

Offenbach and the ‘féerie’

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It would appear that these whimsical characters and this crazy action are symbols, behind which one can hear humanity rocking with tears and laughter.

(Émile Zola, ‘La féerie et l’opérette’, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre*, Paris: Charpentier, 1881, p.357)

This is the view of the severe Émile Zola on the *féerie* and its universe in the chapter he dedicates to the genre in his *Naturalisme au théâtre* (1881), advocating the return of brilliant and talented authors, composers and designer so that ‘after our daytime dissections, *féeries* [may be], in the evening, the waking dream of all the greatness and beauties of humanity’ (p. 356).

Le Voyage dans la Lune (1875) is the last of the five works by Jacques Offenbach he designated as a *féerie*. When he first tackled the genre with *Le Roi Carotte* in 1872, it was, in the minds of the public of the time, primarily a visual entertainment in which, on principle, music was relegated to the background. In order to understand Offenbach’s position in this universe, whose theatrical potential was bound to attract him, it will be useful to sum up its origins and codes in order to understand the use he made of them throughout his career, his approach to creating *féeries* and his contribution to the genre.



THE *FÉERIE*: BIRTH AND DECADENCE OF A GENRE

The fairies met one day, and one of them, speaking in their name, had this to say: 'The lives of poor humans, which are so often oppressive, deserve our pity. The realities that surround them are sad enough. They have no true joys except in illusion and artifice. Let us allow them to summon us to their theatres.'

(Paul Ginisty, *La Féerie*, Paris: Louis Michaud, 1910, p.7)

The *féerie* traces its descent back to the *ballets de cour*, machine plays and *féeries foraines* (fairground shows) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It initially grew out of existing theatrical genres (*vaudeville*, melodrama, *opéra-comique*, opera, etc.), to which the suffix '-féerie' was added when the plot involved elements of the supernatural (fairies, magicians, talismans and so forth). Having adopted a Manichaean, moralistic template in the last decade of the eighteenth century in reaction to the events of the French Revolution, it instrumentalised large-scale spectacle to reinforce the pathos of its situations and thereby arouse audience emotion for didactic purposes. The *féerie* appeared at the same time as melodrama, where 'the fairy is represented by Providence' and 'the traitor plays a role that is not significantly different from the evil genius' (Ginisty). Hence authors, who generally specialised in one genre or the other, 'had to choose: either fairy tales [*féerie*] or real life' (Zola).

When it is not founded on folk tales, the dramaturgy of the *féerie* focuses essentially on a quest, most often for love, or a struggle between two opposing entities (which the addition of a prologue in the 1840s sometimes elucidates after the manner of eighteenth-century *opéras-ballets*) that provides the pretext for a fantastical journey. 'These journeys, in short, are the chief business, for they allow the set designers to take us deep into enchanted forests, into the pearly caves of the sea, through the unknown and marvellous realms of birds, fish or reptiles' (Zola). *Le Pied de mouton*, a *mélodrame-féerie* in three acts by Martainville and Ribié performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in 1806, became established as the model of the

genre and was revived throughout the nineteenth century: it very quickly gave rise to avatars bearing extravagant titles such as *Le Pied de bœuf et la Queue du chat* (a three-act piece in prose, 'mingled with songs, dances and combats', by Charrin fils and Redon, Théâtre des Jeunes Artistes, 1807).

The Romantic *féerie* also invoked the Devil, ghosts and other creatures of darkness, under the literary influence of Walter Scott, Goethe and E. T. A. Hoffmann: examples include *Les Pilules du Diable* (three acts, Laloue and Bourgeois, Cirque Olympique, 1839), *Les Cinq Cents Diables* (three acts and thirty tableaux, Dumanoir and D'Ennery, Théâtre de la Gaîté, 1854) and *Les Bibelots du Diable* (three acts and sixteen tableaux, Th. Cogniard and Clairville, Variétés, 1858). *Les Quatre Éléments* by Pixérécourt, Brazier and Dumersan (five acts, Gaîté, 1833) mocks this Romantic fad and even contains a ballet of the dead. In parallel, *opéra-comique* and opera also conjured up these fantastical beings in works such as Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* (1825), Hérold's *Zampa* (1831), Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) and Gounod's *Faust* (1859), giving their libretti a touch of *féerie*.

However, Paul Ginisty adds:

[...] there is always an old fairy whom no one invites to the party. [...] 'Very well', she said. [...] 'I have decided, in order to be avenged, [...] that this charming genre, calculated to tempt poets, and the finest among them, will soon fall into the hands of the *vaudevillistes* and that species of dreadful beings called [theatrical] professionals.'

(Ginisty, *La Féerie*, p.8)

Under the pen of authors such as the Cogniard brothers (*La Fille de l'air* in three acts, Folies Dramatiques, 1837; *La Biche au bois* in four acts and sixteen tableaux, Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, 1845; *La Chatte blanche* in three acts and twenty-two tableaux, Théâtre-National, 1852), the *féerie* abandoned the pathetic and moralising element to become an increasingly dizzying succession of tableaux with more and more spectacular staging in order to give its audience a (literal) change of scenery: its

producers set out to explore techniques of stage design with a view to constantly pushing back their limits. Hence it began to compete with the Opéra, even though music played only a secondary role, consisting essentially of *timbres* (verse songs [*couplets*] sung to popular tunes) inherited from *vaudeville*, along with incidental music and ballets, which were generally written by the theatres' conductors or by composers of ballroom dances or café-concert music.

The *féerie* grew increasingly extravagant and ended up generating its own parodies which borrowed its plots and its grandiloquent subtitles, such as *Le Fils de la Belle au bois dormant*, a *féerie* in three acts and ten tableaux 'supported by scene-changes in full view of the audience [*changements à vue*], *coups de théâtre* and knockabout comedy all over the place, axe fights and knife fights, adorned with transformation scenes, non sequiturs, witticisms and puns, embellished with special effects and scenery, and rounded off with fireworks and Bengal lights, all to the satisfaction of the audience' (Siraudin, Cholier and Lambert-Thiboust, Palais-Royal, 1858).

Following the 1864 decree liberalising the theatre business, theatrical managers sought to exploit their shows as long as possible in order to generate maximum profits; as a result, they often mounted revivals for which the original scenario was reworked. Dramaturgy was sacrificed to luxuriant staging, and every pretext was seized for introducing changes of scenery and showing scantily clad women in the ballets – the famous 'swimming costume roles' of the 'genre theatres' mentioned by Microscope when he speaks of *Cascadine*. A good example of this was the dazzling 1865 revival of *La Biche au bois*, to which Offenbach's rival Hervé contributed music.

Despite a few genuine attempts at renewal, among them Jules Verne's stage adaptations of his *Voyages extraordinaires*, the genre gradually fell out of favour in the late nineteenth century, having exhausted its exploration of theatrical techniques and suffering from the competition of the cinematograph. This new art form took over the codes of the older genre, notably in the filmed *féeries* of Georges Méliès, whose celebrated *le Voyage*

dans la Lune (1902) has more in common with Offenbach's work than with Verne's novel *De la Terre à la Lune*.

The *féerie* was also exported elsewhere in Europe and subsequently to the United States, where its stagecraft, its use of dance and its formal division into tableaux contributed to the blossoming of the American musical, of which Jerome Kern's *Show Boat* (1927) is one of the leading examples. The advent of the musical in 1920s France ushered in the return of the *opérette à grand spectacle* from the 1930s onwards (Joseph Szulc's *Sidonie Panache*, Maurice Yvain's *Au soleil du Mexique*, among others) before it entered a second decline, once again neglecting its dramaturgy in favour of spectacular staging.



OFFENBACH AND THE WORLD OF THE FÉERIE

Offenbach created a genre [...]. He was and will remain a milestone in the history of our society.

(Zola, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre*, p.368)

With *Le Roi Carotte* (1872), *Whittington* (1874) and *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1875), whose libretti focus on extravagant journeys in the purest *féerie* tradition, Offenbach provided all the elements inherent to the concept of the genre: marvellous events, sumptuous staging and extensive ballets. The same applies to the revised versions of *Orphée aux Enfers* (1874) and *Geneviève de Brabant* (1875), whose original libretti utilise the myths and legends that form the basis of the *féerie* repertory.

Although he did not officially take up the genre until *Le Roi Carotte*, Offenbach was not entirely unfamiliar with the world of the *féerie*: he wrote a new *ronde* for Zulma Bouffar to sing in an expanded revival of *La Fille de l'air* in 1864 and planned a *Panurge* in four acts and fourteen tableaux with Meilhac and Halévy for the Porte-Saint-Martin in 1867. In addition, hoping to pay off the debts incurred by his administration of

the Théâtre de la Gaîté in 1875, he chose to present another work by the Cogniard brothers, *La Chatte blanche*, with a revised text, writing some of the new music himself in order to renew its audience appeal.

In his works in the Romantic tradition, Offenbach was able to use the codes of the *féerie* for the sole purpose of enchanting his spectators. For example, he evoked supernatural elements in *Die Rheinnixen* (opera in four acts, Vienna, 1864), where the water-spirits of the Rhine participate in the action and its denouement by saving the protagonists from certain death. In 1865, he used the same musical devices to turn the appearance of Eros at the end of the first act of *Les Bergers* into a brief *féerie*-like moment.

In fact, though, he had already employed the traditional codes of the genre as early as 1857, in *Les Trois Baisers du Diable*, an *opérette fantastique* in one act that Albert de Lasalle's *Histoire des Bouffes-Parisiens* (1860) rightly describes as a *féerie*, mentioning that it 'included [...] stage illusions and scene changes in full view of the audience, illuminated by Bengal lights, which were sometimes pleasing in effect' (p.53). Yet by using the term 'opérette fantastique' Offenbach was trying to move closer to the effect of works such as *Robert le Diable* in the still restricted setting of his Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, and thereby to place himself in the tradition of the masters of the previous generation while at the same time demonstrating his musical savoir-faire.

The diabolical intervention of this early work naturally recurs in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, his *opéra fantastique* in four acts (1881) adapted from the *drame fantastique* by Barbier and Carré given at the Odéon in 1851. It is significant that Offenbach initially conceived *Les Contes*, with its world of living dolls, evil doctors and lost reflections, as a *féerie* for the Gaîté in 1873: is its plot depicting love's vain struggle against the evil being, which eventually leads to the redemption of the soul through art, not stamped with the traditional scheme of that genre?

But Offenbach's relationship with the *féerie* was even closer than that: he introduced several components of the genre into his *opéras-bouffes* in order to underline the absurdity of theatrical conventions. For example, when he tackled the myth of Bluebeard with Meilhac and Halévy in 1866,

he could not help resorting to the codes of the *féerie*, which often drew inspiration from the tales of Charles Perrault. Hence the fake resurrection of the terrible Bluebeard's wives, who are supposed to be dead, is accompanied by music reminiscent of the *féerie*, even though it involves no supernatural event: in the end, it merely illustrates the somewhat banal opening of a door. But, since we are immersed in a tale, albeit a parody of one, this thematic kinship justifies the recourse to the code of the *féerie*, and the audience laughs because it is entirely out of place in this context. The same spirit animates *Geneviève de Brabant* (1867 version), where the vision conjured up by the mechanical hermit, whose air parodies the style of the *timbres* used in *féeries*, shows Duke Sifroid and Charles Martel disporting themselves at the [nineteenth-century] Ball of Asnières. As in the duet 'Ô grandes leçons du passé' in *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867), the composer sets a certain grandeur alongside an incongruous banality: hence the practice of magic reveals only utterly commonplace things, which are therefore quite unexpected in their situation. Similarly, transformations are used for twin purposes: while the dismemberment of the magician Quiribibi in *Le Roi Carotte* might be imagined as appearing in a genuine fairytale, the metamorphosis of Jupiter into a fly to enable him to join Eurydice in *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858/1874) drapes the allusion to the infidelities of Napoleon III (and the bee that was the Napoleonic emblem) in a fairytale-like naïveté.

Supposedly magical talismans, whose merits are frequently vaunted in Offenbach's works after the manner of fairground mountebanks, often serve only to manipulate overly credulous characters by promising them the fulfilment of a deeply held desire. This is the case with Guido in *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme* (1859), who believes that he is giving human form to the cat of which he is enamoured, but which in fact is replaced by his cousin. After Guido has recited the invocation to Brahma while rubbing a talisman for which he has obviously paid a tidy sum, the libretto indicates that 'suddenly the curtains of the bed open to a roll of drums', revealing to the young man the cat Minette 'metamorphosed' into a young girl. In similar vein, the 'magic' pie brought by Drogon in the

1867 version of *Geneviève de Brabant*, the attributes of which are supposed to enable Duke Sifroid to have offspring at last, merely give him bad indigestion. However, 'It is from the queen of the fairies / That it derives its wonderful properties!' proclaims the little kitchen boy... only to admit in the next scene that 'my pie isn't enchanted at all, it's a pie like any other, but I wanted to get close to Madam Geneviève' (with whom he is in love). And as for the cider praised by Caprice in the scene with the fairground quacks in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which supposedly makes 'thin people fat and fat people thin' and benefits those who consume it in any and every circumstance, the only aim of his list of its virtues is to get Cosmos to drink some. Thus the magic of the talisman of *féerie* becomes no more than a huckster's sales pitch and a trick of sleight of hand, giving it a kinship with the charlatanism of the fairground. Its power thereby becomes much more dangerous than it seems, although Offenbach adorns these words with music that sounds good-natured and seemingly harmless: by playing on the character's credulity, Caprice manipulates him to get what he wants. Is this not the very image of the spectators at a *féerie* who, duped by the theatrical machinery and the illusion that constitute the convention of the genre, nevertheless buy their seats to escape from their daily life into a fictitious universe?

Offenbach's parodic use of the *féerie* form did not prevent the composer-impresario from spending colossal amounts of money on luxurious costumes and sets, sometimes at the risk of bankrupting his theatres. For instance, *Orphée aux Enfers* already resembled a *féerie* to some extent in 1858, an option very much confirmed by the expanded revival of 1874. Albert de Lasalle describes that earlier version:

The final tableau was extremely brilliant: it represented the underworld of mythology in its most vivid colours; all was palaces, arches, porticoes whose dizzying perspectives became lost in a sea of burning lava. [...] Everything was spinning, everything was ablaze, it was a Homeric orgy held in Babylonian palaces.

(Lassalle, *Histoire des Bouffes-parisiens*, p.77)

Similarly, the first two versions of *Geneviève de Brabant* contain typical elements of *féerie*. In 1859, the final tableau presents a ball entitled *Le Royaume de la Complainte* in which the most alluring female performers of the Bouffes-Parisiens personified old French songs. By contrast, the 1867 version for the Théâtre des Menus-Plaisirs already contains a ballet: should one not respect the convention of the genre when the basis for the plot is a legend from the Middle Ages?



OFFENBACH AS COMPOSER OF FÉERIES

In the theatre, a substantial framework must be set aside for the adorable truancy of the imagination. And the *féerie* is the perfect setting for this exquisite luxuriance.

(Zola, *Le Naturalisme au Théâtre*, p.355)

The scope for the spectacular in *féeries* placed greater demands on Offenbach's creativity than ever before. As usual, he took an active part in developing the libretto with his collaborators, constantly requesting changes. For example, he wrote to Victorien Sardou on the subject of *Le Roi Carotte*:

I agree with you, it's too long. And – even though I have already written my music – since we must above all move quickly, well then: after careful consideration, I believe we must cut the whole of the first tableau. [...] All this will make a genuine, quite extended introduction, as is necessary for a piece of the importance of *Le Roi Carotte*. [...] I find mercenary enthusiasm lengthy and pointless. – It has often been done before; I would prefer a sung march.

And, in another letter to the same correspondent:

As far as music is concerned, there won't be too much in the second act. [...] This ending [of the duet] will be better than the other one, without the excessively grand operatic style that one was bound to have, and we stay more in the vein of the *féerie*.

Though perfectly conscious of the demands and limitations of the genre, Offenbach nevertheless followed the approach of the fantastical or fairy-tale operas of earlier masters by writing not a *féerie* with a touch of opera, but an opera imbued with elements of *féerie*, as Halévy (*La Fée aux Roses*, 1849), Auber (*Le Cheval de bronze*, 1835), Boieldieu (*Le Petit Chaperon rouge*, 1818), Isouard (*Cendrillon*, 1810, and *Aladin ou La Lampe merveilleuse*, 1822), and even Grétry (*Zémire et Azor*, 1771) and Mozart (*Don Giovanni*, 1787, and *Die Zauberflöte*, 1791) had done before him. Incidentally, Offenbach was a great admirer of Mozart and must have seen the revivals of these two works in 1865 and 1866: they were an integral part of his musical culture when it came to handling the supernatural; so too was *Le Cheval de bronze*, in the premiere of which he had participated as a cellist in the Opéra-Comique orchestra.

Once the libretto and its music had been written, the composer made modifications during rehearsals to guarantee the desired effect: if he thought some element seemed to slow down the action, he would cut it without hesitation. In his book *Sur le plateau: souvenirs d'un librettiste* (1917), Albert Vanloo writes of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*:

Along with that, as a true man of the theatre he never let himself be dominated by the composer. I remember that in the third act [*sic*] there was a duet, 'the apple duet', which everyone in the theatre counted on for applause – and rightly so. In this duet, there were two solo verses [*couplets*], exquisitely scored, which we were counting on even more. One day, when I arrived, I learned that the verses had been removed:

'Why?' I said to him. 'They were bound to get an encore.'

'I'm very well aware of the fact. That's why I cut them. If they hadn't been likely to produce such an effect, I would have left them in. But that suc-

cess would have been detrimental to the success of the duet, which we need much more.'

All we could do was submit. But I know of few musicians who would have been capable of making such a drastic cut on the spot.

(Albert Vanloo, *Sur le plateau: souvenirs d'un librettiste*, Paris: Ollendorff, 1917, pp.99-100)

Since the *féerie* called for perfect coordination between the dramatic action and the stage machinery proper, authors and composers often had to make adjustments to allow the stagehands to achieve the effects required by the production. When rehearsals for *Le Voyage dans la Lune* began, Offenbach was already dividing his time between *La Boulangère a des écus* at the Variétés and *La Créole* at the Bouffes-Parisiens. Albert Visentini took over the Gaité after Offenbach's bankruptcy in 1875 and had been the theatre's conductor since *Le Roi Carotte*: his handwriting can be found on the composer's own manuscript, at one point developing the music during the change of scenery between the first and second tableaux of the first act, at another extending the orchestral postlude of the Act One Finale for the departure of the cannon, and before that orchestrating an ensemble that was finally reduced to straightforward incidental music for the entrance of the rocket.

As with *Le Roi Carotte* and *Orphée aux Enfers*, Offenbach recycled earlier music for *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. Having composed a new ballet entitled *Le Royaume de Neptune* in order to renew the appeal of *Orphée* in August 1874, he reused part of it with some adjustments: the Andante with horn solo from the Overture, which was to enjoy a new lease of life after Offenbach's death in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, the Dromedary March (no.13), and the Melodrama and Volcano Scene (no.30).



THE INNOVATIONS OF *LE VOYAGE DANS LA LUNE*

'In 1875 came *Le Voyage dans la Lune* [...] by Vanloo, Leterrier and A. Mortier, with music by Offenbach. Almost a milestone in the history of the *féerie*, or at least the beginning of an evolution', Paul Ginisty remarks (p.214). The observation is accurate, for although *Le Roi Carotte* is distinguished by a more elaborate stylistic and musical approach, it did not renew the dramaturgical themes of the *féerie* proper, even if a journalist noted:

This was no ordinary *féerie*, the stupid sort, arranged by any old hack scenarist [*carcassier*] for the sole pleasure of the eyes. We knew that [Victorien Sardou] [...] would give it what it had never had before, finesse, piquancy, originality, genuine fantasy [...]. And what wonders could not be expected from the collaboration of those two minds so well attuned to each other, Sardou and Offenbach!

(Gérôme, *L'Univers illustré*, 20 January 1872)

Unfortunately, the lack of success of *La Haine* (1874), a drama by the same author for which Offenbach had written a substantial amount of incidental music, thwarted their plans for a new *féerie* on the subject of Don Quixote and forced Offenbach to give up the direction of the Théâtre de la Gaîté.

Since Jules Verne's theatrical adaptation of *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* in 1874, which Zola placed in the category of the 'scientific drama', nevertheless remained close to the extravagant journeys of the old-fashioned *féeries*, true thematic renewal came with *Le Voyage dans la Lune*: the magic that had been the mainspring for the plot in the past now gave way to a fantasy science. This element, deriving from Verne's influence and testifying to the importance of science in this era of industrial progress, was to reappear in *Le Docteur Ox*, an *opéra-bouffe* in three acts and six tableaux premiered at the Variétés in 1877, a veritable little *féerie* with its sequence of tableaux and its use of stage effects. This led Zola to predict that 'the scientific spirit of the century, the analytical method,

the exact observation of facts, the return to nature through experimental study, will soon sweep away all our dramatic conventions and enliven the stage' ('Le drame scientifique', *Le Naturalisme au théâtre*, p.283).

Le Voyage dans la Lune also scrutinises society by depicting the reversal of values on the Moon, as well as formulating a possible critique of the *féerie* genre itself: by turning woman into a speculative value, does the libretto not point to the excessive exploitation of femininity in this type of spectacle? The science that replaces magic is itself called into question through the erroneous assertions (in the libretto, at least) of the scientists, who claim that neither the Moon nor the Earth has an atmosphere. If science permits the dissemination of love in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, does not *Le Docteur Ox* warn of the dangers it poses if it should go astray? This approach was resolutely novel in a genre that was concerned solely with outward appearances.

Émile Zola, fervent Naturalist though he was, finally admitted: 'I therefore confess my fondness for the *féerie*. It is, I repeat, the only theatrical setting in which I will accept disdain for reality. With it, we are in the midst of convention, in the midst of fantasy, and its charm lies in the possibility of deluding oneself, of evading all the realities of this world' (p.356). That attempt to escape from reality explains the craze for the *féerie* throughout the nineteenth century: it presents the image of an idealised life where problems are solved by magic. Its quest for a dream has withstood the passing of time, and the cinema, from its infancy onwards and once again supported by fantasy literature, has taken over the task of developing ingenious special effects in order to illustrate imaginary universes where magic reigns. In the twenty-first century, the Harry Potter series and *The Lord of the Rings* are brilliant cinematic descendants of the old *féeries* of the Gaité, the Porte-Saint-Martin and the Châtelet.

Although he designated only five of his scores as *opéras-féeries*, Jacques Offenbach never ceased to use the codes of the *féerie* throughout his career, taking them both at face value and ironically, highlighting the conventions of the genre while contributing to its renewal. Indeed, his very last

work to be premiered in Paris was a *féerie*: *Le Chat du Diable* (1893), the French version of *Whittington*, originally composed in English for London. Drawing on the heritage of Romanticism, he made use of every theatrical convention, whether comic, sentimental or spectacular, with the aim of arousing emotion in the spectator, right up to his final composition, the *opéra fantastique* *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, which achieves this subtle synthesis of genres one last time.



Title page of the *Valse des Chimères* after Offenbach (Léon Dufils).
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Page de titre de la *Valse des Chimères* d'après Offenbach (Léon Dufils).
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.



Henri Meyer, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin
(*Ballet de la Neige*), 1892. Jérôme Collomb Collection.

Henri Meyer, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* au théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin
(*Ballet de la Neige*), 1892. Collection Jérôme Collomb.