

Velléda and *Sémélé*: final hesitations of the Institut de France prior to making a reactionary choice

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Anyone who hears the name of Velleda will then recall reading François-René de Chateaubriand's *Les Martyrs* (1809). Likewise, anyone who has Semele mentioned to them will be reminded of Gustave Moreau's painting, *Jupiter et Sémélé* (1895). Such might be the reactions of an intellectually-honest individual from today. Alas, such an instinctive response is contradicted by the matter of historical precision (such dates tend to be awkward like that), since *Sémélé* was set for the Prix de Rome candidates a few – yet still some – months prior to Moreau being commissioned by a rich amateur to create his version in oils. If Chateaubriand indeed provided the source of the cantata text for the 1888 competition examination (prior to him, Velleda, was regarded as being 'a prophetess active in Germania, where she was afterwards revered as a goddess', according to the *Dictionnaire abrégé de la fable* of 1787), it is unrealistic to consider Moreau as being the examination source for the year following the completion of his work of art. The positive aspect, however, of this cursory comparison between Chateaubriand and Moreau – two proponents of a similar aesthetic restraint, even of suppressed grief – is that it gets to the point of the question, to that idea borne out by later librettos (broadly speaking those used for the Prix de Rome competition over a twenty year period), accord-

ing to which, to paraphrase the preface of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, 'one is not a great artist through torturing one's soul'.

Between 1887 (*Didon*) and 1905 (*Maïa*), 17 of the 19 titles for the cantatas of Rome are also the names of female heroines (such as with *Velléda* and *Sémélé*), a figure unparalleled in the competition's history. Only the titles for *L'Interdit* (1891) – although clearly this derives from *Agnès de Méranie* by François Ponsard – and *Amadis* (1892) are not based upon this association. Moreover, this topic is not exhausted by the tendency to 'gender' the cantatas, given that all of these female figures relate to the same type – that of the passive heroine whose tragic fate is sealed by tenors and baritones (this follows a clearly commonplace vocal repertory plan of the time). For all that, thinking of this nature had not been applied to the Rome cantata exercise to such an extent. The 'strong woman' character, such as *Dalila*, *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Clytemnestre*, *Judith* or *Médée* (the titles for the cantatas of 1866, 1871, 1875, 1876 and 1879 respectively), had disappeared, except with *Frédégonde* (the cruel baritone-bass being replaced on this occasion by the mezzo soprano). In the time span being considered here, *Frédégonde* is indeed the only example of a cantata bearing the name of a woman driven by resentment (vengeance), of a woman who succeeds in causing the action of the male character (Chilipéric) to be altered; this she achieves when she obtains the head of the queen Galeswinthe from Chilipéric: 'What a lovely day, what joy / to sacrifice such a beautiful prey to my hatred', is how the libretto concludes. In those instances where a strong woman type appeared in the period between 1887 and 1905, this would never be more than one who had been defeated (*Didon* in 1887, *Cléopâtre* in 1890, *Sémiramis* in 1900), or one whose plans had been thwarted by some higher authority; this was the case with *Myrrha* (1901) who failed to revive the love (and his zeal in combat) of Sardanapale under the curses of the high priest Bélésis. Simply put, *the fin-de-siècle* cantata takes refuge behind a formula which until then had represented only one of a number of approaches – that of the soprano-heroine being the witness to her own tragedy, a tragedy engendered purely by male singers, be they tenors or baritones. Whether it had as its title

Antigone (1893) or *Radegonde* (1898), whether it had taken its inspiration from Celtic (*Mélusine*, *Alyssa*) or Greco-Roman fable (*Daphné*, *Callirhoé*), whether it might even be venturing into modern times such as with *Clarisse Harlow*, the subject matter for the cantata for the Prix de Rome honed in on a single type: that of the beautiful victim resigned to her fate. Should the explanation for this uniformity be sought through an internal analysis (the history of the medium in question), or through an external one (by considering the said medium within the context of its era: history, society, culture)? The second option clearly represents the more hazardous challenge of the two; it not only requires a command of the implied parallel disciplinary fields, but also of the often simplistic character of the interpretations to which it leads. By way of external analysis, let us stick to mentioning the deeply ‘conservative’ nature of these librettos, which convey the sacrosanct values of order and of moderation (evidently an overwhelmingly phallogocentric viewpoint in regard to the male–female relationship), a conservatism which the tests facing the then-young Third Republic might help to explain (the rise of Boulangism, 1888–1889; the wave of anarchist attacks, 1892–1894) and the lawful hardening of attitudes which these led to, on all – including the artistic – institutional levels. Having said that, let us limit ourselves to internal analysis. In this area, there is already plenty of material from which to draw upon, if only as a result of all those unhappy victims of men’s madness; and by recalling what was written by Chateaubriand (the author of *Velléda*) and what was painted by Gustave Moreau (the creator of *Jupiter et Sémélé*), we are brought back to our initial comparison point:

One is not a great writer through torturing one’s soul. The real tears are those which a beautiful poem sheds; admiration and pain need to be mixed together in equal doses. [...] These are the only tears destined to soften the strings of the lyre, and move its tones. The muses are celestial females who in no way disfigure their features by grimacing: when they cry, it is with the covert purpose of making themselves more beautiful.

(Preface to the first edition of *Atala*, 1801)

Just as Chateaubriand replaced the declamatory rhetoric of the passions with a more emotionally withdrawn aesthetic, Moreau wanted to relieve historical painting from the theatrical codes, from pantomimic gesturings and from the *tête d'expression*. The non-academic historical painting to which from the 1860s onwards he laid claim was that of interiorized drama, of restraint – he termed this 'contemplative immobility'. At the opposing ends of the century, neither Chateaubriand or Moreau imagined any longer that interior disorder should cause faces to grimace, that any gaping stare should disfigure them, or worse still, that they should go as far as to 'make gestures'. What they both thought should be avoided at all costs was poor pathos, what the Greeks used to call the 'parenthyrse' (the 'ill-timed emotion') and, alongside that, the avoidance of the motif of disorder as personified by strong women. So, the librettos for 1888 (*Velléda*) and 1889 (*Sémélé*) make for complete sense: that of the final wavering between the cantata's multiple meanings such as had been common up to that point (*Sémélé*) and its stabilizing into a unique formula-type (*Velléda*). Whilst all this was taking place precisely when the time for formal musical experiments (by Debussy, for example) seemed to be over and done with, the judges of the Académie des Beaux-Arts were overcome by a certain nervousness. And Paul Dukas was the first victim of this (given that he was never to win the prize).

It was the case that *Sémélé* could just as easily have been called *Junon* (so, the title had not been transparent, it had continued to be too open, the wife of Jupiter very often having the occasion to avenge herself of her rivals: Callisto, Europe, Io, etc.). In 1889, the Juno who defeats Sémélé – as Frédégonde did with Galeswinthe – is still a strong woman of the calibre of the Dalilas and Médées. And yet, the previous year, *Velléda* was still experimenting with the topic of the strong woman, but one who was already fallen, given that the druidess calling for rebellion against the Roman oppressor was demeaning herself with a guilty love for a Roman (Eudore); this provided the librettist with an opportunity to indulge in a fine stylistic exercise with the piling up of contrasts (Gaul/Rome; vestal/Christian) and missed dualisms (vestal Gaul/Roman, but Christian):

You were born a Gaul and a Vestal;
I am a son of Rome and a Christian!

Not only does Velléda abandon all warlike ambitions (it is therefore no longer a question of being ‘strong woman’), but the setting in which this ‘feminisation’ (or ‘demasculinisation’) is played out – each person recovering her rightful place according to the ‘natural order’ – serves to drain away all martial or heroic colour. Clearly, a cantata for a competition is but a modest form, and there was no question of the librettist trying to emulate the emphasis of a four or five-act *grand opéra* such as was written by Charles Lenepveu for his own *Velléda* (1882). All the same, however, it is astonishing to note the absence of any indication evoking what, in Book X of *Les Martyrs*, closes the ‘Velléda episode’: namely, a battle. For it is actually atop a chariot, right in the throng of armed men that the prophetess unceremoniously cuts her own throat. According to the methods customarily used in these not untypical scenarios, the libretto might have included indications such as, ‘The trumpets ring out’ (*Le Gladiateur*, 1883), ‘The triumphal march approaches. The awnings of the tent open out, David appears, at the head of all his soldiers’ (*La vision de Saül*, 1886), or ‘Clamouring is to be heard outside, cries of menace and death are raised in the heart of the assembled crowd’ (*L’Interdit*, 1891). However, even the scenery indications convey a restraint for which, really, no obligation had been felt by Chateaubriand. Other than the opening storm (‘Sounds of a tempest’), nothing recalls the wild and ominous landscape of Armorica: ‘A forest at the edge of a lake’ is all there is, as formulaically brief and ordinary as in many subsequent related occurrences (‘The edge of a wood, on the banks of the Ladon’, *Daphné*, 1894; ‘A forest. Night falls. Beneath mossy locations where, in some places, moonbeams are like mysterious marks of silver, a spring trickles’, *Mélysine*, 1896). What has become of the fantastic colouring of *Les Martyrs*’ prose? This ‘solitary, sad and stormy region, enveloped in fogs, echoing to the sound of the wind, and whose coasts bristling with rocks are battered by a wild ocean’, this fortified castle ‘built upon a rock, pressing against a forest and bathed by a

lake', which seems, even so, to provide the framework for Fernand Beissier's libretto for *Velléda*. The storm quieters almost as soon as it arises, offering to the observer only 'boats adrift on the gloomy shoreline'. Ségenax [the father of Velléda] may well have declaimed that 'Teutatès has spoken in the Druids' tree' and that he 'is after blood'. There is no question – in the stage directions – of that shrine, however much it was evoked in considerable detail at the beginning of Book X of *Les Martyrs*, and which, in the absence of an impossible battle field, could have rendered justice to Chateaubriand's text:

A dead tree, stripped of its bark by iron, was to be seen. Its pallor in the midst of black forest hollows was enough to identify this kind of phantasm. [...] Around this image, some oak trees whose roots had been splattered with human blood, carried arms and ensigns suspended in their branches, and they produced, when knocking against each other, sinister murmurs.

However, this was not a *topos* employed by the French operatic stage for which – with a minimalism which would have been perfectly suitable for the exercise of the cantata – the set decorator Ciceri had, in his time, devised a masterpiece of a stage setup: 'dreadful and wild place in the region of Stockholm', Act III of *Gustave III ou Le Bal masqué* by Auber (1833). Certainly these sets would only possess an indicative value, for composer and listener alike, for regardless of all this, the public performance of the winning cantata was carried out under the dome of the Institut de France:

An auditorium arranged as an amphitheatre, with a false Attica style aspect, into which the breathable breeze from outside is never allowed to enter and to ventilate the memories stacking up within, where the seats carefully keep the ancient dust safe, where the whiff of mould, inseparably united to something of a dreary and sacred nature, brings on headaches and consideration. This is the official venue where, each year, the Prix de

Rome are condemned to public execution. At the lowest part and in the centre, instead of the antique trivet in which myrrh and incense would be burned, an early modern-age stove, its mouth agape, peacefully puffs out lukewarm dust from its entrails. On one cut-off corner, next to some curves, is a fully open bay; it is over there where the musicians and their conductor appear, as though hovering in a cage. Some of them can be seen, nothing can be heard of them; but they are there because they have been there before. They will be there always, protected from any act of temerity by the sheltering wing of routine, one of the impassive guardians of the Institut, and the most stalwart. M. Vianesi raises his baton. From my place, I see only this baton. Not all of the orchestral musicians could say as much, unfortunately for them and for the listeners.

All this did not prevent, up till then (and this will also be the case for *Sémélé*), the stage directions becoming both increasingly numerous and precise in their detail. Together with that obliteration of the visual dimension (even of the virtual) of the cantatas, another symbolic detail can be revealed of this stylistic turning point which was then taking place: the choice of Rose Caron in the role of Velléda for the concert of the annual public session held on October 20, 1888 (she appears not to have been accustomed to this ceremony). For, beyond the obvious vocal importance of this choice, one of this singer's traits could not be ignored: her acting. Even in a 'concert version', the poise and presence of a singer counts and, in the case of *Velléda*, the weakening of the Gaulish prophetess' warrior urges, once she had become enamoured with Eudore (previously 'pride prevailed in this barbarian, and the exuberance of her emotions often led to trouble'), tallied completely with the slow and restrained acting of Rose Caron. A 'contemplative immobility' of which Degas was said to be an admirer and which he compared to the painted figures of Puvis de Chavannes (but which could easily also have borne comparison with the paintings of Moreau). This Rose Caron, he wrote, 'as she knows how to keep her arms up in the air for a long time, without there being any affectation – these slender and heavenly arms – then ever so slowly, she low-

ers them' (Edgar Degas, *Lettres*). The libretto itself, in its handling of the figure of Velléda, is improved by a quite unfaithful change made to the fictional character invented by Chateaubriand. And, so, Chateaubriand had not created – for this druidess – a 'celestial female who does not disfigure her features by grimacing', his claimed ideal (although this would be explained by the very secondary status of Velléda in *Les Martyrs*, whose true heroine is Cymodocée). Velléda is successively presented with her 'clothing in disarray, her hair dishevelled', 'as though she was delirious', and for her final appearance, 'leaning over her steeds, a woman in a frenzy'. In brief, a 'Fury', who 'grimaces'. Oh well, Bessier had made this gesturing barbarian worthy and, undoubtedly, Rose Caron would have dealt with it in *Atala*...

The contrast between the two cantatas set to music by Dukas, one with an understated Velléda and the other with a more emphatic Sémélé, look like the crossroads presented to the Institut de France. Juno's ire even lent itself to musical experimentations tinged with a certain modernity (in the line of the concessions made in the course of the 1880s), the wise restraint of the character of Velléda, in herself, was suggestive of a more conservative emphasis, a return to known territory for the academic institution. After the ebb and flow of 1888-1889 (*Velléda-Sémélé*), it was in the end the Velléda option that was chosen: the cantata for 1890 inaugurated ten years of academicism at the Académie.



The courtyard of the Institut de France at the time of the deliberations for the Prix de Rome in 1911. *Musica*, August 1911.

La cour de l'Institut pendant les délibérations du prix de Rome en 1911. *Musica*, août 1911.



The jury room of the Institut de France. *Musica*, November 1912.

La salle des délibérations de l'Institut. *Musica*, novembre 1912.