



REVIEW: BOOK

## Coquettes, Wives, and Widows: Gender Politics in French Baroque Opera and Theater

Marcie Ray

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It is generally accepted that opera treats women badly. Since the English translation of Catherine Clément's *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press) appeared in 1988, academic discourse has grappled with the way canonical works oppress, abuse and frequently 'kill off' the women who stand at their musical centres. In recent years, and particularly in wake of the #MeToo movement, increasing attention has been paid to the sexual violence inherent in so many operas, and the ways in which these dramatic works seem to stand against the feminist ideals advanced throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Marcie Ray's *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows: Gender Politics in French Baroque Opera and Theater* is not a book about sexual violence or death in opera – indeed, many of the works she touches on end in marriage. Yet in discussing these works, with their ostensibly happy conclusions, Ray catalogues a multitude of insidious ways in which baroque drama enacted the subjugation of women. Rooted in fears about the changing roles of women in French society, these works dramatized regressive ideas about how women should behave, confining them to approved roles in patriarchal societies or punishing their so-called crimes with humiliation and exile. Ray's monograph thus contributes to the existing discourse on the oppression of women in opera, demonstrating that even without a tragic, violent end, dramas can entrench patriarchal and misogynistic ideas about women and actively work to silence the narratives women create for themselves.

Studies of French baroque opera generally centre on the *tragédie en musique*, in which characters like Sangaride in Lully's *Atys* (1676) allow duty, rather than love, to guide their actions. Unsurprisingly, these tragic genres are often marked by the death of women – Sangaride herself is murdered by a temporarily insane *Atys*. Turning away from the *tragédie*, Ray focuses on comic genres that were performed in various theatres across Paris. These works were populated by average humans, rather than kings and gods, and featured plots in which the pursuit of love, not political power or glory, was often the primary driving force. Within these comic works, Ray identifies four types of women that the drama establishes as dangerous to the existing social order and in need of correction or control. Chapter 1 centres on the coquette, flirtatious and unattached, who pursued men for sexual pleasure, financial benefit or social ambition (or perhaps all three). The second chapter introduces the widow, who gained an unexpected – though limited – independence following the death of her husband. Chapter 3 examines women who chose to separate from their husbands, thus challenging the idea of 'happily ever after'. Finally, chapter 4 introduces the indifferent women, those characters who do not seek out love but must be won over – occasionally by force – before they can be convinced to participate in a romantic relationship.

One of the most compelling aspects of Ray's study is its historical grounding in the French social milieu and the changing role of women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Women in France enjoyed considerably expanded social powers and freedoms in the baroque era, particularly through social structures such as the salon, in which a woman could achieve greater equality with, and even authority over, her male peers. As Ray argues, the theatre presented an important means of understanding – but also controlling – the new roles women were creating for themselves. As a result of this historical focus, the number of dramatic works that Ray discusses is relatively small. Nevertheless, the links she draws between a changing French society and the dramatic works it produced are persuasive. In chapter 1, for instance, Ray explains how the seventeenth-century coquette symbolized class instability. This interloper sought to use her feminine wiles to infiltrate the upper classes, convinced of her ability to mingle with aristocracy while unaware of her own inadequacies.

The evidence Ray provides is richly contextual. Rameau's *Platée* exemplifies the coquette, the frog-woman so sure of her own beauty and social graces that she believes Jupiter, the king of the gods, is madly in love with her. While the repeated 'Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?' of the frog chorus alone would have been a humorous aural representation of Platée's swampy origins, for example, Ray also notes that different pronunciations of the word following either aristocratic or bourgeois norms could have been used to highlight her lofty social ambitions further. Throughout the text, Ray paints a convincing picture linking dramatic works to contemporary events. It seems more than coincidence that *Platée* premiered at the marriage of the Dauphin in 1745, the very event at which Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, the daughter of a non-noble financier, officially became the mistress of King Louis XV. While Poisson – better known as Madame de Pompadour – succeeded where Platée failed in winning the heart of a king, Ray points out that the kind of mockery inflicted upon Platée would follow Pompadour for the rest of her life. While one would assume that a biting song describing a woman with 'yellow and fishlike skin' was referring to Platée, many understood it to be about Pompadour herself.

The works Ray examines in her study feature the output of all of Paris's major theatres: the Académie Royale de Musique, the Comédie-Italienne, the Comédie-Française and the *théâtres de la foire*, the fair theatres that would evolve into the Opéra-Comique. In addition to exposing the reader to a wider variety of dramatists than one would otherwise encounter in a study of a single theatre, this broad scope allows Ray to examine how the different types of audience for each venue affected their theatrical offerings. As the author notes, 'the genres in Paris's four public theatres had contrasting political stances with regard to women and love; therefore, each proposed to solve the "problem" of progressive women in different ways' (9). At the Comédie-Italienne, the elderly widow was often mocked for chasing inappropriate love interests or showing financial recklessness in her newfound independence. In Desporte's *La Veuve coquette* (1721), Flaminia pursues her daughter's admirer, too excited by the prospect of marrying the unwilling suitor to realize that the contract she signs not only grants the young lovers permission to wed, but also gives them the vast majority of her fortune. At the Comédie-Italienne, there was no place for widows like Flaminia in society, only in exile from it. Dramas at the Opéra-Comique, which catered more to the lower classes, were kinder to the widow. In Lesage, d'Orneval and Autreau's one-act opera *Les Amours de Nanterre* (1718), Madame Thomas ends up remarried, albeit to the unconventional choice of her former valet, who she believes will protect her assets. A happy ending, but one in which the widow's continued participation in society is dependent on her once more submitting to the authority of her husband.

The underlying theme of subjugation is most prominent in Ray's final chapter on the indifferent woman, the character who forswears and avoids love, yet is pursued until she finally submits to her insistent lover. Here we can see most clearly how the attempts to force women into cultural narratives that serve men have the potential to cause harm to women. Violence and rape are real threats to the indifferent woman, even as her protests are dismissed as fake resistance, a baroque enactment of 'no means yes'. But while the indifferent woman faced the most obvious danger, she exists on the

same sliding scale of oppression that all of Ray's dramatic types were subject to, a scale weighted by the dramatists' desire to control the actions, options and future of women both on and off the stage. The dramatic outcomes of these stories were meant to demonstrate the proper place of women in society – be they coquettes, wives or widows – and the punishments they faced if they refused to conform. Ray's focus on these varying character types and the different means by which their progressive impulses were curbed highlights the degree to which feminist issues remain a necessary component of academic dialogue. As Ray highlights in her epilogue, when faced with a changing society, 'these dramatists wrested narratives away from women and weaponized them in a defence of the status quo' (105). It is a status quo we, as scholars of music and culture, must continue to recognize, and dismantle, even in its most tuneful forms, and Ray has provided an excellent example of how this kind of work can be done.

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