

Two operas for one novel

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The rivalry between *grand-opéra* and *opéra-comique* dates back to the time of the Théâtres de la Foire,* when vaudevilles and *comédies en ariettes* fought with the Académie Royale de Musique for the right to sing on stage. There were a number of overlaps from one theatre to another, initially in the form of parodies, then of duplications, when the same subject was treated at the Opéra and at the Opéra-Comique, in the ‘grand style’ (*grand genre*) at the former and the ‘intermediate style’ (*genre moyen*) at the latter. This might mean a recasting of the libretto and the score, as in the case of *Robert le diable*, initially conceived for the Opéra-Comique as a continuation of the medieval vein of *La Dame blanche*. Each institution could also handle a single subject in two distinct works, as with Carafa’s *Masaniello*, premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1827 two months before Auber’s *La Muette de Portici* at the Opéra. Such is also the case with *Le Pré aux clercs*, which anticipates by four years Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*, given its first performance at the Opéra on 29 February 1836.

The relationship of *Le Pré aux clercs* and *Les Huguenots* to Mérimée’s novel *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, the direct source of the *opéra-comique* and a more distant point of reference for the *grand-opéra*, sheds light on their respective and distinct dramaturgies. Is Mérimée’s work closer in spirit, in tone, in historical vision, to the ‘demi-caractère’ (semi-

* The ‘Fair Theatres’, originally held at the Foire Saint-Germain and Foire Saint-Laurent in Paris, which were the forerunners of the Opéra-Comique.

serious nature) of *opéra-comique*? Or did the violence of its story find spectacular fulfilment on the stage of the Opéra?



CONTEXTS OF CREATION

Le Pré aux clercs had its genesis in 1832, during a critical phase in the life of the Opéra-Comique and against the background of a cholera epidemic. Since the Théâtre-Italien was occupying the first Salle Favart, the Opéra-Comique was constantly on the move: between 1829 and 1840, it left the Théâtre Feydeau and moved from the Salle Ventadour to the Salle de la Bourse (where *Le Pré aux clercs* was premiered) before finally settling in the second Salle Favart in 1840. The institution lurched from bankruptcy to changes of management. The genre was in search of its identity. While Scribe and Boieldieu, followed by Scribe and Auber, gave it a new lease of life with *La Dame blanche* in 1825, then *Fra Diavolo* in 1830, the *Zampa* of Mélesville and Hérold opened up the field of possibilities with its fantastical dimension, its disturbing hero, its play on the myth of Don Juan. *Opéra-comique* now showed itself ready to shift in the direction of its rival, *grand-opéra*: *Zampa* was staged in 1831 a few months before *Robert le diable* and Meyerbeer could be afraid of appearing as an imitator. On the other hand, the Opéra had been enjoying a spectacular boom at the Salle Le Peletier since Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* and *Guillaume Tell* and Scribe and Auber's *La Muette de Portici*. From the outset of the July Monarchy, its new director Louis-Désiré Véron resolved to make his theatre 'the Versailles of the bourgeoisie'. The colossal success of *Robert le diable* in 1831, followed by that of Halévy's *La Juive* in 1835 and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in 1836, put the finishing touches to the modern metamorphosis of the old temple of enchantments.

Thus *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* was exploited by two rival houses which had arrived at very different situations. The relationship with history that Mérimée's work obliged its adaptors to fix must allow

opéra-comique and *grand-opéra* to be distinguished from each other, and permit the former genre to recast itself in a new mould. The rivalry between the two works existed right from the start of their compositional process, which began in 1832 for both. The contract signed by Meyerbeer stipulated that his new work must take its subject from the nation's past. According to Jane Fulcher, the subject of *Les Huguenots* was chosen in the context of an anticlericalism that had persisted since the July Revolution. In reality, two historical operas were planned: *Les Huguenots* and *La Juive*, both assigned to the same librettist, Scribe. They form a diptych intended to illustrate the danger of religious fanaticism. In both cases, the heroes refuse to abjure their faith and choose martyrdom instead. The massacre of 24 August 1572 has its counterpart in the Council of Constance (1414). Scribe's works subscribe to a liberal philosophy, Voltairean in origin, anxious to uphold, in opposition to the deposed Bourbon regime, the renewed values of tolerance and universalism – and this at a time when the 'Loi du culte israélite', voted by the Assemblée Nationale on 4 December 1830, gave the Jews of France complete equality of civil rights, while the concept of an established state religion was replaced by the 'religion de la majorité' in Article 6 of the revised Charter of 1830.

There can be no doubt that this liberal moment of 1830 had little influence on the creation of *Le Pré aux clercs*. The libretto by Eugène de Planard aims to tailor a colourful, picturesque subject, rich in strong situations, to fit the musico-dramatic forms of an *opéra-comique* in three acts, conceived for a spatially and technically limited performing space and an orchestra, chorus and ensemble of soloists on a completely different scale from the resources of *grand-opéra*. The idea was less to dazzle than to entertain agreeably, though not without giving the audience a few thrilling moments. As Jules Janin declared in the *Journal des débats* on 17 December 1832: 'It is a very well-made piece, Opéra-comically speaking.'



TWO DRAMATURGICAL EXPLOITATIONS OF MÉRIMÉE

Grand-opéra is founded on an aesthetic of collage of varied musical numbers and on the articulation of ‘wide-angle shots’ and ‘close-ups’, with unity of perspective provided by the unleashing of ‘powerful historical interests’ that crush individual destinies. The Protestant Mergy and the Catholic Diane de Turgis of the novel become Raoul de Nangis, a rakish Protestant gentleman, and Valentine de Saint-Bris, a chaste lady-in-waiting to Marguerite de Valois. Jane Fulcher analyses the intrication of public and private spheres as a way of distancing the representation of religious violence:

As in his previous libretti for the Opéra, Scribe attempted to concentrate attention on the love story between the characters, thus directing attention away from controversial aspects of the plot. Through such means historical interests and lofty sentiments could be ‘mis en jeu’ and narrow partisan ideals or the conflict of ideological extremes could be avoided, as the state wished.

This point of view, though, may perhaps exaggerate the influence of politics on the work of Scribe, a formidable creator of musico-dramatic forms answering first and foremost to the requirements of spectacle and lyric theatre.

Mérimée’s novel-chronicle, with its narrative discontinuity and its spatiotemporal fragmentation, might have led the libretto into the pitfall of dispersal, with a concomitant loss of the effect of dramatic crescendo. Scribe takes over only a few of its elements, removing the historical figures of Charles IX and Admiral Coligny, inventing Saint-Bris, Valentine’s father, and Marcel, Raoul’s servant, and giving Marguerite de Valois the role of a go-between. But can this really be described as infidelity, given that the libretto is not conceived in terms of adaptation or even transposition?

As the musicologist Anselm Gerhard has emphasised, the novelty of *Les Huguenots* lies in the implacable increase in dramatic tension from

one act to the next, the highlighting of contrasts, and above all the depiction of fanaticised crowds:

In *La Muette de Portici*, the bloody uprising of the Neapolitan fishermen still took place offstage, like the duel between two thoroughly respectable characters in Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs*.

The interweaving of a love story and a stage action of social significance bestows on *grand-opéra*, over and above its stylistic eclecticism, a homogeneity of perspective and an epic dimension. The opera constructs a profoundly tragic vision of history, in that the political actors are eliminated from the stage and we are shown only characters confronted with brutal crowds. There is no calling into question of the weakness of kings, but an appalled observation of the blind fury of collective passions. Is this perhaps akin to Mérimée's point of view, sceptical of the notion of progress and refusing to credit history with a rational meaning?

Nothing like this was on show at the Opéra-Comique. In Hérold's work, the librettist Planard moves the story to a decade later: 'in 1582, during the reign of Henri III'. The plot's shift of focus to the duel is inspired by Chapter IV of the novel:

From one end of France to the other, the touchy sensibilities of the aristocracy produced deadly results, so much so that, by a conservative estimate, during the reigns of Henri III and Henri IV the mania for duelling cost more gentlemen their lives than ten years of civil war.

The aim here is to efface all epic perspective. The plot falls back on the device of a duel provoked by amorous rivalry. Planard borrows the name of the place of the action and takes over the vivid image of the boat crossing the Seine to ferry the adversaries to the duelling ground, then carry the loser's body back, but keeps the violence of the confrontation strictly offstage. Planard's and Hérold's decisions tend towards avoidance of the Romantic conception of history in its social destiny, its moral pro-

fundity, the convergence of collective movements and private evolutions. History, at the Opéra-Comique, is treated more as theatrical material, with picturesque decoration gaining the upper hand over explanatory local colour. In parallel with this, the musical dramaturgy is characterised by a rhetoric not of contrast but of dilution of juxtaposed colours. An example of this is the respect of traditional stage roles in the conception of the characters. As in classical comedy, the noble couple of young lovers Isabelle and Mergy, whose union is supported by the Queen, is complemented by a couple from the popular classes, who are also in search of private happiness within their own cultural sphere: Girot and his fiancée Nicette. Far removed from the severe figure of Marcel in *Les Huguenots*, and equally far from the blaspheming atheist Béville in Mérimée, the character of Cantarelli appears as a total invention, motivated by the need to assign a role to Féréol, the company's resident *Trial*, or comic tenor. Hence the cast of characters represents a simple but effective formula of sweetening the bitterness of the historical events.

A similar balance is found in the score, especially in the magnificent finale, representative of the temperate aesthetic and restrained dramaturgy characteristic of *opéra-comique* in the first half of the nineteenth century. The situation is partly borrowed from Mérimée: Comminge (though unaware of Mergy's love for Isabelle) has challenged him to a duel; in the meantime, the Queen has arranged for the two lovers to marry in secret, and they are now ready to make good their escape; Mergy comes back to pay off his debt of honour with Comminge. Watchmen force the duellists to settle their quarrel out of sight. The audience sees boatmen taking a body away on their barque: it is Comminge. Mergy and Isabelle are free to think of their happiness and to run off together. Although the dancers in the distance create an effect of contrast with the ferrying of the corpse across the river, this is not for the purpose of Romantic oxymoron (in which the grotesque grimace of Death interferes with the pleasures of the living), but to assert the triumph of the life force and of private happiness, now that the spectators have felt the thrill of violence, lightly touched on theatrically and stylised musically.

The image of the boat gliding over the Seine, on an immutable pedal on *B* sustained by a subdued roll on the timpani and unison cellos and scordatura violas ('the violas lower their *C* to *B* natural'), symbolises the treatment of historical violence in *opéra-comique*: less collective than individual, less shown than suggested, swept away by rhythms of hectic gaiety. 'Romantic' *opéra-comique* is dependent on a tradition of legends and tales, closed forms and strophic numbers: all it knows of history is its imagery; all it knows of temporality is its cycles, with their message of an assured return to life.

These two dissimilar exploitations of Mérimée's novel, then, do not stem only from the differences between the two genres in the 1830s. The *Chronique* captivated the *opéra-comique*, while merely furnishing a few elements for the *grand-opéra*, because its detached treatment of history adapted more spontaneously to the *demi-caractère* of *opéra-comique*, its art of touching lightly on subjects and favouring fleeting thrills – whereas *grand-opéra* sought splendour, and, in the liberal phase of the early July Monarchy, a philosophical demonstration of the danger of fanaticisms.

Yet, for all that, the humour of the *opéra-comique* does not possess the caustic character of Mérimée's. It does not go so far as to shake the belief that history has a meaning, which the opera of Scribe and Meyerbeer calls into question with the brutality of its dénouement. Finally, it is the charms of Mérimée the storyteller that give *Le Pré aux clercs* its air of a tale – a tale in which we no longer think of History with a capital 'H', which it is left to *grand-opéra* to tackle. Nevertheless, neither of these two operatic works succeeds in incorporating the foundational tension of Mérimée's narrative, a blend of fascination with the horror of history and amused detachment from the codes of the historical narrative. No one opera can convey the split between radically different levels of the 'critical historical novel' invented by Mérimée. But the generic and aesthetic contrast between *Le Pré aux clercs* and *Les Huguenots* at least permits us, at one remove from the literary work, to realise how significant that split is.



Madame Casimir in the role of Isabelle.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Madame Casimir dans le rôle d'Isabelle.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.