

The Endymion Myth in Early French Opera

by
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One of the most curious of the Hellenistic myths showed the goddess most often associated with chastity, Diana, falling in love with a mortal man, Endymion, who was usually described as a shepherd or hunter and who spent the majority of his life asleep in a cave. There had been passing references to Endymion going back to classical Greece, but his immortal beloved was originally another moon goddess, Selene (known in Roman times as Luna). Not until the Renaissance would poets, painters and musicians become intrigued with the paradoxical nature of the later version of the story, in which Diana and Luna were fused into a single goddess. During the reign of Louis XIV there were two machine plays and five operas devoted to the Endymion myth, as well as an episode in a huge court ballet. I plan to examine several of the operatic treatments, to try to ascertain why this particular story was so popular at the time and how these works, now totally forgotten, contributed to the development of early French opera.¹

The main area where those two questions come together is that of operatic genre. As French opera got off the ground during the second half of the seventeenth century it took two different forms, related to the spoken dramatic genres of pastoral and tragedy. Pastoral operas, most often referred to as *pastorales héroïques*, were set throughout in a rustic locale, featured no kings or political elements, usually involved no danger of death for the characters, and were exclusively concerned with the love story. They could be

¹ For a general history of the myth in modern literatures, especially in England, see Le Conte. See also the introduction to my edition of Françoise Pascal's machine tragicomedy entitled *Endymion*, in which I discuss French versions of the myth prior to hers.

in either three or five acts, though one-act operas could be used as *divertissements* for private performances. The qualifier “héroïque” meant nothing more than the presence of a mythological hero or deity; actions of a genuinely heroic character were deemed unnecessary. All of the Endymion operas were designated as pastorals by their creators².

What were the implications of treating the Endymion story under the rubric of pastoral, rather than tragedy? Perhaps the most obvious was the choice of decor: no palaces or even cities, but only forests and caves, thus emphasizing the symbolic associations of the hero as sleeper or recluse and of the heroine as huntress. A second consequence is extreme simplicity of plot, with no external obstacles. The main difficulties that the lovers face are their extreme bashfulness and the extreme difference in status between goddess and mortal. A third consequence is the total absence of political or religious constraints. Unlike, for example, Gabriel Gilbert’s spoken machine tragedy from 1657 entitled *Les Amours de Diane et d’Endimion*, the operatic versions feature no other deity with the power to issue orders to the goddess or threats to her beloved. Diane is thus free to yield to love as she sees fit.

The first of these operas, likewise entitled *Les Amours de Diane et d’Endimion*, was intended for the wedding festivities of Monsieur (that is, Philippe d’Orléans, the king’s brother) with the Palatine Princess Elisabeth-Charlotte in November 1671. The librettist, Henri Guichard, and the composer, Jean Granouillet, sieur de Sablières, both in Monsieur’s entourage, had just purchased two-thirds of the opera *privilège* from Pierre Perrin and thus became official purveyors of royal entertainments. For unknown reasons, the king chose instead to stage the work at Versailles several weeks before Madame’s arrival. However, Madame probably got to see it at its second performance at Saint-Germain on February 18 of the following year (Brooks and Yarrow

² For a comparison of pastoral and tragic operatic genres in France, see Kintzler, especially 305–17. The most complete study to date of the former genre is Powers.

71–72). The reason for that revival is that when the king subsequently ordered Guichard and Sablières to compose a new opera for the carnival season, they did not have enough time to do so. Instead, they merely added some new material to their earlier opera and changed its title to *Le Triomphe de l'amour*, with the protagonists' names now relegated to a subtitle. Guichard published his libretto under the new title, but the music was never printed and is now lost. There were no subsequent revivals, which was hardly surprising, since when Jean-Baptiste Lully took control of the Académie Royale de Musique he was careful to ban all pieces written by his rivals.

Guichard and Sablières's designation of their opera as a pastoral is significant for several reasons. First of all, it shows that they were incapable of radical innovation and could only work within preexisting patterns. It would take the genius of Lully and Quinault to devise the alternative form of *tragédie lyrique*, the first example of which, *Cadmus et Hermione*, would not appear until two years later. In 1671 the only previous full-length genuine opera in the French language was Perrin and Cambert's *Pomone*, which similarly featured a minimal love plot, classical deities with unlimited free time, a rustic setting, and a handful of special effects. Both works use *récitatif* sparingly, leaving ample room for dance episodes and for vocal set pieces, which tend to be short and simple.

The second reason for conceiving the work as a pastoral is the total lack of plot conflict. No external obstacle separates the lovers, who do not speak to each other until Act III. In fact, Diane never sets eyes on Endimion until the hunt that occurs offstage just prior to that act. The hero has seen the goddess before but does not fall in love with her until Cupid coerces him into doing so, shooting darts at him and making his assistants bind the youth with magical chains. The other characters all function as spokespersons for love; no one tries to discourage the protagonists, let alone interfere with their budding passion. Thus, Diane is pressured to yield to love by no fewer than two confidantes, two fellow deities and multiple choruses, while Endimion is encouraged to hope by a

confidant and the echo. Internal conflict is present but perfunctory. The hero spends only about a dozen lines in Act II worrying whether his love will be requited and whether his passion for a goddess might seem presumptuous. In Act III Diane spends about forty lines attempting to stifle her love in the name of reason and pride, but her resolve crumbles immediately when Endymion arrives. The pains connected with love could hardly be briefer in duration. In fact, the same could be said of the main plot itself, which occupies a mere 308 lines out of total of 571.

A third justification for the choice of genre was that it could justify the inclusion of a comic subplot filling the two *intermèdes*. Actually, these brief scenes barely constitute a plot at all: three satyrs compete for the love of a shepherdess, who despises all of them, and manages to escape from them when they try to use force. In the following act the frustrated satyrs decide to renounce love and join the worship of Bacchus, who arrives in person to welcome them, but l'Amour chases them away, proclaiming his superior power. The comic episodes are thematically linked to the main plot in that one of the satyrs predicts that Diane will soon fall in love despite her initial defiance, and they show how the desertion of love leads to punishment. That audiences of the time could accept the mixing of heroic and comic characters in pastoral works but not in tragic works would become apparent before the end of the decade, as Quinault and Lully, bowing to intense pressure, would drop the practice after their first few *tragédies lyriques*.

The incessant praising of love, together with the constant badgering of the protagonists to yield to it, might suggest an irresponsible, even immoral and hedonistic perspective, but such is not really the case. Guichard and Sablières presented the story of Diana and Endymion under its most innocuous allegorical guise: namely, the need for a supremely virtuous princess to accept the need to marry and try to love the husband chosen for her. The incongruity of making the goddess of chastity falling in love thus serves as a hyperbolic compliment for the bride at a royal wedding, while the other element in the myth (i.e., the fact that the goddess's beloved is a mere mortal) is deemphasized. After all, the younger

brother of Louis XIV had little in common with Endymion, being of royal blood, a recent widower, and openly gay! However, the solo priest's declaration that Endimion is no longer "mortal" might conceivably have been meant as a subtle hint that Monsieur was expected to be fully heterosexual in the future. The opera ends with an elaborate wedding ceremony held in Diane's own temple and presided over by a group of singing and dancing priests. At its conclusion the three deities who have already participated in the opera, namely, l'Amour, Pan and Flore, arrive with additional singers and dancers. L'Amour receives a crown in honor of his victory, whereupon he crowns the two newlyweds. Curiously, although Endimion gets to marry a goddess, it is unclear whether he is allowed to join the ranks of the gods. This ambiguity presumably results from the haste with which the opera was written; Louis gave only two weeks' notice. Moreover, as John Powell has conclusively shown, the final scene was strongly influenced by the concluding divertissement of Molière, Corneille, Quinault and Lully's *Psyché*, premiered the preceding January, at the end of which Jupiter formally admits the mortal heroine into the ranks of the Olympians (Powell 307–09).

The shortest and simplest of all the operatic versions is the one-act *Diane et Endimion* by Louise-Geneviève de Saintonge, commissioned by the Duc de Lorraine and staged at the Opéra de Nancy in January of 1711. Henry Desmarest, a prolific composer of stage works and superintendent of music to the duke, supplied the music. Unfortunately, the score is lost, but the libretto survives because Saintonge published it in 1714 in a collection of her poetry. Leaving aside the prologue, devoted to praises of the duke, the nine short scenes of the opera present the story in a most rudimentary form. The lovers, when they come face to face for the first time, eventually overcome their timidity and declare their mutual love, whereupon Diane transports her lover to an enchanted garden in order to enjoy eternal pleasures. The sole innovative feature is the reason for the goddess's descent. A monster is currently ravaging the region, possibly meant as an allegory for the interminable War of the Spanish Succession. In his opening aria Endimion compares his frustrated love to the monster's cruelty. No

sooner has a chorus of hunters implored Diane's aid when she arrives on earth to assure them of her protection and to participate in the hunt, and it is she who slays the monster. Curiously, in Gilbert's play, where there is likewise a monster wreaking havoc on the land, it is the hero who slays it, thus proving his worthiness of the goddess's love. Is it a coincidence that it was a female playwright who showed a woman, and not a man, performing such an archetypical act of heroism? To be sure, Sainctonge, the first French woman to write opera libretti, was very proud of her sex, though one wonders how much freedom she would have had in a court commission.

It is not clear why Sainctonge and Desmarest, or perhaps the duke, chose the Endymion story. If the occasion for the commission was the holiday season known as the Twelve Days of Christmas (and I have not discovered any special event at the court of Lorraine at that particular moment), then why evoke the love of a goddess and a mortal? Perhaps the fact that the Endymion myth had already been used in a number of previous ballets and operas at the French court was the deciding factor. But there is another curious coincidence: the duke's wife just happened to be Elisabeth-Charlotte d'Orléans, daughter of the very Madame in whose honor the 1671 opera was composed. Might the later librettist and composer have been familiar with the earlier work? And is it just a further coincidence that both prologues begin with the god Pan summoning a troupe of singers and dancers? (In the first opera Pan orders a group of fauns, dryads and hamadryads to entertain the goddess Diane; in the second opera he summons les Jeux to praise the duke, protector of the arts.) In the absence of facts one can only speculate. In any case, the duke must have appreciated the opera since he had it revived at the Opéra de Nancy in 1715 (Collin 144).

The longest and most complex of the French Endymion operas comes from the pen of a far more famous author, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle. His libretto entitled *Endimion* was composed around 1692 for the amusement of an unnamed noblewoman. Alain Niderst conjectures that the "beauté" in question was Louise-Françoise de Bourbon, daughter of Louis XIV and Mme de

Montespan, known at court as Mme la Duchesse, who had a series of liaisons with men of lower rank (Niderst 157–60). If this is correct, then Fontenelle was using the myth in its less virtuous allegorical guise, hinting at and excusing a queen or royal princess who loves beneath her station. The “pastorale héroïque” designation is especially appropriate for this reading of the myth, since it is in the overtly anti-realistic world of pastoral, far removed from real-life social and political constraints, that such extreme misalliances can most easily win acceptance. Perhaps because the work alluded to court scandals, the author made no effort to find a composer for it, even though he had just seen his two *tragédies lyriques* staged at the Opéra. The text would sit in his desk drawer for nearly four decades, until François Colin de Blamont set it to music. The opera had its premiere in 1731, though with only limited success; it stayed in the repertoire only from May 17 to May 31 and was never revived.

Faced with the probably self-imposed challenge of expanding the story to fill five acts, Fontenelle invented a two-pronged misunderstanding occasioned by the presence of two scorned lovers: the rustic god Pan loves Diane and hopes to win her through his perseverance, while the shepherdess Ismène, betrothed to Endimion by agreement of their fathers, loves her fiancé but has been consistently rebuffed by him. It is because the two protagonists are so incredibly timid and modest that they cannot bring themselves to admit their true feelings and are only too willing to surmise that someone else has won the other’s heart. The confusion, reminiscent of a long tradition of pastoral dramas, begins in Act II: Endimion, unable to declare his love, displays his affection and respect for the goddess by enlisting the help of his fellow shepherds in erecting a temple in her honor; Diane, appearing at the dedication of that temple, is likewise too bashful to declare her feelings openly and asks the shepherds to shun love but not denounce it — a notable softening of her normal position. She hopes that Endimion will interpret her remarks as an encouragement, but instead her remarks are repeated to Pan, who at once becomes convinced that he is the object of the goddess’s favor. Endimion, thinking that Pan has interpreted Diane’s

statement correctly, goes wild with jealousy and resolves to cure himself of his passion by marrying *Ismène*. But since in the interim that shepherdess, frustrated by *Endimion*'s rejection of her, has joined the troupe of *Diane*'s nymphs, he must plead with the goddess herself to get the girl released. Speaking to *Diane* face to face for the very first time, *Endimion* makes that request, declaring that he loves *Ismène*. *Diane*, shocked and hurt, replies only that she will think the matter over. Next, confronted with a triumphant *Pan* who is convinced that his love is requited, she decisively rejects him. *Pan* is so indignant at her treatment of him that he vows to stifle his passion; he then disappears from the opera. In Act IV, when the protagonists meet again, *Diane* announces that she has granted his request: he will be able to marry *Ismène*. *Endimion*, horrified at this prospect, now admits that he has used *Ismène* to cover his real passion, and he blurts out enough of his feelings to make it clear who his true beloved is. *Diane* is immensely relieved to learn that *Endimion* loves her and not her rival, but before she can respond she is summoned, in her role as moon goddess, to mount her chariot and light up the night. Again believing the worst, the poor shepherd thinks that *Diane* left him so abruptly because of her anger at his inadvertent declaration of love and resolves to go off to a solitary place and die. That night, *Diane* is so overcome with her passion that she takes time away from her mission to visit *Endimion* in his cave as he sleeps. When he awakens she has no choice but to admit her feelings for him, leading to the long-delayed love duet³.

It has taken three meetings of the lovers spread over three acts to achieve the same result that the other versions accomplished in

³ It is quite possible that *Fontenelle* knew one or both of the spoken plays from 1657. Both works add a rivalry episode to the original myth, but there is only one rival per play. In *Gilbert*'s version *Apollon*, who loves *Diane* and wants to marry her, persecutes and finally murders his rival, while in *Françoise Pascal* the hero is also loved by the essentially passive priestess, *Sthénobée*. However, neither of these plays presents any clear similarity to *Fontenelle*'s plot.

one. Moreover, the plot complications serve to make the characters less admirable and less likable, since no one displays much courage or magnanimity. The worst moment comes in Act III with the hero's threats of vengeance, which conflict too jarringly with his normally timid nature. Moreover, as his confidant pointedly reminds him, he has no justification to speak of revenge since the goddess has never made any promises to him. The best he can do later on to excuse his bad behavior is to invoke temporary insanity.

The final scene in Fontenelle's original libretto is arguably the most charming in his entire dramatic corpus. Diane summons her court, consisting of all the mythological characters ever metamorphosed into stars, to celebrate her love, while at the same time concealing it from the daylight hours. This visually splendid denouement, featuring dancers in ethereal costumes, would fit admirably with the traditional version of the myth according to which Endymion either slept eternally or else spent his days in a cave, emerging only at night to contemplate the moon. But apparently this ending was insufficiently grandiose for the Opéra, because when the libretto was finally set to music, Fontenelle replaced it with a more conventional finale: when Diane wants to restrict knowledge of her love to the cave, the night and silence, l'Amour descends and insists on a public display of his victory. He changes the cave into a brilliant garden where the lovers will be able to enjoy each other's company forever, though presumably with some degree of privacy (Powers 342–43).

One final aspect of the "pastorale héroïque" label needs to be considered. Right from the start it became a convention in French opera to include in each act a full-fledged *divertissement* where the chorus and ballet take center stage. In a *tragédie lyrique* one would expect at most one pastoral episode contrasting with more formal courtly dance sequences, but in an explicitly pastoral opera all the dance sequences must by definition fit the rustic setting. How do the librettist and composer avoid monotony? Guichard cleverly contrasted serious and comic balletic sequences. The former involve the followers of the woodland deities Pan and Flore, as well as those of l'Amour, consisting of *putti* and amorous dreams.

The latter consist either of pantomime scenes or grotesque dances involving fairies, dragons, drunken woodcutters and followers of Bacchus. Fontenelle, although he featured a comic dance sequence in the prologue (not intended for performance), used different categories of dancers in each of the divertissements and showed great skill in making these episodes advance the plot. Thus, in Act I Diane's nymphs celebrate Ismène's entry into their ranks; in Act II the shepherds welcome the goddess to the inauguration of her new temple; in Act III Pan orders the fauns to celebrate what he believes to be his betrothal to Diane; in Act IV the hours who summon the goddess to drive the moon chariot first dance in her honor. This arrangement allows for further contrast in that the dance sequences in Acts II and III are for men while those in Acts I and IV are for women; the full corps de ballet comes together only for the finale.

In conclusion, the Endymion myth seems to have owed much of its popularity to the fact that it epitomized one of the key components of pastoral ideology: in an idealized fantasy land where love is the primary occupation and most of the standard human problems are banished, the consummation of a passion between a goddess and a mortal symbolizes the achievement of absolute freedom and happiness. The fact that the lovers are virtuous, constant, well matched and free to make their own choices means that we can identify with them without reserve and derive vicarious satisfaction from the happy ending. If, on the other hand, the librettists and composers were to emphasize the difference in social rank and place the story in a more realistic setting, the love affair would have to end tragically, as it does in Gilbert's spoken play. In that sense, the 1672 title adopted by Guichard and Sablières, *Le Triomphe de l'amour*, takes on ironic significance: love's triumph can be guaranteed only in the world of make-believe and wish fulfilment. It also helps explain why *pastorale héroïque* was, in the view of many artists and patrons, the most logical choice for a purely happy court celebration. To M.

Jourdain's oft-quoted question "Pourquoi toujours des bergers?" we can thus respond, "Pourquoi pas?"⁴

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⁴ Of the two remaining Endymion operas, both music and text are lost for Desmarest's earlier operatic version, entitled *Endymion*, produced at Versailles on March 16, 1682. As for *Diane et Endymion* by Anne Danican-Philidor with text by Abbé Morel, produced at Marly on December 16, 1698 and which apparently survives only in manuscript form, there is a plot synopsis and brief discussion in Powers, 335–37

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