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„TOUTE DANSE DOIT EXPRIMER, PEINDRE ...“:  
FINDING THE DRAMA IN THE OPERATIC DIVERTISSEMENT

by REBECCA HARRIS-WARRICK

The historiography of opera tends to take a dim view of dance. The tone was set in 1760 by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw dance as not only saturating French opera, but as doing so in the most useless possible way: „Is the prince joyous? His courtiers participate in his joy, and they dance. Is he sad? He must be cheered up and they dance.“<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau's view is widely shared in the 20th century: dance in opera is generally seen as a disruption, a decorative element with no dramatic function. Conductors often omit the dances altogether and too many musicologists merely nod in their direction before settling down to the serious business of the opera – the sung drama.

Yet such attitudes beg the question of why dance is such a fundamental part of French opera. The familiar explanation – that the French simply loved dance – while indisputable, surely does not suffice to explain why for over a century every act of every opera contained at least one danced divertissement. The Italians loved ballet as well, but since they usually relegated it to the status of entr'acte entertainment, its existence does not impinge on our conception of the operatic object. In French opera, however, the dancing occurs within the acts where it is interwoven with vocal music, and thus compels at least superficial acknowledgment. Yet all too often operatic dancing is treated, implicitly or explicitly, as if it were parenthetical, as something surrounded by the opera but that has very little to do with it. Now that opera studies have begun to open up toward the visual elements of the genre, in recognition that opera incorporates multiple systems of meaning, the time seems ripe to ask in a serious way what dance is doing inside of opera.

Whereas it is undeniable that dance signifies as spectacle that provides a feast for the eyes and ears, I have taken as my working hypothesis the notion that the creators of French opera had dramaturgical reasons for incorporating dance into their works; the question then becomes what those reasons might be. Because Quinault and Lully essentially „invented“ the genre of French opera, and because their works remained models for a century thereafter, I have taken their operas as a necessary point of departure. This paper will thus concentrate on the 17th-century repertoire, but will also take a look at what happened in the 18th century, as the changes that occurred then go a long way towards explaining Rousseau's – and our – negative impressions of operatic

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1760), as cited in Marian Hannah Winter, *The Pre-Romantic Ballet* (London 1974), p. 111; see also Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1996), pp. 17 and 281, n. 15, which cites the original passage in full, in both French and English.



dance. It will be limited to divertissements with the five acts of the *tragédie en musique*, and will discuss neither the prologue nor the genre of opera-ballet, both of which have their own conventions. The work presented here is part of a larger study of dance within French opera from Lully to Rameau, which is still in progress.

The title of this paper borrows a few words from Louis de Cahusac, one of Rameau's librettists, author of many of the dance articles in the *Encyclopédie*, and an ardent crusader on behalf of expression in dance. In his book of 1754, *La danse ancienne et moderne*, Cahusac pointed out what he saw as a paradox: the Paris Opera dancers of his day had reached unprecedented technical and artistic heights, but the dances they performed expressed nothing beyond the mere fact of movement. As part of his larger project of making dance imitative of both external actions and internal emotions, Cahusac offered a highly colored, but very instructive view of dance history, whose linchpin was none other than Philippe Quinault.

Quel étoit [le] dessein [de Quinault]? C'étoit ... de s'aider de la Danse pour faire marcher son action, pour l'animer, pour l'embellir, pour la conduire par des progrès successifs jusqu'à son parfait développement. ... Seroit-il possible qu'il eût fait entrer la Danse dans sa composition comme une partie principale, si elle n'avoit dû toujours agir, peindre, conserver en un mot, le caractère d'imitation & de représentation que doit avoir nécessairement tout ce qu'on introduit sur la Scène.<sup>2</sup>

Given that by the mid-18th century Lully's operas were generally regarded as stuffy and old-fashioned, such a strong defense of his librettist Quinault on the part of a dance reformer may seem surprising. But Cahusac was not alone in his admiration. Even Jean-Georges Noverre, choreographer and tireless crusader on behalf of pantomime ballet, defended Quinault's handling of operatic divertissements in his famous *Lettres sur la danse*, first published in 1760.<sup>3</sup> Such remarks sent me back to the operas themselves in an attempt to look at them from the perspective of people who were convinced of dance's expressive possibilities. Cahusac introduced his discussion with one of Quinault's most

<sup>2</sup> „What was Quinault's goal? It was...to use dance to advance the action, to animate it, to embellish it, to lead it by progressive stages to its perfect development. ... Is it possible that he would have introduced dance into his work as a principal component, if dance were not supposed to always act, to paint – in a word, to conserve the character of imitation and representation that everything placed on the stage must have?“ Louis de Cahusac, *La danse ancienne et moderne ou Traité historique de la danse* (The Hague, 1754; reprint Geneva 1971), Vol. 3, pp. 75–6. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> „J'ai toujours regretté, Monsieur, que M. Rameau n'ait pas associé son génie à celui de Quinault. Tous deux créateurs & tous deux inimitables, ils auroient été faits l'un pour l'autre.“ („I have always regretted that Rameau did not collaborate with Quinault. Both endowed with creative genius, they were made for each other.“) Noverre goes on to blame the weakness of these operas on Lully's „simple and monotonous airs“. Noverre, *Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets* (Stuttgart and Lyon 1760), Lettre VIII, pp. 134–35, as translated in *Letters on Dancing and Ballet*, trans. Cyril W. Beaumont (London 1930), pp. 58–9.



dramatic divertissements, from the fourth act of *Cadmus et Hermione*, and I would like to begin there as well.<sup>4</sup>

In the climax of both Lully's opera and the Greek origin myth on which it is based, the hero Cadmus kills the dragon and then distributes its teeth over a ploughed field as if they were seeds.

*Cadmus et Hermione*, IV-2:

Cadmus sème les dents du Dragon, dont la Terre produit des Soldats armés, qui se préparent d'abord à tourner leurs Armes contre Cadmus, mais il jette au milieu d'eux une manière de Grenade, que l'Amour lui a apportée qui se brise en plusieurs éclats, & qui inspire aux Combatans une fureur qui les oblige à combattre les uns contre les autres, & à s'entr'égorger eux-mêmes. Les cinq derniers qui demeurent vivants, viennent apporter leurs Armes aux pieds de Cadmus.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that aside from Cadmus, all of the characters mentioned here are dancers. Although no choreographies survive for this scene, the movements of the dancers must have been mimetic – that is, imitative of specific actions such as fighting and relinquishing their weapons. Two things are particularly striking about this divertissement: first, that the dancers clearly engage in some kind of pantomime, and second that the hero himself participates in the action, rather than observing the divertissement as a spectator. (The music in this divertissement consists of a single „Air pour les combattants“, in C major and in quadruple meter, with triadic figures set to dotted rhythms.) The dancers are so obviously essential to the plot, that the word „divertissement“ seems inappropriate for such a scene.

This is not, moreover, the only Lullian divertissement in which a protagonist participates in an active way alongside dancers. Two other examples come from *Thésée* and *Amadis*.

*Thésée*, III/7-8:

Les Habitants des Enfers expriment la douceur qu'ils trouvent dans les ordres que Médée leur donne de donner des frayeurs, & de faire de la peine à Aégélé ... Les Habitants des Enfers espouventent Aégélé, elle les fuit, & ils la suivent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The following and all other textual citations from Lully's operas are taken from the librettos published in Paris by Christophe Ballard in the year of the opera's premiere. Ballard later published a compendium of all the librettos from the opening of the Paris Opera under the title *Recueil général des opéra représentés par l'Académie Royale de Musique, depuis son établissement* (Paris 1703-1746); this series of publications has been issued in facsimile by Slatkine Reprints (Geneva 1971).

<sup>5</sup> „Cadmus sows the teeth of the dragon, from which the land produces armed soldiers, who at first turn their weapons against Cadmus. He, however, throws into their midst a kind of grenade that Cupid has given him. It breaks into many pieces, which force the soldiers to fight and slaughter each other. The five who remain alive at the end of the battle deposit their weapons at Cadmus's feet.“

<sup>6</sup> „The inhabitants of Hell express the sweetness they find in the orders Medea has given them of frightening Aégélé [Thésée's beloved] and making her suffer. ... The inhabitants of Hell scare Aégélé. She runs from them and they follow her.“



*Amadis*, II-7:

Plusieurs Demons sous la figure de Monstres terribles, s'efforcent en vain d'étonner & d'arrester Amadis: D'autres Demons sous la forme de Nymphes, de Bergers, & de Bergeres, prennent la place des Monstres, & enchantent Amadis. ... Amadis enchanté, croit voir Oriane. ... Amadis met son épée aux pieds de la Nymphé qu'il prend pour Oriane, & la suit avec empressement.<sup>7</sup>

In both cases a powerful sorceress has summoned demons to do her bidding: Medea wants Aeglé to abandon her love for Thésée because she herself wants to marry him; arousing fear is but one of the methods she attempts, although she ultimately fails in her goal. Arcabonne, on the other hand, succeeds in capturing Amadis through the ruse of disguising demons as seductive nymphs. Because the dancers directly engage with the protagonists and because their movements are to be read as some kind of purposeful action, it is easy to agree with Cahusac that such scenes participate in what he sees as Quinault's project of integrating dance with the unfolding of the plot.

It is much more common, however, for the singing protagonist *not* to participate in the movement of the divertissement – at least not physically. In the third act of *Atys*, the hero falls asleep and experiences dreams that are sent to him by the goddess Cybèle, who is in love with him.

*Atys*, III-4:

Les Songes agreables aprochent d'Atys, & par leurs chants, & par leur dances, luy font connoistre l'amour de Cybele, & le bonheur qu'il en doit esperer. ... Les songes funestes approchent d'Atys, & le menacent de la vengeance de Cybele s'il mesprise son amour, & s'il ne l'ayme pas avec fidelité.<sup>8</sup>

*Atys*'s sleeping body remains on stage, but he can only be said to participate in the sense that we in the audience are watching and hearing what is happening in his mind while he is dreaming. From a purely dramatic perspective, there are other means by which the audience could have learned about the dream. *Atys* could have narrated it, as *Armide* does her fateful dream in the first act of the eponymous opera. But Quinault and Lully chose to show us what is going on via a shift from the protagonist himself onto other bodies that stand in for his thoughts. This displacement foregrounds a central concern of *Atys*: the inhibitions on verbal expression. Throughout the entire opera the characters are unable to reveal to each other what is in their hearts: neither *Atys* nor *Sangaride* can make a declaration of love; each thinks the other is indifferent.

<sup>7</sup> „Several demons disguised as terrible monsters try in vain to astonish and stop Amadis. Other demons disguised as nymphs, shepherds, and shepherdesses replace the monsters and enchant Amadis. ... The enchanted Amadis thinks he sees [his beloved] Oriane. ... He places his sword at the feet of the nymph he takes to be Oriane and follows her eagerly.“

<sup>8</sup> „The good dreams approach Atys and by their songs and dances tell him of Cybèle's love and the happiness he may hope for from it. ... The bad dreams approach Atys and threaten him with Cybèle's vengeance if he scorns her love and does not love her faithfully.“



They speak via indirection, and the music sometimes reveals more than their words do. Even the most powerful character in the opera, the goddess Cybèle, cannot bring herself to make an open declaration of love to Atys, but sends dreams instead. The dancers in the *divertissement* thus have the task of making visible to us in the audience what the characters themselves only hint at in their words. Dance opens up a means of communication beyond the sung word by moving into the realm of the visual and the kinetic.<sup>9</sup>

In this scene from *Atys* the dancers unambiguously serve as an external projection of the hero's internal state, but the same phenomenon may be observed in other operas. Take, for example, another famous *divertissement*, the *trembleurs* in *Isis*.

*Isis*, IV-1:

Le Théâtre change, & represente l'Endroit le plus glacé de la Scythie. Des Peuples paroissent transis de froid.<sup>10</sup>

The implacable Juno is tormenting Io, Jupiter's latest love, by driving her through all the most dreadful regions of the earth, from the coldest climes to the hottest. The freezing cold that Io experiences in Scythia is made palpable for the audience not so much through her own complaints, but, even before she arrives on stage, through the shivering bodies of the dancers. Here again the burden of physical expression seems to have been shifted from the singer to the dancers, who become, in some sense, stand-ins for the heroine herself. In a Lully opera however, dance never detaches itself completely from the realm of the verbal, owing to the way *divertissements* are structured. Dance in these works is not an isolated event, but is embedded in a predominantly vocal context. Not only is the usual structure of a *divertissement* one that alternates vocal pieces with instrumental ones, the music itself makes connections between them. The dream sequence from *Atys* has a more complex structure than usual, but adheres to the general principle of pairing an instrumental dance with a vocal piece written in the same key, the same meter, and with similar melodic and rhythmic gestures. Example 1 shows a vocal air sung by Phantase, one of the creatures Atys sees in his dream („Que l'Amour a d'attraits“), followed by the „Entrée des songes agréables“. The two pieces are separate in the score, but both are in G minor, both are in triple meter, both start on beat two of the measure and have similar stepwise melodic writing.

<sup>9</sup> Those who saw the revival of Lully's *Atys* by Les Arts Florissants in 1987 will undoubtedly remember the spectacular staging of the dream sequence in the third act which showed how effective as drama such *divertissements* can be.

<sup>10</sup> „The scene changes and represents the coldest place in Scythia. The people appear numb with cold.“



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Acte III.

Que l'Amour a d'atraits, Lors qu'il commence, A faire sen :  
tir sa puis.sance. Que l'Amour a d'ac...traits, Lors qu'il com :  
men...ce, Pour ne fi...nir Ja...mais.

Entrée  
des Songes  
agrecables

Example 1: *Atys* III-4 (Paris: Baussen, 1709), p. 128.

In a case such as this, the musical connections are so strong that the audience perceives this pair of pieces as a single unit. A similar pairing occurs later in the same scene between the threatening air sung by a *Songe funeste* and the *entrée* for the dancing nightmares that follows, and the same procedure happens in the scene mentioned above from *Isis*, where the audience first



sees the shivering people and then hears, in very similar music, their voices quaking from the cold. This seamless musical structure, found in opera after opera, raises interesting questions in regard to staging. We can tell from the librettos that the singers and the dancers within the divertissements were different people. The 1676 libretto for *Atys* reveals that the cast for the dream sequence included twelve *Songes funestes chantants* and nine *Songes funestes dansants*. In a sense the roles in the divertissements were double cast, with singers and dancers playing the same characters. Some of the bodies sang and some of the bodies danced, but they were essentially the same people. This division of labor accords with what is known about the chorus at the Paris Opera – that beyond its entrances and exits it rarely moved. The practice was for the chorus to take up positions around the perimeter of the stage, leaving the center free for the solo singers and the dancers.<sup>11</sup> Some engravings of the period even show the chorus members seated, either around the edges of the stage or in cloud machines.<sup>12</sup> Given the immobility of the members of the chorus, the dancers thus become their moving surrogates.

The musical similarities between the component parts of song and dance could suggest that the dancers would move not only during the purely instrumental numbers, but also during the singing, and a number of contemporary choreographers reviving Baroque opera have accepted what seems to be a clear invitation to do just that. The weight of the evidence, however, suggests otherwise. The performance practice of such a scene was for there to be an alternation between movement and stasis: that is, that the dancers performed during the purely instrumental pieces, but stood still during the vocal numbers. In this way, the audience would focus first on the dance, then shift its attention to the sung text.<sup>13</sup> This paired structure – which is fundamental to Lully's divertissements – strongly suggests that the movements of the dances are to be „read“ through the lens of the vocal piece with which they are associated. Or to put it another way, the text of vocal piece „rubs off“, so to speak, on the dance, even when (as is often the case), the texted piece *follows* the dance. The sung text tells us not only about the song, but also what the dance is about. Thus the dance is not an abstract interruption, unrelated to its surroundings, but an expression of the same ideas as the vocal music via a different medium.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of how different groups of performers were deployed on stage, see Rebecca Harris-Warrick and Carol G. Marsh, *Musical Theatre at the Court of Louis XIV: „Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos“* (Cambridge 1994), pp. 48–66.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, François Lesure, *L'opéra classique français* (Geneva 1972), pp. 58–9.

<sup>13</sup> Stage directions in librettos sometimes provide indications of this practice; see, for example the final scene of *Bellérophon*, cited in Table 1 below: „Nine Lyciens separate from the group and dance an entrée, after which the People sing the two following strophes ...“. The clearest evidence, however, comes from *Le mariage de la Grosse Cathos* (1688), a masquerade by André Danican Philidor, which survives with dance notation by Jean Favier for the entire work; see n. 11 above.



What might this close connection to words suggest about the choreography? No choreographies survive from the original productions of Lully operas,<sup>14</sup> so one can only speculate; there are, however, various possible stances Lully's choreographers such as Beauchamps and d'Olivet could have taken. They might have seen the sung text as a spur toward greater mimesis in the choreography, encouraging them to engage in a kind of madrigalistic „text painting“ through movement. On the other hand, perhaps the proximity of words might have removed the need for mimesis from the dance and allowed the choreographers to make the dancers' movements more abstract. Pécour's theatrical choreographies from the era following Lully's death would seem to support the second hypothesis; however perhaps we have not yet learned to „read“ the movement vocabulary conveyed by the notation for all of its expressive content. Questions such as these remain to be thoroughly investigated.

The principle of the single focus for the audience's attention – either on dancing or on singing, both not on both simultaneously – seems very clear when the vocal number is a solo song or duet that is adjacent to an instrumental number. But the principle of alternation even seems to have held within choruses that invite dancing, such as the many celebratory choruses that have a „Chantons et dansons“ kind of text. Quite often such choruses have an internal structure that alternates instrumental phrases with sung ones; the latter are the places where the dancers would have participated. Only at the end of the chorus, once the text has become familiar through numerous repetitions, would the dancers be allowed to dance at the same time as the chorus was singing. Concrete evidence for this practice comes from the one fully choreographed stage work of the period, *Le mariage de la Grosse Cathos* (performed at Versailles in 1688; music by Phildor l'aîné, choreography by Jean Favier) and from the score for the machine play *Circé* by Thomas Corneille and Donneau de Visée, set to music by Marc-Antoine Charpentier in 1675.<sup>15</sup> In the *Circé* score, which is in Charpentier's own hand, the word „danceurs“ appears above the purely instrumental passages, the words „sans danceurs“ above the vocal passages; moreover, one of the instrumental passages that calls for the dancers lasts only a measure and a half before the singers re-enter and the dancers are instructed

<sup>14</sup> There are eleven choreographies set to music by Lully whose notation states that they were performed at the Paris Opera; all, however, date from revivals of the operas following Lully's death. See Rebecca Harris-Warrick, „Contexts for choreographies: Notated dances set to the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully,“ *Jean-Baptiste Lully: Actes du colloque/Kongreßbericht, Saint-Germain-en-Laye – Heidelberg 1987*, ed. J. de La Gorce and H. Schneider (Laaber 1990), pp. 433–55. For a catalogue of all the choreographies preserved in Feuillet notation, see Meredith Ellis Little and Carol G. Marsh, *La Danse Noble: An inventory of dances and sources* (Williamstown, New York, Nabburg 1992), henceforth LMC.

<sup>15</sup> F-Pn Vml 259. Regarding this work, see H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Les œuvres de Marc-Antoine Charpentier: Catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Picard, 1982), pp. 369–71 and Catherine Cessac, „March-Antoine Charpentier et les pièces à machines“, *Littératures classiques* 21 (1994), pp. 118–21.



to stop moving. Only on the last statement of the sung text does Charpentier's annotation read, „Icy les danseurs figurent sur la fin du chœur“ („Here the dancers perform for the end of the chorus“).<sup>16</sup>

The dance embedded in this particular chorus moves us into a different representational realm. The Lullian divertissements discussed up until now use dance either pantomimically or mimetically – that is, the movements of the dancers are to be read as some kind of action, not as dance. In some cases, as in the example of the soldiers from *Cadmus et Hermione*, the movements of the dancers have a genuine narrative function; more often their movements are emblematic of a physical state, as with the *trembleurs* in *Isis*, or of a type of character, as with the terrifying demons in so many operas. In divertissements of this type it is not difficult to argue that the dance fulfills a dramatic function, simply because it is not functioning as dance, but as action. Many of Quinault's divertissements belong to this type; *Cadmus et Hermione* alone has three such out of its five: the statues coming to life in Act 2; the ritual sacrifice in Act 3; and the battle in Act 4. It is no wonder that Cahusac so admired Quinault's ability to integrate what he called *actions de danse* into the larger operatic frame.

But many operatic divertissements are framed as celebrations, in which case the movements of the dancers are to be read as actual dancing – simply because at celebrations, one dances. The celebration need not necessarily take place on earth: in the fourth act of *Alceste*, which is set in the Underworld, „Les Suivants de Pluton se réjouissent de la venue d'Alceste dans les Enfers par une espece de fête“ („Pluto's followers celebrate the arrival of Alceste in Hell through a type of fête“). Cahusac pointed out that such celebrations, no matter where they are located, are motivated within operas, as in life, by joy; he himself saw them as a natural and desirable part of a theatrical work.<sup>17</sup> We have already seen, however, that his view was not shared by his contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Certainly it is this type of celebratory divertissement, where dance seems to function simply as entertainment, that has colored many people's impressions of divertissements in general, and led to the charge that they are dramatically superfluous. But is this charge justifiable?

Tables 1 and 2 provide outlines of two very similar divertissements, both of them celebrations of victory and love that conclude operas.<sup>18</sup> (Each outline combines information from the score and the libretto; the words in italics are stage directions that come from the libretto.) Even the set is similar: architectural constructions frame the stage, whose purpose is to provide a place for the members of the chorus to stand or sit. In the case of *Bellérophon*, the hero has killed the Chimera and won the hand of the princess, Philonoé. He

<sup>16</sup> In the 18th century this distinction of focus begins to loosen and as the century progresses one finds more and more choruses that are danced throughout; see the paper by Thomas Betzwieser in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Cahusac, *La danse*, Vol. 3, pp. 116–17.

<sup>18</sup> See p. 203 ff.



descends from the heavens in Pallas's chariot, sings a duet with his beloved, then watches the celebrations in his honor. In *Alceste* there is double reason for celebration: Alcide has gone down to the Underworld and brought back Alceste from the dead, but instead of keeping her for himself, as he had planned, his better nature triumphs and he restores her to her beloved, Admète.

The structure of the two celebratory scenes is also similar. Both open and close with choruses, which are then followed by an alternation of dances with dance songs. The brackets in the tables indicate close musical connections between song and dance pairs. In *Bellérophon*, for example, the piece, labeled „Second Air“ in the score, is an instrumental *canarie* in C major. It is followed without a break by the first verse of the chorus, which is also a *canarie* in C major, with very similar rhythms, although the shape of the melody is somewhat different. This alternating structure is then repeated, and the second bracket around the entire piece shows that it is really all one unit. Certainly it should be performed with the same beat throughout and no breaks between the vocal and instrumental sections. The dotted lines indicate looser, but still audible, musical connections between the separate pieces.

The *Alceste* divertissement is a bit longer, with three instrumental dances, not just two. The „Deuxième Air“ danced by the Shepherds is followed immediately by a very similar song by Straton. In the next pairing, the audience first sees a danced minuet, then hears a sung minuet, both of them in G minor and both with a similar rhythmic and melodic profile. What one never finds in a Lully/Quinault divertissement, even a celebratory one such as this, is a long string of instrumental dances without any intervening vocal music. In fact, the number of dance pieces is very restrained – usually two or three, and sometimes as few as one.

Despite the fact that the structure of these two divertissements is similar, the roles of the dancers are not. *Bellérophon* requires nine male dancers, identified as Lords, one of whom performs a solo; thus the dancers all represent a single group of characters. In *Alceste*, on the other hand, there are three groups of dancers: three male *bergers*, two *bergères*, and four *pâtres*. Whereas all of these people look after sheep, the librettist was clearly at pains to give them different functions. Although the score muddies the waters by assigning all three dances to the *pâtres*, the libretto makes it clear that the groups do, in fact, have independent functions.<sup>19</sup> The indications in square brackets include my hypotheses as to which group danced in each of the pièces, but the larger point is that the differences in the ways the dancers are deployed seem purposefully to reflect fundamental differences between the two operas.

<sup>19</sup> The librettos contain considerably more information about staging than do the contemporary scores, but since they tend to describe a whole scene at a time, it can sometimes be difficult to identify who danced in the individual pieces. My conclusions derive from comparing the different types of information found in librettos and scores in the light of evidence regarding general practices from theoretical and practical sources, including, when possible, dance notations.



The final chorus of *Alceste* makes explicit the dual nature of the celebration: it is a double chorus in which one group of singers honors Alcide, who has triumphed over himself, while the other choir honors the reunited lovers, Alceste and Admète. Initially the two vocal choirs alternate, then join their voices at the end. The staging indication shows that the dancers participate in this symbolic unification by making it visible: up until this point in the divertissement the *bergers* and the *pâtres* have been dancing separately, but in this chorus, they too join together, probably by alternating phrases at first, then dancing together at the end. The construction of the music – which not only alternates instrumental and vocal phrases, but involves two different instrumental textures – would permit such a choreography. The presence of shepherdesses as well as shepherds is also significant, given that one of the reconciliations being celebrated is between a man and a woman. In fact, it was probably during the minuet, the courtship dance par excellence, that this particular reconciliation was made visible. So whereas the dancers in this scene are so minor that they don't even have names, Beauchamps may well have choreographed the divertissement in order to provide visual resolution – enacted through dance – of the conflicts that underlie the plot of *Alceste*.

By way of contrast, the divertissement in *Bellérophon* seems odd precisely because there are no female dancing roles. In a scene celebrating a wedding, one would expect there to be at least one dance in which men and women dance together, for the obvious symbolic reasons that operate in *Alceste*. But here there are nine men – why? A choreography in Feuillet notation set to the music of this divertissement suggests a possible answer.<sup>20</sup> Even though there is no reason to believe that this particular choreography was used at the Paris Opera, it is for nine men and provides at least some idea of what Beauchamp might have done in this scene. The choreography opens with an extremely virtuosic *entrée grave* (set to the *Premier Air*), the most difficult kind of dance in the entire Baroque repertoire, performed first by the soloist, and then echoed by four of the men. This is a choreography about male prowess and power, about control and self-possession, about a leader and those who follow him. Anyone who has seen a male *entrée grave* danced well knows the thrill and awe it inspires. The *canarie* that follows is also technically difficult; it plays off the soloist against the group of eight; the nine men never dance simultaneously.

Even if the choreography Beauchamp composed for *Bellérophon* was quite different, we know at the very least that it involved a male soloist and eight other men. In the context of this opera such a choice deflects the spotlight

<sup>20</sup> „Balet de neuf Danseurs“, *Recueil de dances, composées par M. Feuillet* (Paris, 1700), pp. 67–84 (LMC 1320). For a more extended discussion of this choreography, see Rebecca Harris-Warrick, „Recovering the Lullian divertissement“, *Dance and music in French Baroque theatre: Sources and interpretations* (London: Institute of Advanced Musical Studies, King's College London, 1998), pp. 56–61.



away from Bellérophon the bridegroom and onto Bellérophon the hero. It is true that the solo dancer is an anonymous Lord, and not Bellérophon at all. However, a divertissement that so forcefully features a virtuosic, powerful male cannot help but resonate with the exploits of the hero who, in the fourth act, single-handedly killed the Chimera and saved his country from destruction. It can even be argued that the choreography of this divertissement gives the audience a different impression than do the words of the concluding chorus, which in typical fashion celebrate the pursuit of pleasure („Cherchons les ris, les jeux, et les plaisirs“). There are two systems of meaning operating here, and in this case they seem to be making different statements.

I would like to discuss one other divertissement that at least on the surface seems to serve no other purpose beyond entertainment. The last act of *Armide* opens with the formerly heroic Renaud now completely in thrall to the sorceress Armide. He has lost all desire for war and lives only for her. They express their love in an expansive duet (that is, expansive by Lullian standards). Armide, however, is uneasy; she knows that her power over Renaud depends purely on magic, so she decides to go consult the spirits of the Underworld, leaving him to be entertained by demons disguised as fortunate lovers. It is true that at this point in the opera Quinault had to find some mechanism for getting Armide off-stage so that Renaud could be rescued from his enchantment by Ubalde and the Chevalier Danois. But the enormous *passacaille* that follows completely overwhelms the minimal needs of the plot. The instrumental section alone takes several minutes to perform and is followed by an extended vocal section with soloist and chorus, a repeat of the entire instrumental *passacaille* and a repeat of part of the chorus. The entire complex takes about fifteen minutes to perform, although the music is so compelling that we hardly notice the time passing. But why is it there at all? What do these fortunate lovers have to do with the plot of the opera?

The libretto for the original production does not name the performers, so we know nothing more about them beyond the fact that both men and women (*Amants fortunés* and *Amantes heurueses*) danced in this divertissement. There are, however, three 18th-century choreographies set to the instrumental section of the *passacaille*, two of them for a solo woman, the other for a female duet. The one by Pécour, who succeeded Beauchamps as choreographer at the Paris Opera when Lully died, is particularly expressive and powerful, with startling changes of mood encompassing both the tender and the aggressive.<sup>21</sup> This choreography is associated with Mlle de Subligny, who danced in this divertissement in the 1703 revival of *Armide*. Whether this choreography dates from the 1703 revival or not, the fact that this piece of music is associated in

<sup>21</sup> The three choreographies are LMC 6480 and 6520, both by Anthony L'Abbé, and LMC 6560, by Pécour. This last has been the object of an extended analysis by Judith L. Schwartz, „The *passacaille* in Lully's *Armide*: phrase structure in the choreography and the music“, *Early Music* 26 (1998), pp. 300–320.



choreographic sources with women suggests that this scene represents another example of displacement from the body of the protagonist onto that of the dancer. Even though, as in *Bellérophon*, the solo dancer is not Armide, it is nonetheless Armide's powers of both sorcery and seduction that are on display in this passacaille. Cahusac speaks of the „ton de volupté qui regne dans la première partie de l'Acte“ („the tone of sensuality that governs the first part of the act“);<sup>22</sup> this is the place where the audience lets itself be seduced by Armide, just as Renaud has been. If the ending of the opera is to have any effect, the outcome needs to be in doubt. Will Renaud be able to free himself from the bonds of sensuality in which Armide has enmeshed him?

The power on display in this divertissement brings us to a central point about the social role dance plays in French operas in general and Lully's operas in particular. Because dance is always structured into an opera via a group scene, it participates in a social enterprise where issues of power come into play. Two common scenarios account for many Lullian divertissements: on the one hand, a malevolent being who is attempting to wield power to evil ends; on the other the celebratory divertissements that end so many operas, with the gods in their heavens and all right with the world. In both cases, the dancers and the members of the chorus, with whom they are identified, are representing the subjects of a powerful being, under whose orders they are either opening their mouths or springing into motion. The rulers over the divertissement – that is, the main characters in the opera – may be silent spectators, or even entirely absent, as was Armide in the scene just discussed. Nonetheless, the fact that such characters can put all these bodies into motion is a measure of their power. Thus these divertissements repeatedly enact for us the spectacle of both the proper and the improper uses of authority.

Other kinds of social relationships are also built into divertissements. In Act 3 of *Alceste*, for example, Admète has just learned that his wife Alceste has sacrificed herself to save him from death. After struggling to come to terms with the catastrophe via the moving dialogue chorus, „Alceste est morte,“ Admète faints. At this point a large group of mourners enters the stage, and expresses via both song and dance, the collective grief of the society upon the death of their queen.

*Alceste*, III-5:

Un transport de douleur saisit les deux troupes affligées, une partie déchire ses habits, l'autre s'arrache les cheveux, & chacun brise au pieds de l'image d'Alceste les ornements qu'il porte à la main.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cahusac, *La danse*, Vol. 3, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> „A transport of grief seizes the two troupes of mourners. Some of them rend their clothes, others tear their hair, and all of them break the ornaments they have been carrying at the feet of the image of Alceste“.



It could presumably be argued that such a scene is superfluous: we already know that Alceste is dead, and her own husband has already lamented her loss. The entire scene could be snipped out without requiring any musical adjustments on either side. But by so doing we would lose the voice of the society to which Alceste and Admète belong. Under the *ancien régime* the death of a queen was a dynastic loss that affected the entire body politic; it was mourned publicly and at great length. (When Louis XIV's own wife died in 1683, the court carried out official expressions of mourning for an entire year.) To eliminate this group scene from the opera would be to falsify the nature of the ritualized world of the French court which Lully's operas so clearly seek to uphold.

Dance in a Lully opera is thus enmeshed in a web of relationships – social, musical, and visual. If one were to cut the dance out of an opera, one should logically cut out everything that comes with it, i.e., the entire *divertissement*. This in turn would remove the societal element that is at the core of the *tragédie en musique* and that separates it so profoundly from *opera seria*, where the struggles of individuals take place in a social vacuum. Moreover, such a cut would remove the primary moments of musical expansion in Lullian opera, those in which rich orchestration, closed musical forms, and choral sonorities with abundant text repetition take over from the seamless blend of recitative and little airs, mostly set to continuo accompaniment and operating in something akin to real time, that characterizes the rest of the opera. In their musical sumptuousness, the *divertissements* have sometimes been seen as analogous to the arias in *opera seria*. From the perspective of a historiographic tradition that sees arias as dramatically central to opera (because, to cite Joseph Kerman's famous dictum, „in opera, the dramatist is the composer“<sup>24</sup>) Cahusac's view that in Metastasian opera the arias are dramatically superfluous and could be cut seems absurd.<sup>25</sup> Yet perhaps this startling perspective may serve to remind us that dance can also lay claim to contributing to operatic drama.

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York 1956), p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> Cahusac, *La danse*, Vol. 3, p. 60: „Le charme d'un pareil chant fait oublier apparemment ce défaut énorme de bienséance. Il est cependant d'autant plus inexcusable, que l'Aria n'est presque jamais qu'un morceau isolé & cousu sans art, à la fin de chaque Scène, qu'on peut l'ôter sans que l'action en souffre; & que, si on le supprimoit, elle y gagneroit presque toujours.“ („The charm of such a song makes one forget its enormous lack of appropriateness [Cahusac has been discussion issues of verisimilitude]. It is nonetheless all the more inexcusable that an aria is almost always an isolated piece that is attached without skill to the end of each scene and that could be removed without damaging the plot; if it were suppressed, the plot would almost always benefit.“)



It is an interesting exercise to read through the librettos of the *tragédies lyriques* composed after Lully's death, with an eye on the divertissements. The number of divertissements that engage the dancers in pantomime declines; celebratory divertissements, on the other hand, can be found in great number, in many different settings. The dancers may be costumed as sailors or sorcerers or nymphs or Egyptians, but they are dancing for the sake of dance, and the words of the neighboring vocal numbers so indicate. The librettist Houdar de Lamotte, author of such operas as *Amadis de Grèce* (1699) and *Alcyone* (1707) seems to have been the prime mover behind this change in emphasis; in his *tragédies* the divertissement becomes the centerpiece of each act, the tail that wags the dog. Librettos from this period also suggest that a shift was occurring from what seem to have been predominantly group dances in Lully's day toward a greater emphasis on solos and duets that showcased the talents of star dancers such as Mr Duprez, Mlle Sallé and Mlle Camargo. The number of dances in the scores increased. When Lully's operas were revived, new dance music was added to the divertissements to bring them up to date. Table 3 shows what happened to the fourth act of *Roland* over the years of revivals, as dancing character after dancing character got added to what had originally been a tightly structured, dramatically integrated scene.<sup>26</sup> Noverre was later to complain of the demands that the stars of the Opéra put on the choreographer for a sufficient number of solo *entrées* or for dances in characters appropriate to their abilities.<sup>27</sup> In other words, French dancers were beginning to behave like Italian *prime donne* in their demands for sufficient time in the spotlight.

Rameau's tragedies occupy an intriguing middle ground between the restrained Lullian tradition on the one hand and the radical expansion of the divertissement on the other. Two examples from Rameau's first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie* of 1733, will serve to make the point (see Table 4).<sup>28</sup> One barrier to providing a full answer to the question of how the divertissements work in *Hippolyte* is that compared to even the limited information provided by Quinault, Pellegrin's libretto is singularly uncommunicative about the staging. There are relatively few staging directions in general, and none at all for the divertissements beyond the terse „On danse“, which merely serves as a place-marker and indicates nothing about the nature of the movement. One may nonetheless infer that only the divertissement in Act 2 offers any kind of pantomimic possibilities. This divertissement, which is set in the Underworld where Thésée has gone in an attempt to rescue his friend Pirithous, could, in terms of its structure, be straight out of a Lully opera. It has only two dances, one of which is virtually identical to the adjacent chorus. Even the dance piece that is the

<sup>26</sup> See p. 206.

<sup>27</sup> Noverre, *Lettres sur la danse*, Letter VIII, pp. 169–71 and in Beaumont (trans.), *Letters*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>28</sup> See p. 206 f.



most independent musically – the „Premier air infernal“ – belongs to a familiar genre, that of the *entrée grave*, that often has more structural independence than other dances. (The same is true of the Premier Air in Act 5 of *Bellérophon* [Table 1], although there the key is the same as in the preceding chorus.) Thus as in the Quinault/Lully model, the dances are anchored by the sung texts and are smoothly integrated into their surroundings.

By Act 5, however, the connection between the dances and the vocal music has loosened and the structure has grown more diffuse. Instead of two dances, there are now six, including a substantial chaconne. Given that the number of vocal pieces does not increase in kind, the balance between song and dance becomes skewed. And whereas the opening march and chorus have musical connections to each other, the remaining dances are completely independent from their vocal surroundings. Moreover, in Act 4 Pellegrin passed up the opportunity to structure a divertissement around the mourning following Hippolyte's death; instead he opted for a pastoral scene earlier in the act that better allowed for pure dance. Not surprisingly, these celebratory divertissements take up more time; in Acts 4 and 5 they occupy about half of the elapsed time of each act. Presumably the institutional pressures on Pellegrin to allow the dancers to show off their *entrechats* were very great.

But there were counter pressures to this movement toward more and more display dancing. Not only was dance in the 18th century becoming more technically challenging, certain much admired dancers such as Marie Sallé were moving it in the direction of greater expression – expression in this case meaning capable of communicating both narrative ideas and their emotional content. In this new climate it is no wonder that Cahusac admired Quinault, whose librettos provide numerous opportunities for mimetic dance – decidedly more than the mere single instance in *Hippolyte*. Cahusac's own librettos for Rameau, with their *ballets figurés* that sometimes have quite detailed instructions for action, thus seem innovative when juxtaposed with a work like *Hippolyte et Aricie*.<sup>29</sup> But in a sense they mark a return to the aesthetic values of Quinault's operas, where dance and drama were more intimately allied. However, this alliance depended on the connection between words and dance, and ultimately it was the logic of dance, more and more severed from words, that imposed itself. Only two years after *Hippolyte*, in *Les Indes Galantes*, Rameau composed nine dance pieces in a row without any framing or explanatory vocal numbers – this for the „Ballet des Fleurs“, which tells an entire little story through dance. *Les Indes Galantes* belongs, of course, to the genre of opera-ballet, and it is true that the divertissements in Rameau's subsequent *tragédies lyriques* stayed closer to the Lullian model. But even there the connection between word and dance had become more tenuous, as we have seen in *Hippolyte*.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the chaconne in *Naïs*, I-7, which depicts an athletic contest involving in turn wrestling, boxing, and running, with one athlete ultimately being crowned the victor.



All these conflicting tendencies are in evidence in the architecture of Rameau's divertissements – the Lullian conception that pairs vocal and instrumental numbers, the long strings of dances for the star performers, and the move in the direction of an integrated, dramatic ballet-pantomime. Each of these structures has a different relationship to the surrounding drama, but one that is always more interesting than the many dismissive comments about dance in French opera would suggest. It is my hope that students of French opera will no longer treat the divertissements as if they had parentheses around them, but start taking a serious look at how they work.



Table 1

T. Corneille/Lully: *Bellérophon* (1679)

Divertissement from Act V

(The following outline combines information from the score and from the libretto for the 1680 performance at Saint-Germain, both of which were published in 1680 by C. Ballard.)

Stage description at the start of Act V:

*The stage represents a large courtyard in front of a palace that may be seen up above in the „gloire“. One may approach the courtyard via two large steps, which form the two sides of this oval stage set, and which are enclosed by two large architectural constructions of extraordinary height. The two steps and the galleries that surround them are filled with the people of Lycie, who are gathered in this place to welcome Bellérophon, whom Pallas is about to bring following his defeat of the Chimera.*

49 performers on stage in this scene:

- 4 solo singers: Pallas, the King, Bellérophon, Philonoé
- a chorus of „peoples of different nations“ (26 men, 6 women)
- 4 trumpeters
- 1 Lord dancing a solo (Lestang the younger)
- 8 other Lords, followers of the first, dancing

#### SCENE DERNIÈRE

(At the start of this scene, the goddess Pallas descends in a chariot with Bellérophon. She says he is to marry the princess, and tells the crowd to show their joy and to thank the gods. After a short duet between Bellérophon and Philonoé, the divertissement begins.)

*One now hears the drums and the trumpets, and all the other instruments, whose sound blends with the acclamations of the People who sing the following words.*

-----  
| CHŒUR DE PEUPLE

| Le plus grand des Heros rend le calme à la terre,  
| Il fait cesser les horreurs de la guerre.  
| Joüissons à jamais/Des douceurs de la paix.

|  
| *Nine Lycians separate from the group and dance an entrée, after which the People sing the two following strophes, to the sound of the drums, the trumpets, and all the other instruments. [The staging note at the start of the scene shows that the dancers consisted of one soloist and a group of eight.]*

PREMIER AIR [*Entrée grave in duple meter, C+, dotted rhythms, binary structure*]



SECOND AIR [*Canarie* in 6/4, C+, binary structure]

CHŒUR DE PEUPLE [*Canarie* rhythms, in 6/4, C+, binary structure]

(2 strophes celebrate the pleasures of peace that Bellérophon has restored.)

1) Les plaisirs nous préparent leurs charmes, . . . [4 more lines of text]  
Cherchons les jeux, les ris & les amours.

Repeat of the SECOND AIR

Second strophe of the CHORUS

2) Que la paix qui succède à la peine . . .  
Cherchons les ris, les jeux & les plaisirs.



## Table 2

Quinault/Lully, *Alceste* (1674)  
Divertissement from Act V

(The following outline combines information from the critical edition published by Prunières in Lully's *Oeuvres complètes* [based on 17th-century manuscript scores] and the 1677 libretto, published by C. Ballard for a performance at Fontainebleau.)

Stage description at the start of Act V:

*The stage represents a triumphal arch between two amphitheatres, where a multitude of different peoples of Greece are assembled to greet Alcide, returning from his triumph over the Underworld.*

39 performers on stage in this scene:

6 solo singers: Apollon, Alceste, Admète, Alcide, Straton, Céphise

18 Peuples Grecs chantants

3 Bergers dansants: Beauchamps dancing a solo plus 2 other men

2 Bergères dansantes

4 Pastres dansants

6 Flûtes dans la gloire

(In scenes 4 and 5 Alcide, who has brought Alceste back from the Underworld, decides to restore her to Admète rather than keep her for himself. Apollo descends from the heavens for the double celebration of the love of Alceste and Admète and of the victory of Alcide over himself.)

## SCÈNE DERNIÈRE

*A troupe of shepherds and shepherdesses (Bergers & Bergeres) and a troupe of Pastres, some of whom sing and the others of whom dance, come contribute to the celebration by order of Apollo.*

CHŒUR de Muses, Thessaliens, et Bergers [double chorus in 3, G-minor, ABA]

Chantons, chantons, faisons entendre / Nos chansons jusques dans les cieux.

PREMIER AIR pour les Pastres

[in ̸, G-minor, binary; probably danced by the 3 bergers, including the soloist]



DEUXIEME AIR pour les Pastres

[in 2, B<sup>b</sup>+, binary; probably danced by the 4 pastres]

STRATON

„A quoy bon / Tant de raison / Dans le bel âge“

[in 4, B<sup>b</sup>+, musically similar to the Deuxième Air]

TROISIEME AIR pour les Pastres (Menuet)

[in 3, G-minor, binary; probably danced by the 2 bergers and 2 bergères]

CEPHISE

„C'est la saison d'aimer / Quand on sçait plaire“

[in 3, G minor, menuet en rondeau]

*The troupe of Bergers dances with the troupe of Pastres. The two choruses sing back and forth and finally join voices.*

CHORUS [double chorus, in 3, G-minor]

„Triomphez, genereux Alcide/Aimez en paix, heureux Epoux/...“



Table 3

Quinault/Lully, Roland (1685)

Act IV, Sc. 3: Roland, having just discovered that his beloved Angélique is in love with Médor, comes across a festive village wedding. The happiness of the scene points up his own misery. The performers in the original *divertissement* included only shepherds and shepherdesses.

*Marche* [C+, in 3]

*Chœur*: „Quand on vient dans ce bocage“ [chorus of shepherds, same music as march]

*Menuet* [C+, in 3; similar in character to march and chorus]

*Ritournelle* [C+, in 3, a3 hautbois]

*Entrée de Pastres, Pastourelles, Bergers, Bergères* [C+, in 4–8, „Fort gay“]

Duo, un Pastre, une Pastourelle: „Vivez en paix, Amants“ [C+, in 4–8]

*Modifications to the cast made during revivals:*

1690: three years after Lully's death, a dance for the bride and groom is added, set to music borrowed from one of Lully's ballets, *Les nocces de village* (1663).

1709: cast expands from the bride, the groom and shepherds to include the father and mother of the groom, plus their son Jannot.

1716: Jannot disappears, but the father and mother of the bride join the parents of the groom (the shepherds remain).

1727: in addition to all four parents, the bride's sister now gets invited (danced by la Camargo).

1743: the parents and the bride's sister are joined by the groom's brother.

1755: the relatives now include two brothers and two sisters (plus the four parents).



Table 4

Pellegrin/Rameau, *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733)

II-3: *Pluton, troupe de divinités infernales, les trois Parques*

Pluton et chœur: „Que l'Averne, que le Ténare ... vengent Proserpine et Pluton'  
[c-, in 6-8]

*Premier air infernal*. Gravement [F+, in 2, binary]

*2e Air*. Vite [F+, in 3, binary]

Chœur: „Pluton commande“ [F+, in 3; same music as 2e Air]

IV-3: *Hippolyte, Aricie, Troupe de Chasseurs & de Chasseresses*

Chœur: „Faisons partout voler nos traits“ [D+, in 6/8]

*Premier Air* [D+, in 6/8, rondeau]

Air, Une Chasseresse: „Amants, quelle est vôtre faiblesse?“  
[D+, in 6/8, rondeau, very similar to Pr. Air]

*2e Air en Rondeau* [D+, notated in 2 but like 12/8, rondeau]

Une Chasseresse et Chœur: „A la chasse, armons-nous“  
[D+, same meter as 2e air, rondeau]

*1er Menuet* [D+, w. horns and repeated 8ths, as in above]

*2e Menuet en rondeau* [d-, a3 hbs and bsn, ABA]

*On reprend le 1er Menuet*

V-8: *Diane, Hippolyte, Aricie, Troupe d'habitants de la forêt d'Aricie*

*Marche* [A+, in 3, uses musettes & hbs, loose rondeau]

Chœur: „Chantons sur la musette...Dansons“ [A+, very similar to march]

*On reprend la Marche*



Recitative and Air, Diane: „Que tout soit heureux“ [a-, in 3, a3]

Chœur, „Que tout soit heureux“ [built on same words and same music, but much longer]

*Chaconne* [a- to A+, in 3]

*Ariette* (Air du rossignol), Une Bergère [A+, in 3]

*1re Gavotte*, Très vite [A+, binary]

*2e Gavotte* [a-, binary]

*Repeat of 1re Gavotte*

Recitative Hippolyte, Diane

Repeat of chorus „Que tout soit heureux“ [a-]