

# Plot and libretto

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The order to write a libretto based on the story of Amadis came directly from Louis XIV. Its author, in 1684, was the playwright Philippe Quinault (1635-1688), and the work was to be set by Jean-Baptiste Lully. Understandably at that time in France's history, the subject was not much to the poet's liking. *Amadis* was the archetype of the chivalric romance, a category invented by the theorists of the Classical age with an undisguised pejorative intention: that of eradicating all medieval and Renaissance influences, considered unreasonable, though pleasant, from literature of the early modern period. Belonging to the early modern period, and a contemporary of those theorists of the Classical age, who included Boileau, as well as being a member of the French Academy since 1670, Quinault had every reason to have reservations about such a subject. Amadis belonged to another age, that of the Renaissance. The Spaniard Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo (d. 1504) had arranged the modern version of the anonymous fourteenth-century chivalric romance, and that had in turn been 'Gallicised' by Nicolas Herberay des Essarts in 1540, whose version was greeted with such enthusiasm at the Valois court that historiographers began to refer to the 'Amadis phenomenon'. It was also a favourite work of Henri IV, successor of the Valois kings and grandfather of Louis XIV, so much so that it came to be known as 'Henri IV's Bible'. However, after being such a source of delight to a Mannerist world on the decline, *Amadis* inevitably appeared dated to the following generation. Only Louis XIV's (unusually outmoded) taste for the work explains its adoption at that time as the subject for a *tragédie lyrique*.

Amadis, the Lion-knight (so called after the device on his shield), is the son of Perion, a fabulous king of Gaul. In the romantic history of Spain, the country where he accomplishes his feats of arms, in which he is never defeated, Amadis is basically the equivalent of the English King Arthur or the French Charlemagne. The hero falls in love with Oriana, daughter of Lisuarte, king of England, and determines to win her by his valour. He sets out in search of adventure, and takes part in the restoration of Princess Briolania to her throne. Mistaking his motives and believing him to be in love with the princess, Oriana rejects him, and Amadis, who loves her loyally, decides to withdraw from the world. In a secluded hermitage, Amadis the 'darkly beautiful' (a description earned by his personal appearance) leads a quiet life until Oriana finally believes his innocence. But then, just when the two lovers could at last be united, Oriana is carried away across the sea by the king of Rome, to whom her father has meanwhile promised her in marriage. Amadis pursues his rival's fleet, puts it to rout, and saves Oriana. After finally succeeding in winning over the English king, Amadis and Oriana are married. Quinault's libretto, as shortened by Devisme for Johann Christian Bach's *Amadis*, presents a very simplified – even elliptical – version of Amadis's adventures, focusing on Oriana's resentment towards Amadis, but without giving any explanation for it.

The seventeenth century conceived a deep aversion to the aesthetics of wonder and fantasy. Spanish authors, through the antihero of the picaresque novel, took a contrary approach to the codes of the chivalric romance. But it was Miguel de Cervantes (who nevertheless held the original in high esteem) who, in his parodic novel *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), most openly ridiculed the *topos* of the knight-errant constant in his love. The eponymous hero has read of the Lion-knight's great deeds and intends to follow in his footsteps; Dulcinea is his Oriana. Let us note, by the way, that shortly after the fifth revival of the Quinault-Lully work at the Académie Royale de Musique (8 November 1740), Joseph Bodin de Boismortier presented a work entitled *Don Quichotte chez la Duchesse* to a libretto by Charles-Simon Favart, based on an episode from

Cervantes's novel (12 February 1743). This *ballet comique* in three acts (Act I, 'A forest'; Act II, 'The Cave of Montesinos'; Act III, 'The Duchess's Gardens') could be seen in a way as prefiguring Devisme's shortened version of Quinault's text. Thus, after being admired as a hero by the Valois kings, Amadis became, rather, a subject of ridicule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

By a century after Quinault's initial misgivings, contemporary tastes had moved even further away from the magical world in which the knight errant Amadis accomplished his feats of arms. 'What interest can we hope to find in a plot based entirely on magic, in which, in the plan given by the first author [Quinault], the passions have no force, no energy; in which major conflicts are not allowed?' asked the *Mercure de France* in December 1779 (p. 194). 'Amadis should not have been altered; and that is perhaps the only criticism that can be levelled at the amateur [Devisme] for whose work and modesty it is hard to show recognition.'

The second half of the eighteenth century marked a return to a taste for seriousness, gravity, and, at the same time, verisimilitude: Amadis, a man who puts up with everything as if nothing really affects him, was too remote a hero for people of that time. After 1770, audiences appear to have had difficulty in accepting that world of convention in which nobody really suffers, people sigh when they ought to be heartbroken and their fate is settled by the timely arrival of a 'guardian angel' (such is Urgande's *raison d'être*). Audiences at that time were discovering the plays of Shakespeare through the adaptations of Jean-Francois Ducis (1733-1816) and were being moved by the sensational paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). Typically, when there was a small revival of interest in the figure of Amadis, it was for the wrong reasons – or rather, for reasons that had nothing to do with those that had ensured the success of the Spanish knight's adventures in the sixteenth century and beyond. Auguste Creuzé de Lesser (1771-1839), for example, was interested above all in its medieval flavour (an aspect that was completely alien to Quinault): that was the time of the French artistic movement of the Empire and Restoration periods known as the Troubadour Style (*Amadis de Gaule, poème*, 1813).

Is it any wonder that it is so hard to find any paintings or sculptures inspired by the story of Amadis? Even in the seventeenth century, when the chivalrous hero was still a possible subject, painters and sculptors, looking towards Italy as a reference and ignoring the Iberian Peninsula, had preferred to paint the characters of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (a good example being the Tancredi and Clorinda cycle painted by Ambroise Dubois – born Ambrosius Bosschaert – at Fontainebleau under Henri IV). In 1770 were they likely to take an interest in what they had every reason to regard as poppycock? The return to *le grand goût*, equated with the grand manner of Poussin and embodied in the Antique, called for the severe subjects of republican Rome, 'examples of virtues' and not the 'fable'. Amadis could not have served as a subject for an historical painting, and was clearly not even acceptable for one inspired by fiction. Thus, Fragonard, winner of the Prix de Rome, who had thus been immersed in Italian culture, painted *Renaud dans les jardins d'Armide*, inspired by Tasso; never did he paint the knight Amadis, who hailed from distant Iberia.

Finally, just a detail: *Amadis*, the Quinault-Lully work, was so called until the performance in 1699 of *Amadis de Grèce* by André Cardinal Destouches and Antoine Houdar de La Motte. From then on, the title *Amadis de Gaule* was commonly used to differentiate the earlier work from the latter. And it was the title adopted in 1779 for Johann Christian Bach's version, although the title page of the engraved score displayed the more fanciful *Amadis des Gaules* – a form that never found its way into the published libretto, however, and was never used by the press of the time.



At the turning-point between the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, the return to the Antique and to *le grand art* meant above all a return to models dating from the time of Louis XIV, whether in architecture (the columnar facades of the twin palaces in the Place de la Concorde, designed by Ange-Jacques Gabriel, were inspired by Perrault's great east front of the Louvre), painting (Greuze and David revered Poussin) or opera (this

time the model was double: Lully and Quinault). The 'Grand Siècle' invented by Voltaire was seen as the golden age of the early modern period, the reference in an art that was both national and elevated.

Thus, between 1767 and 1782, eight *tragédies lyriques* to librettos by Quinault were staged. Gradually, Lully, whose music had hitherto been retouched – his *Amadis* had been subjected to such treatment by Berton and La Borde in 1771 – was no longer celebrated other than virtually, and after 1771 none of the original works he wrote were revived at the Académie Royale. With the exception of a *Thésée* staged there by Devisme as an experiment in 1779, the Académie preferred to have entirely new scores. And so, in a complete reversal of the original situation during their lifetimes, Quinault (the librettist) prevailed over Lully (the composer) as the yardstick for *le grand goût français*. Quinault, who in his time had been considered quite minor, thus came to be seen as the guardian figure of French opera.

Of the eight librettos by Quinault that were restaged between 1767 and 1782, only two, *Thésée* and *Amadis*, were restaged several times. *Amadis*, revived in 1771, then 1779, not only reflects the switch from Lully to Quinault (by 1779 there was nothing left of the former's music), but also shows a surprising attitude towards a heritage now limited to its purely literary aspect. In 1771 Razins de Saint-Mard revised Quinault's text slightly: he retained the five-act structure and the prologue, and removed just one of the twenty-six scenes, thus respecting the original Quinault text almost in its entirety. Eight years later, however, that was no longer the case. Despite the *avertissement* placed at the beginning of the libretto printed for the performances ('We hope the audience will see herein only a desire to please, and not a bold and pretentious attempt to correct a famous poet, whose memory has been consecrated by so many master-pieces'), the alterations were considerable to say the least. Quinault's libretto was reduced from five to three acts; the prologue was omitted; only nineteen of the original twenty-six scenes survived. Of a total of 455 lines by Quinault, less than half remained (210) and 245 lines were rewritten by Devisme. So once Lully had gone, even Quinault's lines began to

be tampered with, the aim being to superimpose on Quinault's Classical aesthetic the contemporary dramatic logic of the *opera seria* as championed by Metastasis (concise plot, few characters, expression of violent and contrasting passions): in short, to 'purge' the text of all events considered to be of secondary importance, keeping only the basic plot, and thus making the work more succinct in order to capture the audience's full attention, while quickening the pace of the main plot: 'The aim is to condense the action and interest the spectator more, by speeding up the main plot' (*Journal de Paris*, 15 December 1779).

Thus, in 1779 two of the secondary characters, the pair of lovers Corisande and Florestan (brother of Amadis), disappeared completely, as did the enchanter Alquif, husband of Urgande. As for the latter, a fairy and Amadis's guardian, once the prologue had been omitted she became simply the *deus ex machina*, brought in to solve the plot and give the work its triumphant ending. The plot became more succinct with the compression into a three-act structure like the one Gluck was propagating at that time, which meant a reduction in the number of sets and divertissements required, thus bringing the *tragédie lyrique* closer to the Classical tragedy, and giving it greater strength and finesse by limiting the part played by elements henceforth considered to be of minor importance in the *grand genre sérieux*: machinery and ballets. Quinault's first act, boiled down to the amorous dispute between Amadis and Oriane, gains in Devisme's version an exposition scene presenting the desires for vengeance of Arcabonne and her brother Arcalaüs. The structure of Quinault's third act is respected, and it becomes Act II of Devisme's libretto, thus retaining its role as the middle act. But then Quinault's fourth and fifth acts are compressed into one to make Act III, with Quinault's fifth act becoming a vast choreographic divertissement at the end. We are reminded in this of *Les Scythes enchainés*, a *grand ballet pantomime* by Gossec, which had been used a few months previously as a conclusion for Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*.

The 1779 version of *Amadis* reflects the contradictory dual origin that Quinault had managed to overcome: French Classicism (the tragedy) and

Italian Baroque (taste for the spectacular and for ornamentation). The tragedy becomes ‘pathetic’ (through the condensing and speeding up of the action), but to make that acceptable it is attenuated by means of ornaments concentrated in the divertissements. The critical reception of this rewriting of the libretto was all in all very negative: ‘As for [Quinault’s libretto], we found it strangely mutilated. The author, without taking much trouble, has simply lopped off not only the prologue, but also the first act and the fifth; it is as if, considering a statue to be too large in its proportions, one were to chop off the head and the feet. This is a new way of shortening that we did not realise existed until now, a rare discovery, as one would expect of an invention by M. Alphonse Devisme.’ (*Anecdotes secrètes*, 16 December 1779.) But we cannot help wondering whether the fact that the latter was related to the director of the Paris Opéra was not in fact the main reason for that very bad reception. Ridiculing Alphonse Devisme (‘an artillery officer, brother of Monsieur le Directeur de l’Opéra’), whose ‘very ingenious repair work [...] is very much like the initiative of a man who, in order to strengthen a building, simply destroys its roof and foundations’ (*Correspondance littéraire*, December 1779), was then the surest way of stinging a director who, as we have seen, was highly contested.

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**ATYS**  
**TRAGÉDIE LYRIQUE**  
en Trois Actes

Représentée pour la première fois par l'Académie  
Royale de Musique, le Mardi 22 Février 1780.

*Paroles de QUINAULT*  
*Musique de M. PICCINNI.*


*Gravé et Corrigé par Huguet Musicien de la Comédie Italienne*  
en 1782.  
Prix 24<sup>th</sup>

A PARIS

Chez { *Le Suisse de l'Hotel de Noailles rue Saint-Honoré.*  
*De la Chevaliere, rue du Roule.*

*À Lyon chez Castaud.*  
*Et aux adresses ordinaires.*

AVEC PRIVILÉGE DU ROI. *Imprimé par B. L. V. T.*



Title page of Piccinni's *Atys*, another work contemporary with *Amadis* and set to a revised Quinault libretto. Collection of the French Academy in Rome.

Page de titre d'*Atys* de Piccinni, autre ouvrage contemporain d'*Amadis* à être conçu sur un ancien livret de Quinault retouché. Collection Académie de France à Rome.