

The Haverford Journal

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Opposition to Italian
Opera, 1706-1711**
Veronica Faust '06

Childbirth in Medieval Art
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**Baudrillard, Devo, and the Postmodern
De-evolution of the Simulation**
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Gender and Power in Rubens's *The
Disembarkation at Marseille* from
*The Life of Marie de' Medici***
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‘Music has learn’d the discords of the state’

The Cultural Politics of British Opposition to Italian Opera, 1706-1711

Veronica Faust '06

Introduction

In the late seventeenth century, Italian opera began to find its way into the royal court and public theaters of London. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Italian opera successfully penetrated the English theatrical tradition, and by 1711, with the premiere of Handel’s *Rinaldo*, the foreign art had conquered its English audience.¹ However, this was not a peaceful conquest. Italian opera provoked British criticism, censure, and ridicule as it emerged on the London stage. British authors argued in different ways: some verged on or even embraced xenophobia, while others attempted to laugh Italian opera out of the country.

Various political and social fears in this period, from the war with France to the expansion and broader diffusion of wealth, created concerns that crystallized in British arguments against Italian opera. John Hughes, the early eighteenth-century British poet and dramatist, contended that more than music was at stake in opera houses—the florid arias and recitative of Italian singers threatened the safety of the British nation:

Music has learn’d the discords of the state,
And concerts jar with Whig and Tory hate...
There fam’d L’Epine does equal skill employ,
While list’ning peers croud to th’ecstatic joy:
Bedford to hear her song his dice forsakes,
And Nottingham is raptur’d when she shakes:
Lull’d statesmen melt away their drowsy cares
Of England’s safety, in Italian airs.²

These assertions about the effect that sung music could have on the

nation arose from the close relationship between culture and politics at this time.

While many writers opposed Italian opera, I have chosen to focus on three authors, each for the different political or social fear that he brought to the argument against opera. I begin with John Dennis, the vehement and relentless critic of Italian opera. In *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner, Which Are About To Be Establish'd on the English Stage: With Some Reflections on the Damage Which They May Bring to the Publick* (1706), Dennis denounced Italian opera as a foreign invasion in a time of war and a Roman Catholic threat to the Protestant nation. Dennis also defended the masculine, British, constitutional monarchy against the effeminate and debauched Italian courts. His writings exemplify an extreme political opposition to opera.

Next, I turn to Joseph Addison, editor of the single sheet newspaper the *Spectator*. Addison's writings on Italian opera reveal the social struggles arising from economic change. Members of the elite exploited Italian opera as a luxury import to set themselves apart from the growing urban middle class. To counter this attempt at social exclusivity, Addison encouraged his middle-class readers to unite in laughter against the excesses of the elite-sponsored Italian opera. Addison believed that opera could equal the quality of spoken drama if it was trimmed of its shallow subject matter and excessive staging effects. To this end, Addison critiqued Italian opera with the intent to reform, rather than to condemn.

The final author I discuss is Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's emphasis on cultural politics allowed him to see a reciprocal relationship between arts and the nation. In a letter written in 1709, Shaftesbury expressed his approval of Italian opera music. However, he found the spectacle of the genre dangerous to the nation. Spectacle had once led to the political decline of the Roman empire, and it now threatened to reduce its British audience to slaves of an absolute monarchy rather than active participants in governmental affairs. Since the arts only flourished in free nations, rather than in empires intent on conquest, the British nation determined what path opera would take on the London stage—if Britain remained a free nation, opera could develop into a venerable and lofty art form. Shaftesbury's argument also shows the influence of the cultural debate between the Ancients and Moderns, which played a large role in the British response to opera. Shaftesbury combined culture and politics to ultimately vindicate Italian opera.

In the midst of this debate, Handel arrived in London in 1710. His opera *Rinaldo*, the first Italian opera composed specifically for the London stage, premiered at the Queen's Haymarket Theater on February 24, 1711. Despite the heated arguments against Italian opera, *Rinaldo* was a resounding success. Handel's music, the Italian castrati singers, the spectacular staging effects, and certain elements of the English dramatic tradition appealed to the London audience. *Rinaldo* verified the taste of the London public for well-composed Italian *opera seria*, yet it also confirmed the fears of Italian opera's British critics.

Before Handel's arrival, certain factors favored the establishment of Italian opera in London and pointed to the later popularity of the genre under the German composer. First, English fascination with Italian singers, including the famous castrati, led to performances in the Italian language before Handel arrived. Italian opera was also part of the larger diaspora of Italian culture to northern Europe in the early eighteenth century. In addition, an expanding print culture ensured the dissemination of Italian opera music beyond the confines of the opera house. Publishers exploited the British taste for Italian music, making the style more accessible and well-known.

Opera in London before Handel

Italian opera first entered England through the early seventeenth-century Stuart court masques, a variety of allegorical performance that combined dance, theater, and music with elaborate scenery, costumes, and machines to praise the reigning monarch.³ After the Civil War and the period of interregnum under Oliver Cromwell known as the "Commonwealth," Charles II revived the tradition of the masque in 1661. The first castrato to perform in England, Siface, sang at court during the reign of Charles's successor, James II.⁴

Italian opera spread to the public theaters in the late seventeenth century. Theatrical managers capitalized on the English taste for Italian instrumental music and singers. Managers and composers made Italian opera music more palatable to London audiences by inserting opera arias into the English dramatic tradition, resulting in the half-sung, half-spoken 'semi-opera' that reached its zenith under Henry Purcell in the 1690s.⁵ Semi-operas, composed and performed in English, continued the masque tradition of lavish scenery and staging effects. Although semi-

operas were reworkings of earlier plays that remained focused on spoken drama, the insertion of operatic music into the framework of English drama was essential to the acceptance of Italian-style opera in London.⁶

The English taste for their native semi-opera equaled the English fascination with Italian singers, but since Italian singers refused to sing in any language but their native tongue, early all-sung operas in London were a peculiar mix of English and Italian.⁷ These operas were usually pasticcios, that is, performances consisting of various pieces from different composers and adapted to a new or existing libretto. The pasticcio arose from practical exigency. Italian operas were almost always composed for specific singers, so it was easier for English theatrical managers to allow Italian performers to substitute arias they had sung elsewhere, their “suitcase arias,” than to adjust the music of another opera or to commission a new work.⁸ The popularity of Italian castrati and other singers lent popular appeal to the pasticcio; at the same time, the early death of Purcell in 1695, and a government order separating opera from drama, were unfavorable to the English semi-opera.

There were two playhouses in London in the early eighteenth century: the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, which had formerly been Purcell’s house, and the recently completed Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket. These rival theaters competed with each other to mount pasticcios with famous Italian singers to woo Londoners. In 1705, the Drury Lane manager Christopher Rich staged *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus*, the first all-sung opera performed at Drury Lane in London. For the next couple years, Drury Lane and the Haymarket continued to gamble on expensive Italian singers, who sang in increasingly Italian-language pasticcios that ranged in quality and popularity. In 1707, the Haymarket gained a monopoly over opera through an order from the Lord Chamberlain that restricted plays to Drury Lane and opera to the Haymarket.

The British response to Italian opera was part of the larger relationship between England and Italy, which was tentative in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since Henry VIII’s break with Rome after the pope refused to approve his divorce, Italian culture had been the object of disdain and satire.⁹ After 1688, British nationalism defined itself in relation to the continental monarchies of France and Italy—Britain was Protestant, manly, and rational while Italy was Roman Catholic, effeminate, and passionate. In addition, Grand Tourists reinforced a persuasive British fiction of Italian society as corrupt and decadent by pouring into

Italy's cities and imposing their own cultural values on local practices.¹⁰

Yet at the same time, Italian culture daunted the British. Familiarity with the Latin language was an important mark of status, and British writers deemed classical antiquity the model for humanistic endeavors such as rhetoric and music. Italy's Renaissance heritage humbled the British, and Italian cultural influence was strong in early eighteenth-century England's architecture, painting, poetry, and music.¹¹ The British imported Italian instrumental music, opera, and singers because their native versions could not match the excellence of Italy's.¹² The Grand Tour became increasingly requisite for aristocratic young men; each of the three authors I examine had toured Italy before settling in London to write.¹³

The mixture of suspicion and awe that marked British attitudes towards Italy shaped British ambivalence towards Italian opera. While Italian music and castrati singers continued to fascinate Londoners who flocked to the Haymarket, these elements needed to be inserted into the British dramatic tradition to appeal to the British public, a practice that, as we shall see, continued with Handel. Tension between nationalist rhetoric and considerable respect for Italian culture shaded the discourse of British authors in their critiques of Italian opera.

Finally, the expanding print culture in London assisted in the dissemination of Italian opera music. Shrewd business strategies enhanced the early eighteenth-century burst of print activity. London music publishers experimented with new ways of printing and distributing music. John Walsh, the preeminent music publisher in early eighteenth-century London, was a particularly excellent businessman. He advertised widely; used plates economically; experimented with new methods such as subscription issues, free copies, and musical periodicals; lowered prices to compete with rival publishers; printed attractive title pages; and imitated the ideas of others.¹⁴ Musical piracy was common, as adequate copyright protection did not exist.

Music publishers catered to English society's preference for Italian music. Baroque music from Italy (especially that of Corelli and Vivaldi) was popular among the amateur musical clubs, societies, and students.¹⁵ In an increasingly competitive climate, where novelty and variety were prerequisites for commercial success, publishers exploited the English taste for Italian music in their printing and advertising.¹⁶ Title pages declared their inclusion of "the most celebrated Italian Authors" or "new songs after the Italian manner," and publishers sold instrumental arrange-

ments of Italian opera arias for amateur musicians soon after an opera's premiere.¹⁷ The song books of Walsh and other publishers allowed the growing middle class to enjoy Italian opera music in the privacy of their homes. Thus, Italian opera was consumed not only in the Haymarket, nor was it the concern solely of the nobility and the elite who purchased expensive subscriptions to the Haymarket. The wide popularity of Italian instrumental music was one of the most important factors in paving the way for Italian opera in the first decade of the eighteenth century.

John Dennis

Few British authors opposed Italian opera as harshly as did John Dennis. Dennis's critical writings reveal his discomfort with embracing Italian culture at a time when Britain was forging its national identity in contrast to the monarchical governments of France and Italy. Dennis relentlessly employed the nationalist rhetoric of Britain as strong, masculine, and rational versus Italy as debauched, effeminate, and passionate. While Dennis's writings often smack of xenophobia, they are not the mere ravings of a disgruntled critic; rather, they express the worries of a dramatist confronted with a genre that he cannot understand and that could, he feared, disintegrate the nation.

John Dennis was born in London in 1658, during the final years of the Commonwealth. In 1688, the crucial Revolution year of James II's flight and William's invasion of England, Dennis departed on a continental tour. He visited Paris, Lyons, Torino, Rome, and other European cities, forming opinions that would stay with him for the rest of his life. He encountered Italian opera for the first time, writing of the "much fine Musick as I heard in Italy, both in their Churches and Theatres."¹⁸ But as Dennis would decide two decades later, when Italian opera first appeared in London, what was fine in Italy was not necessarily good for Britain.

In the years following his Grand Tour, Dennis turned his talents to the more serious literary mission of moral reform, particularly on the national level. Like other writers, he set out to reclaim the stage from the decadent Restoration entertainments of Charles II's court.¹⁹ In his *The Usefulness of the Stage* (1698), an early work in his new style, Dennis compared literature, and especially drama, to religion in its ability to move men's minds. He emphasized the ability of good drama to support and

strengthen government and religion. Tragedy, for example, instilled in men a desire to serve their country, a theme he would re-visit in his later texts against opera:

Now nothing can be a better Remedy than Tragedy for Inconsiderateness, which...shews them the ill and the fatal consequences of irregular Administration; and nothing is more capable of raising the Soul, and giving it that Greatness, that Courage, that Force, and that Constancy, which are the Qualifications that make Men deserve to command others.²⁰

In his prefaces, plays, and poetry, Dennis continued to insist that he wrote to improve his readers and his nation on a moral level.²¹

The political atmosphere of early eighteenth-century Britain provided Dennis with a rich context for his emphasis on national reform. England was pursuing an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy both militarily and economically, and Britons were forging a national identity as a result of these conquests.²² The fall of James II in 1688 inaugurated the longest period of British warfare since the Middle Ages; from 1689-97 and 1702-13, Britain was at war with France and her allies.²³ Internally, the face of the nation altered in 1707 when the Act of Union joined Scotland to England and Wales.²⁴ Fundamental questions about the proper roles of the monarch, parliament, the people, and the Church of England continued to spark commentary and controversy in England's expanding print culture, and to feed the polemics of political parties.²⁵ Dennis contributed to these debates by publishing pro-Whig pamphlets such as *The Danger of Priestcraft* (1702) and *A Proposal for Putting a Speedy End to the War* (1703).²⁶

Dennis's poetry and plays conveyed his nationalist focus as much as his literary criticism and noncritical prose. His poem *Britannia Triumphans: or The Empire Sav'd, and Europe Deliver'd* (1704) celebrated, in overtly nationalist terms, the Duke of Marlborough's victory against French and Bavarian forces in the Battle of Blenheim during the War of Spanish Succession.²⁷ Also in 1704, the most successful of Dennis's plays premiered at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, the tragedy *Liberty Asserted*, which epitomized Dennis's conviction that the stage should benefit the established government.²⁸ *Liberty Asserted* offered a vehement attack on the French and on Frenchness, relying on emerging cultural stereotypes for its plot and characterization.²⁹

Religion was so entwined with politics in Britain at this time that any commentary on politics subsumed religion as well. Roman Catholicism was firmly linked to absolutism in the public conscience. The Test Act of 1673, reluctantly passed by Charles II and still in effect in the early 1700s when Dennis wrote his essays against opera, barred all but Anglicans from holding national office.³⁰ Prior to each monarchical succession, fears that a new king or queen might embrace Roman Catholicism rather than Protestantism abounded, prompting both the Exclusion Crisis of 1679 and the Revolution of 1688.³¹

In this era of tense relations between church and state, religion played a key role in Dennis's writings. He emphasized the importance of passion in poetry, and he believed that greater passion could be derived from sacred subjects than from profane ones; according to Dennis, the superiority of the ancient poets rested on their choice of sacred subjects.³²

Dennis's political and religious concerns crystallized in his denunciations of Italian opera. Dennis did not object to British semi-opera; he himself wrote a few plays with intermittent song that he labeled 'tragedies' but that were actually in the 'dramatic opera' tradition.³³ But in 1705, several events pointed to the establishment of Italian-style opera in Britain: the popularity of Thomas Clayton's *Arsinoe*, the first all-sung opera in the Italian style performed in London; the opening of the new Haymarket Theatre and its devotion to opera; and the growing public demand for Italian singers.³⁴ These events prompted Dennis to respond critically in *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner* (1706). This essay illustrates the close relationship that Dennis saw between politics and culture—music and harmony interfered with the moral clarity of the text in opera, thus corrupting the usefulness of drama to support government and instill nationalism; Italian opera symbolized the infiltration of foreign influence during a time of war; and opera was the product of a Roman Catholic nation.

From the first page of his preface, Dennis describes the stage as a tool of government and exhorts the British government to monitor the arts and entertainment, repeating arguments he had made a decade earlier in *The Usefulness of the Stage*:

That...if the Government does not take care to provide reasonable Diversions for them [the public], they will not fail to provide such for themselves as are without Reason. That unreasonable ones are pernicious to Government, and the rea-

sonable ones are advantageous to it; that pleasure of Sense being too much indulged, makes Reason cease to be a Pleasure, and by consequence is contrary both to publick and private Duty.³⁵

By “reasonable Diversions,” Dennis means drama, that almost sacred genre with the power to inspire men to virtue and courage. Dennis continues to emphasize the entwined nature of drama and government:

That it [drama] is so very agreeable to good Government, that most of the great Men who have writ of the Art of Governing, from *Plato* down to *Harrington*, have writ either Plays or Directions, or Rules for the Stage. That some of the greatest Monarchs and greatest Ministers of State have not only encourag’d Plays, but have writ them themselves...³⁶

By firmly establishing the support that drama gives the British nation, Dennis prepares his readers for his description of the antithesis of drama: Italian opera. According to Dennis, music had to be firmly subordinate to text, as passion and sensual delight were subordinate to reason. Music grew pernicious if it became independent of drama and poetry:

Musick may be made profitable as well as delightful, if it is subordinate to some nobler Art, and subservient to Reason; but if it presumes not only to degenerate from its ancient Severity, from its sacred Solemnity; but to set up for itself, and to grow independent, as it does in our late Opera’s, it becomes a meer sensual Delight, utterly incapable of informing the Understanding, or of reforming the Will.³⁷

Dennis believed that in any given culture, opera and poetry could not coexist. He supported this claim with historical evidence, pointing to the supposed disappearance of poets in Italy since the birth of opera a hundred years earlier.³⁸

Dennis wrote *An Essay on the Opera’s* in the midst of the War of Spanish Succession, a time when Continental Europe was politically threatening to England. In this tense international climate, Dennis preyed on fears of national security by likening the import of foreign Italian opera to a successful military conquest: “While the English Arms are every where Victorious abroad, the English Arts may not be vanquish’d and oppress’d at home by the Invasion of Foreign Luxury.”³⁹ Dennis drew on England’s

diplomatic and military situation to frame his argument and highlight the danger of Italian opera.

For Dennis, the emergence of Italian opera in England presented a real, not a symbolic, danger that sapped the moral fiber of the British nation. Whereas drama inspired men with 'publick spirit' and with a noble disregard for death in the defense of their native customs and manners, Italian opera enveloped its listeners in the softness of luscious sounds.⁴⁰ As Dennis noted, "We are at present contending for Liberty, and hard is the Contention, and the event doubtful, and we cannot so much as hope to succeed, but by the Virtue of that magnanimous Spirit, which Poetry exalts, and which effeminate Musick debases."⁴¹ Italian opera therefore provided a means whereby Dennis could articulate features that constituted a reasonable and masculine British identity in opposition to the passionate and effeminate Other of Italy.⁴²

As the product of Roman Catholic culture, opera threatened the religious identity of Britain as well. Drama, the Reformation, and liberty had flourished together during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and Dennis believed they could disappear together as well: "We are going very bravely to oppress the Drama, in order to establish the luxurious Diversions of those very Nations, from whose Attempts and Designs both Liberty and the Reformation are in the utmost Danger."⁴³ While drama and liberty were secure under the "Immediate Protestant Successors" to the throne, Dennis feared that a French military victory and the restoration of James II's Roman Catholic son to the throne ("such contagious Distempers rage throughout Europe, as may make a great Alternation in the Line of Succession in a little time") would upset the balance.⁴⁴ During this time when so much was at stake for the British nation, Dennis's diatribe against Italian opera crystallized British fears of Roman Catholicism and an absolute monarchy.

Dennis's argument against Italian opera also articulated early eighteenth-century views and anxieties concerning gender:

We could easily make it appear that Plato and Cicero are of the same Opinion, but what need can there be of Authorities, when we can shew by experience what Influence the soft and effeminate Measures of the Italian Opera has upon the Minds and Manners of Men.⁴⁵

An Essay on the Opera's contains no explanation of Dennis's use of these

gendered terms in his argument, and early eighteenth-century readers did not require one. British society was familiar with the vocabulary and its implications. Gender structures all the opposing categories of Dennis's essay. 'Effeminate' Italian opera was mindless, luxurious, and sensual sound, while 'masculine' British drama was reasonable, forceful, and inspiring sense; the former was therefore dangerous to the health of the nation:

And as soft and delicious Musick by soothing the Senses, and making a Man too much in Love with himself, makes him too little fond of the publick, so by emasculating and dissolving the mind, it shakes the very foundation of Fortitude.⁴⁶

Later in the essay, Dennis expanded his use of effeminacy to encompass the Italian language:

But if any one objects that an Opera may be so contriv'd and Writ, as to inspire us with an affection for the Publick, and with a generous contempt of Death; to him I answer, that an Opera so design'd, must be writ with force or without it. If 'tis writ with force 'tis incompatible with Musick, especially in so masculine a Language as ours.⁴⁷

The inability of music to be forceful and instill in men courage and national ardor supported Dennis's assertion that opera undermined patriotic sentiment. Dennis labeled the entire nation of Italy 'effeminate' near the end of his essay:

An Englishman is deservedly scorned by Englishmen, when he descends so far beneath himself, as to Sing or to Dance in publick, because by doing so he practices Arts which Nature has bestow'd upon effeminate Nations, but denied to him, as below the Dignity of his Country, and the Majesty of the British Genius.⁴⁸

By labeling both Italian opera and the country in which it was born the 'feminine Other,' Dennis forged masculine British military identity in relation to the debauched and effeminate monarchies of France and Italy.⁴⁹

Dennis was part of the eighteenth-century cultural effort to stabilize the uncertain category of gender and lock the two sexes in difference. Rejecting the older notion of gender as imperfect variations on a single sex,

writers constructed gender as fixed and immutable difference grounded in nature.⁵⁰ Castrati singers threatened the strict opposition of the sexes with their unnatural and ambiguous sexual identity. British writers labeled the castrati as effeminate as the music they sang and the nation from which they came. At the same time, the castrati's reported sexual prowess with women, and their identification as the ultimate British-woman pleaser, threatened British masculinity.⁵¹ Attacks against castrati, then, embodied a compelling paradox, revealing the British discomfort with the contingent nature of gender and sexuality that the castrati exposed.⁵²

The castrati reinforced their ambiguous sexual identity through their ability to attract men as well as women. Dennis recognized the potential of Italian opera to disrupt his idea of gender difference as fixed and immutable, noting harmful and unnatural changes that had already occurred. Italian opera had "transform'd our Sexes: We have Men that are more soft, more languid, and more passive than Women... we have Women, who as it were in Revenge are Masculine in their Desires, and Masculine in their Practices; yes, we have Vices which we dare not name."⁵³ Dennis came close to naming his fear of homosexuality later in his essay, when he chided women for supporting opera:

The Ladies, with humblest Submission, seem to mistake their Interest a little in encouraging *Opera's*; for the more the Men are enervated and emasculated by the Softness of the *Italian* Musick, the less will they care for them, and the more for one another...if our Subscriptions go on, at the frantick rate that they have done, I make no doubt but we shall come to see one Beau take another for Better for Worse.⁵⁴

For Dennis, the castrati, those "Eunuchs [who] tickle their Ears with a Straw, while they pick their Pockets," caused Italian opera to promote homosexual desire.⁵⁵

Dennis's objection to Italian opera was an extreme one, often metamorphosing into xenophobia. His contemporaries remarked on his extremism, especially his rival Alexander Pope, who relished poking fun at Dennis's notorious vehemence and irascibility. However, while modern readers may find Dennis's argument quaint or ridiculous, Dennis's works need to be seen in their proper historical context. Dennis's works genuinely frustrated that plays, his own included, did not receive proper attention

in the wake of this tremendously popular new art form that introduced novelties never seen in previous dramas. Dennis was compelled to denounce opera because he could not understand the ground rules for evaluating the new genre, and his frustration increased with his certainty that admirers of opera could not understand why they supported it.⁵⁶ For Dennis, Italian opera represented a radical disorder in society, and his beliefs, particularly his belief in the power of the stage to fortify the nation, compelled him to attack the art form.⁵⁷

Joseph Addison

Not every British writer wrote in the polemical tone of Dennis. In 1711, nine days after Handel's *Rinaldo* premiered on the Haymarket stage, Joseph Addison's newspaper the *Spectator* made its first appearance in London coffee houses. While Dennis resorted to xenophobic preaching, Addison used a civilized tone to reach the middle-class readers of his newspaper. In early eighteenth-century London, members of the elite valued Italian opera because it offered cultural and social distinction from the lower classes. To counter this elite attempt at social exclusivity, and to prevent his middle-class readers from flocking to the opera house as well, Addison united his readers in laughter at the ridiculous and foolish excesses of the elite and of the foreign opera that they supported.⁵⁸ Addison shows this approach in his response to the premiere of *Rinaldo*:

An opera may be allowed to be extravagantly lavish in its decorations, as its only design is to gratify the senses, and keep up an indolent attention in the audience. Common sense, however, requires, that there should be nothing in the scenes and machines which may appear childish and absurd. How would the wits of King Charles's time have laughed to have seen Nicolini exposed to a tempest in robes of ermine, and sailing in an open boat upon a sea of pasteboard! What a field of raillery would they have been let into, had they been entertained with painted dragons spitting wildfire, enchanted chariots drawn by Flanders mares, and real cascades in artificial landscapes!⁵⁹

While Dennis sought to restore an older socio-political order through traditional aesthetic rules, Addison recognized the new style and looked ahead to a time when it could hold society together rather than divide it.

Addison's critiques were meant to reform, not to condemn. He hoped to revamp Italian opera, to transform it from a decadent elite pleasure to a purveyor of civic morals.

The importation of Italian-style opera occurred at a time in which the aristocracy and the royal court were losing their social and cultural preeminence. England was expanding economically—mercantile interests were growing, personal commercial wealth was increasing, and the socioeconomic elite increasingly consisted of not only the nobility, but also baronets and professional men and women.⁶⁰

The aristocracy needed to express their distinction from the lower classes, and the court had long provided such distinction, both as a space removed from the rest of society and as a source of exclusive cultural pursuits. As John Brewer notes, royal courts had long been the sites for the struggles and alliances between monarchs and nobility. In the court, the king tried to curtail the martial prowess of the nobility, who in turn came to accept humanist ideas that valued learning and taste as much as military might, and courts thus became centers of culture and refinement.⁶¹ As a place of elegant dancing, literary composition, and the playing of music, the court offered social distinction to members of the nobility who sought their entertainment there. Under Charles I, ritual and art combined and culminated in the court masque—a mixture of theater, music, and scenery, and classical myth—that praised the virtues of the monarch.⁶²

But court dynamics changed during the seventeenth century. The regicide of Charles I in 1649 and the Revolution of 1688 dealt serious blows to the idea of the court as a secure and stable center for art patronage, good taste, and refinement. Court culture further languished under William and Mary; neither William, the foreign usurper, nor Mary, who had hated the English court in her youth, were interested in the lavish courtly pleasures of their predecessors.⁶³ The elite, then, had to find new venues in which to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. High culture, including Italian opera, thus gradually moved out of the narrow confines of the court and into the galleries and concert halls of London.⁶⁴ The elite, however, retained their roles as the chief patrons of opera as it moved from the court to the city.

In 1705, with the opening of John Vanbrugh's Haymarket Theatre (which the nobility had funded), members of the elite had a distinct space in which to enjoy the spectacles of Italian opera; or, more appropriately,

they enjoyed the spectacles of themselves on display as individuals who possessed knowledge of a foreign language, wealth to purchase a subscription, and appreciation for well-composed music and talented singers.⁶⁵ The hierarchical system that operagoers valued was embedded in the Haymarket Theatre itself. Different ticket prices for each section of the theater illustrated the varying desirability and distinction of each seat. The stage boxes, in particular, contained the most expensive seats in the house and displayed their wealthy occupants to the rest of the audience alongside the singers, machines, and scenery. The worst seats in the house, those in the upper gallery, were a tenth of the price of stage boxes, and, like other seats in the theater, could be purchased individually rather than through subscription.⁶⁶ Italian opera, then, was not the preoccupation solely of the elite. Members of the middle class could enjoy Italian opera along with wealthier Londoners, though in less desirable seats.

The hierarchy between the singers on the stage, too, reflected the hierarchy of their audience. The strict conventions of *opera seria*, though still developing in these years, required that each singer have a certain number of arias in a specified order (the leading singers having the most); that each singer wear a costume whose costliness reflected their importance in the opera; and that each character participated in the staged, hierarchical world of kings, servants, valiant knights, and noble heroines.⁶⁷ It is no wonder that a couple decades later Carlo Goldoni would throw down his pen after his attempt at an *opera seria* libretto, "horrified by the rules of the Drama," and "quite determined never to write one again."⁶⁸ But in early eighteenth-century London, the postured hierarchy and conventions of the opera singers on the Haymarket stage reflected the hierarchy of their audience, seated according to their wealth and on display as much as the performance they had purportedly come to see.

With the social distinction conferred by the Haymarket, rising members of London society used Italian opera as an aesthetic marker to assert their place among the elite. In this society where distinctions between aristocracy, gentry, and elite were collapsing, behavior mattered a great deal.⁶⁹ James Brydges, for example, who in the first years of the eighteenth century laid the foundation for his lucrative career as paymaster general under the Duke of Marlborough, found it compulsory to attend the theater to establish his place among the wealthy and influential. In his diary, he recorded not what was acted and sung on the stage, but the names of important people whom he met or spotted in the audience.⁷⁰

Brydges would later become a private patron of Handel.⁷¹

However, alongside the scattered social spaces in London where the elite mingled, a parallel social space was gradually emerging. The expensive chocolate houses, where elite clientele could purchase costly opera subscriptions and even watch opera dress rehearsals, were countered by the plethora of coffee houses and the growing popularity of the middle-class periodicals they sold, the newspaper. Coffee houses had always functioned as centers of information, where regular customers gathered to spread, hear, and discuss the latest news. As a public space that admitted men of any social standing to exchange information and opinions, the coffee house had received governmental censure and disapproval soon after its inception in the 1660s, but it continued to thrive.⁷² The newspaper press, then, grew as an integral part of the coffee house culture; papers such as the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* were written, spread, read, and discussed in coffee houses.⁷³

Addison denounced the lavish pursuits of the elite that conflicted with the class-consolidating and patriotic culture of the coffee house and newspaper. For Addison, Italian opera was another imported luxury item, along with Venetian glass or French painting.⁷⁴ Both Dennis and Addison moralized about the evils of luxury. Addison, however, avoided the distant and pretentious tone of Dennis in his critiques. Addison assumed the persona of the witty "Spectator," the social equal to his readers, addressing them as his peers rather than inferiors. He encouraged his readers to scoff at the absurd entertainments of the elite, particularly Italian opera. In regard to the opera *L'Idaspe fedele* (1710), for example, Addison ridiculed the pleasures of the Italian opera house, the operatic plot, and the sexual nature of the castrato Nicolini:

There is nothing that of late years has afforded matter of greater amusement to the town than Signior Nicolini's combat with a lion in the Haymarket, which has been very often exhibited to the general satisfaction of most of the nobility and gentry in the kingdom of Great Britain...Many likewise were the conjectures of the treatment which this lion was to meet with from the hands of Signior Nicolini; some supposed that he was to subdue him in *Recitativo*, as Orpheus used to serve the wild beasts in his time, and afterwards to knock him on the head: some fancied that the lion would not pretend to lay his paws upon the hero, by reason of the received opinion, that a lion will not hurt a virgin.⁷⁵

By lampooning upper-class amusement, Addison spoke to, and on behalf of, the middle-class Londoners with whom he interacted daily in the coffee house and on the street. Addison represented middle-class resentment of aristocratic privilege by exhorting his readers to avoid this ridiculous pastime of the nobility, to realize opera's need for reform, and to unite in laughter against elite follies. In October 1711 Addison appended a letter to the *Spectator* supposedly written by a country clergyman in need of advice:

A widow lady, who straggled this summer from London into my parish for the benefit of the air, as she says, appears every Sunday at church with many fashionable extravagancies, to the great astonishment of my congregation. But what gives us the most offence is her theatrical manner of singing the psalms. She introduces above fifty Italian airs into the hundredth psalm, and whilst we begin 'All people' in the old solemn tune of our forefathers, she in a quite different key runs divisions on the vowels, and adorns them with the graces of Nicolini...I am very far from being an enemy to church music; but fear this abuse of it may make my parish ridiculous...⁷⁶

In the parish of this fictitious clergyman, luxury and Italian opera combined in the figure of a wealthy London woman with ridiculous and embarrassing results. Excerpts such as this one illustrate Addison's mocking tone towards the frivolities of opera, as well as his writing on behalf of his imagined and ideal 'common people,' who were content wearing simpler clothing to church and singing the "old solemn tune" of their forefathers.

Yet Addison also presented some serious thoughts on Italian opera in London. Rather than restricting himself to poking fun at Italian opera and its patrons, Addison crafted serious criticisms and ways that opera could be reformed. He agreed with Dennis that Italian opera had broken away from the aesthetic cornerstones of artistic expression: nature, reason, and classical antiquity.⁷⁷ He also thought England should follow the lead of France in adapting Italian opera to their own culture and language, as Lully had skillfully done in France in the seventeenth century: "He [Lully] did not pretend to extirpate the French music, and plant the Italian in its stead; but only to cultivate and civilize it with innumerable graces and modulations which he borrowed from the Italians. By this means the French music is now perfect in its kind..."⁷⁸

Addison recommended a similar path for British opera composers:

I would allow the Italian opera to lend our English music as much as may grace and soften it, but never entirely to annihilate and destroy it. Let the infusion be as strong as you please, but still let the subject matter of it be English.⁷⁹

Addison believed that all-sung opera could be superior to the English semi-opera as long as the subject matter was good. For him, the Italian recitative style allowed the dramatic plot to develop more naturally, without interrupting the music with spoken dialogue; this style was less disturbing to reason than the mixture of speaking and singing.⁸⁰

Addison's thoughts on reform can be seen in his own attempt at an English-language opera, *Rosamond*, in 1707, prior to his commencement of the *Spectator* four years later. Unlike British semi-operas, Addison's *Rosamond* was all-sung, illustrating his belief that this was more natural than interrupting song with speech. He took the plot from English medieval history, writing of King Henry II and his choice between passion for his mistress Rosamond and duty to his wife Queen Elinor.⁸¹ In adopting this plot, Addison attempted to lend dramatic cogency to the opera stage, and to combine serious and compelling subject matter with well-composed music.⁸² As Thomas Tickell wrote in his preface to the published libretto of *Rosamond* in 1713:

The *Opera* first *Italian* Masters taught,
 Enrich'd with Songs, but Innocent of Thought.
Britannia's learned Theatre disdains
 Melodious Trifles, and enervate Strains;
 And blushes on her injur'd Stage to see
 Nonsense well-tun'd, and sweet Stupidity.⁸³

Unfortunately for Addison, most Londoners in 1707 did not agree with Tickell's later laudatory verses. *Rosamond* proved a failure that closed after only three nights, apparently because of its poor music by composer Thomas Clayton.⁸⁴ While Addison had endeavored to improve the subject matter of opera, the music had suffered in comparison. Five weeks after *Rosamond's* failure, Addison vented his frustration at the success of Italian opera: "Our homespun authors must forsake the field/ And Shakespeare to the soft Scarlatti yield."⁸⁵

Yet Addison retained his belief that Italian opera could be reformed.

Far from Dennis's xenophobic ranting, Addison's essays continued to embody a more balanced critique: the music and singers were good while the plots were poor, all-sung opera was preferable to semi-opera, and opera could be adapted to the language and dramatic strengths of Britain. In June 1712, Addison lamented the departure of the castrato Nicolini who, despite his participation in ridiculous operatic staging effects, contributed true musical talent to the stage:

I am very sorry to find, by the opera bills for this day, that we are likely to lose the greatest performer in dramatic music that is now living, or that perhaps ever appeared upon a stage. I need not acquaint my reader, that I am speaking of Signior Nicolini. The town is highly obliged to that excellent artist for having shewn us the Italian music in its perfection...⁸⁶

Addison sought to unite his middle-class readers against the follies of the aristocracy by exposing Italian opera in all its frivolity and senselessness, but he was never staunch or uncompromising in his criticism. Addison emphasized the ridiculousness of elite Italian opera because he wanted opera to become an art form that united society in promoting civic virtue rather than foolish spectacle.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury

Like Addison, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, examined the social implications of the cultural shift from the court to the city. Shaftesbury, however, did not share Addison's desire for Italian opera to unite society in civic virtue. Shaftesbury believed that culture should remain the province of the elite, which, he hoped, would evolve from decadent courtiers to polite gentlemen of reason and talent in the wake of the 1688 revolution. While Shaftesbury was more socially conservative than Addison, he did not fully embrace the xenophobia of Dennis. While Shaftesbury agreed with Dennis that a strong relationship existed between culture and politics, he did not view culture as the dominant force in the relationship. Shaftesbury instead believed culture and politics affected each other, and, like Addison, he believed that Italian opera could be reformed. Shaftesbury's focus on 'cultural politics' therefore locates him between Dennis and Addison; despite some reservations about Italian opera, he believed the genre could flourish and prosper in

Britain.

Historian Lawrence Klein suggests that Shaftesbury's political interest combined with his preference for solitary intellectual pursuits produced his emphasis on cultural politics, which was a way for him to achieve a political personality without active participation in political life itself.⁸⁷ The shift of cultural authority from the traditional ecclesiastical and courtly institutions to the new public and gentlemanly culture of criticism and politeness, which occurred in the wake of the 1688 Revolution, was at the heart of Shaftesbury's cultural politics. For him, the paradigm of politeness offered an alternative to the order provided by the seventeenth-century Church and Court.⁸⁸ At court, the need to please those in power inhibited and distorted conversation, and the courtly game of flattery abandoned the directness and honesty of true politeness.⁸⁹

For Shaftesbury, the weakening of courtly life offered an opportunity for the elite to turn to gentlemanly politeness, which rested on philosophy and high culture. Shaftesbury believed that early eighteenth-century Britain was ready for a cultural take-off that would display and strengthen the moral and civic virtue of its elite.⁹⁰ Unlike Addison and Steele, who disseminated public moralism to the middle class, Shaftesbury crafted his agenda of cultural politics and politeness for the intellectual and social elite.⁹¹ Rather than the class-consolidating cultural goal of Addison, Shaftesbury supported a reformed elite as the cultural authority. Yet despite Shaftesbury's elite focus, his work appealed to members of the urban middle class as well. A 1733 edition of his most influential work, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (originally published in the spring of 1711), cut Shaftesbury's commissioned engravings to render the three-volume work more affordable; according to advertisements for this more affordable edition, some printers imagined middle-class readers of lesser means who were drawn to Shaftesbury's message of moral rather than social elevation.⁹²

For Shaftesbury, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had established the dominance of gentlemen over the traditional English court, and he sought to legitimate the Whig government by ushering in an era of gentlemanly culture.⁹³ Reacting against those agencies with which gentlemen had traditionally shared hegemony—the Church and the King—Shaftesbury advocated a vision of politics and culture that replaced godly and courtly understandings with a public gentlemanly one.⁹⁴ In contrast to the decadent courtier, his ideal gentleman was a man of politeness, reason, and

education. The Whigs, the party of liberty, promised political, intellectual, and discursive freedom that, with a society dominated by Shaftesbury's gentlemen, would lead to the flourishing of British culture.⁹⁵

Shaftesbury's cultural politics, and the publication of *Characteristicks* within a few weeks of the premiere of *Rinaldo*, make him an interesting, though often overlooked, figure in the British debate over Italian opera. Shaftesbury described his thoughts on Italian opera in a letter to his friend Pierre Coste in 1709. Coste had sent Shaftesbury a copy of Francois Raguenet's notorious pamphlet *Parallèle des italiens et des françois, en ce qui regarde la musique et les opera*, originally published in 1702, in which the French author had scandalously proclaimed the superiority of Italian opera over French opera. For Raguenet, French opera was too meticulous in its musical expression. Raguenet preferred the reckless and bold music of Italian opera, which often "seems to be upon the brink of ruin, [when] he immediately reconciles 'em by such regular cadences that everyone is surprised to see harmony rising again, in a manner, out of discord itself and owing its greatest beauties to those irregularities which seemed to threaten it with destruction."⁹⁶ Raguenet also preferred the Italian decorations and machines. He described spectacular onstage inventions that he had seen in operas: apes that seemed alive, elephants that disappeared in an instant to reveal an army, the ghost of a woman that transformed into a palace. After reading the pamphlet, Shaftesbury thanked Coste for "Your entertaining french Treatise. I assure You 'twas extreamly pleasant, and I found it the only just and sensible Work of this Kind."⁹⁷ However, Shaftesbury objected to Raguenet's enthusiasm for the Italian stage effects, which he considered "vulgar, miserable, barbarouse."⁹⁸

To support these objections, Shaftesbury turned to Horace's *Epistle to Augustus*, a work that was well-known in England at the time. Horace offered a legendary account of the rise and fall of Roman dramatic poetry. The rural Roman countryside was the birthplace of Roman drama, and the conquest of Greece refined Latin poetry, which still retained much of its earlier rusticity. After the Punic Wars, Roman poets had the leisure to study and adapt Greek tragedy, but in the end, Roman poets gave in to spectacle and passion (appealing to the eye) rather than the tragic and reasonable (appealing to the ear) in order to attract audiences, thus irrevocably corrupting their plays.⁹⁹ For Shaftesbury, the consequences of dramatists yielding to spectacle went beyond the mere decline in dramatic standards in the playhouse—opera corrupted by spectacle could lead

to political decline and moral decay. Shaftesbury saw tragedy as the natural consequence of liberty, a means of encouraging freedom and averting the rise of an absolutist regime like that of France: "Tragedy opens the inward Scene of the Palace, and shews Us the Misfortunes and Miserys of the *Great*: by which the People are not only reveng'd, but comforted and encourag'd to endure their equal plain Rank when they see the Tyranny attended with such Disasters."¹⁰⁰ Spectacle, on the other hand, merely kept a populace amused and contented in slavery.¹⁰¹ Like the dazzling court ceremonies that blinded onlookers and reduced them to slaves of the monarchy, operatic spectacle threatened Shaftesbury's gentlemanly culture of politeness.

For Shaftesbury, though, it was not only the art that shaped the nation, but also the nation that shaped the art. He noted that poetry, rhetoric, music, and the other arts were exclusive products of free nations, not empires that dominated other nations. Like other writers at the time, Shaftesbury saw a clear parallel between Rome's Punic Wars and England's Continental war with France.¹⁰² If England pursued the path of conquest, and spectacle overtook opera, British liberty might be lost. To avert this danger, Shaftesbury believed that instead of banishing Italian opera from the London stage, opera should be made to emulate ancient Greek tragedy by adopting the simple Italian recitative (thus bringing opera closer to the nature and dignity of spoken drama) and purging opera of spectacle. These changes would reinforce liberty and virtue in Britain.¹⁰³ Shaftesbury saw more potential good in Italian opera than harm and, in the midst of British censure and criticism of opera, he ultimately vindicated the genre.

Shaftesbury's reliance on Horace shows the influence of the pervasive cultural debate between the Ancients and Moderns, which at times seemed to engage and divide nearly all writers in late seventeenth-century England.¹⁰⁴ Moderns saw England as superior both to the ancient Greeks and to England's eighteenth-century Continental rivals; this superiority derived from England's free constitution, commercial economy, and unprecedented circulation of ideas.¹⁰⁵ Ancients, on the other hand, revered the ancient Greeks and Romans as the creators of the models for every endeavor, particularly for politics and the humanistic arts associated with it (rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy).¹⁰⁶ In late seventeenth-century England, writers were concerned with the authority of the classical past and had to articulate a position with respect to an-

tiquity before plunging into a discussion of modern life. No subject—art, literature, philosophy, science, politics, or religion—could ignore the burdens of the classical period and its models.¹⁰⁷

Ancients often disparaged Italian opera in favor of Greek tragedy. In the first century AD, Plutarch had mourned the shift of music from military and religious styles to a theatrical context. For Plutarch, this evolution was a sign of decadence, and music—once strong, masculine, and appealing to the gods—was degraded to an effeminate twittering in the theaters.¹⁰⁸ Ancients in Restoration England, like Dennis, echoed Plutarch's concerns when they attacked Italian opera.

As we have seen, Shaftesbury used ancient Roman history to comment on contemporary British foreign policy. Shaftesbury was a trained classicist: he inserted Greek and Latin quotes in his *Characteristicks*, and assumed that his readers were learned enough to understand them.¹⁰⁹ However, Shaftesbury's cultural politics linked liberty to arts and letters, and he saw Athenian diversity rather than Spartan uniformity as conducive to cultural prosperity.¹¹⁰ In addition, for Shaftesbury, France was the modern analogue of imperial Rome, with its luxurious courts, slavish hierarchy, and push for a universal monarchy.¹¹¹ The expensive, false, magnificent, and deformed courtly heritage of the Baroque era in both France and Britain betrayed classical values.¹¹² Only with the shift of culture and patronage from the court to the urban elite could the arts hope to regain the moral and civic virtue of antiquity. Shaftesbury was therefore a Modern; he believed that Italian opera could be improved, and he lauded Britain's republican values of liberty and virtue in contrast to France's debauched monarchy.

Handel's *Rinaldo*

At the time of Handel's arrival in London in 1710, the city's operatic management was in upheaval. The Haymarket Theatre, devoted to the presentation of opera, was in financial trouble; opera was a costly venture, and subscriptions could not cover the high initial expenses for each premiere. The Haymarket also had to continue its competition with Drury Lane which, despite the Lord Chamberlain's order restricting operatic performances to the Haymarket, continued to mount musical entertainment of all kinds (song, dance, pantomime, masques, instrumental interludes, and English operas) between the acts of plays.¹¹³ The first de-

cade of eighteenth-century musical life in London was thus marked by opportunistic businessmen, secret deals with the Lord Chamberlain, the desire of the nobility and elite for the exclusivity of Italian opera, a public clamoring after the new Italian music, exorbitantly-paid castrati who dazzled audiences, poorly-paid actors and tradesmen filing lawsuits for their money, and the uncertain future of English semi-opera.¹¹⁴ This volatile atmosphere often erupted, not only in the critiques of pamphlets and newspapers, but occasionally in rebellious actors breaking into theaters with drawn swords.¹¹⁵

Nonetheless, this 'critical decade' witnessed the gradual triumph of Italian opera over the London stage. Members of all social classes enjoyed Italian opera, which had gained a foothold in London; these conquests pushed writers like John Dennis and Joseph Addison towards feverish exhortations against foreign invasions and witty pleas for common sense. Despite this criticism, Londoners continued to choose between the operatic fare at Drury Lane and the Haymarket, and attend operas in English, Italian, or a mix of both. They flocked to hear the famed castrati, who refused to sing in any language but their native Italian.¹¹⁶ If well-composed music could be added to London operas, an element they were often lacking, Italian opera would thrive, despite native criticism and behind-the-scenes managerial upheavals. Handel had the requisite talent to provide this much-needed fine music upon his arrival in London; his music, combined with an excellent cast and spectacular staging effects, ensured a resounding success for *Rinaldo*, the first Italian opera composed specifically for the London stage.¹¹⁷

Handel had studied opera in Rome as the conventions of Italian *opera seria* were crystallizing. This process had begun with the Arcadian Academy of Rome, established in 1690, which responded to French criticism of Italian poetry and drama by bringing the undisciplined and licentious opera librettos of the time into accord with the principles of classical Greek drama. According to these conventions, the action should be limited to a single argument involving no more than eight characters, whose entrances and exits were strictly regulated so that the stage was never empty except during set changes and between acts. The action should take place within a short period of time, preferably a day, and in locations of close proximity. Subject matter was taken from myth and ancient history, and characters were kings and nobles embroiled in conflicts of love and duty. Recitative moved the plot forward, while arias froze time as a

character expressed his or her emotions. The 'exit aria,' sung at the end of a scene before the singer left the stage, was gradually becoming the norm.¹¹⁸ Music critics regard Handel as representative of the first generation of *opera seria* composers, and his operas are considered typical *opera seria* works.¹¹⁹

The emotional depth that Handel's music brings to the characters is often striking. This depth is embodied in the sorceress Armida, the most dramatically powerful character of the opera.¹²⁰ Her fiery and passionate opening cavatina, 'Furie terribili', is a welcome burst of energy after the sedate opening scene. In Act II, Armida rises to her full dramatic stature with her aria 'Ah! crudel' after she is rejected by Rinaldo. This aria reveals Armida's anguished heart, torn between involuntary love and anger, emotions that are presented musically in a G minor lament with solo oboe, bassoon, and double bass, followed by a highly melismatic *presto* section.¹²¹ After discovering Argante's disloyalty, Armida ends Act II with her brilliant vengeance aria, 'Vo' far guerra.' Handel punctuated this aria with electrifying solo harpsichord cadenzas, which he performed himself.¹²²

For *Rinaldo*, Handel expanded the London orchestra to fit his creative ideas and the opera's dramatic needs. When Handel arrived in London, the opera orchestra consisted of about ten violins, two violas, four to seven cello/basses, two oboes, three bassoons, one trumpet, and one harpsichord. For the premiere of *Rinaldo*, Handel added three trumpets, timpani, and three recorders.¹²³ Handel deployed these forces shrewdly to achieve maximum sound impact in the theater. For example, after Argante's first aria near the beginning of Act I, the trumpets and drums do not play again until the Christian march in the middle of Act III, when the sudden entry of four trumpets results in a triumphant feeling of splendor and exhilaration.¹²⁴ Almirena's aria 'Augelletti', sung in the first act while she waits for Rinaldo in the grove of singing birds, features three recorders with a soprano or flageolet trilling like a bird above the other instruments.¹²⁵ The introduction to Armida's 'Ah! crudel', featuring the oboe, bassoon, and double bass, also shows the shrewdness of Handel's scoring with its dramatic and plaintive effect.¹²⁶

In Handel's time, the orchestra was merely part of the larger entertainment—it supported the singers and dramatic action of an opera.¹²⁷ Handel's orchestral writing challenged this tradition; while his orchestra continued to support and augment the onstage spectacle, it sometimes

called attention to itself in ways that other composers would not have dared. The most stunning example of this change is the harpsichord in Armida's aria 'Vo' far guerra.' Blank spaces in the score marked the solo and extemporized harpsichord cadenzas played by Handel, who impressed London audiences with his dexterity and drew their attention to the activity in the orchestra pit.¹²⁸

While Handel followed the strict conventions of *opera seria*, he often stretched these conventions to fit the dramatic context of the opera. His arias, for example, are often unconventional in form, with shortened da capo arias, cavatina-cabaletta designs, and through-composed pieces.¹²⁹ Rinaldo's aria 'Cara sposa' shows Handel's confidence and flexibility in his treatment of the aria—the slow A section continuously develops for a full 80 bars, while the quick B section is a mere ten bars, just long enough to establish a contrast before returning to the A section. The focus on the slow lament underlines the hero's despair at the sudden loss of his beloved, a move that shows Handel's talent for fitting the musical form to the drama.¹³⁰ Many of Handel's scenes also feature short aria-style or arioso interjections, choruses, and *recitativo accompagnato* more frequently than other operas at the time. Both Handel and his librettists were aware of *opera seria* conventions, but they were willing to test these imposed limits for the sake of the dramatic action.¹³¹

The castrati and other Italian singers assured the popular appeal and success of *Rinaldo* and of Handel's subsequent Italian operas. The original cast of *Rinaldo* included seven excellent Italian singers: three castrati, three women, and one bass. The Italians performed all the title roles, while the one English singer, a bass, sang only five lines of recitative as Argante's herald.¹³² In particular, the famous castrato Nicolini drew large audiences and fascinated London operagoers in his portrayal of Rinaldo. Handel composed Rinaldo's arias specifically for Nicolini—he gave the versatile singer showy yet effective melodies.¹³³ A year before the premiere of *Rinaldo*, Richard Steele had praised Nicolini's talents in the *Tatler*:

I was fully satisfied with the Sight of an Actor who, by the Grace and Propriety of his Action and Gesture, does Honour to an Human Figure...Every one will easily imagine I mean Signior Nicolini, who sets off the Character he bears in an Opera by his Action, as much as he does the Words of it by his Voice. Every Limb, and every Finger, contributes to the Part he acts, insomuch that a deaf Man might go along with him

in the Sense of it.¹³⁴

Even critics of Italian opera, like Steele and Addison, could not fault Nicolini's fortuitous combination of skillful singing with dramatic presence.

The spectacular scenery and machines in *Rinaldo* were also significant in guaranteeing the opera's success. Aaron Hill, the manager of the Haymarket, drew on the popularity of machinery in the British semi-opera tradition to create the most lavish staging effects that Londoners at the time had ever seen.¹³⁵ As the hierarchy of audience members was embedded in the design of the Haymarket, so too was the importance of magnificent staging effects. Between the opening of the Haymarket and the premiere of *Rinaldo* there, the theater's managers had purchased a house adjoining the theater and opened it to the stage, increasing the stage's depth by 30 feet. The space reserved for the orchestra, actors, and scenery, then, was significantly large in relation to the space reserved for the audience.¹³⁶ On this deep stage, characters flew through the air, sailed away on an ocean, and rose out of the ground; complete scenes were razed within a few minutes; and there was thunder, lightning, fire, smoke, and waterfalls.¹³⁷

Handel joined the theatrical managers in their preoccupation with scenic design. Unlike other composers, Handel wrote almost all scene descriptions and stage directions in his autograph scores; visual images apparently inspired the composer's musical imagination.¹³⁸ Throughout *Rinaldo*, Handel fashioned the music to fit the staging. For example, after the scene change from the Jerusalem city walls to the grove of singing birds in Act I, Handel extended the opening *ritornello* to Almirena's aria 'Augelletti' for a full two minutes to allow the audience to enjoy the spectacle of tree foliage and real sparrows.¹³⁹ During Goffredo and Eustazio's struggle up the mountain to Armida's palace, Handel covered the action with a *sinfonia* and then with an aria sung by the Christian sorcerer. Handel did not require Goffredo or Eustazio to sing while they were on the mountain, as singing was generally confined to the front of the stage.¹⁴⁰ Handel thus crafted his music to complement the scenery and staging.

While the lavish staging of *Rinaldo* delighted many Londoners, Steele and Addison were alarmed by the appeal of the elaborate and extravagant machines and scenery.¹⁴¹ In their attempt to render Italian opera ridiculous, both writers delighted in pointing out the inconsistencies

and excesses of the production. Addison disparaged the mixture of real and artificial elements on the stage; this criticism is obvious in his famous response to the real birds released onstage during Almirena's aria 'Augelletti' in the grove scene:

As I was walking in the streets about a fortnight ago, I saw an ordinary fellow carrying a cage full of little birds upon his shoulder; and, as I was wondering with myself what use he would put them to, he was met very luckily by an acquaintance, who had the same curiosity. Upon his asking what he had upon his shoulder, he told him that he had been buying sparrows for the opera. Sparrows for the opera, says his friend, licking his lips; what, are they to be roasted? No, no, says the other, they are to enter towards the end of the first act, and to fly about the stage... There have been so many flights of them let loose in this opera, that it is feared the house will never get rid of them; and that in other plays they may make their entrance in very wrong and improper scenes, so as to be seen flying in a lady's bed-chamber, or perching upon a king's throne; besides the inconveniencies which the heads of the audience may sometimes suffer from them.¹⁴²

Addison also drew his readers' attention to the confused mythological mixing in the characters of the pagan sorceress Armida and the Christian sorcerer in *Rinaldo*: "I must confess I am very much puzzled to find how an Amazon should be versed in the black art, or how a good christian, for such is the part of the magician, should deal with the devil."¹⁴³ For Addison, these discrepancies offended credibility and weakened the plot.

Despite this criticism—perhaps even because of it—Londoners thronged the Haymarket to see the much-talked-of castrati and the spectacular staging effects, to hear the music that offended their ears less than British semi-opera, and to participate as cultured members of society. *Rinaldo* was performed fifteen times before the end of the season; the thirteenth performance was announced as the last, but popular demand required two more.¹⁴⁴ Curtis Price suggests that *Rinaldo's* success can also be explained by Hill's inclusion of English dramatic traditions in the libretto and the staging of the opera. While Hill based the opera on Tasso's epic poem, he borrowed elements of plot and character from an earlier British semi-opera, *The British Enchanters*, which had been performed at the Haymarket in 1706. The outstanding success of this semi-opera saved

the Haymarket from early bankruptcy. The similarities between the two works are striking—in both, a beautiful and vengeful sorceress is at war with a morally superior order and, through her magic, she ensnares an ineffectual hero from the enemy's side and falls in love with him, thus alienating her ally.¹⁴⁵

William Weber suggests that *Rinaldo's* success in England also derived from Handel's ability to navigate the polarized political culture of London. Handel mingled easily with both Whigs and Tories; this was a significant accomplishment, as theater managers were almost entirely Whigs, while subscribers included prominent Tories.¹⁴⁶ Burrows notes that Handel had a talent for gravitating toward the center of power and influence soon after his arrival in a city. Only a couple of months after his arrival in London, for example, he gave a private court performance for Queen Anne on her birthday. Nicolini and other Italian singers of the Haymarket sang an Italian dialogue in front of state officers, foreign ministers, and the nobility.¹⁴⁷

The queen's approval, however, did not appease British critics, and it apparently meant little to Dennis, if he even knew about it. In his *An Essay upon Publick Spirit; Being a Satyr in Prose upon the Manners and Luxury of the Times*, published in the year of *Rinaldo's* premiere, Dennis escalated his attacks on Italian opera and his claim of the threat that it posed to the nation. As he wrote, "Why then, if these Gentlemen love their Country, do they encourage that which corrupts their Country-men, and makes them degenerate from themselves so much? If they are so fond of the *Italian* Musick, why do they not take it from the Hay-Market to their Houses, and hug it like their secret Sins there?"¹⁴⁸

Ironically, with the entrepreneurship of John Walsh, opera lovers could do exactly that. Two months after the premiere of *Rinaldo*, Walsh published the first of many editions of the music from *Rinaldo*. This first edition contained the overture and *coro* in full score and all the arias in short score.¹⁴⁹ There are occasional scoring indications—'Venti, turbini' contains a four-part *ritornello* with bassoon, and 'Lascia ch'io pianga' is followed by a flute arrangement. It is unknown whether Handel corrected the proofs, as Walsh claimed he had, but the comprehensiveness of the publication suggests that Walsh at least had Handel's authority.¹⁵⁰ Walsh's later editions of *Rinaldo's* music, and his publications of many of Handel's future operas, continued the dissemination of Italian opera music to the larger public, allowing audience members to prolong their enjoyment of

Handel's opera music in the privacy of their homes. Even those who had not attended the Haymarket production had the opportunity to experience and appreciate Handel's music through their own amateur musical talents.

Rinaldo's success confirmed the fears of London's literati: a foreign opera had infiltrated the nation, and its ridiculous excesses did not hinder elite patronage or middle-class fascination. Though spurred to critical commentary by the strong political, social, and cultural context of early eighteenth-century England, British authors could not stop the continental deluge that represented debauched monarchs, effeminacy, Roman Catholicism, and senseless spectacle. Italian-style opera had triumphed over the London stage.

Conclusion

Although British writers could not stop the influx of Italian opera, their criticism of the genre did not end with the success of *Rinaldo*. For example, Aaron Hill, the English co-librettist of *Rinaldo*, would later turn against Italian opera and join the ranks of the British critics. In 1724, less than fifteen years after Hill had employed castrati singers for *Rinaldo*, he published an attack on Senesino, the famous castrato who performed in Handel's operas during the 1720s and 1730s. Hill's words are more reminiscent of Steele or Dennis than of the previous manager of the Haymarket:

O Thou! our Country's Folly and Expense!
 Dull Foe to Tragedy and GOD-like Sense
 Too long, mean, mercenary shade, too long
 Hast thou these ISLES Incharmed with thy Song.¹⁵¹

In 1725, Hill continued to echo the language of his British critical predecessors and of his 1711 preface to *Rinaldo*, expressing his desire for an opera in which the "Force of Words and Meaning were increas'd by Musick; where...our emasculating present Taste, of the Italian Luxury, and Wantonness of Music, will give way to a more Passionate, and animated Kind of Opera, where not only the Eye and Ear may expect to be charm'd, but the Heart to be touch'd and transported."¹⁵² Italian opera had disappointed Hill, who felt that it had not fulfilled its initial promise or reached British dramatic standards. He believed that Italian opera was not as passionate as it should be, and that its florid music destroyed the

sense of the words.

In 1732, Hill voiced his concerns to Handel, his old operatic colleague. After the success of *Rinaldo*, Handel had remained in London and continued composing Italian opera, an activity that dominated his musical output for the next thirty-five years. His status as London's most renowned Italian opera composer was solidified in 1720 with the establishment of the Royal Academy of Music. While he produced many more works of *opera seria* for the London stage, *Rinaldo* remained the most performed and beloved.¹⁵³ But in 1732, Hill urged Handel to turn his compositional talents to revitalizing English-language opera: "My meaning is, that you would be resolute enough, to deliver us from our *Italian bondage*; and demonstrate, that *English* is soft enough for Opera, when compos'd by poets, who know how to distinguish the *sweetness* of our tongue, from the *strength* of it..."¹⁵⁴ The tension between English and Italian opera thus continued.

Four years later, Handel corresponded with another ghost from his past—Shaftesbury's son, the fourth Earl of Shaftesbury. He was an ardent admirer of Handel; he subscribed to publications of his operas and concertos, corresponded with the composer concerning his health and musical activities, possibly hosted him at the family home, and wrote a brief memoir of Handel's activities in London. In 1736, Handel wrote to the fourth Earl, thanking him for "that Part of My Lord Your Fathers Letter relating to Musick." Handel wrote that he found the third Earl's notions very just, and was "highly delighted with them, and [could] not enough admire 'em."¹⁵⁵ Thomas McGeary suggests that the letter to which Handel was referring was Shaftesbury's 1709 letter to Pierre Coste concerning Raguenet. If this is so, it is perhaps surprising that Handel embraced Shaftesbury's ideas so wholeheartedly. While Shaftesbury ultimately vindicated Italian opera, his fears of spectacle probably would not have led to his appreciation for the spectacularly staged *Rinaldo*. But the amenability between Handel and Shaftesbury's son, side by side with the rift between Handel and his former Italian opera-promoting colleague Hill, suggests a posterity that continued British opposition to Italian opera while finding a place in London musical life for Handel, his Italian operas, and his later English oratorios.

Italian opera in London would continue to be fashionable and socially exclusive, as well as expensive and difficult to finance. Yet as operatic elements spread to the popular theaters, Italian opera would gradually

lose its earlier exclusivity. Handel's turn to the religious oratorio in the 1740s hastened this trend, and wealthy English men and women searched for other musical outlets to satisfy their desire for novelty and exclusivity. Beginning in the 1760s, the British elite began attending costly performances of technically difficult foreign instrumental music, played by imported professionals. In the cosmopolitan city of London, where elites were constantly searching for new diversions, dawned the age of Haydn and Mozart. The era of Classical music had begun.¹⁵⁶

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Capturing the Wandering Womb

Childbirth in Medieval Art

Kate Phillips '06

Introduction

Though birth is a rite of passage common to every living being, little of its ritual history has been preserved. In the Middle Ages, the event of childbirth was a process witnessed and experienced almost exclusively by women, as the birthing chamber was the only secular space from which men were systematically absent. Giving birth, therefore, was the essential difference between men and women not only in the biological realm, but also in the cultural realm.

The birthing ritual was also a practice rife with tensions from conflicting powers. Regarding childbirth and female sexuality in general, women received varying messages from the Church, medical practitioners, lawmakers, and fellow women. These incompatible voices led to an increasing marginalization of women within the context of the physical ritual and created an ambiguous societal attitude toward birth itself. Images of childbirth convey how men and women dealt with conflict. For instance, doctrine taught that women ought to be fruitful, yet it also stated that pain from childbirth was God's original punishment to women for failing to ignore temptation. Additionally, women received pressure both to reproduce abundantly and to remain chaste. Both the tensions around childbirth and the related marginalization of women are evident in images of secular and religious births, medieval medical writings, and biblical texts.

Medical and Social Context of Childbirth

Because of high rates of infant mortality, closeness to children was generally discouraged in the Middle Ages, and the act of childbirth held

less of an emotional importance and more of a political one.¹ Healthy babies—especially males—bore significance as heirs who ensured the continuation of a patriarchal lineage. Medieval medical descriptions of the act of childbirth reflected unease about the perpetuation of this patriarchy; part of this anxiety stemmed from men's dependency on women for the line's survival.

It is difficult, however, to determine the truth about the physical process of medieval childbirth because the texts that describe it were primarily written by men who were systematically absent from the birthing chamber. Even the authorship of those texts that have been traditionally accepted as written by women, such as the influential book on women's health, the *Trotula*, has now been called into question. Texts and images describing childbirth relied mostly on female eyewitness accounts related to male writers and artists, as well as ideas passed down from antiquity.

The majority of medieval gynecological beliefs stemmed from the theories of three authors: Hippocrates, Galen, and Soranus. Though mostly outdated by the Middle Ages, certain theories presented by Aristotle also greatly influenced medieval attitudes towards the female body, which was thought of as a vessel that carried the male's seed.

Hippocrates's theory on the wandering womb had a great impact on feelings about the female body and sexuality. Hippocrates, as well as generations of medical thinkers after him, viewed the womb as an independent creature. Because female bodies were thought to crave warmth and moisture, frequent sexual activity was needed to stabilize the uterus. It was thought that unnatural behavior, such as celibacy or an excess of "male activities," would drive the uterus to distraction and cause it to wander freely throughout the body. There were various consequences to these travels depending on how far the uterus wandered and where it chose to attach itself, but when the roving organ ultimately came to rest next to the brain, it caused hysteria.

By the Middle Ages, the majority of Hippocrates's theories on women's bodies had become obsolete, but the idea of the wandering womb remained influential. Galen, the writer who dominated medieval and renaissance medical thought (as well as other prominent theorists writing after Hippocrates and prior to the Middle Ages) rejected the idea, but the notion resurfaced with the writings of medieval medical writers including the supposedly female Dame Trotula. These writers, following in the footsteps of Hippocrates, claimed that the womb would only remain

settled through frequent sexual activity, and, because birth control methods were less reliable, frequent reproduction.

This selective reinterpretation of the antique gynecological theories not only indicated a distrust of female control over sexuality, but it also identified motherhood as a socially mandated way for women to maintain their health.² Though all women were subject to marginalization because of the assumed weakness of their sex, those who were unmarried and who strayed from the feminine norm were considered more susceptible to illness, both mental and physical. Therefore, the dominant medical theories of the time made procreation a matter of central importance to women and their overall health.³

Jennifer Wynne Helwarth describes the medieval ritual of childbirth as having three phases: separation, transition, and reincorporation.⁴ A woman in labor was first sequestered in an all-female space, then she was allowed significant recovery time, and later she was reintegrated into mainstream society. Birth was not yet included in the category of hard medicine; rather, it was considered a part of everyday life, and it therefore remained entirely within the realm of the female experience. The birth itself took place in what one writer called an “*emphatically closed female space*”⁵ known as the lying-in chamber. A pregnant woman tended to make arrangements well in advance regarding who would attend her birth. Typically, those present in a birthing chamber included a midwife and five or six other women, usually family or friends, but never men. A woman who was invited to a birth was called a “*gossip*,” a word originally meaning “*godparent*.”⁶ Increasing anxiety about the existence of such an exclusively female space resulted in a growing negative connotation of the word, which eventually linked “*gossip*” with unbridled speech among women.⁷

The lying-in chamber provided women with a completely enclosed space cut off from the commotion of the rest of the world. When the expectant mother began her labor, all entrances to the room were shut and all windows were sealed to block out light; the environment of the chamber was reminiscent of the womb. After the birth, the new mother remained in her sealed chamber for up to a month (her lying-in period was known as “*her month*”). During this time, she would visit only with her female companions and the midwife.

The midwife occupied a unique place in medieval society. Unlike physicians, whose knowledge was passed on through institutions, mid-

wives learned their craft from their mothers. The knowledge remained within the female province from generation to generation. Also, a midwife's workload could reach up to 300 births per year, and she was therefore among the most active of community members.⁸ Moreover, these women were provided with several powers denied to all other members of society. In addition to their exclusive permission to touch the woman's genitals during the birth and to swaddle the baby for warmth after the birth, the midwife was also designated as the sole lay person who could baptize a baby. Because of the dangerous nature of the birthing process in the Middle Ages, the acknowledged possibility of death permeated the birthing chamber as much as the anticipation of new life. Women were even instructed to confess their sins before going into labor. In case of an emergency, midwives were required by canon law to be instructed in the process of infant baptism, thus ensuring the infant a proper burial and a place in heaven. Midwives, therefore, occupied a nebulous, but important space within medieval society.

Medieval Images of Childbirth

Although images of childbirth in the Middle Ages are rare, the few that exist provide much insight into the ritual itself. These images of births fall into several categories. Some extant manuscripts of the medical writings mentioned above are filled with illustrations that served as visual aids for medical practitioners and wealthy families concerned with their health. As dissections and autopsies became more frequent as ways of understanding the human body, illustrations of the internal organs (and, later, surgical procedures) began to circulate. In addition to medical texts, many of the available secular images come from illustrated chronicles of great historical figures. For example, we have a large body of illustrations of caesarean sections because, according to legend, Julius Caesar was delivered through this procedure. Many of the later historical narratives that describe the life of Caesar include lavish illustrations of his birth. Because these images began to appear at around the same time as the publication of the first written medical account of the procedure in 1305, it is generally assumed that the pictures provide an accurate view of the birthing chambers, the participants in the procedure, the medical tools, and to a certain extent, the procedure itself.⁹ Images of secular births also appear on ritual objects used during the births. The most common type

of birth illustrations in the Middle Ages are those depicting the births of biblical figures such as Jacob and Esau or Cain and Abel, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary, and, most commonly, Jesus Christ.

The majority of images of secular births survive in the form of wooden childbirth trays called *desco da parto*, which were used to bring refreshments into the birthing chamber during the new mother's period of confinement following the birth. Though made primarily by men, these trays were one of the few secular forms of art made specifically for women. The trays, often lavishly painted, first appeared circa 1370 and remained popular until the late 16th century, predominantly in Italy. According to inventories of personal belongings, nearly one half of all families owned at least one *desco da parto* during the late 14th and early 15th centuries.¹⁰ These inventories also reveal the esteem in which the trays were held; if they were kept in storage, they usually lay wrapped in fine fabrics or specially made bags.¹¹ Usually, however, these trays hung on bedroom walls both before and after births, which is evidenced by the ornate painting on one side and less elaborate imagery on the other, as well as the hanging devices (nails, hooks, etc.) which remain on several of the trays.

The iconographic themes displayed on the elaborate fronts of the trays, which hung facing the room, mostly fall into four categories: mythological and classical narratives, contemporary literary themes, religious stories, and scenes depicting a new mother's confinement. The backs of the trays also tended to be decorated with four distinct themes: naked male children, heraldry, game boards, and allegorical figures. This limited scope of iconography implies that the illustration was not purely ornamental.¹² Each theme evoked certain meanings within the context of the ritual of childbirth. Specific mythological characters may have invoked legends associated with fertility and reproduction. Literary schema such as the 'garden of love' brought to mind visions of courtly ideals and harmony. Biblical figures may have been presented as examples of familial role models or representations of parental expectations.¹³

According to Gail McMurray Gibson, surviving medical texts inform us that, "...from Norway to Italy, childbirth practices and especially the presiding over those customs by midwives and female attendants were remarkably consistent from the early Middle Ages until those practices gradually began to be replaced by the science of male-dominated obstetrics in the 17th century or later—or even much later."¹⁴ Therefore, confinement scenes, which were immensely popular as *desco da parto* decoration,

are worth a close examination for their detailed illustration of the ordinary birth ritual.

A mid-15th century Florentine tray held at Ca'd'Oro in Venice (figure 1) portrays a cut-away room in which a birth has just occurred. The new mother, resting on a luxurious and imposing bed, is surrounded by eight women, most likely her midwife and her "gossips." The mother is obviously wealthy, as evidenced by the lavish brocade garments worn by her attendants. There is an element of calmness that permeates the image. The face of each woman is serene, and the mother's posture is relaxed. An attendant and the mother share a soothing look as they clasp hands in a congratulatory and relieved fashion. Mother and child sit in parallel upright and sprightly positions. There is no sign of exhaustion or pain. Considering the risks involved in childbirth, it is significant that there are no signs here of suffering or danger. Images like this one may have been used to reassure expectant mothers who would have been the recipients of childbirth trays as gifts. Because they hung on bedroom walls, it is possible that these images served the meditative purpose of preparing the women for the birthing ritual that lay ahead.

The scene is set in a cross-sectioned room situated in a dramatic landscape that appears on the left and right edges of the tray. Despite the vast outer setting, the overall image has an intimate, almost claustrophobic, feel to it. The room is closed off from the landscape, with the exception of a small window and a doorway blocked by two attendants. The ceilings are low, barely high enough to accommodate the tallest of the scene's characters. The large bed fills the entire room, leaving little space for the mother's gossips and no room for additional furniture. The presence of red curtains on either side of the bed further emphasizes the tightly enclosed feeling of the scene. This compact space is womb-like, perhaps with the undersized illuminated window serving as a representation of the birth canal. It is possible that the enclosed space was intended to comfort pregnant women in the same way that immediate swaddling comforted a newborn. Both the depiction of the chamber and the ritual simulate the initial comforting space of the womb. The compact zone, cut off from the outside world, also emphasizes the complete separation that the woman experienced in her postpartum month. This separation is further defined by the room's complete severance from the rest of the house. The scene is not contextualized. The room is isolated from all other signs of domesticity; it is situated in the domestic landscape, but strangely di-

forced from that landscape simultaneously. Considering the emphasis on childbirth as a conduit for the continuation of patriarchal lineage, the scene's complete isolation from the rest of the household is startling.

Another wooden childbirth tray, dated 25 April 1428 (figure 2), provides an even clearer representation of the spatial significance of the birthing chamber. The painted image on the tray again shows a cut-away room with a confinement scene. Again, the room is closely cropped to barely enclose the bed, the mother, and her attendants. Here, the female attendants make a full circle around the new mother, which is completed by the figure of a woman situated above the room gazing out the window towards a small crowd of male visitors who wait outside the chamber. The gender separation is obvious here: the men wait, small and passive, bearing gifts. They are physically cut off from the main space and sequestered into the claustrophobic lower left-hand corner. It is interesting to note the disparity in the representations of the landscape within this image. Sprouting from the male section of the image are bountiful flowers, signs of fertility and virility. Above the feminine space is a rocky and inhospitable coastline topped by a daunting sea on which sails an ominous black boat. In all likelihood the artist was a male, and it is conceivable that male anxieties over the birthing ritual and the exclusively female space are manifested in this uninviting landscape.

This second image also serves as a strong example of the potential reassurance that these tray paintings may have offered to an expectant mother. There is absolutely no sign of the pain and exhaustion that must have occurred immediately prior to this moment, and the interior of this space is filled with calming reference points. At the center of the bottom section of the tray, a woman in cascading garments plays the harp while gazing at the newborn child, who rests in the gently caressing grasp of another woman. This attendant looks up towards the bed and tilts her head back, allowing the infant to support its head on her chin. The mother's vibrant red cloak and sheets, which add an air of festivity to the scene, draw the eye towards the center of the composition and highlight the role of the mother. Though the child plays an important part in the scene, as evidenced by the relatively colorful and luxurious fabric in which he is swaddled, it is apparent that the real focal point of this image is the mother. She is situated in the center of a complete circle of female attendants, several of whom kneel before her, thereby creating an atmosphere of worship around her. She is depicted as a near Marian figure.

With very few exceptions, nearly all of the 17 additional pairs of eyes in the composition point towards her. This collective worshipping gaze emphasizes the sacred nature of the birth ritual, and taken in conjunction with the relegation of the men to the exterior of the scene, provides a potential for a sense of female holiness. The reverse side of this tray portrays a large figure of a naked male child. He kneels on a tree stump surrounded by a lush forest, and he holds a pinwheel and a riding toy. Gazing out at the viewer, the child urinates in a stream of gold and silver. The inscription running around the edge of the wooden tray invokes wishes for a safe delivery of a healthy child.¹⁵ Considered together, the images on the front and back of this tray likely provide comfort for an anxious expecting mother.

If confinement scenes painted on wooden childbirth trays were in fact intended to reassure a pregnant woman, it is difficult to imagine the response that an image of a caesarean birth would have elicited. As opposed to the confinement scenes painted on childbirth trays, which were hung in domestic spaces while not in use and meant to be viewed by women, caesarean images were produced primarily for historical and medical texts, so it is not likely that the average woman would view them frequently.

Caesarean sections were rare in the Middle Ages; they were attempted only as a last resort in case of a complication that imperiled the mother's life. Like traditional confinement scenes, pictures of caesareans provide insight into the layout of the birthing chamber. The majority of these images create an all female space, like that depicted in a miniature from *Les Faits des Romains* (figure 3), where the midwife has taken control of the situation and is shown in the process of removing the child from an incision in the mother's abdomen. The procedure is always portrayed as a success, though a successful caesarean birth meant a healthy outcome for the child, but not necessarily for the mother. The midwives in these images are always depicted as competent, and the procedure, surgical instruments, and division of labor tended to be illustrated accurately.¹⁶ It was not until the late fifteenth century that this procedure became associated with hard medicine rather than ritual birth, and this association led to the appearance of male obstetricians and the total exclusion of female midwives and attendants from the operating room.¹⁷

It is possible that caesarean births evoked images of Saint Margaret or that images of Saint Margaret called to mind caesarean births. Saint

Margaret of Antioch, who became the patron saint of childbirth after she emerged unharmed from the belly of Satan in the disguise of a dragon, was called upon during labor to ensure the safe delivery of the child and the preservation of the mother's health. However, the image of Saint Margaret may not have been an entirely reassuring one. Madeline Caviness claims that the image of this triumphant female saint presents a negative view of women's bodies when associated with childbirth: "Margaret then assumes the role of the infant escaping from the threatening birth canal, identified in medieval biological discourse as polluted and even as 'a hell-mouth that is cursed with an all consuming thirst.'"¹⁸ Images of Saint Margaret and images of caesarean sections may have evoked similar reactions. The presence of the dragon in the legend of Saint Margaret, a monstrous beast made even more monstrous in this case by its satanic origins, evokes violent images, made sexual when one considers the medieval view that the dragon-viper gave birth by splitting open. Both Saint Margaret's emergence from the dragon, therefore, and the birth of a child through caesarean section, display the violent and deadly consequences of sexual activity. Because her image emphasizes the violence inherent in birth, the role of St. Margaret as protector of a woman in labor weakens and she too bears the unease surrounding the female ritual.

The Virgin Mary was seen as another ideal intercessor for the medieval woman in labor. However, Mary also made for a conflicted role model for a medieval mother. On one hand, her experience with childbirth brought her closer to the average woman; in Nativity scenes, objects of every day medieval life were often scattered around the image to humanize the birth. Mary was often depicted sitting on or near the ground, implying her identification with earthly beings. These scenes do not show a regal vision of Mary. Instead she is typically rendered in humble reverence to her child, while sometimes exhausted from the birthing process. She is always more human than celestial. However, medieval theologians were quick to emphasize the fact that Mary conceived without pleasure and bore her son without pain, thus differentiating her entirely from the typical woman. Mary was held up as a paragon of motherly love, but was made inaccessible to all mothers.

The relationship between the Virgin Mary and childbirth extends to other types of images. Caviness presents a new reading of the series of Virgin and Child images known as the Throne of Wisdom, which creates the possibility of a conduit through which pregnant women could con-

nect with Mary. Traditionally, these images, which tend to take the form of freestanding sculptures, have been interpreted with an eye towards the concept of majesty. The Virgin Mary takes on the role not only of the mother supporting her son on her lap, but also the seat of divine wisdom incarnate. She therefore allows the divinity and humanity of Christ to shine through equally. Despite the Virgin's physically larger presence in these scenes, Christ is the focus; Mary serves as the throne for her child.¹⁹ Caviness posits that the Virgin and Child's pose can be read as a vision of a successful childbirth. She claims that these images call attention to

the tensions between what [the Virgin Mary] is allowed to be in medieval theology and the slippages that accrue in the visual form; the symmetry of her tall upper body and her widely placed knees may make her a throne (or a quality of mind—wisdom) personified, but they also dehumanize her motherhood. Only a woman's reading that was innocent of theology might have seen evidence of a serene birthing in her seated posture, open legs, and healthy child because medieval women gave birth on a stool, where they were aided by gravity (and by midwives).²⁰

Caviness provides the example of the Visitation and Nativity tympanum on the virgin portal of the west façade of the Chartres Cathedral. Here, the central image depicts a grand and isolated Throne of Wisdom scene. Below the figures are a Visitation and a Nativity scene. The bottom two scenes imply a general emphasis on the theme of birth in the tympanum. The Visitation scene portrays the pregnant Mary, while the Nativity includes a postpartum Mary who rests and receives visitors. Considering this inclusion of the before and after birth scenes, it is reasonable to conclude that the third section of the image would capture the process of the birth itself.

An examination of medical illustrations of the birthing process provides further evidence for this connection. A miniature from a 13th century edition of Pseudo-Apeleius' *Herbarium* (Vienna, NB, MS 93, folio 102; figure 4) shows a woman in labor surrounded by four women, probably three "gossips" and a midwife. The birth takes place in a nondescript location, rather than a specific domestic space like the confinement scenes, but is still emphatically closed by the restricting architectural details. The woman sits on a birthing stool²¹ while the midwife holds a coriander seed near the mother's vagina in an attempt to hasten the birth.²² The rest

of the women encircle the mother, with their arms coming together in a tangled knot, which works to emphasize the notion of childbirth as a collective female ritual. The lines in the women's clothing and the animated position of their hands, suggest vibrancy in the image and imbue the scene with a sense of forthcoming life. The mother's skirt is hoisted up around her knees and her feet are bare, pushing the limits of medieval conceptions of modesty. As in the confinement scenes painted on childbirth trays, the composition here, which places the mother in the middle of the frame surrounded on all sides by attendants, imbues the scene with a worshipful quality. Here, the mother sits on a birthing stool positioned atop a platform as if she were placed upon an altar. The laboring woman holds the exact same pose as the Virgin Mary in the Chartres tympanum. Assuming that this image is an accurate illustration of the normal secular birthing process, it is logical to associate the Throne of Wisdom images with an act of successful and serene childbirth, which would provide the scene with a humanizing element that is lacking in the traditional identification of Mary as a Throne for Divine Wisdom. Most Throne of Wisdom scenes, however, were freestanding sculptures made for monastic settings, complicating the association with childbirth, yet potentially sanctifying the act of childbirth at the same time.

The other type of image linking Mary with the ritual of childbirth is the Nativity scene that illustrates the Holy Family immediately after the birth of Christ. The late medieval Nativity scene, which created the iconographic scheme that has remained popular even today, was shaped by the mystic visions of Saint Birgitta of Sweden, who recounted the scene in her *Revelations*. She described a pregnant maiden arriving at "a stall" with an ox and an ass. The man who accompanied her readied the space by lighting a candle. Birgitta continues:

And when she was all prepared, she kneeled down with great reverence and prayed, and set her back against the manger, and turned her face to the east and held up her hands and her eyes up to Heaven, and she was raised in contemplation with so great a sweetness that it is hard to write about it. And then I saw in her womb something stir; and suddenly she bore her Son. And then came so great a light and brightness that it passed the brightness of the sun, and the light of the candle that Joseph had set on the wall could not be seen. And it was so sudden, that birth of the child, that I might not perceive the passing forth of the child. Nevertheless I saw that blissful

child lying naked on the earth, and he has the fairest skin that I ever saw, without any spot. Also I saw the afterbirth, that is, the surrounding that the child was in, lying all white. Then I heard the angels sing wondrously sweetly and pleasingly.²³

The space in which these Nativity images are set is significant. The typical medieval woman's birthing chamber was defined by its enclosure and exclusivity. Windows and doorways were sealed to block light from entering. This space essentially served as a re-creation of the womb. In the Nativity scenes, Mary gives birth in a semi-open space, usually a ruined barn with open sides and a damaged roof. The walls of the structure are rarely complete and the whole scene is situated in a very visible landscape. In addition to the light streaming through the roof, the child himself usually emanated light. Following Saint Birgitta's description, the light often became the focus of the scene. This focus is exemplified in the Nativity scene from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, created c. 1440 (Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.945), where the pyramidal composition draws the eye directly up towards a bright sun and the angels who rejoice in its light. The child is the direct recipient of this glowing warmth (figure 6). In the corresponding scene in the Limbourg Brothers' *Belles Heures*, made for the Duke de Berry, a light shines directly from a star above the manger, through a hole in the roof, and onto the child (figure 7).

Considered in conjunction with this luminous and open space, the characters present at the birth of Christ are also noteworthy. Joseph, the surrogate father of the child, is portrayed sitting close to the mother and child, and he looks baffled by the event that has just unfolded. In addition, Christ is attended by several shepherds, an ox, an ass, and often a wise man or three. Birth, then, becomes first, a public experience; the act's sexual nature is denied, and the act is therefore separated from its origins in Eve. When it becomes a public experience, childbirth is removed from the zone that had once only been accessible to females. It therefore transforms into a masculine experience. The ritual has been deemed holy by its removal from the enclosed female space. Fortunately, the presence of the ox and the ass imply that the child was revered by all living beings. Though the artist works to separate the mother from her all-female space, the image does not become entirely masculine through the separation.

Mary's separation from the previously female space of childbirth relates to the popular medical texts that provide men with agency in childbirth. In both, Mary is depicted as a passive mother. She does not labor

or push during the birth of her son. According to Saint Birgitta's story and the accepted imagery, Christ appears suddenly next to her. The need for a ritual, especially an exclusively female one, is eradicated. Caviness points out that Mary's passivity is further emphasized in her death. Just as she is deprived of normal acts of sexual reproduction, she is also relieved of a real death. The Virgin is consistently portrayed as being assumed into heaven through the agency of angels, as contrasted to Christ's active Ascension.²⁴

Childbirth in Text

This ambiguity—the tension between birth as a holy and feminine necessity versus a punishment—that surrounds childbirth has its roots in biblical text. The first section of the Book of Genesis is charged with incredible sexual energy. The text is loaded with fertile imagery and abuzz with excitement over freshly shaped life and things to come. The creation story ends with the mention of childbirth: Eve, after her expulsion from the Garden of Eden with her partner Adam, is punished through the promise of pain and labor during childbirth. This punishment is passed down to all mothers. Childbirth, in the biblical sense, is closely associated with punishment. The ambiguous attitude towards birth in the Bible is demonstrated through God's command to his creations to "be fruitful and multiply." This command takes the agency of creation away from humanity and places it with a divine power. However, the admonition is followed by a promise, taking several forms:

"I will make your descendents as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendents also can be counted" (Genesis 13:16); "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them, so shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5); "I will multiply your descendents as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17).

In her study of the origin of human suffering, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that through this promise "the multiplication of humanity comes to be understood as a re-enactment of the original creation, for the power 'to make' bodily tissue at the original appearance of Adam and Eve is also the power to alter, magnify, multiply the amount of that

bodily tissue.”²⁵ Again, a divine being takes the agency of reproduction out of the hands of mankind. This thread continues with the repeated referral to the opening and closing of wombs throughout the Bible. Several biblical stories feature barren women who have given up hope of having children, but who later find their wombs suddenly opened by the hand of God after prayer. This theme doubly removes any reproductive agency from women. These women are positioned between the absolute categories of barren and pregnant. Any sense of self-alterability is denied.²⁶ This lack of agency is apparent even in the prayer that is meant to catalyze the womb’s opening. It is typically not uttered by women, but by their husbands. In this case, man appropriates whatever power is not entirely handed over to God, and the result is projected onto the female body.

Childbirth as a Liminal Experience

Through the visual and textual depictions of childbirth available at the time, childbirth became a liminal experience for medieval women. First of all, women were faced with conflicting pressures regarding their sexuality. The medieval church prized chastity as a great virtue. Many theologians wrote that a woman reached her most virtuous state when she disregarded her feminine nature and became more like a man. However, the emphasis placed on chastity conflicted with the widely held belief that a woman was most healthy when she engaged in frequent sexual activity. Ultimately, these contradicting demands led to the marginalization of female sexuality and the female ability to reproduce, thereby creating anxiety around the ultimate distinction between man and woman: the possibility of carrying a child.

The birthing ritual itself was one defined by its dualities. In a successful birth, the end result was joyful, especially if the child was a male. However, because of high infant mortality rates and the risk posed to the mother, the birthing room always carried connotations of death. The midwife’s power to baptize an infant indicated a clear acknowledgement of the possibility of losing that child. This fear led mothers to closely identify with the Virgin Mary. As Christa Grössinger writes, “The Virgin’s motherhood was at its most human at the Nativity, when, from the very time of his birth, she had premonitions of Christ’s death.”²⁷ In Nativity scenes, Christ’s swaddling cloths can be interpreted as premonitions of his shroud, and the juxtaposition of these images acknowledge

that Christ was born to die. Biblical texts waffled back and forth between designating childbirth as a uniquely female experience, and indicating it as another ritual that asserts the omnipresent power of a divine force. Further, the biblical designation of the ritual of childbirth as the result of punishment gave a bitter tinge to the fulfillment of God's command to be fruitful and multiply.

Comparing images of the nativity to images of secular births emphasizes conflicting tensions surrounding childbirth. While the real medieval woman's lying-in chamber was emphatically dark and closed and exclusively female, the Virgin gave birth in an open space, surrounded by family, strangers, and animals. Her company was primarily male and both the space and her child emanated light. Perhaps it is helpful to look back at the notion of God opening and closing the wombs of early biblical characters through the prayers of men, and to see the Nativity scene as the depiction of the ultimate act opening of the womb. The womb is now open. The conflicting pressures from religious, medical, and social powers led to an eventual denial of an exclusively female grasp on the childbirth ritual.

Endnotes

¹ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 13-14.

² Laurinda S. Dixon, "The Curse of Chastity: The Marginalization of Women in Medieval Art and Medicine, in Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler, *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), 72.

³ For further information on the medical beliefs behind medieval childbirth, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler, eds., *Matrons and marginal women in medieval society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 1995); Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Loren MacKinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965)

⁴ Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

⁵ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29.1 (Winter, 1999).

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1989.

⁷ Hellwarth, 7.

⁸ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1999, 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Gibson, 10.

¹⁵ Musacchio, 1.

¹⁶ Blumenfield-Kosinski, 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁸ Quoted in Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 111-112.

¹⁹ Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 49-50.

²⁰ Caviness, 8.

²¹ The birthing stool can be seen even more clearly in a woodcut from Jacob Rueff's *Ein schön lustig Trostbüchle*, 1554 (figure 5). Although this image was created after the Middle Ages, medieval medical writings identified the use of this type of birthing stool.

²² Loren MacKinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 94.

²³ *Saint Bride and Her Book: Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Newburyport, MA: Focus Texts, 1992), 130.

²⁴ Caviness, p. 7.

²⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁷ Christa Grössinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

New Traditionalists

Baudrillard, Devo, and the Postmodern De-evolution of the Simulation

James Weissinger '06

The point is not to resist by clinging to older visions and values—a mistake made alike by the survivalist Right and the communitarian Left. Let us rather push further and further, into ever-new landscapes of simulation and delusion.

-Steven Sharviro, *Doom Patrols*¹

Devo asks the questions that help point us all in the right direction/ to go forward/ move ahead/ and give the past the slip/ It's time to seek out new traditions/ We know where the old ones took us/ and now we are all here together/ So let's go/ take in the full measure of Devo's new traditionalist spirit.

-Devo, "Nu-Tra Speaks (New Traditionalist Man)"²

The above passages from Steven Shaviro's book *Doom Patrols* and the Devo song/manifesto "Nu-Tra Speaks" both advocate a contradiction emblemized by the phrase "New Traditionalists": rather than cling to past social norms and ways of living, humanity should "move ahead" while recognizing that we never truly can do so, for we are perpetually caught in a cycle of aesthetic repetition that yields the same retro result—just more traditions. The only possible "new," then, is our novel acceptance of that inevitability: conscious parody becomes the only option available to the individual who seeks—while at the same time understanding the impossibility of—individuality. Achieving this paradoxical equilibrium between future and past, original and copy, ridicule and praise, Devo disdains the status quo while immersing itself in it; the band's pretense of rebellion recalls arch post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard's description of the postmodern implosion—the co-opting of counterculture by the reigning cultural norm, the revolutionary collapse of revolution itself. Thus, the band's initially resistant rhetoric and bizarre aesthetic eventually progress

from parody to indistinguishable *simulation* of normative music culture. The band welcomes this degeneration into the norm because it realizes the perpetual stylistic repetition observed by Shaviro, the calcification of the new into another version of the old. De-evolution persists thirty years later as it is now played out by Devo's descendents—the Japanese noise rock group Polysics and the Disney-sponsored child band Devo 2.0. Polysics's Devo fetishization generates a startling "hyper-simulation" of the original which threatens to outdo—to out-Devo—Devo; conversely, Devo 2.0's family-friendly reworkings of the Devo catalogue empty the music of its sexually transgressive content, a process overseen by producer and founding band member Gerald Casale. In both instances, we discover that the original band has been made into a replicable and alterable "garment," easily tailored for Japanese noise fans and American pre-teens alike. That Devo 2.0 and Polysics possess a culturally handed-down Devo aesthetic form reveals the foundational paradox of the once-rebellious de-evolutionary theory. Devo's own cultural revolution only succeeds in its own failure, its dissolution into the mainstream itself; quirk is willingly degenerated into commodity.

The band that would become Devo formed in 1972, two years after the Ohio State National Guard shootings that killed four students at Kent State. Bob Lewis, founding member and coauthor of the group's de-evolutionary theory, notes the importance of this event in the development of the band's ideology:

When the university shut down after the shootings, the administrators learned that the university actually functioned better without the students. They were messy and troublesome, and the system would work so much better with 'droids. But the stresses and pressures placed on the scene by such naked oppression created a superheated plasma stream that had to vent before it reached critical mass, and one of the places it emerged was in the birth spasms of de-evolution, whose *raison d'être* was a desire to create a universe of discourse that would be both an aesthetic capable of critical analysis and a tool for social justice.³

Lewis's reimaginings of the Kent State shootings as "a super heated plasma stream" and of Devo as "a tool for social justice" go far beyond hyperbole, yet Baudrillard strangely makes a consonant critique in his discussion of May 1968. The Ohio shootings—or perhaps, the media im-

ages of those shootings—are just one instance in a series of aftershocks predicted by Baudrillard in his discussion of the Paris student riots, a phenomenon he labels the postmodern implosion: “Fundamental it is that which continues, the implosion of the social, of institutions, of power...revolution itself, the idea of revolution also implodes.”⁴ Revolution becomes yet another product circumscribed by the status quo, a carnivalesque violation of established power which is a vital, regulated part of that power. Baudrillard contends that this implosion is a result of the commodity over-saturation of late capitalism. In this simultaneously bleak and celebratory vision, everything becomes a repeatable commodity, and the boundary between consumer and product disintegrates. Replicated simulations become so exact that they trouble any identifiable originality, thereby disrupting the hierarchy between the authentic and the copy. “Society” thus protects humanity from the realization that there is no “real”: “The media and the official news service are only there to maintain the illusion of an actuality, of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of the facts.”⁵ The postmodern implosion signals the co-opting of revolutionary action by these forces of the simulation, the replica: the norm anticipates and generates all challenges to itself, and in this cycle, revolution becomes a kind of necessary—and controlled—socio-cultural safety valve. All conceivable modes of opposition to the status quo thus become a part of that status quo, having been brought to heel by capitalism’s need to reconfigure the strange into the saleable.

This collapse dovetails with Devo’s theory of de-evolution: everything eventually decomposes or undergoes commoditization. Strangely, Baudrillard’s language recalls one of Devo’s earliest and most controversial theoretical influences: “The Beginning Was the End,” Oscar Kiss Maerth’s 1969 science fiction polemic that imagined a humanity descended from super-intelligent, cannibalistic apes—a racist, reworked *Planet of the Apes*. Writing on the commingling of space and time, Baudrillard explains,

Nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: *implosion*—an absorption of the radiating mode of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative charge—an implosion of meaning. *That is where simulation begins.*⁶

The implosion of duality, of the very possibility of opposition, signals the birth of the simulation, the eradication of difference between the “original” and the “copy.” The assignment of value based on precedence becomes impossible—authenticity disappears in the wake of a legion of factory replicas. Lewis also observes this temporal collapse of antipodes. In the early Devo manifesto “Readers vs. Breeders: Didactical Works re: De-Evolution,” he writes, “When up or down, light and dark, progression and regression are viewed not as opposites, but as contraries, different manifestations of the same basic energies, then devolution becomes not only possible, but viable.”⁷ Recognizing one’s inability to attain originality in the face of the simulation, Devo posits de-evolution as a “viable” mode of life in the postmodern implosion.

Thus, Devo intrinsically must fail as it bravely marches forward into the inevitability of this degradation. The “point” of Devo is that the band embraces this collapse. Shaviro concurs, “Call it the Reagan gene: the ability to deceive others by first of all deluding yourself. Pull the wool over your own eyes, as they say in the Church of the SubGenius.”⁸ Shaviro’s citation of the Church of the SubGenius is quite fitting, as the pseudo-religious organization’s rhetoric forms yet another pillar of Devo’s de-evolutionary philosophy. The Church is an artificial, postmodern religion that ordains priests, such as founding Devo member Mark Mothersbaugh, at the low-low price of \$29.95.⁹ Much like the Church’s denigration of “normal people” who refuse to challenge authority as the problematically-termed “pinks,” Devo similarly created the othered “spuds,” so-called regular folks. However, the ambiguous valuation of the term “spud” returns us to Baudrillard’s deconstruction of polar opposites, as the band also refers to itself and its supporters as “spud-boys,” thus critiquing while celebrating the band, its fans, and its detractors alike—as the saying goes, “We’re all Devo.”

Self-reflexive criticism, therefore, forms the core of de-evolutionary doctrine. As band co-founder Gerald Casale notes in an interview with the appropriately simulacral, fake-yet-true newspaper *The Onion*, “I don’t see how we would be able to escape the long arm of de-evolution ourselves. You ultimately are part of the thing you are talking about.”¹⁰ One of the band’s earliest singles, a cover of the Rolling Stones’ song “Satisfaction,” applies de-evolutionary rhetoric to a sacrosanct rock icon. Devo’s version kicks the legs out from under Mick Jagger’s swagger-

ing boogie to create a tautly nervous, polyrhythmic mess. But as Casale notes, Devo soon fell prey to its own de-evolutionary regression. After Devo's first two albums, the group abandoned most of its original instruments in favor of synthesizers—what else but electronic *simulations* of actual guitars and drums? The band's sound de-generated with each successive album.¹¹ What was once parody of 80s synth-pop became indistinguishable from actual 80s synth-pop. As Baudrillard theorizes that “[S]imulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary,’”¹² Devo's biggest single “Whip-It” realized this confusion. Enshrined as one of the iconic hits of the 80s by countless late-night infomercial compilations, the song wed cowboy ranch with S & M raunch while somehow remaining “mainstream.” The song's constant flickering between the in/appropriate recalls Baudrillard's portrait of the Centre Pompidou as in/out; the building's utilitarian, operational components are exposed on its exterior rather than hidden within: “The masses, themselves, rush [to the Centre Pompidou] to enjoy this execution, this dismemberment, this operational prostitution of a culture finally truly liquidated, including all counterculture that is nothing but its apotheosis.”¹³ The art museum becomes an overwhelming work of art unto itself, which both obscures and showcases the actual art within. Similarly, Devo's song simultaneously hides and proliferates the band's sado-masochistic message beneath a sheen of slick, early 80s production. “Whip-It” can thus be heard as the soundtrack to the postmodern implosion. It is a revolutionary work so potent in its attack on conventional taste that it obliterates its own revolutionary potential in that potential's very realization, for the song bludgeon its way into the pantheon of “the normal.” Casale concurs, revaluing the “prostitution” observed by Baudrillard:

[P]eople still have a high recognition factor of Devo. People remember the hats, the suits, the movements. They remember “Whip It.” We are on a cultural-icon level. We burned it in despite all the efforts of those in control to kind of sweep us aside or get rid of us.¹⁴

Perhaps overestimating the band's cultural impact, Casale nevertheless recognizes that decades later, this “burn” persists: although Devo no longer records music as a band, its ideological de-evolution contin-

ues in various musical progeny. Disemboweled of its original intellectual content, the band lives on as a fetishized, hollowed-out aesthetic, its image “worn” by the child group Devo 2.0 and the Japanese noise-rockers Polysics. “[O]nly nostalgia endlessly accumulates,” writes Baudrillard; “[E]verything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately in the same morose and funereal exaltation, in the same retro fascination.”¹⁵ While the members of Devo proclaimed themselves to be the paradoxical “New Traditionalists” in sampling from the past while looking ahead to a sci-fi future envisioned *by* that past, the band Polysics finds itself mired in an inescapable nostalgia, Baudrillard’s “retro fascination.” The band has devoured Devo and regurgitated the original at intense shibuya-kei speeds to the point where playing a 45rpm Polysics single at 33rpm creates a sound eerily similar to that of a Devo original. Thus, whereas Devo “undid” the Stones by slowing them down, Polysics achieves a similar effect by speeding up Devo through an all-too-perfect, fast-forward simulation. Here’s a typical review taken from music website Pitchforkmedia.com:

Tokyo’s Polysics must know their Japanese take on Devo could sound ridiculous, so they cut out the sardonic middleman and simply lampoon themselves. Their matching jumpsuits and space-age specs are brilliantly meta, not to mention the egregious shoutouts to new wave influences. *Polysics or Die!!!*, a greatest hits compilation of sorts—and Polysics’s first release since leaving Asian Man Records—sorts titles like “New Wave Jacket”, “Eno”, the not-so-veiled “XCT”, and a cover of “My Sharona”. However, the Polysics’ obsession with a certain Akron, Ohio five-piece permeates this collection. Not only do they boast the craziest synth, surf guitar, robo-beat and spastic vocals combo since [Devo album] *Freedom of Choice*, but everything’s accelerated for current listeners’ frenetic, DDR-paced attention spans.¹⁶

The members of Polysics are not shy about speaking their influences; before concerts, they will broadcast a Devo album over the PA, and they will even sound-check by playing along with it. This reference to the past gives way to an intensified hyper-repetition of Devo that portrays

a nostalgic link over the music itself. Literally playing on top of Devo's music, this descendent "traces" the songs, and this act of repetition is an ambiguously violent one: in the face of these Polysics's covers, Devo's songs now seem too slow, oddly "not Devo enough." While admittedly fusing Devo's style with elements of Japanese noise rock groups like the Boredoms and Melt Banana, Polysics's added intensity does not so much copy Devo's sound as create a *Cliffs Notes* reinterpretation, a streamlined essentialization of the Devo aural (and visual) aesthetic. The simulation here eclipses while paradoxically foregrounding the original; de-evolution and the repetitions of simulation as conceived by Baudrillard do not so easily align, then, as we can distinguish this (d)evolved descendent of Devo from the original. Polysics's sonic overachievement thus reveals both the failure and the triumph of Devo's revolution against the norm. So successful in its creation of a unique audio-visual aesthetic, Devo transformed itself into the marketable, repeatable product that it initially challenged. The sonic overachievement of Polysics is an unintended offshoot of Devo's de-evolutionary trajectory, a re-imagining of the norm as leavened by Devo's cultural influence.

Whereas Polysics might speak to Baudrillard's vision of an unending, uncontrollable stream of simulations, Casale's production of the Disney-funded Devo 2.0 evokes Shaviro's sense of a celebratory participation in one's own destruction. Thus while Baudrillard notes "that everything here has come out of a coma, that everything wants to be animation and is only reanimation, and that this is good because culture is dead,"¹⁷ Shaviro counters that in America, "We prefer to repeat history a second time, as farce."¹⁸ Is Devo 2.0 such a "farce," then, merely parody of the original; or, is it instead the perfect realization of de-evolutionary ideology? Mothersbaugh observes that "the nursery rhyme-like cadences of songs like 'Whip It' ('Step on a crack, break your mamma's back') and 'Peek-a-Boo' [are] proof that Devo's music has always been kids' stuff."¹⁹ However, these songs' lyrics—like those of many Devo songs—fixate on sex; the Devo songbook includes such family classics as "Jerkin' Back and Forth," "Fountain of Filth," "Pink Pussycat," "Sloppy (I Saw My Baby Gettin')," "Be Stiff," and "Baby Talkin' Bitches," among others. The band thus evacuates its catalogue of sexually transgressive content: just as the Church of the SubGenius encourages its own members to leave the faith, de-evolutionary ideology drops out of the songs to create pop-lobotomized versions of the originals. A repetition that obscures the original

is thus idealized from the start: this form of repetition is built into Devo. Mothersbaugh recalls,

Back in the mid-'70s, when we were trying to figure out what Devo was, we thought of the actual five members of the group more as a concept than as performing artists, and we imagined sending out bands to perform Devo songs so we wouldn't have to tour...It would be like the Blue Man Group is now, with four troops out there at a time playing our songs.²⁰

Hence the identical outfits, the flowerpot hats, the plastic wigs portraying the same Kennedy-esque perm on each head. Even the new Devo action figure is just one body with five interchangeable heads. Devo's welcomed self-simulations destroy the myth of individuality and originality while pollinating the norm with a ridiculous new mythology. Devo's strange aesthetic is proliferated in its own suicidal death throes.

Like Polysics, however, the Disney-fication of Devo only partially aligns with Baudrillard's theory of the simulation. In his famous critique of Disneyland, Baudrillard writes, "Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety...that is carceral)."²¹ But while Devo 2.0 might at first seem an underhanded elision of the true, subversive Devo, the child group better fits Shaviro's vision of Disney. Shaviro reminds that "[l]ike all the parks, [Disney Land's] function is rather one of encouragement and exhortation, or even provocation. It teaches us how to behave, in this new postmodern, robot-ridden service economy."²² Baudrillard is thus only half-right: Disney Land is the real world, but there is no illusion: self-conscious Americans embrace their robotization. Disney, then, does not subversively appropriate Devo; Devo willingly yields itself unto The Mouse and voluntarily stands amongst the clucking, animatronic denizens of the "It's a Small World After All" ride.

Thus, despite cries of protest from Devo-tees the world over, Devo's postmodern suicide by way of Disney is but one more stop on the band's original de-evolutionary journey. Shaviro agrees, "The regulative principle of postmodern irony is that we can survive only by squandering ourselves, which is to say by becoming yet more cynical than our control-

lers.”²³ Actively participating in its own ideological disembowelment, Devo ironically reaffirms that very ideology by emptying their music of any transgressive content while performing that very transgression. We cannot know whether Devo intentionally “went bad” in their fall down the evolutionary music ladder from the avant-garde, Brian Eno-produced “musique” to bargain-bin-filling, dance floor-ready dreck.²⁴ However, the band’s voluntary progression to Disney-funded pre-teen pop via Devo 2.0 points toward some degree of purposeful submission to their own de-evolutionary agenda and to the commoditizing forces of late capitalism. Fittingly, many of the band members now spend their days actually making commercials themselves. They have slipped subliminal messages into advertisements for companies like Nike, McDonald’s, and Toyota. Yet even this subversive act finds corporate circumscription—Mothersbaugh admits, “A few times we even told [companies] we did it, and they just laughed. They didn’t care.”²⁵ The laughing executives of the postmodern implosion continue to cut checks for a controlled insurgency—the revolution is now on their payroll. As Mothersbaugh concludes, “We learned something from the hippies that, unfortunately, the punks at the same time didn’t learn, and that is that rebellion is obsolete. In a healthy capitalistic world, rebellion is just something else to market.”²⁶ Peddling cultural debris in the wake of Baudrillard’s postmodern implosion for over thirty years now, Devo embraces its own hyper-“retirement.” As a joke, Mothersbaugh forces all those on call-waiting to listen to an eardrum-bursting, Polysics-provided thrashout.

Endnotes

¹ Steven Shaviro, *Doom Patrols* (New York/London: Serpent’s Tail, 1996) 22.

² Devo, “Nu-Tra Speaks (New Traditionalist Man),” *New Traditionalists [Bonus Tracks]*, 1997 Warner Bros.

³ Bob Lewis, “Some thoughts on Devo, the first postmodern band,” *devo.devalueate.com*, <<http://devo.devalueate.com/Devolution.doc>>.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994, 2006) 73.

⁵ Baudrillard, 38.

⁶ Baudrillard, 31.

⁷ Bob Lewis, “Readers vs. Breeders: Didactical Works re De-Evolution,” *Cleveland.com*, originally published in *The Los Angeles Staff*, 1972 <http://www.cleveland.com/music/index_story.ssf?/music/more/local/cle/3a/readers/index.html>.

⁸ Shaviro, 13.

⁹ Devo has often played with religious themes, the song “Praying Hands” the most notable example. The band has even opened for itself at concerts as the anagrammatically-correct DOVE, the Band of Love, pumping out family friendly, Christian rock re-workings of “Pray-

ing Hands" and "Shrivel Up."

¹⁰ Joe Garden, "Cultural Myopia," *The Onion* July, 1997 <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24924/1/2>>.

¹¹ A matter of taste, certainly; readers are encouraged to sample the backend of Devo's catalog for personal verification.

¹² Baudrillard, 3.

¹³ Baudrillard, 66.

¹⁴ Joe Garden, "Cultural Myopia," *The Onion* July, 1997 <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24924/1/2>>.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, 44.

¹⁶ Adam Moerder, "Polysics or Die!!," *Pitchforkmedia.com*, Apr. 2005 <<http://pitchforkmedia.com/record-reviews/p/polysics/polysics-or-die.shtml>>.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, 63.

¹⁸ Shaviro, 15.

¹⁹ Gil Kaufman, "Are They Not Kids? Yes, They Are—And They're Giving Devo a Disney Makeover," *MTV.com* Mar. 2006. <<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1525358/20060303/devo.jhtml?headlines=true>>.

²⁰ Gil Kaufman, "Are They Not Kids? Yes, They Are—And They're Giving Devo a Disney Makeover," *MTV.com* Mar. 2006. <<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1525358/20060303/devo.jhtml?headlines=true>>.

²¹ Baudrillard, 12.

²² Shaviro, 16.

²³ Shaviro, 22.

²⁴ It should be noted that the Devo catalogue also includes the "EZ Listening Disc," an album of waiting room "muzak" versions of many of the band's songs.

²⁵ Joe Garden, "Devo (Mark Mothersbaugh)" *The Onion* July, 1997 <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24924/1/1>>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The Puppet Princess

Politics and the Representation of Gender and Power in Rubens's *The Disembarkation at Marseille* from *The Life of Marie de' Medici*

Aaron Wile '06

In January 1622, Peter Paul Rubens traveled to Paris to receive the most important commission of his life: the decoration of the two galleries at the Luxembourg Palace, residence of the Queen Mother of France, Marie de' Medici. The project was enormous. In the first gallery, the Queen Mother charged Rubens with depicting her life in twenty-four panels; in the second gallery, she charged him with depicting the life of her deceased husband, Henri IV.¹ Rubens only completed the first cycle, but he delivered a masterpiece. Rendered in glowing color and sensuous flesh, and draped in a complex language of allegory, *The Life of Marie de' Medici* glorifies the Queen. History and myth intertwine in tribute to the Queen and create a confident assertion of her right to power.

This assertion of Marie's authority, however, is not as confident as it might first appear. A closer inspection of the cycle reveals that it ultimately fails to provide a convincing picture of active female power. Throughout the work, representations of the Queen vacillate between passivity and heroism, as if Rubens were unable to fashion a coherent vision of Marie's power. What accounts for this inconsistency? What cultural and political forces were at work in the production of Marie's image?

As a female ruler trying to establish her authority in a patriarchal society, Marie de' Medici occupied an ambiguous position. During her reign as Regent for her son, Louis XIII, from 1610-1616, the Queen was dogged by questions about her legitimacy and competence. She had to contend not only with the rivalry of her son, but also with the intrigues of court. After the Regency, the Queen was exiled to Blois for four years, and she only returned in 1621 after a tenuous reconciliation with the full-fledged King. But even by 1622, her position was far from secure as she and her son continued to vie for power.² In this light, Marie's decision to commission a cycle of paintings about her life amounted to a political act,

which was designed to remind the court of her authority, to bolster her claims to power, to reassert her legitimacy, and to provide an everlasting tribute to her reign and her quest for peace.³

Aware of the precariousness of her situation, Marie realized that she had to fashion her image carefully. Had she presented herself in a purely heroic light, the implied challenge in such a representation would have had disastrous political consequences. In parts of the cycle, therefore, the Queen appropriated contemporary tropes of femininity that extolled passivity and eschewed active heroism. By fashioning herself in this way, the Queen sought to avoid the dangerous political fallout that would have accompanied any perceived threat to her son's authority. Of the paintings in the cycle, *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* best reveals Marie's use of images of passive femininity in shaping her representation. In the work, Marie's passivity does not signal the Queen's lack of control over her image or her inability to transcend the gender norms of a patriarchal court culture; on the contrary, it represents Marie's solution to her problematic position, both in her immediate political situation and more broadly as a woman in power in Early Modern France. In short, her passivity demonstrates not weakness, but the Queen's skillful negotiation of contemporary constructions of femininity and her use of gender manipulation as a political tool, a weapon in the game of political power at the French court.

In order to explore the dynamics of Marie's image in the cycle, we must first understand the circumstances that gave rise to the commission. Marie married the king of France, Henri IV, at the relatively late age of 27 in 1600. She arrived at a court that was deeply mistrustful of her and her family after the earlier reign of Catherine de' Medici, who had instigated the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. Furthermore, she had to contend with both the rivalry of the king's mistresses and the machinations of his ministers. Aware of her tenuous position, she convinced her husband to have her crowned as Queen on 13 May 1610. As chance would have it, the next day Henri was murdered on the street by a religious fanatic. Prevented by France's Salic law from succeeding her husband on the throne, Marie took decisive action, and within hours the Parliament of Paris named her Regent of France for her nine-year-old son, Louis XIII. Throughout her seven-year reign, she continued to implement many of her husband's policies. She considered the negotiation of peace between the great powers of Europe to be her chief aim, which she tried to accom-

plish through a series of diplomatic marriages between her children and the Houses of Spain and England.

After seven years as Regent, Marie was unwilling to cede her power, but she soon she saw her power begin to crumble. In 1617, her son, now in his majority, had Marie's favorite, Concini, assassinated. He had his wife, a childhood friend of the Queen, put on trial for witchcraft, and he exiled Marie to Blois. After a series of wars between mother and son, the two sides reconciled in the summer of 1620 with the Treaty of Angers, which was brokered by the Queen's upstart *créature*, Richelieu. With peace restored, Louis XIII reinstated his mother in the Royal Council.⁴

It was during this delicate period in 1622 that work on the cycle began. For the task, Marie called upon the illustrious Flemish painter and diplomat Peter Paul Rubens.⁵ Designed for semi-public display in one of the galleries in her palace, the cycle allowed Marie to make a statement about her political legitimacy and power to the elites of Europe—courtiers, nobles, and ambassadors—who would have contemplated Rubens's work as they awaited an audience with the Queen.⁶

The decision to use Rubens for the paintings of the galleries stemmed from a number of factors. Though some scholars have argued that Marie stumbled upon the artist by "dumb luck," Deborah Marrow has shown that the Queen, in the tradition of her ancestors, patronized art quite astutely throughout her career, and she was ever mindful of the importance of fashioning an effective public image.⁷ In 1600, Rubens had his first contact with Marie when he attended the Queen's proxy marriage in Florence as a representative of the Duke of Mantua. Both Marie's sister Eleonora, Duchess of Mantua, and her close advisor, Nicolas de Peiresc, knew the painter and could have advised the Queen in her decision. But perhaps most importantly, Marie, astute patron that she was, realized that Rubens's virtuosic technique and command of allegory made him one of the few artists able to handle such a project.⁸

Rubens's contract, signed at the Louvre in February 1622, called on the artist to paint "twenty-four pictures in which will be represented the very illustrious life and deeds of Madame the Queen," with "all the stories which are written down and enumerated at length in accord with the Queen's intention."⁹ The pictures, which began at the entrance wall, were hung clockwise in chronological order. On the first wall hung the first half of the cycle, which portrayed the Queen's childhood, her marriage, and her coronation. The wall facing the entrance contained a large paint-

ing of the apotheosis of Henri IV and the proclamation of the regency. The second half of the cycle detailed the events of Marie's reign as Regent, her quarrels with her son, and their reconciliation.¹⁰

Rubens's task was not easy. In the first place, a monumental series of paintings dedicated to a living person had never before been attempted. In addition, that living person was a woman. Thus, the work had to be done carefully to avoid political complications. Most notably, the cycle could not offend the king, with whom Marie still had a tenuous relationship.¹¹ As art historian Geraldine Johnson notes, "Marie de' Medici and Rubens must have been aware...of the possible problems involved in developing a series of paintings which would extol the Queen's abilities to govern France without suggesting that she was a dangerously aggressive woman intent on seizing traditional male power."¹² To meet these challenges, Rubens had to develop a new rhetoric of female heroism—one distinct from the representations of battle scenes and military victories that were typical of masculine courtly art. Art historian Kristin Belkin notes, Rubens "turned to mythological allusions, emblematic references, personifications of vices and virtues and religious analogies to veil an often unheroic or ambiguous reality...employ[ing] a strange cast of characters to appease factions."¹³ The use of allegory was not uncommon in the 17th century, but Rubens, with his vast intellect, transformed a standard collection of images and symbols into a monumental tribute to the Queen that were general enough for its educated viewers to be able to interpret it in a way that suited their interests.¹⁴

But allegory was not the only tool that Marie and Rubens used to calm her critics. In addition, the artist and his patron appropriated the image of passive femininity in their representation of the Queen. Indeed, Marie's political concerns about the commission—the desire not to offend the king and the problem of depicting the deeds of a female ruler—resulted in a rejection of a consistently heroic image throughout the cycle. In many of the panels, Marie appears submissive, vacant, and almost consumed by the momentum of the allegorical figures swirling about her. An analysis of *The Disembarkation at Marseille* will bring to light the function of the Queen's lack of agency in the cycle.

The Disembarkation at Marseilles depicts Marie de' Medici's first arrival in France as the wife of Henri IV. Rendered in high Baroque style, the scene features a crowded, energetic composition of dramatically gesturing figures who are awash in vibrant reds, fleshy pinks, and gold. In

the center of the picture, the future Queen descends the velvet-swagged gangplank of her gilded ship, on which a knight of Malta, dressed in black, stands guard. She is led by her aunt, the Grand Duchess Cristina, her sister Eleonora, Duchess of Mantua, and other members of the Florentine party. Allegorical figures of France, dressed in a blue cape dotted with *fleur-de-lys*, and The City of Marseille—representatives of the State officials at the actual disembarkation—stand in front of the group, their arms out-stretched to welcome the Florentine princess. Behind them, their attendants hold out the royal baldaquin. Amidst the smoke of celebratory cannon fire, Fame flies overhead and sounds her twin trumpets in triumph. In the foreground, Nereids splash in the turbulent sea—exposing their sensuous, fleshy bodies to the gaze of the viewer—while Tritons help anchor the ship.¹⁵

In the midst of this activity stands Marie de' Medici, her body limp, her face devoid of expression, and her eyes blank and unfocused. She seems to ignore the encouragement of the figures of France and the City of Marseilles. The reluctant princess, like a puppet, must be led ashore by a cavalier, who appears to prop her up by holding her arm. Although the women in Marie's entourage also lack the animation that characterizes the rest of the piece, their alert gazes are fixed at definite points, and they therefore contrast with Marie's vacant expression. Marie, who called on Rubens to glorify her life in an effort to regain power, is completely passive in this painting.

Surprisingly, while many scholars have examined actively heroic representations of the Queen in the cycle as a whole, they have neglected the dynamics of Marie's passivity in this particular painting. For example, Geraldine Johnson claims that in the cycle, "the Queen's triumph was over her own gender and its limitations in the eyes of seventeenth-century patriarchal culture," that "in the *Disembarkation at Marseilles*, Marie de' Medici not only symbolically walks away from her earlier political attachments in Tuscany but also literally walks over the frothy nude Nereids frolicking in the sea below."¹⁶ She fails to acknowledge, however, that it is a *man* who leads her over the nude Nereids.¹⁷ Likewise, Katherine Crawford holds that in the cycle, Marie "rejected the foundational aspects of a gender politics that required feminine deference and dependence."¹⁸ But does she? In fact, Marie's submissiveness and her need to have a male guide her in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* signifies the very "feminine deference and dependence" that Crawford says the Queen eschews. Al-

though Crawford notes that Marie also fulfills “expected female roles” in the paintings,¹⁹ she, like Johnson, fails to address the problem of the Queen’s lack of agency directly.

How, then, do we account for this lack of empowerment? What role did Marie’s deferential representation play in her political project? Working on the formal level, some art historians have traced the Queen’s passivity to an unresolved tension between the allegorical figures and living people. By examining the Queen’s depiction in its political context, other scholars have attributed the problem to a network of political control governing the cycle. In a series of works produced in the 1940’s, Otto von Simson argued that the Queen’s passivity points to Richelieu’s control over the works.²⁰ Since then, other scholars have argued that the King had influenced the paintings; he had, in fact, commissioned Rubens to produce a series of tapestry cartoons of the *Life of Constantine* to rival his mother.²¹ Even the Queen’s own advisors controlled and censored the paintings’ imagery.²² Recent historical research, however, has made these interpretations unconvincing. For example, historians like Deborah Marrow have shown that Marie had more control over the production of her image in general, and over the cycle in particular, than previously thought.²³ These scholars argue that Marie took a keen interest in art patronage, and that she used art to express her own point of view and her own ambitions.

To fully understanding its meaning, then, we must see *The Disembarkation at Marseille* in the context of the broader world of Early Modern French culture and politics. Indeed, the problem of representing the active heroine emerges as a salient feature of this period. Deborah Marrow points out that the passivity exhibited by the Queen is not limited to the *Medici Cycle*; rather, it appears throughout Rubens’s later work and in courtly art in general.²⁴ It would therefore have been unwise for Marie to deviate too aggressively from this model; otherwise, she would have appeared overtly threaten her son’s authority. Nevertheless, feminized heroism was not always problematic. During her regency, Marie had successfully cultivated a somewhat androgynous heroic female image, embodied in the *femme forte*, to back up her claims to power and work against the limitations imposed by Salic law.²⁵ But after her fall from power, as Deborah Marrow notes, “there was an attempt to purge the female from royal imagery and to strip the heroic female image of its strength in order to support the rule of Louis XIII.”²⁶ Accordingly, dur-

ing the 1620's, French political writers transformed the ideal of the noble Amazon, the savior of France, into a tyrant²⁷ and they began to equate feminine virtue with passivity.²⁸

In response, Marie had to adjust her pictorial strategy if she wanted to regain her influence. The Queen did not unwittingly accept the conventions of courtly art. Rather, she understood the negative shift in attitude towards the *femme forte*, consciously devised a passive image of herself, and instructed Rubens to include it in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* in order to present herself as less threatening. During this period, her supporters also began to deemphasize the Queen's active heroism and highlight her passive qualities—her obedience, fidelity, and piety.²⁹ By realizing the importance of appropriating contemporary conceptions of femininity and by using them in her painting cycle, Marie de' Medici, to use Crawford's phrase, negotiated political "gender performance"³⁰ to advance her cause.

In the difference between the *bozzetto* (oil sketch) of *The Disembarkation* and the final version, for example, we can see how Marie may have demanded changes in her representation to make her appear less challenging. In Rubens's preparatory sketch, Marie stands farther above the other figures; she gazes down at them with haughty authority, and she appears commanding and powerful. This presentation, however, would have been unacceptable to the Queen, who could not risk offending her son or his supporters. Confronted by his rivalry, Marie had to tread carefully to avoid provoking his anger, and her assumption of the passive feminine image reveals the careful steps she took not to offend him or make an outright challenge to his authority. With this representation, she was able to display her political legitimacy in a way that neither deviated from her perceived roles as a female regent nor invited comparisons with Louis XIII.

This mastery over gender manipulations was not new. Historian Katherine Crawford demonstrates that Marie transgressed accepted gender norms throughout her reign and that she manipulated representations of femininity as part of her political strategy. After the death of Henri IV, for instance, the Queen, in a rather theatrical manner, presented herself to the court and her people as both grieving widow and dutiful mother. She shows that, in her devotion to the family, she would sustain France and the monarchy through the regency. This performance, as Crawford notes, was a crucial step in her consolidation of power at the

beginning of the regency. Without it, she would not have gained the sympathy and support of her people. Even at the beginning of her rule, then, Marie understood the importance of conforming to expectations of her role as woman while also manipulating understandings of her gender to gain power at court.³¹ Twelve years later, when her power was more precarious than ever, she reassumed the image of the passive, dutiful mother in *The Disembarkation at Marseille*.

Still, not all of the panels portray a passive Marie. In *The Triumph at Juliers*, for instance, Rubens portrays the Queen as the *femme forte*. He presents her atop a horse and in full military costume—an image from which she had tried to distance herself in other panels. In glorifying herself with Rubens's work, it seems Marie was unable to resist displaying herself in a mode typically reserved for kings. This panel, as Crawford points out, becomes a source of unresolved tension between the two models of femininity—the Queen as mother and wife versus the Queen as *femme forte*—in the cycle.³² The panel also hints at Marie's ambitions to usurp her son's power and once again rule France.

But for the moment, this problem went unnoticed by the court, and the work succeeded magnificently. Marie de' Medici unveiled the cycle on 11 May 1625 for the celebration of the marriage between her daughter, Henriette-Marie, and the King of England, Charles I. This day was the Queen Mother's greatest triumph. Back in the limelight after her years of exile at Blois, she celebrated, simultaneously, a marriage that would fulfill her diplomatic vision of bringing peace to Europe and the presentation of a work of art that sent a clear message to the court about her renewed status.³³ As Jacques Thuillier explains:

There can be little doubt that this sumptuous feast represented for Marie the finest hour of her life: the entire court and ambassadors of other powers were there to behold, as she advanced down the gallery amid blazing candles and the glints of fresh-gilded stuccoes, a Queen sparkling with jewels; her image, repeated twentyfold in the pictures on the walls, appeared in the company of Olympian gods and goddesses in painted allegories of the varied fortunes of her life: by art she assumed all perfection, in an apotheosis whereby she already took her place among the great heroines of history.³⁴

Marie de' Medici's guests praised her and her new work of art. She

seemed to have convinced the court that she had accepted her role not as the ruler of France, but as its deferential Queen Mother.

The Queen's moment of glory, however, could not last. During the next six years, Marie continued to vie for power with her son. Her former favorite, Cardinal Richelieu, became not only the most powerful man in France, but also her bitter enemy. Though Louis XIII and Richelieu had organized the unveiling of the cycle, by 1631, they were no longer willing to tolerate her attempts to claim her former power, and they banished Marie for the last time. Marie escaped to Brussels and died, still in exile, in Cologne in 1642. She had finally lost her battle for authority.³⁵

The Life of Marie de' Medici provides a fascinating view into the politics and culture of early 17th France and Early Modern Europe, where the power of the image resounded throughout the great courts, and the ability to self-fashion that image became an essential political tool. Though we cannot know for certain Marie's motives for commissioning the cycle, we can appreciate that what could have been a ludicrous piece of bombast ended as a magnificent assertion of a ruler's ability to manipulate and transfigure her identity to make a political statement. The stakes of the commission were high, and even though Marie did not win more power, Rubens's tribute to her life has become a lens through which we can examine the dynamics of gender, power, and representation in the court culture of 17th century Europe.

In the cycle, the multi-faceted presentation of the Queen's image, the virtuosic shifting between different modes of feminine representation, reveals Marie's mastery over the power of the image. Katherine Crawford observes that this mastery became "unintelligible" to her contemporaries.³⁶ But, perhaps more accurately, it came to signify the threat she posed to her son and to the patriarchal power structure of the French monarchy. Marie displayed admirable skill in fashioning her image, but, by appropriating active as well as passive representations of femininity, she exposed her ambitions to become not the dutiful Queen Mother, but the ruler of France. Despite her skillful deployment of constructions of passive femininity in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles*, she remained, in the eyes of Louis XIII and Richelieu, a dangerous woman.

Endnotes

¹ Kristin Lohse Belkin. *Rubens*. (London: Phaidon, 1998), 175.

² *Ibid.*, 173.

³ Katherine Crawford. *Perilous Performances*. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 84; Paul.

Oppenheimer. *Rubens: A Portrait*. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 257; Wendy Beckett. *The Story of Painting*. (London: DK, 2000), 342.

⁴ Jacques Thuilliers, and Jacques Foucart. *Rubens's Life of Marie de' Medici*. (New York: Harry H. Abrams, Inc., 1967), 12-19.

⁵ Belkin, 175.

⁶ Crawford, 89.

⁷ Deborah Marrow. *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*. Studies in Baroque Art History, ed. Ann S. Harris, no. 4. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).

⁸ Marrow, 42; Susan Saward. *The Golden Age of Marie de' Medici*. Studies in Baroque Art History, ed. Ann S. Harris, no. 2. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 42.

⁹ Quoted in Oppenheimer, 261.

¹⁰ Belkin, 181-182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 176-181.

¹² Géraldine Johnson. "Pictures Fit for a Queen: Peter Paul Rubens and the Marie de' Medici Cycle." *Art History* 16, no. 3 (September 1993): 447.

¹³ Belkin, 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ Interpretation of the work's iconography from Ronald Forsyth Millen, and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mythic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens's Life of Maria de' Medici*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 63-72.

¹⁶ Johnson, 456.

¹⁷ At the same time, though, Johnson rightly notes how the painting disempowers Marie by pointing out that not only do the nude Nereids display themselves for the delectation of the male viewer (the primary audience for the painting was male), but also, in their prominent position, take away attention from the future Queen.

¹⁸ Crawford, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ Otto George von Simson. "Richelieu and Rubens: Reflections on the Art of Politics." *The Review of Politics* 6, no. 4 (October, 1944): 422-451.

²¹ Martin Warnke. *Peter Paul Rubens: Life and Work*. (New York: Barrons, 1980), 124.

²² For example, see Juliuz Chroscicki A. "The Recovered Modello of P. P. Rubens's *Disembarkation at Marseilles*: The Problem of Control and Censorship in the Cycle *Life of Marie de' Medici*." *Artibus et Historiae* v. 26 no. 51 (2005) p. 221-49.

²³ Marrow, 43.

²⁴ Marrow, 71.

²⁵ Elaine Rubin. "The Heroic Image: Women and Power in Early-Seventeenth Century France, 1610-1661." (Ph.D diss, George Washington University, 1977), 46-49.

²⁶ Marrow, 71.

²⁷ Rubin, 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁹ Marrow, 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹ Crawford, 71

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

³³ Thuillier, 9-11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ Crawford, 79-89.

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