C. The Mythological Pastoral and Pastoral Opera

INTRODUCTION

The performances of Italian operas in Paris, with their magnificent sets, breathtaking machine effects, and the rapid set-changes devised by the machine wizard Giacomo Torelli, brought about a transformation in French stagecraft of the latter 1640s. While rudimentary special effects (as described by Bruscambille) had been part of French theatre since the late sixteenth century, Rossi's *Orfeo* and its 'marvellous set-changes, machines, and other inventions until now unknown in France' galvanized Parisian stage-designers. When the old Marais playhouse was destroyed by fire in 1644, the actors built a new theatre designed for the production of *pièces à grand spectacle*. Henceforth, the so-called 'Théâtre des Machines du Marais' marshalled the visual, mechanical, and performing arts to recreate an Olympian world of mythological gods, demigods, and the supernatural.

Early printed editions of pastoral drama devoted relatively little space to the description of stage décor, special effects, and music and dance. These variable aspects of a play's performance fell within the purview of the set-designer, composer, and choreographer, and hence would change with each new production. However, as French stagecraft improved, dramatists began to build their mythological dramas around a succession of predetermined spectacular events—usually with a minimum of one set-change per act. The role of the stage-designer, the composer, and the choreographers took on new importance in the late 1640s, as stage-machinists (Denis Buffequin, Giacomo Torelli, the Sieur de Beaulieu, and the Marquis de Sourdée), court composers (Dassoucy, Louis de Mollier, Michel Lambert), and dancing masters (Anthoine des Brosses) began creating the music, dance, and visual effects for these *pièces à grand spectacle*. The décor helped define the subject-matter of Boyer's *Ulysse dans l'Île de Circe* (1648), where, according to the author, 'the scene is different, according to the various machine changes'. In his preface to *Andromède* (1650), Corneille cautioned that the machine effects are more than mere ornament: 'in some ways they bring about the conflict and the resolution, and are so necessary to the play that you could not omit a single one without causing the entire edifice to collapse'. This new generation of mythological machine plays represented a united response to the challenge posed by Italian opera. By unifying the French dramatic, scenic, musical, and choreographic arts, these multigenre *pièces à grand spectacle* strove 'to hold the mind, the eyes, and the ears in equal enchantment'.

This combination of the arts had the support of many theorists, who recognized the importance of music in classical theatre and urged contemporary playwrights to follow suit. The sixteenth century knew that portions of Greek tragedy had been sung, for Julius Caesar Scaliger's *Poétiques libri septem* (1561) provided a vivid account of the music, dance, and instruments that accompanied the tragic chorus, as well as the modes most suitable for setting these choral odes. When many humanist playwrights began omitting choruses in their dramas, Pierre d'Aigalliers argued that sung choruses should be retained after each act, 'so that the stage might not be left empty and the audience become inattentive to the events in the tragedy'. Vauquelin de la Fresnay associated the instruments used in Renaissance morality plays (rebec, flute de bois, and bodon) with the ensembles of flutes that had accompanied performances of classical Greek drama.

The debate over the purpose of music and dance in contemporary French theatre continued well into the seventeenth century. Jean Chapelain urged dramatists to adopt the ancient use of choruses, music, and expressive dance. Jules de la Mesnildière drew a parallel between Greek drama (which united poetry, song, instrumental music, and dance) and contemporary ballet *de cour*, and he enjoined playwrights to return tragedy to its original musical form. Once having heard *

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2. An important early study of the evolution of the mythological machine play during this period is Gros, 'Origines de la tragédie lyrique', 161–93.
Italian opera, however, François d’Aubignac was doubtful about a drama set to continuous music, ‘no doubt the stage can indeed support music, but it must be introduced so as to whet the appetite—not engorge it’.12 Pierre Corneille’s Andromède was the first official attempt to unite the arts in a French mythological machine play. Corneille’s tragedy bore a superficial resemblance to Italian opera in its choice of subject, in its allegorical prologue, in its use of elaborate sets, staging, and abundance of machines, and in its combination of vocal solos, duets, choruses, and instrumental music. Andromède, however, was conceptually different from Italian opera, for its author strictly limited the role of music. Corneille’s Examen d’Andromède and the three Discours on theatre, which appeared in the 1660 edition of his plays, offer the dramatist’s reflections on the place and function of music in spoken drama.13 Corneille viewed the sung chorus in classical tragedy as a disruption to the dramatic flow:14

For either one paid attention to what was being sung, or one did not: if so, the mind of the listener would be too overworked, not having any moment to unwind; and if not, his mind would wander by the proximity of the singing—so that when the next act began he needed to strain his memory to recall what he had seen, and at what point the previous action had left off.

Instead, Corneille preferred purely instrumental entr’actes: for then ‘the listener’s mind would relax while they played, and even reflect upon what he had seen . . . and the short time that they perform allows him to remember, so that when the actors return he makes little effort to recall what transpired, and pick up where the play left off’.15

Corneille, nevertheless, felt that contemporary French drama lost an important lyrical element in the sung chorus, for its absence had forced dramatists to introduce a far greater number of episodes into their plays. ‘A chanson can be graceful there, and in machine plays it has again become necessary to occupy the ears of the listener with this ornament while the machines operate.’16 However, Corneille cautions that singing should be used ‘only to occupy the ears of the spectators while their eyes are fixed on seeing a machine descend or ascend, or while attracted to something that would have kept them from paying attention to what the actors had been saying’.17 As an adjunct to scenic spectacle, song should not convey information necessary for understanding the plot; ‘because in general words that are sung (which are poorly understood by the audience because of the confusion caused by the diversity of the voices that pronounce them together) would cause a great obscurity in the body of the work if they had to relate something of importance to the listener’.18 To this end, Corneille assigns the chorus communal sentiments formulated in hymns and prayers, where the general sense is always clear—regardless of whether the words are understood. When possible, Corneille has his chorus repeat lyrics sung first by solo voices, and, with a view to both practicality and dramatic verisimilitude, Corneille assigns one of his fictional characters the task of cueing the chorus.

Corneille’s musico-dramatic theories and their practical application in Andromède held sway over the mythological machine play for the next thirty-five years. When a revival of Andromède took place at the Comédie-Française in 1682, it was timed to coincide with Lully’s new opera Persée. By then, theorists had become more receptive to the aesthetic of opera. For Menestrier, ‘of all spectacles, there is none more accomplished that the représentations en musique’.19 He felt that theatrical song ‘is hardly less natural to man than the word’,20 while Perrault found operatic recitative to be ‘a declamation more marked and more pathetic than ordinary declamation’.21

13 Examen d’Andromède, Discours de l’utilité et des parties du poème dramatique, Discours de la tragédie, and Discours des trois unités d’action, de lieu, and de temps, all repr. in Théâtre complet, ed. Liévré and Cailliès, i. 6–92 and ii. 237–47.
14 Discours des trois unités; ibid. i. 71–3.
15 Ibid.
16 Discours de l’utilité et des parties du poème dramatique; ibid. i. 24.
17 Examen d’Andromède; ibid. ii. 243.