Chapter Eleven

Berlioz’s “To be or not to be”

*Hamlet!*… *profonde et désolante conception!… que de mal tu m’as fait!*
—Berlioz, *Lélio ou Le Retour à la vie*

This little poem—

And as Juliet dies with her Romeo near,
Disregard Letourneur with his French deeply marred,
Look to Berlioz now for the key to Shakespeare,
It is he who gives truth to the words of the Bard.

—slightly less silly in the original French—

*Avec son Roméo quand Juliette expire*
*Évitez Letourneur et son français banal,*
*Avec Berlioz seul vous comprendrez Shakespeare*
*Le traducteur est grand comme l’original.*

—was improvised by a rhymester at an after-concert party in Baden-Baden, where the mid-nineteenth-century’s international smart set took the summer waters and amused themselves with conversation, gaming, and music. Joseph Méry’s lines were preserved for posterity when the photographer Étienne Carjat printed them beneath one of the four delightful drawings he made of the controversial French composer (see figure 11.1). Usually portrayed as a beak-nosed, big-haired bird of prey (see figure 11.2), as by Émile Planat, known as Marcelin, in a drawing of 1863, Berlioz, in Carjat’s rendering, appears almost gentle, kindly, *sympathique*.

The ditty tells us something important: that by that time, August 1858, when *Madame Bovary* was new, when *Tristan und Isolde* was *in utero*, when Napoléon III was in full bloom, Hector Berlioz was known not only as the composer of the *Symphonie fantastique*, not only as the peripatetic conductor
Figure 11.1 Étienne Carjat, Caricature of Berlioz (1858), charcoal, heightened with white, on yellow paper, 47.7 x 31.6 cm. RF39015R. Photo: Franck Raux. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY
who for well over a decade had been promoting his music from London to Moscow, and not only as the sharp-tongued music critic for the *Journal des débats*, but also as the voice of authority among those in the know who cared to read and interpret Shakespeare.

Berlioz and the Bard is a long story. The composer’s final opera, *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1862), a version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, is the subject of the following chapter. *La Mort d’Ophélie* (1842), which we studied in chapter 7, is a heart-breaking setting of the tale of Ophelia’s demise as encapsulated in a text “imité de [that is, based upon] Shakespeare” by the composer’s playwright friend Ernest Legouvé. The dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette* (1839) is arguably the composer’s most avant-garde work. A sequel that he earlier wrote for the *Fantastique—Le Retour à la vie* (1832)—is a miscellany of musical numbers (including a fantasy on *The Tempest*) and monologues recited by a musician who, ailing with Hamlet’s angst and in the throes of artistic and amorous despair, considers suicide, only to decide that he must live on for the sake of his art. Berlioz’s remaining Shakespearean
music includes a programmatic overture on *King Lear* (1831), an astonishment *Marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d’Hamlet* (1844), and a duet in his grand Virgilian opera *Les Troyens* (1858) whose words, “par une telle nuit” (“on such a night”), are lifted literally from the love scene in act 5 of *The Merchant of Venice*. The greatest might-have-been of Berlioz’s career is an opera on *Hamlet*, for which a commission was promised but, alas, never proffered. Even Berlioz’s reaction to Goethe’s *Faust*, which he discovered in the 1828 translation by Gérard de Nerval, was imbued with Shakespeare: not only is each of his *Huit Scènes de Faust* (1829) graced with a quotation from *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, but the delightfully ironical text of last of them, the *Sérénade de Méphistophélès*—Goethe’s lines 3682–3697, Nerval’s *Une Nuit, devant la porte de Marguerite*—is freely adapted from Ophelia’s mad scene, “Quoth she, before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed: / So would I ha’ done, by yonder sun, / An thou hadst not come to my bed” (act 4, scene 5), as Goethe himself, likening Gretchen to Hamlet’s would-be wife, acknowledged to his friend Johann Peter Eckermann.¹

For Joseph Méry, then, the Berlioz who translated the poet was the composer. And indeed, in the music there is much that may be heard as Shakespearean, because the marriage of “contrastes et oppositions” (as he called them) that engendered the scores is the counterpart of the mixing of genres that Berlioz admired in the plays. But there is more, much more, because the composer was also a reader, going round in the later years to recite the plays aloud, in French, to friends and acquaintances whom he wished to infuse with his enthusiasm. And he was an advocate, joining in 1864 such luminaries as George Sand, Alexandre Dumas, and Théophile Gautier, as a member of the local committee formed to celebrate the quatercentenary of Shakespeare’s birth. From Guernsey, Victor Hugo assumed the honorary presidency of the group, something that caused such trepidation in the Emperor (in protest of whose ascendancy Hugo had gone into exile) that he canceled the party. For Berlioz, birthdays were never terribly important, particularly his own, but Shakespeare’s provided an occasion to honor in public the quiet voice which long accompanied his writing and enlightened his life. Indeed, it is his unbroken forty-year fascination with the plays that sets Berlioz apart from his contemporaries as a Shakespearean of conspicuous note.

My purpose here is the small one of setting down an appreciation of the composer’s parody of Hamlet’s most famous monologue, and of registering Berlioz as a player in the nineteenth-century’s elevation of the Elizabethan writer to the status of a god. To do so requires preliminaries of various kinds,
because we need to know something of Berlioz’s ability to read Shakespeare in English, and we need to know something of Shakespeare’s standing in France. When, on March 13, 1861, Berlioz published the parody in the *Journal des débats*, the leading newspaper of the French capital, he knew that it could function as parody because the soliloquy was now nothing if not a familiar tune. Despite his long war with Shakespeare, Voltaire, in 1734, had offered an adaptation of the “to be” speech, in rhymed alexandrines, in the eighteenth of the *Lettres philosophiques*. And Jean-François Ducis, in 1769, completed an adaptation of the entire play, no matter its distance from the original, which became the daily bread of the Comédie-Française until well into the nineteenth century. All of those who felt constricted by the canons of classicism, the knowledgeable and the newcomers in the age we call Romantic, adopted Shakespeare as the exemplar of freedom.

Berlioz cannot be said to have been gifted at languages other than his own, of which he became a master. As a boy in the Isère, in the eighteen-aughts (the noughties, our British friends would say), he was tutored in Latin by his demanding father, a learned country doctor. Virgil became the composer’s lifelong companion (ergo *Les Troyens*). Berlioz spent two years in Italy in his late twenties and picked up conversational Italian as do our students on their junior years abroad. He travelled extensively in Germany in his forties and learned nary a word. He twice visited Russia and there spoke exclusively French. He went five times to England between 1847 and 1855 and did on the first occasion mention to his father that he found himself able, to his surprise, to say what he needed to say. His love of Shakespeare derived, however, from no such practical experience. It rather developed—this is one of those things that cause us to see Berlioz as *fanatique* and *excentrique*—from love itself. Love for the Anglo-Irish actress Harriet Smithson, that is, who came to Paris when Berlioz was in his second year at the Conservatoire, and who, during an intensive but short-lived craze for Shakespeare in English, revealed the depths of the dramas and captivated the French public with her performances of leading roles in *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, King Lear, The Merchant of Venice*, and *Richard III*.

All of the French Romantics were smitten by Smithson—Hugo and Gautier, Dumas and Delacroix, the list goes on—but only Berlioz made it his business relentlessly to pursue the actress, as we have seen in previous chapters, and eventually to persuade her, after a courtship whose vicissitudes forever confirm that truth is stranger than fiction, to become his wife. He could barely communicate with his *Henriette*, as he called her (to aspirate the *h* of Harriet, for a Frenchman, is hard); her French was nearly nil; and
prurient, he would discover, she was not. The vogue of viewing the plays in English came to an end well before the marriage was celebrated, in October 1833, and her career became fatally foreshortened. Five and six years earlier, the vivid pantomime and posturing of the English actors, with their striking voices and intonations, had brilliantly enlivened Shakespeare on the stage. Now, amateurs in France would prefer to pursue their enthusiasm for Shakespeare on the page.

This meant dealing with printings in English of uncertain authority and translations in French whose relationship to the originals was unsure. Pierre Letourneur, the target of Méry’s admonitory alexandrines, published his renderings of the plays over a period of six years, from 1776 to 1782. His original edition (now rare) was reissued in 1821 in a version revised and reworked by the remarkably prolific historian and politician François Guizot, whose very championing of Shakespeare—seen in France as a breaker of rules—matched his opposition to the authoritarianism of the last of the Bourbons, Charles X, and his subsequent support of the more liberal Louis-Philippe, enthroned by the Revolution of 1830. By “Letourneur,” Joseph Méry and Berlioz and the others clearly meant “Guizot.” His thirteen volumes of Shakespeare went essentially unchallenged in the nineteenth century until Victor Hugo’s son François-Victor embarked upon another translation of the complete works: the first of the scion’s eighteen volumes appeared in 1859, the last in 1866.

Later I will offer a tiny sample from those and other competing editions, but let me now say who, in the minds of the opinion makers, was deemed competent to judge them. Of the members of the Shakespeare anniversary committee mentioned earlier, “I count only two,” wrote a reporter for Le Figaro on April 21, 1864, “who are capable of reading Shakespeare in his own language.” One was François-Victor Hugo himself. The other was Berlioz. The journalist, one Benoît Jouvin, thinking of the forthcoming banquet (Napoléon III had yet to order its nullification), then told a little story:

Two years ago, Hector Berlioz, Paul de Saint-Victor [the essayist and literary critic], and I found ourselves dining at the same table. In the mind of the author of Les Troyens, neither Beethoven nor Gluck occupies a greater place than Shakespeare. As the conversation gently drifted from music to poetry, we came to speak of the translation by François-Victor Hugo, and I asked Berlioz his opinion of it, since he knows the great English poet by heart. He gave it to us, directly and decisively, despite Paul de Saint-Victor’s mild objections. If Hector Berlioz is thinking of expressing this opinion as a part of the toast he is preparing to offer to Shakespeare, the banquet on April 23rd might well end as did the banquet of the marriage of Pirithous: in inevitable lapithating.2
Let me explain. In Greek mythology, at the marriage of Pirithous, King of the Lapiths, in Thessaly, a grand battle broke out between the Lapiths and their drunken cousins the Centaurs. Rape, murder, mayhem, lapidation. Thinking of the Lapiths, Jouvin changed “lapider” (to stone) to “lapither.” Whence my “lapithating.” (I know…) Again, a bit of phonic fun hides a fact: Berlioz was dissatisfied with François-Victor Hugo’s new Shakespeare. Like arrangements in music, which he called dérangements, translations, too, were nefarious falsifications.

And yet, with reluctance, Berlioz needed them. “I have three editions of Shakespeare,” he wrote in 1856, “two in English, and one in French—a TRANSLATION,” the capital letters dripping with disdain.³ The first two were probably The Dramatic works of W. Shakspere [sic] from the text of Johnson, Stevens and Reed, with a biographical memoir and summary remarks on each play, published in Paris, by Baudry, in the late eighteen-twenties and early eighteen-thirties; and the one-volume Works of William Shakspere [sic], containing his plays and poems, edited by Charles Knight and published in London, by George Cox, in the late eighteen-forties and early eighteen-fifties. The translation was by Benjamin Laroche, in the Œuvres dramatiques de Shakspeare [sic] first published in Paris, by Marchant, in 1839 (volume 1) and 1840 (volume 2). “The translators are such asses!” Berlioz wrote in the letter of October 28, 1864, which I quoted in chapter 2. “I have corrected in my edition I don’t know how many absurdities by Monsieur Benjamin Laroche, and yet he is the most faithful and least ignorant of the lot.”⁴

Such exasperation is characteristic of much of Berlioz’s criticism. He earned his living as a writer, I remind you, working out of necessity (because his concerts rarely reaped what it cost to put them on) as a correspondent for the small-circulation musical press and as chief music critic for the large-circulation Journal des débats, producing a weekly column or feuilleton from the mid-eighteen-thirties to the mid-eighteen-sixties. He later published four collections of his journalistic writings, adjusting them to new surroundings and adding stories and yarns; he published a treatise on orchestration that was the first of its kind and that, as an aesthetics textbook, remains in contention; and he published a volume of Mémoires which, among the musical autobiographies, is unequivocally the best of the lot. He was a crusader for integrity and an opponent of fluff: vocal embellishment and vainglorious virtuosity were his bêtes noires. And when his emotions were high, when his hackles were raised—I come now to the point—he would typically cite Shakespeare. Confiding to his sister his frustration at having to live among so many souls simply incapable of appreciating the genius of his heroes, he
writes: “To know those Gods”—Beethoven and Shakespeare in this instance (and most of the time)—“and yet to have to live among so many miserable animals who grovel about in the real world!” Everywhere nothing but “anti-music” and “anti-poetry”; “everywhere the opposite of the beautiful and the true, everywhere the effrontery of the ugly and the absurd.” He adds: “Ah, qu’Hamlet a raison! qui voudrait rester en ce monde si l’on savait quels seront nos songes dans cette contrée inconnue d’où nul voyageur ne revient!”—“Ah, how right was Hamlet! Who would want to remain in this world if he knew what will be our dreams in that unknown country whence no traveler returns.”

This sounds familiar. Perhaps I should have translated by using what Shakespeare actually wrote in act 3, scene 1—

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will…

—for that is what Berlioz meant. What remained in his mind was the metaphor for death. Are those words (“cette contrée inconnue d’où nul voyageur ne revient”) his words? Here we have a small example of the larger problem of tackling this subject. Did Berlioz understand words that give us pause, fardels and bourn, as deriving from the Old French? Was he translating himself, or rather mouthing what he knew from the extant translations? This question concerned us in chapter 2; it will concern us, again, in chapter 12.

In Laroche, Berlioz would have found a more prosaic formulation, with the uncommon contrée replaced by pays, and the emphatic nul become the commonplace aucun. In Letourneur he would have seen “cette contrée inconnue des bords de laquelle nul voyageur ne revient,” adding the not inappropriate notion of banks (“bords”) to Shakespeare’s bourn, which (for the OED) means “stream.” Three different translations from the mid-eighteen-thirties offered three different alternatives: “cette contrée inconnue, d’où ne revient aucun voyageur”; “cette contrée ignorée dont nul voyageur ne revient”; and “cette contrée inconnue de laquelle ne revient nul voyageur.” In fact Berlioz was quoting the version that he came to know first, and best—the one issued at the time of those thrilling Smithson performances, the iPhone-sized libretto printed in two languages by the publisher Madame Vergne, in the Place de l’Odéon, in 1827.
A full accounting shows that Berlioz knew and quoted from twenty-three of the thirty-eight plays, including ten of the twelve tragedies. That is a more than honorable score for even a professor of English literature. The one he cited, loved, and identified with the most was *Hamlet*. He saw the play in London, in 1848, and in a letter set down what he took it to mean:

Shakespeare wished to paint the nothingness of life, the futility of human endeavor, the tyranny of good fortune, and the utter indifference of fate, or of God, to what we call virtue and crime, beauty and ugliness, love and hate, genius and stupidity. And he cruelly succeeded. On this occasion they deigned to give us *Hamlet* more or less as it was written, almost in its entirety, something that is extremely rare in this country, where there are so many people who are superior to Shakespeare that most of the plays are expanded and corrected by the likes of Cibber and Dryden and other rascals who in fact merit only a public spanking!

Again, the admiration is tinged with ire. “Life’s but a walking shadow” was the story of *his* life, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” The quotation from *Macbeth* appears on the last page of Berlioz’s * Mémoires*, in the poet’s English, and, on the first page, in the composer’s French: you need no translation to take in “La vie n’est qu’une ombre qui passe; un pauvre comédien qui, pendant son heure, se pavane et s’agit sur le théâtre, et qu’après on n’entend plus; c’est un conte récité par un idiot, plein de fracas et de furie, et qui n’a aucun sens.” As his career played out, the ecstasy of victory was invariably followed by the agony of defeat. He won the Prix de Rome in the summer of 1830, and six months later lost his fiancée to a man far richer and more powerful than he. He scored a success with the *Requiem*—a government commission—in 1837, and a failure with *Benvenuto Cellini*—at the government sponsored opera house—in 1838; the premiere of *La Damnation de Faust*, in 1846, was a grand artistic accomplishment—and an unmitigated financial disaster. Despite ill health, he brought to completion what many see as his crowning artistic achievement, *Les Troyens*, in 1858, only to see it mutilated, five years later, in a partial performance that was diminished by administrative parsimony and theatrical inadequacies of the usual kind.

And yet, through it all, Berlioz maintained a certain distance, a certain irony, a certain humor. We see it in his word play, in his banter with friends, and in this article from the *Journal des débats* of March 13, 1861, which was theoretically a review of a forgettable and now forgotten opéra-comique, but which led off with the far more important “paraphrase,” as he called it, of
what would become the most parodied, pirated, parroted, and even pantomimed passage in all of English literature.

How, in French, do you say “to be, or not to be”—that is the question! In 1734, Voltaire, claiming that the letter kills and that only spirit gives life, worried not a whit about the original construction, writing simply (that is, not simply), “Demeure; il faut choisir, et passer à l’instant / De la vie à la mort, ou de l’être au néant” (“But wait, we must choose, and must at once pass from life to death, or from being to nothingness”). In 1769, Ducis, too, sacrificed Shakespeare’s two infinitives to the twelve syllables of the alexandrine: “Je ne sais que résoudre… immobile et troublé… / C’est rester trop longtemps de mon doute accable” (“I know not what to resolve… Yet to remain unsettled and frozen is to remain too long stricken by doubt”). The infinitive construction reappeared in 1821, when Guizot, following Letourneur, wrote “Être ou n’être pas, c’est la question” (which sounds like “that’s the question”). In 1827, the anonymous translator for Madame Vergne’s pocket publication wrote “Être ou n’être pas, telle est la question” (“such is the question”). In 1839, Benjamin Laroche, whose version Berlioz acquired and assailed, set down “Être ou n’être pas, voilà la question” (“there’s the question”). In 1865, when he got around to Hamlet, François-Victor Hugo decided upon “Être ou n’être pas, voilà le problème”—“there’s the dilemma,” or, as Hamlet says a moment later, “there’s the rub.”

On the matter of denoting not, I am put in mind of what Jacques Barzun wrote, with characteristic mirth and economy, in his remarkable Essay on French Verse for Readers of English Poetry (which I cited in chapter 2): “No two languages are closer and farther apart than English and French.” While the English infinitive requires two words, the French one, the English negation requires one word, the French two. “Not to be,” in English, is the only possibility; “to not be” is… to err. (Let us not be concerned with the zero infinitive—the base, without to. Shakespeare did not, after all, write “to be or not be,” although that is… a question.) French offers both “n’être pas,” which these translators adopted, and “ne pas être,” which became Berlioz’s choice. The difference would seem to reflect the translator’s sense of what the question is. But the Académie Française admitted, and continues to admit, the validity of both.

Here, if I may, is what Shakespeare wrote:

To be or not to be, that is the question—
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them.

Here is the opening of the monologue in the prose translation by Benjamin Laroche:

Être ou n’être pas, voilà la question! —Une âme courageuse doit-elle supporter les coups poignants de la fortune cruelle, ou s’armer contre un déluge de douleurs, et, en les combattant, y mettre un terme?

And here is the opening of the “paraphrase” by Berlioz:

Être ou ne pas être, voilà la question. —Une âme courageuse doit-elle supporter les méchants opéras, les concerts ridicules, les virtuoses médiocres, les compositeurs enragés, ou s’armer contre ce torrent de maux, et, en le combattant, y mettre un terme?

Which means:

To be, or not to be, that is the question. —Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of second-rate operas, ridiculous concerts, mediocre virtuosos, mad composers, or to take arms against this sea of troubles and by opposing end them.

Berlioz’s words originate in Laroche’s; his additions, in his sufferings as a critic.

Shakespeare goes on:

To die, to sleep—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to— ’tis a consumption
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—
To sleep, per chance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub […]

Laroche continues:

—Mourir, —dormir, rien de plus; et dire que par ce sommeil nous mettons fin aux souffrances du cœur et aux mille douleurs léguées par la nature à notre chair mortelle, —c’est là un résultat qu’on doit appeler de tous ses vœux. Mourir, —dormir, —dormir! rêver peut-être, —oui, voilà la difficulté […]
Berlioz paraphrases:

—Mourir, —dormir, rien de plus; et dire que par ce sommeil nous mettons fin aux déchirements de l’oreille, aux souffrances du cœur et de la raison, aux mille douleurs imposées par l’exercice de la critique à notre intelligence et à nos sens! —C’est là un résultat qu’on doit appeler de tous ses vœux. —Mourir, —dormir, —dormir, —avoir le cauchemar peut-être, —oui, voilà le point embarrassant.

That is:

To die, to sleep, no more. And by a sleep to say we end the ear-ache, heart-ache, head-ache, and the thousand natural shocks to our senses and intelligence that the métier of the critic is subject to. ’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep, to sleep, perchance to have a nightmare. Ay, there’s the rub.

Shakespeare’s next three lines—

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

—are inflated by Berlioz to more:

For in that sleep of death, what torturous dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, what absurd theories may come to be judged, what discordant scores to be heard, what fools to be flattered, what indignities inflicted upon masterpieces to be endorsed, what extravagances to be exalted, what dwarves to be extolled as giants? —This must give us pause. This is the stuff that swells the numbers of feuilletons and that prolongs the lives of the poor fools who write them.

And at these verses—

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?
—Berlioz reaches a climax:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of a senseless world, the spectacle of its delirium, the disdain and illusion of its ignorance, the injustice of its laws, the glacial indifference of its heads of state? Who would bear the cyclone of the most reprehensible passions and the most petty interests hiding behind the name of love of art? Who would wish to debase himself in order to discuss the absurd, to dare as a soldier to demonstrate maneuvers to the commanding general, to guide as a tourist the guide himself (who will nonetheless get lost) —when, to put an end to such humiliation, he himself might his quietus make with a bare flask of chloroform or with a steel-tipped bullet?

Benjamin Laroche knew that a “bodkin” was a dagger (a poignard), but the scientifically trained Berlioz (who had spent some years in medical school before giving in to the urge to become a composer) was chemically alert to chloroform, among other hallucinatory drugs, and knew what it could do. As for those steel-tipped bullets: Berlioz himself owned of a pair of pistols, and more than once thought of using them, in premarital frustration, to blow his brains out.

When his eyes fall upon Ophelia—

Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! —Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.

—Berlioz is less ambiguous than Hamlet: “Allons, il n’est pas même permis de méditer pendant quelques instants; voici la jeune cantatrice Ophélie, armée d’une partition et grimaçant un sourire”—“Leave off! It is not even permissible to meditate for a few minutes! Here comes the young singer Ophelia, armed with a score and forcing a smile.” Shakespeare’s Ophelia wishes to return Hamlet’s gifts (“remembrances”); Berlioz’s, to return a musical manuscript!

The conversation, as the composer gives it, is close to the original:

Hamlet: Ha, ha! Are you compassionate?

Ophelia: My lord?

Hamlet: And are you a singer?

Ophelia: What means your lordship?
Hamlet: That if you be compassionate and a singer, you should admit no dis-
course between the singer and the compassionate woman.

Ophelia: Could the voice have better commerce than with compassion?

Hamlet: Ay, truly; for the power of a voice such as thine will sooner pervert the
most compassionate impulses of the heart than those impulses would ennoble
the merciless aspirations of talent. This was sometime a paradox, but now the
time gives it proof.

If Shakespeare’s point is that the chaste Ophelia should keep away from those
who would corrupt her beauty (Shakespeare’s point is of course much dis-
pputed by the scholars), then Berlioz’s point is that the virtuous singer (which
he knew as a vanishing breed) should keep away from those who would
exploit her voice. The paradox, for Berlioz, could be that while a woman’s
beautiful voice might lead to an assault upon her purity (as the beauty of
Hamlet’s mother led to her commission of adultery), purity by itself cannot
lead to a beautiful voice.

After the powerful line “Get thee to a nunnery”—the word cloître, which
the French translators used, does not obviously carry nunnery’s double sense
of “convent” and “brothel”—Berlioz adds a riff: “Get thee to a nunnery.
What wouldst thou want? A famous name, a lot of money, the applause of
the mob, a titled husband, the rank of duchess? Yes, yes, they all dream of
marrying a prince.”

Hamlet’s tirade against Ophelia continues with pointed visual imagery:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one
face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, you
nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to,
I’ll no more on’t, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage.
Those that are married already, all but one shall live, the rest shall keep as they
are. To a nunnery, go.

Berlioz had a field day transforming the visual to the musical and the diatribe
against women into a diatribe against sopranos:

I have heard of your vocal flirtations, your enticing pretentions, your ridiculous
vanity. God hath given you one voice, and you make yourself another. He hath
entrusted you with a masterpiece, and you defile it, you mutilate it, you alter its
character, you adorn it with shoddy ornaments, you amputate it with insolent
cuts; you append to it horrible roulades, preposterous arpeggios, and ludicrous
trills; you insult the composer, persons of taste, art, and common sense. Go to, I’ll no more on it. To a nunnery, go.

On that line Hamlet makes his exit, leaving Ophelia to exclaim, “Oh what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” This provokes from Berlioz a final comment:

Young Ophelia is not entirely wrong. Hamlet has indeed gone a little crazy. But this will not be observed in our musical world, where everyone these days is totally mad. Besides, this poor prince of Denmark does have moments of lucidity. He is but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly he knows a hawk from a handsaw.

As he does elsewhere, Berlioz here, too, proves he knows, not only the famous soliloquy, but the play as a whole. For it is before welcoming the players, in act 2, that Hamlet confides to Guildenstern that he is demented only some of the time, and that he can nonetheless distinguish a “hawk from a handsaw.” For Berlioz the distinction was between une buse and un aigle, a hawk and an eagle. He sees that the prince could still be sharp, but hears not the alliteration and sarcasm that promoted Hamlet’s expression to a proverb.

We know that Berlioz felt in full the tragedy of Hamlet’s death. The march that he wrote for that ultimate theatrical moment—at the head of whose score, in both French and English, we find the full text of Fortinbras’ final speech, “Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage […]”—constitutes some of the most dark and dignified funeral music we have between Beethoven’s Eroica and Wagner’s Götterdämmerung. Impractical and thus rarely played—an offstage chorus is required merely to punctuate the proceedings with several sorrowful vocables (“ah!”), and a gun crew (farther away) is needed to fire the “peal of ordnance” bidden by the final stage direction of the play—Berlioz’s Marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d’Hamlet is a descendant of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, employing the same obsessive rhythm (a dactyl followed by a spondee) and the same minor key.

More tender and more touching is the music Berlioz wrote for the death of Ophelia, which we have touched upon in chapter 7: a setting of Ernest Legouvé’s lyrical summation of the tale in four strictly constructed stanzas, as the poet assumed the music would require, each with seven octosyllabic lines, each with a rhyme scheme of ababccba. The first reads as follows:
Au bord d’un torrent, Ophélie
Cueillait tout en suivant le bord,
Dans sa douce et tendre folie,
Des pervenches, des boutons d’or,
Des iris aux couleurs d’opale,
Et de ces fleurs d’un rose pâle,
Qu’on appelle des doigts de mort.

“Following along the banks of the mountain stream,” he writes, in imitation of Gertrude’s accounting of the death at the end of act 4, “Ophelia, sweetly and gently mad, was gathering periwinkles, buttercups, opalescent irises, and those ‘long purples’ [to use Gertrude’s word] that one calls dead men’s fingers.” To the “long purples,” Gertrude exclaims, “liberal shepherds give a grosser name.” If this is an un-queenly allusion to bawdiness, neither Legouvé’s unemancipated poem nor Berlioz’s more free-flowing score suggests anything other than the sincere sadness of loss.

Indeed, Shakespeare’s bawdy was inevitably lost in translation. One specialist has asserted that Pierre Letourneur, François Guizot, and after them Benjamin Laroche “completely obliterated any trace of ribald pun.” When Ophelia resists his request to lie in her lap, Hamlet asks, in a famously vulgar pun, if she thought he meant “country matters.” In French, the question is whether she thought he was employing a boorish expression—“un propos de manant.” Her reply—“I think nothing my lord”—also contains a word then generally understood to refer to pudenda femina. In French, “rien” carries no such implication. Berlioz and his countrymen may have been deprived of such lascivious word play, but they took no less delight in the essence of the Shakespearean line: verbal contrast on the microlevel and inexorable intermingling of the comic and the sublime. At the approach of the tragic separation of Dido and Aeneas, for example, in the final act of Berlioz’s epic opera, prior to the departure of the Trojan hero and the self-immolation of the Carthaginian Queen, we find ourselves momentarily in the company of two Trojan soldiers perfectly content to remain on the Mediterranean shore and perfectly happy to forsake founding Rome. “To my pretty Carthaginian, I can already speak Phoenician,” sings the one, to an intentionally waggish tune; “Mine obeys me with devotion,” sings the other, “and speaks a little Trojan.” The moment is nothing if not Shakespearean. Like the gravedigger scene in Hamlet, it delivers the wisdom of simpler souls; it offers humble realities, not tragic harangues. A tiny two-minute march, a walking, pizzicato bass beneath two chuckling clarinets and two chortling bassoons, with two
sentries trudging back and forth and muttering, to paraphrase, “to leave, or not to leave…”

Berlioz’s “to be or not to be” filled three of the six columns of his front-page article—six columns that occupied, as did all such artistic and scientific and otherwise nonpolitical articles at the time, the “sous-sol” (“basement”) or bottom third of the first and second pages of the four-page newspaper (of which the last was devoted to advertising). The paraphrase thus represented about five percent of the “news.” That is not nothing, but about it much ado has never been made. The Shakespeare parody in chapter 21 of *Huckleberry Finn* is surely better known:

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
But that the fear of something after death
Murders the innocent sleep,
Great nature’s second course,
And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
Than fly to others that we know not of.

Like Berlioz’s of twenty-four years earlier, Mark Twain’s burlesque assumes the reader’s familiarity with the soliloquy if not his ability to parse the mish-mash of lines from *Hamlet, Macbeth,* and *Richard III*. The American author, here speaking over the head of Huck, as it were (because Huck is impressed by the speech), pokes fun at the pomposity of the characters of the King and the Duke and at the culture of the public that attends their shows: that scrambled soliloquy, we read in the same chapter, “always fetches the house.”

The French composer wishes rather to air—and not for the first time, for it was the *idée fixe* of his career as a critic—the frustrations of his fate. In the “to be” paraphrase, he derides the abuses of the star system, still young but fast growing. Elsewhere, long before Twain, he deplors the benightedness of the public. At the scene in the tomb, the most imaginative moment of his own dramatic symphony, *Roméo et Juliette*, a note in the score says it all: “The public has no imagination. Works addressed solely to the imagination, therefore, have no public.” He urges that the scene be played only when the audience is replete with sensitive listeners and readers of the play. That is to say, “it ought to be omitted ninety-nine times out of a hundred.”
In one of his earliest efforts at journalism, a three-part biography of Beethoven based on popular anecdotes, press reports, and the recollections of his teachers and friends, Berlioz attempted to explain how to come to grips with what many now take to be the greatest of the “late” works, the String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op. 131—at that time regarded, on the rare occasions of its performance, as the product of a deranged mind. “You have to be of a mindset in sympathy with that of the composer,” wrote Berlioz; “you have to have experienced the kinds of feelings that this music embodies; you have to have felt the devastation that Shakespeare speaks about [quoting now in English]: ‘The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law’s delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes.’”

That was written in 1829. The paraphrase we have examined came thirty-two years later. *Hamlet* accompanied the composer throughout his mature existence, acting in the darker days as a beacon of hope. “Vivons donc,” he cries, as the alter-ego of the hero of *The Return to Life*, resuscitated from the execution he suffered in the *Fantastique* and determined now to carry on: “que l’art sublime auquel je dois les rares éclairs de bonheur qui ont brillé sur ma sombre existence, me console et me guide dans le triste désert qui me reste à parcourir”—“Let us live, then, and may the sublime art to which I owe the rare moments of happiness that have brightened my gloomy existence console me and guide me upon that sad desert that it remains for me to traverse.” Berlioz, an atheist, concludes with a prayer to the singular divinity he worshipped: “May Shakespeare protect me”—“Que Shakespeare me protège.”