



PROJECT MUSE®

Fire, Sacrifice, Iphigénie

Amy Wygant

French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 60, Number 3, July 2006, pp.
305-319 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/208222>

FIRE, SACRIFICE, *IPHIGÉNIE*

AMY WYGANT

Abstract

Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), his first opera written for the French stage, never settled on an ending. In order to analyse the historical conditions of this musical reluctance, this argument reads the opera's literary source, Jean Racine's *Iphigénie*, developing a three-fold link: to the fireworks that followed the first performance of Racine's tragedy in 1674 in the garden of Versailles, to the discovery in 1774 by Joseph Priestley of oxygen and related developments in the poetics of fire, and to changes in the political culture of sacrifice and so necessarily in the ends of tragedy. Racine's cosmic storm around a sacrificial pyre that auto-ignites, the self-immolation of the monarch created by the garden festival, and this opera which now ends with a chorus of soldier-workers crowned as kings all point to music's fabled ability to predict and determine the political, a danger recognized by governments from the Greek city-state to the present. In the course of a revolution that had been precisely figured in Gluck's music, *Iphigénie* the victim becomes the young queen who had been Gluck's singing pupil in Vienna, Marie-Antoinette.

Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), his first opera written for the French stage, has not lately been considered to be an urgent subject for scholarship. The last flurry of interest surrounded the 1987 bicentenary of Gluck's death, and saw the re-publication by Fayard of Prod'homme's 1948 biography, which remains standard,¹ as well as the issuing by Erato of John Eliot Gardiner's recording of the opera.² Apart from the Gluck bicentenary, there had been a discussion of the *Aulide* to be found in Jean-Michel Glicksohn's study of *Iphigenia*³ and, more recently, one essay taking up both of Gluck's *Iphigenia* operas in the collection *Opera and the Enlightenment*.⁴ Source-critical and philological matters were analysed in Julian Rushton's essay.⁵ The latest contribution to musicological scholarship that touches on Gluck, an article by Robert C. Ketterer in 2003,⁶ repeats commonplaces about the elitist, courtly

¹ Jacques-Gabriel Prod'homme, *Christoph-Willibald Gluck* (Paris, Fayard, 1985).

² Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Iphigénie en Aulide* (Erato, WE 815-ZA).

³ *Iphigénie de la Grèce antique à l'Europe des Lumières* (Paris, PUF, 1985).

⁴ Julie E. Cummings, 'Gluck's *Iphigenia* Operas: Sources and Strategies', in *Opera and the Enlightenment*, ed. by T. Bauman and M. P. McClymonds (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 217–40.

⁵ "'Royal Agamemnon': The Two Versions of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*", in *Music and the French Revolution*, ed. by Malcolm Boyd (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 15–36.

⁶ 'Why Early Opera is Roman and Not Greek', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 15 (2003), 1–14.

status of this music; these charges have been current at least since the beginning of the last century.⁷

There exists, then, an opportunity to take on, or to take on again, some of the major questions posed by the opera. One of those questions goes to the fact that this is an opera that had a great deal of trouble coming to a satisfactory ending. The opera's plot originally concluded with a divinely inspired change of mind on the part of Calchas: it was sufficient for Iphigénie to have offered herself willingly for sacrifice; the goddess was now satisfied, and the chorus sings, according to a logic that has forgotten about the wind, that the happy wedding which will now follow somehow predicts the forthcoming military victory in Troy.⁸ The opera then concluded with a *divertissement* including no fewer than ten songs and dances, and a final unison chorus.⁹ This ending was changed, and we know from an account in the 11 January 1775 *Mémoires secrets* that a new version had the goddess Diana herself appearing to pardon Iphigénie. The *divertissement* was cut.¹⁰ The change was not considered by everyone to be for the better, and Grimm took it to be a lesson in the inverse relationship between properly dramatic logic and special effects: 'L'arrivée de la déesse, malgré la riche décoration qui l'entoure, ne fait pas grande impression parce qu'elle est beaucoup trop précipitée et que les témoins les plus intéressés à ce prodige ont tout l'air de n'y pas croire eux-mêmes et de s'en soucier fort peu. Plus un spectacle a de pompe et d'appareil, et moins il frappe, s'il n'a point l'ensemble et la vérité qu'il doit avoir.'¹¹

Indeed, through the course of the opera's reception history, it still has not ever been able to settle on an ending. Most famously, Richard Wagner changed it when he revised the score in 1847, and we have another version, performed at the Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles in the late nineteenth century, in which Iphigénie goes to her death with the chorus shouting 'Ilion!'.¹² The Gardiner recording furnishes us with a hybrid: the goddess makes her appearance, as she had not done at the première in

⁷ 'En somme vous fûtes musicien de cour', wrote Claude Debussy in the 'Lettre ouverte à M. le chevalier C. W. Gluck', which appeared in *Gil Blas* of 23 February 1903 (*Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. by François Lesure (Paris, Gallimard, 1971), pp. 98–101 (p. 98)); à propos of the 1907 production in the salle Favart, the first new production in Paris since the 1774 première, Louis Laloy wrote that Gluck's was an 'art grec entrevu à travers la mollesse des répliques romaines, poètes lus en des traductions bénévoles qui leur font porter perruque afin d'être corrects'. 'Théâtre de l'opéra-comique: *Iphigénie en Aulide*, de Gluck', *Bulletin français de la Société internationale de musique*, 4 (1908), 79–81 (p. 79).

⁸ The problem of the wind tended to be forgotten in the eighteenth century. The article 'Victime humaine' in the *Encyclopédie* notes that 'on se persuade que la fille d'Agamemnon déchargerait par sa mort l'armée des Grecs des fautes qu'ils avoient commises'.

⁹ C. W. Gluck, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Marius Flothuis, (London — Basel — New York, Bärenreiter Kassel, 1989) 1.5.b.

¹⁰ *Iphigénie en Aulide*, pp. x–xi. But see Rushton, 'Royal Agamemnon', p. 29, n. 37, and p. 30, Table 3.

¹¹ Maurice Tourneux, ed., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.* (Paris, Garnier, 1879, rpt. 1968), XI, 12.

¹² C. W. Gluck, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, ed. by F. A. Gevaërt (Paris, Lemoine, 1899).

1774, but so does a truncated form of the final divertissement, and the closing unison chorus, both from the 1774 score.

This inability to come to a conclusion accordingly seems to be the kernel of any conclusion to which we might wish to come about the opera. Who or what opened up the possibility of tinkering with the ending? My argument here will be that this ending had no secure footing, no plot-logical necessity, because the meaning of sacrifice changed fundamentally between the time of the creation of its literary source by Jean Racine in 1674 and the opera's première in 1774. This argument will be framed by two historicisms that seem to have gone strictly unnoticed by Gluck, his librettist, and contemporary observers in 1774. First, a grand opportunity for a birthday party was lost, for the centenary connection with Racine's *Iphigénie* was never made, and second, also in 1774, this century of extraordinary developments in the philosophy of fire saw the discovery by Joseph Priestley of the gas that the great French chemist Lavoisier would later call oxygen. However, although these historicisms seemingly are such only with hindsight, there was one overwhelming, convulsive historicism of which everyone at the time, composer, librettist and contemporary commentators, was acutely aware, and that was the connection between this opera and revolution. 'La fermentation que cette révolution produisit dans les têtes parisiennes est incroyable', wrote one observer,¹³ the revolution in question being Gluck's, not yet Robespierre's. But it is with music's ability to predict and determine the political that a new kind of sacrifice emerged, a sacrifice in which fire and wind, breath, *aria*, have reconfigured themselves.¹⁴

The mood with respect to the borrowing from Racine's tragedy was very far from being conducive to a birthday party. In France, there had been little or no tradition prior to du Roullet's libretto for Gluck of adapting the great tragedies of French classicism for the operatic stage. In the early to mid-eighteenth century, there were Iphigenia operas in London, Florence, Venice, Munich, Naples, Rome, Vienna, Berlin and Turin, but there was no French version between 1674 and 1774.¹⁵ So, although not a party gesture, du Roullet's libretto is nevertheless a surprise, and one for which his preface apologizes: 'On sera étonné, sans doute, qu'en transportant à

¹³ J.-C. Mannlich, quoted in *Prod'homme*, p. 199.

¹⁴ The predictive capacity of music within a political economy was elaborated by Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris, PUF, 1977). Attali observed that the efforts of governments, from the Greek city-state to the present, to control and contain music betray an instinctive awareness of its danger to those in power. Possible reasons for this are advanced in Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice', in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC — London, Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 7–31.

¹⁵ Cummings, 218–19. See also the *Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts*, ed. by Jane Davidson (Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press, 1993). Du Roullet, however, seems to have opened up the possibility, and other settings rapidly followed. See René Guiet, 'L'évolution d'un genre: le livret d'opéra en France de Gluck à la Révolution (1774–1793)', *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 18, 1–4 (October 1936–July 1937), 57–58.

notre théâtre lyrique l'un des chef-d'œuvres immortels de Racine, on n'en ait pas emprunté un plus grand nombre de beautés.' The beautiful Racinian lines were indeed sparse in the livret, and they were most noticeably absent from the ending, for the opera's ending difficulties were to a large extent hereditary. Three enormous problems faced the librettist.

First, Racine follows Euripides in providing an ending that narrates the final scene at the sacrificial altar instead of setting it in action. There is even a second level of narrative remove when the narrator, Ulysse, comes to tell of the intervention of the goddess and cannot in fact tell of it, but can only report what the simple soldiers told: 'Le soldat étonné dit que dans une nue/Jusque sur le bûcher Diane est descendue' (ll. 1785–86). Some considered this aspect of Racine's ending problematic for the play's dramaturgy, and authors eventually began to provide versions in which the final scene was acted out by a battling Achilles, a knife-wielding Calchas, and the clear-eyed victim. In 1700, Abel Boyer's *Achilles, or Iphigenia In Aulis* for the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, set the fifth act in action, and Sainte-Foix supplied an action ending to Racine's play in 1769. Opinions were divided on its success. Some thought that Racine had missed a wonderful chance to provide a gripping spectacle,¹⁶ but Voltaire and Diderot were generally appalled. Diderot thought that the images in words were better than any acting or scenography, even the greatest: 'L'imagination les voit. L'art ne les imite point.'¹⁷ Voltaire wrote that 'il y avait beaucoup de témérité de mettre le récit d'Ulysse en action. Je ne sais pas quel est le prophane qui a osé toucher ainsi aux choses saintes.'¹⁸ Du Roullet, however, apparently never considered ending the opera livret with a long récit. The ending required action, and the Racinian–Euripidean dramaturgy was never a possibility for the opera.

Secondly, Racine's most obvious departure from Euripides, the addition of a second Iphigenia, known under the false name of Ériphile until the revelations of the final scene, and who takes the place of the first Iphigénie as the sacrifice to the goddess, was not adopted by du Roullet, who eliminated the character completely. Ériphile had, ironically, been inserted into the plot by Racine as a solution to the problems posed by the ending of Euripides. 'Et quelle apparence encore de dénouer ma tragédie par le secours d'une déesse et d'une machine', his preface to *Iphigénie* had questioned, 'et par une métamorphose qui pouvait bien trouver quelque créance au temps d'Euripide, mais qui serait trop absurde et trop incroyable parmi nous?'.¹⁹ Racine's substitute for the miracle of the goddess's pity is this

¹⁶ Guiet, pp. 52–53.

¹⁷ 'Entretiens sur *Le Fils Naturel*', in *Œuvres complètes*, x (Paris, Hermann, 1980), p. 142.

¹⁸ Letter of 7 August 1767 to Michel Paul Gui de Chabanon, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. by Theodore Besterman, vol. 119 (Banbury, Voltaire Foundation, 1974), pp. 138–39 (p. 138).

¹⁹ *Œuvres complètes*, 1, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris, Gallimard, 1999), p. 698.

covert 'Fille du sang d'Hélène' (l. 59), the fruit of an early marriage between Helen and Theseus, who is also named 'Iphigénie', and whose sacrifice is demanded by the oracle. In Racine's ending, she takes the sacrificial knife into her own hands and kills herself, with the result that the wind picks up. The first Iphigénie is left looking on to stand and weep tears that Chateaubriand later claimed made her the Christian daughter par excellence,²⁰ and to marry Achilles.

Racine found his own invention in this matter of the pesky ending to be entirely satisfactory, conforming as it did to the Aristotelian requirement that the ending of the plot be 'tiré du fond même de la pièce', and making of Ériphile a hero who is neither completely bad nor completely good, deserving as she does 'd'être punie, sans être pourtant tout à fait indigne de compassion'. Racine's invention was always, however, going to be an impossibility for the livret of an opera, which requires, as du Roulet observes in the *Lettre sur les drames-opéra* 'la simplicité du sujet',²¹ and for which the goddess-machine happy ending is not a problem requiring to be solved. He noted that 'il est dans la nature du sujet que Diane révoque ses ordres rigoureux; qu'elle vienne elle-même enlever Iphigénie de l'autel. [...] Le dénouement surnaturel est dans le sujet, toute la vraisemblance nécessaire lui est conservée' (p. 15).

However, perhaps the greatest problem posed by the adaptation one hundred years later of Racine's tragedy to an opera livret begins to be indicated by the very last lines of the tragedy, for the impending wedding, although concluding the plot, does not conclude the play. The play's conclusion is an open question, asked by Clytemnestra, about what sacrifice she can make, what price she can pay for this plot ending. 'Par quel prix, quel encens, ô Ciel, puis-je jamais/Récompenser Achille, et payer tes bienfaits!' (ll. 1791–92). No other play of Racine ends with a call for sacrifice, much less a vegetarian one, and with it, the tragedy accomplishes three tasks: it gives a hostage to the fortune of the plot; it underlines the status of Racine's ending as something like a critical anthropology of sacrifice; and it links itself to what immediately followed it on the night of 18 August 1674 in the garden of Versailles, that is, fireworks.

As Susanna Phillippo has pointed out with reference to the annotations that Racine made on his two copies of Euripides, Racine treats the shadow of Clytemnestra's future vengeance on her husband much less directly than does his source.²² There is, however, a delicate tissue of references to the murderous future to be read in the play, most clearly when Iphigénie hopes that her little brother will be 'moins funeste à sa mère'

²⁰ 'La Fille — Iphigénie', in *Génie du christianisme* (Paris, Flammarion, 1966), pp. 265–68 (p. 267).

²¹ Marie François Louis Gand Bailli du Roulet, *Lettre sur les drames-opéra* (Amsterdam — Paris, Esprit, 1776), p. 11.

²² *Silent Witness: Racine's Non-Verbal Annotations of Euripides* (Oxford, Legenda, 2003), pp. 103–05.

(l. 1662). The reference to Achilles in the play's final line takes its place in this fabric of tragic awareness, for it is to him, and not to her husband that Clytemnestra declares herself to be indebted. Her Agamemnon, unmentioned, is killed by her silence and as good as dead from this point. There seems indeed to have been a general sense in the French versions of Euripides at this time that the final line should connect the tragedy delicately but fatally with the future of its plot. The *Iphigénie* of Le Clerc and Coras, from 1676, concluded with Agamemnon's unwitting reference to his own death: 'Allons à Troye et vous retournez en Argos,/Madame, et secondez nos efforts legitimes/Par des vœux plus constans et par d'autres Victimes.'²³ This tragedy of sacrifice, the theory of which requires a victim whose life does not enter into the economics of the cycle of vengeance, becomes in this ending both economic and cyclical.

This final line seems also necessarily to involve Clytemnestra in a proper sacrifice, in contrast to what has just occurred. That is, the Racinian spectacle of sacrifice, on the one hand, provides a textbook case of a proper anthropology of sacrifice, responding fully to René Girard's analysis of sacrifice as a ritual of substitution.²⁴ On the most local level of the plot, the victim substitutes for the internal violence and dissention of the army of Greece, and then the substitute victim, Ériphile, substitutes for her. Within the broader plot dynamic, the double Iphigénie-Ériphile, *les sœurs ennemies*, substitutes for the *frères ennemis* of Euripides, for Racine has eliminated the character of Menelaus. The rhyme that concludes Racine's plot, 'Iphigénie-Ennemie', sets the seal on this macro-substitution: 'Tout s'empresse, tout part. La seule Iphigénie/Dans ce commun bonheur pleure son Ennemie' (ll. 1785–86). At the micro-level of the text, Racine's language registers this logic of substitution perfectly, as, at the moment of Ériphile's recognition, she is called by the text simply 'elle', a pronoun, a word which takes the place of a noun. Sacrifice is precisely, as Racine clearly states, 'in a word', 'en un mot': 'Et c'est elle, en un mot, que demandent les Dieux' (l. 1760).

On the other hand, the suicide of Ériphile at the sacrificial altar is illegal. Within the anthropology of animal sacrifice, Marcel Detienne identified the double problem of avoiding contamination from either the hunt or warfare. If the animals refuse to go to the altar and must be rounded up, or if they rush to it in order to attack and kill each other, the sacrifice is corrupted.²⁵ When Ériphile does precisely this, running to the altar, 'Furieuse elle vole' (l. 1775), seizing the knife, and killing herself, it is not at all clear that a sacrifice has occurred, and, if the winds had not risen in response to her

²³ Michel Le Clerc and Jacques de Coras, *Iphigénie* (Paris, Olivier de Varennes, 1676).

²⁴ *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris, Hachette, 1990), pp. 9–61.

²⁵ 'Pratiques culinaires et esprit de sacrifice', in Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Paris, Gallimard, 1979), pp. 7–35 (pp. 17–20).

act, her illegitimate death would simply have been beside the point, as Glicksohn noted (p. 132). Locally, then, the incense that Clytemnestra proposes offering up to the gods in order to compensate them for Achilles' action returns meaning to the gesture of sacrifice, which, in Ériphile's act, was not one. Globally, the meaninglessness of the sacrifice of Iphigénie, Racine's Agamemnon having committed no prior fault, is in this way precisely compensated.

Finally, Clytemnestra's proposed sacrifice links Racine's tragedy to the structures of its festive context. We know that the sacrifice of Iphigenia was for the seventeenth century necessarily about fire. The image accompanying Pierre Du Ryer's 1660 *Métamorphoses d'Ovide* shows the deer on the altar, flames leaping out and smoke billowing up as Agamemnon kneels in an attitude of Christian reverence and Diana whisks Iphigenia away.²⁶ Racine's account does not roast the human victim, but fire surrounds the scene. Lightning bolts flash amidst the cosmic storm caused by the victim's flowing blood, and the sacrificial pyre miraculously auto-ignites: 'La flamme du Bûcher d'elle-même s'allume' (l. 1782). Further, we know, also from Du Ryer, that the moral and political lesson to be drawn from the sacrifice was about royal power. Glicksohn noted that Racine's Iphigénie is willing to sacrifice herself not to Greece but rather to her father (p. 96), and Du Ryer saw in her sacrifice the lesson that 'les Rois ne doivent rien avoir de plus cher que le bien de leurs peuples et de leurs Estats [...] et si la nécessité le veut ainsi, ils doivent preferer le salut commun et à leur propre conservation, et à la conservation de leurs enfans' (p. 513). The monarch, that is, must always be potentially both suicidal and infanticidal, both sacrificial victim and sacrificial priest. Clytemnestra's final lines invoking a proper sacrifice lead this logic, which the seventeenth century read in *Iphigénie*, on to what would follow the play on the night of 18 August, that is, a fireworks display in which the monarch underwent a fiery alchemical immolation.

The première of *Iphigénie* was part of the 1674 festival celebrating Louis's recent military victory in the Franche-Comté. The festival was held in the garden of Versailles over six days spread over the months of July and August, and *Iphigénie* was the only new work included, the other stage works already having been seen by the court. Jean-Marie Apostolidès accordingly points out that *Iphigénie* is an exception to what were generally 'les fêtes de la nostalgie', and further claims that this garden festival celebrating a military victory participated in a wide-ranging change in the mechanics of warfare in the seventeenth century.²⁷ From

²⁶ *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide [...] avec de nouvelles explications historiques, morales et politiques* (Paris, Sommaville, 1660), p. 509.

²⁷ 'L'année 1674: analyse idéologique', in *Actes de Baton Rouge*, ed. by Selma A. Zebouni (Paris — Seattle — Tübingen, Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1986), pp. 255–66.

being a matter of individual feudal heroism, warfare had become a corporate affair of the siege. The sacrifice of noble blood, that is, was no longer the point (p. 265, n. 2). More recent scholarship has extended this analysis of the common ideology of warfare and the French formal garden, whose engineering had much in common with the military fortress, and whose construction was literally accomplished by soldiers.²⁸ The exception of *Iphigénie* takes place within this context generally suited to its thematics of warfare and specifically open to its questioning of what sacrifice might be.

The king's official *historiographe des bastiments*, André Félibien, has left a detailed account of the evening's festivities.²⁹ Following the play, the court moved to the Bassin d'Apollon, at the head of the Grand Canal, for the fireworks display. Fireworks were fundamentally connected to warfare, and, in the Italian tradition of fireworks that was followed in France, the devices themselves were hidden in elaborate, decorated monuments called 'machines'.³⁰ The machines, designed by Le Brun, on this evening were calculated to evoke the majesty and magnificence of the king. The area was surrounded by a balustrade featuring *fleurs de lis* and the number fourteen, there were repeated references to the god Apollo, and in the midst was a great obelisque on whose pedestal was a bas-relief image of the king. The fire display began, and its effect, according to Félibien, was to mix together the alchemical elements and to create gold:

Tout ce que l'on voyait dans cette grande étendue de plus de trois cents toises n'était plus ni du feu ni de l'air ni de l'eau. Ces éléments étaient tellement mêlés ensemble que, ne les pouvant reconnaître, il en paraissait un nouveau, et d'une nature tout extraordinaire. Il semblait être composé de mille étincelles de feu qui, comme une infinité d'atomes d'or, brillaient au milieu d'une plus grande lumière.

As though the park were a giant alchemical alembic, then, fire transforms itself and its neighbouring elements. Water cannot extinguish it, nor air resist its infectious goldenness. According to Félibien, it challenges the stars, seeming to 'attaquer les astres mêmes', and its display is horrifying, 'épouvantable'. Finally, creating a new nature and a new heaven, fire engages in that impossible literary exercise, the oxymoron, and it rains stars.

Enfin, toute cette grande pièce d'eau fut environnée du nombre de cinq mille fusées qui, étant parties toutes à la fois, s'élevèrent en l'air et composèrent un dôme de lumière qui couvrit toute la tête du canal sur lequel on vit tomber en forme d'une grosse pluie une infinité d'étoiles d'une clarté qui surpassait celle des véritables étoiles.

²⁸ Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambition and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. Ch. 2, 'Military Ambitions and Territorial Gardens'.

²⁹ *Relation de la fête de Versailles (1668), Les Divertissements de Versailles (1674)* (Maisonneuve et Larose, Éditions Dédale, 1994).

³⁰ Abby E. Zanger, *Scenes from the Marriage of Louis XIV: Nuptial Fictions and the Making of Absolutist Power* (Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. 'Fires of Joy', pp. 100–09.

But who or what is the philosopher's stone that enables this transmutation? Just as Racine's poetry had served as a trailer for the fireworks, 'Le ciel brille d'éclairs, s'entr-ouvre, et parmi nous/Jette une sainte horreur qui nous rassure tous' (ll. 1783–84), his tag-ending evocation of a proper sacrifice is a structure repeated in Félibien's account. The show was over. The new heaven raining stars 'mit fin à ce beau feu'. But then, seemingly as an afterthought, like an offering of incense, 'on laissa aussi embraser toute la machine qui était sur le canal', and we know that the ultimate object of the burning is the great metonymy for the body of the king, his gold, his garden, indeed the entire mechanics of magnificence. No one wrote of this more beautifully than did Louis Marin, claiming that 'l'embrasement de la machine [...] est l'épiphanie du corps glorieux du roi dans l'instant bref et soudain de sa présence réelle mais dont il a fallu multiplier les représentations et les simulacres pour que leur conflagration puisse la révéler.'³¹ The king is indeed, as Marin saw, a magician, an alchemist whose fiery effects change base elements into gold. But he is double, filling as well the role of the stone, which is at once the end of alchemy and its instrument.

The possibility of this ending to the evening's entertainment, as well as the ending to Racine's play, which, as I have argued, predicts and creates that possibility, depends upon a very particular poetics of fire. Not only is fire the alchemists' tool of elemental transmutation, but also that transmutation is at work when the sacrificial body is burned; what Girard analysed for the history of religious ritual as a mechanics of substitution participates as well in this notion drawn from the history of science. The victim can substitute for and take away disorder and sin because the fire in which her body is burned can change it from being that most animal-like part of ourselves to being a sacred offering. So, when the poetics of fire changed, the meaning of sacrifice, and accordingly the meaning of tragedy, had to undergo a thorough reconceptualization.

This belief in the power of fire to transform bodies, and in fire itself as a body, was an ancient one. For the ancients, and indeed until around 1774, fire was understood to be a substance, not a chemical process. Macquer's *Eléments de chymie-théorique* of 1753 explains that fire is:

une substance que l'on peut considérer comme composée de particules infiniment petites, qui sont agitées par un mouvement très-rapide et continu, par conséquent essentiellement fluide. Cette substance, dont le soleil est comme le réservoir général, paroît s'en émaner perpétuellement, et se répandre universellement dans tous les corps que nous connoissons.³²

³¹ 'Le Roi magicien ou la fête du prince', in *Le Portrait du roi* (Paris, Minuit, 1981), pp. 236–50 (p. 248).

³² Pierre-Joseph Macquer, *Eléments de chymie-théorique* (Paris, Herissant, 1753), p. 12. See John Henry White, *The History of the Phlogiston Theory* (London, Arnold, 1932), p. 103.

No one had ever actually isolated this body, but the course of lectures given in Paris by Étienne-François Geoffroy in the early eighteenth century insisted ‘that can be no Reason for doubting of its Existence, since it must concur in the Composition of all bodies, which, if they were made of Water and Earth alone, would remain for ever without any Virtue or energy’.³³ Fire is thus the general principle of animation, and Geoffroy summarizes this ancient poetics of fire:

[Fire is] a simple and most subtle Body in a continual swift Motion, filling and easily permeating the Pores of all other bodies. Its immense Subtlety is evident from this, that it penetrates all Bodies whatsoever; and its swift Motion, from that Rapidity, which it is capable of communicating to them. (pp. 9–10)

So, fire is a body that interacts with another body, and the nature of that interaction is penetration and communication. It communes with bodies, has communion with them, and is accordingly a phenomenon, in other words, of sacrifice.

However, by the early eighteenth century, this ancient poetics of fire was already under pressure, and that pressure would eventually mean that the alchemical elements of fire and air would be reconceptualized. In works published in 1697 and 1709, Georg-Ernst Stahl developed the idea of fire as a combustible principle, which he called ‘phlogiston’.³⁴ Phlogiston theory permitted the unification of ideas about fire, respiration, fermentation and rust, and was the first general theory of properly chemical action. Its great difficulty, however, was that material that had been burned and so had supposedly lost its combustible principle, its phlogiston, did not lose weight but rather gained it. This fact occupied the great scientific minds of Europe for a good fifty years and more. Joseph Priestley was still working on it when, in 1774, through what, as he himself observed, had been ‘a succession of very extraordinary accidents’, he discovered oxygen, a kind of air in which ‘a candle burned with a remarkably vigorous flame’, and which ‘had all the properties of common air, only in much greater perfection, so as to be entitled (according to my idea of purity and impurity with respect to air) to the name of dephlogisticated air, which, for that reason, I gave to it’.³⁵ Two years later, he read a paper to the Royal Society claiming that breathing was a function of the blood’s coming into contact with this air in the lungs.³⁶ It was for the great French chemist

³³ *Treatise of the Fossil, Vegetable and Animal Substances that are made use of in Physick, [...] translated from a manuscript copy of the author’s lectures read at Paris, by G. Douglas* (London, Innys and Manby, 1736), p. 9.

³⁴ Hubert Saget, ‘Cirey-sur-Blaise, le phlogistique et les idées sur le feu’, in *De la nature et de la propagation du feu: cinq mémoires couronnés par l’académie royale des sciences, Paris, 1738*, ed. by Leonhard Euler (Cirey-sur-Blaise, Association pour la sauvegarde et la promotion du patrimoine métallurgique haut-marnaise, 1994), pp. 7–18.

³⁵ *Experiments and Observations relating to various branches of natural philosophy; with a continuation of the ‘Observations on Air’*, 2 vols. (London, J. Johnson, 1779), 1, 195.

³⁶ *Observations on Respiration and the Use of the Blood* (London, The Royal Society, 1776).

Lavoisier around the same time to propose the astonishing idea that burning could be explained by the absorption of Priestley's newly discovered air, not by the expulsion of phlogiston, and, with his renaming of that air 'oxygen', the conceptual realignment had been accomplished. Fire was not a material substance but instead a chemical process that releases energy in the form of heat. No longer necessarily about communion, its poetics had been thrown into confusion. If fire's mystical power to transform a body, be it the body of Iphigénie or the body of the monarch, was no more, what or where would a proper sacrifice be? It is with this problem that we see the opera struggling as it attempts to end itself.

Following the intervention of the goddess, Iphigénie indicates precisely the problem that critics of the opera's scenography had noticed from the first: 'Ah! qu'il est doux,/Mais qu'il est difficile,/De passer si subitement/Du plus cruel tourment/A la félicité suprême!' How are the characters to register the suddenness of the disappearance of sacrifice? The first words of the astonishing quartet that ensues are 'Mon cœur', and their reaction situates itself in that organ, which the ancients thought to be the seat of fire. There is trouble, however, in the empyrean. The place of sacrifice seems to have moved within the body, but this is a body that cannot contain it. First affect escapes the heart, 'Mon cœur ne saurait contenir/l'excès de mon bonheur extrême', and then the heart throws itself clear of the body: 'Palpitant, il s'élançe/Au-delà de moi-même'. Then breathing nearly stops, 'A peine je respire', an anti-mimetic moment in the midst of singing, equivalent to singing, 'I am not singing', and a registering within the body of the absence of the breath of the world, the wind. They descend into delirium, 'Quel aimable délire,/Vient s'emparer de tous mes sens!', and the opera has reached a point of crisis.

It resolves the crisis momentarily by distracting attention to focus on itself, and by gesturing to ancient sacrifice. This is all about singing, for their singing, 'nos gémisséments', they claim, has inspired the goddess to relent, and they invoke at last the ghost of what a sacrifice would have been as they urge each other to carry their vows of recognition, 'nos vœux reconnaissants', to a heaven imagined in medieval scientific terms: it is a series of vaults, and it is not a vacuum but rather filled with ether, 'jusqu'aux voûtes éthérées'.

There would be a rather rarefied point to be made here about the scientific notion of the ether. The existence of ether, that is, posited a universe full of media through which the forces of gravity and light, as well as sacrificial vows, presumably, could move comprehensibly, and within which planets floated comfortably. Universal emptiness, on the other hand, was a comparatively menacing notion, and it is indicative of the popular reception of the science associated with it that, when that 'antigluckiste enragé' La

Harpe wanted to disparage Gluck's music, he could think of nothing worse to say than 'c'est le vide de Newton'.³⁷

But it seems to me that specific scientific controversy is not the opera's concern at this point. These references to beating hearts leaping out of chests, ethereal vaults, and lovely delirium speak in a code that is properly poetic. They mark the moment when the plot of the opera takes leave of any pre-existing narrative ground, and their function is to secure the exclusively poetic status of the following chorus. In it, the Greeks urge each other to celebrate the wedding that is now to follow in the wake of the cancelled sacrifice. The wind has not been mentioned in a very long time, but cosmic assent can be read in the happiness of the young lovers, which is the sign that the Gods are on their side: 'Leur bonheur est le premier gage/De la juste faveur des Dieux'.

There is a problem with this celebration, however. The fact that its logic and images relate to a properly poetic code does not mean that it can manipulate its figures in just any way at all. Its figures must respond to that code. Unfortunately, when the winds cease to matter, the relentless logic of the poetry contradicts its own code, and we are left with its two final lines: 'Et leur hymen est le présage/De nos triomphes glorieux'. This is about fire, the fire of Hymen's wedding torch, and the fire of war. But the poetic code of the dynastic wedding is that it is meant to end war, not start it. Figured as the seduction of Mars by Venus, a long iconographical and theatrical history declares that the pursuit of war ends when its energy is displaced onto the pursuit of an object of erotic desire. Perhaps the best visual illustration of this is Rubens's painting for the Marie de Médicis cycle, *The Presentation of the Portrait*, in which the power of the bride's portrait allows putti to carry away her warrior-husband's armour, and the fire of Hymen produces a purely fictional scene of a concluded battle in the background, the smoke from which is precisely parallel to his torch.³⁸

Within the logic that has reigned in the opera since the cancelled sacrifice, then, a purely poetic logic, there is trouble. Poetic codes mean that a happy wedding should end a war, not begin one, and the operatic apparatus accordingly fails to come to rest on this note. There follows a danced divertissement, a defining mark of French operatic identity, and the closing chorus, which finally manages to conclude the opera by answering Clytemnestra's question about what would constitute payment, and by opening the opera up to its political-sacrificial future.

It is written for all of the singers and orchestra in unison. On the one hand, its martial character and simplicity of scoring can be seen as part of Gluck's overall concern for characterization. Olivier de Courancez, editor

³⁷ *Journal de politique et de littérature*, 19 May 1776, quoted in Guiet, p. 100.

³⁸ Amy Wygant, 'Corneille, Rubens, and the Heroic Emblem', *Emblematica*, 9 (1995), 111–32 (pp. 127–29).

of the *Journal de Paris*, complained to Gluck about the monotony of the soldiers' choruses in the opera, and reported Gluck's response:

Ces soldats [...] ont quitté ce qu'ils ont de plus cher, leur patrie, leurs femmes, et leurs enfants, dans la seule espérance du pillage du [sic] Troye. [...] Ils ne voient que Troye ou le retour de leur patrie; ils ne doivent préférer que les mêmes mots et toujours [sic] avec le même accent. J'aurais pû sans doute faire un plus beau choix musical [...] mais je n'aurais été que musicien, et je serais sorti de la nature que je ne dois jamais abandonner.³⁹

On the other hand, the homophony and general style of the closing chorus cannot be explained as simply mimetic. Patricia Howard noted long ago that Gluck showed 'with an abundance of examples that realism, like rationality, was the last quality he was interested in incorporating in an operatic finale' (p. 83). Prod'homme in fact called the character of this chorus 'popular' and claimed that it was the 'prototype of the revolutionary songs composed by Gluck's disciples' (pp. 219–20). This observation returns us to the notion of sacrifice, to Gluck's musical revolution, and to historicism after the fact.

Gluck's opera seems to have produced a kind of manic reaction, Iphigénie-mania. So many wanted to attend the open rehearsals that a ticketing system had to be set up, and the entire court, or that part of it in the dauphine's camp, attended all of them. Mannlich reported that 'Iphigénie étoit le sujet de toutes les conversations'. Specifically, the opera displaced political discourse: 'tout cela fut mis de côté et oublié pour ne s'occuper et s'entretenir que de récitatifs, d'ouvertures, de basse-fondamentale, et de tierce-majeur et mineure, de dissonances et d'harmonie.' The subject set for the Rome Prize competition for sculpture that year was the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and there seems even to have been an Iphigenia hair style.⁴⁰

The opera opened on 19 April. On 10 May the king died and the aforementioned dauphine, the young Austrian woman who had been Gluck's singing pupil in Vienna, became queen of France. This was of course Marie-Antoinette. She was not yet infamous. And it seems that, in the midst of the public mania occasioned by the opera, her identity had somehow merged with that of the erstwhile sacrificial victim. We know from a report in the *Mémoires secrets* of 14 January 1775 that on the night of 10 January, when the new queen was in the audience, Le Gros, singing the part of Achille, modified the second act chorus, 'Chantez, célébrez votre reine', sung as he introduces Iphigénie to his countrymen. On this occasion, Le Gros turned to the queen and sang, 'Chantons, célébrons notre Reine,/Et l'hymen qui sous ses lois l'enchaîne/Va nous rendre à jamais heureux!' The queen reportedly wept tears of joy, and the people, 'la foule' outside the theatre, played the same part as the chorus

³⁹ 'Lettre sur le Chevalier Gluck', *Journal de Paris*, 24 August 1788, pp. 1021–23, quoted in Patricia Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera* (London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1963), p. 80.

⁴⁰ Prod'homme, pp. 179–294 (pp. 187–88, 195, 197–99, 214).

on the stage, for, following the performance, 'allégresse du peuple n'a pas moins éclaté, et la foule a suivi la Princesse autant qu'elle a pu avec les acclamations ordinaires de vive la Reine, etc.'⁴¹

In about twenty years, in 1793, this crowd would see to her execution, and this returns us to the odd ability of music to prefigure the political. Marie-Antoinette had literally patronized a revolution in music, and allowed herself from its beginning to be collapsed upon its most fragile figure. Both of them, Iphigénie and the young queen, in these early days, frustrated the structure of sacrifice. On the stage, this chorus calling for the people to celebrate their queen became a political flashpoint. At the performance of 10 December 1790 the singer Lainez apologized before beginning it: 'Messieurs, tout bon Français doit aimer son roi et sa reine; ainsi je vais commencer.' Two days later the performance was disrupted at this point and there were riots in the streets afterwards. The municipality reprimanded the singer and banished the words 'roi', 'reine', and 'trône' from the stage for ten years.⁴²

Gluck's final unison chorus, his closing of the opera on a note that is sung by the people, the simple soldiers who, as Gluck imagined, have only the spoils of war and a safe homecoming as recompense, had of course disappeared long before this from the opera. But it is no accident, I would argue, that attentive listeners have heard in it a forecast of political revolution. The ending of tragedy, if frustrated of sacrifice, looks elsewhere for recompense, exactly as had Racine's Clytemnestra. There must be payment. Gluck's warriors sing of their work, 'travaux', the only word that the text repeats, and, in the end, their payment is to be crowned: 'Le plaisir seul paye et couronne/Du guerrier désarmé les pénibles travaux'. The workers thus become monarchs, sacrifice has become a practical politics, and it will find another stage, one ruled by the guillotine.

How music accomplished this is a bit mysterious, but we can find a hint about the case of Gluck in the formulation of Richard Wagner. Wagner's insight was that the gesture of sacrifice resides first and foremost in the music itself, and, in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, he compared Gluck and Mozart to stars, sparks, and fire-works.⁴³ They are 'einsame Leitsterne', 'lonely guiding stars', 'who lead us to the perception of that pure artistic possibility of the absorption [*Aufgehen*] of the richest music into an even richer dramatic poetry, that poetry which only becomes all-powerful dramatic art through this free absorption of the music into it'. Sparks leapt from Gluck's genius, according to Wagner, but in the end, this was

⁴¹ Facsim. in Flothius, ed., Gluck, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, p. xxv. The collapse of the opera chorus upon the nation's 'people' is analysed for grand opera in Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicised Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴² Prod'homme, pp. 355–56.

⁴³ 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig, Breitkopf und Härtel, n.d.), III, 42–177 (p. 122).

music immolating itself for a poetry unworthy of it. His were ‘only phantasmic fireworks’, ‘*nur gaukelndem Feuerwerke*’, not real fire capable of setting the place ablaze. It was the ending of the *Iphigénie* that took the heat, and when Wagner made his own version for Dresden, he changed it.

Discussing music is always somehow like serving up a menu instead of dinner. But if acute ears have heard revolution and fire in Gluck’s music, if fire, that is, has moved its transformative, revolutionary power inside of a music whose drive is sacrificial, then this would be one way to think about the turbulence that this music created in history, one way to understand how it was that Gluck’s first opera for the French might just as well have been their queen’s last.

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW