

*'Music has learn'd the discords of the state': The Cultural Politics of
British Opposition to Italian Opera, 1706-1711*

Veronica T. Faust
Haverford College
Advisors: Lisa Jane Graham & Richard Freedman

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Introduction

*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. ~John Hughes¹*

In the late seventeenth century, Italian opera began to find its way into the royal court and public theaters of London. During the first decade 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.² However, this was not a peaceful conquest. The importation of Italian opera provoked British criticism, censure, and ridicule as it emerged on the London stage. British authors approached their arguments in different ways, some verging on or even embracing xenophobia, others attempting to laugh Italian opera out of the country. This opposition to Italian opera cannot be explained purely on stylistic grounds.³

Why, then, were British writers so upset about a musical style? An examination of the political, social, and cultural contexts of early eighteenth-century England is necessary to understand the anxieties that prompted writers to resist Italian opera. It is my argument that various political and social fears in this period, from the war with France to the expansion of wealth, created concerns that crystallized in British arguments against Italian opera. As John Hughes expressed in the quote that opened this paper, more than music was at stake in opera

¹ Charles Burney, *A general history of music, from the earliest ages to the present period* (London: 1776-89), Vol. 4, p. 218.

² Curtis A. Price, "The Critical Decade for English Music Drama, 1700-1710," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 26, no. 1 (1978): p. 38.

³ Carole Mia Taylor, "Italian operagoing in London, 1700-1745," Ph.D. diss. (Syracuse University: 1991), p. 50.

houses – the florid arias and recitative of Italian singers threatened the safety of the British nation. The close relationship between culture and politics at this time allowed writers to make these assertions about the effect that sung music could have on the nation.

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 his aptly titled *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 republic against the effeminate and debauched Italian courts, constructing gender difference to stabilize the uncertain category exposed by Italian castrati singers. His writings exemplify an extreme political opposition to opera.

Next, I turn to Joseph Addison, editor of the single sheet newspaper the *Spectator*, which began its run on March 1, 1711. Addison's writings reveal the social class struggle that went along with Italian opera. 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 match 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 not to condemn, but to reform.

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 a monarchy rather than active participants in a republic. Since the arts only flourished in free nations, not 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 late 1710. After only a few months, 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 excellent music, the Italian castrati singers, the spectacular staging effects, and certain elements of English dramatic tradition appealed to the London audience. *Rinaldo* verified the taste of the London public for well-composed Italian *opera seria*, and 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. An expanding print culture, as well, 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. First, let us explore the gradual Italian infiltration of London's musical culture that preceded Handel.

Italian-Style Opera in London Before Handel

Italian opera first entered England through the early seventeenth-century Stuart court masques. These masques combined dance, theater, and music with elaborate scenery, costumes, and machines to praise the reigning monarch.⁴ After the Civil War, Charles II revived the masque tradition in 1661. The first castrato to perform in England, Siface, sang at court during the reign of James II.⁵

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.⁶ Semi-operas, composed and performed in English, continued the masque tradition of lavish scenery and staging effects. As reworkings of earlier plays, semi-operas remained focused on spoken drama. This insertion of Italian-style opera into the framework of English drama was essential to its acceptance in London.⁷

However, the English taste for their native semi-opera equaled the English fascination with Italian singers. As 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.⁸ These operas were

⁴ Robert D. Hume and Arthur Jacobs, "London: Musical Life 1660-1800," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy.

⁵ J. Merrill Knapp, "Eighteenth-Century Opera in London before Handel, 1705-1710," in *British Theatre and the Other Arts, 1660-1800*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 93.

⁶ Hume and Jacobs, "London: Musical Life."

⁷ Price, "Critical Decade," pp. 39-40.

⁸ J. Merrill Knapp, "English reactions to Handel and Italian opera in London during 1711-1720," *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 2 (1986): p. 156.

usually pasticcios, made up 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 commission a new work.⁹ 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 two rival theaters struggled 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 in London. The composer, Thomas Clayton, had intended his English-language pasticcio for the Haymarket, but the shrewd Rich bribed him to Drury Lane instead.¹⁰ The novelty of *Arsinoe* ensured its success, and for the next couple years, Drury Lane and the Haymarket continued to compete for the London public.¹¹ The companies gambled on expensive Italian singers, who sang in increasingly Italian-language pasticcios that ranged in quality and popularity. In 1707, the Haymarket gained monopoly over opera through an order from the Lord Chamberlain restricting plays to Drury Lane and opera to the Haymarket. These developments led to the tradition of performance in Italian that would flourish under Handel.

⁹ Curtis A. Price, “Unity, Originality, and the London Pasticcio,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 2, no. 4 (1991): p. 17.

¹⁰ Price, “Critical Decade,” pp. 42-4.

¹¹ Knapp, “Eighteenth-Century Opera,” p. 95.

Italian Culture in London

The British response to Italian opera was also part of the larger relationship between England and Italy, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was tentative. Since Henry VIII broke with Rome after the pope refused to approve his divorce, Italian culture was the object of disdain and satire.¹² After 1688, British nationalism defined itself in relation to the continental monarchies of France and Italy – Britain was Protestant, republican, manly, and rational while Italy was Roman Catholic, debauched, effeminate, and passionate. As Italy was being politically carved up in a series of succession wars, Grand Tourists poured into its cities, imposed their own cultural values on local practices, and constructed a persuasive fiction of Italian society.¹³

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 ideal 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 in architecture, painting, poetry, and music.¹⁴ The British imported Italian instrumental music, opera, and singers because their native versions could not match the excellence of Italy.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

The mix of suspicion and respect that marked British attitudes towards Italy influenced British ambivalence towards Italian opera. While Italian music and castrati singers continued to

¹² Todd S. Gilman, "Augustan Criticism and Changing Conceptions of English Opera," *Theatre survey* 36, no. 2 (1995): p. 1.

¹³ Shearer West, "Introduction: visual culture, performance culture and the Italian diaspora in the long eighteenth century," in *Italian Culture in Northern Europe in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Shearer West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁴ Knapp, "Eighteenth-Century Opera," p. 93.

¹⁵ West, "Introduction," p. 11.

¹⁶ Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

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 cultural awe shaded the discourse of British authors in their critiques of Italian opera.

The Expanding Print Culture

Finally, the expanding print culture in London assisted in the dissemination of Italian opera music. This expansion resulted from technological advances. First, the extensive commercial use of engraving began in London and Amsterdam in the late seventeenth century.¹⁷ This technique, in which works were printed from engraved copper or pewter plates rather than from movable type, soon became the usual method of printing music with its considerable advantages of flexibility and cheapness.¹⁸ John Walsh, who dominated early eighteenth-century music publishing in London, was quick to capitalize on this new method, and he began publishing engraved music on a scale previously unknown in England.¹⁹ Second, Walsh was the first music publisher to regularly use the passe-partout technique of printing title pages. This technique involved the creation of title-page plates with a blank area in which title information was printed from a second plate or written by hand.²⁰ Passe-partout plates were often elaborate, as more effort could be expended in designing fewer plates. These decorated and ornate title pages gave music arrangements a cosmopolitan look that distinguished them from previous publications and underlined London as a major musical center.²¹

¹⁷ D.W. Krummel, "The Age of Engraving, 1700-1860," in *Music Printing and Publishing*, ed. Stanley Sadie and D.W. Krummel (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 100.

¹⁸ D.W. Krummel, *English Music Printing 1553-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 143.

Kathleen Dale and Peter Ward Jones, "London: Commercial Aspects, Music Publishing," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁹ David Hunter, Frank Kidson, William C. Smith, and Peter Ward Jones, "Walsh, John (i)," *Grove Music Online*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Dale and Ward Jones, "London: Commercial Aspects, Music Publishing," *Grove Music Online*.

Shrewd business strategies also created the early eighteenth-century burst of print activity. London music publishers experimented with new ways of printing and distributing music. Walsh, in particular, was an excellent, if not always scrupulous, 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 and copied the ideas of others, with or without their permission.²² Walsh established a rocky business relationship with Estienne Roger, his Amsterdam counterpart; Walsh occasionally borrowed Roger's plates, and also issued pirated copies of Roger's musical catalogues.²³ Musical piracy was a common business practice at the time, as adequate copyright protection did not exist. Texts could be obtained not only from composers but also from theater copyists, orchestral musicians, and the first editions of rival publishers; this continued after the passage of the 1709/10 Copyright Act, and an effective copyright law did not appear until 1777.²⁴ The interests of composer and publisher were radically different at this time. Composers, such as Handel, had no more than a limited interest in popular published music, and publishers like Walsh were only interested in operas if they contained marketable and commercially viable music.²⁵

Early eighteenth-century England had a wider range of musical publications than any other country.²⁶ John Walsh had first established himself as a publisher of song sheets around 1700, and then decided to expand into instrumental music. In his instrumental editions, Walsh

²² Hunter, Kidson, Smith, and Ward Jones, "Walsh, John (i)," *Grove Music Online*.
William C. Smith, *A Bibliography of the Musical Works Published by John Walsh during the years 1695-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. xxviii.

²³ Samuel F. Pogue and Rudolf A. Rasch, "Roger, Estienne," *Grove Music Online*.

²⁴ Hunter, Kidson, Smith, and Ward Jones, "Walsh, John (i)," *Grove Music Online*.

Dale and Ward Jones, "London: Commercial Aspects, Music Publishing," *Grove Music Online*.

²⁵ Donald Burrows, "Walsh's editions of Handel's Opera 1-5: the texts and their sources," in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England: Essays in memory of Charles Cudworth*, ed. Christopher Hogwood and Richard Lockett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 80.

²⁶ Dale and Ward Jones, "London: Commercial Aspects, Music Publishing," *Grove Music Online*.

included songs, overtures, and dances from the London theater; arias from favorite London operas; dance collections; instrumental tutors; and sonatas and concertos. In December 1703, Walsh was able to issue a catalogue with a section of ‘English and Italian Musick for all sorts of Instruments,’ in which appeared no fewer than sixteen violin and ten flute collections.²⁷

The success of these instrumental arrangements depended on the London public who eagerly purchased them. The proliferation of musical clubs and societies of amateur musicians spurred the publication of these various types of instrumental music.²⁸ Musical clubs gathered every week or month in public rooms of inns and taverns to play, drink, and eat together. Many of these groups were socially exclusive, barring members of the working class from their rehearsals, while humbler taverns and ale houses welcomed artisans to their lively musical societies. Amateur fiddlers, choral groups in churches, and professional musicians staging occasional concerts and teaching wealthy pupils also required printed sheet music.²⁹

Many amateur pupils were women, as the ability to play the harpsichord or pianoforte and to sing in tune were increasingly considered essential skills for refined young ladies.³⁰ Music publishers recognized this large female audience in their marketing. In 1708, for example, Walsh published “The 3d Book of the Ladys Entertainment or Banquet of Music,” a collection of airs and duets from the operas *Pyrrhus and Demetrius* and *Clotilda* arranged for harpsichord. These lessons could also be played on the spinet, lute, harp, and organ, all acceptable instruments for women to play. Various editions and reprints of this collection attested to its popularity.³¹

²⁷ Krummel, *English Music Printing*, pp. 169-70.

²⁸ Dale and Ward Jones, “London: Commercial Aspects, Music Publishing,” *Grove Music Online*.

²⁹ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 366.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 533.

³¹ Smith, *A Bibliography of the Musical Works Published by John Walsh*, p. 85.

Above all, music publishers catered to English society's preference for Italian music. Among the amateur musical clubs, societies, and students, Baroque music from Italy was popular, especially that of Corelli and Vivaldi.³² 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.³³ Title pages declared their inclusion of "the most celebrated Italian Authors" or "new songs after the Italian manner," and publishers sold instrumental arrangements of Italian opera arias for amateur musicians soon after an opera's premiere.³⁴ 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. With the song books of Walsh and other publishers, Italian opera music could be enjoyed by the growing middle class in the privacy of their homes. Any member of the middle class willing to spend 3 or 4s. for a printed collection of Italian instrumental music, or 1s. 6d. for the cheapest seats in the Haymarket, could enjoy the music of Italian opera along with the elite.³⁵ 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.

³² Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 366.

³³ Rosamond McGuinness, "Musical Provocation in Eighteenth-Century London: The 'British Apollo,'" *Music & Letters* 68, no. 4 (1987): p. 333.

³⁴ David Hunter, *Opera and Song Books Published in England 1703-1726* (London: London Bibliographical Society, 1997), pp. 108, 194.

³⁵ Smith, *A Bibliography of the Musical Works Published by John Walsh*, p. xv.

Mark W. Stahura, "Handel's Haymarket Theater," in *Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini*, ed. Mark A. Radice (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998), p. 98.

Chapter One

John Dennis

Few British authors opposed Italian opera as harshly as did John Dennis. Dennis' critical writings reveal his insecurity 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 republican, masculine, and rational versus Italy as debauched, effeminate, and passionate. While Dennis' writings often smack of xenophobia, they are not the mere ravings of a disgruntled critic. They are the worries of a dramatist confronted with a genre that he cannot understand, and of an entertainment that had the power to fortify or disintegrate the nation.

John Dennis was born in London in 1658, during the final years of the Commonwealth, to the saddler Francis Dennis and his wife Sarah Dennis. He was educated at Harrow School and Cambridge; he completed his studies in 1683 and probably remained in Cambridge as a tutor until 1686. 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. While in France, for example, he noted that "the *French* then are affected and impudent, which are but the necessary effects of that National Vice, their Vanity."³⁶ He also encountered Italian opera for the first time, writing of the "much fine Musick as I heard in Italy, both in their Churches and Theatres."³⁷ But as Dennis would discover two decades later when Italian opera first appeared in London, what was fine in Italy was not necessarily good for Britain.

³⁶ Avon Jack Murphy, *John Dennis* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 1-2.

³⁷ Henrik Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators: Studies in Journals, Opera and the Social Scene in Late Stuart London* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1995), p. 86.

Upon his return to Britain, Dennis became an aspiring writer. He was thirty years old and had to his credit only one published poem, so he worked throughout the 1690s to forge personal connections with important British writers of the day and to establish himself as a witty man of letters. By 1694, for example, he had entered into correspondence with John Dryden, who encouraged his poetry and received Dennis' effusive praise.³⁸ Dennis' early poetry features the railing tone popular with young gallants, and his letters refer to coffeehouse gossip and boast of his membership in "the *Witty Club*."³⁹

After a few years, however, Dennis could no longer afford the extravagant life of a gallant, stumbling instead upon the debt and intermittent poverty that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Partly as a result of his financial situation, partly because of the trends of the time and his own character, 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.⁴⁰ In his *The Usefulness of the Stage* (1698), an early work of Dennis' 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 reminds Men of their Duty, and perpetually instructs them, either by its Fable, or by its Sentences, and 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; which is evident from Experience.⁴¹

³⁸ Joseph M. Levine, *Between the Ancients and the Moderns: Baroque Culture in Restoration England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 88.

³⁹ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Joanne Altieri, *The Theatre of Praise: The Panegyric Tradition in Seventeenth-Century English Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1986).

⁴¹ John Dennis, *Miscellaneous Tracts* (London: 1727), p. 341.

In his prefaces, plays, and poetry, Dennis continued to insist that he wrote for the good of his country, seeking to morally improve his readers and his nation.⁴²

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 in relation to these conquests.⁴³ The early eighteenth century in England was a time of war; 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.⁴⁴ Internally, the face of the nation altered in 1707 when the Act of Union joined Scotland to England and Wales.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Dennis worked within these debates, serving the Whig cause in the early 1700s with pamphlets such as *The Danger of Priestcraft* (1702) and *A Proposal for Putting a Speedy End to the War* (1703).⁴⁷

Dennis' 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

⁴² Murphy, *John Dennis*, pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 27.

⁴⁵ Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Phillipson, "Politeness and politics in the reigns of Anne and the early Hanoverians," in *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500-1800*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 211. Lois G. Schwoerer, "The right to resist: Whig resistance theory, 1688 to 1694," in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 232.

⁴⁷ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 3.

Succession. Despite the poem's verbosity and overwrought language, the grateful Duke of Marlborough awarded Dennis with a hundred pounds and the post of royal waiter in the London Custom-House.⁴⁸ Also in 1704, the most successful of Dennis' plays premiered at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, the tragedy *Liberty Asserted*, which epitomized Dennis' conviction that the stage should benefit the established government.⁴⁹ *Liberty Asserted* offered a vehement attack on the French and on Frenchness, relying on emerging cultural stereotypes for its plot and characterization. According to Dennis' eighteenth-century biographer Theophilus Cibber, the popularity of *Liberty Asserted*, combined with other derogatory statements Dennis had made concerning the French, caused Dennis to fear that France would take him hostage and to ask the Duke of Marlborough to protect his person when the peace treaty ending the War of Spanish Succession was stipulated.⁵⁰

Religion was so entwined with politics in Britain at this time that any commentary on politics subsumed religion as well. Prior to each monarchical succession, fears of the new king or queen's embracing Roman Catholicism rather than Protestantism abounded, prompting both the Exclusion Crisis of 1679 and the Revolution of 1688.⁵¹ 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; Roman Catholicism was firmly linked to absolutism in the public conscience.⁵²

⁴⁸ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 84.

⁵¹ J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, ideology, and politics during the ancien regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 66.

Mark Knights, "'Meer religion' and the 'church-state' of Restoration England: the impact and ideology of James II's declarations of indulgence," in *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration*, ed. Alan Houston and Steve Pincus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 41.

⁵² J.G.A. Pocock and Gordon J. Schochet, "Interregnum and Restoration," in *The Varieties of British Political Thought*, p. 175.

In this era of tense relations between church and state, religion played a key role in Dennis' 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.⁵³ Dennis' Protestantism played an important role in his writings and in his personal life, exacerbating his long literary feud with Alexander Pope, a Roman Catholic. At the same time, Dennis' writings place him within the tradition of English Protestant dissenters of the Low Church, as he attacked religious bigotry and a corrupt clergy.⁵⁴

Dennis' 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ These events prompted Dennis to respond critically, which he did in 1706 in *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner*.

In this essay, Dennis continued to expound his ideological views of cultural aesthetic forms. His argument illustrates the close relationship he saw between politics and culture – music and harmony interfered with the moral clarity of the text, 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.

⁵³ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Mark Goldie, "Priestcraft and the birth of Whiggism," in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, p. 209.

⁵⁵ Dennis, *Miscellaneous Tracts*, p. 200.

⁵⁶ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 110.

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 reasonable 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.⁵⁷

By “reasonable Diversions,” Dennis means drama, that almost sacred genre with the power to inspire men to virtue and courage. Dennis continues in his preface 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...⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ John Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera’s after the Italian Manner* (London: 1706), unpaginated preface.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, p. 2.

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.⁶⁰

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 casting his cultural criticism in the language of military conflict and conquest. For Dennis, the import of foreign Italian opera was 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.”⁶¹ Italian opera was a stealthy foreign invader sneaking through the lines of battle to destroy Britain from within: “I know not what Whimsey of Fate, while in the Field we have been knocking their bravest Men on the Head, we have been caressing and hugging the Off-scowring of them at home.”⁶² 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 dissolved its listeners in the softness of luscious sounds.⁶³ 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

⁶⁰ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera's*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Spirit, which Poetry exalts, and which effeminate Musick debases.”⁶⁴ Dennis asserted that the British nation gained its sense of identity, strength, and superiority through its contrast to the cultural values of Continental Europe. Italian opera provided a means whereby Dennis could articulate features that constituted a reasonable and masculine British identity in opposition to the passionate and effeminate Other from Italy.⁶⁵

As the product of Roman Catholic culture, opera threatened the religious identity of Britain as well. Dennis noted that drama, not musical entertainment, went hand-in-hand with British Protestantism. Drama, the Reformation, and liberty had appeared 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.”⁶⁶ While drama and liberty were secure under the “Immediate Protestant Successors” to the throne, Dennis feared 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.⁶⁷ During this time when so much was at stake for the British nation, Dennis’ diatribe against Italian opera crystallized British fears of Roman Catholicism and an absolute monarchy.

Dennis’ argument against Italian opera also provided a forum in which early eighteenth-century views and anxieties concerning gender were articulated. Authors, including Dennis, frequently used ‘masculine’ versus ‘effeminate’ vocabulary in their arguments against opera. Such writers labeled Italian opera ‘effeminate,’ linking effeminacy with passion, sentiment, and

⁶⁴ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Thomas McGeary, “Gendering Opera: Italian Opera as the Feminine Other in Britain, 1700-42,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 14 (1994): p. 27.

⁶⁶ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Dennis, *An Essay upon Publick Spirit* (London: 1711), p. iv.

luxury. *An Essay on the Opera's* contains no explanation of Dennis' 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. Dennis' statement "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" is only shocking today.⁶⁸

Gender structures all the opposing categories of Dennis' essay. 'Effeminate' Italian opera was mindless, luxurious, and sensual sound, while 'masculine' British drama was reasonable, forceful, and inspiring sense. This opposition was dangerous and threatening: "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."⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

The inability of music to be forceful and instill in men courage and national ardor supported Dennis' assertion that opera undermined patriotic sentiment. Dennis' claim that effeminacy opposed nationalism also supports Joan Wallach Scott's statement that at critical moments in national histories, "emergent rulers have legitimated domination, strength, central authority, and

⁶⁸ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera's*, unpaginated preface.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

ruling power as masculine (enemies, outsiders, subversives, weakness as feminine).”⁷¹ 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.⁷²

By labeling both Italian opera and the country in which it was born the ‘feminine Other,’ Dennis forged masculine British military and republican identity in relation to the debauched and effeminate monarchies of France and Italy.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ For Dennis, then, castrati singers threatened the strict opposition of the sexes with their unnatural and ambiguous sexual identity. On one hand, British writers labeled the castrati as effeminate as the music they sang and the nation they came from. On the other hand, the castrati’s reported sexual prowess with women, and their identification as the ultimate British-woman pleaser, threatened British masculinity.⁷⁵ Attacks against castrati, then, embodied a compelling paradox, revealing the British discomfort with the contingent nature of gender and sexuality that the castrati exposed.⁷⁶

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

⁷¹ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 172.

⁷² Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, p. 13.

⁷³ McGeary, “Gendering Opera,” p. 27.

⁷⁴ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 149.

⁷⁵ Todd S. Gilman, “The Italian (Castrato) in London,” in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 58.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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.”⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

For Dennis, the castrati, those “Eunuchs [who] tickle their Ears with a Straw, while they pick their Pockets,” caused Italian opera to promote homosexual and same-sex desire.⁷⁹ In this light, Dennis’ stress on the difference between the sexes can be seen as an attempt to stabilize gender in the face of the destabilizing effects wrought by the castrati.⁸⁰

Dennis structured his argument through opposing categories. He put reason in conflict with passion, text with sound, and drama with music. His argument often proceeds along these neat oppositions:

If that is truly the most Gothick, which is the most oppos’d to Antick, nothing can be more Gothick than an Opera, since nothing can be more oppos’d to the ancient Tragedy, than the modern Tragedy in Musick, because the one is reasonable, the other ridiculous; the one is artful, the other absurd; the one beneficial, the other pernicious; in short, the one natural, and the other monstrous.⁸¹

The opposition between male and female thus fit nicely into Dennis’ rhetoric. Dennis desperately wanted his argument to be as simple and self-evident as the many opposites he cited, and he

⁷⁷ Dennis, *Essay upon Publick Spirit*, p. 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸⁰ Gilman, “The Italian (Castrato) in London,” p. 50.

⁸¹ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, pp. 13-4.

wanted the gender difference of male and female to be clear as well, and to support his argument against Italian opera.

Dennis' 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' notorious vehemence and irascibility. In 1713, Pope published a humorous satire that purportedly took place in Dennis' bedchamber, in which a confused Dennis mistook his caretakers as agents of Louis XIV and raved, "Is all the Town in a Combination? Shall Poetry fall to the ground? Must our Reputation be lost to all foreign Countries? O Destruction! Perdition! *Opera! Opera!* As Poetry once rais'd a City, so when Poetry fails, Cities are overturn'd, and the World is no more."⁸² Dennis' belligerent tone continued to be ridiculed and dismissed by a posterity influenced and convinced by Pope's characterization of Dennis.

Avon Jack Murphy, however, advocates a more nuanced appreciation for Dennis' writings. While Murphy admits that Dennis sometimes offered his conclusions about the pernicious effects of opera without satisfactorily explaining the causes, as in his *An Essay upon Publick Spirit*, Dennis should be admired for wrestling hard with the problem of Italian opera in *An Essay on the Opera's*.⁸³ While modern readers may find Dennis' argument quaint or ridiculous, Murphy encourages the analysis of Dennis' works in their proper historical context. Dennis was 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 by his certainty that

⁸² Murphy, *John Dennis*, pp. 52-3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

admirers of opera could not understand why they supported it.⁸⁴ 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 it.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Murphy, *John Dennis*, p. 112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Chapter Two

Joseph Addison

Not every British writer wrote in the polemical tone of Dennis. In 1711, nine days after *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 for the cultural and social distinction from the lower classes that it offered them. 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.⁸⁶ This approach can be seen in Addison's famous 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!⁸⁷

While Addison and Dennis shared many concerns about Italian opera, the two authors had different cultural goals for the musical style. Dennis sought to restore an older socio-political order through traditional aesthetic rules, while Addison recognized the new style and looked ahead to a time when it could hold society together rather than dividing it. Addison's critiques

⁸⁶ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Joseph Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison, Esq. in the Tatler, Spectator, Guardian, and Freeholder* (Edinburgh: 1790), Vol. 1, p. 342.

were meant to reform, not to condemn. He hoped to revamp Italian opera, transforming it from a decadent elite pleasure to a purveyor of civic morals.

Most of the *Spectator's* arguments against Italian opera came from earlier writers: opera was sensual, unreasonable, artificial, foreign, and effeminate.⁸⁸ Yet while these criticisms were familiar, the style in which Addison presented them was not. Earlier critics like Dennis had published their ideas in pamphlets, which had emerged as a means of propaganda during the sixteenth-century and later peaked during the Interregnum. The pamphlet form continued in the eighteenth century, but with the new century came the gradual shift of critical writing from the pamphlet to the newspaper.⁸⁹ The *Spectator* and its predecessor the *Tatler*, a newspaper edited by Addison's close friend and collaborator Richard Steele, depended on earlier pamphlets for their arguments, but not for their way of arguing. Whereas the pamphlet projected political agitation and propaganda, the single sheet papers of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* aspired to a more polite and civilized manner of discourse in their larger circulations, guiding rather than preaching to their readers.⁹⁰

Dennis wrote of Italian opera as an idea, an abstract Continental enemy that infiltrated London cultural life, debauched men's minds, and threatened the British nation. Addison, on the other hand, treated Italian opera as a real and living being, a genre that consisted of specific performances and libretti, prompted dialogue on the streets, and raised concerns of its ridiculousness. While the political vulnerability of early eighteenth-century England spurred Dennis to compose his abstract critique of opera, Addison's argument retained the vitality of the recent social changes that had accelerated the import of opera. The nobility had first brought

⁸⁸ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 49.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Bob Clarke, *From Grub Street to Fleet Street: An Illustrated History of English Newspapers to 1899* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 44.

opera to the court of Charles II, and the elite continued as Italian opera's chief patrons into the eighteenth century.⁹¹ As Addison pointed out in 1711, "It does not want any great measure of sense to see the ridicule of this monstrous practice; but what makes it the more astonishing, it is not the taste of the rabble, but of persons of the greatest politeness, which has established it."⁹²

The importation of Italian-style opera occurred alongside the loss of the royal court as the cultural center of England. The elite 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.⁹³ 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, shaped by classical myth, and praising the virtues of the monarch.⁹⁴

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

⁹¹ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 41.

⁹² Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, pp. 331-2.

⁹³ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

court in her youth, were interested in the lavish courtly pleasures of their predecessors.⁹⁵ The elite, then, had to find new venues 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.⁹⁶ The elite, however, retained their roles as the chief patrons of opera as it moved from the court to the city.

Within the metropolitan space of London, where more nobles chose to live during the winter 'season,' the elite transferred the exclusivity of the court to scattered social spaces.⁹⁷ Chocolate houses, for example, were fewer in number and more expensive than coffee houses, and were thus frequented by the elite. At White's chocolate house on fashionable St. James's Street, members of the elite could purchase tickets for various musical events, including opera.⁹⁸ The high initial cost of staging an opera required costly subscriptions, which those with enough wealth could also purchase at White's.⁹⁹ There is also evidence that before the premiere of an opera, the principal singers held dress rehearsals, with limited instrumental accompaniment, in chocolate houses; the public was invited, but for a fee.¹⁰⁰ The exclusive social space of the chocolate house, then, was connected to the equally exclusive social space of the Italian opera house.

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, to enjoy the spectacles of themselves on display as individuals who possessed knowledge of a foreign language, wealth to purchase a subscription, and

⁹⁵ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp. 17-8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 199.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁹⁹ Taylor, "Italian operagoing in London, 1700-1745," p. 35.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Leppert, "Imagery, Musical Confrontation and Cultural Difference in Early 18th-Century London," *Early Music* 14, no. 3 (1986): p. 328.

appreciation for well-composed music and talented singers.¹⁰¹ The hierarchical system that opera goers valued was embedded in the Haymarket Theatre itself; seating was divided among stage boxes, front and side boxes, the main-floor pit of semicircular benches, and two galleries. Different ticket prices for each section 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.¹⁰² 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. This reality prompted Addison to remind his readers of the follies of opera and the reform that it required.

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.¹⁰³ 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.”¹⁰⁴ But in early eighteenth-century London, the postured hierarchy and conventions of the opera singers on the Haymarket stage

¹⁰¹ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, pp. 217-8.

¹⁰² Stahura, “Handel’s Haymarket Theater,” pp. 97-8.

¹⁰³ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁴ Carlo Goldoni, “The Conventions of the *Opera Seria*,” in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, ed. Richard Taruskin and Piero Weiss (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1984), p. 231.

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. During the aristocratic move from the court to the city, England was expanding economically – mercantile interests were growing, and personal commercial wealth was increasing, thus expanding the *beau monde* of London to include not only the nobility, but also baronets and professional men and women.¹⁰⁵ In this society where distinctions between aristocracy, gentry, and elite were collapsing, behavior mattered a great deal.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ Brydges would later become a private patron of Handel.¹⁰⁸

Alongside the scattered social spaces in London where the elite mingled, a parallel social space was gradually emerging. The expensive chocolate houses and the costly opera subscriptions they sold 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

¹⁰⁵ Hume and Jacobs, “London: Musical Life,” *Grove Music Online*.

William Weber, “Handel’s London – social, political and intellectual contexts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 48-9.

¹⁰⁶ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁰⁸ Donald Burrows, *Handel* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), pp. 79-80.

information and opinions, the coffee house had received governmental censure and disapproval soon after its inception in the 1660s, but it continued to thrive.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹ Both Dennis and Addison moralized about the evils of luxury. Dennis saw luxury as the vice that had corrupted the excellent virtue of the ancient Romans:

The Modern Italians have the very same Sun and Soil which the Ancient Romans had, yet are their Manners directly opposite; their Men are neither Vertuous, nor Wise, nor Valiant, and they who have reason to know their Woman, never trust them out of their sight. 'Tis impossible to give any reason of so great a Difference between the Ancient Romans, and the Modern Italians but only Luxury, and the Reigning Luxury of Modern Italy, is that soft and effeminate Musick which abounds in the Italian Opera.¹¹²

Addison criticized luxury in a less lofty and presumptuous tone than Dennis. During a coffee-house conversation with his friends, for example, Addison's acquaintance supposedly told him that "if you avoid that foolish beaten road of falling upon aldermen and citizens, and employ your pen upon the vanity and luxury of courts, your Paper must needs be of general use."¹¹³

Addison took this advice, resolving "to assault the vice without hurting the person" and "to march on boldly in the cause of virtue and good sense, and to annoy their adversaries in whatever

¹⁰⁹ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 37.

¹¹⁰ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 202.

¹¹¹ J.R. Jones, *Country and Court: England, 1658-1714* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 77.

¹¹² Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's*, unpaginated preface.

¹¹³ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, p. 360.

degree or rank of men they may be found.”¹¹⁴ With this goal, Addison ridiculed the luxuries of the time, even if – or perhaps especially if – the elite class embraced them.

At the same time, Addison avoided the distant and pretentious tone of Dennis. 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 unite in laughter 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:

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.¹¹⁵

In this passage, Addison derided operatic plot and the sexual nature of the castrato Nicolini. By painting the follies of upper-class amusement, Addison spoke to, and on behalf of, the middle-class Londoners with whom he daily interacted in the coffee house and on the street. He exhorted them to avoid this ridiculous pastime of the nobility and gentry and to realize its need for reform.

Dennis was more conservative in his social appraisal of the opera house. He saw Italian opera as anything but laughable, and he took for granted that London cultural pursuits revealed rifts in society. Indeed, he criticized opera because it did not distinguish between the classes as English drama did:

Now there are but few judicious Spectators at our Dramatick Representations, since none can be so, but who with great Endowments of Nature have had a very generous Education, and the rest are frequently mortify’d by passing foolish Judgments; but in

¹¹⁴ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, p. 362.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

Musick the Case is vastly different, to judge of that requires only Use and a fine Ear, which the Footman often has a great deal finer than his Master.¹¹⁶

For Dennis, then, the appreciation and enjoyment of drama required a refined, upper-class education, whereas opera did not. In his desire to maintain an older social order and traditional aesthetic rules, Dennis believed it was natural for the elite to set themselves apart from the lower classes through cultural pursuits. The problem, however, was the quality of such entertainments.

Addison criticized opera in a less purist manner. He did not charge opera with the ruin of the nation or the overthrow of English Protestantism. For Addison, opera was the sign of a foolish elite class, and he spoke for middle-class resentment of aristocratic privilege and disdain by uniting his middle-class readers in laughter against elite follies. For example, 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...¹¹⁷

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.

¹¹⁶ Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's*, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 2, pp. 287-8.

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.¹¹⁸ 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...”¹¹⁹ Addison recommended a similar path for British opera composers.

For Addison, Italian opera was problematic in its subject matter, but not in its music. Unlike Dennis, Addison did not denounce the singing of text, but rather the shallow and unbelievable plots. He adopted this view while he was in Venice during his Continental tour in the early years of the eighteenth century: “Operas are another great entertainment of this season. The poetry of them is generally as exquisitely ill, as the music is good.”¹²⁰ If a libretto consisted of loftier prose and plot, opera could become a worthy pursuit. To this end, Addison suggested the mixing of Italian music with English dramatic plots in the pages of the *Spectator*: “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.”¹²¹ Addison even considered all-sung opera, so long as the subject matter was good, superior to the English semi-opera. For him, the Italian recitative style

¹¹⁸ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 56.

¹¹⁹ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, p. 354.

¹²⁰ Addison, *The Miscellaneous Works, in verse and prose, of the right honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.* (London: 1765), p. 64.

¹²¹ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, p. 353.

allowed the dramatic plot to develop more naturally, without interrupting the music with spoken dialogue; this was less disturbing to reason than the mixing of speaking and singing.¹²²

Addison's thoughts for 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.¹²³ With this plot, Addison attempted to lend dramatic cogency to the opera stage, and to combine serious and compelling subject matter with well-composed music.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵

Written after Italian opera had a firmer footing in London with the premiere of Handel's *Rinaldo*, Tickell's verses showed his belief that Addison had improved opera by infusing it with thought and reason.

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.¹²⁶ While Addison had endeavored to improve the subject matter of opera, the music had suffered in comparison. Five weeks after

¹²² Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 57.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹²⁴ Gilman, "Augustan criticism," p. 23.

¹²⁵ Thomas Tickell, "A Copy of Verses in the Sixth Miscellany, to the Author of *Rosamond*," in *Rosamond. An Opera, Inscribed to Her Grace the Dutchess of Marlborough*, ed. Joseph Addison (London: 1713), p. 25.

¹²⁶ Gilman, "Augustan criticism," p. 23.

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."¹²⁷

Addison had directly experienced the preference of London opera audiences for the foreign, exclusive, and musically satisfying to the sentimental and moralizing.¹²⁸ He would never play the opera librettist again, turning instead to the role of the witty spectator and critic.

Yet Addison retained his belief that Italian opera could be reformed. Far from Dennis' xenophobic ranting, Addison's essays expose his 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, over a year after the premiere of *Rinaldo*, 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...¹²⁹

Addison sought to unite his middle-class readers against the follies of the gentry 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. His nuanced opinions offer us a valuable look at the cultural debate behind the importation of Italian opera, and what was at stake for London society in their patronage of this foreign art.

¹²⁷ Addison, "Prologue," in *Phaedra & Hippolitus. A Tragedy*, ed. Edmund Smith (London: 1777), p. 5.

¹²⁸ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 179.

¹²⁹ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 3, p. 231.

Chapter Three

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury

Like Addison, 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 culture and Italian opera to unite society in civic virtue. Shaftesbury believed that culture should remain the province of the elite, who, Shaftesbury hoped, would evolve from decadent courtiers to polite gentlemen of reason and talent in the wake of the 1688 revolution. While Shaftesbury was socially more conservative than Addison, he did not approach the political conservatism 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, having the power to support or undermine government, which could only respond by banishing it. Shaftesbury believed culture and politics affected each other, and, like Addison, he believed that Italian opera could be reformed. Shaftesbury's focus on 'cultural politics' locates him between Dennis and Addison, offering an interesting portrait of a British writer who, despite some reservations about Italian opera, believed the genre could flourish and prosper in Britain.

The third Earl of Shaftesbury's grandfather had first gained the title of "earl" for the family in 1672. Though a parliamentarian during the Civil War, Shaftesbury's grandfather adjusted to the Restoration, gaining royal favor and serving as minister to Charles II. However, the first earl of Shaftesbury gradually became one of the most formidable politicians of the Whig opposition against the king and his policies. It was the elder Shaftesbury who led the movement to exclude Charles II's brother, the Roman Catholic James, from the throne; this act placed him for a time at the pinnacle of English politics, but also resulted in his fleeing the country and dying in Amsterdam shortly afterwards. It was also the first earl of Shaftesbury who had taken

over the education and upbringing of his grandson, who inherited his grandfather's Whig beliefs and was left to vindicate his grandfather's memory in his own political career.¹³⁰

Yet the third earl of Shaftesbury did not lead the active political life of his grandfather. In 1690, after his two-year Grand Tour of the Continent, he refused to stand for a seat in Parliament, expressing his desire to study more before entering public service. Throughout his life, Shaftesbury alternated between phases of political engagement and seclusion. He entered Parliament in 1695, but after three years he withdrew due to physical and psychological exhaustion – poor health would plague him for his entire life, leading to his early death at the age of 42. Shaftesbury was an active participant in William's final parliaments, but the king's sudden death and the accession of Queen Anne to the throne in 1702 was a setback for the Whigs, leading to another period of withdrawal and personal reflection for Shaftesbury.¹³¹ During these periods of seclusion in Holland, Shaftesbury wrote his most influential work, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, published in the spring of 1711 in three volumes.¹³²

Historian Lawrence Klein suggests that Shaftesbury's political interest combined with his preference for solitary intellectual pursuits to produce his emphasis on cultural politics: a way for him to achieve a political personality without active participation in political life itself.¹³³ 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 and the new Whig regime, was at the heart of Shaftesbury's cultural politics. For Shaftesbury, the paradigm of politeness offered an alternative to the order provided by the

¹³⁰ Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 14-15.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

seventeenth-century Church and Court.¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵

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.¹³⁶ *Characteristicks* was published within a few weeks of the influential first run of Addison's *Spectator*, another work concerned with civic politeness. 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.¹³⁷ 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 *Characteristicks* 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 Shaftesburian readers who counted their pennies and were drawn to Shaftesbury's message of moral rather than social elevation.¹³⁸

Shaftesbury structured his thoughts on philosophy and culture in the larger political framework of Whiggism. For Shaftesbury, the Revolution had established the dominance of gentlemen over the traditional English court, and Shaftesbury sought to legitimate the Whig

¹³⁴ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, pp. 8-12.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³⁸ Klein, "Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 64, no. 3/4 (2001): p. 530.

government by ushering in an era of gentlemanly culture.¹³⁹ 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.¹⁴⁰ For Shaftesbury, the ideal gentleman was a man of politeness, reason, and education in contrast to the decadent courtier. 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.¹⁴¹

The close connection Shaftesbury drew between culture and politics recalls the writings of Dennis. However, Dennis had afforded more agency to culture, with its power to support or undermine government, while Shaftesbury traced a reciprocal relationship between government and the arts. As we will see in relation with Shaftesbury and opera, he believed that government and culture could influence each other for the better.

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 Ragueuet’s notorious pamphlet *Paralèle 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 Ragueuet, French opera was too meticulous in its musical expression. Ragueuet 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

¹³⁹ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

manner, out of discord itself and owing its greatest beauties to those irregularities which seemed to threaten it with destruction.”¹⁴² 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 extreemly pleasant, and I found it the only just and sensible Work of this Kind.”¹⁴³ However, Shaftesbury objected to Raguenet’s enthusiasm for the Italian stage effects: “he made me a little Blush for him (for I was mightily in his Interest) when he seemd to give into the Machine and Decorations of the Theater.”¹⁴⁴ Shaftesbury concluded that the danger in Italian opera lay in the spectacles that it presented, which were “vulgar, miserable, barbarouse.”¹⁴⁵

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. In a primitive period, 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.¹⁴⁶ For Shaftesbury, the consequences of dramatists yielding to spectacle went beyond the mere decline in dramatic standards in the playhouse –

¹⁴² Francois Raguenet, *A comparison between the French and Italian musick and opera’s* (London: 1709), p. 17.

¹⁴³ McGeary, “Shaftesbury on Opera, Spectacle and Liberty,” *Music & Letters* 74, no. 4 (1993): p. 539.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

opera corrupted by spectacle led to political decline and moral decay. Shaftesbury saw tragedy as the natural consequence of liberty, a means of reassuring and encouraging freedom, and an art suited to maintaining a republic: “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.”¹⁴⁷ Spectacle, on the other hand, kept a populace amused and contented in slavery.¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ If England pursued the path of conquest, spectacle risked overtaking opera, leading to the loss of British liberty. Rather than denouncing opera as a pernicious and foreign influence in Britain, as Dennis did, Shaftesbury emphasized the reciprocal relationship between government, in its different forms, and the arts. Shaftesbury believed that instead of banishing Italian opera from the London stage, opera could be tailored to reflect the ancient Greek tragedy; adopting the simple Italian recitative, as opposed to the florid French recitative, would bring opera closer to the nature and dignity of spoken drama. Combined with purging opera of spectacle, this change would reinforce the republican values of liberty and virtue in Britain.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ McGeary, “Shaftesbury on Opera, Spectacle and Liberty,” p. 539.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 533-4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 534-5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

Shaftesbury saw more potential good in Italian opera than harm and, in the midst of British censure and criticism of opera, ultimately vindicated the genre.

Shaftesbury's reliance on Horace shows the influence of the cultural debate between the Ancients and Moderns. This debate was pervasive in late seventeenth-century England, at times seeming to engage and divide nearly all writers.¹⁵¹ 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.¹⁵² Ancients, on the other hand, revered the ancient Greeks and Romans, who had set the ideal models for every endeavor, particularly for politics and the humanistic arts associated with it (rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy).¹⁵³ In late seventeenth-century England, every writer was concerned with the authority of the classical past, and everyone had to craft a position with respect to antiquity before plunging into modern life. No subject – art, literature, philosophy, science, politics, or religion – could ignore the burdens of the classical period and its models.¹⁵⁴

Ancients were often critics of Italian opera, who disparaged opera in favor of Greek tragedy. In the first century AD, Plutarch had mourned the shift of music from a military and religious 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.¹⁵⁵ Ancients in Restoration England echoed Plutarch's concerns when they attacked Italian opera. Dennis was one of these Ancients:

¹⁵¹ Levine, *Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, p. vii.

¹⁵² Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 95.

¹⁵³ Levine, *Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, p. ix.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹⁵⁵ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, p. 70.

If these Gentlemen love their Country, why do they sacrifice its Interest and Reputation for a Song? Why do they sacrifice these noble Arts, which may bring Profit and Renown to it, to inglorious ones, which threaten it with Danger and Infamy. What Article has Musick in the *Grecian* and *Roman* Greatness?..Now is not the *Opera*, say they, an effeminate Trifle? Has it not, where-ever it comes, emasculated the Minds of Men, and corrupted their Manners? Has it not made good the Accusations of *Plato* and *Cicero*?¹⁵⁶

For Dennis, Italian opera stood in direct contrast to English drama, which, like venerable Greek tragedy, promoted the ‘publick spirit’ and willingness to die for one’s country. Dennis feared that Italian opera and drama could not coexist on the London stage. One would dominate the minds of the public: “I presume to oppose a popular and prevailing Caprice, and to defend the English Stage, which together with our English Liberties has descended to us from our Ancestors, to defend it against that Deluge of Mortal Foes, which have come pouring in from the Continent.”¹⁵⁷ If drama lost the battle with its Italian ‘mortal foe,’ the support that it lent the government would be gone, and the results would be disastrous for the British nation, for “the Declension of Poetry in *Greece* and Ancient Rome was soon follow’d by that of Liberty and Empire.”¹⁵⁸

Yet, for all his literary gestures to classical authors, Dennis was not a staunch Ancient. In his younger days, he had deplored the extremes of both Ancients and Moderns. Throughout his life, he continued the search for a middle way between the two sides, acknowledging ancient precedence but not placing it so high as to preclude modern excellence. He admitted that the Moderns had improved many of the arts. He also believed that the excellence of ancient poetry derived from its moral and religious subjects, and if modern writers drew inspiration from Christianity, they could match the accomplishments of the classical writers.¹⁵⁹ Dennis’ vehement objection to Italian opera resulted not from a stubborn belief in classical superiority, but from his

¹⁵⁶ Dennis, *Essay upon Publick Spirit*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁵⁷ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera’s*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁹ Levine, *Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, p. 91.

belief that the genre of opera, where music and sound reigned, was not suitable for the expression of sense and reason.¹⁶⁰

Addison, despite his frequent forays into humor and satire, also seriously criticized Italian opera for its straying from the dramatic rules of antiquity. As a student at Oxford, Addison had earned distinction in Latin verse, and he was thoroughly knowledgeable and appreciative of the classical authors. He confronted Italian opera with the learning of a trained classicist, and he criticized opera as the Baroque art form of excesses that, in some ways, it was. Opera had its roots in the Renaissance and its classical heritage, but a century of performance practice had added layer upon layer of Baroque extravagance, and classical subjects became popularized rather than accurate.¹⁶¹ Every operatic reform in the history of opera, from the *opera seria* to Gluck, was an attempt to return opera to its classical roots. To this end, Addison suggested the combining of English dramatic plots with Italian music to improve operatic poetry. Addison was thus a Modern in his belief that opera could be reformed.

As we have seen, Shaftesbury used ancient Roman history to comment on contemporary British foreign policy. Shaftesbury, like Addison, was a trained classicist: he inserted Greek and Latin quotes in his *Characteristicks*, and assumed that his readers were learned enough in the classics to understand them.¹⁶² Shaftesbury's cultural politics prompted him to link liberty to arts and letters; he saw Athenian diversity rather than Spartan uniformity as conducive to cultural flowering.¹⁶³ For Shaftesbury, France was the modern analogue of imperial Rome, with its luxurious courts, slavish hierarchy, and push for a universal monarchy.¹⁶⁴ The expensive, false, magnificent, and deformed courtly heritage of the Baroque era in both France and Britain

¹⁶⁰ Levine, *Between the Ancients and the Moderns*, p. 138.

¹⁶¹ Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, pp. 61-2.

¹⁶² Klein, "Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times," p. 533.

¹⁶³ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 148.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

betrayed classical values.¹⁶⁵ 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. Like Addison, Shaftesbury was 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.

It is unknown whether Shaftesbury saw *Rinaldo* performed in London – his poor health prompted his move to southern Italy in the summer of 1711, a few months after *Rinaldo's* premiere, where he died two years later. But considering Shaftesbury's critique of Baroque culture and the importance of the arts to the nation, his opinion of *Rinaldo*, if he had seen it, must have been mixed. While he would have approved of the simpler Italian recitative and musical idioms, as well as Handel's careful attention to the drama, the magnificent spectacle and hierarchical nature of the *opera seria* would have sparked his criticism. Shaftesbury's belief in the nation's influence over culture was a call to maintain control over opera; if Britain maintained its liberty and did not copy France's aspirations for an empire, operatic spectacle would not overtake the public, and Italian opera could flourish in the excellence of ancient tragedy.

In respect to Italian opera, then, Shaftesbury occupies a position between Dennis and Addison. Socially more conservative than Addison, while not approaching the extremism of Dennis, Shaftesbury's focus on cultural politics led him to approve of reformed Italian-style opera. Freed from spectacle and florid music, opera would support the British nation, which would in turn support opera if it maintained its republican values of liberty and virtue.

¹⁶⁵ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 193.

Chapter Four

Handel's Rinaldo

After three years of composing and studying opera in Italy, Handel made his way through Germany and Holland, embarking for England in the autumn of 1710. A year earlier, at the very successful premiere of his opera *Agrippina* in Venice, he had received an invitation to London from the English ambassador there.¹⁶⁶ Whether this provided the main impetus for his move to England is unknown. Handel's eighteenth-century biographer John Mainwaring explained Handel's removal to London by citing "the resolution he had long taken to pass over into England, for the sake of seeing that of London."¹⁶⁷ According to Donald Burrows, Handel's contacts in Italy had raised his hopes for musical employment in London, a city that attracted him primarily because of the Italian opera company at the Haymarket.¹⁶⁸ For whatever reason, Handel arrived in London in late November or early December in 1710. Burrows describes Handel's arrival in London as propitious – his need for an operatic outlet was matched by London's need for an adequate composer of opera.¹⁶⁹ Handel's first London opera, *Rinaldo*, which premiered just a few months after his arrival, was also the first Italian opera composed specifically for the London stage.

Handel arrived in to London amidst upheavals in the city's operatic management. 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

¹⁶⁶ John Walter Hill, *Baroque Music: Music in Western Europe 1580-1750* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 388.

¹⁶⁷ John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the life of the late George Frederic Handel* (London: 1760), p. 72.

¹⁶⁸ Burrows, *Handel*, p. 61.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

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.¹⁷⁰ The first decade 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.¹⁷¹ 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.¹⁷² London's musical culture was volatile indeed when Handel composed *Rinaldo* in late 1710.

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, attending 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.¹⁷³ If well-composed music could be added to London operas, something 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

¹⁷⁰ Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, "Handel's London – the theatres," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, p. 57.

¹⁷¹ Price, "The Critical Decade."

Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, "The Haymarket Opera in 1711," *Early Music* 17, no. 4 (1989): p. 526.

¹⁷² Price, "The Critical Decade," p. 70.

¹⁷³ Knapp, "Eighteenth-Century Opera."

with an excellent cast and spectacular staging effects, ensured a resounding success for *Rinaldo*.¹⁷⁴

The authorship of *Rinaldo* involved two writers. Aaron Hill, the ambitious manager of the Haymarket at the time of Handel's arrival (theatrical finances would later prove his downfall when he was fired after the first two performances of *Rinaldo*), provided the scenario for *Rinaldo*.¹⁷⁵ Hill based his outline on Tasso's sixteenth-century epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata*, a dramatic elaboration of the history of the First Crusade, in which Christian forces led by Godfrey of Bouillon captured Jerusalem from the Saracens.¹⁷⁶ Giacomo Rossi then used Hill's scenario to produce the Italian libretto.¹⁷⁷ According to Rossi in the preface to the published libretto, Handel composed the music for *Rinaldo* in only two weeks.¹⁷⁸ This is probably true, as Handel borrowed extensively from his earlier works.¹⁷⁹

Hill borrowed from Tasso's poem freely: he added characters to fit *opera seria* conventions, emphasized scenic transformations and other stage effects, and inserted fantastic settings of no specified location.¹⁸⁰ The opera opens with Goffredo, captain of the Christian armies, laying siege to Jerusalem, which is defended by the Saracen king Argante. With Goffredo are his brother Eustazio and his daughter Almirena, who loves and is loved by the celebrated Christian knight Rinaldo. Argante's ally and lover is the formidable sorceress Armida, Queen of Damascus. Hill divided the opera's action into three acts. In the first act, Goffredo anticipates the imminent capture of Jerusalem and confirms his promise to Rinaldo of Almirena's hand in marriage if the Christians are victorious. A herald announces the arrival of

¹⁷⁴ Burrows, *Handel*, p. 67.

¹⁷⁵ Milhous and Hume, "Handel's London – the theatres," p. 57.

¹⁷⁶ Anthony Hicks, "Rinaldo," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁷⁷ Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 171-2.

¹⁷⁸ Giacomo Rossi, *Rinaldo, an opera. As it is perform'd at the Queens Theatre in London* (London: 1711), unpaginated preface.

¹⁷⁹ Milhous and Hume, "The Haymarket Opera in 1711," p. 525.

¹⁸⁰ Hicks, "Rinaldo," *Grove Music Online*.

Argante, who emerges from the city to request a three-day truce, which Goffredo grants. Left alone, Argante summons the aid of Armida, who descends from the sky in a chariot drawn by dragons. Armida proposes to secure victory by seducing Rinaldo away from the Christian camp. She proceeds, however, to abduct Almirena from a beautiful grove with singing birds where she and Rinaldo had been exchanging vows of love. A distraught Rinaldo tells Goffredo and Eustazio what has happened, and Eustazio advises Rinaldo to seek help from a local Christian sorcerer. Rinaldo is encouraged and calls on the winds and heavens to help him in his revenge.¹⁸¹

The second act opens on a shore near the Christian sorcerer's dwelling. Goffredo, Eustazio, and Rinaldo see mermaids playing in the water and singing of love's delights, and a siren tries to lure Rinaldo into her boat. Goffredo and Eustazio try to hold Rinaldo back, but he breaks free, boards the boat, and sails out of sight. In Armida's enchanted palace, Almirena laments her captivity and receives unwanted attentions from Argante. Meanwhile, Armida exults in Rinaldo's capture and, captivated by his proud defiance, declares her love for him. Rinaldo scornfully rejects her, and Armida tries to seduce him by taking the form of Almirena. After some initial confusion, Rinaldo again spurns her. Argante then resumes his advances to (he believes) Almirena, promising to free her from Armida's bondage. Unfortunately, it is the disguised Armida he is addressing, and the two part in anger. Armida vows to be revenged on Argante.¹⁸²

The third act opens outside the cave where the Christian sorcerer dwells, at the foot of the threatening mountain on which Armida's palace is situated. The sorcerer tells Goffredo and Eustazio to ascend the mountain, giving them magic wands to overcome the infernal power of

¹⁸¹ Hicks, "Synopsis," in *Handel: Rinaldo*, ed. Christopher Hogwood (New York: Decca Music Group Limited, 2000), p. 19.

Hicks, "Rinaldo," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁸² Hicks, "Synopsis," pp. 19-20.

Hicks, "Rinaldo," *Grove Music Online*.

Armida. Goffredo and Eustazio defeat the monsters that defend the mountain, and they touch the palace gate with their wands. At this, the whole mountain vanishes and Goffredo and Eustazio find themselves clinging to a rock amid a turbulent sea. They climb over the rock, and the scene changes to a garden in Armida's palace, where Armida is threatening to kill Almirena to avenge herself on Rinaldo for his indifference towards her. Goffredo and Eustazio arrive in time to save Almirena; they touch the garden with their magic wands and it disappears, transforming into open country outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Christian heroes rejoice at their reunion and resolve to lead an assault on the city the next morning. The Saracens are also preparing for battle; Argante and Armida are reconciled and review their troops together. The two armies engage in battle, and the Christian army, led by Rinaldo, is victorious. Argante and Armida are captured, and both resolve to embrace the Christian faith and to marry. Goffredo releases them, and everyone proclaims the supreme value of virtue.¹⁸³

Handel's music expresses the drama and emotion of this convoluted plot, and is full of striking invention.¹⁸⁴ Handel had studied opera in Rome as the conventions of Italian *opera seria* were first 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

¹⁸³ Hicks, "Synopsis," pp. 20-1.

Hicks, "Rinaldo," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁸⁴ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 173.

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.¹⁸⁵ Music critics regard Handel as representative of the first generation of *opera seria* composers, and his operas are considered typical *opera seria* works.¹⁸⁶

Hill and Rossi adhered to *opera seria* conventions in the plot and characters they crafted for *Rinaldo*. Handel, within the strict framework of musical *opera seria* conventions, managed to compose a score of exuberance and variety to Hill and Rossi’s libretto. An expanded orchestra, energetic rhythms, and the presence of three duets and six symphonies made up for the clumsy insertions of music from earlier operas, and for the occasionally weak dramatic elements (i.e. Eustazio as a superfluous character whose arias hold up the action, inappropriately-placed arias, and Armida wasting her sensational first entry on her lover, among other dramatically questionable moments in the opera).¹⁸⁷

The emotional depth that Handel’s music brings to the characters is often striking. This is especially apparent with Armida, the most dramatically powerful character of the opera.¹⁸⁸ 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 her rejection 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.¹⁸⁹ After discovering Argante’s disloyalty, Armida ends Act II with her brilliant vengeance aria, ‘Vo’ far

¹⁸⁵ Daniel Hertz and Marita P. McClymonds, “Opera Seria,” *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁸⁶ Hill, *Baroque Music*, p. 387.

¹⁸⁷ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, pp. 172-4.

¹⁸⁸ Burrows, *Handel*, p. 87.

¹⁸⁹ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 174.

guerra.’ Handel punctuated this aria with electrifying solo harpsichord cadenzas, which he performed himself.¹⁹⁰

Armida is Handel’s most dramatically compelling character, but other characters show refined emotional depth as well. Almirena’s lament while being held captive, ‘Lascia ch’io pianga’, conveys intense despair through its simple sarabande tune.¹⁹¹ Rinaldo’s famous lament ‘Cara sposa’, his first music after the shock of Almirena’s abduction, is his finest aria and strikes the note of high tragedy. For the first twenty-four bars, Rinaldo sings unsupported by the bass continuo – the ground had literally been cut from beneath him.¹⁹² Rinaldo’s imploring melody is set against a highly chromatic and emotionally compelling string accompaniment, and the two parts constantly cross.¹⁹³ A late eighteenth-century music historian called this aria “by many degrees the most pathetic song, and with the richest accompaniment, which had been then heard in England.”¹⁹⁴ But this is only one side of Rinaldo’s character – his energy and heroism burst forth in the final aria of Act 1, ‘Venti, turbini.’¹⁹⁵

Handel expanded the London orchestra for *Rinaldo* 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, between four and seven cello/basses, two oboes, three bassoons, one trumpet, and one harpsichord. For the premiere of *Rinaldo*, Handel added three more trumpets, timpani, and three recorders.¹⁹⁶ 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 1, the trumpets and drums do not play again until the Christian march in the middle of Act III,

¹⁹⁰ Burrows, *Handel*, pp. 84, 87.

¹⁹¹ Terence Best, “Handel and the keyboard,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, p. 213.

¹⁹² Price, “English Traditions in Handel’s *Rinaldo*,” in *Handel Tercentenary Collection*, ed. Anthony Hicks and Stanley Sadie (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 129.

¹⁹³ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 177.

¹⁹⁴ Burney, *A general history of music*, p. 224.

¹⁹⁵ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 177.

¹⁹⁶ Stahura, “Handel and the orchestra,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, pp. 239-40.

when the sudden entry of four trumpets results in a triumphant feeling of splendor and exhilaration.¹⁹⁷ 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 sopranino or flageolet trilling like a bird above the other instruments.¹⁹⁸ The oboe, bassoon, and double bass introduction to Armida's 'Ah! crudel' also shows the shrewdness of Handel's scoring with its dramatic and plaintive effect.¹⁹⁹

In Handel's time, the orchestra was merely part of a larger entertainment – it supported the singers and dramatic action of an opera.²⁰⁰ 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 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 skillful dexterity and drew their attention to the activity in the orchestra pit.²⁰¹

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.²⁰² 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

¹⁹⁷ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 179.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁰⁰ Stahura, "Handel and the orchestra," p. 238.

²⁰¹ H. Diack Johnstone, "Handel's London – British musicians and London concert life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, p. 68.

Best, "Handel and the keyboard," p. 216.

²⁰² Hill, *Baroque Music*, p. 389.

A section. The focus on the slow lament underlines the hero's despair at the sudden loss of his beloved, fitting the musical form to the drama.²⁰³ Many of Handel's scenes also include 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.²⁰⁴

Handel's constant attention to the drama raises the question of how John Dennis would have responded to *Rinaldo*. According to Dennis, music corrupted words, undermined poetry, and debased dramatic action; he denied the possibility that all-sung opera could support and improve drama through its orchestration and musical forms. Unfortunately, no evidence of Dennis' response to *Rinaldo* exists, but his vehement denunciation of opera in *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner* would almost certainly have led to his condemnation of Handel's first London opera, despite Handel's careful crafting of the music to fit the drama.²⁰⁵

The libretto of *Rinaldo* alone, however, contained sentiments that would have enflamed Dennis' fears that Italian opera weakened masculinity, a resolve for war, and nationalist feeling. In the first scene of the opera, both Goffredo and Almirena must remind Rinaldo that his focus should be on war with the Saracen enemies, not on marriage. As Almirena warns her betrothed, "la face d' Amore spesso gela nel sen marzial ardore" ("Cupid's flame often cools a passion for war").²⁰⁶ Rinaldo marvels at the power that the blindfold archer wields over him – "Quanto possente sei, bendato arciero!"²⁰⁷ For Dennis, Italian opera had the same power to sap a man's military ardor.

²⁰³ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 177.

²⁰⁴ Hill, *Baroque Music*, p. 389.

²⁰⁵ Dennis, *Essay on the Opera's*.

²⁰⁶ Kenneth Chalmers, "Libretto," in *Handel: Rinaldo*, p. 35.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

The opening of Act II, when the sirens lure Rinaldo into their boat through their seductive song despite the protests of both Goffredo and Eustazio, would have galled Dennis in its depiction of musical passion trumping reason. Goffredo and Eustazio have no sway over the alluring mermaids, whose haunting melody veers seductively between minor and major tonality.²⁰⁸ Goffredo and Eustazio's pleas to Rinaldo are futile:

Goffredo: La tua gloria?

Rinaldo: Ne freme.

Eustazio: Il tuo senno?

Rinaldo: Languisce.

("Your honor?" "It falters." "Your reason?" "It grows weak.")²⁰⁹

Dennis feared that Italian opera would have the same effect as the seductive sirens, weakening and destroying the warrior's resolve in a critical time of war and nation building.

In the end, Rinaldo appears as an ineffectual hero. He must be reminded of his soldierly duties, and he disregards these military obligations in the midst of the seductive sirens. He does not regain his beloved through his own actions, for it is Almirena's father who secures her eventual release.²¹⁰ Rinaldo does not heed Goffredo's call to war and manly valor until after Almirena's rescue: "E tu, Rinaldo, dei, contaminato da tuoi molli amori, col sangue del rubel purgar la spada" ("And you, Rinaldo, corrupted by languid love, must cleanse your sword in enemy blood").²¹¹ Rinaldo's victory over the Saracens finally shows his delayed acknowledgment of a soldier's duty. Yet his effeminate weakness in the first two acts could not have recommended the character of Rinaldo to Dennis, especially in the form of a castrato singing in Italian.

²⁰⁸ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 178.

²⁰⁹ Chalmers, "Libretto," p. 51.

²¹⁰ Price, "English Traditions in Handel's *Rinaldo*," p. 130.

²¹¹ Chalmers, "Libretto," p. 76.

The castrati and other Italian singers, however, 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.²¹² In particular, the famous castrato Nicolini drew large audiences in his portrayal of Rinaldo and fascinated London operagoers. Handel composed Rinaldo's arias specifically for Nicolini, giving the versatile singer showy yet effective melodies.²¹³ 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.²¹⁴

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

The spectacular scenery and machines in *Rinaldo* were also significant in guaranteeing the opera's success. Hill 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.²¹⁵ 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

²¹² Lowell Lindgren, "Handel's London – Italian musicians and librettists," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, p. 83.

²¹³ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 177.

²¹⁴ Richard Steele, *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.* (London: 1754), pp. 1-2.

²¹⁵ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 173.

orchestra, actors, and scenery, then, was significantly large in relation to the space reserved for the audience.²¹⁶ 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.²¹⁷ Anticipation for these elaborate effects had begun two months before the opera's premiere (albeit in a periodical edited by Aaron Hill):

Streams from *Fountains*, which arise,
 'Till they hit the Azure Skies;
Cataract and *bright Cascade*,
 Both the Ears and Eyes invade:
 Nor the *Land* alone, but *Ocean*,
 Will appear in Genuine motion;
 Sometimes peaceful *Calms*, then *Storms*,
 In the most terrific Forms...²¹⁸

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.²¹⁹ 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.²²⁰ 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

²¹⁶ Lowell Lindgren, "The Staging of Handel's Operas in London," in *Handel Tercentenary Collection*, p. 93.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²²⁰ Stahura, "Handel's Haymarket Theater," p. 104.

they were on the mountain, as singing was generally confined to the front of the stage.²²¹ Handel thus crafted his music to complement the scenery and staging.

As Hill noted in the preface to the published libretto of *Rinaldo*, he had “resolv’d to spare no Pains or Cost, that might be requisite to make those Entertainments [operas] flourish in their proper Grandeur.”²²² This magnificence applied to the costumes as well as the staging; Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume estimate that the costumes for *Rinaldo* cost approximately 305 pounds. Hill purchased the finest fabrics for these costumes, ordering expensive blue peeling satin, cherry-colored velvet, white and silver tissue, and black silk plush in the months leading up to *Rinaldo*’s premiere.²²³ Hill’s freedom with the opera finances, while no doubt producing a magnificent spectacle with first-rate singers, would lead to his downfall as manager and spark controversy over the method of collecting subscription money in White’s chocolate house.²²⁴

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.²²⁵ In their attempt to render Italian opera ridiculous, both writers delighted in pointing out the inconsistencies and excesses of the production. Addison disparaged the mixing of real with artificial elements on the stage; this criticism prompted 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.

²²¹ Stahura, “Handel’s Haymarket Theater,” p. 107.

²²² Rossi, *Rinaldo, an opera*, unpaginated preface.

²²³ Milhous and Hume, “The Haymarket Opera in 1711,” pp. 531-2.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 534.

²²⁵ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 173.

This strange dialogue awakened my curiosity so far, that I immediately bought the opera, by which means I perceived the sparrows were to act the part of singing-birds in a delightful grove; though upon a nearer enquiry, I found the sparrows put the same trick upon the audience, that Sir Martin Mar-all practiced upon his mistress: for though they flew in sight, the music proceeded from a concert of flagelets and bird-calls which were planted behind the scenes...

...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.²²⁶

Addison also drew his readers' attention to the discrepancies and confused mythological mixing 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."²²⁷ Not to mention why both characters were in Jerusalem during the First Crusade. For Addison, these discrepancies offended credibility and weakened the plot.

Despite this criticism – perhaps even because of it – Londoners thronged to 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.²²⁸ Curtis Price suggests that *Rinaldo's* success can also be explained by Hill's inclusion of English dramatic traditions in the libretto and 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

²²⁶ Addison, *The papers of Joseph Addison*, Vol. 1, pp. 295-8.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

²²⁸ Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, p. 181.

the two works are striking – in both, a beautiful and vengeful sorceress is at war with a morally superior order and, through her magic, ensnares an ineffectual hero from the enemy’s side with whom she falls in love, thus alienating her ally.²²⁹

By mixing national musical traditions, Hill made a self-conscious attempt to change the course of both English and Italian opera in London. Hill dedicated the published libretto to Queen Anne and urged her to support *Rinaldo*’s musical endeavor, for “‘twere a publick Misfortune, shou’d Opera’s for want of due Encouragement, grow faint and languish: My little Fortune and my Application stand devoted to a Trial, whether such a noble Entertainment, in its due Magnificence, can fail of living, in a City, the most capable of *Europe*, both to relish and support it.” Hill underlined the Englishness of *Rinaldo*: “This Opera is a Native of your Majesty’s Dominions, and was consequently born your Subject.” Hill even expressed his endeavor “to see the *English* Opera more splendid than her Mother, the *Italian*.”²³⁰ *Rinaldo* was an Italian *opera seria*, performed in Italian by Italian singers, yet Hill saw himself as contributing to a distinctly English work and promoting a uniquely English style of all-sung opera. His gamble would fail: his laxity with the opera finances led to his dismissal as Haymarket manager after *Rinaldo*’s first two nights, and Handel continued to compose Italian language *opera serie* for the Haymarket. However, the English traditions of spectacle, plot, and character that Hill managed to insert into *Rinaldo* probably eased Italian opera’s entry into the musical life of London.²³¹

William Weber suggests that *Rinaldo*’s success in England also derived from Handel’s ability to navigate the polarized political culture of London. For example, Handel mingled easily with both Whigs and Tories; this was a significant accomplishment, as theater managers were

²²⁹ Price, “English Traditions in Handel’s *Rinaldo*,” p. 123.

²³⁰ Rossi, *Rinaldo, an opera*, unpaginated preface.

²³¹ Price, “English Traditions in Handel’s *Rinaldo*,” pp. 120-1.

almost entirely Whigs, while subscribers included prominent Tories.²³² Burrows notes that Handel had a talent for gravitating to 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 of his music for Queen Anne on her birthday. In front of state officers, foreign ministers, and the nobility, Nicolini and other Italian singers of the Haymarket sang an Italian dialogue. Neither this performance nor Hill's request for the queen's support resulted in direct royal patronage; Italian opera remained a commercial enterprise. Nonetheless, according to the newspapers, Handel's performance for the queen greatly pleased her, which could only bode well for the premiere in two-weeks time of his *Rinaldo*, the first Italian opera composed for the London stage.²³³

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 upon Italian opera and the threat 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?"²³⁴ 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 in *Rinaldo*. This first edition was 65 pages long and contained the

²³² William Weber, "Handel's London – social, political and intellectual contexts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, p. 50.

²³³ Burrows, *Handel*, p. 66.

²³⁴ Dennis, *Essay upon Publick Spirit*, p. 22.

overture and *coro* in full score and all the arias in short score.²³⁵ 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.²³⁶ Walsh’s later editions of *Rinaldo*’s music, and his publications of many of Handel’s future operas, continued his dissemination of Italian opera music to the larger public, offering audience members the pleasure of prolonging 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.

Despite British authors’ attacks on Italian opera in the years leading up to Handel’s arrival in London, *Rinaldo* was a success. Its excellent music, stunning visual spectacles, famed castrati singers, and underlying English traditions ensured its popular appeal and its many revivals in the years to come. *Rinaldo*’s success confirmed the fears of London’s literati: a foreign opera had infiltrated the nation, and its ridiculous excesses did not halt elite patronage or middle-class fascination. Spurred to critical commentary by the 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.

²³⁵ Smith, *A Bibliography of the Musical Works Published by John Walsh*, p. 116.

²³⁶ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 203.

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 verses are reminiscent of Steele or Dennis, not of a 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 Inchant'd with thy Song.²³⁷

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."²³⁸ 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

²³⁷ Knapp, "Aaron Hill and the London theatre of his time," *Händel-Jahrbuch* 37 (1991): p. 180.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

Academy of Music. While he produced many more works of *opera seria* for the London stage, *Rinaldo* remained the most performed and loved.²³⁹ But in 1732, Hill urged Handel to turn his compositional talents to revitalize 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...”²⁴⁰ 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. The fourth Earl 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.”²⁴¹ Thomas McGeary suggests that the letter to which Handel was referring was Shaftesbury’s 1709 letter to Pierre Coste concerning Ragueneau. 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

²³⁹ Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, p. 183.

²⁴⁰ Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), p. 299.

²⁴¹ McGeary, “Shaftesbury, Handel, and Italian Opera,” *Händel-Jahrbuch* 32 (1986): p. 99.

while finding a place in London musical life for Handel, his Italian operas, and his later English oratorios.

In the early eighteenth century, Italian opera entered England at a critical time politically, socially, and culturally. British writers never opposed Italian opera solely for its music, but in response to its relation to the larger political and cultural context. John Dennis, Joseph Addison, and the third Earl of Shaftesbury each reveal different fears that crystallized in their arguments against Italian opera. Dennis, the most vehement of the three critics, resorted to xenophobia in his extreme political condemnation of foreign opera. Addison encouraged his middle-class readers to laugh at, rather than attend, the lavish operatic productions sponsored by the elite in their struggle to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. And Shaftesbury urged the culturally refined British gentleman to resist operatic spectacle and hoped Britain would remain a free and republican nation in which opera could develop as a venerable art form. The arguments of these authors illuminate the political and cultural tension that would come to define emerging Enlightenment thought.

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.²⁴²

²⁴² Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp. 396-7.

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