

Operatic Danaids

It is well known that the origins of opera involved an attempt to re-create the specific qualities that distinguished Greek tragedy. Why, then, were there so few attempts in opera's early stages to create musical adaptations of Greek tragedies? Many reasons have been suggested: both in its function as court entertainment and as a commercial theatrical genre, the "happy end" (*lieto fine*) was felt as a requirement of the genre (Burian 2012). And, as Gerbino (2009) points out, the literary roots of opera were deeply embedded in pastoral drama, a dramatic genre that did not exist in antiquity and which made only one kind of suffering, the suffering generated by love, the appropriate source of tragic pleasure.

This paper will examine the example of a Greek tragic myth brought to the operatic stage some forty times between 1658 (Cavalli's *Hipermestra*) and Mercadante's *Ipermestra* (1825). The source here was the subject of the final tragedy of Aeschylus' Danaid trilogy, but that play does not survive and the immediate sources for the libretti were Hyginus, *Fabula* 168 and Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.1.4. Despite the differences between their brief summaries, one sees how this story can be made to center on the sufferings of love, and that it could have a tragic ending or a *lieto fine*; indeed, it could have both. Danaus, King of Argos, orders his fifty daughters to slay their bridegrooms, the fifty sons of Danaus' brother Aegyptus, on their wedding night because of an oracle that foretold his death at the hands of one of his sons-in-law. Forty-nine obey, but Hypermestra spares her bridegroom, Lynceus, whom she loves. Danaus threatens their deaths, but in the end relents, and their union gives rise to the Argive royal house. (Thus Apollodorus, and the one substantial fragment of Aeschylus' lost play, Aphrodite's praise of marriage, suggests that this was Aeschylus' solution). The other daughters were made at their death to carry water endlessly to fill a leaky jar in the Underworld (thus Hyginus).

This paper will look at three of the most interesting of the Hypermestra operas, which offer three quite different ways of presenting the dramatic conflicts inherent in the subject, and three contrasting conclusions. Francesco Cavalli's *Hipermestra* (Florence 1658), to a libretto by G. A. Maniglia, invites us to consider the competing claims of different kinds of duty and love: *Hipermestra* must choose between her loyalty to her father and her beloved and, in saving Linceo, becomes a traitor to her king and country. At the same time, however, the plot is complicated by unrequited loves, jealousies and betrayals. Linceo, who fled when *Hipermestra* spares his life, returns to free her from prison, but convinced by his rival, the Argive general Arbante, that she has married another sets out to kill her and destroy Argos. In despair, *Hipermestra* throws herself off a tower, but is miraculously rescued as she falls—by a peacock! Linceo and *Hipermestra* are happily reunited.

Johann Adolf Hasse's *Ipermestra* (Vienna 1744), the first of many set to a libretto by Pietro Metastasio, suppresses much of the violence of the earlier version; gone are the forty-nine other brothers and sisters, leaving only *Ipermestra* with the dreadful burden of killing Linceo, which she refuses to do. After contemplating suicide, Linceo accedes to a plot to rebel against King Danao. Now *Ipermestra* rescues her father, as she had previously spared her betrothed, and when the uprising is suppressed, pleads for the lives of the rebels. Danaus pardons them and grants Linceo and *Ipermestra* permission to marry. *Lieto fine* indeed.

Antonio Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* (Paris 1784), a French adaptation by Du Roullet and Tschudi of a libretto by Calzabigi, is an impressive example of Gluckian *tragédie lyrique*, far sparer and clearer in its plot than Cavalli's or Hasse's. Like those, however, the pull between duty and love, between vengeance and mercy are at its heart. The first four acts are spacious, taking us through the wedding of the fifty couples and *Hypermnestre's* refusal to kill Lyncée as

we hear the cries of the other grooms being slain off stage. The final act moves very quickly and in distinctive and surprising directions. The Danaids, obeying their father, set out to find and kill Lyncée, but he arrives with an army and slaughters them. Trapped, Danaüs decides to kill Hypermnestre, but Lyncée's trusted companion Pélagus rescues her and kills her father. The final scene reveals the Underworld, where Danaüs and his daughters are being variously tortured and tormented. Only in this version are the truly tragic possibilities of the myth given their due.

Bibliography

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