3 Fictions and librettos

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> The verses which the librettist writes . . . are really a private letter to the composer . . . They must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.[1]

It is a cliché to observe that opera, and perhaps in particular grand opera, is a composite venture, and that it is from this very hybridity that its strengths are fashioned. One need only peruse the range of 'resources' discussed in Part I of this Companion to see that grand opera generates a form of cultural force-field in which otherwise disparate skills are focused in the service of a particular production (and a particular product which hopes to exceed the proverbial sum of its parts). If this is true of performance arts in general, then to the theatrical arts here we must add the musical faculties of orchestration and singing. Indeed, it is hard to resist the sense that these faculties are at the core of a cultural product to which the visual and the textual contribute but which they do not dominate.

One can imagine how the story of the relationship between grand opera and its textual complement, the libretto, might be idealised as a harmonious marriage of equal partners; purely aesthetic criticism would explore how the libretto supports or underpins the project of staging a particular opera. It would, however, probably be a mistake to claim that it is largely in such textual frameworks where we find the most conspicuous innovations of grand opera, innovations which might lead us to recall, for more than purely historical reasons, the merits of an essentially nineteenth-century genre as the twenty-first begins. This tension between words and music has a long history, of course, which is set into dramatic relief by Salieri's *Prima la musica et poi le parole* (1786) and Strauss's *Capriccio* (1942). Examples abound of the derision and contempt with which words for music have often been condemned: such as the observation in Act I scene 2 of Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Seville* that 'nowadays, what's not worth saying, you sing'; and Joseph Addison's quip in *The Spectator* in 1711 that 'nothing is capable of being well set to Musick that is not nonsense'.[2]

It would be wrong, however, to think that there is little that is particular and characteristic in the librettos around which grand operas are plotted. On the contrary, many of those operas which were intended for the Paris Opéra around and after the July Revolution of 1830 draw a link between the two senses of the French term 'histoire' by grounding their *story* (or plot) in specific incidents often located in medieval or Renaissance *history*.

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Although the politics behind such evocations may be complex,[3] the least that one can say is that many such representations do share a fascination for those crisis moments at which questions of nationhood come to the fore. Such a fascination needs to be contextualised in terms of European nationalism and Romantic historicism (whose taste for the Middle Ages was epitomised by the publication of Jean Froissart's fourteenth-century chronicles in the *Chroniques nationales* series of Alexandre Buchon), but its particular forms are usually the result of negotiation with those we might term the capitalists and managers of grand opera (directors, state sponsors and censors) and in particular negotiation between composer and librettist. The way in which this composite cultural product assembles different talents invites us to reconstruct the interpersonal relations upon which grand opera depended, and it is in the light of such a history of cultural production that we should temper any temptation to idealise grand opera as an unproblematic union of the arts.[4] It would often be wise to write 'negotiation' in ironical quotation marks, not least when the composer felt sufficiently powerful as to override the goals of the librettist by either prescription or a kind of artistic 'promiscuity' in which a dissatisfied Giacomo Meyerbeer, for example, might turn to other writers to find the satisfaction he desired or, as in the case of *Le Prophète* and *L'Africaine*, ask the librettist himself, Eugène Scribe, to 'show the outline to our mutual friend, Germain Delavigne'.[5] Other composers such as Wagner and Berlioz would rely on their own multiple talents to write librettos as the notion of composer as dramatist developed during the course of the century. Moreover, in the words of Brian Trowell:

> It is important to remember that a libretto is addressed in the first place to the composer, and that the convenience of an audience or critic is only a secondary function . . . It should not necessarily be assumed that the words always preceded and inspired the musical setting, or that, particularly in the texts of arias, the poet had an entirely free rein, as if he were writing verse for its own sake.[6]

In any event, it is to the libretto that we must turn if we wish to find the site of grand opera's poetry and plotting, even if that poetry should not be overrated and those plots were subject to pragmatic alterations in keeping with musical imperatives. Louis Véron, the director of the Paris Opéra from 1831 to 1835, argued that,

> It has been thought for a long time that there was nothing simpler than writing an opera libretto. That is a great mistake in literary criticism. An opera in five acts can come to life only if it has a very dramatic plot, involving the great passions of the human heart and powerful historical factors. This dramatic plot must, however, be capable of being taken in through the eyes, like the action of a ballet.[7]

As Didier van Mœre reminds us, 'Far from smiling at librettos as we often do today, criticism of the time was most pernickety on this matter'.[8] But it is important not to forget the problematic status of the libretto as poetic narrative, given in particular the hierarchy of contributions within the composite frame of the operatic product. As much as the music and language may aim at mutual enhancement, the music may be said to hold sway, not least in the mind of the audience who may well have some difficulty in following the intricacies of the plot and may indeed only display a limited interest in its detours and complexities.

This tension between contributing art forms in the production of opera (and here we must also include theatrical staging and dance, as well as the business of opera houses) is reflected in critical as well as popular responses to that product. Just as each contributor to an opera may have vied for some sort of influence within that hierarchy, so different critical traditions may be tempted to inflate the centrality of their own particular interests. Clearly the libretto fashions a narrative form in which certain musical and theatrical procedures are invited (e.g., certain types of staging on a grand scale). Textual and in particular literary criticism might as well avow, however, that plot and language (or what might be termed the performance of language) are probably not the source of the ultimate emotional power of grand opera. Indeed, although there are characteristic types of grand opera plot, it would be an error to see in the aesthetic texture of their language any great poetic innovations. It is not only artificial to isolate librettos from the rest of the operatic product, it is also painful to do so, for they are often rather blunt textual instruments intended to convey a plot, sometimes in rather basic terms, and to allow for the repetitions and inflected variations of song. We may at moments be tempted to sympathise with the Venetian Signora B's stipulation that nobody should bring a libretto into her box, even at the première. As Stendhal tells us in a reference to 'the sinful indiscretion of reading the libretto' in his *Life of Rossini*, she would have a summary of forty lines prepared and then during the performance be informed in four or five words of the theme of each aria, duet, or ensemble.[9]

Operatic narratives do not necessarily read well as poetry, fashioned as they often are with the broad brushstrokes of simple rhyme schemes and commonplace rhetoric. In the words of Théophile Gautier, 'The verses in librettos are rather mediocre, it is true; but we don't hear them and the music lends wings to the most lame and transfigures the most shapeless into sylphs or cupids.'[10] But these very limitations might invite a reading of them which is attuned to their cultural rather than purely literary resonance. The modern reader might best conceive of this relationship by drawing a contrast between, on the one hand, the ultimately supportive (if also animating and amplifying) role of the text in opera where music is to the fore, and on the other, the role of the *backing* track in film where plot, and thus the

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text, come to the fore. In both cases, though, the mediations of language are focused by the different types of immediacy offered by musical and visual pleasures. This tension between collaborators also stages the conflict between, on the one hand, burgeoning Romantic notions of individual genius (or the cult of authorial power allegorised as the 'aristocracy of the spirit') and, on the other, the manifestly collaborative nature of a project so vast as opera.

Nevertheless, the plot lends the music a narrative shape and creates patterns of character identification which compel the audience in its tracking of musical shapes and forms. Indeed, the role of language can be dynamic rather than merely vehicular, and the site of such dynamic interaction is of course in song. At the level of reception, it should also be noted that audiences may have been more aware of the historical (*Charles VI*) and cultural (*Les Troyens*) models than today we might imagine. These are some reasons why opera in particular may lend itself not merely to an account of its many components but also to a scholarly approach which is in itself composite or – to use the terminology of modern humanities research – interdisciplinary.

The most prolific author of grand opera librettos was undoubtedly that 'well qualified supplier'[11] Eugène Scribe (1791–1861), though this was by no means the only area of the performance arts where his considerable industry paid high dividends.[12] By 1820 'the inevitable Scribe'[13] had become the most popular playwright in Paris. We may find in grand opera a reflection of a number of the concerns of Romantic writing, not least in a desire to authenticate this otherwise 'extravagant art' by grounding its plots in historical particulars rather than what were perceived to be the abstractions of neoclassical culture. This dependence on the illuminating exemplarity of local colour found its most eloquent advocacy in Victor Hugo's preface to *Cromwell* (1827: see p. 59). In spite of a keenness for such authenticating specificity, Scribe did not preen himself on the narcissistic cult of Romantic subjectivity. If he had not been born with the name Scribe, it would have had to have been invented for him, as his view of his craft was in no small degree artisanal.[14] According to Karin Pendle:

> The constant use of ellipses and the almost complete lack of true poetry in Scribe's verses, the use of a single language and a single manner for all characters in all situations, indeed the presence of actual grammatical errors in his writing, did not sit well with the [critics].[15]

More recently, Herbert Schneider has stressed the practical side of this approach: 'Scribe's work during rehearsals and his strict control over the first performances after the première were both valued and feared.'[16] He made even the younger Meyerbeer effect multiple changes to *Robert le Diable*, such

Figure 7 *Question*: 'Why do foreigners understand Scribe's opera so easily?' *Answer*: 'Because they don't know French!' Drawn by Marcelin for *L'Illustration*, 12 January 1856.

was his sureness of touch after twenty years writing plays, *mélodrames*, and vaudevilles. He was, in Patrick J. Smith's phrase, 'a story planner and scene-and-act organizer',[17] who created librettos by astutely merging elements taken from disparate sources.

Rather than imagining himself to be a solitary Romantic genius, alone in his ivory tower (as Gérard de Nerval was to characterise his generation in *Sylvie* (1853)), Scribe was willing and able to work with others in the very writing of librettos themselves, hence the green-eyed jibe heard in the dispute over his subsequent election to the Académie française, 'We shouldn't give him a chair but a bench!'[18] His complete works are dedicated 'To my collaborators', and in particular to those fellow writers with whom he worked 'en société' (to borrow his own phrase, though Scribe seems to have been the dominant contributor in such collaborations[19]). From the very beginning French grand opera librettos were conceived of not as immutable expressions of a particular Romantic *génie* but as malleable responses to the needs of the Paris Opéra and its composers, not least Auber, Halévy, Meyerbeer and Verdi. Contracts permitting, the latter were not averse to altering certain texts which Scribe and his collaborators had generated, as for instance in Rossi's reworking of the character Marcel in *Les Huguenots*, written for Meyerbeer.[20] Grand opera librettos were not well-sealed artefacts; with neither the aura of the Romantic classic nor the autonomy of the 'well-made work' associated with Scribe's own spoken drama, they served rather than dictated the process of production and performance.

Although such a demystification of the text might suggest that its status is somehow subliterary, we should not conclude that the poetry and plotting of the text were uninfluential in terms of the audience's experience. On the contrary, Scribe's sense of the particularity of operatic staging meant that in spite of literary influences he would not base librettos on a drama so directly and with as few changes as Desriaux made in his version of

Voltaire's *Sémiramis* for Catel (1802). Whereas his opéras comiques usually took a novel, drama or other literary plot as their foundation, the influence of literature on his grand operas was diluted in a freer association involving various fictional works and historical 'facts'.[21]

In order to categorise the dramatic effects which underpin this achievement, critics as diverse as Smith and Anselm Gerhard still rely on the six characteristics defined in a thesis now almost half a century old: (i) the delayed-action plot in which obstacles come to the fore (see p. 169); (ii) the acceleration of suspense and action; (iii) the alternating focus on and fortunes of hero and antagonist; (iv) the logical order of climactic scenes; (v) the spectators' awareness of a central misunderstanding or *quiproquo*; and (vi) the reproduction in individual acts of the general delayed-action structure.[22] To these, Scribe's operas integrate the chorus as the natural allies of one or both sides, for as Schneider observes, 'opposition between different social or philosophical groups was at the root of Scribe's plots.'[23]

Amidst the many collaborative successes they enjoyed, Scribe worked on two grand opera librettos for Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1782–1871): *Gustave III* (1833), whose full-blown plot as an *opéra historique* was borrowed by Verdi in *Un ballo in maschera*, and *La Muette de Portici* (1828) with Germain Delavigne (1790–1868), often cited as the first grand opera.[24] Set, with the obsessive geographical and historical specificity of much grand opera, on 15 and 16 March 1792 in Stockholm, *Gustave III* turns on the cross-fertilisation of the love plot (between the composer-king and Amélie, the wife of his best friend Ankastrœm) with the unjust cabal against the king. Just as the king has renounced his transgressive desire, the 'historical magic' of Arvedson's prediction is fulfilled as Ankastrœm shoots him (see the jacket illustration). This theme of revolt echoes *La Muette de Portici* which is based on the events narrated in Raimond de Moirmoiron's *Mémoires sur la révolution de Naples de 1647*, when the people of Naples rose against their Spanish oppressors (and also on the 1631 eruption of Mount Vesuvius). This sets a tragic pattern for grand opera in which the ultimate price of national struggle is death (see Chapter 9). The play begins on the wedding day of Elvire and Alphonse, son of the Spanish viceroy, and Scribe triggers his characteristic delayed-action plot by the mimed account (shown in Ex. 9.1) of Alphonse's seduction of Fenella, her month-long imprisonment by the Viceroy, and her escape. The plot begins once Elvire has already come to Naples to be married and Masaniello has already started to dream of overthrowing the Spanish. A concern for national, ethnic and religious distinctions underpins the libretto written by Scribe for Jacques-François-Fromental Halévy's (1799–1862) *La Juive* (1835) which is set in Konstanz (Constance), Switzerland, in 1414 and recounts the tragic love of

the Christian, Léopold, who disguises himself as a Jew in order to see his beloved Rachel, only for her anti-Christian, social rather than biological father, Eléazar, to reveal when it is too late that she was not born a Jewess at all, but the daughter of the very Cardinal de Brogni who has condemned her. Only in sacrificial death is apotheosis possible. Four of Halévy's other grand operas were set in Renaissance or medieval Europe: *Guido et Ginevra* (1838), *La Reine de Chypre* (1841, with a libretto by Georges Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges (1799–1875)), *Charles VI* (1843, libretto by Casimir (1793–1843) and Germain Delavigne), and *Le Juif errant* (1852). In *La Juive*, as in *Guido et Ginevra*, the well-being of romance depends upon a paternal authority which wavers between tyranny and wisdom. Only a blessing by Ginevra's lost-and-found father, Médicis, can legitimate her passion for Guido. Scribe's 'spring-loaded' plot for *La Juive* follows sensations and revelations with moments of horrified reaction, often expressed as a grand static ensemble, the *pezzo concertato* of Italian tradition. Though the most obvious point of comparison may well be Lessing's 1779 drama of toleration, *Nathan der Weise*, critics have from the start been tempted to map the figure of Eléazar back to Shylock and Rachel to Rebecca from Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Certainly the influence of the historical novel as embodied by Scott pervades grand opera's attention to history as a process, while comparable motifs include the widowed Jewish father, 'the love affair spanning the cultural divide, and a scene centred on the woman's imminent execution'.[25] The ideal of toleration is brought into relief by a depiction of fanaticism comparable with representations of Saint-Bris (in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*), the Anabaptists (in the latter's *Le Prophète* (1849) which is set in the sixteenth century around the seizure and occupation of Münster by John of Leyden), and the priest of Brahma in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*.

One of the most testy yet fruitful relationships developed by Scribe involved him in the composition of librettos for Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864). As we have seen, the collaboration became more difficult with the passing years. Meyerbeer's creative ideas regularly preceded the casting of the libretto, since Scribe would be offered dummy texts with prosodic models carrying rhymes for him to follow. The cautionary function of these models, or *monstres* (monsters), is perhaps best understood in terms of its Latin etymology, *monere*, to warn. Certainly it was the music which appears to have balanced the more grotesque elements in *Robert le Diable* (1831) written by Scribe and Delavigne jointly in 1825–27 as a three-act opéra comique, and reworked in 1829–31 into the five-act form which would become typical of grand opera.[26] Like Max in *Der Freischütz*, Robert is tempted by magic in the pursuit of his beloved, the princess Isabelle. In its stretching of the bounds of plausibility it recalls Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* and M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* (later reworked by Scribe

as *La Nonne sanglante*), but it was the very prevalence of this literary mode which helped to fashion an audience amenable to such dark extravagance. Equally the figure of Bertram recalls Charles Maturin's tragedy, *Bertram* (1816), whilst operatic influences include Weber's *Der Freischütz* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

One of the most conspicuous choices of historical setting is to be found in *Les Huguenots* (1836) which is constructed around the Catholic massacre of Huguenots in Paris on the night preceding the feast of St Bartholomew, 24 August 1572, and thus returns to the theme of cohabiting rivals, whose difference is religious. Here as elsewhere librettist and composer signed a contract to cement the project. Whereas *Le Prophète* is a historical opera based merely on suggestions drawn from descriptions of the events themselves,[27] *Les Huguenots* is filtered through a novelistic conception of history. For not only did Scribe work on Emile Deschamps's model, but he also considered other paradigms, not least Mérimée's *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (1829), as well as Hérold's opéra comique based on the same source, *Le Pré-aux-Clercs*. Although Mérimée's melding of politico-religious violence and love plot does not offer the problems of scale imposed by other potential models of historical narrative such as Scott's and Dumas *père*'s, Scribe still telescopes his material using the delayed-action plot not only for the drama as a whole but also for individual acts. Rather than borrowing the array of Mérimée's characters, Scribe absorbs their dominant traits into a tighter range of individuals, bracketing out prominent historical figures such as Coligny and foregrounding the romance of Raoul and Valentine rather than the events of political history themselves.[28]

It would be simplistic to find in historical references some absolute marker of authenticity, for as Roland Barthes explains in his analysis of Balzac's technique of keeping historical figures such as Napoleon in the background of *La Comédie humaine*, 'it is precisely this meagre importance which confers on the historical character his *exact* weight in reality: this meagreness is the measure of authenticity.'[29] In fact, Mérimée's own account contains within Chapter 8's 'Dialogue between the reader and the author' a parodic self-distancing from the very assumptions of historical fiction about psychology and causality, inviting his reader in Byronic terms merely to 'suppose this supposition'.[30] Such a foregrounding of the process of cultural confection at the expense of claims to historical referentiality is completed by the very incompleteness of the ending: 'Did Mergy find consolation? Did Diane take another lover? I leave this decision to the reader, who, in this way, will always finish the novel as he pleases' (450). In parodying the genre of historical fiction as much as he indulges in its fetishising of the past, Mérimée is ironically not so distant from the self-conscious artifice of grand opera.

As with Halévy's *La Juive*, a post-Enlightenment discourse of religious toleration permeates *Les Huguenots* in a plot shape which is common to a number of grand operas. In conflicts between factionalism and romance, the cross-wires of personal and official affiliations (be the latter by blood, race, political or religious creed) lead to the sacrifice of the romantic connection. Even if it is true that 'Scribe's plays and operas are always well controlled and methodically carried out, no event occurring unexpectedly or without purpose', we should beware the conclusion that 'his characters are their own masters, moving in accordance with their own wills or plans, seldom subject to external control whether from human or superhuman sources. In this lies one of the essential differences between Scribe and the Romanticists.'[31] Among nine parallels between Walter Scott's novels and the world of opera, Jerome Mitchell locates the 'leading character who finds himself caught in the middle; he cannot . . . support either side because he has ties on both sides; he *wavers* . . . he himself has little control over what happens to him.'[32]

So general is the tragic schema present in *Les Huguenots* that it would be ridiculous to suggest that it is unique to grand opera, and its particular inflections in different operas mean that it might be misleading to reduce it to a 'Romeo and Juliet complex'. Nevertheless this structure of contrary imperatives (namely, the heart versus the rationale of official ties to collective groupings of church, party or family) facilitates the representation in the *grosse Szene* (or grand scene) of major historical moments in all their epic breadth, whilst implying the particularity of each person embodied in the chorus as crowd. The use of the group scene in Act III, for instance, allowed for the serial evocation of the simultaneity of the crowd which could not help but resonate in the echo chamber of post-revolutionary historical memory. In Act V's typically melodramatic scenario of delayed recognition, Saint-Bris only realises when it is too late that he has ordered his troops to fire on his own daughter who has renounced her faith in order to marry her beloved.

Though Scribe's personal writings convey an anti-authoritarian and anti-clerical liberalism, his pragmatic relativism made him suspicious of all absolute creeds and thus ambivalent on the topic which necessarily underpinned most reflections on history in nineteenth-century France: revolution.[33] In *Le Prophète* Scribe's Jean is something less than the mad fanatic: he dreams of his coronation but joins the Anabaptists in response to Oberthal's cruelty; and his fiancée Berthe's presence in Münster draws him there. The fact that such devotion is 'a far-cry from the real and enthusiastically polygamous John' reveals Scribe's dramatic wish to contrast two forms of idealism, one amorous and the other religious.[34]

As Edward Said has famously shown, the colonial project of nineteenth-century France amplified the cultural interest in exoticism, and Meyerbeer's

L'Africaine shares this tendency to fix otherness from the perspective of Western eyes.[35] Though the idea was first conceived in 1837, the opera was not premiered until 1865 after the composer's death: it was left to François-Joseph Fétis to supervise the final alterations to the work. That tendency, which Said discusses, to homogenise the exotic is evident in this bizarre title for an opera whose heroine is the Indian princess Sélika. Again the path of love links hegemonic (Portuguese) and dominated (Indian) groups in a way which reflects the structure of colonial power even though Vasco da Gama's shipwrecked crew is massacred by the Indians. The tragic chain of desire runs thus: Nélusko (whose ballad 'Adamastor, king of foul storms'[36] suggests Scribe's reliance on the sixteenth-century epic penned by Luis de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*) loves his fellow captive, the princess, who loves the European explorer Vasco, who in turn feels passionately about Inès. The European couple is released by Sélika to return home once their mutual passion is evident, while Nélusko joins Sélika in death by inhaling the poisonous perfume of the manchineel tree.

Scribe worked with Charles Duveyrier on Verdi's *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855: now more familiar as *I vespri siciliani*). As in the case of Wagner, grand opera allowed the composer to conjure with a theatrical framework which would bear more significant fruit later, though Verdi complained about the enormous five-act length required by French grand opera. Like *Don Carlos*, Verdi's opera drew on post-classical European history. This tale (set in Palermo in 1282 and already fictionalised in Lamothe-Langon's novel, *Jean de Procida*) recounts the efforts by Sicilians to dislodge their French invaders and is indeed reflected in the feuding between Scribe and Verdi which was discussed in the newspapers, and not swept under the carpet so as to present an apparently effortless product to the public. The libretto was adapted from a text on which both Halévy (for a brief spell in 1838) and Donizetti (intermittently but at some length from 1839) had worked without success. Verdi made it clear that he disliked the libretto which he said would offend the French because they are massacred at the end, and would offend the Italians because of the depiction of the treacherous behaviour of Sicilian patriots.

For however distant it might seem, medieval and Renaissance history offered a set of analogies by which the French audience of the second quarter of the nineteenth century could reflect upon the turbulent history of its own country in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, especially the alternation of republican and imperial régimes inaugurated by '1789 and all that'. Grand opera does not suggest that we merely learn *about* history, but rather that by implication and analogy we might learn *from* it.[37] Or in Lindenberger's words, 'The continuity between past and present is a central assertion in history plays of all times and styles'.[38] Such an operatic version of history is

defined in terms of those crisis moments in which the very existence of a nation may be put in jeopardy . . . or in which the nation itself may not yet exist. As Gary Schmidgall argues, '[the composer] and the librettist must search for moments in literature – call them lyric or explosive or hyperbolic – which permit them to rise to an operatic occasion', or in other words 'moments of expressive crisis' or 'nuclear moments in which potential musical and dramatic energy is locked'.[39] The precarious nature of national identity and security which underpins such dramatic possibilities also facilitates a form of counterfactual hypothesis particular to grand opera:

> Earlier works present history as a straightforwardly closed book, whether in background or foreground. Grand opera with a public political interest, however, comments upon history, repeatedly, through the dramatisation of opposition groups acting within a given society. The illusion is created, by the usual suspension of disbelief in the theatre, that history could have been different. Thus the spectator must consider why it was not different, and can analyse history as something in the making. The processes of power themselves are under scrutiny.[40]

Such moments abound in Gioacchino Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829), set to a text co-authored by Victor-Joseph Etienne de Jouy and Hippolyte Louis Florent Bis and inspired by the dramatic model of the early Schiller play *Wilhelm Tell*[41] in its account of the birth of the Swiss nation in the thirteenth century. Like *La Muette de Portici*, it reflects the revolt of an oppressed people against dictatorial foreign rulers. As Guillaume utters emblematically, 'All unjust power is fragile'. Once again we see factional conflict traversed by the bonds of love, though the ending resists its full potential for tragedy since the Swiss triumph and the Austrian Mathilde, whose brother Gesler is killed by Tell but who still loves the Swiss Arnold, finds refuge in the latter's arms. The personal and the political are not merely parallel plots which interweave in the dramatic dilemma of contrary affiliations to desire and duty but also mutually underpinning drives in the bid for secure identity. Family happiness, so Guillaume notes, can only be based on national integrity: 'A slave has no wives, a slave has no children!' Otherwise, 'there is no longer a fatherland' ['patrie'] (the connotation of paternity in the term 'patrie' signalling the metonymical relation between the traditional family and full nationhood). Here as elsewhere it is most productive to read the model neither as a slavishly transposed master-plot nor as an opportunistically stolen gem whose shine is dimmed, but instead as the name of a narrative field in which history and legend meet in ways which invite subsequent nuances and simplifications by librettists. The problematic quality of the original libretto by Jouy led to the revision by Bis. In the words of Jules Janin, 'If they ever decided to award a prize for the most dull production,

Messieurs Jouy and Bis would share the crown'.[42] Even afterwards changes had to be made by Armand Marrast and Adolphe Crémieux, as well as the composer himself. Still, the success of *Guillaume Tell* showed how older techniques might simply be reformed in the light of recent trends, even if its structure lacks the tightly constructed cohesion of a Scribean libretto.

A French version of that myth of national origins is encoded in Halévy's *Charles VI*. Suzanne Citron suggests how 'liberal and national history in the nineteenth century incorporates the imaginary constructed around the Frankish kings: Clovis, Charlemagne (annexed), Hugues Capet, this is already "France". Substituted for the Trojan myth, this myth of gallic origins spatialises continuity . . . The predestination of France is inscribed in the soil, it is geographical.'[43] Halévy's cautionary tale echoed themes witnessed in Népomucène Lemercier's banned 1820 play, *La Démence de Charles VI* (*The Madness of Charles VI*) and other fictions (see p. 245). Here critical interest lies not merely in the finessing of sources for the libretto written by the Delavigne brothers, but in the elucidation of a cultural mood attuned to the resonances of this tale. The crisis runs thus: can Odette (a fictional conflation of Odette de Champdivers and the Maid of Orleans) cure the mad king Charles so as to inspire revenge against the perfidious Albion? At first the king does not recognise his own son. Indeed his madness is exemplified by his confusion of terms in the metonymy linking family and state which we have already considered in the context of *Guillaume Tell*: 'He is right to call me father, all Frenchmen are my children'. By the end of the opera political and biological paternity are realigned as Charles dies confident in the belief that his son will lead the rebellion against the English: 'Your old king is dying . . . Long live the king!'

Odette uses the image of Charlemagne (the first king Charles after whom all others would be judged), found on a playing card turned over by Charles VI, as a model to inspire him. Indeed, inasmuch as such examples of grand opera offer cautionary tales of nationhood (and in this case invite censorship), they are also inspirational at a number of levels, breathing life (hence the etymology: *in* + *spirare*) back into the national past. As Odette tells the king, her father, Raymond, is 'guardian of these vaults, where your ancestors the kings sleep; he will watch over their tombs'. In other words it is his symbolic role to protect the heritage of the nation as a set of historical models to which the modern age must aspire. We find here a Janus-like gesture which promises to save the nation by such necromancy, raising the spirits of former heroes as Odette does when she leads French troops into the Eglise Saint-Denis in Act V scene 2, and by Charles passing on the beacon of national sovereignty to the Dauphin. Such an inspirational gesture might be said to emblematise the project of French grand opera in general, which breathes new life into the body of the nation and its shaping narratives.

The undermining of such hard-won national security by the moments of peripeteia provided by history sometimes finds expression in the disruption of formal ceremonies such as the malediction and excommunication which are imposed on Wagner's Rienzi as he enters the church expecting to be greeted by the *Te Deum*. Herbert Lindenberger sees in opera's oaths, curses, prayers, waltz interludes, marches and friendship-vow duets a 'ceremonial character, by means of which we are meant to feel ourselves overwhelmed by forces larger than ourselves'.[44] The irony is that even the confident staging of national identity and grandeur which such ceremony embodies is liable to interference by the historical process. In other words, the *mise en abyme* in such a staging of the theatre of state does not hold in the face of the *coups de théâtre* of events.

Indeed, in its tendency to depict history on an epic scale, the librettos imposed a considerable burden on the process of staging. As such it is worth asking just how grand could grand opera afford to be? At the opposing pole to the pared-down elegance of the neoclassical unities lay the threat that *histoire* as plot might acquire the potential formlessness of history itself. (The sprawling Romantic 'plays', Victor Hugo's *Cromwell* (1827) and Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio* (1834), were actually aimed at a reading audience rather than stage production.) The libretto for Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, authored largely by the composer himself on the basis of books 1, 2 and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid* (though Horace and Ovid are also footnoted), returns to Classical subject matter out of fashion in grand opera, due in no small part to the influence of a Romantic concern for the history of the second millennium AD. It nevertheless foregrounds the by now familiar force of the past. Enée is haunted by four spectres from his Trojan encounter: Priam, Chorèbe, Cassandre, and Hector – whose widow finally yields to Pyrrhus as he later reminds himself, Dido and, not least, the French public via an echo of Racine in Act IV. It also ends with a characteristic vision of a fractious and fractured future: Anna and Dido foresee the end of Carthage and the immortality of Rome, 'our sons against our sons', as we hear the first cries of the Punic War. The opera's function in the reconsolidation of a fabricated narrative of French nationhood which antedates the nineteenth century emerges from Citron's demystificatory prose: 'This tale is woven from textual sources intended to exalt the memory of the Frankish kings . . . in a mystical continuity going back to Clovis, whilst attributing to them prestigious Trojan origins.'[45]

The opera was not produced in its full five-act form until twenty-one years after the composer's death (in Karlsruhe, over two evenings, in German). The Paris Opéra failed it, and an unintended split was made. Acts III to V were premièred as *Les Troyens à Carthage* at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1863, and the first two acts, given the title *La Prise de Troie*, did not appear

in France until 1891, in Nice. Though the music is audacious, the language and structure of the libretto are less so; nevertheless the perceived significance of the libretto in its own right is underlined by the fact that Berlioz gave apparently successful readings of it before the good and the great of the Parisian cultural world.[46] In addition to that characteristic garnering of considerable forces including off-stage bands, Berlioz himself was aware that he had produced a 'Shakespeareanised Virgil'. Indeed, the Romantics' estimation of Shakespeare is visible not only in the influence of Lorenzo and Jessica's evocation of 'In such a night' from *The Merchant of Venice* on the love duet in Act IV (where Berlioz claimed merely to have 'edited' Shakespeare 'who is the real author of the words and music'[47]) but also in the mixture of genres, the wide geographical range of the action and the sharp juxtaposition of contrasted scenes (which reflects the techniques of *mélodrame* too). The growth of *mélodrame* on the French stage, from the late eighteenth century on, also exerted an influence in its use of historical and supernatural subjects, thrilling horror plots and all the attendant stage effects.[48]

The double life of librettos as both springboards to performance but also as texts in their own right allowed librettists to use the publication of their texts as a means of authenticating their project in terms of the literary and historical sources they used, not least by means of considerable footnotes. Even though the experiences of the opera-going public might not be directly affected by such bids at self-authentication, Berlioz for instance was keen to use such notes to articulate the cultural modelling left implicit in performance, explaining in Act V Dido's apparently mythical vision of her avenger Hannibal in a historical note which explains the Ancients' belief in such foresight on the verge of death. Such otherwise excessive gestures can be understood as a kind of mortgaged textual authority. Scribe himself had begun to add such notes in *Gustave III*, citing John Brown's *The Northern Courts* (see p. 181) and the composer-king's opera *Gustave Wasa*. In the case of Scribe, moreover, the *Œuvres complètes* allowed the librettist to publish his own text even if it were at odds with the version ultimately used for performance, the prime instance being the differences between his and Meyerbeer's versions of the text for *Les Huguenots*. In a gargantuan footnote which would look more at home in a doctoral thesis than a libretto Scribe also explains how *Les Vêpres siciliennes* 'unfortunately has no relation to Casimir Delavigne's version',[49] a five-act tragedy which appeared at the Odéon in 1819. Instead of literary sources, Scribe piles up historical references to Fazelli, Muratori and Giannone . . . but only in order to counter 'those who will as usual blame us for ignoring history', and to prove that he realises the fictitious nature of the tale of Jean de Procida's organised revolt. As in Mérimée's version of the St Bartholomew's Eve massacre, the

fascination centres on the mysterious forces by which a 'general revolution' emanates from sudden manifestations of popular displeasure without concerted planning and clearly delineated causes. Scribe uses historians in order to justify his recourse to myth by suggesting that it is the very formlessness of historical events and their very unfathomability which invite the licence of artists.

Berlioz was certainly not the only composer to write his own libretto for grand opera; nor was he the only composer to aspire to a verbal poetry which might do justice to his musical achievement. Wagner's *Rienzi* (first performed in Dresden in 1842) borrows its setting in mid-fourteenth-century Rome from literary sources. The composer (who was to theorise the importance of the libretto as poetic focus rather than parenthetical adjunct in *Oper und Drama*[50]) knew Bulwer-Lytton's quite epic novel of 1835, *Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes*, which had been translated into German by Bärmann (from whom he borrows directly in his evocation of the battle hymn in Act III scene 3, as he states in a footnote). In this cautionary tale the fickle people turn on their champion who is ultimately joined in death by his sister, Irene, and her beloved Adriano (who has already conveyed the sense of fatalism we have observed above in *Gustave III* in his anticipation of misfortune). The influence of Mary Mitford's 1828 tragedy, *Rienzi*, can also be seen in Wagner's condensation of Rienzi's two careers as tribune and senator into one (just as Rienzi absorbs any personal life into his political function with the words 'Rome will be the name of my bride!'). Such conflation in Mitford's 'beautiful Tragedy' is actually criticised in Lytton's preface to his first edition in a manner which reveals by implication the challenge facing grand opera as it, too, attempts to overcome 'the advantage possessed by the Novelist of embracing all that the Dramatist must reject'.[51] As we have seen, grand opera often constructs history in terms of its moments of inauguration and crisis, but here it resists the myth of an end to history, as the equation of political 'Freiheit' (freedom) with the 'Friede' (peace) of narrative stasis evoked in Act II by the Friedenboten (messengers of peace) is displaced by the nobles' appropriation of the same vocabulary of antithesis, 'Frechheit' (impudence) and 'Schmach' (ignominy), which motivated popular revolt in the opening act. The names attached to particular roles may change but the conflict borne of desire (political as well as sexual) remains, as the opera closes in flames and darkness. As we read in Lytton's cautionary appendix, 'the moral of the Tribune's life, and of this fiction, is not the stale and unprofitable moral that warns the ambition of an individual: – More vast, more solemn, and more useful, it addresses itself to nations.'[52]