson.” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 25-35.
- . “Music, Metaphor and Metaphysics.” *The Musical Times* 145/1888 (2004): 5-18.
- . *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.
- . “Musicology and Meaning.” *The Musical Times* 144/1883 (2003): 6-12.

- . “Philosophizing Musically: Reconsidering Music and Ideas.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139/2 (2014): 387-404.
- . “Review of Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Musica Ficta: Figures of Wagner*.” *Ars Lyrica* 9 (1998): 217-220.
- Krimmer, Elisabeth. ““Eviva Il Coltello?” The Castrato Singer in Eighteenth-Century German Literature and Culture.” *PMLA* 120/5 (2005): 1543-59.
- Kruger, Loren. “Keywords and Contexts: Translating Theatre Theory.” *Theatre Journal* “Theatre and Translation” 59/3 (2007): 355-58.
- Kuizenga, Donna. “*Mithridate*: A Reconsideration.” *The French Review* 52/2 (1978): 280-85.
- Küster, Konrad. “Von *Mitridate, re di Ponto* zu *Il Re Pastore*: Stationen auf Mozarts weg zur Konzertform.” *Mozart-Jarhbuch* (1991): 956-62.
- Lagarde, François. “Mimesis et persuasion: l’exemple du *Télémaque*.” *French Forum* 16/1 (1991): 39-50.
- Lanavère, Alain. “Les deux Antiquités dans *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 43-57.
- Lapp, John Clarke. *Aspects of Racinian Tragedy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955.
- Latour, Bruno. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-48.
- Lavocat, Françoise. “Le *Télémaque*, pastorale.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 155-71.
- Le Brun, Jacques. “*Les Aventures de Télémaque*: destins d’un best-seller.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 133-46.
- Lecompte, Jerome. “Racine et la Vraisemblance a l’age classique: statu de la rhétorique chez René Rapin et Jean Racine.” *L’Information littéraire* 60 (2008): 58-64.
- Lederer, Josef-Horst. “Wenn der Bruch im Satzgefüge auf Überraschung basiert: zur Konzeption dramatischer Wendepunkte in Mozarts seria-Opern.” *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (2001): 221-30.
- Leduc-Fayette, Denise. “Fénelon Philosophe?” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* “Fénelon” 193/2 (2003): 147-49.
- Leitch, Vincent B. “Late Derrida: The Politics of Sovereignty.” *Critical Inquiry* 33/2 (2007): 229-47.
- Leppert, Richard. *Essays on Music*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.
- Lessing, G.E. *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-1770). Translated by Helen Zimmern. Toronto: Dover, 1962.
- Levin, David J. *Unsettling Opera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Lindenberger, Herbert. *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Longino, Michèle. “*Mithridate*, or *La Cour de France turbanisée*.” In *Actes Du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature* “*La Rochefoucauld, Mithridate, Frères et Sœurs, Les Muses Sœurs*,” 137-46. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Luckhurst, Mary. *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Lucy, Niall. *A Derrida Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

- Lühning, Helga. "Mozarts Auseinandersetzung mit der da capo-arie in *Mitridate, Re di Ponto*." *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (2001): 427-61.
- Maréchaux, Pierre. "Les Dieux de Fénelon: Homère, Virgile et la tradition mythographique dans le *Télémaque*." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 59-74.
- Marmontel, Jean-François. "Critique." In *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* 4:490-4:497. Edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. ARTFL Encyclopédie Project 2013 Edition. Edited by Robert Morrissey. University of Chicago. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.
- Maus, Fred. "What Was Critical Musicology?" *Radical Musicology* 5 (2011).
- Mazouer, Charles. "*Idomeneo, rè di Creta*: Mozart et la tragédie." *Revue belge de Musicologie* 36/38 (1982-4): 133-44.
- . "Mozart et la tragédie française." *Studi Francesi* 53/1 (2009): 112-19.
- McClelland, Clive. "*Ombra and Tempesta*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*. Edited Danuta Mirka, 279-300. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- . *Ombra: Supernatural Music in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Lexington Books, 2012.
- McClymonds, Marita Petzoldt. "Opera Seria? Opera Buffa? Genre and Style as Sign." In *Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna*, 197-231. Edited by Mary Kathleen Hunter and James Webster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- McLelland, Jane B. "Changing His Image: Diderot, Vernet and the Old Dressing Gown." *Diderot Studies* 33 (1988): 129-41.
- Mercier, Louis-Sébastien. *Du Théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique*. Amsterdam: E. van Harrevelt, 1773.
- Mediavilla, Claude. *Histoire de la calligraphie française*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2006.
- Metastasio. *Estratto dell'arte poetica d'Aristotile*. Edited by Elisabetta Selmi. Palermo: Novecento, 1998.
- . "Letter to Algarotti, 16 September 1747." In *Opere Postume del Signor abate Pietro Metastasio*, Vol. 1, 236-46. Edited by Conte d'Ayala. Vienna: Alberti, 1795.
- Michaud, M. "Recette pour composer un poème épique." *Almanach des Prosateurs* 7 (1808): 146-8.
- Mizrachi, François. "Boileau, ou l'Order des mots." In *L'Art Poétique de Boileau suivi de l'Épître aux Pisons (Art Poétique) d'Horace*, 7-20. Edited by Jean-Clarence Lambert and François Mizrachi. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1966.
- Moberly, R. B. "The Influence of French Classical Drama on Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*." *Music & Letters* 55/3 (1974): 286-98.
- Moindrot, Isabelle. "*Mitridate*: Œuvre Racinienne?" *L'avant-scène opéra "Mozart: Mithridate"* 263 (2011): 75-79.
- Monelle, Raymond. "Recitative and Dramaturgy in the *Dramma per musica*." *Music & Letters* 59/3 (1978): 245-67.
- . "The Rehabilitation of Metastasio." *Music & Letters* 57/3 (1976): 268-91.
- Moore, Fabienne. "Almanach des Muses vs. Almanach des Prosateurs: The Economics of Poetry and Prose at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century." *Dalhousie French Studies* 67 (2004): 17-35.

- . *Prose Poems of the French Enlightenment: Delimiting Genre*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009.
- Morgan, Janet. "The Meanings of Vraisemblance in French Classical Theory." *The Modern Language Review* 81/2 (1986): 293-304.
- Moriarty, Michael. *Roland Barthes*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Mozart, Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart. *Mozart Briefe und Dokumente*, Online-Edition. Salzburg: Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum, Bibliotheca Mozartiana. Online Edition, <http://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/letter.php?mid=1146&cat=>.
- Mozart, Wolfgang. *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, Serie II, Werkgruppe 5, Band 11: *Idomeneo*. Edited by Daniel Hertz. Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1972.
- Mueller, Martin. "Escape from D-Minor: Mozart's Encounter with Ancient Tragedy in *Idomeneo*." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 18/1 (2010): 27-53.
- N. CC. Fr. and P.B. Lamare, eds. "Préface." *Almanach des Prosateurs* 1 (1801): vi-vii.
- Néraudau, Jean-Pierre. "Mais où sont ces Romains que fait parler Racine?" *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996): 75-90.
- Nesbitt, Alexander. *The History and Technique of Lettering*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1950.
- Nicole, Pierre. *Les Visionnaires ou Seconde partie des lettres sur l'Heresie imaginaire*. Liège, Adolphe Beyers, 1666.
- Niderst, Alain. "Mithridate Opéra?" In *Actes Du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature* "La Rochefoucauld, Mithridate, Frères et Sœurs, Les Muses Sœurs," 125-36. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Noiray, Michel. "L'Opéra seria de Haendel à Mozart: réflexions préalables à une analyse du répertoire." *Musurgia* 4/4 (1997): 29-39.
- O'Regan, Michael J. *The Mannerist Aesthetic: A Study of Racine's Mithridate*. Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 1980.
- Papasogli, Benedetta. "Pour et contre la Lecture: paradoxes du *Télémaque*." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 315-30.
- Patey, Douglas Lane. "'Aesthetics' and the Rise of Lyric in the Eighteenth Century." *Studies in English Literature* 33/3 (1993): 587-608.
- Picard, Raymond. *New Criticism or New Fraud?* Translated by Frank Towne. Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1969.
- . *Nouvelle Critique ou nouvelle imposture?* Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1965.
- Piroux, Lorraine. "The Encyclopedist and the Peruvian Princess: The Poetics of Illegibility in French Enlightenment Book Culture." *PMLA* "The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature" 121/1 (2006): 107-23.
- Pommier, René. *Le "Sur Racine" de Roland Barthes*. Paris: Eurédit, 1988.
- Pope, Alexander. "An Essay on Criticism (1711)." In *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, 233-326. Edited by E. Audra and Aubrey Williams. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Prigent, Michel. *Le Héros et l'état dans la tragédie de Pierre Corneille*. Paris: Quadrige, 1986.

- Prince, Gerald. "Foreword." In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* by Gérard Genette, ix-xi. Edited by Claude Doubinsky and Channa Newman. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Racevskis, Roland. *Tragic Passages: Jean Racine's Art of the Threshold*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008.
- Racine, Jean. *Mithridate* (1673). Edited by Georges Forestier. Notes and commentary by Étienne Leterrier. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999.
- . *Œuvres complètes de Racine - Théâtre, Poésies*, Vol.1. Edited by Raymond Picard. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1950.
- Ramsay, A.M. "Discours de la poésie épique et de l'excellence du poème de *Télémaque*." In *Les Aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse*, vii-lviii. Paris: F. Delaulne, 1717.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Autonomie et Historicisme: la fausse alternative - sur les régimes d'historicité de l'art?" In *Penser l'Œuvre musicale au XXe siècle: avec, sans ou contre l'histoire*, 61-70. Edited by Martin Kaltenecker and François Nicolas. Paris: Cdmc, 2006.
- . *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009.
- . *Figures of History*. Translated by Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.
- . *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- . *Le Maître Ignorant: cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*. Paris: Fayard, 1987.
- . *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*. Translated by Hassan Melehy. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- . *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989.
- . *Les Noms de l'histoire: essai de poétique du savoir*. Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- . "On Ignorant Schoolmasters." In *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 1-16. Edited by Gert Biesta and Charles Bingham. New York: Continuum, 2010.
- . *The Politics of Literature*. Translated by Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.
- . "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization." *October "The Identity in Question"* 61 (1992): 58-64.
- . "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics." In *Reading Rancière*, 1-17. Edited by Richard Stamp and Paul Bowman. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Rancière, Jacques, Davide Panagia. "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière." *Diacritics* 30/2 (2000): 113-26.
- Rex, Walter E. "The Landscape Demythologized: From Poussin's Serpents to Fénelon's 'Shades,' and Diderot's Ghost." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30/4 (1997): 401-19.
- Rice, John A. *Mozart on the Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Riley, Patrick. "Introduction to *Telemachus* by Fénelon." In *Telemachus, Son of Ulysses*, xiii-xxxi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Robinson, Paul. *Opera and Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss*. Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Rohou, Jean. *L'Évolution du tragique racinien*. Paris: SEDES, 1991.

- . “Structure et signification dans *Britannicus*, *Bérénice* et *Mithridate*.” *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996): 51-72.
- Ronzeaud, Pierre, and Alain Viala, eds. “Les Tragédies romaines de Racine: *Britannicus*, *Bérénice*, *Mithridate*.” *Littératures Classiques* 26 (1996).
- Rosen, Charles. *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Expanded Edition*. London: Faber, 1997.
- Ross, Kristin. “Translator’s Introduction.” In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, vii-xxiii. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Rumph, Stephen. *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2012.
- Rushton, Julian. “‘...Hier Wird Es Besser Seyn - Ein Blossen Recitativ Zu Machen...’: Observations on Recitative Organization in *Idomeneo*.” In *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: Essays on His Life and His Music*, 436-48. Edited by Stanley Sadie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- . “Idomeneo, re di Creta.” In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/O902313>.
- . *W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Sadie, Stanley. “A Note on Mozart’s First Serious Opera.” *The Musical Times* 113/1547 (1972): 41-42.
- Saint-Armand, Pierre. “Diderot’s Dressing Gown: The Philosopher in the Cabinet.” Translated by Jennifer Curtiss Gage. *Diderot Studies* 31 (2009): 71-81.
- Saint Victor, Pierre M. de. “Les Théories littéraires de l’*encyclopédie*.” PhD diss. Indiana University, 1964. ProQuest (AAT 6503513).
- Savage, Roger. “Staging an Opera: Letters from the Cæsarian Poet.” *Early Music* 26/4 (1998): 583-95.
- Schmidgall, Gary. *Literature as Opera*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Schmidt, James. “The Legacy of the Enlightenment.” *Philosophy and Literature* 26/2 (2002): 432-42.
- Schmidt, James (ed.). *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.
- Schröder, Volker. “La Place du roi: guerre et succession dans *Mithridate*.” In *Actes Du 29e Congrès Annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature “La Rochefoucauld, Mithridate, Frères Et Sœurs, Les Muses Sœurs,”* 147-58. Edited by Claire Carlin. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998.
- Sellier, Philippe. “La Résistance à l’épopée: *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 33-41.
- Sermain, Jean-Paul. “*Les Aventures de Télémaque*: un titre programme.” *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 147-53.
- Sheriff, Mary D. “Painting in the French Regency.” In *Fénelon in the Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations, and Variations*, 281-311. Edited by Christoph Schmitt-Maaß, Stefanie Stockhorst, and Doohwan Ahn. New York: Rodopi, 2014.

- Simon, Julia. *Mass Enlightenment: Critical Studies in Rousseau and Diderot*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Somerset, Anne. *The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV*. London: Phoenix, 2003.
- Spiegel, Gabrielle M. "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages." *Speculum* 65/1 (1990): 59-86.
- Spitzer, Anais N. *Derrida, Myth and the Impossibility of Philosophy*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Starobinski, Jean. "The Promise of *Idomeneo*." Translated by Richard Pevear. *The Hudson Review* 55/1 (2002): 15-30.
- Stone, Lawrence. "History and Post-Modernism." *Past & Present* 135 (1992): 189-94.
- . "Notes: History and Post-Modernism." *Past & Present* 131 (1991): 217-18.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber, 1967.
- Strohm, Reinhard. *Dramma per Musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
- . "Handel, Metastasio, Racine: The Case of *Ezio*." *The Musical Times* 118/1617 (1977): 901-03.
- Susini, Laurent. "'Avec Force et douceur': esthétique de la répétition dans *Les Aventures de Télémaque*." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 331-49.
- Tagliavini, Luigi Ferdinando. "Martini, Mozart e *Mitridate*." In *Un Anno per tre filarmonici di rango: Perti, Martini e Mozart - un principe, un 'definitore' e un fuoriclasse da celebrare nel 2006*, 15-20. Edited by Piero Mioli. Bologna: Pàtron, 2008.
- . "Quirino Gasparini and Mozart." In *New Looks at Italian Opera: Essays in Honor of Donald J. Grout*, 151-71. Edited by William W. Austin. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968.
- . "Vorwort - zum vorliegenden Band." In *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - Mitridate, re di Ponto, Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke, Serie II: Bühnenwerke*, vi-xxv. Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1966.
- Taruskin, Richard. *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Taylor, Timothy D. "Peopling the Stage: Opera, Otherness, and New Musical Representations in the Eighteenth Century." *Cultural Critique* 36 (1997): 55-88.
- Terada, Rei. "After the Critique of Lyric." *PMLA* 123/1 (2008): 195-200.
- Teyssandier, Bernard. "Le Prince à l'école des images: la pédagogie des 'peintures' dans le *Télémaque* de Fénelon." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 201-23.
- Till, Nicholas. *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas*. London: Faber, 1992.
- Tobin, Ronald W. *Jean Racine Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.
- Tomlinson, Gary. "Gary Tomlinson Reponds." *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 36-40.
- . "Monumental Musicology." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132/2 (2007): 349-74.
- . "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer." *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18-24.

- Trémolières, François. "Amour et Gloire dans *Les Aventures de Télémaque*." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 297-313.
- Verba, Cynthia. *Music and the French Enlightenment: Rameau and the Philosophes in Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Viala, Alain. "Le Monarque d'élection." *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2009): 119-30.
- Vier, Jacques. "Le *Mithridate* de Racine." *Littérature a l'emporte pièce*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cèdre, 1958.
- Vizier, Alain. "Fénelon et la question de l'éloquence." *Cahiers du dix-septième* 6/2 (1992): 23-49.
- Voltaire. *Ecrivains sous Louis XIV: Catalogue*. In *Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, Tome 20 "Siècle de Louis XIV." Edited by the Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. Kehl: Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire Typographique, 1784.
- . "Épopée." In *Œuvres De Voltaire*, 129-80. Edited by M. Palissot. Paris: Stoupe & Serviere, 1792.
- . *Lettres Philosophiques*. Edited by F.A. Taylor. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946.
- . *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire: Théâtre, Nouvelle Édition*, Tome 2, 47-58. Editor unknown. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877.
- . "Préface d'*Œdipe* (1730)." In *Théâtre complet de Mr. de Voltaire*, Tome 1, xix-xxxix. Edited by Voltaire. Lausanne: Franc, Grasset, et Comp., 1772.
- Waldoff, Jessica Pauline. *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wasiolek, Edward. "Introduction." In *The New Criticism in France* (by Serge Doubrovsky), 1-34. Edited by Derek Coltman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.
- Webb, Ruth. "Ekphrasis." *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025773>.
- Weber, Jean-Paul. *Néo-critique et paléo-critique ou Contre Picard*. Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1966.
- Webster, James. "The Analysis of Mozart's Arias." In *Mozart Studies*, 101-99. Edited by Cliff Eisen. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- . "Mozart's Operas and the Myth of Musical Unity." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2/2 (1990): 197-218.
- Weightman, John George. "Civil War among the Critics." *Times Literary Supplement* (3 February 1966): 83.
- . "Crisis in Criticism - Review of Serge Doubrovsky, *Pourquoi La Nouvelle Critique*." *Times Literary Supplement* (23 June 1966): 545-6.
- Weimer, E. *Opera Seria and the Evolution of Classical Style, 1755-1772*. Ann Arbor: MI: UMI Research Press, 1984.
- Weinberg, Bernard. *The Art of Jean Racine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Weiss, Piero. "Metastasio, Aristotle, and the *Opera Seria*." *The Journal of Musicology* 1 (1982): 385-94.
- Weiss, Piero. "Baroque Opera and the Two Verisimilitudes." In *Music and Civilization: Essays in Honor of Paul Henry Lang*, 117-26. Edited by Edmond Strainchamps, Maria Rika Maniates, and Christopher Hatch. New York: Norton, 1984.

- Westrup, Jack Allen. "Alessandro Scarlatti's *Il Mitridate Eupatore* (1707)." In *New Looks at Italian Opera: Essays in Honor of Donald J. Grout*, 133-50. Edited by William W. Austin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968.
- White, Hayden. "Foreward: Rancière's Revisionism." In *The Names of History*, vii-xix. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- . "Historical Pluralism." *Critical Inquiry* 12/3 (1986): 480-93.
- . "Historiography and Historiophoty." *The American Historical Review* 93/5 (1988): 1193-99.
- . "Reflections on 'Gendre' in the Discourses of History." *New Literary History* 40/4 (2009): 867-77.
- . "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7/1 (1980): 5-27.
- Wignall, Harrison James. "The Genesis of 'Se di Lauri': Mozart's Drafts and Final Version of Guglielmo d'Ettore's Entrance Aria from *Mitridate*." *Mozart-Studien* 5 (1995): 45-99.
- . "Guglielmo d'Ettore: Mozart's First *Mitridate*." *The Opera Quarterly* 10/3 (1994): 93-112.
- Williams, David. "The Role of the Foreign Theatre in Voltaire's *Corneille*." *The Modern Language Review* 71/2 (1976): 282-93.
- . "Voltaire and the Patronage of Pierre Corneille." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6/2 (1972-3): 221-37.
- Williams, Peter. "Peripheral Visions?" *The Musical Times* 145/1886 (2004): 51-67.
- Worvill, Romira. "From Prose *Peinture* to Dramatic *Tableau*: Diderot, Fénelon and the Emergence of the Pictorial Aesthetic in France." *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 151-70.
- . *"Seeing" Speech: Illusion and the Transformation of Dramatic Writing in Diderot and Lessing*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005.
- Zaluski, Iwo and Pamela Zaluski. *Mozart in Italy*. London: Peter Owen, 1999.
- Zeiss, Laurel E. "The Dramaturgy of Opera." In *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, 179-201. Edited by Nicholas Till. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Zeno, Apostolo. "Argomento: *Mitridate* (1728)." In *Poesie drammatiche di Apostolo Zeno*, Vol. 5, 97-99. Editor unknown. Venice: Giambattista Pasquali, 1744.