

La Vestale:
Dedication and Preface

Étienne de Jouy

TO HER MAJESTY THE EMPRESS QUEEN.

MADAM,

It is with an extreme lack of confidence in my own capacities that I dare to avail myself of the honour YOUR MAJESTY has done me by permitting her name to appear at the head of this work.

I am far from believing (whatever prejudice may be raised against the genre) that opera, which Corneille and Voltaire practised, is inferior to the other branches of the theatrical art. In the most brilliant era of our literary glory, Quinault, among so many other great writers, took up a place that posterity has preserved for him; and nowadays the author of *Œdipe à Colone* [Nicolas-François Guillard] has acquired a well-deserved reputation by following in the footsteps of that great model.

But the more I am convinced, MADAM, that a good opera can only be the work of a distinguished talent, the less I had the right to hope for the favour with which YOUR MAJESTY honours me: I am bound to see in it no more than a new effect of the universal encouragement, the inexhaustible benevolence which YOUR MAJESTY deigns to grant to all those who cultivate the arts, whatever the success of their efforts.

If I could have flattered myself, in composing this tragedy, that YOUR MAJESTY would deign to accept its homage, I dare to believe that that

idea, compensating for the talent which I lack, would have given me the wherewithal to make my work more worthy of YOUR MAJESTY'S august protection.

I am with deep respect, MADAM,
YOUR IMPERIAL AND ROYAL MAJESTY'S
most humble, most obedient servant, and faithful subject,
JOUY.



PREFACE:

The historical incident on which this play is based dates from the Year of Rome 269, and is recorded in Winkelmann's work entitled *Monumenti antichi inediti*. During the consulship of Q. Fabius and Servilius Cornelius, the Vestal *Gorgia*, smitten with the most violent passion for *Licinius*, a Sabine by origin, introduced him into the temple of Vesta one night when she was guarding the sacred flame. The two lovers were discovered; Gorgia was buried alive, and Licinius killed himself to escape the punishment prescribed by the law for his crime.

In proposing to bring to the operatic stage a plot whose crux, interest and details seem to me to be particularly suited to that type of spectacle, I did not conceal from myself the difficulties presented by the denouement.

Historical truth demanded that the guilty Vestal should suffer the death to which her transgression had exposed her; but was this dreadful catastrophe, which might, through the use of reported speech, find its place in a spoken tragedy, of such a nature that it could be consummated before the eyes of the spectator? I do not think so.

My decision to save the victim by a miracle, and to unite her with her beloved, may attract a further criticism. It will be objected that this ending is contrary to the most widespread notions, and to the inflexible laws to which the Vestals were subject. I would not think that I had sufficiently

justified the liberty I have taken by availing myself of all such liberties customary in the operatic genre to which this work belongs, and of all the concessions which have been made to that genre; and so I will try to demonstrate in a few words that by admitting, on behalf of the Vestal whom I depict upon the stage, an exception to the terrible law whose severity she had incurred, I have at least armed myself with historical pretexts.

No doubt I will not be asked to account for the miracle to which Julia owes her life: history mentions several Vestals snatched from death by this means, the secret of which the priests of Rome had no doubt kept to themselves. I even dare to believe that no one will quote Horace's precept against me:

Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus [inciderit].

[Let no god intervene, unless there appear a difficulty worthy of such a deliverer.]

But it was not enough to extricate the Vestal from her ordeal: the completion of the dramatic action required her to marry her lover; and while departing from history on this point of my work alone, I can still justify doing so on the basis of a number of facts hallowed by that same history.

It was commonly accepted among the Romans that the founder of their empire, Romulus, owed his birth to the union of the god *Mars* and the Vestal *Ilia*. We also know that *Heliogabalus* (in any other circumstance I would carefully refrain from appealing to such an authority) married the Vestal *Aquilia Severa*, and that the Senate invoked ancient precedents, which it may well have invented, to authorise a similar marriage. Finally, Dion Cassius speaks, though admittedly saying he himself does not believe it, of a Vestal named *Urbina* who was released from her vows by order of the Decemvirs, and married shortly afterwards.

It was my view that these accounts, however impugnable they may appear, were enough to meet the degree of verisimilitude required for the denouement of an operatic drama, especially given the fact that Racine,

in his tragedy *Britannicus*, deviated even more unashamedly from history by placing *Junia* among the Vestals, without being able to adduce any exception to the law which forbade a girl from being admitted into that order after the age of ten.

Durée 2 heures ½.

<i>Personnages.</i>	<i>Créateurs des rôles.</i>	<i>Emplois.</i>
<i>Sicinus.</i>	<i>M. M. Sainex.</i>	<i>1^{er} Tenor.</i>
<i>Le grand Pontife.</i>	<i>Douvis pie.</i>	<i>1^{er} Basse.</i>
<i>Cinna.</i>	<i>Sais.</i>	<i>Baryton.</i>
<i>Un consul.</i>	<i>Mcartin.</i>	<i>3^e Basse</i>
<i>Un aruspice.</i>	<i>Duparc.</i>	<i>2^e Basse.</i>
<i>La grande Vestale.</i>	<i>M^{lle} M^{lle} Maillard.</i>	<i>Forté chanteuse.</i>
<i>Julia.</i>	<i>Brancheu.</i>	<i>1^{er} chant^{er} dram.</i>
<i>Consuls.</i>	<i>Pêtres.</i>	<i>Victeurs.</i>
<i>Captifs.</i>	<i>Chef de l'Armée.</i>	
	<i>Gardiens.</i>	<i>Vestales.</i>
	<i>Peuple.</i>	

Page from the staging manual of *La Vestale* (mid-nineteenth century):
original cast list.

Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

Extrait du livret de mise en scène de *La Vestale* (milieu du XIX^e siècle) :
distribution originale.

Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris.