

# The Historical Context of Handel's *Semele*

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### Declarations and Statements:

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

None of the material in this thesis has been submitted for any other qualification.

This thesis does not exceed the word limit of 80,000 words,  
as stipulated by the Faculty of History.

A summary of the thesis is given on pages 4-5 of the introduction.

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## Abbreviations

Congreve, CW:	Congreve, W., <i>The works of Mr. William Congreve; in three volumes. Containing his plays and poems</i> (London, 1710)
GHB:	<i>Göttinger Händel-Beiträge</i>
EM:	<i>Early Music</i>
HHB I:	Baselt, B. (ed.), <i>Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis: Bühnenwerke</i> (Händel-Handbuch, Band I, Leipzig, 1978)
HHB II:	Baselt, B. (ed.), <i>Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis: Oratorische Werke, Vocale Kammermusik Kirchenmusik</i> (Händel-Handbuch, Band II, Leipzig, 1984)
HHB IV:	Eisen, W. & Eisen, M. (eds), <i>Dokumente zu Leben und Schaffen</i> (Händel Handbuch, Band IV, Leipzig, 1985)
HJB:	<i>Händel Jahrbuch</i>
HWV:	<i>Verzeichnis der Werke Georg Friedrich Händel</i> (as set out in <i>HHB I-III</i> , ed. B. Baselt).
ML:	<i>Music and Letters</i>
MQ:	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
MT:	<i>The Musical Times</i>
New Grove Online:	<i>New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians Online</i> , ed. L. Macy < <a href="http://www.grovemusic.com">http://www.grovemusic.com</a> >
ODNB Online:	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online</i> , Oxford University Press, 2004 < <a href="http://www.oxforddnb.com">http://www.oxforddnb.com</a> >

Every effort has been made to give quotations from *Semele* in full the first time they are discussed. For subsequent citations of the same text, larger quotations are given in the footnotes if essential, but otherwise the reference alone has been given. The orthography of the sources has been retained without modernisation.

## The Plot of Semele

### *Dramatis Personae*

Jupiter, king of the gods	Juno, queen of the gods
Cadmus king of Thebes	Iris, attendant on Juno
Athamas, a prince of Bœotia	Semele, daughter to Cadmus
Somnus, god of sleep	Ino, sister to Semele
Apollo	

Chorus of priests and augurs  
Chorus of loves and zephyrs  
Chorus of nymphs and swains

Act One opens with the marriage of Semele to Athamas.<sup>1</sup> Auspicious flames rising from the altar indicate that Juno assents to the union. Semele, temporising, is urged by Athamas and by her father, Cadmus, to go through with the ceremony. In an aside, she reveals that she is in love with Jupiter and she prays to him either to rescue her, or to reconcile her mind and heart to the marriage. Meanwhile, her sister Ino is secretly in love with Athamas herself. As Cadmus, Athamas and Semele try to persuade her to explain her unhappiness, the wedding is interrupted by Jupiter's thunder, lightning and rain. Juno rekindles the altar flame but Jupiter's rain extinguishes it. Another burst of thunder scatters the worshippers, leaving Ino and Athamas. Athamas assumes that Ino's tears are shed out of sympathy for him, which prompts her to confess her love. Cadmus returns with the news that Semele has been

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<sup>1</sup> Congreve's libretto was divided into three 'Acts.' Handel's published word-book was divided into three 'Parts' to reflect its oratorio style of performance. However, Handel called them 'Acts' in his autograph and conducting score and no distinction has been made in the thesis between the two terms when discussing Handel's version.

abducted by an eagle ‘of mighty size’. The priests congratulate Cadmus on becoming son-in-law to the gods, and then celebrate the physical union of Semele and Jupiter and their ‘Endless pleasure.’

Act Two opens where Ovid began his treatment of the Semele myth in the *Metamorphoses*. Juno is doubly furious, having been thwarted over the wedding and having discovered Jupiter’s affair with Semele. Iris reports that Semele is residing in a newly-built palace guarded by dragons. Juno vows to visit Somnus, the god of sleep, to get assistance with her revenge. Meanwhile Semele awakes, already conscious of her mortal status while surrounded by ‘nymphs and graces’. Jupiter perceives her desire to become immortal. Knowing that he could never grant this, he brings Ino to the palace as company for Semele and then transforms the palace into an Arcadian idyll where the two sisters can watch an entertainment of dancing.<sup>2</sup>

Act Three begins in the Cave of Sleep where Juno and Iris find Somnus. Juno demands that he give her his magic rod whereby she will pacify the dragons guarding Semele’s palace. She also instructs him to send Morpheus to give Jupiter an erotic dream to make him susceptible to Semele’s demands when he awakes. Somnus is persuaded by the promise of the nymph Pasithea. Having subdued the dragons, Juno appears to Semele disguised as Ino. She pretends that Semele has taken on the appearance of a goddess and gives her a mirror in which she sees herself deified. Juno convinces her that the only way to become immortal is to persuade Jupiter to make love to her in his divine, rather than human form. Juno also suggests (knowing that Jupiter has been visited by Morpheus’ dream) that Semele should withhold sex from him until he grants a ‘boon without a name’. Semele follows this advice to the letter and Jupiter swears to grant her anything. Semele makes her demand and is completely impervious to his attempts to dissuade her. Jupiter is distraught. Juno is triumphant. Semele realises, too late, what she has demanded and is incinerated by

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<sup>2</sup> Handel extended Congreve’s pastoral idyll to give the two women a glimpse of the music of the spheres, ending with an apotheosis of the power of music.

Jupiter's lightning bolts. Cadmus, Ino, and Athamas discover Semele's destruction. Ino announces that Jove has decreed that she and Athamas should marry. In a final *deus ex machina*, Apollo descends and prophesies that Semele's unborn son shall be a god 'more mighty than love' – Bacchus, the god of wine and theatre. There follows a final chorus in praise of the new-born god.

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## Introduction

Handel wrote *Semele* in 1743 for inclusion in his 1744 season.<sup>1</sup> It was based on a libretto by William Congreve that was originally intended for a production at the Queen's Theatre, with music by John Eccles, at some point around 1705-6. This production never happened, but the libretto was published in Congreve's *Complete Works* of 1710, and also in Dublin in 1736. It was adapted for Handel by an unknown intermediary. Contemporary reports suggest that *Semele* was enjoyed by Handel's supporters but fell victim, at least in part, to a hostile campaign by a section of the aristocracy. It was revived only once, that December, with several cuts and five additions in Italian from Handel's earlier operas. It was never again performed during Handel's lifetime. There was a heavily cut performance in 1762 by J.C. Smith, but no more by Handel's close circle.

'A literary artist, like any other man, lives in a shared world.'<sup>2</sup> How much more so then was this true of a theatre composer in the early and middle eighteenth century when 'as at no other period before or since, politics pervaded literature and music theatre, and...the nation was unusually politically aware and opinionated.'<sup>3</sup> The following thesis asks what we can learn about that world from a single piece of art, and, conversely, what knowledge of that world tells us about the art. Adorno described the sociology of music as 'knowledge of the relationship between music and the socially organised individuals who listen to it.'<sup>4</sup> By studying the development

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<sup>1</sup> The 1744 'season' was run on a subscription basis from 10 February to 21 March with twelve performances. The new works were *Semele* and *Joseph and his Brethren*, together with repeat performances of *Samson* and *Saul* planned if necessary.

<sup>2</sup> H. Erskine-Hill, *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope* (New Haven & London, 1975), p3

<sup>3</sup> R. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p10

<sup>4</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* tr. E.B. Ashton (New York, 1976), p1. Adorno pointed out that even in an ostensibly non-political art form, the work of art would be substantially determined by the institutional and social structures of the society that it is part of. *ibid.*, p202

of this work we can see how a work of art both reflects, and interacts with, the society which produced it.

Robert Hume, outlining a methodology for reconstructing artistic contexts, noted that scholarly advances in this field were likely to come from a broadening of focus rather than the discovery of new facts. He suggested that any such study should cover six questions: why the author wrote it; what audience the author addressed; what were the interpretative implications of the work's allusions; what reactions there were to it; how it was understood by audiences; and what was illustrated by parallels and differences between it and related works.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Ruth Smith has suggested that study of a Handelian oratorio should cover fifteen areas.<sup>6</sup> The present thesis takes up Smith and Hume's approach, focusing on a single work of the theatre.

Analysing the sociological impact of music is inherently complicated because it must at some level address fundamental questions of aesthetics, and consider how music impacts on its audience. On the one hand, 'at a certain point, the listener has the experience of a first-person perspective on a life that is no one's',<sup>7</sup> whilst on the other, the composer has designed the sounds to be mentally ordered and emotionally comprehended in a certain way<sup>8</sup> and the librettist has almost certainly constructed the text to reflect (albeit indirectly) on very real lives and experiences. All aesthetic meaning is located in the *experience* of the work.<sup>9</sup> This not only includes the music and libretto, but also the titles, typeface and paper of the printed word-book which many would have followed during performance.<sup>10</sup> All of these provided listeners with semiotic information which shaped their aesthetic experience. In addition, all listeners bring their own experiences, understanding and preconceptions to bear on

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<sup>5</sup> R.D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts, The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford, 1999), pp31, 37

<sup>6</sup> R. Smith, 'Comprehending Theodora', *Eighteenth-Century Music* I (2005), p83

<sup>7</sup> R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1997), p364

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p444

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p227

<sup>10</sup> Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts*, p79

understanding the work, and so the aesthetic 'text' as experienced by the audience member may therefore be different from the artistic 'text' composed by the author.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in reconstructing intellectual and cultural contexts it is often misleading to think in terms of either/or explanations.<sup>12</sup> People are susceptible to more than one idea at a time and different currents may co-exist either in conflict or in mutually complementary ways. Therefore when considering the intellectual cross-currents inherent within society and within a large and complex work of art, explanations are more often multiple and overlapping. An approach to this must be a compromise between the empirical and heuristic.<sup>13</sup>

*Semele* is a particularly valuable case study because a comparison of its sources and its composition in 1705 with its production in 1744 offers an illustration of changing political currents and social and religious mores over the intervening period. This thesis therefore takes the various ways in which *Semele* related to politics, religion, culture and society and examines them in detail. *Opera seria* has been described as creating drama by 'refracting' the plot into separate constituent elements or 'affects'.<sup>14</sup> The following thesis does much the same with *Semele*, looking at it from a range of separate, but often related, angles. Whilst there is inevitably a small amount of duplication, it is hoped that by the end it will have achieved a similar degree of coherence as the best of those dramas.

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<sup>11</sup> W. Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London, 1978), p21

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover, and the Protestant Interest* (Woodbridge, 2006), p16

<sup>13</sup> R.C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 2003), p145

<sup>14</sup> G.E. Dorris, *Paulo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London 1715-1744* (The Hague, 1967), p41

## **Summary of the Thesis**

This thesis attempts to locate Handel's *Semele* within the broadest possible appreciation of the political, religious, moral and literary ideas of its time, to show not only how they enhance our understanding of it, but also, more importantly, how it develops and broadens our understanding of them. The first chapter examines the development of Congreve's original libretto in the context of Queen Anne's reign and the approaching Hanoverian settlement. It traces his sources, including both Ovid and eighteenth-century English and French dramas. It locates his treatment in the context both of the national politics of the Act of Settlement and Hanoverian succession, and the theatrical and moral politics of Jeremy Collier's attack on Congreve in 1698, and shows, through a study of the libretto, how Congreve was responding to a range of political and moral imperatives.

The second chapter considers the social and political context of Handel's production. It illustrates how *Semele* related to national political concerns, to the changing moral climate of Georgian Britain, and to the political manoeuvrings of London's theatre companies. It suggests that *Semele* needs to be understood within multiple and conflicting contexts, which included the fall of Walpole, the rise of the Countess of Yarmouth, and the Patriot King opposition in the political sphere, and Arne's English masques, Lord Middlesex, and opposition to *Messiah* in the theatrical sphere.

The third chapter considers some of the musical and artistic influences on Handel's composition of *Semele*. It outlines the other settings of *Semele* that already existed and considers which of these, if any, might have influenced Handel's version. It also considers how extensively and from whence he may have borrowed, in order to illuminate how he viewed his project in the summer of 1743.

The fourth chapter examines in detail the development of Handel's libretto. It traces the process of adaptation to establish at which stage changes were made to the

libretto in order to show exactly what concerns motivated the changes. It also examines how his approach to performing *Semele* changed during the season of 1744 and what that illustrates about how the work was understood and perceived by his contemporaries.

## The Sources

### **Manuscript sources for *Semele***

Nearly all of Handel's autographs from his career in England are held together in 93 bound volumes in the Royal Collection at the British Library. A guide to these was published in 1927,<sup>15</sup> and Burrows and Ronish have produced a complete catalogue of rastra and watermarks for the collection.<sup>16</sup> Handel's autograph score of *Semele* is the earliest surviving source for this work.<sup>17</sup> It shows the changes that Handel made during composition, and indicates a considerable speed of writing. Handel's approach to composing English-language dramatic works was to complete the work in draft with treble and bass, and then to work through again from the beginning 'filling up' the inner parts.<sup>18</sup> The autograph score therefore shows all the changes that were made during the composition process, most notably the re-writing of Athamas' part for an alto, and the insertion of a new finale.

In several instances Handel replaced sheets of the manuscript score with fresh insertions. This occurred most notably in the re-writing of 'You've undone me' (necessitated by the changes to Athamas' part), the opening of Part Three, and the finale. In the case of the Part Three opening, Handel's rejected draft has survived

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<sup>15</sup> W.B. Squire, *Catalogue of the King's Music Library, i: The Handel Manuscripts* (London, 1927); W.C. Smith, *Handel, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Early Editions* (London, 1960 2/1970); R.A. Streatfield, *Handel Autographs at the British Museum* (London, 1912)

<sup>16</sup> D. Burrows, & M.J. Ronish, *A Catalogue of Handel's Musical Autographs* (Oxford, 1994); see also D. Burrows, 'Rastra Types in Handel's Conducting Scores' *GHB* VI (1996), pp206-35

<sup>17</sup> London, The British Library, R.M.20.f.7, dated 3 June – 4 July, 1743, except the Symphony to Act Two, which is R.M.20.c.2

<sup>18</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), pp88-9. Though no paradigm can explain all of Handel's working, this provides a useful summary. For a more detailed study see D.R. Hurley, *Handel's Muse, Patterns of Creation in his Oratorios and Musical Dramas, 1743-1751* (Oxford, 2001), pp83 & passim.

along with a number of incomplete notes and fragments. These are now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.<sup>19</sup>

After the completion of the autograph score, a copy of the libretto was made for submission to the Inspector of Stage Plays under the terms of the 1737 Licensing Act. This copy survives in the Larpent Collection at the Henry Huntingdon Memorial Library in San Marino.<sup>20</sup> The British Library holds a microfiche copy. It shows numerous corrections which reflect changes made by Handel to the score after the copy had been taken. This makes it an invaluable source for postulating a chronology of the changes made between the initial composition and first performance.

At some point after the 'Larpent' manuscript was copied, probably around the time that the 'conducting score' (see below) was prepared, a fair set of vocal parts for the cast were copied.<sup>21</sup> Nothing is known of their history, and the paper type suggests that the surviving manuscripts are slightly later copies. However, they are invaluable for fixing the chronology of changes made to *Semele* before the first performance because they reflect the composition after the completion of the autograph, at the time of, or shortly before, the initial copying of the 'conducting' score.<sup>22</sup>

The 'conducting scores' were fair copies of Handel's manuscripts made by the older J.C. Smith, presumably for the purposes of performance and the copying of individual orchestral and vocal parts. These incorporate changes made for revivals and so include slightly later versions of the work. The collection of conducting scores is now in the State and University Library in Hamburg. All changes made to the conducting scores as against the autographs have been catalogued by H.D.

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<sup>19</sup> Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MU.MS.259; See also J.A. Fuller-Maitland, & A.H. Mann, *Catalogue of the Music in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge* (London, 1893)

<sup>20</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele* libretto, Larpent Collection, No. 43. San Marino, Huntingdon Memorial Library

<sup>21</sup> London, The British Library, R.M.19.b.3

<sup>22</sup> In addition, they establish without question that the principals sang all of the choruses.

Clausen.<sup>23</sup> In the case of *Semele*, the score shows changes made for both productions in Handel's lifetime, and also for the posthumous production under the younger J.C. Smith in 1762.<sup>24</sup>

### **Printed word-books**

*Semele* was performed three times by Handel or his close circle: in February 1744, December 1744, and in 1762. In each case a printed word-book was published by Jacob Tonson. These provide information about how the work was presented to the public and also show clearly the changes which were made for each production. Copies of the February 1744 and the 1762 versions are held in the British Library, London. The December 1744 version is in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris.<sup>25</sup> A comparison of these with the autographs offers the possibility of developing a very clear picture of the process of adaptation.

Congreve's original libretto for *Semele* was also published several times in the eighteenth century. It was published as part of his *Complete Works* in 1710,<sup>26</sup> which had reached a fifth edition by 1730. It was also published in Dublin together with *The Judgment of Paris* in 1736 and 1752.

### **Printed Scores of *Semele***

Immediately after the first performance in 1744, Walsh brought out the whole oratorio in three volumes (one per act) and then complete, in each case without the

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<sup>23</sup> H.D. Clausen, *Händels Direktionspartituren* ('*Handexemplare*') (Hamburg, 1972)

<sup>24</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele* conducting score. Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, MA/1050, 3 Vols

<sup>25</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Bibliothèque Nationale, FRBNF38721010

<sup>26</sup> W. Congreve, *Semele, an Opera*, in W. Congreve, *The works of Mr. William Congreve; in three volumes. Containing his plays and poems* (London, 1710) II, pp793-832



recitatives. Arnold included *Semele* in his 1788 edition of Handel's works at the end of the eighteenth century, using Walsh for the arias and apparently using the autograph to supply the recitatives.<sup>27</sup> There was also an edition published in vocal score, with a German translation, in Berlin in the early nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

Chrysander's edition dates from 1860 as part of his monumental *Complete Works*.<sup>29</sup> He based his edition on the 'conducting score' and therefore omits numbers that seem to have been cut during rehearsals, and also a large number of the original stage directions. His edition was followed in Britain by two versions by Ebenezer Prout.<sup>30</sup> The later of these introduced a further range of heavy cuts, and made several changes to the libretto to tone down its explicit eroticism. These editions are not within the scope of the present study.

There are two modern performing editions: by Mackerras and Lewis,<sup>31</sup> and Bartlett.<sup>32</sup> The OUP edition supplies a fully realised continuo part and Mackerras' *da capo* decorations. It was published without a full critical source commentary, and tends to follow the conducting score where this and the autograph diverge. Bartlett's edition is closely modelled on the autograph, and includes all of the 1744 variants as appendices. There is no modern critical edition of *Semele* available at the present time, though it is in progress for both Novello and Bärenreiter.

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<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Sir Charles Mackerras for allowing me access to his copy of this score.

<sup>28</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele. Ein dramatisches Gedicht von Congreve ... nach dem englischen Original bearbeitet, und der Musik im Klavierauszuge untergelegt von J. O. H. Schaum* (Berlin, 1820?)

<sup>29</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele*, ed. F. Chrysander (Leipzig, 1860)

<sup>30</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele. An Oratorio, edited by E. Prout* (London & New York, 1889); G.F. Handel, *Semele, Abridged Concert Edition, adapted from the complete edition of E. Prout* (London & New York, 1926)

<sup>31</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele*, ed. C. Mackerras & A. Lewis (Oxford, 1975). This editorial approach brought a stinging critique from Anthony Hicks. Hicks, A., 'Ravishing Semele', *MT* cxiv (1973), pp275-80

<sup>32</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele*, ed. C. Bartlett (Kings Lynn, 1998)

John Eccles' setting of Congreve's libretto was never published in the eighteenth century. A single manuscript copy now survives, with several pages missing, in the Royal College of Music. It is now available in a modern critical edition.<sup>33</sup>

The original *Semele* story is found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, ll253-315. Modern translations are too numerous to list in full. A critical edition of the original Latin is published by Bristol Classical Press.<sup>34</sup> A study of the English translations available in the early eighteenth century forms part of Chapter One.

### **Collections of source material**

The student of Handel is in a fortunate position in relation to the source material for his life and works. Although only a tiny fraction of Handel's personal correspondence survives,<sup>35</sup> scholars have the benefit of several major edited collations of these and other documentary sources. The first (chronologically) was Deutsch's monumental *Documentary Biography* which collated a very large number of surviving references to Handel's life and music from his lifetime.<sup>36</sup> This was expanded to take into account subsequent discoveries as the fourth volume of the *Händel-Handbuch*.<sup>37</sup> This is of real value in placing Handel's work in its historical context. The first three volumes provide a systematic thematic catalogue of Handel's works and this is useful for tracing purely musical ideas between the works.<sup>38</sup>

To these was added in 2002 a further remarkable resource, which has provided several key sources for the present thesis. The musical portions of the family papers of Handel's friend (and co-librettist of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*) James

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<sup>33</sup> J. Eccles, *Semele, an Opera* ed. R. Platt (London, 2000); London, Royal College of Music, MS 183

<sup>34</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, ed. with introduction by A.A.R. Henderson (Bristol & London, 1979)

<sup>35</sup> G.F. Handel, *The Letters and Writings of George Friderick Handel* ed. E.H. Müller (London, 1935)

<sup>36</sup> O.E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London, 1955)

<sup>37</sup> *HHB IV*

<sup>38</sup> *HHB I; HHB II*

Harris were published as *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris 1732-1780*.<sup>39</sup> Harris' circle of correspondents included the librettist Charles Jennens, and Handel's secretary, J.C. Smith, and thus offers rare glimpses into the personal life of Handel, particularly the specific stresses of the period 1743-5, and Handel's behaviour towards members of the nobility in 1743-4.<sup>40</sup> They also form a barometer of audience tastes and record several tantalising fragments, such as reports of songs from *Semele* being popular when published and an intended staging of *Hercules* for George II.<sup>41</sup>

### **Other published sources**

In reconstructing the cultural context of a work, it is necessary to draw on as wide a range of sources as possible. This study therefore encompasses published plays, poems, novels, operas, and polemics, as well as private journals and correspondence. In focusing on ideas and concepts that had a wide currency, priority has tended to be given to published works, with manuscript sources providing some invaluable specific information about the people close to Handel.

### *Correspondence*

The collections by Deutsch, Eisen, and Burrows and Dunhill encompass all the extant correspondence relating directly to Handel. However, use has also been made of the correspondence and memoirs of figures close to Handel for building up a more general picture of the age. These include Handel's friends and colleagues such as Charles Burney and Mrs Delany, general cultural commentators like Horace Walpole, as well as other important artists such as Pope and Swift. The Strafford

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<sup>39</sup> D. Burrows, & R. Dunhill (eds), *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris 1732-1780* (Oxford, 2002). Harris' treatise, *On Music*, was published in the same year as the first performances of *Semele*.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, pp167-8

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, pp187, 206

Papers at the British Library provide further invaluable information, and also provide a context for the life of Newburgh Hamilton, who may have adapted the libretto of *Semele* for Handel.

### *Pamphlets*

This was the age of pamphlets and periodicals, and two fierce debates in particular frame the inception of both Congreve's and Handel's *Semeles*. The first was on the morality of the stage in general, initiated by Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698), and seconded by several works by Arthur Bedford. The second was a fractious debate about English-language drama on the London stage, which first found voice in John Dennis' *An Essay on the opera's after the Italian manner* (1706). This debate included figures like Aaron Hill, Henry Carey, James Miller and Henry Fielding. Of major importance are those numerous pamphlets from the 1730s, such as *See and Seem Blind* (1732), which form partisan contributions to contemporary debates about opera and oratorio.<sup>42</sup> Although *The Spectator's* first short life was over by 1744, it nevertheless offers a valuable insight into currents of thought in the 1710s when Handel arrived in England, and shortly after Congreve wrote the libretto for *Semele*. It illustrates in particular Addison's vitriolic opposition to Italian opera, and Steele's view of audience reactions: 'when a scene tending to procreation is acted, you see ... old lechers with mouths open, stare at the loose gesticulations on the stage with shameful earnestness...'<sup>43</sup>

Such moral condemnation also had a strong political dimension as the corruption of manners and morals was held to be a direct outcome of the debasement of political life. Political pamphlets are also considered here, in particular those relating to George II's reported infidelities. There remains a question as to whether George and

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<sup>42</sup> Anon.[Aaron Hill], *See and Seem Blind* (London, 1732), p15

<sup>43</sup> D.F. Bond (ed.), *Critical Essays from The Spectator* (Oxford, 1970), p238

his mistress, the Countess of Yarmouth thought themselves reflected in *Semele*. This thesis will therefore examine popular pamphlets and reactions to attempt to show whether or not this was likely. There are of course several major philosophical tracts around this period, particularly Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*.<sup>44</sup> Also important are treatises on music and musical theory, such as James Harris' *On Music* and John Brown's *A Dissertation on the RISE, UNION, and POWER, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music*<sup>45</sup> which reveal a strand of educated thinking about the power and purpose of both theatre and music.

### *Other Music and Literature*

*Semele* is considered here not only in the context of Handel's other works, but in terms of the other forms of theatre and literary entertainment available to the public. There were repeated attempts at this time to establish English-language opera, oratorio and masque entertainments, and consequently works such as Arne's *The Judgment of Paris* (1740) are considered in relation to *Semele*'s inception and performance. This thesis also considers contemporary works for the theatre (both spoken and musical) including Carey's *The Dragon of Wantley* (1737) and other burlesques which Handel is reported to have enjoyed and against which he may have been reacting. The *Semele* libretto is also studied in the context of both the plays and theatrical traditions of Congreve's time and those other works which may have been sources for his version. This was a great age not only of theatre, but also of literature, and, after 1737, the growth of the novel. A number of contemporary plays and novels have been considered here, including Congreve's works (especially *A Hymn to Harmony* with music by Eccles), Cibber's sentimental comedies, Fielding's *Amelia* (1751) and *The Wedding Day* (1743), Clelland's *Fanny Hill* (1749), and also the

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<sup>44</sup> A.A. Cooper [Shaftesbury, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl], *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* ed. L.E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999)

<sup>45</sup> J. Brown (D.D.), *A Dissertation on the RISE, UNION, and POWER, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (London, 1763)

works of Aaron Hill, Alexander Pope (especially the *Dunciad* and the *Essay on Criticism*), Dr Arbuthnot, and Henry Carey.

### The Main Secondary works

All doctoral research stands on the shoulders of giants. The collections of source material gathered by Deutsch (revised and updated by Eisen & Eisen) and by Burrows and Ronish have been mentioned already.<sup>46</sup> In 1959, Winton Dean produced his magisterial *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*. This remains the definitive musicological study of Handel's oratorios, based on meticulous research of the primary sources available at the time, including the autographs, conducting scores and fragments. It locates Handel's works within the development of Italian and German oratorio traditions and sets out to analyse each work stylistically, sociologically, aesthetically and psychologically.<sup>47</sup> This remains the most thorough study of the music for *Semele* available and its analysis forms the starting point for this study. Whilst unquestionable in its thoroughness and scholarship, Dean's account is not without personal idiosyncrasies. He was extremely hostile to *opera seria* as a form (a view he has since modified – at least as far as Handel is concerned) which possibly leads him to overstate the differences between the operatic and oratorio forms. He also sees *Semele* as suffering from misdesignation as an oratorio and suggests that it can only be understood as an English opera, thereby not really considering how its form relates to the other oratorios. He also resists strongly the notion of the oratorios having any genuine religious significance, seeing them instead as *purely* theatrical works.<sup>48</sup> The present study aims to build on his conclusions by broadening the scope beyond the purely musical and theatrical context to locate the work in a wider political and social milieu, and illustrate that it does indeed relate to the ideas and attitudes of its time.

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<sup>46</sup> Deutsch, *Handel, A Documentary Biography*, pp579-82 & passim; *HHB IV*; Burrows, & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*

<sup>47</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p33

<sup>48</sup> 'Neither Morell nor Handel regarded their oratorios as a forum for metaphysical or philosophical disquisition.' *ibid.*, p356

Ruth Smith took just such an approach in her monograph *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* and a number of groundbreaking articles.<sup>49</sup> Her study of the intellectual, political and religious context of the Israelite oratorios is the principal inspiration for the present thesis. Critically, Smith reminds us that political or religious meanings in art need not be intentional (and indeed, where they are, they may still be subject to multiple and contradictory interpretations), and that: 'We should not be inhibited in our readings of the librettos by a notion that Handel would not have set a text containing ideas to which he did not personally and fully subscribe... Equally we should not assume that he did not subscribe to the commonplace ideas of his time because he did not leave us authenticated verbal statements in support of them.'<sup>50</sup> The range and richness of contemporary pamphlet literature and personal correspondence treated is formidable, and she draws attention to the paucity of scholarly work in the field of sentimental drama, and also to the pervasive influence of 'Patriot' literature, Jacobite subtexts, and the influence of classical tragedy. The book also deals in detail with the contemporary religious context, including the perceived need to defend Christianity from heterodoxy (including through the 'moral improvement' of Old Testament stories) – all of which is relevant to understanding how *Semele* was received. However, Smith does not include any treatment of the music itself, instead inviting musicologists to take her conclusions to that next stage. The present study seeks to answer this invitation and illustrate the symbiosis between the musical and intellectual worlds of the eighteenth century in one of the works not explicitly treated by Smith herself.

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<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*; R. Smith, 'Intellectual contexts of Handel's English Oratorios' in C. Hogwood, & R. Lockett, (eds) *Music in Eighteenth Century England* (1983), pp115-33; R. Smith, 'Handel's English Librettists' in D. Burrows (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (1997), pp92-108; R. Smith, 'The Meaning of Morell's Libretto of "Judas Maccabeus"', *ML*, lxxix (1998), pp27-49; R. Smith, 'The Achievements of Charles Jennens' *ML* lxx (1989), pp161-89

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p39



## Chapter One: The Historical Context of Congreve and Eccles' *Semele*

The exact circumstances surrounding the inception of Congreve and Eccles' *Semele* remain to a certain extent conjectural. William Congreve (1670-1729) was at the height of his powers.<sup>1</sup> In four comedies, one tragedy and one masque he had both delighted and challenged audiences with his comic exposure of genteel society's faults, whilst in his witty and urbane dialogue, he had perfectly 'caught the accent of the time.'<sup>2</sup> John Eccles (1668-1735) was the pre-eminent theatre composer in London after the death of Henry Purcell.<sup>3</sup> As composer-in-residence at Drury Lane from 1693, he had written songs and incidental music for many plays, including those of Congreve.<sup>4</sup> In 1700 he became Master of the King's Musick, and the following year took the second prize in the competition to set Congreve's *The Judgment of Paris*.<sup>5</sup> He was also the favourite composer of London's leading actress, Anne Bracegirdle, who refused to sing any songs but his.<sup>6</sup>

Both the work itself and the fact of its withdrawal without performance illustrate a set of fundamental changes within English political, religious and cultural life. In its portrayal of a failed royal marriage and a disastrous relationship with a 'Universal Monarch', *Semele* reflects national anxiety over the succession. In its overt sexuality

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<sup>1</sup> C. Y. Ferdinand and D. F. McKenzie, 'Congreve, William (1670-1729)', *ODNB Online*

<sup>2</sup> W. Congreve, *The Complete Plays of William Congreve* ed. H. Davis (Chicago, 1967), pp5, 11

<sup>3</sup> D. J. Golby, 'Eccles, John (c1668-1735)', *New Grove Online*

<sup>4</sup> Purcell himself composed the songs and incidental music for *The Old Batchelour*. W. Congreve, *The Complete Plays of William Congreve* ed. H. Davis (Chicago, 1967), p26. For Eccles and the London theatrical scene, see R. Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxford, 1986), p7 & passim

<sup>5</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p14

<sup>6</sup> Anne Bracegirdle (bap. 1671, d. 1748) was trained as a child actress by Thomas Betterton and quickly rose to be one of the leading members of his company, eventually running it with Betterton and Barry. She had several parts written for her by Congreve, and several poems of the time implied that they were either lovers, or were secretly married. Her fame was also due to her powerful singing voice, in which she had been trained by Eccles. J. Milling, 'Bracegirdle, Anne (bap. 1671, d. 1748)', *ODNB Online*; S. Lincoln, 'The First Setting of Congreve's *Semele*', *ML* XLVI (1963), p105

it represents a conscious rejoinder to the growing body of opinion which called for a reformation in manners and morals to make England (and then Britain) worthy of the divine protection that it enjoyed against foreign domination and popery. In its treatment of Ino and Athamas it demonstrates the growth of sentimentalism in English theatre. Finally, in its very nature as an English opera it illustrates powerfully the parameters of the cultural debate in England about the artistic validity, public morality, and political acceptability of opera as an art form.

## The Historical Context

### **The political context**

*Semele* was written during the fiercely controversial first decade of the eighteenth century, between the Acts of Settlement (1701)<sup>7</sup> and Union (1707)<sup>8</sup> which between them determined the future course of the English monarchy, and thereby the British political landscape.<sup>9</sup> The Glorious Revolution had exposed the weakness behind the image of the monarch's divine right to rule. Whilst James II had been succeeded by his Stuart daughters, it was difficult to ignore the fact that the Glorious Revolution had produced a *de facto* elective monarchy.<sup>10</sup> There was intense competition to provide a convincing rhetoric of legitimation. J.C.D. Clark has argued that divine right and divine providence remained a viable political strategy, and for outward displays of monarchical power these remained strong.<sup>11</sup> Whigs by contrast argued that God had favoured them as protectors of true, protestant, religion, evidenced by God's protection of William III's successful intervention. Many tories and moderate Anglicans on the other hand believed that their oaths to James and his issue were inviolable, and felt unable to take the oaths of allegiance to the new monarchs. At the same time, many who accepted the revolution settlement believed that, since England had been granted divine favour in order to protect true religion, divine favour must therefore be maintained through a thorough moral reformation of manners. Uncertainty and fear brought to the fore anxiety about the relationship between politics and religion. The lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 brought both Grub

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<sup>7</sup> The Act decreed that, in default of issue to either William or Anne, the crown was to pass to Sophia, Electress of Hanover and granddaughter of James I, and to 'the heirs of her body being Protestants.'

<sup>8</sup> The Act formally brought Scotland and England together, making Scotland also subject to the Act of Settlement.

<sup>9</sup> W.A. Speck, *The Birth of Britain, A New Nation 1700-1710* (Oxford & Cambridge Mass., 1994), *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?, England 1689-1727* (Oxford, 2000), pp18-22

<sup>11</sup> J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), p123

Street journalism and virulent satire to an ever wider public, to the horror of religious and political conservatives. *Semele* was therefore written in an age of increasing political anxiety, moral censoriousness and religious paranoia.<sup>12</sup>

This anxiety was given particular focus by two events. Firstly, in 1700, the Duke of Gloucester, Queen Anne's only heir, died. Anne's own health then declined and it became clear that after seventeen failed pregnancies, the protestant line of the house of Stuart would end with her.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the following year, James II died in exile. This inevitably weakened Jacobitism in England, as Anne was a stronger and more popular figure than James Edward Stuart (The Old Pretender), but it nevertheless meant that the issue of succession would be bitterly contentious. Anne had inherited from William III a largely whig government and a volatile parliament with a small tory majority. This division allowed her to become a genuine third force in political life.<sup>14</sup> Resisting tory calls for a purge of the whigs in government, she brought in moderate tories. The majority of the government sat in the House of Lords, so Harley as speaker effectively co-ordinated policy in the Commons, maintaining a mixed, moderate government between 1704 and 1708. He strongly believed that 'liberty' lay in the monarch's freedom to choose between the political sides in parliament.<sup>15</sup>

Parliamentary controversy during these years was dominated by four main issues: trade, personal liberty, land, and religious toleration.<sup>16</sup> The last of these was particularly volatile. There was an increasingly hysterical fear of 'irreligion' and 'unbelief', blamed successively on Charles II, commerce, the Toleration Act and general freethinking.<sup>17</sup> Catholics were feared as crypto-Jacobites and subject to

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<sup>12</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, pp1-2; 177-8

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p280

<sup>14</sup> Speck, *The Birth of Britain*, p15. It is important not to overestimate the organisation of the parties at this stage. These were still flexible and loose groupings. L. Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy, The Tory Party 1714-1760* (Cambridge, 1982), p56

<sup>15</sup> Speck, *The Birth of Britain*, p100

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p3

<sup>17</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p223

heavy penalties. The treatment of protestants abroad, especially after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, gave genuine cause for concern about what a Catholic monarchy would do in Britain.<sup>18</sup> The discovery in 1696 of an assassination plot by James II against William had solidified fears of Jacobitism and done much to shore up William's position. However, it also led to a more rigorous oath of allegiance being required, which increased the number of non-jurors in the clergy.<sup>19</sup> The fear of a foreign-imposed Catholic monarchy increased when Louis XIV, in violation of the Treaty of Ryswick, recognised James Edward Stuart as James III in September 1701.<sup>20</sup> The perceived threat of a Franco-Jacobite invasion continued from the Nine Years War (1689-97) to the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13).<sup>21</sup>

Non-conformists had also been regarded with suspicion as potential political radicals since the civil war and republican protectorate. This suspicion was based on rational concerns, as many non-conformists rejected traditional structures of ecclesiastical authority.<sup>22</sup> For the majority of commentators, and for most ordinary people, the political structure of England in 1700 was inextricably woven into that of the established church, and political debate tended to take place within an explicitly Christian framework. 'Few contemporaries could imagine a life without Christianity. It gave them hope and understanding, experience and identity.'<sup>23</sup> Anglicanism therefore encompassed both the political and the social order. Any threat to it was perceived to be a threat to society itself and, although the Blasphemy Act (1697) was

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<sup>18</sup> L. Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1996), p24

<sup>19</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p35

<sup>20</sup> J.P. Kenyon, *The Stuarts, A Study in English Kingship* (London, 1958), p201

<sup>21</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p48; Colley, *Britons*, p3

<sup>22</sup> Hoppit *A Land of Liberty?*, p218; Clark, *English Society*, p293

<sup>23</sup> D. Beales, 'Religion and Culture' in T.C.W. Blanning, *The Eighteenth Century, Europe 1688-1815* (Oxford, 2000), pp131-77. Whilst they differ on the extent of it, this view is shared by all mainstream historians of the period. See Clark, *English Society*, p48; Colley, *Britons*, p19; Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, pp207-214

generally not enforced,<sup>24</sup> subversion of Christianity was deemed to be treasonous throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

This anxiety about the safety and status of the established church and political order was reflected in an aggressive campaign of proselytising which halved the number of dissenters between 1690 and 1740.<sup>26</sup> In 1710 it found a powerful voice through the national reaction to the trial of Dr Sacheverell. The Anglican clergyman preached a ninety-minute tirade before the Corporation of London, in which he asserted that the whig policy of limited toleration had led to schism and heresy, explicitly referring to the tolerationist whigs as 'false brethren.'<sup>27</sup> His sermon was published on 25 November 1709. It quickly sold 100,000 copies. He was prosecuted by the government for 'high crimes and misdemeanours', many of its members having been stung personally by his criticisms. However, his trial before the House of Lords was a disaster for the ministry. Westminster Hall had to be converted to hold the crowds, who became violent and attacked the dissenters that Sacheverell had identified. If the government had set up the trial to propagate a contractarian view of the 1689 settlement, it failed.<sup>28</sup> Sacheverell was convicted by a majority of just seventeen, and given the lightest of punishments.<sup>29</sup>

The verdict was followed by national uproar and a crushing tory victory of 332 seats to 181 that October, which demonstrated how widely his fears were shared by the electorate. This left Marlborough as a lame duck leader. In 1711 occasional conformity was finally outlawed. The following year the General Naturalisation Act (1709) was repealed, effectively excluding foreign protestants, and in 1714 the

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<sup>24</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p286

<sup>25</sup> J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty 1660-1832: Political discourse and social dynamics in the Anglo-American world* (Cambridge, 1994), p179

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *English Society*, p137

<sup>27</sup> Speck, *The Birth of Britain*, p164

<sup>28</sup> Hoppit *A Land of Liberty?*, pp233-4; Kenyon, *The Stuarts*, p219

<sup>29</sup> Speck suggests that this was due to Harley's influence, done with the specific intention of undermining the whig Junto. Speck, *The Birth of Britain*, p173

Schism Act sought to stamp out dissenters' schools.<sup>30</sup> The sheer numbers involved in the protests against Sacheverell's trial serve as a reminder that while the franchise was extremely small, elections 'generated a regular and sustained flow of political information between rulers and ruled, as well as periodic face-to-face contact.'<sup>31</sup> This was an era in which political engagement spread to a hitherto unimaginable proportion of society. By 1700, London had many coffee shops where periodicals could be read and the topics of the day discussed.<sup>32</sup> Although the franchise was small, political understanding and opinion was spreading to a larger and larger group of people.

However, for the whigs, two acts of parliament effectively and successfully determined the course of British politics. The Act of Settlement (1701) barred the Catholic line of the Stuarts from the succession. Now, in the first reversal of the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*, the English monarch was required to be of the faith of the people – as defined by parliament – and furthermore could only leave the country with the permission of parliament.<sup>33</sup> On Anne's death, the crown would pass to Sophia, Electress of Hanover, and to 'the heirs of her body being Protestants.' This was established when Congreve was writing, but it threw up a further problem which may well have been reflected in the *Semele* libretto. The Act only applied to England and Wales, but James Edward Stuart not only claimed the English throne as James III, but also the Scottish throne as James VIII. Moreover, there was strong hostility to the Act in Scotland, as the Stuarts were originally kings of Scotland and had only ruled England since 1603. The prospect arose of James being welcomed as King of

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p157

<sup>31</sup> J. Van Horne Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), p25; there were six elections between January 1701 and September 1710.

<sup>32</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger with F. Lawrence (Cambridge and Oxford, 1989), p32. Estimates of the number vary from Habermas' 3000 to Cowan's 90, though this is for 1692-3. B.W. Cowan, *The social life of coffee: the emergence of the British coffeehouse* (New Haven & London, 1995), pp156-60, 149. Cowan also cautions that 'Their goal was not to prepare the ground for an age of democratic revolutions; it was to make the cultural politics of Augustan Britain safe for an elitist whig oligarchy.' *ibid.* p256

<sup>33</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p30

Scotland, where he would be in a position to launch an invasion of England with Louis XIV's help. England was at war with France over the Spanish succession, and only France's containment would ensure a smooth transition in Britain. The constitutional solution was the Act of Union (1707) which united England and Scotland, dissolving the Edinburgh parliament and making the Act of Settlement applicable to Scotland as well. This settlement was secured militarily by the containment of France after the victory at Blenheim (1704), which eventually led Louis to withdraw his support from James Edward.

To observers in the first decade of the eighteenth century, the threat of further civil unrest, or even foreign invasion from Scotland, France, or Ireland was very real. Safety and prosperity required not only vigilance, but piety. The 'only giver of victory was God' and the growing Society for the Reformation of Manners argued that 'the blessing bestowed on England by Providence in that event [the Glorious Revolution] would be forfeited if it were not accompanied by a moral revolution.'<sup>34</sup> This idea would persist well into the 1740s, and it was by no means restricted to a devout minority. Moreover, it was not only of political importance. A reformation of morals would have to encompass the arts, and in particular the London theatres. For many, maintaining artistic morality became a religious and patriotic imperative.

### **Theatre politics and moral controversy**

Unlike continental theatres, which tended to be extensions of the court and the ruler's representation of royal power, Britain had no court theatre. Moreover there was effectively an interregnum in royal influence over the theatre between 1688 and 1714. William III was not particularly interested, Anne was largely too ill to attend.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A.C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover, and the Protestant Interest* (Woodbridge, 2006), p202; Speck, *The Birth of Britain*, p58

<sup>35</sup> Court life under Anne was also restricted due to financial circumstances. R.O. Bucholz, *The Augustan Court, Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture* (California, 1993), p202



There was therefore a lack of the kind of cultural direction from the monarchy common on the continent. Later, under the Hanoverians, the royal family patronised the London theatres but they did not control them, and this weakened relationship between the monarchy and the theatres as much as anything determined the unique position that the latter enjoyed during this period. This is not to say that the political elites had no influence. Quite the contrary, it is just that the royal family held no monopoly. Rather than representing monarchical power and values, the theatre was viewed as a reflection of the world, its attitudes, its rulers and its faults. Restoration theatre divided fairly clearly into heroic drama and comedies of manners, the one elevating the expected political and social virtues, the other ruthlessly exposing the failure of people or groups to live up to them.<sup>36</sup>

Many contemporary writers hailed theatre's freedom to ridicule and criticise the political classes as a foundation of English liberty, often drawing explicit parallels with Athenian 'old comedy'.<sup>37</sup> This liberty increased in 1695 when the 1662 Licensing Act was allowed to lapse.<sup>38</sup> Prominent politicians and public figures were openly caricatured; pro- and anti- ministry speeches or lines in plays were alternatively applauded or hissed.<sup>39</sup> Theatre, and particularly opera, was an art form in which audiences expected to see multiple layers of meaning.<sup>40</sup>

Congreve was the first playwright since the Restoration to be named on playbills and this period sees the beginning of the professionalisation of writing. However, in an

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<sup>36</sup> L. Brown, *English Dramatic Form 1660-1760* (New Haven, 1981), p3

<sup>37</sup> A.A. Cooper [Shaftesbury, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl], *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* ed. L.E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999), pp111, 116; Anon., *The Case of Our Present Theatrical Disputes, fairly stated* (London, 1743), pp10-11. See also P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford, 1973), pp100, 167

<sup>38</sup> Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p20

<sup>39</sup> C. Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole, Politics, Poetry and National Myth 1725-1742* (Oxford, 1994), p230; J. Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England* (Oxford, 1963), pp1-2

<sup>40</sup> C. Price, 'Political Allegory in Late Seventeenth-Century English Opera' in Fortune, N. (ed.) *Music and Theatre, Essays in honour of Winton Dean* (Cambridge, 1987), p3; The same was of course true on the continent. See R. Strohm, *Dramma per Musica, Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1997), p35

age when the rewards from a dedication far outweighed those of publication, playwrights were far from independent of aristocratic patronage.<sup>41</sup> The role of social and cultural leadership, once wielded by the monarchy, instead passed first to aristocratic London houses, and thence to the theatres.<sup>42</sup> Theatres were also a public forum which, unlike parliament or the pulpit, had a strong whig element, and therefore provided an effective platform for oppositional rhetoric. Whig writers had enjoyed almost complete supremacy of the stage during the last years of the seventeenth century.<sup>43</sup>

The theatre was also, and perhaps consequently, subject to violent controversy of its own. This was partly an overspill of the increasing anxiety and moral and religious hysteria from in the political sphere, but partly a reaction to the tone and subject matter of Restoration comedies, of which Congreve was the last undisputed master. Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) was a conservative, non-juring, Anglican clergyman. He wrote a number of treatises attacking the legitimacy of the 1689 settlement, and was in turn satirised as a devious political traitor by Colley Cibber in his play *The Non-Juror*.<sup>44</sup> In 1698, Collier published *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*,<sup>45</sup> a violent and concerted attack on all Restoration comedies, especially those of Congreve and Vanbrugh.<sup>46</sup> The subsequent public debate with Congreve kept it in print for the next forty years.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, pp 124-5

<sup>42</sup> Bucholz, *The Augustan Court*, p248

<sup>43</sup> Loftis, *The Politics of Drama*, p23. The division of the theatres between a whig Drury Lane and tory Lincoln's Inn Fields dates from after 1714. *ibid.* p63

<sup>44</sup> C. Cibber, *The Non-Juror* (London, 1717). *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, ed. R. L. Hayley (New York & London, 1980), I, pxlvi

<sup>45</sup> J. Collier, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage &c With the Several Defences of the Same In Answer to Mr Congreve, Dr. Drake &c* (5<sup>th</sup> ed. London, 1738). This was the same year that the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) was founded. Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p236

<sup>46</sup> A. Sieber, *Character Portrayal in Congreve's Comedies* (Salzburg, 1996), p6

<sup>47</sup> Though Collier himself died in 1726. *ibid.*, p3

Collier's point was simple. 'The Business of Plays is to recommend Vertue and discountenance Vice.'<sup>48</sup> He believed that any portrayal of vice would legitimise and soften it.<sup>49</sup> However, in Congreve's comedies the morality is implicit rather than explicit. His plays often dealt with the conflict of youth and beauty against age and (political) power.

The dramatist, who was influenced by Hobbesian philosophy, does not moralise about this situation but accepts this perpetual and aggressive strife for power as an integral part of human nature and as being but the way of the world.<sup>50</sup>

Congreve believed in exposing follies, so that people would be shamed into behaving better. In his comedies, good-natured but libertine 'truewits', foppish 'witwoulds' and reformed rakes do battle with witty, independent minded young women and domineering parents in the drama of courtship which, whilst often portrayed as more exciting than marriage, all leads in that direction.<sup>51</sup>

Collier either could not see the implicit social criticism in these plays, or he revolted at their questioning of absolutist patriarchal authority.<sup>52</sup> For him, 'The Stage-Poets make their principal Persons vicious, and reward them at the End of the Play.'<sup>53</sup> In response to Congreve's assertion that he drew moral lessons from the behaviour of his characters, Collier replied that 'A moral Sentence at the close of a lewd Play, is much like a pious Expression in the Mouth of a dying Man, who has been wicked all his Life Time.'<sup>54</sup> Moreover, he believed that any criticism of the ruling classes, and the clergy in particular, would undermine the divine order of religious and political

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<sup>48</sup> Collier, *A Short View*, p1; This anticipates the neoclassical view of Diderot and others, although Collier's view of 'Vertue' and 'Vice' was a great deal narrower.

<sup>49</sup> It was a natural extension of this attitude which led to actors and playwrights being denied the sacraments in most Catholic countries. Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p165. For one of the most famous examples, see R. Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty, a life in pursuit of freedom* (London, 2005), p376 & passim.

<sup>50</sup> Sieber, *Character Portrayal in Congreve's Comedies*, pp68-9

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, pp20-1, 27, 33, 80

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p130

<sup>53</sup> Collier, *A Short View*, p91

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p208

authority. In this he represented the antithesis to Shaftesbury, who argued that true religion must be able to withstand polite raillery and should be subject to civic and intellectual discipline.<sup>55</sup> In Collier's world, raillery against the Church could never be polite. Moreover, even the pagans were superior to contemporary writers in this. There was no precedent in classical tragedy for mocking the clergy, or showing unpunished vice amongst the characters, so there could be no excuse for the moderns. Roman theatre (he is forced to be critical of Aristophanes) saved comic mockery for low-born characters, whose denigration did not have political overtones.

Collier took particular exception to blasphemies, both in a pagan and Christian context. To portray Jupiter (here referring to his appearance in Dryden's *Amphitryon*) as both the supreme being, and at the same time 'full of lewdness' was completely beyond the bounds of decorum,<sup>56</sup> and he condemned the use of 'heaven' imagery to describe erotic love as unforgivably blasphemous.<sup>57</sup> He was therefore particularly exercised about cursing. Profaneness was '...grating to Christian Ears, dishonourable to the Majesty of God, and dangerous in the Example.'<sup>58</sup> To show aristocrats as immodest or lecherous was particularly unforgivable because there could be no excuse (such as desperation or want) for their behaviour. He also points out that 'The Poets make women speak smuttily' when in reality they are modest, and that classical theatre (even comedy) never portrayed the debauching of married women.<sup>59</sup> Congreve wrote *Semele* while this debate was at its height. In some instances, he seems ready to try to prove Collier wrong. At other times, he almost seems to be setting out to provoke. One of Collier's particular criticisms was Congreve's use of songs (for which Eccles composed the music):

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<sup>55</sup> L.E. Klein., *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness* (Cambridge, 1994), pp160, 168, 10

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, pp116-122

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p218

<sup>58</sup> Collier, *A Short View*, p63

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p5

Now to work up their lewdness with Verse, and Musick, doubles the force of the Mischief. It makes it more portable and at Hand, and drives it stronger upon Fancy and Practice.<sup>60</sup>

There could be few things more provocative to those of Collier's viewpoint than the heady mix of eroticism, cursing, satirizing of the gods, and engaging, sensuous music, than *Semele*.

Collier was by no means a lone voice, though he was one of the loudest.<sup>61</sup> In 1706, Arthur Bedford wrote *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays*, arguing that Congreve and his colleagues had completely failed to heed Collier's criticisms.<sup>62</sup> He warned that 'the Tenth part of what I have quoted, is sufficient to prove, that our Poets are the Bane of Religion, the Promoters of Vice, and the Nuisance of the Nation.'<sup>63</sup> In his extensive survey of contemporary plays he found scenes in heathen temples with the classical deities (even Bacchus!) owned as real gods.<sup>64</sup> He found the gods mocked even though the Greeks themselves always treated them honourably.<sup>65</sup> Also, with particular relevance to the *Semele* libretto, he criticized poets who mock the seriousness of thunder and lightning as a divine rebuke.<sup>66</sup> Storms had closed the theatres in 1703 and many religious observers had asserted that this was divine punishment for their immorality.<sup>67</sup> He criticized characters blaming their actions on predestination or providence, as Jove does, and he lambasted plays for encouraging

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p16

<sup>61</sup> E.L. Avery, *Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (London, 1951), p3

<sup>62</sup> A. Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays: shewing their natural tendency to destroy religion, And introduce a General Corruption of Manners* (Bristol, 1706), pp177-93. He also made the point that upholding morality was one of the conditions of their letters patent in 1704. *ibid.* p12; Congreve wrote his only tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, to convince Anne of his moral purpose as a playwright. W. Congreve, *The Complete Plays*, p17. He wrote *The Way of the World* to answer Collier, but since the clergyman rejected the basic premise of using comedy to expose and ridicule moral failings, he was not impressed. *ibid.*, p386

<sup>63</sup> Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays*, preface

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p48

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p103. He evidently did not include Aristophanes.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p6

<sup>67</sup> Speck, *The Birth of a Britain*, p58. This belief was still strong in 1750, when divine wrath at the immorality of the theatres was blamed for the storms which led to their closure. R. Smith, 'Comprehending Theodora', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/I (1995), p58

whoring and drunkenness by teaching the arts of seduction.<sup>68</sup> All of this was made worse when music was involved. He singled out Eccles for giving beautiful music to the devil's supplications in *The British Enchanters*, 'The Players treating the *Devil* in such manner; the respects which they pay the *Pagan Deities* will the less be wondered at.'<sup>69</sup>

Following classical criticisms of music, he warned that it 'hath an extraordinary Force and Power to work upon the Passions of Men,'<sup>70</sup> therefore when allied to the immorality of the theatre it 'adds more Venom to the poison, and doubles its Force.'<sup>71</sup> In *The Great Abuse of Musick*, Bedford followed up his original criticisms with several directed specifically against music. Given that '...the first Design and Use of Musick was for the *Praise* and *Glory* of God',<sup>72</sup> then the elevation of the heathen gods in musical theatre is an outright subversion of Christianity:

Here they lay the Axe to the Root of Religion, and if they can but place Jupiter, Juno, Cupid and Venus upon the same level with the True God, it will be the Home-Stroke.<sup>73</sup>

Together with characters swearing 'by hell', this could lead to 'the pulling down of God's judgements on this Nation for such abominable pieties.'<sup>74</sup> This was a genuine fear as the country was at war and under periodic threat of invasion.

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<sup>68</sup> Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays*, pp107, pp120-30

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p48

<sup>70</sup> A. Bedford, *The Great Abuse of Musick* (London, 1711), p1. The dominant musical theory of the eighteenth century was that of the 'affects'. The major theorist of this was Handel's erstwhile colleague, Johnnanes Mattheson. J., Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (New Haven & London, 1986), pp24-51. These theories derived ultimately from classical Greek writers including Plato who saw music as representing, and thus inducing specific emotional states through its *ethos*. This aimed at the perfect union of music with text. The simultaneous power and therefore also danger of music was a dominant strain in mediaeval Christian writings on the arts. See J. Andrews, *The Role of Music in the Religious and Moral Thought of Erasmus of Rotterdam and the North European Humanists* (Unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000), pp7-11, and pp50-2

<sup>71</sup> Bedford, *The Great Abuse of Musick*, p62

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p59

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p66

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, pp127, 167

These criticisms were at one extreme of the debate and they did not succeed in driving popular playwrights from the stage, but they illustrate the beginning of a gradual change in public manners and morality.<sup>75</sup> To a certain degree, Collier even followed the change rather than leading it. After a period during the early Restoration when young aristocrats had used 'libertinism' as a way of defining themselves against the convention-bound rising bourgeoisie, a number of plays had been becoming increasingly 'moral' in their denouements. These included *The Libertine* (1675), *The Lancashire Witches* (1681), *The Virtuous Wife, Love's Last Shift* (1696), and perhaps most famously Cibber's *The Careless Husband* (1709), which turns on a husband's repentance from infidelity after discovering the depth of his wife's love and care for him.<sup>76</sup> Thus when Congreve's complete works were published in 1710, risqué sections were toned down in plays written only fifteen years before. By the 1740s and 50s, the works of Congreve and Dryden were being performed on the London stage with considerable excisions.<sup>77</sup> This included the subject matter (which often involved secret affairs), indelicacy of language, and the freedom with which servants were portrayed as speaking to their masters. When Dryden's *Amphitryon* was published in the 1740s it carried an apologetic preface and prologue justifying the omissions and lamenting the 'Profaneness and Immodesty of the Time in which [Dryden] wrote.'<sup>78</sup> This illustrates how quickly English society had changed in the intervening years. Collier and Bedford's attacks were part of a growing change in manners and morals, which were also reflected in the formation and growth of the Society for the Reformation of Manners and other groups. Their agenda included the

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<sup>75</sup> The far more moderate Lord Shaftesbury also worried that the portrayal of Jupiter made wanton lust seem morally acceptable, thus encouraging a wrong moral sense. Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy*, in *Characteristics*, p180

<sup>76</sup> Brown, *English Dramatic Form*, pp40, 105-12. The often dramatically unsatisfactory nature of these plays was to be solved in the 1730s by the emergence of the novel. *ibid.*, p180

<sup>77</sup> Even new plays might be performed in edited versions if there was material that the cast felt was inappropriate. A. Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama* (Michigan, 1957), p149

<sup>78</sup> J. Dryden, *Amphitryon, or, the two Sosias, Alter'd from Dryden As it is Performed at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane* (London, 1756), preface

perceived increase in drinking, and the perennially perceived increase in all manner of sexual vice.<sup>79</sup> Both appear in *Semele*.

### **The rise of opera and the moral reaction**

After Charles II's re-opening of the playhouses, only two theatres in London were licensed to produce spoken plays. In the 1690s, under Christopher Rich and Thomas Betterton's direction, these included the spectacular dramatic operas of Purcell and others. However, after the 'rebellion' of 1695 and Betterton's move to Lincoln's Inn Fields, he and Rich were in direct competition. Betterton had the more experienced actors, Rich the better theatre and resources. As a consequence, Rich sought to compete by producing the kind of spectacular shows in which Betterton had formerly excelled, but could no longer afford. By 1701, however, the two theatres were co-existing fairly peacefully (and collaborated on several productions), and for several seasons neither was willing to risk the expense of producing large scale dramatic opera. At the same time, Congreve embarked on a partnership with Vanbrugh to open The Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket which would be well-equipped for producing opera.<sup>80</sup> Vanbrugh received the patent in 1704 and transferred Betterton's company to the new theatre. *Semele* was intended to be one of its first productions.<sup>81</sup> Rich decided to respond in kind, by once again producing spoken and sung theatre.

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<sup>79</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, pp224, 236

<sup>80</sup> The new theatre was to be designed with a deeper orchestra and machinery for the most spectacular effects, capable of producing English operas worthy to succeed Purcell. The site cost £1870 and was paid for by thirty £100 subscriptions. All but two of the subscribers were titled aristocrats. D. Nalbach, *The King's Theatre 1704-1867* (London, 1972), pp1-3; C. Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London 1700-1745* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Syracuse, 1991), p12

<sup>81</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p107



Vanbrugh planned to open with two operas, Daniel Purcell's *Orlando Furioso* and Clayton's *Arsinoë*.<sup>82</sup> This suggests that *Semele* was not yet completed. Unfortunately the theatre was not ready in time and Rich succeeded in obtaining *Arsinoë* for the rival Drury Lane Company, where it was a great success. It was the first English opera to absorb the style of the Italian *opera seria*, with sung recitative and eschewing machines and effects. Although Vanbrugh had Eccles and Granville's *The British Enchanters* ready to perform, the theatre was still not equipped to produce the spectacular effects necessary, so instead he seems to have bought in Greber's *The Loves of Ergasto*, produced by a visiting company of Italians, probably in Italian, and certainly a failure.<sup>83</sup> In 1706 Vanbrugh did produce *The British Enchanters* which was a considerable success, but Rich responded with Bononcini's *Camilla* (in English) which was also a success.

In 1707 the theatres came to an agreement whereby Rich exchanged his best actors for exclusive rights over musical entertainments. *The Muses Mercury* reported that *Semele* was ready for rehearsal in 1707, which supports the theory that it had not been in 1705.<sup>84</sup> It appears that Rich had agreed to perform *Semele* in the 1707 season but was outbid by Heidegger, acting for *Thomyris*:

Besides my Lord Chamberlain knows that Mr Rich was in a manner Engag'd in the presence of himselfe & my Lord Hallyfax to perform an Opera written by Mr Congreve and sett by Mr Eccles before ever Mr Heidegger offered his Opera to Mr Rich who thinks himselfe hardly used to putt by other good Bargains meerly for Mr Heideggers Interest & profit.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> For a chronology of these events, see R.D. Hulme, 'Opera in London, 1695-1706', in S. S. Kenny (ed.), *British Theatre and the Other Arts, 1660-1800* (London & Toronto, 1984), pp84-8

<sup>83</sup> Nalbach, *The King's Theatre*, pp5-6.

<sup>84</sup> Lincoln, 'The First Setting of Congreve's *Semele*', p105. Patterson argues that the long gestation was due to an unusually close collaboration between the composer and librettist. This is possible, but does not really fit with the picture of the historical circumstances. W.H. Patterson, *Semele: Structure in Baroque Opera* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Washington, 1982), p29

<sup>85</sup> Rich to Coke, ca. January 1707, reproduced in J. Milhous & R.D. Hulme (eds.), *Vice Chamberlain Coke's theatrical papers, 1706-1715* (Carbondale, 1982), p17

The season therefore included two new operas, neither of them *Semele*.<sup>86</sup> *Rosamond*, by Clayton in collaboration with Addison, was a complete failure reaching only three performances. A month later, *Thomyris* was a moderate success, and the appearance of the castrato Valentini introduced Londoners to the idea that they could have real Italian composers and performers (singing in Italian) for their operas. Perhaps because of this, or the broader pressures of theatrical management, Congreve had quit the Haymarket project altogether at the end of 1705.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Bracegirdle, for whom he had written the title role, was retiring from the stage. In the event no performances of *Semele* were recorded. Then on 13 January 1708 Vanbrugh succeeded in getting a ruling from the Lord Chamberlain that each of the theatres should produce either sung or spoken drama. This returned opera to the King's Theatre, and destroyed all possibilities of staging dramatic opera.<sup>88</sup> It seems likely therefore that because either the work or the theatre was not ready in 1705, a very narrow window of opportunity was missed. Eccles 'was immensely talented. Much of what he wrote is of Purcell calibre, and its neglect is hard to comprehend,'<sup>89</sup> and in *Semele* he showed great skill in blending aria and arioso into a seamless drama.<sup>90</sup> This illustrates again how quickly tastes and expectations were changing during this period. Instead, the arrival of Handel and first performance of *Rinaldo* on 24 February 1711 capitalised on London's readiness to accept all-sung Italian opera and took English music in a completely different direction.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p48. Drury Lane's effective monopoly of the best opera singers would have made a performance of *Semele* impossible anywhere else. Lincoln, 'The First Setting of Congreve's 'Semele'', p106. For an overview of Italian opera in London between 1700 and 1710, see W. Dean, & J.M. Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726* (Oxford, 1987), pp141-50

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p9

<sup>88</sup> C. Price, 'English Traditions in Handel's *Rinaldo*' in S. Sadie & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), p122. Dramatic opera had both spoken dialogue and sung sections and therefore needed a company of actors *and* musicians. This would not, in itself, have prevented *Semele*'s performance.

<sup>89</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p7 This is a fairer assessment than Flower's blanket assertion that English music had fallen to its 'lowest mediocrity.' N. Flower, *George Friderick Handel* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1947), p102

<sup>90</sup> H.D. Johnstone & R. Fiske, *Music in Britain – The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), pp103, 107

<sup>91</sup> D. Burrows, *Handel* (Master Musician Series, Oxford, 1994), p65. Eccles became so disenchanted by the fashion for imported Italian composers and performers that he retired to Twickenham

Opera had originally been seen by aristocratic subscribers as a way of lifting the moral tone of the theatre from bawdy comedies to heroic dramas.<sup>92</sup> However, as Italian opera, with Italian singers and composers, began to take off in popularity, several voices were raised in disquiet about this whole artistic direction. Steele had associated opera with popery as early as 1705, but the most severe warnings came from John Dennis (1657-1734), essayist, playwright and self-appointed scourge of the French.<sup>93</sup> His criticisms were different from Collier's, but they were also essentially very simple:

At a time when we are contending with our enemies for our very Being, we are awkwardly Aping their Luxuries and their Vices... and the Reigning luxury of Modern Italy, is that soft and effeminate musick which abounds in the Italian Opera.<sup>94</sup>

Unlike Collier, he had a fundamentally more optimistic attitude to modern theatre, and he openly criticised Collier for driving people out of the theatres whence they were drawn instead into gaming. He maintained that the best plays had the power to instruct, and that the English stage had helped to defend English liberties by promoting the virtues of courage, discipline and temperance:

'It belongs to Poetry only, to teach publick Virtue and publick spirit, and a noble contempt of Death.'<sup>95</sup>

However, for Dennis this power for moral instruction derived from the words, and his analysis of music shows a suspicion of its emotional and irrational powers that harks back to Plato's *Republic*. For Dennis, the moral power of the theatre depended

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and wrote only the court odes required by his royal pension., Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p31

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London*, p24

<sup>93</sup> L. Lindgren, 'Critiques of Opera in London' in Colzani &c (eds) *Il melolramma italiano in Italia a in Germania nell'eta barocca* (Como, 1995), p147

<sup>94</sup> J. Dennis, *An essay on the opera's after the Italian manner, which are about to be establish'd on the English stage* (London, 1706), p1, & preface

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p7

on its control of reason, and reason's control of music. Italian opera, by contrast, offered only sensual pleasure,<sup>96</sup> after which it is hard to return to the 'severe delights of reason.'<sup>97</sup> Wherever opera has arisen, he maintained, poetry has declined, and with it national courage and political liberties. Shaftesbury had similarly argued that Athenian old comedy had been the best remedy for pomposity and political arrogance and was thus the best model for modern criticism,<sup>98</sup> but Dennis was sceptical that any music could express these qualities because expressing noble and manly sentiments in English requires a force of consonants inimical to the 'softness of luscious sounds' of singing.<sup>99</sup> In *Rosamond*, Joseph Addison had attempted to show that English words and Italian music could be brought together successfully.<sup>100</sup> However, in the wake of its failure, and doubtless partly in self-justification, he appears to have accepted Dennis' viewpoint:

The Sounds of our English words are commonly like those of string music, short and transient, which rise and perish on a single touch; those of other languages are like the notes of wind instruments, sweet and swelling, and lengthened out into a variety of modulation.<sup>101</sup>

Addison concluded that 'nothing is capable of being well set to music that is not nonsense.'<sup>102</sup>

Dennis' criticisms had a nationalist edge. He saw the growth of effeminate music as both a cause and illustration of the corruption of manners that separated the virtue of

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<sup>96</sup> In this he was opposed by Bedford, who maintained that the imported Italian operas were in fact *more* moral than the debased English theatre. Bedford, *The Great Abuse of Musick*, p107; see also Lindgren, 'Critiques of Opera in London', p149

<sup>97</sup> Dennis, *An essay*, p5

<sup>98</sup> Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy*, in *Characteristics*, pp111, 116

<sup>99</sup> Dennis, *An essay*, p10

<sup>100</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p46

<sup>101</sup> [J. Addison] *The Spectator*, 4 August, 1711, in D.F. Bond (ed.), *Critical Essays from The Spectator* (Oxford, 1970), p240

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in G.E. Dorris, *Paulo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London 1715-1744* (The Hague, 1967), pp57-8. This anticipates the debates of the 1720s and 1730s. See Chapter Two.

ancient Rome from the modern Italians.<sup>103</sup> Poetry had sustained the ancient liberty of Athens and Rome, and with the fall of one, so the other declined.<sup>104</sup> He also presented his arguments directly in the context of the war that was still underway on mainland Europe: 'Let us take heed, that as we have taken the Opera from the Nations which we despise, it renders us not contemptible to those very nations.'<sup>105</sup> He warned that the English would never successfully produce an art which was foreign to their own culture – it was as ridiculous as trying to grow olives in Kent.<sup>106</sup> Thus as early as 1706, commentators were associating opera with an effeminacy which explicitly linked sexual (and particularly homosexual) excess with political disengagement. This in turn laid people open to political and religious slavery, as exemplified by the Catholic powers of Europe. Congreve's *Semele* engaged, perhaps unsuccessfully, with these ideas. They would still be powerful in the 1740s when Handel set the libretto.

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<sup>103</sup> The sexual implications of this grew more marked as the century progressed. Initially the main change was to transfer moral concerns from female actresses to the incoming castrati. Lindgren, 'Critiques of Opera in London', p151; J. Dame, 'Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato', in Brett, P., Wood, E., & Thomas, G.C. (eds), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (London & New York, 1994), p147

<sup>104</sup> Dennis, *An essay*, p11; T. McGeary, 'Shaftesbury on Opera, Spectacle and Liberty', *ML* 74 (1993), p535

<sup>105</sup> Dennis, *An essay*, p15

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p15

### The Sources for Congreve's Libretto

Congreve based his main plot on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but he also drew on the native English tradition of 'dramatic opera', the spoken theatre of which he was already an acknowledged master, and the rich resource of classical myth which was by 1700 available from a wide range of sources. Tracing these influences on Congreve's libretto will not only place into clear relief those parts of the text which were his own invention, but also make it possible to show exactly how he was relating to broader political, literary and cultural currents.

### **Ovid and the myth of *Semele***

The original story of *Semele* derives from the Greek myth of the birth and triumph of Dionysus. An illegitimate son of Zeus, his mother was most commonly given as Semele, daughter of Cadmus and princess of Thebes.<sup>107</sup> Dionysus faced ongoing jealous hatred from Hera. As goddess of marriage and Zeus' legal wife, she felt violent antipathy both to his mistresses and to his illegitimate offspring. She therefore persuaded Semele to seek proof of Zeus' divinity by demanding that he appear in his own form. He duly came to her clothed in thunderbolts, and she was instantly immolated. However, the foetal Dionysus was saved, and Zeus sewed him into his own thigh, from whence he was born. Hera had the baby torn apart by Titans and boiled, but Zeus ordered Rhea to restore him to life. The child was subsequently brought up by Semele's sister, Ino, and her husband Athamas. Hera therefore drove Athamas mad so that he killed his son Learchus, believing him a stag. Dionysus wandered through Egypt, Libya and India, where he spread his most powerful

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<sup>107</sup> Graves, *Greek Myths*, p56; genealogies are given by numerous classical authors; Dionysus' mother is also given variously as Demeter, Io, Dione and Persephone. When discussing the original myth I will use the Greek names, when discussing later treatments I will use the naming system of the version in question.

invention, wine.<sup>108</sup> He conquered Thrace, before returning to Thebes where he punished Pentheus for not worshipping him by having him ripped apart by maenads.<sup>109</sup> Dionysus ascended to Olympus where Hestia resigned her place in favour of him. He then descended to Tartarus and rescued Semele, raising her to divinity but changing her name to Thyone to avoid antagonising Hera.<sup>110</sup>

Like all myths, this story embodies a mixture of profound truths about human relations, ancient religious rites and half-remembered history.<sup>111</sup> It recalls the pre-Greek culture in which society was dominated by matrilineal priesthoods and human sacrifice, and the subsequent conquest of Hellas by the invading Greeks and the suppression of these rites by the conquerors.<sup>112</sup> In retelling these stories, audiences partook in a form of re-enactment of ancient rituals.<sup>113</sup> The Dionysus myth has at its heart the ritual tearing apart of the young sacrificial king, whose death would bring about the rebirth of the year.<sup>114</sup> Invading Greek tribes replaced these cults with those of Zeus and his male cohorts. This process of triumphing masculine power was preserved in myth as marriages or couplings between the incoming and the existing deities. Older goddesses were absorbed into this system as wives or daughters of the male gods, and thus secondary in status and power. Semele is most likely a form of Selene, the ancient personification of the moon.

The myths concerning Dionysus therefore contain two separate but related strands; firstly the triumph of the cult of Zeus-Dionysus over the native cult of Semele-Selene, and secondly, the spread of wine across Greece. Dionysus' travels across

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<sup>108</sup> Graves, *Greek Myths*, pp103-4

<sup>109</sup> Pentheus was the grandson of Cadmus. This is told in Euripides, *Bacchae*.

<sup>110</sup> This can be traced back to the *Homeric Hymn I to Dionysus*. Graves, *Greek Myths*, p106

<sup>111</sup> R. Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart, Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (Oxford, 2004), p4

<sup>112</sup> Before the conquest of what is now Greece by Doric Greek speakers, the inhabitants worshipped goddesses, and all religious rites were controlled by priestesses and queens. They took husbands who would reign as 'Sacred King' before being sacrificed. Graves, *Greek Myths*, p56

<sup>113</sup> Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, p11

<sup>114</sup> This became Christianised in the Eucharist as a quasi-Christian image in the early Church – aided by Dionysus' association with wine. Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, pp163-5

North Africa and India and his association with ecstatic orgies are clearly an aetiology for the spread of wine to Greece from the East.<sup>115</sup> Hera's opposition to him probably reflects conservative opponents of the new drug, as well as the instinctive human reaction against marital infidelity. In addition, Hera was an indisputably Greek goddess and her attitude may represent Greek opposition to the influx of deities from the East.

Ovid had been working on his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, for nearly a decade and was near completion when he was banished from Rome in 8CE for his *Ars Amatoria* and an unspecified offence against Augustus.<sup>116</sup> The *Metamorphoses* was his largest and most ambitious work. It consisted of fifteen books and 1200 lines of hexameters. He had already shown a fascination with ancient Roman myths in the *Fasti*, an epic poem based on the Roman calendar of festivals. The *Metamorphoses* looked back even further to Greek myths, and shows both wide research and a thorough knowledge of the previous writers. Its theme is transformations: 'formas in nova corpora mutatas' from the beginning of time through to 'mea tempora'. This *carmen perpetuum* shows Ovid's fertility of invention, treating established materials with flair and wit, often dovetailing them ingeniously into one another through subtle narrative and poetic transitions.<sup>117</sup>

The *Metamorphoses* is, however, an epic only in its length and metre, not in its treatment of the subject matter.<sup>118</sup> Ovid turns the violent and unjust world of

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<sup>115</sup> Dionysus may have been a ritual king scheduled to be sacrificed. Semele took his place, perhaps reflecting either an invasion or a revolution in the society overturning of the system of male sacrifice. It is therefore significant that only after his victory is assured is Semele restored to the Pantheon, by male gift, and to a lower station than Dionysus.

<sup>116</sup> Publius Ovidius Naso was born on 20 March 43BCE in Suomo. He grew up into the early principate of Augustus as a member of the provincial *equites*. He was educated in Rome and then Athens, and began a public career, but quickly retired to private life and his poetry. Before composing the *Metamorphoses*, he produced a string of masterpieces, largely in elegiac couplets. His precise crime remains unclear. He may have been witness to the sex scandal concerning Augustus' daughter Julia, or he may have violated the rites of the *Bona Dea*.

<sup>117</sup> *Book III*, for instance, forms a homogeneous unit focused around the house of Cadmus.

<sup>118</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. A.D. Melville with an introduction by E.J. Kenney (Oxford, 1986), p xvii



mythology into an often black comedy of manners. His abundance of wit, from sophisticated play with words and metre to the most vulgar farce found particular resonance in the eighteenth century. His gods are not the terrifying controllers of mortals' destiny that appear in Homer and Virgil,<sup>119</sup> but recognisably human men and women from his own age and experience, and 'it is even naughtier than the *Arabian Nights*. Its gods have power and passions, but very little principle...there is more sin than virtue, more pleasure than duty.'<sup>120</sup> Alongside Aristophanes and Plautus,<sup>121</sup> this style had an enormous influence on the range of ways in which Augustan writers drew on classical myths in their poetry and plays. Like the Athenian tragedians, Ovid brought acute psychological reality to half-understood myths from prehistory. However, unlike the Greek playwrights, he did so from a witty and urbane perspective.

Semele on the other hand is nothing but a black Divine Comedy, featuring a philandering and fatuously magnanimous Jupiter and his scheming and malignant shrew of a wife, and a silly, vain, greedy mortal...<sup>122</sup>

It was this approach which opened up the possibility for later writers of using mythical subjects to satirise the political and social elites. Just as classical epic could be used to praise, so classical satire could mock.

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<sup>119</sup> Ovid's poetic sympathies were more with Callimachus of Alexandria than with Virgil.

<sup>120</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation into English verse, illustrated with engravings by Hans Erni* (Verona, 1958), introduction by Gilbert Highet pxxi.

<sup>121</sup> For example Plautus' *Amphitryon*, whose version by Dryden was a major influence on Congreve's *Semele*. See below

<sup>122</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, edited with an introduction by A.A.R. Henderson (Bristol & London, 1979), p8

Ovid's account of Semele follows the death of Actaeon.<sup>123</sup> He notes dryly that Juno refuses to engage in the dispute about whether Actaeon's punishment was excessive.<sup>124</sup> She rejoiced in anything unpleasant happening to the family of Cadmus because (as Ovid reminds his reader) Jupiter had already abducted and seduced (or raped) Semele's aunt, Europa.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Thebes was founded as part of Cadmus' journey in search of her and so was particularly tainted in Juno's eyes. Ovid also recalls Juno's attempts on the lives of Jove's other illegitimate offspring, Hercules, Io, Apollo and Artemis. He throws the reader straight into Juno's rage *in media res*.

Now a fresh occasion has been added to her grief,  
and wild with jealousy of Semele,  
her tongue as ever ready to her rage,  
lets loose a torrent of abuse;  
"Away!  
Away with words! Why should I speak of it?  
Let me attack her! Let me spoil that jade!  
Am I not Juno the supreme of Heaven?  
Queen of the flashing scepter? Am I not

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<sup>123</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, ll253-315. Elements of the *Semele* story are found in a range of classical sources, both before and after Ovid. The earliest references to Dionysus are found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, written around 700BCE, and the *Homeric Hymns*. The *Theogony* insists that both Semele and Dionysus became Gods. Pindar's *Dithyrambs* and *Pythian 3* date from the mid fifth century BCE and apostrophise Semele as the goddess Thyone and mother of Dionysus. Apollodoros' *Library* 3.4.3 (c140BCE) contains the complete *Semele* story as found in Ovid, though rather more tersely. Diodorus Siculus (c50BCE) refers to Semele's birth, her deception by Hera, and her apotheosis as Thyone. In a slight variation, Ovid's contemporary Gaius Julius Hyginus (64BCE-17CE) in his *Fabulae* insists that Liber-Dionysus, already a God, was reborn through Semele and that her subsequent apotheosis was accomplished entirely with Zeus' permission. Of those writing after Ovid, two are noteworthy. Pausanias (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE) offers a natural and rational explanation for the myth - that Semele was discovered by Cadmus with the illegitimate child and put out to sea. The boy survived but she did not. This demonstrates that even in the ancient world, writers were alert to the recesses of meaning behind ancient myths. The last and most detailed classical source is Nonnos of Panopolis' *Dionysica*. The final pagan epic of antiquity, its 48 books cover Dionysus' life and campaigns in detail, conjuring up the ecstasy of his worshippers in its poetic style.

<sup>124</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, tr. Brooks-More (1922), in *The Perseus Digital Library* <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+3.251>>  
...But the spouse  
of Jove, alone remaining silent, gave  
nor praise nor blame. Whenever calamity  
befell the race of Cadmus she rejoiced,  
in secret, for she visited her rage  
on all Europa's kindred.

<sup>125</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses II*, ll833-75. Their offspring was the Minotaur

sister and wife of Jove omnipotent?  
She even wishes to be known by him  
a mother of a Deity, a joy  
almost denied to me! Great confidence  
has she in her great beauty--nevertheless,  
I shall so weave the web the bolt of Jove  
would fail to save her.--Let the Gods deny  
that I am Saturn's daughter, if her shade  
descend not stricken to the Stygian wave.”<sup>126</sup>

These lines make it clear that the affair is underway and that Semele is already pregnant. Semele's vanity is hinted at here both in the fact that she has been publicly telling people that she is pregnant with Jupiter's child, and in that she is trusting in her own beauty.

Ovid humanised the gods' emotions, something which Congreve would seize on and take to a further level in his libretto. Juno descends to Semele's palace and disguises herself as the nurse, Beroë. Ovid vividly and comically describes her feeble appearance and quavering voice as she insinuates that Semele's lover could not really be the king of the gods:

... When presently the name  
of Jove was mentioned--artful Juno thus;  
(doubtful that Jupiter could be her love)--  
“When Jove appears to pledge his love to you,  
implore him to assume his majesty  
and all his glory, even as he does  
in presence of his stately Juno--Yea,  
implore him to caress you as a God.”<sup>127</sup>

Semele herself thinks of tricking Jupiter into promising a nameless gift and Ovid dwells heavily on its dire consequences ('overjoyed at her misfortune') even before Jove has assented.

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<sup>126</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, tr. Brooks-More

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

With artful words as these the goddess worked  
upon the trusting mind of Semele,  
daughter of Cadmus, till she begged of Jove  
a boon, that only hastened her sad death;  
for Jove not knowing her design replied,  
“Whatever thy wish, it shall not be denied,  
and that thy heart shall suffer no distrust,  
I pledge me by that Deity, the Waves  
of the deep Stygian Lake,--oath of the Gods.”  
All overjoyed at her misfortune, proud  
that she prevailed, and pleased that she secured  
of him a promise, that could only cause  
her own disaster, Semele addressed  
almighty Jove; “Come unto me in all  
the splendour of thy glory, as thy might  
is shown to Juno, goddess of the skies.”<sup>128</sup>

The oath on the Stygian lake was binding even to the gods.<sup>129</sup> With regret, therefore, Jove ascends to the heavens and rains down his thunderbolts. From Ovid comes the poignant but extremely funny image of the god attempting to mitigate his power with thunderbolts specially forged by the Cyclops to be of a ‘milder heat.’ This is not enough. She is completely incinerated.

her mortal form could not endure the shock  
and she was burned to ashes in his sight.  
An unformed babe was rescued from her side,  
and, nurtured in the thigh of Jupiter,  
completed Nature's time until his birth.  
Ino, his aunt, in secret nursed the boy  
and cradled him. And him Nyseian nymphs  
concealed in caves and fed with needful milk<sup>130</sup>

Semele has had her triumph and destruction in a mere sixty-two lines.

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> It was one of the forces, such as *dike* (justice) or the *erynies* (furies), which bound even the immortals, thus limiting their caprice over the world and mankind.

<sup>130</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, tr. Brooks-More

### **Ovid's influence and status in the eighteenth century**

'It may be doubted whether any poem has had so great an influence on the literature and art of western civilisation as the *Metamorphoses*.'<sup>131</sup> Ovid's work survived dark-age Europe – where along with the *Ars Amatoria* it was a backbone of the minstrel repertoire<sup>132</sup> – to become a major inspiration for Chaucer, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Shakespeare, and even the young Milton.<sup>133</sup> Ovid's disgrace and exile in the wake of the *Metamorphoses* was also the subject of Ben Jonson's *The Poetaster*.<sup>134</sup> The first known printing in England was in 1471, and Caxton made a prose translation into English from the French in 1480. The first verse translation was that credited to Sir Arthur Golding in 1567.<sup>135</sup> This heavily moralising retelling was the version known to Shakespeare, who also learned Latin at school from the original.<sup>136</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, by far the most popular translation was that of Sir George Sandys. Five books were published in 1621, and the complete fifteen in 1626.<sup>137</sup> It was reprinted in 1632 with an extensive commentary (in many cases double the length of the passage in question) on the mythological and moral meanings of the stories, which he believed preserved ancient antediluvian truths.<sup>138</sup> Looking for the meanings behind the myths was as much a part of enlightenment thinking as it had been for classical authors and would be in subsequent ages. Sir Francis Bacon, discussing the wisdom of the ancients, was still being reprinted in

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<sup>131</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. A.D. Melville, pxxxvi-xxxvii

<sup>132</sup> G. Highet, *The Classical Tradition, Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (corrected ed. Oxford 1967), p62

<sup>133</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation into English Verse* (Verona, 1958); Introduction by Gilbert Highet, ppxiv-xv

<sup>134</sup> H. Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea in English Literature* (London, 1983), p114

<sup>135</sup> Highet, *The Classical Tradition*, p116

<sup>136</sup> L.T. Percy, *The Mediated Muse, English Translations of Ovid 1560-1700* (Hamden Conn., 1984), p7

<sup>137</sup> Percy, *The Mediated Muse*, p37

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p71

Congreve's lifetime.<sup>139</sup> He found the *Semele* story to embody a profound moral lesson:

...There is such excellent morality couch'd in this Fable, as that moral philosophy affords not better; for under the Person of Bacchus is described the nature of Affection, Passion or Perturbation, the Mother of which (though never so hurtful) is nothing else but the Object of apparent good in the eyes of Appetite. And it is always conceived in an unlawful Desire, rashly propounded and obtained, but well understood and considered; and when it begins to grow, the Mother of it, which is the desire of apparent good, by too much Fervency, is destroyed and perisheth.<sup>140</sup>

Garth in his 1717 edition excused the lack of a commentary by referring the reader to Sandys. This indicates that moral, allegorical and mythographical explanations were known to, and expected by, eighteenth-century readers.

In explaining the story, Sandys identified Cadmus (literally: 'From the East') as the bringer of writing and learning to Greece. Semele represents image and Ino, fortune.<sup>141</sup> As Bacchus represents wine, so Semele is earth and Sandys made the connection that wine grows best where the soil is rich in ashes – hence Bacchus' birth from her burned body. Sandys also considered what moral lessons the myth embodied for its classical audience. He regarded it as a lesson in the dangers of *hybris*:

Whereby the ancient taught that vnlawfull requests were punished by the Gods in consenting. But more *Theologically*, how those who search too curiously and boldly into the diuine Maiesty, shall be oppressed with the glory and brightnesse of the same.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p45

<sup>140</sup> F. Bacon, *A Discourse on the Wisdom of the Ancients* in *The essays, or councils, civil and moral, of Sir Francis Bacon, ... With a table of the colours of good and evil. And a discourse of the wisdom of the ancients. To which is added, The character of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1718), pp52-53

<sup>141</sup> He suggested that Cadmus and Semele began a viniculture cult and claimed that she was loved by Zeus to give it legitimacy. Because of this Bacchus was presented as Semele's son. Sandys speculated that Semele may have died from a fatal accident or lightning strike, which was used to add further legitimacy to the cult. [Ovid] Sandys, G., *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd* (London, 1632), p102

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

While Bacon saw the myth as dealing with the unleashing of uncontrollable and destructive passions in the name of something ostensibly good. Sandys saw it as a warning against the dangers of excessive enquiry into religious truth. At a time when parliament and the country were condemning as 'heresy' and 'irreligion' some very fine distinctions of faith, and threatening heterodox minorities with further civil punishments, the lesson of not enquiring too deeply into the mysteries of the godhead had a deep range of resonances for contemporary audiences.<sup>143</sup>

The *Metamorphoses* opened up to English writers a wide and rich world of fable.<sup>144</sup> It was particularly congenial to the poets of Restoration London.<sup>145</sup> The *Spectator's* dismissive allegation that 'Many of our modern authors...learning very often extends no farther than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', suggests that it was part of even the most modest education.<sup>146</sup> Although questions were raised about the moral suitability of the *Metamorphoses* in the school curriculum,<sup>147</sup> Sandys' translation continued to be reprinted, reaching its eighth edition in 1690.<sup>148</sup> However, it was not the only version available. Whilst Congreve was working on *Semele*, Sir Samuel Garth was assembling a translation with contributions from 'the most eminent hands' including Addison, Pope, Dryden (recently deceased), and Congreve himself. This was finally published in 1717. Book III was completed by Addison, but the description of the Cave of Sleep from book XI was the work of Congreve's friend and mentor, John Dryden.<sup>149</sup> Addison's translation of the *Semele* episode appeared earlier in 1704,

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<sup>143</sup> The Test and Corporation Acts were still in force, and the Toleration Act was widely opposed.

<sup>144</sup> Highet, *The Classical Tradition*, p207

<sup>145</sup> G.C. Brauer, *The Education of a Gentleman, Theories of Gentlemanly Education in England, 1660-1775* (New York, 1959), p75

<sup>146</sup> *The Spectator*, 30 October 1712, in Bond, *Critical Essays from The Spectator*, p55

<sup>147</sup> M.L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain 1500-1900* (Cambridge, 1959), p41

<sup>148</sup> However, many of these were pocket editions without commentary. Percy dates Trapp's Oxford lectures of 1742 as marking the beginning of Ovid's eclipse. Percy, *The Mediated Muse*, p140

<sup>149</sup> Percy, *The Mediated Muse*, p124

shortly before the planned performance of Congreve and Eccles' *Semele*.<sup>150</sup> It seems likely that Congreve knew this translation, and was possibly inspired by its subject. However, the textual evidence suggests that he was most familiar with Sandys' version.

### **Congreve's debt to Sandys, Dryden and Addison**

Congreve's libretto shows not only that he was familiar with the Semele episode and the description of the Cave of Sleep from the *Metamorphoses*, but also that he was specifically acquainted with Sandys' translation and commentary. Congreve follows Ovid in placing the story in the context of Jupiter's previous encounter with Europa. Sandys' renders Ovid's lines as:

As shee [Juno] rejoyceth at the wounds that bleed [referring to Actaeon]  
In *Cadmus* Family, who keeps in mind  
*Europa's* rape and hateth all the kind.<sup>151</sup>

And although the story of Semele hardly needs this preface for Juno's anger to be understandable, Congreve begins his libretto with:

*AFTER* Jupiter's Amour with Europa, the Daughter of Agenor, King of Phaenicia, he again incenses Juno by a new Affair in the same Family; viz. with Semele, Niece to Europa, and Daughter to Cadmus King of Thebes.<sup>152</sup>

Congreve softens Ovid's bluntness on a number of points. He calls Jupiter's ravishing of Europa an 'Amour' rather than a 'rape', but more importantly he omits any reference to Semele being pregnant, despite this being Juno's main source of grievance:

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<sup>150</sup> Various, *Poetical miscellanies: the fifth part. Containing a collection of original poems, with several new translations. By the most eminent hands* (London, 1704), pp528-533

<sup>151</sup> [Ovid] Sandys, G., *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd* (London, 1632), p86

<sup>152</sup> Congreve, 'Argument introductory to the Opera of Semele' CW. The 'Argument' is not paginated, but is placed between p793 and p794



Now new occasions fresh displeasure moue:  
For Semele was great with child by Ioue<sup>153</sup>

And again a few lines later (in Juno's voice):

But, shee conceiues, to aggravate the blame,  
And by her Belly doth her crime proclaime.  
Who would by *Iupiter* a Mother proue,  
Which, hardly once, hath happened to our loue<sup>154</sup>

This is in fact very different from Congreve's Juno. In Ovid, the main source of anger is not the affair itself but the fact that Semele is pregnant and proud of producing a royal bastard when Juno herself has had so few children with Jove.<sup>155</sup> Queen Anne's embarrassing and politically destabilizing infertility might explain Congreve's reluctance to be specific about Juno's jealousy of a fertile mistress. However, it is not only politically tactful; it is also dramatically more interesting. Congreve begins his opera before this, at Semele's planned wedding to Athamas. This has no precedent in Ovid or classical myth.<sup>156</sup> Congreve thus creates a dramatic ambiguity around whether Jove and Semele are already having a secret affair ('Can *Semele* forgo thy Love/ And to a Mortal's Passion yield?') in Act One, or whether Semele's abduction to 'endless pleasure' at the end of the act is in fact their first consummation.

A number of other phrases in Congreve's libretto suggest that he was familiar with Sandys' translation. When Juno is at her most rhetorically indignant she proclaims:<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, p87

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> She had three, Ares (Mars), Eileithyia, and Hebe.

<sup>156</sup> Athamas first appears in *Metamorphoses IV*, where he and Ino are punished by Juno for adopting the child Bacchus.

<sup>157</sup> All emphasis in the quotations from the various sources is mine, and is given to illustrate words and phrases common to the different versions.

If we a **scepter sway**, if heauen our seat  
If Ioue's fear'd **Wife and Sister** (certainly  
His sister) torment shall the **whore destroy**.<sup>158</sup>

Congreve used all three of these sharply characterised phrases in his own depiction of Juno's fury, as well as Sandys' repetition of 'sister':

If I th'imperial **scepter sway** – I swear  
By Hell –<sup>159</sup>

If I am own'd above,  
**Sister and Wife** of Jove;  
(Sister at least I sure may claim,  
Tho' Wife be a neglected name).<sup>160</sup>

Awake Saturnia from thy Lethargy;  
Seize, **destroy** the curst **Adulteress**.<sup>161</sup>

Although Congreve has changed 'Whore' to 'Adulteress', the sense is the same, and very different from Addison's more ambiguous: 'It is decreed the guilty wretch shall die.'<sup>162</sup>

Perhaps one of the most memorable phrases of Congreve's opera, and lynchpin of the whole story, was taken directly from Sandys. When Juno has tricked Semele into believing that she might be able to attain immortality, Juno advises her to demand that Jove make love to her in his immortal form:

Thus she [Juno] aduiz'd the vnsuspecting Dame;  
Who begs of *Ioue* a **boone without a name**.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, p87

<sup>159</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p808

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*, p807

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, p807

<sup>162</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation into English Verse*, p80

<sup>163</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, p87

In Congreve, this arch phrase is woven instead into Juno's sly manipulation of Semele, where it is charged with both eroticism and danger:

Juno. When Jove appears,  
All ardent with desire,  
Refuse his proffer'd Flame  
'Till you obtain **a Boon without a Name.**<sup>164</sup>

The erotic richness of Congreve's language in *Semele* is truly remarkable. Even in the relaxed moral world of Restoration comedy, characters did not openly discuss the physicality of sexual congress. Congreve, however, revels in some of his most powerfully evocative language, pushing the bounds of decency even in 1705:

2. Aug. Endless Pleasure, endless Love  
Semele enjoys above;  
On her Bosom Jove reclining,  
Useless now his Thunder lies,  
To her Arms his Bolts resigning,  
And his Lightning to her eyes<sup>165</sup>

Cup. See, after the Toils of an amorous fight  
Where weary and pleas'd, still panting she lies;  
While yet in her Mind she repeats the Delight,  
How sweet is the Slumber that steals on her eyes!<sup>166</sup>

Sem. Eager Panting,  
Fond Desiring  
With Grief now fainting,  
Now with Bliss expiring;<sup>167</sup>

Juno. By this Conjunction  
With entire Divinity  
You shall partake of heav'nly Essence.<sup>168</sup>

Given that he was in active dispute with Collier in the years preceding this, it is hard to imagine that Congreve could have written these lines without the puritanical

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<sup>164</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p823

<sup>165</sup> *ibid.*, p804

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*, p809

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, p811

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, p824

clergymen in mind.<sup>169</sup> He shows not only an act of marital infidelity, but also the blissful enjoyment of its physicality. Furthermore, like *Amphitryon*, which Collier had condemned, it shows both a king and a god 'full of lewdness' whilst Semele's aroused description of her erotic dreams and Juno's description of 'partaking of Heavenly essence' surely counts as a women 'talking smuttily'. Juno of course goes even further, actually cursing and swearing by Hell.<sup>170</sup>

Congreve also appears to have been inspired by the language in Sandys' translation of the Cave of Sleep episode in *Book XI* of the *Metamorphoses* when composing the beginning of Act Three:<sup>171</sup>

...Yet from the rock a spring,  
With streames of *Lethe* softly **murmuring**,  
**Purles** on the pebbles, and inuites **Repose**.<sup>172</sup>

This particular imagery, and especially the onomatopoeic alliteration, seems to have caught Congreve's imagination when characterising the god of sleep:

Som. **Lethe**, why does thy lingering Current cease?  
**O murmur, murmur** me again to Peace. [sinks down again.]<sup>173</sup>

And later:

Som. [rising.] More sweet is that Name  
Than a soft **purling** Stream;  
With Pleasure **Repose** I'll forsake,  
If you'll grant me but her to sooth me awake.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> It is unlikely that he would have known of Bedford's criticisms, which were published in Bristol in 1706 and 1711 respectively.

<sup>170</sup> Bedford, *The Great Abuse of Musick*, p127

<sup>171</sup> This episode was one of the available models for the opening of Act Three, although there are similar passages in the *Iliad*. In it, Iris is sent to the Cave of Sleep by Juno to bid Somnus to send Alcyone a dream in Ceyx's likeness. Significantly he delegates the task to Morpheus.

<sup>172</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, pp381-2

<sup>173</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p817

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*, p818

The sheer number of linguistic echoes points to Congreve having absorbed this translation thoroughly. In describing the Cave of Sleep, Iris addresses Somnus with 'O sleepe' and Sandys' commentary quotes a poem by Seneca which begins: 'O Sleepe/ Thou charme to all our cares...'<sup>175</sup> This finds its way into Semele's own arousal (in both senses) from her dreams in Act Two:

Sem.   **O Sleep**, why dost thou leave me?  
          Why thy visionary Joys remove?  
          **O Sleep** again deceive me,  
          To my Arms restore my wand'ring Love.<sup>176</sup>

From the Cave of Sleep episode in *Metamorphoses XI* Congreve has not only taken the character of Morpheus as Sleep's minister, but also the evocative image of a 'downie bed'. In Ovid, this is the resting place of Somnus, but is also taken by Congreve to describe Ino's sleep before being miraculously transported to Semele's palace:

Juno.   There Somnus I'll compell  
          His **downy bed** to leave and silent Cell:<sup>177</sup>

Jup.    Two winged Zephyrs  
          From her **downy Bed**  
          Thy much-lov'd Ino bear;<sup>178</sup>

The Somnus episode indicates that Congreve also knew Dryden's translation. Dryden's description of Sleep:

And **rais'd his tardy head**, which **sunk** again,  
And **sinking**, on his bosom knock'd his chin<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation into English Verse*  
<<http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/sandys/11comm.htm>>

<sup>176</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp809-10

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*, p808

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, p815

<sup>179</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation*

is echoed not only in Juno's impatient: '*SOMNUS*, awake/ Raise thy reclining Head', but also in her Act Two statement:

With Noise and Light I will his Peace molest,  
Nor shall he **sink** again to pleasing Rest,<sup>180</sup>

In Ovid, Juno tempts Semele with Jupiter's sexual prowess in his divine form: 'Such and so mighty, as when pleasure warmes/ His melting bosome, in high *Iuno's* armes'. For Congreve this imagery finds its way into the more comical lust of Somnus' desire for Pasithea, where the meaning of 'warming' becomes a priapic sexual joke:

Juno. Peace, Iris, Peace, I know how to charm him:  
Pasithea's Name alone can **warm** him.<sup>181</sup>

In Sandys' Ovid, Semele demands that Jove come to her 'as when the Inuites/ Of *Iuno* summon you to **Venus Rites**'. This is echoed in the libretto where Juno suggests to Semele that in order to obtain immortality she must couple with Jupiter. The venereal image was softened to the more respectable 'nuptial', but nevertheless remains a startlingly explicit description of the ecstasy awaiting her:

Juno. In Pomp of Majesty,  
And heav'nly Attire;  
As when he proud Saturnia charms,  
And with ineffable Delights  
Fills her encircling Arms,<sup>182</sup>  
And pays the **Nuptial Rites**.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p808

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, p818

<sup>182</sup> Addison's translation contains a passage very close to this:

In all the **pomp** of his **divinity**,  
Encompass'd round by those celestial **charms**.  
With which he fills th' immortal Juno's **arms**

It is the only passage of Addison's version with resonances in Congreve's libretto.

<sup>183</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp823-4

The image of Jove, at the climax of the story, trying to mitigate his lightning comes straight from Ovid, and Sandys' choice of words was also congenial to Congreve:

Low'd thunder and **ineuitable flame**  
Whose rigor yet he striueth to subdew...  
....There is another **lightning**, far more **milde**,  
By *Cyclops* forged with less flame and ire<sup>184</sup>

Congreve picks up both the idea of inevitability, but also the tragi-comic opposition between 'lightning' and 'mild' in characterising Jove's regrets over his duty:

Jup.     Anon, when I appear  
          The mighty Thunderer,  
          Arm'd with **inevitable Fire**...  
          ...My softest **Lightning** yet I'll try,  
          And **mildest** melting Bolt apply:  
          In vain—for she was fram'd to prove  
          None but the lambent Flames of Love.<sup>185</sup>

Congreve also mirrors both the structure and sentiment of Sandys' expression of Jupiter's regret that the oath cannot be undone:

Then fetch'd a sigh; as if his breast would teare  
(For she might not **vnwish**, nor he **vnswear**)<sup>186</sup>  
  
Ah! whither is she gone! unhappy Fair!  
Why did she **wish**?—Why did I rashly **swear**?<sup>187</sup>

On the other hand, the guarded castle where Semele reposes is Congreve's own invention, as are 'the Centinels/ On Mount Citheron'.<sup>188</sup> But they may have been inspired by Sandys' rendering of the Cave of Sleep where: 'no barking Sentinell/

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<sup>184</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, pp87-8

<sup>185</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p828

<sup>186</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, p87

<sup>187</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p828

<sup>188</sup> The dragons with 'a thousand fiery eyes' may have been inspired by Ovid's Description of Argus in *Metamorphoses I*, ll721-6; J. Solomon, 'Reflections in Ovid's Mirror' *ML* 63 (1982), p228

Here guards; nor geese, who wakefull dogs excell'.<sup>189</sup> This image of an assault on a guarded treasure also has overtones of rape and sexual violence, which is entirely appropriate to Congreve's dramatic conclusion.

It is clear, therefore, that Ovid's treatment of Semele in the *Metamorphoses*, and specifically Sandys' 1626 translation, was a prime source for Congreve's libretto. However, it does not account for any of Act One, the palace that Semele is taken to in Act Two, Juno's consequent drugging of its guards, her disguise as Ino, the appearance of Apollo, or indeed many of the subtle changes that Congreve made in characterisation and plot. For these we must look at a wider range of sources that influenced Congreve's work at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>189</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Garth Translation*



### *Semele* in the Context of English Political Theatre

There are four other identifiable strands of influence on Congreve's libretto. The first is the genre of dramatic opera as perfected by Purcell and Dryden in the 1690s, which influenced both the general structure and the tone of Congreve's drama.<sup>190</sup> The second is the plays of the late seventeenth century, both the overtly political satires and the gentler marriage comedies. In particular Shadwell's dramatic opera *Psyche* and Dryden's reworking of the Plautan satire *Amphitryon* seem to have been a direct inspiration. The third and least studied influence is the emerging genre of sentimental drama, which flourished in the early eighteenth century, but had roots much earlier. This is seen most clearly in Congreve's subplot of Ino and Athamas. Finally, Congreve drew on other elements of classical myth to give his libretto some of its most memorable moments.

The tradition of embedding political messages in musico-dramatic works dates back in England to the masques of the early seventeenth century, but it continued on the public stage in works such as *Dido and Aeneas* (Purcell and Tate, 1683?) and *King Arthur* (Purcell and Dryden, 1691-2).<sup>191</sup> In these works, mythological and historical subjects were recognised to be allegories for the current political situation, the persons of the royal family and prominent politicians. For this reason they were explicitly used by playwrights as propaganda in the politically charged atmosphere of the later Stuart era.<sup>192</sup> This was not confined to musical works, and even the most

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<sup>190</sup> The term 'dramatic opera' refers to dramas, usually in five acts, with a spoken main plot and a series of self-standing masque episodes which included solo singing, choruses and dance. The actors involved in the main plot did not take part in the musical episodes.

<sup>191</sup> Price, 'English Traditions in Handel's *Rinaldo*', p131. Political allegory in English music goes back at least as far as the madrigals composed for Elizabeth I, and indeed the plays of Shakespeare.

<sup>192</sup> The vast majority of plays and all musical theatre were newly composed, and by definition contemporary. The growth of the classical canon was only just beginning. W. Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1992), passim.

frivolous comedies often carried coded political messages. However, the combination of musical spectacle and shared myths made masques particularly valuable for imparting political values and ideas.

The same tradition was equally strong on the continent. In the 'representational' art of the European courts, this was more tightly controlled by the political elites and by the royal families in particular.<sup>193</sup> Masques in France and Italy were most often performed for weddings and similar 'occasions' and typically included a prologue flattering the monarch.<sup>194</sup> However, as will be seen in the case of *Psyche*, plays were frequently the focal point of inter- and intra-family rivalry and disputes, and rival claimants to titles or influence might patronise their own productions, putting forward their case.

### ***Semele* and the English masque and dramatic opera**

*Semele* was written to compete with all-sung Italian operas, but it also shows the influence of the English tradition of dramatic operas and masques. George Granville, Baron Lansdowne, the Jacobite peer and poet, wrote in his preface to his 'Dramatick Poem' *The British Enchanters* that:

....We have several Poems under the Name of Dramatick Operas by the best Hands; but in my Opinion the subjects for the most part have been improperly chosen; Mr. Addison's *Rosamond*, and Mr. Congreve's *Semele*, tho' excellent in their kind, are rather Masques, than Operas.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p11 and *passim*; T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford, 2002), pp29-99

<sup>194</sup> Price, 'Political Allegory', p1

<sup>195</sup> G. Granville, Baron Lansdowne, *Poems upon several occasions, with The British enchanters, a dramatick poem. By the Right Honourable George Granville, Lord Landsdown* (Dublin, 1732), preface.

This definition of *Semele* as a 'masque' comes from someone who was himself collaborating with Eccles at the time of Congreve's original libretto, so presumably knew it well.<sup>196</sup> It also assumes that at the time of publication, in 1732, readers would know of Congreve's *Semele* since he mentions it without explanation in the same breath as *Rosamond*, which was certainly performed. His insistence that *Semele* is not a true opera comes from the perspective of ten years' continental exile and a deep acquaintance with both the French and Italian traditions. However, it also draws a distinction between the all-sung *Semele* and the partially-sung dramatic operas. Congreve's libretto in fact includes features of both the masque and dramatic opera traditions, and both are fused in a wholly new manner, with neither allowed to dominate his very individual dramatic design.

The most striking reflection of the dramatic opera tradition is Congreve's structuring of Act One around the marriage rites in the temple of Pronubial Juno. In English dramatic operas, sung dialogue was rejected as irrational and inimical to gravity and deep expression.<sup>197</sup> Therefore the main action took place in spoken verse, and musical sections were confined to 'entertainments' during the action (which the characters were also watching), single songs, battle music, or scenes of solemn religious ceremony. By beginning the opera within this dramatic framework, Congreve drew not only on *Psyche* (see below), but also on Dryden's *King Arthur* (1691/2) which includes a solemn 'heathen sacrifice' in Act One:

Dryden:

Bass. Woden, first to thee  
A milk-white steed, in battle won,  
We have sacrific'd.

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<sup>196</sup> His adaptation of Shakespeare, *The Jew of Venice*, which included an interpolated masque, *Peleus and Thetis*, was published in 1701, and *The British Enchanters* though not published until 1732 was first produced at the Queen's Theatre in 1706, and was thus almost exactly contemporary with *Semele*. Nalbach, *The King's Theatre*, p10

<sup>197</sup> E.J. Dent, *Foundations of English Opera* (Cambridge & London, 1928), p2

Chorus. *We have sacrific'd*

Tenor. Let our next oblation be  
To Thor, thy thund'ring son,  
Of such another.

Chorus. *We have sacrific'd.*<sup>198</sup>

Congreve:

Priest BEHOLD! auspicious Flashes rise;  
Juno accepts our Sacrifice;  
The grateful Odour swift ascends,  
And see, the Golden Image bends.

Priests. Lucky Omens bless our Rites,  
And sure success shall crown your Loves;<sup>199</sup>

Congreve structured the whole first act of *Semele* around a ceremony. The act begins with sacrifices to Juno, interrupted by the thunder of Jove, followed by renewed, but abortive attempts to placate Juno. It concludes with the hymn of praise to Jove and Semele in celebration of her heavenly assumption. All the action takes place within and around the framing pillars of ceremonial, in recitative described by Congreve as:

*... only a more tuneable speaking, it is a kind of Prose in Musick; its Beauty consists in coming near Nature, and in improving the natural Accents of Words by more Pathetick or Emphatical Tones*<sup>200</sup>

Congreve thus used the ceremonial structure in an imaginative and innovative way to introduce material which previously would never have been accepted in English sung drama. By setting the action within this heightened dramatic context, Congreve made a serious attempt to present all-sung dialogue in a manner acceptable to an English audience.

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<sup>198</sup> J. Dryden, *King Arthur: or, The British worthy: a dramattick opera... written by Mr. Dryden* (London, 1695), p7

<sup>199</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p793

<sup>200</sup> Congreve, 'Argument', *CW*

Act Two is also framed by masque-like episodes. It takes place in the 'new erected palace' built by Vulcan to house Semele.<sup>201</sup> This scene is framed at the beginning with a series of songs and dances by Cupid whilst loves and zephyrs dance, and at the end by Jove's transformation of the scene into an arcadia, complete with rustic dances. Granville may offer an alternative explanation as to why Congreve has moved the place of action from the more prosaic Thebes to an enchanted castle:

The nature of this Entertainment requires the Plot to be formed upon some Story in which Enchanters and Magicians have a principal Part: In our modern Heroic Poems, they supply the Place of the Gods with the Ancients, and make a much more natural appearance by being Mortals, with the Difference only of being endowed with Supernatural Power.<sup>202</sup>

This passage illustrates a fundamental part of English thought about opera. Congreve used ancient gods rather than modern magicians, but his approach is similar to that employed in Act One. He has transposed the action to a magical place full of loves, zephyrs and capable of spectacular transformations, thus making recitative more acceptable to his potential audience. However, as we shall see, Congreve used this framework to introduce material in music that is far more varied than the conventions of either masques or dramatic operas would have allowed in their sung sections. In calling it a 'masque', Granville may have been referring to the fact that it all takes place in these heightened worlds, rather than *opera seria* which (though not eschewing magic), tended towards real-life historical or quasi-historical settings.

In Act Three, Congreve interpolated an episode from later in the *Metamorphoses* in order to begin the act in the magical darkness of the Cave of Sleep. The awakening of Somnus seems to owe a great deal (especially in Eccles' music) to the Cold Genius of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*. The rest of the act reverts to the magical palace

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<sup>201</sup> The scene between Juno and Iris effectively functions as a prologue to the rest of the act, and featuring two goddesses descending in chariots was quite unearthly enough to justify music.

<sup>202</sup> Granville, *Poems upon several occasions*, preface

established in Act Two and no sooner does the action return to Thebes than it is interrupted by a *deus ex machina* (literally) as Apollo comes to announce the coming of Bacchus and initiate the final chorus.

From this survey it can be seen that Congreve carefully used the conventional trappings of masque and dramatic opera to keep the action 'elevated' in terms of its place, tone and characters. This was intended to make it more acceptable to English audiences to hear the characters singing throughout. However, his real achievement was to use this as a dramatic framing device for writing profoundly human stories, far more real, complex and emotionally engaging than anything presented previously in the *musical* portions of a dramatic opera. Indeed the graphic and heart-breaking depiction, in highly naturalistic terms, of Jupiter and Semele's disintegrating relationship was explicit even in terms of contemporary spoken theatre.

At the same time, Congreve certainly did offer Eccles the opportunity for luxurious and sensuous sounds rather than the hard sense of speech. The palace of Semele is a dreamy place where sensual delight robs people of reason. John Dennis' criticisms in his 1706 *Essay* of the sensuous irrationality of opera seem particularly apt. Of course, Semele dies for her enchantment with this sensuality, so perhaps Congreve was more aware of Dennis' views than is immediately apparent. Semele herself could be an allegory for English-language opera; Semele chooses the sensuous, Italianate, Jupiter over the prosaically Anglo-Saxon Athamas, and is destroyed in the process.

### **Immediate sources for Congreve's libretto**

#### *Psyche*

The play that seems to have had most influence on Congreve's *Semele* was in fact a court drama, *Psyche*. The parallels between the two are striking. These were first

pointed out by Edward Dent in 1928 and supported by Winton Dean, although neither provides any external evidence for the relationship between the two works.<sup>203</sup> *Psyche* was written by Thomas Shadwell (1642?-92) in either 1673 or 1674 as a dramatic opera with vocal music by Matthew Locke, instrumental music by Giovanni Battista Draghi and choreography by M. St Andrée. It was adapted from the French play by Corneille, Molière and Quinault. This original had been set to music by J. B. Lully, but none of his music was used in the English version. It was, however, played by the French musicians at Charles II's court and was part of the ongoing rivalry between pro- and anti-French factions.<sup>204</sup> The main patron of the performance, and the work's dedicatee, was the Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate eldest son of the king.<sup>205</sup>

It was a work with specific and intended political overtones. It was performed shortly after James, Duke of York, had made his Catholicism public, and was part of a deliberate and concerted propaganda campaign to present Monmouth as a viable alternative successor to Charles II. Charles treated Monmouth like a Prince of Wales, allowing him a royal coat of arms without the 'baton sinister' denoting illegitimacy.<sup>206</sup> It was widely rumoured that Charles had married Monmouth's mother, Lucy Walter, while in exile in 1649. Monmouth certainly believed this and from 1662 onwards there had been persistent suggestions that Charles would declare him legitimate. James' public conversion to Catholicism lent this further urgency. Several leading politicians began to explore more seriously the possibility of making Monmouth heir to the throne. This would secure a protestant succession without the political difficulties of formally excluding James.

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<sup>203</sup> Dent, *Foundations of English Opera*, p115; W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p368

<sup>204</sup> Dent, *Foundations of English Opera*, p105. It was parodied the following year as *Psyche Debauch'd*. *ibid.*, p121

<sup>205</sup> Monmouth danced in the first performance, which was more politically direct than its French predecessor. Price, 'Political Allegory', pp8-9

<sup>206</sup> T. Harris, 'Scott [formerly Crofts], James, duke of Monmouth and first duke of Buccleuch (1649-1685)', *ODNB Online*

Although there is no external evidence for when Congreve might have seen it, a comparison of the two works supports the theory that *Psyche* was an important model for *Semele*.<sup>207</sup> Both stories are about a relationship between a god and a mortal who is destroyed when false friends of the mortal persuade her to trick the god into revealing something secret about himself. The textual similarities between this play and Congreve's *Semele* are also strong, and furthermore in several places Congreve embellishes the Ovidian original with incidents and details with direct antecedents in *Psyche*.<sup>208</sup>

Congreve's *Semele* opens with the abortive marriage of Semele and Athamas at the temple of Pronubial Juno. This has no antecedent in Ovid at all. The inspiration seems rather to be the parallel scene in Act One of *Psyche* where the priest asks for 'propitious prayers', anticipating Congreve's priests': 'Lucky Omens bless our rites/ And sure success shall crown your loves'. In *Semele* the marriage is interrupted by Jove's inauspicious portents of lightning and rain, extinguishing the holy flame. There is a clear model for this in the scene in *Psyche* at Apollo's temple, which is interrupted by fire, thunder and lightning.<sup>209</sup>

Another departure from Ovid in Congreve's libretto is the place of action. Rather than remaining within her own city, as she does in the *Metamorphoses*, Semele is transported by Jove to a 'new erected' palace built by 'Vulcan's skill'.<sup>210</sup> Shadwell's Cupid was also subsequently taken to a palace built by Vulcan. This device enabled Congreve to create a contrast between the mortal world of Act One and the divine

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<sup>207</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p368

<sup>208</sup> Solomon suggests that Ino's visit in Act Two is taken from Narcissus' visit in *Psyche*. This is one of the least convincing parallels between the two works. J. Solomon, 'Reflections of Ovid in Semele's Mirror', *ML* 63 (1982), p239

<sup>209</sup> 'O Heaven! What prodigy is this / Something is in our rites amiss' T. Shadwell, *Psyche* (London, 1690), p14; 'Avert these Omens, all ye Pow'rs! / Some God averse our holy Rites controll's'. Congreve, *CW*, p797

<sup>210</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p806



realm of Acts Two and Three. It is there that Psyche boasts 'We sport and revel all the day/ In soft delights melting the hours away.'<sup>211</sup>

Both plays hinge on the heroine's growing distrust of her lover, leading her to trick him into granting her an unnamed promise.<sup>212</sup> In both cases their lovers warn them explicitly against falling into this trap. Cupid counsels Psyche not to be untrusting,<sup>213</sup> whilst Jove warns: 'Beware of Jealousie: / Had Juno not been jealous, / I ne'er had left Olympus'. In both plays, malignant forces disguised as friends drive the heroines to their destruction. In *Semele* this is Juno disguised as Ino, rather than as Ovid's nurse Beroë.<sup>214</sup> Through this change, Congreve undoubtedly achieves greater unity, avoiding not only another character, but the mixing of 'low' and 'high' which was becoming increasingly frowned upon.<sup>215</sup> However, the impetus for this change may also have been that in *Psyche* it is her own sisters who maliciously goad her into doubting Cupid. There are also striking linguistic parallels between the two works. Not only do both gods swear by the Stygian Lake, but when Cupid has revealed his name and thus departed, Psyche exclaims: 'Ah, wither art thou fled my dear?' Jove – when *Semele* has tricked him into destroying her – similarly laments 'Ah, whither is she gone, unhappy fair?'

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<sup>211</sup> However, the similarity of these lines to the chorus in Handel's version 'Now love that everlasting boy invites/ To revel while you may in soft delights' is misleading, as these lines were interpolated into the original libretto by Handel's adaptor from Congreve's *Imitations of Horace*. The fact that they are by Congreve would nevertheless seem to indicate that he knew the Shadwell.

<sup>212</sup> This is also a common aspect of classical and teutonic myth, for instance in *Lohengrin*. A. Heuss, 'Das Semele-Problem bei Congreve und Handel' in *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* vi (1914), pp143-157. It also has a Biblical precedent in Herod's fateful promise to Salome.

<sup>213</sup> Shadwell, *Psyche*, p28

<sup>214</sup> '... 'Tis hoped, the Liberty taken in substituting Ino instead of the old Woman will be excus'd: It was done, because Ino is interwoven in the Design by her love of Athamas; to whom she was married, according to Ovid; and because her Character bears a Proportion with the Dignity of the other Persons represented. This Reason, it is presumed, may be allowed in a Thing intirely fictitious; and more especially being represented under the Title of an Opera, where greater Absurdities are every day excused.' Congreve, 'Argument' CW

<sup>215</sup> I. Jack, *Augustan Satire, Intention and Idiom in English Poetry 1660-1750* (Oxford, 1951), p6

Like Semele, Psyche dies for her love, and is taken down to Hades. However, unlike Semele, she is saved and raised to immortality when Jove appears as an eagle, introduced with the dramatic lines: 'lo! The mighty Thund'rer does appear'.<sup>216</sup> Both of these elements appear in Congreve's libretto. The eagle abducting the heroine this time comes at the beginning of the work and takes her to heaven, if not to godhead. Later, a close derivation of Shadwell's lines appears when Jove is anticipating his impending immolation of Semele at the work's dénouement: 'Lo, when I appear, The Mighty Thunderer'. However, Congreve does not follow Shadwell in granting his heroine a final apotheosis. Classical mythology clearly told that Semele was rescued from Hades by Dionysus and belatedly achieved the divinity that she had sought.<sup>217</sup> Did Congreve feel that he had to show his 'smutty' woman punished? Perhaps it is a double joke, allowing him to claim to the divines that she had been given her just deserts, whilst nodding to the classically literate audience who would know that the apotheosis of Bacchus implicitly included his mother.

Several further phrases appear in Congreve's libretto with direct antecedents in Shadwell. At the opening of the play, Psyche rejoices in the 'sweet retreat' of Arcadian pleasure where she enjoys 'all pleasure'.<sup>218</sup> Both of these phrases appear in Congreve – the first in Iris' 'There from mortal cares retiring / She resides in sweet retreat' and the second as the priest's reassurance to Cadmus that 'Endless pleasure, endless love/ Semele enjoys above'.<sup>219</sup> Later, Psyche is chided by Venus after her death for her 'pride and vanity'.<sup>220</sup> In transforming Semele's character from Ovid to the stage, Congreve significantly shifted her motivation for demanding to see Jove's real shape. In the *Metamorphoses* it is a straightforward question of doubting that he is who he says he is.<sup>221</sup> In the opera, Semele is convinced that if she makes love to

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<sup>216</sup> Shadwell, *Psyche*, p51. The image of the eagle is also found in classical myth of Ganymede.

<sup>217</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 940; Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.38

<sup>218</sup> Shadwell, *Psyche*, p4

<sup>219</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p804

<sup>220</sup> Shadwell, *Psyche*, p41

<sup>221</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses III*, tr. Brooks-More

Jove in his real form, that she will thereby become immortal herself. At her death, Semele's words therefore echo Venus' reproaches:

Sem. Ah me! Too late I now repent  
My Pride and impious Vanity.<sup>222</sup>

The final act of *Semele* opens in the Cave of Sleep. This episode is dramatically superfluous to the plot as its only function is to allow Juno to drug the dragons guarding Semele (themselves an addition by Congreve), and to give Jove a sufficiently erotic dream to make him weak to Semele's demands.<sup>223</sup> However, its change in dramatic colour from what has gone before is extremely effective. The final act of *Psyche* begins with just such a change of mood, opening in the darkness of Hades, and this seems to be the most obvious inspiration for Congreve's addition.<sup>224</sup>

The most interesting parallel, though, is the final chorus, which allows each of the gods in turn a moment of musical glory to boast of their achievements. Shadwell gives the last word to Bacchus, in a hymn to the superior power of wine over love:

Bacch. The Delights of the Bottle, and the Charms of good Wine,  
To the Power and the Pleasures of Love must resign,  
Though the night in the Joys of good Drinking be past,  
The Debauchees but till the next Morning will last.<sup>225</sup>

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When presently the name  
of Jove was mentioned--artful Juno thus;  
(doubtful that Jupiter could be her love)--  
'When Jove appears to pledge his love to you,  
implore him to assume his majesty  
and all his glory.'

<sup>222</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p830

<sup>223</sup> As shown above, the dragons may have been influenced by Ovid's description of Argus. See J. Solomon, 'Reflections of Ovid in Semele's Mirror', p228

<sup>224</sup> Portrayals of darkness were also a key element of the masque form – embodied in the anti-masque dances.

<sup>225</sup> Shadwell, *Psyche*, pp52-3

In Shadwell's dramatic opera, the chorus is part of an interpolated masque. Congreve's final chorus instead emerges directly from the plot, but follows both Shadwell's sentiments and verse structure almost to the letter:

Apollo. Then Mortals be merry, and scorn the Blind Boy;  
Your Hearts from his Arrows strong Wine shall defend:  
Each Day and each Night you shall revel in Joy,  
For when Bacchus is born, Love's Reign's at an end.<sup>226</sup>

*Psyche* had a specific and clear political agenda. In the context of its commissioning and performance, it celebrated the victory of native over imported, French, absolutist, art. In its plot, it is clearly an allegory for the affair between a royal and non-royal. The mortal, Psyche, dies for the sake of their love, but is subsequently made immortal. This could be seen as arguing that although the mistress had been put aside and was now dead (Walter had died in 1658), she could still be raised retrospectively to royal rank if the marriage were admitted.<sup>227</sup> The play therefore glorifies the relationship between the divine (royal) Cupid and the mortal (common) Psyche – as the Duke of Monmouth wished to legitimise the relationship between Charles II and his mother. Congreve would have been alert to all of these strands of meaning when he encountered it. They were integral to *Psyche*'s performance and meaning to contemporaries. By writing in this genre and using this type of myth, Congreve would have known that *Semele* would also be read for political meanings, both open and covert.

### *Amphitryon*

*Amphitryon* (1690) was written two years before Congreve came into Dryden's orbit and three years before his first major success.<sup>228</sup> Like *Psyche* it was adapted from the

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<sup>226</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p832

<sup>227</sup> This was possible because Charles did not marry Catherine of Braganza until 1662, after Walter's death, so the royal marriage would not be invalidated.

<sup>228</sup> *The Old Batchelour* was first performed in 1693, though written earlier. *The Double Dealer* and *Love for Love* followed in 1694 and 1695 respectively.

French of Molière, but ultimately based on a surviving original by Plautus. Dryden's *Amphitryon* gave Congreve a modern model for using myth to satirise the mores and actions of the political and social elites. What results is a hilarious bedroom farce which, like *Psyche*, has a serious purpose. Dryden's 'last and greatest comedy...was provoked by political disaster and financial exigency.'<sup>229</sup> He intended his audience to see in Jove's usurpation of Amphitryon a parallel with William's invasion of England and usurpation of James.

The presentation of the play's political message was necessarily subtle, as Dryden was no longer in a position of political safety or influence. Having been an active propagandist for the Stuarts and James II in particular, Dryden was stripped of his official posts after the Glorious Revolution.<sup>230</sup> He returned to writing for the London stage as a freelance poet, and therefore had to balance comment on the changed political landscape with a need to reassure the new regime that he was not a threat. Rather than write an openly vicious satire, he retreated into the superficially safe world of the marriage comedy. *Amphitryon* tells the story of Jove's plan to father Hercules by the virtuous Alcmene. Like Congreve's Bacchus, Hercules will be a hero 'Who shall redress the wrongs of injur'd Mortals/ Shall Conquer Masters and reform the World.' Since Alcmene is virtuous, Jove impersonates her husband Amphitryon. With Apollo's help, Jove prolongs the night of bliss to twenty-four hours.<sup>231</sup>

The parallels between this and *Semele* are, at the general level, the fusing of mythical-historical subject matter with the broad farce of sex-comedy and, at the

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<sup>229</sup> M. Corder (ed.), *Four Restoration Marriage Plays* (Oxford, 1995), pxxxi

<sup>230</sup> John Dryden (1631-1700) was the dominant literary figure of his generation. Created Poet Laureate in 1668, and Historiographer Royal in 1670, he was a loyal tory who defended Charles II and James II from the whig attempts to exclude James from the succession. P. Hammond, 'Dryden, John (1631-1700)', *ODNB Online*

<sup>231</sup> J. Dryden, *Amphitryon, or, the two Sosias* (Rev. ed., London, 1690), pp1-2

specific level, the comic portrayal onstage of the king of the gods.<sup>232</sup> Dryden deliberately avoided clear personal parallels with any specific monarch. Although William III did have a relationship with Elizabeth Villiers,<sup>233</sup> Dryden's portrayal of Jupiter owes far more to the charismatic and energetically libidinous Charles II, whose affairs had often been portrayed by satirists as a form of tyranny over the nation.<sup>234</sup> Dryden was making a waspish point about the general abuse of royal power, drawing a parallel between Jove's moralising justification for his acts (both the necessity of fate and the fathering of a hero) and the whigs' use of 'providence' to claim high moral superiority for their own act of political violence in 1688. At the conclusion of *Amphitryon* is Hercules, the glorious issue (and successor) of the reigning monarch:

Jup.   What he [Jove] enjoys, he sanctifies from Vice,  
          And by partaking, stamps into a Price...  
          ...From this auspicious Night shall rise an Heir  
          Great Like his Sire, and like his Mother Fair.  
          Wrongs to redress and Tyrants to disseize  
          Born for a World that wants a Hercules.  
          Monsters and Monster-Men he shall engage,  
          And toil and struggle thro' an impious Age.<sup>235</sup>

After the tawdry comedy that has led up to this moment, the audience is clearly supposed to recognise the rhetoric as empty and hypocritical, and Jove's 'rights' over other people's wives as wholly unjustified. The humour stems from the contrast between his thunderous appearance and his slavishness to his own lusts.<sup>236</sup> Jove's actions were based on lust and arrogance, not a selfless duty to his people. Dryden is explicitly rejecting the idea that the Glorious Revolution can be justified by its own

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<sup>232</sup> They also share the 'Enchanted rod' which Mercury wields in *Amphitryon* and Somnus holds in *Semele*. It is not found in the main classical sources. Dryden, *Amphitryon*, p20

<sup>233</sup> This was mocked in Motteux and D. Purcell's *The Loves of Mars and Venus*. Price, 'Political Allegory', p20

<sup>234</sup> P. Hammond, 'The King's two bodies: representations of Charles II' in J. Black & J. Gregory (eds) *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain, 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1991), p29; Corder, *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, pxxxiv

<sup>235</sup> Dryden, *Amphitryon*, p56

<sup>236</sup> Brown, *English Dramatic Form*, p30

success.<sup>237</sup> Neither the fact that Alcmene is fooled and enjoys Jove's embraces, nor the benefits to the world of the new-born Hercules makes it morally right.<sup>238</sup> In the same way, the mercantile and political benefits of 1689 do not justify the abrogation of the legitimate hereditary succession. Dryden makes this final point clear in his absolute refusal to give the play a conventionally happy conclusion.<sup>239</sup>

Compare this to Apollo's annunciation of the birth of Bacchus in Congreve. In Congreve's conclusion, the achievements of alcohol are given the same rhetorical flourish as Dryden gives to the seven labours, but whether the audience is to take them as literal or ironic is never made clear. In the context of Collier's criticisms that Congreve glorified 'vice' this ending seems extraordinary. Having shown the pleasures of adultery for two acts, Congreve undercut the 'just moral lesson' served up to his heroine by inserting an ending which praises drunkenness as superior to love, at a time when there was a perceived increase in drinking.<sup>240</sup> The needless provocation of the final chorus shows that Congreve was no longer interested in defending himself on Collier's terms.

Apollo. From Semele's Ashes a Phœnix shall rise,  
The Joy of this earth, and Delight of the skies:  
A God he shall prove  
More mighty than Love,  
And a Sovereign Juice shall invent,  
Which Antidote pure  
The sick Lover shall cure,  
And Sighing and Sorrow for ever prevent.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> The providentialist argument ran that God had favoured the victors in battle, and thus granted the right of conquest. However, in the 1690s this was also combined with a whig idea that the religious and commercial benefits of the revolution justified the setting aside of strict royal lineage.

<sup>238</sup> Alcmene's own sexuality is more developed than in the French model, again illustrating the relatively liberal attitudes in English theatre in the 1690s. Corder, *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, pxxxvi

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*, pxi

<sup>240</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p224

<sup>241</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p832

Both works end with a hymn of praise to a new ruler. However, the political landscape changed between Dryden writing *Amphitryon* and Congreve writing *Semele*. Throughout the 1690s the failure of first Mary and then Anne to produce an heir threatened to undo the settlement of 1689. By 1705-6 this had been resolved by the Act of Settlement (1701). However, there was still considerable anxiety about the succession. As a whig, Congreve is likely to have been sympathetic to the Hanoverian cause during these negotiations. Perhaps it is stretching the evidence to see George I as the new Bacchus, but his succession was in certain respects of dubious legality, and yet justified by circumstance. It is entirely plausible that Congreve's libretto is pointing up the end of the debauched Stuarts (in the person of Jove), and by implication the Pretender as well, to be replaced by a new line of monarchs, who are not in direct lineal descent, but whose potential achievements make them worthy to reign. This would of course associate Sophia and George with the god of alcohol, but there is no evidence that Congreve had any difficulty with drink. It is equally possible that the end is an ironic reference to the Hanoverians' demonstrable lack of flamboyance and excess.

#### *Les Amours de Jupiter et de Semele*

There is also an earlier treatment of the *Semele* story which bears several similarities to Congreve's version. Claude Boyer's<sup>242</sup> *Les Amours de Jupiter et de Semele* was published in 1666.<sup>243</sup> Though described on its title page as a *Tragédie*, it is rather a machine-play. These entertainments grew out of the court ballets and were spectacular productions involving gods, goddesses, ascents and descents, and generally striking visual production.<sup>244</sup> This was of course very similar to the

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<sup>242</sup> The Abbé Claude Boyer (1618-1698) was a rival of both Racine and Boileau. Of his many theatre works, only the last two, *Jephté* (1691) and *Judith* (1695) were well regarded at the time. The only work in English on Boyer is C. C. Brody, *The Works of Claude Boyer* (New York, 1947)

<sup>243</sup> C. Boyer, *Les Amours de Jupiter et de Semele. Tragédie par Monsieur BOYER* (Paris, 1666)

<sup>244</sup> Brody, *The Works of Claude Boyer*, p112



aesthetic of English opera at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>245</sup> Boyer's play was written in rhyming couplets with some songs. The prologue and dedication offers a reminder of the continental tradition of directly associating Jupiter with the reigning monarch:

Au Roy...  
Sire,  
Ceux qui verront à la teste de mon Ouvrage  
Vostre Auguste Nom avec celui de Jupiter.<sup>246</sup>

It was a tradition of machine plays that whilst Jupiter would retain some mythological trappings, he would appear as a seventeenth-century gentleman, with all of the attendant human weaknesses and frailties.<sup>247</sup> This is very similar to Dryden's portrayal of Jupiter in *Amphitryon* and Shadwell's gods in *Psyche*. This common approach to divine characterisation is only the first of a remarkable number of similarities which strongly suggest that Boyer's play was a source for Congreve's libretto.

The most striking similarity is that in Boyer's play, Semele is betrothed to another mortal, Alcmeon, and her father is trying to conclude the alliance as the play opens.<sup>248</sup> Then, in Act Two, Jupiter appears to Semele in disguise to woo her as a shepherd. He transforms the park into an enchanted garden, just as he turns his palace into an Arcadia in Act Two of Congreve's libretto. This is cut short by the fact that Cadmus insists that Semele and Alcmeon marry that day.<sup>249</sup> As Semele waits in

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<sup>245</sup> The preface to the *Psyche* explains that 'the great design was to entertain the Town with variety of Musick, curious dancing, Splendid scenes and machines...' Shadwell, *Psyche*, preface. See also Price, 'English Traditions in Handel's *Rinaldo*', p125

<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*, piii

<sup>247</sup> Brody, *The Works of Claude Boyer*, p112

<sup>248</sup> This is less classically apt than Congreve's version. In mythology, Alcmeon was one of the sons of the Seven Against Thebes, and thus lived several generations later than Semele. See Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p384. See also Brody, *The Works of Claude Boyer*, p117

<sup>249</sup> Congreve's Cadmus says 'invent no new delay, on this auspicious day'. Congreve, *CW*, p794

the enchanted garden she is serenaded by Venus and two Cupids, as at the beginning of Act Two of Congreve's libretto.

Act Four opens, like Congreve's Act One, in the temple of Hymen, goddess of marriage, with Semele unsure how she can forgo a god's love for that of a mortal.<sup>250</sup> Hymen appears demanding that they must not force Semele into marriage, followed by Jupiter, disguised as Minerva. Again this is reminiscent of Jupiter's attempts to prevent the marriage ceremony in Congreve's opera. Recognising him, Semele demands that if he really loved her he must appear in his true form as she would otherwise be disgraced. In Act Five Jupiter arrives, as in Congreve's Act One, borne by an eagle.<sup>251</sup> However, in this case the palace is incinerated by his thunderbolts and Semele perishes, with Alcmeon committing suicide in despair. It is then made clear that Semele has in fact been raised to a divine status and the tone mirrors the sentiments that Congreve gives to the priests at the end of Act One:<sup>252</sup>

Jup.    Roy de Thebes, je viens consoler ta douleur,  
          Cesse de t'affliger du trespas de ta fille,  
          Et rends graces au Ciel, d'un illustre malheur  
          Qui consacre a jamais l'honneur de ta famille

          Mais pour ne pas doubter d'un sort si glorieux,  
          Qui la rend par sa mort plus brillante & plus belle  
          Nuages ouurez-vous, & monstres à ses yeux,  
          Ce' qu'a fait pour sa fille une main immortelle  
                  [Semele paroist au fond du Theatre d'enhaus dans un Ciel  
                  lumineux.]<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Brody, *The Works of Claude Boyer*, p118. In Congreve it is Juno's temple, but the overall effect is the same.

<sup>251</sup> *ibid.*, p119

<sup>252</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p803

          'Hail, Cadmus, hail! Jove salutes the Theban King.  
          Cease your Mourning,  
          Joys returning,  
          Songs of Mirth and Triumph sing.'

<sup>253</sup> Boyer, *Les Amours de Jupiter et de Semele*, p93

This also mirrors Congreve's glorification of the new deity at the end of the opera. None of the similarities outlined derives from Ovid, so their closeness requires explanation. This tradition of French theatre was very close to the spectacular productions of English dramatic opera, and there was no shortage of French theatrical exports to England at this time, not least *Psyche*. It seems, therefore, that Boyer's work should be added to Congreve's probable sources.

### *Rosamond*

Addison and Clayton's *Rosamond* was first performed, without success, in 1707, shortly before the planned premiere of *Semele*. Like *Semele*, *Rosamond*'s eponymous heroine is the mistress of a king (though in this case the mortal king of England), and the plot turns on the Queen's revenge on her. The Queen's fury could have come directly from Juno's opening speech:

Queen. My wrath, like that of Heav'n, shall rise  
And blast her in her paradise...  
'Tis her crime to be lov'd  
'Tis her crime to have charms<sup>254</sup>

The queen's attempt to poison Rosamond is narrowly averted, but the king is sent a vision of England's future greatness (symbolized by Blenheim Palace) which returns him to his duty to both country and wife.<sup>255</sup> The opera ends with a chorus in praise of conjugal love as Rosamond is deposited in a convent.<sup>256</sup> The conventional morality of this ending is in stark contrast with that of *Semele*, and illustrates just how daring Congreve's libretto was. However, the two works nevertheless share a very large number of poetic similarities, including 'purling stream',<sup>257</sup> 'fly, fly to my arms',<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> J. Addison, *Rosamond, An opera. Humbly inscrib'd to Her Grace the Dutchess of Marlborough* (London, 1707), pp2-3

<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*, p28

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.*, p36

<sup>257</sup> *ibid.*, p8. In *Semele*, Somnus says 'More sweet is that name / Than a soft purling stream.'

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*, p10, In *Semele*, Jupiter sings, 'Come, come to my arms' [repetition of 'come' is Eccles].

'He loves and is loved',<sup>259</sup> 'Behold, the brazen gates unbarr'd',<sup>260</sup> and 'Hence, ye fears and doubts remove'.<sup>261</sup>

The two works also share an emphasis on ideas of flames and burning as a symbol of passion, such as the Queen's: 'With grief, and rage, and love, I burn'.<sup>262</sup> The two authors both worked on Garth's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (though this does not necessarily imply a close working relationship). Even if the similarities between the two works were entirely coincidental, the failure of an opera with such close resemblances to *Semele* may provide another explanation for why Congreve chose to remove it from the London stage.

### **Congreve, the succession, and Loyatism versus Jacobitism**

A favourite dramatic device of Restoration and post-Restoration theatre was the analogy between a domestic drama and the national political situation. From the late seventeenth century onwards, that often meant the succession question. Charles II had made his position clear when he commissioned Dryden to write *Albion and Albanius*, setting out the clear hereditary right of James to succeed.<sup>263</sup> Thereafter the issue of the legitimate extent of political power was revisited by playwrights from both sides of the political spectrum in Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), Lee's *The Massacre of Paris*, Rowe's *Tamerlane*, and, after *Semele*, in Addison's *Cato* and

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<sup>259</sup> *ibid.*, p17, In *Semele*, the heroine laments: 'I love, and am loved.'

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, p19, In *Semele*, Cadmus reports 'Scare we the brazen gates had passed.'

<sup>261</sup> *ibid.*, p26, In *Semele*, Jupiter comforts Semele with 'Lay your doubts and fears aside' and then later 'Thy needless fears remove / My fairest, latest, only love.'

<sup>262</sup> *ibid.*, p31, which Jupiter almost answers in *Semele* with his transformation of the palace to an arcadia where '...without the rage of jealousy they burn / To taste the sweets of love without its pains.'

<sup>263</sup> Price, 'Political Allegory', p2

Cibber's *The Non-Juror*.<sup>264</sup> As Curtis Price has pointed out, it would be surprising if Congreve was not engaged with this strand of discourse.<sup>265</sup>

The tory royalist position was that God had conferred on the king patriarchal power over the whole nation, and that this power could only be transferred by direct succession to the next in line.<sup>266</sup> Such power was held to operate at all levels of society, right down to the family unit, where the father exercised equally absolute power. Congreve's *Love for Love* therefore presented, in the voice of Sir Sampson, a father's thoughtless, domineering autocracy in order to ridicule tory justifications of divine-right monarchy:

Sir S. Why, sirrah, mayn't I do what I please? Are not you my slave?  
Did not I beget you?  
And might not I have chosen whether I would have begot you or not?  
Oons, who are you? Whence came you?  
What brought you into the world?...  
Did you come a volunteer into the world?  
Or did I beat up for you with the lawful authority of a parent,  
and press you into service?<sup>267</sup>

The very first words spoken by a principal character in *Semele* immediately introduce us to the traditional domineering father of Restoration comedy:

Cad. Daughter, obey,  
Hear, and obey.  
With kind Consenting  
Ease a Parent's Care;  
Invent no new Delay.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England*, pp7-72

<sup>265</sup> Price, 'Political Allegory', p20. *Tamerlane* contained a particularly flattering quasi-portrayal of William III.

<sup>266</sup> The most famous example of this theory was given by Robert Filmer, against whom Locke's First Treatise was directed. R. Filmer, *Patriarcha, or the natural power of Kings* (London, 1680); J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London, 1698)

<sup>267</sup> W. Congreve, *The Comedies of William Congreve* ed. E.S. Rump (London, 1985), p243

<sup>268</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p794

In *Love for Love*, Angelica had schemed to avoid a forced marriage, whilst *The Old Batchelour* turned on the failed marriage of the eponymous hero to Sylvia. Thus in *Semele*, despite the classical setting, audiences were on familiar territory. The next lines introduce the strong-willed heroine who will try to resist her father's schemes:

Sem. Ah me!  
[*apart.*] What Refuge now is left me?  
How various, how tormenting,  
Are my Miseries!  
O *Jove* assist me,  
Can *Semele* forgo thy Love,  
And to a Mortal's Passion yield?<sup>269</sup>

However, she is plotting not an alternative marriage, but an extra-marital liaison. Attempted seductions are central to Congreve's comedies. In *The Old Batchelour* there is a plan to cuckold Fondlewife; in *Love for Love* Scandal tries to seduce Mrs Foresight, and there are multiple intrigues and mis-seductions in *The Way of the World*. The influence of this type of drama is also evident in the almost embarrassing haste – a mere five lines – with which Congreve ties up the hanging relationship between Ino and Athamas:

Ino. ...And added, as from me he fled,  
That *Jove* ordain'd I *Athamas* should wed.  
Cad. Be *Jove* in every thing obey'd.  
Atha. Unworthy of your Charms, myself I yield;  
Be *Jove's* Commands and yours fulfill'd.<sup>270</sup>

We can see therefore that Congreve is working with very familiar dramatic elements in adapting Ovid's plot to the post-Restoration Stage.

A less subtle use of the analogy between domestic drama and national politics was Cibber's *The Non-Juror* (1717), which caricatured the great critic of the theatre, Jeremy Collier, as the eponymous villain – a scheming non-juring clergyman. It spelt

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<sup>269</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p794

<sup>270</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p831

out the dangers to Britain of allowing crypto-Jacobites political influence.<sup>271</sup> One of the common themes of political drama after 1689 was to use the story of a woman wooed by two lovers as an analogy for England having to choose between the Stuart and protestant monarchs.<sup>272</sup> This form of cultural politics was obviously open equally to loyalist and Jacobite propaganda. The Stuarts were more obviously charismatic than the Hanoverians and their absence from England only served to heighten their romantic aura.<sup>273</sup> The Pretender was therefore often portrayed in songs as an absent lover.<sup>274</sup>

In this context, *Semele* can be read in a number of ways, most obviously as a cautionary tale. Semele herself is England (or Britain). A legitimate marriage has been planned for her by her family to Athamas, an upright, respectable, if slightly dull foreign monarch. Semele faces a choice between her planned husband and her secret lover.<sup>275</sup> By 1705, when *Semele* was probably written, the Act of Settlement (1701) made clear that the legal successor was indeed a foreign monarch, the Electress of Hanover (and by extension, Georg Ludwig). However, in Congreve's libretto Semele refuses her duty and is instead seduced by the rakish charm of Jupiter.<sup>276</sup> Semele's abduction by her lover brings violence, chaos, and all the imagery of a destructive invasion.

Priests. Be gone, and fly this holy Place with Speed:  
This dreadful Conflict is of dire Presage;  
Be gone, and fly from Jove's impending Rage.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> C. Cibber, *The Plays of Colley Cibber* ed. R.L. Hayley (2 vols, New York & London, 1980), I, pxxiii

<sup>272</sup> R. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p 212

<sup>273</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p50

<sup>274</sup> M. Pittock, 'The Culture of Jacobitism' in J. Black (ed.), *Culture and Society 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1997), p130

<sup>275</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p797

'O Jove, in Pity teach me which to chuse,  
Incline me to comply, or help me to refuse.'

<sup>276</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p797

<sup>277</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p798. However, this may well equally have been a direct mockery of the religious interpretation of the storms of 1703 as divine punishments on the theatres for their immorality.

In his 1736 tract, *The Idea of a Patriot King*, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke caricatured those who in asserting the divine right of kingship raised the figure of the monarch to such exalted status that they were 'Jupiters'.<sup>278</sup> It is therefore not difficult to see how this king of the gods could represent the Pretender, who based his claim to the throne entirely on his divine lineage, and by extension represented the continental tradition of absolutist kingship exemplified by Louis XIV. Yet whilst he is charming, Jupiter quickly becomes neglectful of his new conquest. More importantly, he is not a free agent, but already owes a higher duty to his legal partner, Juno – just as the Catholic Stuarts owed their ultimate loyalty not to Britain, but to the Pope, the enemy of liberty and true religion. Juno demands absolute obedience or destruction:

Juno. How long must I endure?—  
How long with Indignations burning,  
From impious Mortals  
Bear this insolence!<sup>279</sup>

A battle of wills ensues between Semele (Britain) and Juno (Catholicism) over which the ineffectual Jupiter has no control. He can only stand by and watch with horror as his loved one is destroyed:

Jup. My softest Lightning yet I'll try,  
And mildest melting Bolt apply:  
In vain—for she was fram'd to prove  
None but the lambent Flames of Love.  
'Tis past, 'tis past Recall.  
*She must a Victim fall.*<sup>280</sup>

The warning is clear. However charming and well meaning the Stuart pretenders, they cannot help but expose Britain to the rapacious power of Popery, which threatens the freedoms and very existence of Englishmen, just as imported opera

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<sup>278</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p207

<sup>279</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p807

<sup>280</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p828



threatened native art and liberties by seducing Britons with continental decadence and effeminacy, undermining courage, protestant identity, and finally liberty itself.<sup>281</sup>

The obvious difficulty of this reading is what to make of the ending. According to this scenario, Bacchus would be the issue of the union between Britain and the Stuarts. The most plausible reading would be that if a Stuart heir could be brought up a protestant (i.e. a proper union of Stuart blood with English religion) he would be able to restore unity by bringing together non-jurors and whigs. There were attempts throughout the early eighteenth century to persuade the Stuarts to embrace Anglicanism, or to have Charles Edward brought up by protestant tutors.<sup>282</sup> Queen Anne would have much preferred that solution to the Hanoverian succession, which troubled her right up to her death.

### ***Semele* and sentimental drama**

‘Sentimental drama’ is difficult to define. It ‘is thoroughly discredited as a catchall phrase’<sup>283</sup> and is probably best described as a series of characteristics that certain plays and novels share to a greater or lesser degree, rather than as a specific genre.<sup>284</sup> The major study is by Sherbo and he identifies in it six key elements: 1) concern and sympathy for distressed virtue; 2) admiration for the ‘fundamental goodness of human nature’;<sup>285</sup> 3) the portrayal of vice as leading from human weakness rather than evil; 4) the figure of the forlorn maiden; 5) the (often excessively) repentant rake; and finally 6) the abused wife. These elements were, of course, all present in English drama well before the seventeenth century.<sup>286</sup> The difference is the tendency

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<sup>281</sup> Dennis, *An essay*, p15 & passim. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p73

<sup>282</sup> H. St John [Viscount Bolingbroke], *Bolingbroke's Political Writings* ed. B. Cottret (Hants & London, 1997), p33

<sup>283</sup> R.D. Hume, *The Rakish Stage, Studies in English Drama 1660-1800* (Illinois, 1983), p178

<sup>284</sup> Hume suggests that the dichotomy between sentimental and satirical comedy was overstated by Goldsmith, and that the differences are ones of emphasis rather than genre. *ibid.*, p319

<sup>285</sup> Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama*, p25

<sup>286</sup> *ibid.*, p15

of drama during certain periods to emphasise and dwell on them.<sup>287</sup> 'The sentimental dramatist [is] concerned primarily with distressed virtue, and admiration for innate human goodness'.<sup>288</sup> In practice this meant a tendency to heighten and even to distend scenes of forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, and death for the maximum emotional effect.<sup>289</sup>

The blossoming of this type of work in the early eighteenth century had its roots in the 'affective tragedies' of the Restoration, which substituted at the focus of the drama 'an undeserved situation of its central character', rather than the heroism of an aristocratic hero.<sup>290</sup> Its major successor was the heavy emotionalism of the cult of 'sensibility' in the later eighteenth century.<sup>291</sup> Its definition as a dramatic style was clearly apparent by 1752<sup>292</sup> and contemporaries, such as Horace Walpole, referred to it as 'bourgeois tragedy'.<sup>293</sup> During the 1700s when these themes were emerging, critics tended to disparage the results as emotionally self indulgent, excessive and shallow.<sup>294</sup> Modern critics have largely concurred.<sup>295</sup> However, there was a revival of these dramas in the 1750s, followed by a period of dominance in the 1770s,<sup>296</sup> and their influence should not be ignored.

Brett and Haggarty have demonstrated the influence of sentimental drama on Handel's *Athalia*, summed up by the oratorio's pathos, sentiment and final triumph of feeling over heroism.<sup>297</sup> There are also a number of elements which *Semele* has in common with sentimental drama. Its main protagonists, though immoral in their

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<sup>287</sup> *ibid.*, pp62-5

<sup>288</sup> *ibid.*, p100

<sup>289</sup> For instance the reconciliation scene of *Love's Last Shift*. *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, pp62-3

<sup>290</sup> Brown, *English Dramatic Form*, p69

<sup>291</sup> Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, p148

<sup>292</sup> Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama*, p2

<sup>293</sup> *ibid.*, p10

<sup>294</sup> *ibid.*, p4

<sup>295</sup> Sherbo describes it as 'a debased literary genre, incapable of producing literature of any marked degree of excellence.' *ibid.*, pvii

<sup>296</sup> When they were likewise attacked for their lack of realism or genuine social criticism. *ibid.*, p5

<sup>297</sup> P. Brett, & G. Haggarty, 'Handel and the Sentimental: The Case of *Athalia*' *ML* 68 (1987), p118 & passim

various ways, are weak rather than genuinely evil. In Juno we have the very popular stock figure of the 'abus'd wife',<sup>298</sup> and in Jove the equally popular figure of the (in this case too late) repenting rake.<sup>299</sup> However, the most clearly sentimental element of the opera is the portrayal of the relationship between Ino and Athamas, which dominates much of Act One. They are constant in their loves, in spite of the treatment they receive, and up until this point they have suffered silently and patiently. Neither embodies the traditionally noble characteristics of heroic virtue, military courage or magnanimity. Moreover, the emotion that they inspire in the audience is primarily pity for their emotional distress. They are neither particularly admirable, nor do they evoke the feelings associated with tragedy. Theirs is a domestic sadness of unrequited, and in one case unnoticed, love.

The scene is set beautifully by Congreve. Even before Ino and Athamas are developed, the tone is set by Semele confessing to the inner turmoil of her love for Jove. She is placed in the role of the distressed maiden, although those who knew their Ovid would suspect that her distress was possibly due to being already pregnant with Jove's child. In an aside, Semele confesses her true feelings before Athamas sings:

Sem. O *Jove* assist me,  
Can *Semele* forgo thy Love,  
And to a Mortal's Passion yield?  
Thy Vengeance will o'ertake  
Such Perfidy.  
If I deny, my Father's Wrath I fear.<sup>300</sup>

We are thus aware that his love is not requited and that what he perceives as signs of affection for him are actually marks of Semele's distress at the impending nuptials. We therefore pity him, even as he himself is happy:

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<sup>298</sup> Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama*, p25

<sup>299</sup> *ibid.*, p33. For an example of how this persisted and developed right up to the time of Handel's *Semele* see Fielding, H., *The Wedding Day* ed. Henley, W.E. (The Complete Works of Henry Fielding Esq., New York, 1967), Vol. 5, p137

<sup>300</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p794

Ath.    See, she blushing turns her Eyes:  
          See, with Sighs her Bosom panting:  
          If from Love those Sighs arise,  
          Nothing to my Bliss is wanting.

Hymen haste, thy Torch prepare,  
          Love already his has lighted,  
          One soft Sigh has cur'd Despair,  
          And more than my past Pains requited.<sup>301</sup>

This is followed immediately by Ino's aside, confessing to her secret love for Athamas, and we are introduced to the real distressed maiden – a character suffering for love, but doing so in silence because of both her goodness and her inner turmoil.<sup>302</sup>

She thus refuses to speak even under the interrogation of her father, sister and future brother-in-law. The interruption of Jove's thunder then clears the stage for the pair, with Athamas now conscious of Semele's rejection of him. Again the drama focuses on his suffering, emphasising his 'torture', 'love' and 'despair'. Congreve emphasises how like each other they are in suffering for unrequited love:

Ath.    O Athamas, what Torture hast thou born!  
          And O, what hast thou yet to bear!  
          From Love, from Hope, from near Possession torn,  
          And plung'd at once in deep Despair.

Ino.    Turn, hopeless Lover, turn thy eyes,  
          And see a Maid bemoan,  
          In flowing Tears and aking Sighs,  
          Thy Woes, too like her own.

Ath.    She weeps!  
          The gentle Maid, in tender pity,

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<sup>301</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p795

<sup>302</sup> *ibid*, p795

I can no longer hide my Passion;  
It must have Vent—  
Or inward burning  
will consume me.

Weeps to behold my Misery!  
So Semele wou'd melt  
To see another mourn.  
Such unavailing Mercy is in Beauty found,  
Each Nymph bemoans the Smart  
Of every bleeding Heart,  
But where she herself inflicts the Wound<sup>303</sup>

What makes this 'sentimental' in character is the fact that it goes on for a whole scene at this emotional level. They are prevented from achieving any resolution of this emotional tension by the reappearance of Cadmus, bringing news of Semele's abduction. The tone shifts abruptly back into the mythical-ceremonial. This sub-plot then hangs over the whole rest of the opera until its hasty resolution in Act Three, where Athamas' act of marrying Ino also has strong resonances with the sentimental, showing the triumph of virtuous duty over personal and selfish feelings.

Juno provides a very different perspective on the stock character of the abused wife. She is almost a parody or even reverse-image of the sentimental ideal. Congreve reminded his readers in the preface that Juno was still furious over Jove's 'amour' with Europa, so when first introduced she is doubly incensed by both his behaviour and the vanity of the mortal mistress.<sup>304</sup> However, this is where the sentimentalism ends, because unlike the patient suffering wives whose exemplary virtue brings their husbands back to the straight and narrow, Juno plots a vicious and devious revenge.<sup>305</sup> She does not seem to suffer a moment of doubt, or regret, enjoying her short-lived triumph to the full.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> *ibid*, pp798-9

<sup>304</sup> By Ovid's description, this was a rape and it would therefore be perverse for Juno to blame the victim. However, by leaving the point ambiguous in his preface, Congreve introduces one more psychological level, and makes Juno's hatred for Semele more understandable.

<sup>305</sup> For instance in Cibber's *The Careless Husband*, when Lady Easy discovers her husband asleep with their maid she puts his Steinkirk back on his head to prevent him getting a chill, thus provoking his repentance. Cibber, *The Plays of Colley Cibber* p391

<sup>306</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p829  
Above measure  
Is the pleasure,  
Which my revenge supplies.  
Love's a bubble,

Jove himself comes close to the aesthetics of sentimental drama in the role of repentant rake. He exemplifies the idea of a man led into sin by weakness rather than evil. He does not do anything at all in the opera with the intention of causing pain or suffering. He simply pursues his own loves and lusts, whose draw for him is stronger than his sense of matrimonial duty. Congreve's portrait is of a serial monogamist who genuinely loves each of his conquests, even if not for long. His repentance in Act Three fulfils the stock reformation of such men.<sup>307</sup> However, it is not in time to save Semele from destruction. His grief is genuine, but not deep enough to mend his behaviour. Its threefold repetition might well be seen as the sort of 'luxuriating' that characterised sentimental drama:

Jup.     Ah! whither is she gone! unhappy Fair!  
           Why did she wish?—Why did I rashly swear?  
           *'Tis past, 'tis past Recall.*  
           *She must a Victim fall.*  
           Anon, when I appear  
           The mighty Thunderer,  
           Arm'd with inevitable Fire,  
           She must needs instantly expire.  
           *'Tis past, 'tis past Recall.*  
           *She must a Victim fall.*  
           My softest Lightning yet I'll try,  
           And mildest melting Bolt apply:  
           In vain—for she was fram'd to prove  
           None but the lambent Flames of Love.  
           *'Tis past, 'tis past Recall.*  
           *She must a Victim fall.*<sup>308</sup>

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Gain'd with trouble,  
And in possessing dies.  
With what joy shall I mount to my heav'n again,  
At once from my rival and jealousy freed!  
The sweets of revenge make it worth while to reign,  
And heav'n will hereafter be heav'n indeed

<sup>307</sup> Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama*, p34

<sup>308</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p828

Sentimentalism, however, does not dominate *Semele*, not least because it eschewed both comedy and bawdy.<sup>309</sup> As we have seen and will see below, both of these were integral to Congreve's drama.

### ***Semele* and other classical allusions**

Congreve also drew on other aspects of classical literature and myth for *Semele*.<sup>310</sup> The first classical allusion not derived from the original story as found in Ovid is the eagle which abducts Semele during Act One. Whilst he may well have drawn on *Psyche* for this, the classical image of Jupiter abducting a lover in the form of an eagle was Ganymede, the Trojan prince whose beauty was such that Zeus brought him to Olympus to be his cup-bearer – also earning the anger of Hera.<sup>311</sup> It has already been noted that Congreve took the description of the Cave of Sleep from Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>312</sup> However, two elements of this scene derive from Homer's *Iliad*. Firstly Hera's demand for Hypnos to put Zeus to sleep:

There [in Lemnos] she [Hera] encountered Hypnos, the brother of Thanatos. She clung fast to his hand and spoke a word and called him by name: 'Hypnos, lord over all mortal men and all gods, if ever before now you listened to word of mine, so now also do as I ask; and all my days I shall know gratitude. Put to sleep the shining eyes of Zeus under his brows as soon as I have lain beside him in love. I will give you gifts; a lovely throne, imperishable forever, of gold. My own son, he of the strong arms, Hephaistos, shall make it with careful skill and make for your feet a footstool on which you can rest your shining feet when you take your pleasure.'<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama*, pp73, 86

<sup>310</sup> For the classics in the seventeenth-century curriculum see Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain*, p41 & passim

<sup>311</sup> *Metamorphoses* X. Ganymede (Latin: Catamitus) was often represented as the god of homosexual love, but that is unlikely to be relevant here, except as the abduction of an illicit lover.

<sup>312</sup> It is also found in Hesiod, *Theogony* 758

<sup>313</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 14.231-291. Quoted at *The Theoi Project* <<http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/KharisPasitheia.html>>. Both elements also appear in the *Dionysiaca*, but this is a late (5<sup>th</sup> Century CE) compilation from the earlier sources, and Congreve is far more likely to have read the *Iliad*.

Secondly, because Hypnos is afraid of Zeus, Hera resorts to further bribery, which also provides Congreve with one of the opera's comic moments:

Hypnos, why do you ponder this in your heart, and hesitate? Or do you think that Zeus of the wide brows, aiding the Trojans, will be angry as he was angry for his son, Herakles? Come now, do it, and I will give you one of the younger Kharites for you to marry, and she shall be called your lady; Pasithea, since all your days you have loved her forever.

Congreve takes this incident directly for the beginning of his Act Three, right down to the name of the nymph, Pasithea, promised to Somnus. This provides Juno with the means to get past the dragons, but also Somnus' sending of Morpheus to give Jove an erotic dream, to leave him the more susceptible to Semele's demands. This gives Congreve a strong visual and dramatic contrast from the court of Act One and the palace of Act Two. It also allows him to develop fully the range of images of sleep and dreams which pervade the drama.

Finally, Congreve introduced a dramatically inspired mythological element: the mirror.<sup>314</sup> Whilst classical mythology abounds with mirrors, there are none in Ovid's tale of Semele. In that version, it is doubting Jove's godhead that provokes her demand that he appear in his divine form. In Congreve's opera, it is her own ambition for divine status which propels her, encouraged by seeing herself transformed into a goddess in Juno's deceiving mirror.<sup>315</sup> The mirror thus becomes an emblem of this vanity, and carries with it associations of Echo and Narcissus, as well as Germanic fairy-tales such as Snow White. In early classical cultures, mirrors were associated with Aphrodite/Venus and particularly with brides. Thus it brings together, at the climax of the opera, the idea of beauty and marriage, just at the point where Semele uses her physical charms to trick Jupiter into a physical consummation which will kill her.

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<sup>314</sup> Solomon, 'Reflections of Ovid in Semele's Mirror', p238. The deceiving mirror also appears in Handel's early oratorio *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707), revised as *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità* in 1737.

<sup>315</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p822



### Congreve's *Semele* Libretto

The libretto is one of the greatest ever written in English. In reconciling the conventions of classical opera to a plot with genuine character development, it shows 'phenomenal quality'.<sup>316</sup> It is both compelling human drama and hugely entertaining, showing 'extraordinary sophistication [in] its comedy'.<sup>317</sup> A close analysis shows that it is tightly constructed and that the plot, themes and poetic imagery, and characterisation are integrated with skill, care and sensitivity.

### **Imagery and themes**

#### *Fire and Flames*

Congreve's libretto contains several unifying strands of poetic imagery. The first is the idea of fire and flames. This appears in the very first line of the opera, and points forward to the flames of Semele's death.

1 Pr.    BEHOLD! Auspicious Flashes rise;  
            Juno accepts our sacrifice.<sup>318</sup>

Both the literal flames of sacrifice and the metaphorical flames of passion are present from the very opening of the work. Both meanings prefigure Semele's destruction. Both senses also come together in descriptions of Jupiter's power and in the conflict of wills between him and Juno.

[It lightens, and Thunder is heard at a distance; then, a Noise of Rain; the Fire is suddenly extinguish'd on the Altar: the Chief-Priest comes forward.]

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<sup>316</sup> Lincoln, 'The First Setting of Congreve's *Semele*', p106

<sup>317</sup> Johnstone & Fiske, *Music in Britain – The Eighteenth Century*, p107; J. Keates, *Handel, The Man and his Music* (London, 1985), p252

<sup>318</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p793

1 Pr. Avert these Omens, all ye pow'rs!  
Some God averse our holy Rites controls,  
O'erwhelming with sudden Night, the Day expires!  
Ill-boding Thunder on the Right Hand rolls,  
And Jove himself descends in Show'rs  
To quench our late propitious fires.<sup>319</sup>

That Jove has power to enflame as well as to extinguish also points forward to the dénouement. Cadmus, having witnessed Semele's abduction, exclaims:

Cad. Scarce we the brazen Gates had pass'd,  
When Semele, around her Head  
With azure Flames was grac'd,  
Whose Lambent Glories in her tresses play'd,<sup>320</sup>

However, images of fire and combustion are also used to describe the flames of divine and human passion. Thus Athamas in his first aria calls on Hymen, using 'lighted torch' to signify both passionate desire, and the physical flame on the altar blessing the auspicious marriage:

Ath. Hymen Haste, thy torch prepare,  
Love, already has his lighted.<sup>321</sup>

Ino also uses an image of burning to describe her unspoken pain at Athamas' insensibility towards her passion for him:

Ino. I can no longer hide my Passion;  
It must have Vent –  
Or inward burning  
Will consume me.<sup>322</sup>

Most graphic, however, is the fiery passion of jealousy and anger aroused in Juno at the beginning of Act Two:

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<sup>319</sup> *ibid.*, p797

<sup>320</sup> *ibid.*, p802

<sup>321</sup> *ibid.*, p795

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.*, p795

Juno. Thou know'st what Cares infest  
My anxious breast  
And how with Rage and Jealously I burn:  
Then why this long Delay?<sup>323</sup>  
.....  
No more – I'll hear no more.  
How long must I endure? –  
How long with Indignations burning,  
From impious Mortals  
Bear this insolence.<sup>324</sup>

This passion encompasses precisely the type of jealous pain and destruction from which Jupiter promises Semele an escape in the Arcadian paradise that closes Act Two:

Jup. There without the Rage of Jealousy they burn,  
And taste the Sweets of Love without its Pains.<sup>325</sup>

Flames are also a metaphor for erotic desire, and in particular the heat between Semele and Jupiter at the beginning of Act Two:

Cup. Come Zephyrs, come, while Cupid sings,  
Fan her with your silky wings  
New Desire  
I'll inspire  
And revive the dying Flames.<sup>326</sup>

The link between sexual passion and Semele's growing lust for power and status is explored just before her encounter with the disguised Juno:

Sem. I love and am lov'd, yet more I desire;  
Ah, how foolish a Thing is Fruition!  
As one Passion cools, some other takes Fire,  
And I'm still in a longing condition.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> *ibid.*, p805

<sup>324</sup> *ibid.*, p807

<sup>325</sup> *ibid.*, p816

<sup>326</sup> *ibid.*, p809. Handel set this, but cut it before the conducting score was copied. See Chapter Four.

Given the use of heat metaphors to describe genuine desire, it is significant that Juno's magic mirror pictures Semele in divine radiance but not warmth; light, not heat:

Juno. Behold in this Mirrour  
Whence comes my Surprize,  
Such Lustre and Terror  
Unite in your Eyes  
That mine cannot fix on a Radiance so bright,  
'Tis unsafe for the sense, and too slipp'ry for sight.<sup>328</sup>

This imagery reaches its climax with Semele's destruction. With dark retrospective irony, Semele refuses Jove's 'Proffer'd Flame' until he is prepared to give her its godlike version. She thus dies for getting exactly what she asks for. Jove, 'all over Fire' with desire for her, grants her wish to sleep with him in his divine form, and thus she dies from the excessive heat of his sexual energy.<sup>329</sup> Semele admits as much as she dies, repeating twice the burning that causes her death:

Sem. Ah me! Too late I now repent  
My pride and impious Vanity.  
He comes! Far off his Lightnings scorch me.  
- I feel my life consuming:  
I burn, I burn – I faint – for pity I implore  
O help, O help – I can no more [Dies]<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> *ibid.*, p820. This was cut by Handel's adapter. See Chapter Four.

<sup>328</sup> *ibid.*, p822

<sup>329</sup> *ibid.*, p828

Anon. when I appear  
The mighty Thunderer,  
Arm'd with inevitable Fire  
She must needs instantly expire...  
My softest Lightning yet I'll try,  
And mildest melting Bolt apply:  
In vain – for she was fram'd to prove  
None but the lambent Flames of Love

<sup>330</sup> *ibid.*, p830. The sexuality of this passage may have been even more overt in the 1740s. In Cleland's erotic novel, *Fanny Hill*, the heroine repeatedly uses 'inflamed' to describe her own sexual arousal. J. Cleland, *Fanny Hill, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Wordsworth Classics, London, 2000), p16 and *passim*. See also below, Chapter Four.

*Passion as Suffering*

The image of 'proving' oneself in the sense of making the soul fireproof is also used by Cadmus when he brings news of Semele's abduction when he says 'Prepare O Athamas to prove the sharpest pangs that e'er were born / Prepare with me our common loss to mourn.'<sup>331</sup> Desire is frequently described in terms of suffering in the libretto of *Semele*. The first emotion that Semele expresses is her unhappiness and suffering, expressed in the most painful terms:

Sem.   How various, how tormenting  
[apart] Are my miseries!  
          O Jove assist me,  
          Can Semele forgo thy Love  
          And to a Mortal's Passion yield?<sup>332</sup>

This is particularly the case for Ino and Athamas, both suffering from unrequited love. This silent suffering shows the influence of sentimentalism and the sentimental style in drama. Both evoke pity in the audience through their patient and silent pain:

Ath:   Oh Athamas, what Torture hast thou born!  
          And O, what hast thou yet to bear!  
          From Love, from Hope, from near Possession torn,  
          And plung'd at once in deep Despair.<sup>333</sup>

Whilst Athamas repeatedly refers to his 'despair', Ino describes herself as 'afflicted':

Ino.   ...What I endure!  
          Or cou'd I tell thee –  
          Thou, Athamas,  
          Woulds't for a while  
          Thy Sorrows cease, a little cease  
          And listen for a while  
          To my Lamenting.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> *ibid.*, p802

<sup>332</sup> *ibid.*, p794

<sup>333</sup> *ibid.*, p798

However, pain is used not only to describe unrequited love. It is also used to describe the nature of successful love and sexual desire within a relationship. The coupling of desire with pain finds erotic voice in Semele's longings for Jupiter – which also points clearly forward to the way in which she will die:

Sem. Eager Panting  
Fond Desiring  
With Grief now fainting  
Now with Bliss expiring;  
If this be Love, not you alone,  
But Love and I are one.<sup>335</sup>

All of these images give added emphasis to Congreve's eroticising of Semele's end. The linking of death and orgasm was and is a commonplace of both English and European poetry.<sup>336</sup> Here Congreve takes this poetic conceit to its natural conclusion and makes Semele's death the direct outcome of her sexual longing for Jupiter.

### *Sleep and Dreams*

Congreve's libretto contrasts images of passion, burning, and suffering with the equally powerful idea of sleep and dreams. This countervailing atmosphere pervades the castle where Semele resides as Jupiter's mistress:

Sem. O Sleep, why dost thou leave me?  
Why thy visionary joys remove?  
O Sleep again deceive me,  
To My arms restore my wandering love.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> *ibid.*, p799

<sup>335</sup> *ibid.*, p811

<sup>336</sup> This is also evident in the French settings of *Semele* discussed in Chapter Three, and it also found explicit expression in English erotic writing where both orgasm and penetration are described as 'dying'. See Cleland, *Fanny Hill*, p31

<sup>337</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp809-10

The erotic nature of her dreams is made clear in the preceding aria.<sup>338</sup> Congreve's implication is that in this world the only real solace from the pains of love is found in the deceiving unreality of dreams. All love is painful and potentially destructive; only in fantasy can the inevitable and constant combination of pleasure with pain be avoided. As with fire, sleep appears *both* as a poetic metaphor and as a concrete aspect of the plot. These two aspects, the metaphorical and the concrete, come together in the Cave of Sleep. Like Semele, Somnus initially finds solace and peace only in sleep:

Som. Leave me, loathsome Light,  
[waking]Receive me, silent night  
Lethe, why does thy lingering Current cease?  
O murmur, murmur me again to peace.<sup>339</sup>

The binary opposition of love and pain with sleep and dreams is re-emphasised in Juno and Iris' duet as Somnus wakes at the prospect of the nymph Pasithea's love. Sleep provides the only respite from the pains of love, but at the same time love's passions can dispel sleep:

Juno Only love on sleep has pow'r  
& Iris. Oe'r gods and men  
Tho' Somnus reign  
Love alternate has his hour.<sup>340</sup>

However, sleep is to become one of the tools that Juno will use against Semele. Not only will it be used to help her past the dragons that guard Semele's palace, but it will also be used to weaken Jupiter's resolve in anticipation of Semele's demands. Congreve makes clear the relationship between erotic desire and the weakening of judgement in Juno's instructions to Somnus:

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<sup>338</sup> *ibid.*, p809

Dance around her  
While I wound her,  
And with pleasure fill her dreams

<sup>339</sup> *ibid.*, p817

<sup>340</sup> *ibid.*, p818

Juno. And more to agitate  
His kindling Fire,  
Still let the Phantom seem  
To fly before him,  
That he may wake impetuous,  
Furious in Desire;  
Unable to refuse whatever Boon  
Her Coyness shall require.<sup>341</sup>

Jupiter is duly visited by the dream. He emerges full of affectionate ardour. Here sexual desire is linked for perhaps the one and only time in the opera with genuine affection.<sup>342</sup> But 'all over Fire' with 'Desire', he grants Semele's wish and the world of the pains and sufferings of love triumphs over the dream-world of fantasy romance that Jupiter had attempted to preserve.<sup>343</sup>

### *Ambition*

The nature of ambition and *hybris* is explored in depth in Congreve's libretto. In Act One, Semele's motivation is presented entirely as that of love when she says 'O Jove, assist me / Can Semele forgo thy Love / And to a Mortal's Passion yield?' However, by contrasting Jove's love with that of a 'mortal' Semele voices an implicit snobbery about giving up one of a high social station for one of a lower. This prepares the audience for the tension that will grow during the last two acts. At the end of Act One, Semele is worshipped by the priests and augurs as Jupiter's equal. In an ironic reversal of what will prove to be Semele's end, an augur describes how she has overcome Jove's thunder:

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<sup>341</sup> *ibid.*, p819

<sup>342</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p825

Come to my Arms, my lovely fair / Soothe my uneasie Care:  
In my Dream late I woo'd thee / And in vain I pursu'd thee,  
For you fled from my Pray'r / And bid me despair...  
...When I languish with Anguish / And tenderly sigh,  
Can you leave me, deceive me / And scornfully fly?  
Ah fear not, you must not deny.

<sup>343</sup> W. Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting, A Study of the Relationship between English Music, Poetry and Theatre* (London, 1965), p253



2. Aug. On her Bosom Jove reclining,  
Useless now his Thunder lies,  
To her Arms his Bolts resigning,  
And his Lightning to her eyes.<sup>344</sup>

In addition, the priest calls the people to sacrifice both to Jupiter and to Semele in celebration of the union. Semele was already semi-divine as a great granddaughter of Jupiter and daughter of Harmonia. In becoming the consort of the king of the gods, she has become worthy of worship in her own right:

1 Pr. Haste, haste, haste, to Sacrifice prepare,  
Once to the Thunderer, once to the Fair:  
Jove and Semele implore:  
Jove and Semele like Honours share;  
Whom Gods admire, let Men adore.<sup>345</sup>

There are two meanings of immortality explored in the libretto: the first, that of living indefinitely, the second, holding power and status. By the opening of Act Two, Semele is aware of aspiring to the first of these, feeling the contradiction between her perceived status and her real nature. She is concerned that she will die whilst Jupiter will not, and this is because of how comparatively short in terms of his own life span Jupiter's amours were:

Sem. Mortals whom Gods affect  
Have narrow Limits set to Life,  
And cannot long be bless'd.  
Or if they could—  
A God may prove inconstant.<sup>346</sup>

She is conscious that her status is maintained only by Jupiter's favour and that by her own nature alone she is of an inferior station to those around her.<sup>347</sup> However, Semele

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<sup>344</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p804

<sup>345</sup> *ibid.*, p804. The significance of Handel's cut here is considered in Chapter Four.

<sup>346</sup> *ibid.*, p812

<sup>347</sup> *ibid.*, p814

'Still I am mortal / Still a woman;

later becomes aware of a desire for the second type of immortality, that which encompasses power and status.<sup>348</sup> Jupiter perceives that the logical end of this would be marriage and the displacement of Juno as legitimate queen consort. Knowing that this is impossible, he resolves instead to distract her by transporting her sister, Ino, to see her where they can both enjoy a spectacle of Arcadian pleasures:

Jup. Too well I read her Meaning,  
[apart.] But must not understand her.  
Aiming at Immortality  
With dangerous Ambition,  
She wou'd dethrone Saturnia;  
And reigning in my Heart  
Would reign in Heav'n.<sup>349</sup>

However, the distraction only works for a short time. By Act Three, Semele is conscious not only that she wants more, but that it is the nature of desire that however much she has, she will always want more.<sup>350</sup> Picking up the themes of both flames and passion from earlier in the opera, Congreve brings them together to portray ambition as being a passion in itself, having all the uncontrolled power of lust:

Sem. Whate'er I possess  
Soon seems an Excess.  
For something untry'd I petition;  
Tho' daily I prove  
The Pleasures of love,  
I die for the Joys of Ambition.<sup>351</sup>

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And ever when you leave me / Tho' compass'd round with Deities  
Of Loves and Graces / A Fear invades me,  
And conscious of a Nature / Far inferior,  
I seek for Solitude / And shun Society.'

<sup>348</sup> She assumes that once made immortal, she will have the power to make others divine: 'with charms like mine I'll grace thee.' *ibid.*, p824

<sup>349</sup> *ibid.*, p814

<sup>350</sup> This idea of desire as all-consuming anticipates the philosophy of Schopenhauer for whom: 'life consists of an endless willing, trying, hoping, striving, groping, yearning...and what is more, this endless willing is inherently unsatisfiable because the moment a wish is gratified another takes its place...' B. Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London, 2000), p166

<sup>351</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp820-1

But this awareness is not enough to quench her desire for more and she is easy prey for Juno's subtle manipulation. The last three lines of her aria are filled with retrospective irony with a play on the double meaning of 'proof'. They are directly answered by Jove's last comment on her destruction: '...for she was fram'd to prove / None but the lambent Flames of Love.' Semele herself at the last repents her 'Pride and impious Vanity'. Aiming above one's station is not merely dangerous; it is an offence against the natural order, which Semele learns too late for herself – though not for her son.

### **Characterisation**

#### *Semele*

Congreve spared no effort to give Bracegirdle a part of rich complexity, warmth and humanity. The Romans gave Semele the name Stimula, and for Congreve she relates to the world in an exclusively sensual way. She is, and knows she is, a figure ruled by desires – both loves and jealousies. However, she is also an eighteenth-century heiress, not a mythical figure, and her marriage is implicitly also about reasons of state. Her first words are an aside to Jove pleading to give her the strength either to go through with the marriage or to refuse:

Sem. If I deny, my father's wrath I fear  
O Jove, in Pity teach me which to chuse  
Incline me to comply or help me to refuse.<sup>352</sup>

Her decisions are based on fear of her father (to whom she clearly feels some sense of duty) and love for Jupiter. Semele is then allowed to delight in the 'endless

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<sup>352</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p795

pleasure' of her affair with Jupiter, but here again quickly becomes dominated by her desires, which are beginning to turn to jealousy:

Sem. Let me not another Moment  
Bear the pangs of absence  
Since you have form'd my soul for Loving  
No more afflict me  
With doubts and cruel jealousies.<sup>353</sup>

In Congreve's version, these qualities are ascribed firmly to her femininity. In hinting about her mortal status to Jupiter, Semele draws attention to the fact that these specifically female qualities are what drew him to her in the first place:

Sem. With my Frailty don't upbraid me  
I am Woman as you made me.<sup>354</sup>

However, Semele remains driven by an all-consuming desire for more: more love, more status, and more security. This desire for more is inherently destructive. It is not the achievement, but the wanting, desiring and chasing that fires her. Desire in her is self-perpetuating and as it will not be contained, except by her destruction. It is therefore appropriate that Semele snares Jupiter with a promise for a 'boone without a name,' the ultimate example of a desire without a spoken end. Just as she had predicted, she finally asks for something which in granting will lead to her destruction.<sup>355</sup> There is no doubt in Semele's mind that her death is due to her 'Pride and impious Vanity.'<sup>356</sup>

Semele goes on a considerable emotional journey from aborted marriage to destruction by Jupiter's lightning. She begins as a quiet and submissive daughter, ready to go through with an arranged and loveless marriage. After her abduction by

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<sup>353</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p810

<sup>354</sup> *ibid.*, p813

<sup>355</sup> Congreve, 'Argument', *CW*

<sup>356</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p830

Jupiter we see her in the ecstasies of love, but very quickly this is transformed into the gradual and inevitable breakdown of the relationship. This portrayal onstage of a couple in the final stages of a relationship's collapse was remarkable for the eighteenth-century stage and still has the power to make a modern audience uncomfortable, particularly as Semele whips herself into a temper with 'I'll be pleased with no less'.<sup>357</sup> At her death, Semele is racked by remorse and sadness, and a sudden understanding of herself and the relationship. This brings her character to a tragic death, unleavened by the apotheosis that Greek mythology offered. It therefore exemplifies the inevitable *nemesis* that follows overreaching *hybris*.<sup>358</sup>

### *Jupiter*

Jupiter is very much the 'Restoration rake.'<sup>359</sup> With heavy debts to Plautus, via Dryden and the French tradition, the king of the gods is portrayed with a completely human set of attributes and preoccupations. He does not appear in the first act, except by proxy. When he appears in Act Two he is the epitome of urbane charm, immediately excusing his long absence from his latest conquest:

Jup. Lay your Doubts and Fears aside  
And for Joys alone provide  
Tho' this Human Form I wear,  
Think not I Man's falsehood bear.<sup>360</sup>

There seems little reason to doubt that at this moment he loves her, and is genuinely upset by her unhappiness:

Jup. It gives the Lover double pain,  
Who hears his Nymph complain  
And hearing must refuse her.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> 'No no I'll take no less' in Handel's version.

<sup>358</sup> The element of classical tragedy is considerably stronger in Handel's version. See Chapter Four.

<sup>359</sup> 'Jupiter is the typical Restoration rake who understands Semele only as a desirable object.'

Lincoln, 'The First Setting of Congreve's 'Semele'', p108.

<sup>360</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p811. Respire became 'repose' in Handel.

But we are never allowed to forget that his difficulties arise from the fact that this is not a real relationship for him, and that he cannot offer Semele permanence, parity, or indeed monogamy, for instance when he explicitly warns Semele:

Jup.    Beware of Jealousie:  
          Had Juno not been jealous,  
          I ne'er had left Olympus  
          Nor wander'd in my Love.<sup>362</sup>

And later, when he comes close to admitting that she is merely the latest in a string of conquests:

Jup.    Thy needless fears remove  
          My fairest, latest, only love.<sup>363</sup>

Jove's easy-going hedonism finds expression in his conjured Arcadia at the end of Act Two.<sup>364</sup> This is a fantasy world where love is not polluted by the constraints of marriage, jealousy and all of the pain that that entails; a world without social constraints and real life's inevitable hurts:<sup>365</sup>

Jup.    Now all this Scene shall to Arcadia turn  
          The Seat of happy Nymphs and Swains  
          There without the Rage of Jealousie they burn  
          And taste the Sweets of Love without its Pains.<sup>366</sup>

But as we have seen, a major theme of Congreve's libretto is that love and pain are inextricably linked. Indeed it is perhaps a measure of the genuine integrity of a relationship that it produces pain as well as pleasure. Jove can only avoid this

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<sup>361</sup> *ibid.*, p814

<sup>362</sup> *ibid.*, pp812-3

<sup>363</sup> *ibid.*, p815

<sup>364</sup> For discussion of the conventions of 'Pastoral' drama, see Chapter Four.

<sup>365</sup> In this he resembles Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*. However, his dilemma is more like that of Wagner's Wotan as he finds himself bound by his own - and the furies' - laws.

<sup>366</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p816

suffering by keeping his relationships on an entirely superficial level. The Arcadian fantasy is a pleasant fiction. Because the married Jupiter cannot give himself, his possessions and powers unconditionally to Semele, the relationship must remain asymmetrical and is ultimately destroyed by her desire for emotional parity. Jupiter can only offer his most intimate self at the cost of the relationship.<sup>367</sup>

### *Juno*

Like Jupiter, Juno is a recognisable 'type' of the eighteenth-century stage and novel. She is the injured wife, the jealous harridan, and the malevolent witch all rolled into one.<sup>368</sup> So extravagant and dramatic is her fury that we barely have time to register the many wrongs done to her by Jupiter.<sup>369</sup> Her appearance, complete with underling, as the heroine's nemesis at the beginning of Act Two mirrors the appearance of the Sorceress at the same point in Purcell and Tate's *Dido and Aeneas*, and like her she uses a disguise to destroy the relationship by trickery.<sup>370</sup> Juno is incandescent with rage and filled with a destructive vengeance towards Semele entirely out of proportion to the crime:

Juno. Awake Saturnia from thy Lethargy  
Seize, destroy the curs't Adulteress  
Scale proud Citheron's Top:  
Snatch her, tear her in thy Fury...  
...If I th'Imperial Scepter sway – I swear  
By Hell –  
Tremble thou Universe this Oath to hear,  
Not one of curst Agenor's Race to spear.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> *ibid.*, p828

<sup>368</sup> As goddess of marriage she also anticipates Wagner's Fricka, who also makes her husband abide by conventional laws of morality and in the process sacrifice several of his children.

<sup>369</sup> Educated audiences would have been familiar with Jove's philandering, which was part of both the standard classical education, and a mainstay of Christian polemics against paganism. Those who could afford the word-book would have been reminded of Jupiter's rape of Europa.

<sup>370</sup> Esther Young (Handel's first Juno) played the Witch of Endor in *Saul*. *Dido and Aeneas* had last been performed in London in 1701 and the character type remained a popular one on the London stage.

<sup>371</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p807

In the true manner of Greek tragedy, her curse is to be visited not merely on the miscreant, but on their family in perpetuity. Juno projects the blame for her husband's affairs and rapes onto the women who were either tricked or forced. In Act Two, Juno is allowed only one moment of humanity in what is otherwise an unmitigated desire for vengeance.

Juno. If I am own'd above,  
Sister and wife of Jove;  
(Sister at least I sure may claim,  
Tho' wife be a neglected name).<sup>372</sup>

In Act Three she has a more varied role, but still with a single driving force. She cynically and easily bribes Somnus with Pasithea using love as simply another bargaining chip in the politics of revenge. She then disguises herself as Ino in order to manipulate Semele. Juno's repeated emphasis on the physical act of love in this scene hints at something that she has been denied for a long time. Ovid referred to her comparative lack of children,<sup>373</sup> and whilst this is never mentioned in the opera, the emphasis on Semele making love to Jove 'as when he proud Saturnia charms' hints at a genuine sadness and bitterness at her neglect.<sup>374</sup> However, Juno shows neither remorse nor regret. She is unashamedly triumphant at Semele's destruction:

Juno. With what joys shall I mount to my Heav'n again  
At once from my rival and Jealousie freed.  
The sweets of Revenge make it worthwhile to reign,  
And Heav'n will hereafter be Heav'n indeed.<sup>375</sup>

And this vengeance, like Semele's ambition, can never know any end or bring any peace. Juno would pursue Bacchus to the end of the earth until he rose to Olympus

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<sup>372</sup> *ibid.*, p807

<sup>373</sup> Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis English'd*, p87

'Who would by *Iupiter* a Mother proue,  
Which, hardly once, hath hapned to our loue'

Sandys' footnote reads: 'Spoken perhaps in regard of the paucity of her children: for Iuno bare Vulcan, Mars, Lucina, and Hebe, vnto *Iupiter*.'

<sup>374</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp823-4

<sup>375</sup> *ibid.*, p829



and in a final insult, finally made Semele a goddess.<sup>376</sup> Thus by Collier and Bedford's criteria, *Semele* blasphemes in three separate ways: by accepting Bacchus' godhead, through Juno's curses 'by Hell', and by having a goddess equate heaven with revenge.

### *Ino*

Ino's character is only developed in Act One, but the portrayal of her pain is searingly intense. The sub-plot of unrequited love provides a strong emotional contrast with the hedonistic sensuality of the main storyline. Whilst the overall plot of *Semele* is anything but sentimental, the portrayal of a young woman suffering in silence with unrequited love for the man engaged to her sister shows several characteristics of the sentimental style. Ino is fighting between her feelings and the social mores of her situation, precisely the conflicts that Semele, and in particular Jupiter, escape from in their Arcadian fantasy world. The conflict between love and social duty is therefore part of the mortal, not the divine, world. Ino ultimately loses her battle of self-control:

Ino.    I can no longer hide my Passion;  
          It must have vent –  
          Or inward burning  
          Will consume me.<sup>377</sup>

In front of her father and sister, she reverts to silence. It is only when she and Athamas are left alone that she can speak, and then only when Athamas has taken her tears of self-pity for sympathy at his lost love. Like Juno (and therefore perhaps Congreve is making a point about women in general) she is guilty of displacing her anger on to Athamas. She knows that he cannot be blamed for not noticing

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<sup>376</sup> Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p106

<sup>377</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p795

something that she has carefully kept secret,<sup>378</sup> but she cannot help but be angry with him both for exposing her love for him and failing to reciprocate:

Ino.     You've undone me;  
          Look not on me;  
          Guilt upbraiding,  
          Shame invading.<sup>379</sup>

In Act Three, Ino gets Athamas. However, the ungainliness of the poetry, the sense forced rather self-consciously into a final couplet, suggests either that she is embarrassed about it, or she is exaggerating the extent of the vision:

Ino.     But Hermes in a vision told me  
          (As I have now related)  
          The Fate of Semele;  
          And added, as from me he fled  
          That Jove ordain'd I Athamas should wed.<sup>380</sup>

Neither Hermes nor Jove was responsible for marriage. Juno was. Again, the classically educated would know that in consequence of their looking after the infant Bacchus, Ino and Athamas' marriage would be cursed by the very goddess supposed to bless it.<sup>381</sup>

### *Athamas*

Like Ino, Athamas only plays a significant part in Act One; his is essentially a passive role. He is the man that Semele does not want to marry and the man not in love with Ino. His eagerness to complete the nuptials suggests a genuine love for Semele:

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<sup>378</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p800

Ah no, I cannot blame thee:  
For by effects unknown before  
Who could the hidden cause explore?

<sup>379</sup> *ibid.*, p800

<sup>380</sup> *ibid.*, p831

<sup>381</sup> They are part of 'Curst Agenor's race,' and suffered for their charity to Bacchus.

Ath.     ...If from love those sighs arise  
           Nothing to my bliss is wanting.<sup>382</sup>

Semele's rejection of their marriage causes him genuine grief, and like all the mortal characters he is unable to 'taste the sweets of love without its pain.'<sup>383</sup> However, he remains oblivious to Ino, completely misreading her anguish as sympathy for him. Instead he luxuriates in self-absorbed pain.

Ath.     Your tuneful voice my tale would tell,  
           In Pity of my sad Despair,  
           And with sweet melody compel  
           Attention from the flying fair.<sup>384</sup>

Like Ino, there is not a hint of anger in him. His fault is that he feels too much and too strongly. When Ino confesses her love for him, he is desperate to make amends and to comfort her – still never quite forgetting his own unhappiness:

Ath.     With my life I wou'd attone  
           Pains you've born, to me unknown  
           Cease, cease to shun me...  
           Love, love alone  
           Hath both undone.<sup>385</sup>

His acceptance of the divine will at the end is as perfunctory as Ino's announcement of it. It speaks of duty rather than love, and its almost comic brevity as an acceptance of marriage is surely a gently mockery of the hasty resolutions of many contemporary comedies:<sup>386</sup>

Ath.     Unworthy of your charms, myself I yield,

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<sup>382</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p795

<sup>383</sup> *ibid.*, p816

<sup>384</sup> *ibid.*, p800

<sup>385</sup> *ibid.*, p801

<sup>386</sup> For instance see Cibber, *Love's Last Shift*, and *She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not*, in *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, I, pp71; 310

Be Jove's Commands and yours fulfilled.<sup>387</sup>

The addition of 'and yours' perhaps hints that her grief in Act One is a more genuine motivation for him than her dreamed commands from the gods.

### *Minor Characters*

*Semele* has five character roles: Cadmus, Iris, Cupid, Somnus and Apollo. Cadmus is quickly and clearly drawn as a loving but domineering patriarch, whose first lines to Semele, 'Daughter, obey, hear and obey' sets the background to their relationship and the tension of the marriage ceremony. Whilst he himself projects care and concern for Semele, her aside, 'If I deny, my father's wrath I fear',<sup>388</sup> hints at a different character. He shows little sympathy for his younger daughter's distress at the wedding, more concerned that her tears will render the ceremony invalid.<sup>389</sup>

Cad.    Why dost thou thus untimely grieve  
          And all our solemn Rites prophane?<sup>390</sup>

Cadmus' other role is to report the abduction of Semele by Jove, strongly reminiscent of the 'messenger' speeches of classical tragedy.<sup>391</sup> The convoluted syntax brilliantly captures his confusion:

Cad.    Wing's with our fears and pious Haste,  
          From Juno's fane we fled  
          Scarce we the brazen Gates had pass'd,  
          When Semele around her head  
          With azure Flames was grac'd  
          Whose Lambent Glories in her Tresses play'd

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<sup>387</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p831

<sup>388</sup> *ibid.*, p795

<sup>389</sup> In Greek and Roman religion, showing grief at an occasion declared propitious by the gods was an impiety and risked the gods withdrawing their favour.

<sup>390</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p796

<sup>391</sup> This pre-empted Addison's complaint that theatres tried to portray events, such as battles, which simply looked silly and would be better reported than staged. See J. Addison, *The Spectator*, April 18, 1711, in Bond, *Critical Essays from The Spectator*, p218

While this we saw with dread Surprise  
Swifter than Lightning downwards tending  
An Eagle stoopt, of mighty Size  
On Purple Wings descending...<sup>392</sup>

Iris is a delightfully sketched portrait of the malignant queen's servant. She is loyal and unswerving, but not above rubbing her mistress' nose in what she has discovered. 'There from mortal cares retiring' runs for three verses on Semele's pleasures at her 'new-erected Palace'. Here adulterous sensuality is described in positive and uncritical terms. Iris' knowing wit and enjoyment of Juno's anger make her the perfect foil for the queen's jealous outrage.

Cupid appears in Act Two, serenading the sleeping Semele. He makes explicit the eroticism of the heroine's dreams. He is not a character in the true sense but an anthropomorphic personification of sexual love. The same is true of Somnus. He personifies the idea of sleep which runs throughout the work, but he is also a caricature of the priapic male who can be led anywhere by the promise of a beautiful woman:

Som. More sweet is that Name  
Than a soft purling Stream  
With Pleasure Repose I'll forsake  
If you'll grant me but her to sooth me awake.<sup>393</sup>

In this he is a more extreme version of Jupiter and illustrates how easily men can become slaves to their sexual passion. This is conveyed by words and phrases like 'soft', 'pleasure' and 'sooth me awake', and how risible they thus become. Finally, Apollo appears at the end of the work not really a character in his own right, but a divine nuncio. He announces the birth and victory of Bacchus, thus destroying Juno's revenge, and pointing to Semele's eventual apotheosis.

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<sup>392</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p802

<sup>393</sup> *ibid.*, p819

## Conclusions

Congreve based his libretto on a mixture of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, several other English and continental plays, current theatrical traditions, and his own classical learning. Congreve was clearly familiar with Ovid's playful and erotic handling of ancient myth and mythical characters. He worked from Sandys' translation which provided not only several phrases, but also, via its commentary, the interpretation of *Semele* as a punishment for *hybris*. The libretto also shows the influence of three particular plays, Shadwell's *Psyche*, Dryden's *Amphitryon*, and Boyer's *Les Amours de Jupiter et Semele*, which together account for much of the non-Ovidian material in the opera. It shows strong similarities to Addison's *Rosamond*, whose failure may, alongside the production delays, have been instrumental in *Semele*'s withdrawal. It also draws on the English dramatic opera tradition and marriage comedies of the late seventeenth century. Congreve would have been aware of the implicit analogy that existed between regal or divine characters and the reigning royal family and principal political actors. He was aware of a tradition, deriving from Ovid, and alive in these theatrical works, of using ancient myths satirically. By portraying the gods in a fully human, anthropomorphised, manner, he was puncturing the laudatory comparison of kings to gods favoured in Caroline masques, *tragédies lyriques* and *opera seria*. Such puncturing is all the more powerful because tawdry human characteristics are presented in comparison with the mythical ideal.

*Semele* also illustrates Congreve's intellectual and artistic clash with the revolution in manners and morals. Congreve had been the subject of several prosecutions at the turn of the eighteenth century, and his earlier plays were being toned down for

performance.<sup>394</sup> Therefore his conscious use of heightened erotic language, his portrayal of royal libidinousness, the sexual pleasures of adultery, swearing, and downright blasphemy, represents a powerful and deliberate rejection of the intellectual and moral assumptions behind Collier's attack on the theatre. Congreve's characters are not exemplars, but human beings with human weaknesses and human failings. Some profit, some are destroyed, as happens in the real world, as opposed to the exemplary dramas demanded by his opponents, and expected by audiences.

*Semele* also reflected the political concerns of the Act of Settlement. Political themes could be read on many levels, but *Semele* suggests that England could become victim to foreign, popish domination both politically, through a Catholic succession or Jacobite invasion, and culturally, through the dominance of imported Italian opera. However, the mixing of these political strands with Congreve's spirited refusal to adopt Collier's conservative morality leaves many levels of unresolved tension in the libretto. If Bacchus is the future hope of Britain, is he also a bastard and a drunken libertine? He may represent the mixing of Stuart blood with the Anglican religion, but this was equally problematic as a political message. Congreve and Eccles were both undoubtedly loyal to Queen Anne and the 1688 settlement. It would have been truly remarkable if either had even considered presenting a work with oppositional overtones, especially for the opening production of the Queen's Theatre. However, Anne was far from certain herself about the legitimacy of the succession and *Semele* is a stark reminder of how open, painful, and contested were such questions, even – or especially – to those in the Queen's circle. This ambiguity in the politics embedded in the libretto may well be another reason why it was withdrawn.

*Semele* also embodied unresolved tensions as an Italianate opera, being written in English, in an Italian style, but at the same time possibly warning against the

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<sup>394</sup> A. Lindsay, & H. Erskine-Hill (eds), *William Congreve, The Critical Heritage* (London & New York, 1989), p21. These were referred to by Bedford who doubted the effect of the revisions. Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays*, p4

dominance of the Italian form. It was an English-language drama but one whose language and moral outlook was far removed from those defending English theatre against the perceived immoralities of opera. In the thirty five years which separated its composition from Handel's setting, these unresolved tensions within the libretto grew rather than diminished as the threatened invasion of the Young Pretender approached, English and Italian theatre continued to do battle, and private morality once again became a public issue.



## Chapter Two: The Historical Context of Handel's *Semele*

### **Introduction**

Handel wrote *Semele* during the summer of 1743 and it was premiered in February 1744.<sup>1</sup> Although the London theatres were recognisably those of the turn of the century, the political, social and cultural world they reflected had changed substantially. In spite of Eccles and Congreve's efforts, English opera had been swamped by the import of continental singers, librettists, and composers.<sup>2</sup> The years 1720-8 had seen the rise and fall of the Royal Academy which had brought to London the best Italian singers in the world and drawn from Handel some of his most enduring masterpieces.<sup>3</sup> The Academy's collapse, due to internal tensions and lack of resources, had been followed by Handel's ventures into opera production on his own, leading to another golden period in the 1730s of such masterpieces as *Orlando* and *Alcina*. Handel's overwhelming dominance was satirised affectionately in *Harmony in an Uproar*, where he was charged with having 'feloniously and arrogantly assum'd ... an uncontroled property of pleasing us whether we like it or no.'<sup>4</sup> During the 1730s, he had faced sustained rivalry from both the 'Opera of the Nobility,'<sup>5</sup> and from continuing attempts to promote English-language opera by composers such as Lampe and Arne.<sup>6</sup> However, a private performance of *Esther* in 1732 had shown Handel the possibilities of both unstaged performances and works in

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<sup>1</sup> *Semele* was begun on 3 June, and the filling up and orchestration was completed on 4 July 1743.  
Handel, G.F., *Semele autograph manuscript*. London, British Library RM.20.f.7

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Dorris, *Paulo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London 1715-1744* (The Hague, 1967), pp56-70

<sup>3</sup> D. Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford, 1994), pp102-132; For the failure of English composers, see R. Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford, 1986), pp31-66

<sup>4</sup> Anon. [John Arbuthnot or Samuel Johnson?], *Harmony in an Uproar* (London, 1733), pp10-11

<sup>5</sup> T. McGeary, 'Handel, Prince Frederick and the Opera of the Nobility Reconsidered', *GHB* VII (1998), p156

<sup>6</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p127. For a far from impartial account of how this became confused with royal politics, see [John, Lord] Hervey, *Lord Hervey's Memoirs*, ed. R. Sedgewick (London, 1952), pp78-9

English. He had therefore revised several of his earlier works and begun to include these in his seasons, as well as composing new works for unstaged performance.<sup>7</sup> These included oratorios, such as *Deborah*, *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*; and the odes *Alexander's Feast* and *L'Allegro*. In 1736 the loss of his Italian soloists led to an all-English season, whilst in 1738 Heidegger was forced to cancel the 1738-9 opera season due to a shortage of subscriptions.<sup>8</sup> In 1740 Handel wrote his last opera, *Deidamia*, which was the last of three lighter operas which with retrospect appear to move away from *opera seria*.<sup>9</sup> From 1739 he also faced a rival opera company headed by Lord Middlesex. This process consolidated in the public's mind what had been achieved officially in 1727, namely Handel's naturalisation as an English composer. The immense success of the *Coronation Anthems* and their incorporation into his English-language works, combined with his perceived opposition to two companies dealing exclusively in Italian opera, made it possible for Handel to present himself increasingly as the native composer, rather than one of the foreign imports. However, in the face of rivalry from two sides, Handel accepted the opportunity to leave London for Dublin in 1741 where, working with a concert society rather than a theatre, he first experimented with an all-oratorio season. Its success created a pattern which he would continue for the rest of his career.<sup>10</sup>

The political context had changed beyond recognition. Until 1742, government was dominated by Robert Walpole, whose perceived power and corruption unleashed a wave of satirical attacks upon him and on government in general. National politics was reflected throughout this period in the London theatres, but at the same time the theatres were embroiled in politics of their own as rival companies sought to promote Italian opera, English opera, masques, burlesques, pantomimes and spoken plays.

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<sup>7</sup> Burrows, *Handel*, pp166-7; W. Dean, *Handel* (New Grove, London, 1980), pp38-9

<sup>8</sup> Burrows, *Handel*, pp187, 202

<sup>9</sup> HWV 42. Fp. 10 January 1741, London, Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre. W. Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (London, 1970), p33

<sup>10</sup> C. Taylor, 'From Losses to Lawsuit: Patronage of the Italian Opera in London by Lord Middlesex, 1739-1745', *ML* 68 (1987), pp2-5. In 1740-1, Middlesex also had too few subscriptions to mount a full season. See also Burrows, *Handel*, p269

The unresolved tensions in the politics and morality of Congreve's *Semele* were further complicated by the competitive environment of the 1740s. Meanwhile, satire in poetry and the theatre found voice not only in criticisms of the political landscape, but as part of an increasing concern for the nation's morals, which had much in common with those at the end of the seventeenth century. Anxiety continued to attach itself to the French and Italian – and therefore Catholic – performers who dominated the London Stage.

The following chapter traces the range of cultural, political, moral and religious strands of thought which influenced the composition and reception of Handel's *Semele*. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, opera and music were part of a matrix of concerns which linked opera to imported foreign effeminacy, manners and religion, and thence to moral corruption and through that to political corruption. Time and time again this web of related concerns emerges beneath political and cultural attitudes to music and the theatre. First this matrix of concerns will be examined in detail through the lens of the 'sound and sense' debate. Then the broader political context will be considered, and in particular how political concerns were reflected in the Georgian theatres through a range of plays, operas, satires and burlesques. The third part of the chapter examines the internecine politics between the theatres and performers themselves, which often reflected the larger concerns of society. Finally, the chapter looks at the moral views of some of Handel's circle in order to place the themes in *Semele* in the context of religious and moral attitudes in the 1740s.

### 'Sound and Sense,' The Debate Continued

The success of Italian opera had only served to increase the strength and anger of the voices raised against it since the beginning of the century, and 'Augustan literature abounds with censures of the foolish craze.'<sup>11</sup> It was blamed for a decline in morality by substituting an effeminate and enervating art form (in which sound could only be appreciated sensually since the words were not understood) for the vigorous, manly British culture which sustained political freedom by promoting courage and civic virtues. Opera was therefore implicated not only in moral, but also political corruption.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that opera was corrupting British morality went back to John Dennis in 1706, but from the late 1720s the arguments were reinvigorated by opera's ongoing dominance. In 1729, Henry Carey's *A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age* bemoaned the effeminacy of Italian manners that were creeping into society via the grand tour and Italian opera.<sup>13</sup> Young men now:

...travel only to corrupt the mind;  
Import the Bad, and leave the Good behind...  
They look like Females, dress'd in Boys attire...

The overtly sexual implications are clear:

...Curse on this damn'd Italian Pathic [sic] Mode,  
To Sodom and to Hell the ready Road.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R.M. Myers, *Handel's Messiah, a Touchstone of Taste* (New York, 1971), p14

<sup>12</sup> There is 'no greater Proof of the Virtue or Corruption of the People than their pleasures.' T. Betterton, *The History of the English Stage* (London, 1741), p27

<sup>13</sup> To which Handel subscribed. H. Carey, *A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age*, in H. Carey, *Poems on Several Occasions By H. Carey. The Third Edition much enlarged* (London, 1729), pp29-37

<sup>14</sup> Carey, *A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age*, pp29-30. The same attitude can be seen in W. Hogarth, *Marriage a la Mode* (1724). Plate One shows the bridegroom recently returned from Paris, and already infected with syphilis, the medical outcome of continental debauchery.

This was expressed even more brutally by the poet James Thomson:

In short, these travelling puppies do nothing else but run after foreign bitches, learn to dance, cut capers, play tricks, and admire your fine outlandish howling; though in my opinion, our vigorous, deep-mouthed British note is better music...If a timely stop is not put to this, the genuine breed of our ancient sturdy dogs will, by degrees degenerate into dull Dutch mastiffs, effeminate Italian lapdogs, or tawdry, impertinent French harlequins.<sup>15</sup>

And there could hardly be anything more effeminately corrupting than castrati.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because of their preoccupation with this luxurious pastime, the political classes neglect their proper business:

Our *Petits Maitres* are now so polite;  
They think it ungentle to Read or Write...

They talk not of our Army, or our fleet  
But of the Warble of CUZZONI sweet...  
...With better Voice, and fifty times her skill  
Poor ROBINSON is always treated ill:  
But, such is the good Nature of the Town,  
Tis now the mode to cry the ENGLISH down.<sup>17</sup>

This was perceived to lead to the neglect of better native performers in favour of the fashionable imports. As many singers invested their earnings back in Italy, this concern became a focus for wider concerns about the balance of trade, and was thus emblematic of the kind of trade protection for which patriots called.

Carey satirised the mindlessness of fashion in his poem *Blunderella*, whose heroine is so obsessed with all things Italian that she demands to hear arias that have been

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<sup>15</sup> James Thomson to [Andrew Millar?] 7 December 1742, *James Thomson (1700-1748), Letters and Documents* ed. A.D. McKillop (Kansas, 1958), p141

<sup>16</sup> Pope's second *Epistle* cited 'Eunuchs' as symbols of degeneration, and warned that the blurring of gender identities in opera threatened chaos. H. Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea in English Literature* (London, 1983), p327; R. Ness, 'The Dunciad and Italian Opera in England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* XX (1986-7), p187

<sup>17</sup> Carey, *A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age*, p31. 'Robinson' was the English soprano, Anastasia Robinson.

sung by the leading singers of the day, but cannot name one.<sup>18</sup> Rejecting English singers, she is completely fooled by 'Eugenio' who delights her with a faux Italian aria.<sup>19</sup> In *The Woman of Taste* the supposed author (a metropolitan lady) talks breathlessly of swooning in 'rapture' at the barely understood music. This is evidence of her debased sexual and social morality, as she advocates an entirely pleasure-driven lifestyle.<sup>20</sup>

This association between foreign arts and moral – particularly sexual – corruption went beyond opera. In *Harlequin Horace*, James Miller lashed out at opera, spoken theatre, and mime.<sup>21</sup> Mimes 'show the most significant gestures' of sex, plays 'Begin with Bluster and with Bawdry end,'<sup>22</sup> and meanwhile Handel's 'Singsongs more delight / Than all a Dryden or a Pope can write.'<sup>23</sup> The moral effects are clear:

A song inspires our Breasts with am'rous Fury  
And turns our fancies on the *Nymphs* of Drury.

Not only sexual, but aesthetic and moral and political senses become debased:

How much more entertaining is the Bard  
That all of Vertue shows a disregard  
Who by no Laws Divine or Human aw'd  
Rails at his Prince and ridicules his God.<sup>24</sup>

A decade later Betterton was no more optimistic:

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<sup>18</sup> Carey, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p15. According to Hawkins 'Those who had not heard Farinelli sing and Foster preach were not qualified to appear in genteel company.' J. Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776, reprint 1963 ed. C. Cudworth), p878

<sup>19</sup> Carey, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p21

<sup>20</sup> [T. Newcombe], *The Woman of Taste. Occasioned by a late Poem, entitled, The Man of Taste* (London, 1733), pp7, 8, 19 & passim

<sup>21</sup> J. Miller, *Harlequin Horace: or, the art of modern poetry* (London, 1731). He was the future librettist of *Joseph and his Brethren* (1744).

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, preface & p8

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p36

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp27, 54

Now Farce on the One hand, with its Mimes and Pantomimes, and Opera on the Other, with its emasculating Sounds, invade and vanquish the Stage, and draw the Ears and Eyes of the People; who come only to laugh, or to see things extravagant or monstrous.<sup>25</sup>

In 1735 Miller again took up the satirist's pen, deliberately echoing the old Athenian manner:

Boldly the Comic Scourge he takes in hand,  
To lash the reigning Follies of the Land:  
[R]ushing to see Britannia's Sons become  
[D]upes to each Vagabond from *France* and *Rome*.<sup>26</sup>

In the prologue he laments that all social distinctions have broken down and that '...a Peer, and a Mechanic are cloath'd in the same Habits, and indulge in the same Diversions and Luxuries: [and] Husbands are ruin'd, Children robb'd, and Tradesmen starv'd, in order to give Estates to a *French* Harlequin, and *Italian* Eunuch, for a shrug or a Song.'<sup>27</sup> In the play, Harcourt, a young but old-fashioned peer has been rejected by Maria for being insufficiently fashionable. He sends his footman to her in the guise of a foppish and effete 'Lord Apewell',<sup>28</sup> who wears only Italian clothes, and only visits the theatre where he doesn't understand the language, saying 'tis quite out of fashion to go to anything one understands.'<sup>29</sup> He persuades Maria and her family to visit card assemblies on Sunday and to delay payment to their tradesmen as behaviour befitting the truly fashionable.<sup>30</sup> The women are duly disabused of their fantasy Lord, but Maria and Harcourt are not reconciled. It is the starkest possible caricature of the mores of a generation where fashionable society

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<sup>25</sup> Betterton, *The History of the English Stage*, p27

<sup>26</sup> J. Miller, *The Man of Taste, A Comedy as it is Acted at the THEATRE-ROYAL in Drury Lane, By His MAJESTY's Servants* (London, 1735), prologue

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, prologue

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p26

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p61

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p58

and stable family life are in total opposition.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly important as an illustration that those advocating a return to English-language drama also often had a conservative moral perspective which, hardened by their cultural opposition to 'foreign' luxury, grouped Italian opera with mime and pantomime as vehicles for sexual, and therefore political, corruption.<sup>32</sup>

Exactly the same attitude is found in *The Case of Our Present Theatrical Disputes* written in the same year that *Semele* was composed. 'The scene is exactly the same on the great Theatre [the polity] and the small one.'<sup>33</sup> There managers live 'at the Expense of the Publick at the Rate of an English Duke, or a German Prince.'<sup>34</sup> However, whilst Athenian old comedy was morally improving and would 'point out particular Persons, to expose notorious Acts of Corruption, flagrant Frauds and Vices of singular Enormity'<sup>35</sup> the power of the aristocracy has now suppressed this. Shakespeare's 'honest and manly freedom'<sup>36</sup> is no longer tolerated. What is worse, foreign performers were paid huge sums better given to charity.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the plots of opera reflected the continental aesthetic of royal representation. 'Princes and rulers, political and military power, states and nations, were among the most significant themes Italian *opera seria* was expected to address.'<sup>38</sup> These exhibited the proper behaviours expected of an absolutist monarch, rather than the constitutionally bound rulers exalted by English drama, and for this

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<sup>31</sup> Fielding also included a warning parable of choosing between a fashionable and worthy husband in *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, ed. D. Brooks-Davies (Oxford, 1966 & 1970), pp90-114

<sup>32</sup> In addition, opera was bracketed in many people's minds with the 'masquerades', also organized by the impresario, J.J. Heidegger. C. Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London 1700-1745* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Syracuse, 1991), p118; See for instance W. Hogarth, *The Bad Taste of the Town* (1724), and W. Hogarth, *Masquerade Tickets* (1727)

<sup>33</sup> Anon., *The Case of Our Present Theatrical Disputes, fairly stated* (London, 1743), p1

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p4

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p11

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p20

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p46

<sup>38</sup> R. Strohm, *Dramma per Musica, Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1997), p270



reason, as well as that of language, could not be a vehicle for British national aspirations.<sup>39</sup> Thus with its highly-paid castrati and preference for unambiguously royalist plots, Italian opera perfectly combined in moralistic minds luxury, sexual ambivalence, popery and absolutist authority. This suspicion was both illustrated and satirised in *The Devil to Pay at St James*:

...God forbid I should judge amiss; yet I cannot but think there is more in this Matter than People are aware of; who knows but they are sent here to raise Dissentions among true Protestants! There are too many shrewd Causes of Suspicion.

1. They come from *Rome*;
2. The Pope lives at *Rome*;
3. So does the Pretender.
4. The Pope is a notorious Papist;
5. So is the Pretender;
6. So is Madam *Faustina*,
7. And so is Madam *Cuzzoni*.
8. King *George* (God bless him) is a Protestant;
9. The Papists hate the Protestants;
10. The Pope hates King *George*;
11. The Pretender can't abide him.
12. But Madam *Cuzzoni* and Madam *Faustina* love the Pope, and in all Probability the Pretender.<sup>40</sup>

As Catholics, these hugely paid singers would have laboured under suspicion of disloyalty and no small number of legal penalties if they had been native. Finally, Carey attacked the senselessness of listening to a language one cannot understand.

I hate this singing in an unknown Tongue  
It does our reason and our senses wrong.  
...When Words instruct and Music clears the Mind  
Then is the Art of service to Mankind:  
But when a Castrate Wretch of monstrous size  
Squeaks out a treble, shrill as Infant cries,  
I curse the unintelligible Ass  
Who may, for ought I know, be singing Mass.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford, 2002), p273

<sup>40</sup> J. Arbuthnot, *The miscellaneous works of the late Dr. Arbuthnot. The first volume. The second editions with additions* (Glasgow, 1751), pp214-5. This attribution is now doubted.

<sup>41</sup> Carey, *A Satyr on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age*, pp33-4

Listening to music without understanding the words undermined the whole aesthetic of eighteenth-century music. Musicians and commentators were absolutely united in seeing music as *mimesis*, whose power came from the union of words and music, emotion with reason.<sup>42</sup> This power of music for moral good was seen as deriving from its union with the words, which could not happen if the latter were incomprehensible. James Harris had articulated the commonly held view that ‘these two arts [music and poetry] can never be so powerfully singly, as when they are united,’ and the audience who are excited by music will the better accept the poet’s ideas.<sup>43</sup> Music’s power for good only extended in as far as it was subordinate to the poetry it enlivened and imitated. Akenside suggested that the separation of the arts from philosophy had been behind the fall of Rome.<sup>44</sup> Only when music is allied to poetry can it be the vehicle for the political engagement of the arts which keeps the country free.<sup>45</sup> Without that engagement, the arts become a softening diversion and a prelude to decline and absolutist rule. Miller thus caricatured opera as ‘All league, melodious Nonsense to dispense / [Which] give us sound and show, instead of sense.’<sup>46</sup> Sound without sense could only appeal to the emotions, and for most commentators, this meant the baser ones.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> This is the classical explanation, going back to Plato and beyond. R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1997), p118. Handel’s erstwhile friend and colleague Mattheson also recalled the emphasis Plato had placed on music in the good regulation of the state. J. Mattheson, *Johann Mattheson’s Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, ed. and tr. E.C. Harriss (Ann Arbor, 1981), p127

<sup>43</sup> J[ames] H[arris], *Three Treatises* (London, 1744), pp102; 98

<sup>44</sup> M. Akenside, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. A Poem in Three Books* (London, 1744), p39

<sup>45</sup> ‘If there be anything in the world that is at variance with tragic action, it is song’ J. Brown (D.D.), *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (London, 1763), p204

<sup>46</sup> Miller, *Harlequin Horace*, p30

<sup>47</sup> This view was also articulated by Alexander Pope in the *Essay on Criticism* and the 1742 *Dunciad*. P. Rogers, ‘The Critique of Opera in Pope’s *Dunciad*’, *MQ* LIX (1973), p15 and passim. Pope was a strong supporter of a return to ‘sense’ in music, to which he looked Handel. Brownell, M.R., ‘Ears of an Untoward Make: Pope and Handel’ *MQ* 62 (1976), pp565, 570; Ness, ‘The *Dunciad* and Italian Opera in England’, pp191-2

The response of English writers and composers was a renewed drive to create popular vernacular opera.<sup>48</sup> This found expression in *See and Seem Blind*, written (probably by Hill) in the pivotal year of 1732 which saw Fielding reconciled to Drury Lane, the construction of Goodman's Fields Theatre, and a serious and concerted attempt over fifteen months to lay the foundations of English-language opera.<sup>49</sup> Whilst regretting that 'this is too merry an age for Tragedy,'<sup>50</sup> the pamphlet praised Lampe's *Amelia* as 'most Excellent and Masterley [which] gives room to hope for better productions from the same hand.'<sup>51</sup> However, it also notes Handel's response to the Opera of the Nobility was not at all what they had hoped: 'This alarm'd Handel, and out he brings an Oratorio... [a] sacred drama, a mere Consort.'<sup>52</sup> Unimpressed by the English pronunciation of Handel's Italian cast, and the lack of scenery, Hill clearly did not see any future in this art form. Instead he hoped that '...now Lampe has broken the Ice, the rest may flow steadily.'<sup>53</sup> Finally he offers the hope, common to all of the writers surveyed here, of 'how great will [be] the general satisfaction, at least to Rational Creatures, when Sense and Sound shall be united.'<sup>54</sup> On first reflection, *Semele* seems to answer this call.<sup>55</sup> However, as we have seen and will see, not only was *Semele* ten years too late to appeal to these demands, its plot was also very unlikely to appeal to the conservative morality that underpinned the calls for English-language opera.

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<sup>48</sup> H.D. Johnstone, 'Handel's London – British Musicians and London Concert Life' in D. Burrows, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge, 1997), p77

<sup>49</sup> Anon. [A. Hill], *See and Seem Blind: Or, A Critical Dissertation on the Publick Diversions, &c* (London, 1732).

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p8

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p11

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp14-15

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p22

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p23

<sup>55</sup> It was Handel's oratorios, not operas which rescued him from Pope's disapprobation in the 1742 *Dunciad*, though he lamented that they were too manly for British tastes. Ness, 'The Dunciad and Italian Opera in England', p176; X. Cervantes, "'The Phoenix of our our Age in All modes of Musical Expression' The Handelian Exception', *GHB* VIII (2000), p148

## The Political Context as reflected in the Georgian Theatres

### **Introduction: the political context**

In 1727 George II succeeded his father peacefully. His coronation was celebrated with massive pomp and ceremony, including the four *Coronation Anthems* of the newly-naturalised Handel.<sup>56</sup> Robert Walpole survived the change of king with his position intact and continued to dominate domestic politics.<sup>57</sup> The tory party therefore remained excluded from power and political opposition came instead from an uneasy alliance of anti-ministry groupings, known as the 'Country' or 'Patriot' whigs, who stood in opposition to the political corruption and pacific foreign policy of Walpole's court.<sup>58</sup> Because of their weakness in Parliament, they carried out much of their opposition in the press and through cultural sponsorship. A second strand of opposition emerged in 1737 when the Prince of Wales placed himself at the head of a rival court, casting himself as the figurehead of the 'Patriot' opposition. Jacobitism and non-juring remained sources of fear and distrust for many of the political elite, and the perceived danger of a Franco-Jacobite invasion remained.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, imperial and trade competition between the continental powers constantly threatened to upset Walpole's delicately balanced peace strategy.<sup>60</sup>

Walpole had held various government posts in the first years of George I's reign, but his real power dated from 1721 when he combined the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer with that of First Lord of the Treasury, earning the then negative

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<sup>56</sup> HWV 258-61. F.p. 11 October 1727

<sup>57</sup> J.H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole, Vol II, The King's Minister* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1972), p80; J. Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727* (Oxford, 2000), pp412-7

<sup>58</sup> P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, England 1729-1783* (Oxford, 1989), p27; L. Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy, The Tory Party 1714-1760* (Cambridge, 1982), p91

<sup>59</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p11

<sup>60</sup> L. Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (2nd ed. London, 1996), p3

soubriquet 'Prime Minister'. The tories had been effectively proscribed after the 1715 election, when they were defeated with 150 seats to the whigs' 270.<sup>61</sup> However, Walpole's personal dominance, and, more lastingly, that of the whig party, was secured in 1722 by the discovery of the so-called 'Atterbury Plot' to begin a Jacobite uprising in the North of England.<sup>62</sup> Walpole used the complicity of these senior tories and rumours of an imminent invasion by the Pretender to suspend *habeas corpus* and then to publicly try and exile Atterbury. By doing so he successfully tarred all tories with the accusation of disloyalty.<sup>63</sup> In this way, Walpole undoubtedly painted the tory-Jacobite threat as larger than it in fact was. Jacobites had mistaken anti-government sentiment in 1714 to 1715 for genuine revolutionary fervour and the 1715 invasion of Charles Edward Stuart had been easily repulsed.<sup>64</sup> Between 1713 and 1743 Britain enjoyed thirty years without being at war with France.<sup>65</sup> However, the perceived threat of danger from a Franco-Jacobite invasion and a Catholic monarch remained.<sup>66</sup> For many Anglicans, there was an ongoing fear that one of the Catholic powers would become strong enough to dominate Europe in a form of universal monarchy. Against this, the balance of power could only be maintained by a vigorous and proactive defence of the protestant interest.<sup>67</sup> The Pretender relied on French military support, and thus even Jacobite sympathisers feared that if he attained the British throne, he would be a puppet ruler, subordinating the national interest to an all-powerful France.<sup>68</sup> There was also a genuine fear that a Stuart king would enforce religious persecution of protestants, as had happened in France with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, in Spain with the treatment of Jews

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<sup>61</sup> Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy*, p188

<sup>62</sup> Atterbury was Bishop of Rochester and had been a leading tory in the years after George I's accession. Plumb describes him as violent, aggressive and unbalanced, but pugnacious in his defence of tory values. Plumb, *Walpole*, p45

<sup>63</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p411. The planned rising had also included the Earl of Strafford, Newburgh Hamilton's employer (see below).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p395

<sup>65</sup> This was the longest period without hostilities between 1689 and 1802, although Britain was of course at war with Spain from 1739. Colley, *Britons*, p1.

<sup>66</sup> W. Weber, 'Handel's London – political, social and intellectual contexts' in Burrows, D., (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge, 1997), p51

<sup>67</sup> A. C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover, and the Protestant Interest* (Woodbridge, 2006), p41

<sup>68</sup> Colley, *Britons*, pp83, 24

and protestants, and in Salzburg with the expulsion of protestants. This anxiety was illustrated by the reprinting, in 1726, of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*.<sup>69</sup> Even before Handel's oratorios, the analogy between the biblical Israelites and modern British, defenders of true religion threatened from all sides by hostile heathen, was common.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Jacobite threat and European tensions**

In the face of this, the cult of Charles Edward Stuart persisted and may have some relevance to Handel's *Semele*. Charles II was blamed by many for his unduly lenient attitude to religion which had allowed the spread of heterodoxy.<sup>71</sup> However, he had also been notorious for his womanising and large number of illegitimate children. These two facets of his personality were naturally often linked, and his sexual obsessions had often been portrayed by contemporaries as a kind of tyranny over the nation.<sup>72</sup> However, to contrast with the dour Hanoverians, Stuart sympathisers emphasised the charisma and charm of the Young Pretender as heir to Charles' warm and engaging personality. Many songs emphasised his natural fertility and sexual potency, and he continued to be portrayed in verse as an absent lover.<sup>73</sup> It is certainly possible that the portrayal of Jupiter in *Semele* continued to have Jacobite or rather anti-Jacobite resonances for audiences. In baroque theatre, characters often represented allegorical qualities, for instance kings, power and glory, princesses,

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<sup>69</sup> J. Foxe, *The book of martyrs: containing an account of the sufferings and death of the Protestants in the reign of Queen Mary the First* (London, 1726). It was printed again in 1732.

<sup>70</sup> Colley, *Britons*, pp31-3; R. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p186

<sup>71</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p223

<sup>72</sup> P. Hammond, 'The King's two bodies: representations of Charles II' in J. Black, & J. Gregory (eds.), *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain, 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1991), p29

<sup>73</sup> M. Pittock, 'The Culture of Jacobitism' in J. Black, (ed.), *Culture and Society 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1997), pp129-30

honour and fidelity.<sup>74</sup> Gods on stage were naturally taken to represent the ruling monarch, but this was a continental, absolutist, tradition which the Hanoverians largely eschewed.<sup>75</sup> It is therefore possible that the king of the gods on stage might imply the Catholic pretenders, or the aspirant Universal Monarch himself, Louis XIV.<sup>76</sup> This is particularly relevant to *Semele* because as it was being premiered, the French fleet was approaching England and the Pretender was planning the invasion which would culminate in 'the '45'.

Yesterday the King sent a message to the two houses to let them know the Pretender's son was in France, and that they had undoubted intelligence the French design an invasion with the Brest fleet and it is suspected that a great many disaffected people here are ready to join them...<sup>77</sup>

By February 1744, with the fleet off Torbay, many people clearly regarded an invasion as imminent.

For many Britons in the early eighteenth century, 'a cult of commerce became an increasingly important part of being British.'<sup>78</sup> The growth of markets and increasing prosperity were seen as one of the great and lasting benefits of the Glorious Revolution. However, the 'Prime Minister' and most of the population differed

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<sup>74</sup> T. Lediard & J.F. Lampe, *Britannia. An English Opera* (London, 1732), preface; See also Strohm, *Dramma per Musica, Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1997), p18

<sup>75</sup> H. Smith, *Georgian Monarchical Culture in England, 1714-60* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2001), passim. Although embraced by many protestant princes, *opera seria* was principally a Catholic, monarchical form of representation. D. Beales, 'Religion and Culture' in Blanning, T.C.W., *The Eighteenth Century, Europe 1688-1815* (Oxford, 2000), p143

<sup>76</sup> In Lediard and Lampe's *Britannia*, Jupiter descends at the end to crown the celebrations. Whilst clearly not meant to be read as France, he is symbolic of a supra-national power. Lediard & Lampe, *Britannia*, pp31-2

<sup>77</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 16 February 1744 in M. Delany, *Autobiography and correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany : with interesting reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte, edited by Lady Llanover* (6 vols, London, 1861), II, p265, Similarly Horace Walpole warned: 'Don't be surprised if you hear that this crown is fought for on land. As yet there is no rising, but we must expect it on the first descent.' Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 16 February 1744 in *The Yale edition of Horatio Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis (37 volumes, New Haven, 1937-1983) vol. 18, pp398-401

<sup>78</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p61. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p1

irreconcilably on how this should best be maintained. Arguing from a mercantilist perspective, most people saw an increase in empire as the best way to expand the markets for British goods and therefore demanded an aggressively expansionist foreign policy that protected British goods abroad (and by implication, minimised English money spent on foreign goods – including singers).<sup>79</sup> Walpole believed that the contrary was true, that wars inevitably hinder the free passage of goods and consumed much of the capital that might otherwise be spent on them. He was convinced that British trade would benefit more from peace than war, and firmly tried to maintain peace between Britain and her neighbours. Political criticism of Walpole therefore coalesced around three grievances. The first was his perceived protection of corrupt politicians from parliamentary retribution after the South Sea Company, York Buildings Company, Charitable Corporation and Derwentwater Trust scandals.<sup>80</sup> The second was maintenance of his position through bribery and manipulation.<sup>81</sup> The third was his refusal to take a bellicose line in foreign affairs.

### **Political satire and the role of politics in the London theatres**

Addison and Steele had first turned satire on the gentry at the turn of the century.<sup>82</sup> However, it was the enormous success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728 which began a 'decade of belligerence' against both the government and against the associated traditional models of heroic morality embodied in opera and loyalist theatre.<sup>83</sup> When Gay died in 1732, the mantle of theatrical opposition was taken up by Henry Fielding.<sup>84</sup> He repeatedly drove home his criticisms of the government

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<sup>79</sup> C. Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole, Politics, Poetry and National Myth 1725-1742* (Oxford, 1994), pp7-9

<sup>80</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p22

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p15

<sup>82</sup> J. Loftis, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding* (Stanford, 1959), p84

<sup>83</sup> J. Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England* (Oxford, 1963), p94; R. Paulson, *Emblem and Expression – Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1975), p50

<sup>84</sup> Loftis, *The Politics of Drama*, p130; M. C. Battestin 'Fielding, Henry (1707-1754)', *ODNB Online*



until Walpole reacted by getting Parliament to pass the Licensing Act,<sup>85</sup> under the terms of which, plays had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain fourteen days before performance.<sup>86</sup> The main aim of the act was to suppress Patriot plays and several, including Brooke's *Gustavus Vasa* and Paterson's *Arminius* were banned.<sup>87</sup> However, the act did not cover publication, and so the works continued to circulate.<sup>88</sup> The terms of it gave no specific criteria for what was or was not acceptable. Therefore the act empowered the Chamberlain to order cuts not only to prevent slandering the government, but also to cater for public taste and morals, as was the case for Fielding's *The Wedding Day* (1743).<sup>89</sup> The most significant lasting impact of the legislation, however, was the growth of the novel, to which Fielding and others turned as an alternative platform for political and moral debate.<sup>90</sup>

By the 1740s, Fielding had turned his brilliant gifts from political to social satire, which resulted in three masterpieces of eighteenth-century fiction, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1748) and *Amelia* (1751). This change in direction was also the result of the spectacular success of Samuel Richardson's<sup>91</sup> epistolary novel, *Pamela*

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<sup>85</sup> L.W. Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824* (San Marino, 1976), p13

<sup>86</sup> Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama*, pp13-14; 'The London Stage has never been more dominated by politics than it was between 1725 and 1737, when slandered beyond endurance, Walpole instituted a censorship of the theatre'. J.H. Plumb, 'Political Man' in J.L. Clifford (ed.), *Man Versus Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1968), p10.

<sup>87</sup> Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama*, p56

<sup>88</sup> 10 Geo 11, cap xxviii in J. Raithby (ed.): *Statutes at large*, vol. 5 (London, 1811), pp266-8 '... no person shall for hire, gain or reward, act perform, represent, or cause to be acted, performed or represented any new interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce, or other entertainment of the stage, or any part of parts therein; or any new act, scene or other part added to any old interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce or other entertainment of the stage, or any new prologue or epilogue, unless a true copy thereof be sent to the Lord Chamberlain of the King's household for the time being, fourteen days at least before the acting, representing or performing thereof, together with an account of the playhouse or other place where the same shall be and the time when the same is intended to be first acted, represented or performed...'

<sup>89</sup> Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama*, pp140-1

<sup>90</sup> 'When we mention transactions behind the curtain, St James is more likely to occur to our thoughts than Drury Lane.' H. Fielding, *Tom Jones* (Penguin Popular Classics, London, 1994), p273. See also Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England*, p152. Fielding's preface to *Amelia* makes it clear that his intention in writing is to expose and correct social ills. H. Fielding, *Amelia*, ed. with introduction by M.C. Battestin (Oxford, 1983), pxxi

<sup>91</sup> Richardson was strongly supported by Aaron Hill, who became almost a collaborator on *Clarissa* in 1748. C. Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector 1685-1750* (Oxford, 2003), p212

(1740), which was so popular that it was not only translated into French, but also made the subject of paintings and adapted for stage performance, immediately, spawning not only a play but an opera, as well as numerous 'anti-Pamela' satires, of which Fielding's *Shamela* is the most famous.<sup>92</sup> Fielding found the morality of Richardson's novel narrow and superficial. He found the emphasis on the heroine's chastity as the supreme virtue as wholly out of proportion. In his own novels, Fielding sought to show that whilst important, chastity was only one of many virtues that made up a truly moral person, the first being love and charity.<sup>93</sup> He repeatedly presented heroes and heroines with flaws and failings, often in their sexual continence, whose shortcomings were nevertheless outweighed by their concern for, care of, and charity towards, their fellow human beings.<sup>94</sup> However, his repeated railings illustrate how powerfully chastity was coming to be seen as the most important of the virtues, especially for women.

Of course satire was not limited to plays and novels. The most famous satirist of the age wrote neither. Alexander Pope was not only a great poet; he was also responsible for the most famous recreation of classical art of the eighteenth century.<sup>95</sup> In his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, Pope was both responding to a renewed interest in Greek epic, and driving that interest. This taste for epics was to be catered for by Handel's biblical oratorios.<sup>96</sup> More importantly for this study, Pope represented a continuation of the Athenian culture of ridicule, mediated through Horace, which held public figures up to open shame and abuse before the public. He saw in

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<sup>92</sup> H. Giffard, *Pamela: a comedy. As it is performed gratis at the late Theatre in Goodman's Fields* (London, 1741). This version had reached Dublin by the following year. J. Dorman, *Pamela: or virtue rewarded. An Opera* (Newcastle, 1742); [anon.] *Anti-Pamela, or. Feign'd innocence detected* (London, 1741); J.W., *Pamela, or the fair imposter. A Poem* (London, 1744); H. Fielding, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews*, ed. with introduction by D. Brooks-Davies (Oxford, 1966 & 1970); J. Highmore, *Four Scenes from Samuel Richardson's Pamela* (1743-4, engravings published 1745)

<sup>93</sup> H. Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, ed. D. Brooks-Davies (Oxford, 1966 & 1970), px

<sup>94</sup> H. Fielding, *Tom Jones* (London, 1748), passim

<sup>95</sup> H. Erskine-Hill, 'Pope, Alexander (1688-1744)', *ODNB Online*

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p127

government, and therefore society, a general corruption of high aristocratic ideals.<sup>97</sup> The classics remained 'the education of the age',<sup>98</sup> and this reverence for Attic comedy and its descendants was of course part of a wider hellenism which held up tragedy as the supreme dramatic model – which oratorio would also imitate.<sup>99</sup> As a Catholic and a fierce critic of both Walpole and of many of the establishment's artistic figures, Pope was a strongly oppositional force in cultural life. By the time Handel was writing *Semele*, Pope was dying and it is unlikely that the poet was directly involved with inserting 'Where e're you walk' into the libretto. However, the fact that the adapter knew his poetry and decided to insert it indicates not only that his output was well known, but also that it was both influential and congenial within the circle preparing the libretto of *Semele*.

During this period, politics, poetry and the theatre therefore remained indissolubly intertwined.<sup>100</sup> Many politicians either wrote poetry and plays, or commissioned and accepted dedications for them. It was a popular and effective way of 'representing' themselves to the people, and a dedication frequently earned a poet or playwright more than his sales.<sup>101</sup> Unlike in France or in many German states, there was no court theatre, and so the relationship between politics and culture in London was complex and unique.<sup>102</sup> The royal family could patronise plays and the opera in the metropolis, but they could not exert direct control.<sup>103</sup> However, Prince Frederick increasingly looked for ways to promote a more colourful and artistically active monarchy, and to present his own political viewpoint.<sup>104</sup> Because of the relative openness of the London theatres, they could still become vehicles for rival

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<sup>97</sup> H. Erskine-Hill, *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope* (New Haven & London, 1975), p263; I. Jack, *Augustan Satire, Intention and Idiom in English Poetry 1660-1750* (Oxford, 1951), p102

<sup>98</sup> R.G. King, 'Classical History and Handel's *Allessandro*', *ML* 77 (1996), p35

<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p56

<sup>100</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, pvii

<sup>101</sup> J. Van Horne Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), p125

<sup>102</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p210

<sup>103</sup> Tom Davies' view that George II 'neither understood, nor encouraged' the arts illustrates how little he was personally identified with the creation of metropolitan culture. T. Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick Esq.* (London, 1780), p184.

<sup>104</sup> McGeary, 'Handel, Prince Frederick and the Opera of the Nobility Reconsidered', p172

presentations of political ideas. The theatre, and especially the opera, was the main venue where the elite met, and George II treated the theatre like an extension of the court and expected court etiquette and ritual to apply when he went.<sup>105</sup> Unlike his father, George II genuinely loved pomp and ceremony. Unfortunately, he laboured under the same financial restraints and his cultural patronage was to be equally governed by a necessary frugality.<sup>106</sup> Georgian monarchical culture was therefore 'dynamic' even if it was not 'orchestrated from above.'<sup>107</sup> Prince Frederick deliberately cultivated his self-image as a patron of the arts, initially with his patronage of the Opera of the Nobility, in rivalry with his father's patronage of the Royal Academy, deliberately presenting himself as Elizabeth I's true heir.<sup>108</sup> He followed this first by founding the journal *Common Sense* in 1737,<sup>109</sup> and then after his expulsion from court, by the staging of nationalist dramas at Cliveden, which gave cultural articulation to his position as head of the 'Patriot' opposition. In this way, the cultural conflicts of the theatrical world directly reflected those of the broader political sphere.<sup>110</sup>

### **The Patriot King context**

The 'Country' or 'Patriot' whigs sought an end to Walpole's dominance of domestic politics and the corruption through sinecures and placemen with which he managed Westminster.<sup>111</sup> In an environment where trade was regarded as a form of

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<sup>105</sup> Weber, 'Handel's London – political, social and intellectual contexts', p45; H. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy, Politics and Culture, 1714-1760* (Cambridge, 2006), p235

<sup>106</sup> Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, pp100, 69

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 245

<sup>108</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p197. This was of course a familiar father-son relationship in 'arguably the most dysfunctional [royal family] since the time of Henry VIII'. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, p3

<sup>109</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p48

<sup>110</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, pp79, 15

<sup>111</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p20-2

‘undeclared warfare’<sup>112</sup> they demanded a more vigorous, bellicose foreign policy to secure and defend British trade around the world. Most importantly, they sought national unity instead of the political domination of ‘Court’ whigs, preferably under a monarch who could bring the political classes together under the patriotic banner, rather than relying on a narrow clique of ministerial supporters.<sup>113</sup> Theirs was therefore a unified and patriotic movement, but not centred on the king and his ministers. The most strident voice in this movement was Henry St John, first Viscount Bolingbroke.<sup>114</sup>

Bolingbroke had been a charismatic if unpredictable tory politician and diplomat under Queen Anne, but his career had been curtailed by the accession of George I.<sup>115</sup> He devoted himself to opposing Walpole’s ministry, principally through the foundation of *The Craftsman*, named after Walpole’s political ‘craft’ – corruption. In it he advocated a ‘Patriot’ agenda calling for whigs and tories to unite against the court. He remained deeply committed to the idea that only the landed gentry could be trusted to put the good of the nation first, because unlike the ambitious bourgeoisie, they could not be corrupted by bribes and promises of ennoblement. Similarly, he was vehemently hostile to standing armies, long parliaments, national debt, and any other mechanisms by which the court could control the aristocracy.<sup>116</sup> He saw in

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p174. This tension reached its height at the end of Walpole’s tenure as the colonial conflict with Spain and the War of the Austrian Succession divided Walpole from popular opinion.  
*ibid.*, pp50-4

<sup>113</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p10

<sup>114</sup> Plumb, *Walpole*, p131.

<sup>115</sup> Thompson, *Britain, Hanover, and the Protestant Interest*, p59.

Aware that the new whig administration was searching government papers for evidence of his misconduct, he fled to France in 1715, giving an impression of both guilt and complicity with the Pretender. Realising that he had effectively destroyed his hopes of a career under the Hanoverians he joined James Edward. Not naturally a Jacobite, he tried to persuade the Pretender to accept the reality of the 1688 settlement and to make his claims to the throne alongside guarantees for the established church and the rights of parliament. Pardoned by George I in 1723, he returned to England but was excluded from parliament.

See H. T. Dickinson, ‘St John, Henry, styled first Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751)’ *ODNB Online*

<sup>116</sup> The opposition to a standing army was a key part of the eighteenth-century concept of ‘liberty’.  
See J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time* (London, 1971), p122

Walpole's regime power transferring to 'stockjobbers' and the mercantile classes away from the natural elite. He called for a leader to unite the political elites behind his political agenda; but the specific identity of this 'Patriot King' was initially ambiguous.<sup>117</sup> Since he was aiming to lead a movement containing substantial numbers of whigs, the Catholic Stuarts were out of the question. Bolingbroke had tried at various points to have Charles Edward brought up as a protestant to fulfil this role, but ultimately failed. As the 1730s progressed, however, and the division between the King and Prince Frederick deepened, the latter began more and more to court identification with the 'Patriot King' of opposition rhetoric.

'Patriot' dramas often used subjects from ancient British history to exemplify pristine political virtues. Such dramas had a broad appeal as they didn't need detailed knowledge of contemporary politics to be understood.<sup>118</sup> Frederick was assiduous in cultivating an image of himself as both a Patriot ruler, and a patron of culture. Frederick's patronage of the Opera of the Nobility during the 1730s had less to do with any hostility to Handel, and everything to do with wanting his own vehicle for representational theatre.<sup>119</sup> The Royal Academy and its successor under Handel were inevitably perceived as close to the court, and continued to receive a royal subscription. In supporting the rival company, Frederick was representing himself as a patron of the arts, and an independent ruler in his own right. In contrast to Bolingbroke, however, he deliberately courted the mercantile sector, portraying himself as a friend to trade, and by implication prepared to support British trade with British arms. In 1737, after removing the Princess from royal supervision at Hampton Court to the privacy of St James' Palace for the birth of their son, the Prince and Princess of Wales were expelled from court. In the same year, the Opera of the Nobility folded, giving their final performance on 11 June. The Prince

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<sup>117</sup> This name was first used by Bolingbroke in his tract of 1738, but this was only circulated privately to begin with. It was first published in 1749.

<sup>118</sup> Lediard & Lampe *Britannia*, pp28-9 & passim. See also Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p79

<sup>119</sup> Illustrated by the fact that he attended Handel's performances when the King was away in 1736-7. D. Burrows, 'Handel and the London Opera Companies in the 1730s' *GHB X* (2004), p159

therefore assembled writers and composers around him at his country residence at Cliveden, where he produced overtly patriotic dramas for private performance. The most obvious demonstration of this was his commissioning of Thomson and Malet's masque *Alfred* (with music by Arne) in 1740 for private performance, which was then transferred to Drury Lane in 1741.<sup>120</sup> According to Burney it was performed three years later (presumably shortly after *Semele*) 'after the manner of an oratorio.'<sup>121</sup> Here the audience were invited to identify Frederick with the legendary king who had first brought unity to the divided kingdoms of early Britain, and its three tableaux represented Bolingbroke's three stages of reform.<sup>122</sup> Its final chorus has of course become legendary, but in the context of the Prince's political self-presentation, its meaning is quite clear, each stanza of 'Rule Britannia' focusing on a key aspect of the Patriot agenda:

*Still more majestic shalt thou rise,  
More dreadful from each foreign stroke;  
As the loud blast that tears the skies,  
Serves but to root thy native oak.*

*Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame,  
All their attempts to bend thee down  
Will but arouse thy generous flame;  
But work their woe, and thy renown.*

*To thee belongs the rural reign;  
Thy cities shall with commerce shine;  
All thine shall be the subject main,  
And every shore it circles thine.*

*The Muses, still with freedom found,  
Shall to thy happy coast repair;  
O blest Isle!<sup>123</sup> With matchless beauty crowned,  
And manly hearts to guide the fair.<sup>124</sup>*

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<sup>120</sup> M. Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred* (New York, 1994), p37

<sup>121</sup> C. Burney, *Memoirs of Dr. Charles Burney 1726-1769*, ed. S. Klima, G. Bowers, K.S. Grant (Nebraska, 1988), p47; The performances were on 20 March and 3 April, 1745, in rivalry with Defesch's *Joseph*. A.H. Scouten (ed.), *The London Stage, 1660-1700 (-1776-1800), Part 3, 1729-1747* (London & Amsterdam, 1960), pp1161, 1164

<sup>122</sup> Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred*, p19

<sup>123</sup> The reference to 'blest Isle' echoes Purcell and Dryden's 'Fairest Isle' in *King Arthur*.

Frederick's agenda is here summed up as an expansive foreign policy, resistance to France and Spain, and promotion of British trade. It also encompasses the idea of cultural renewal which was dear to many Anglophone writers, and serves as a reminder that for many the Patriot agenda was as much cultural as military.<sup>125</sup> The ongoing grievance was the dominance of Italian opera and singers seen at the beginning of this chapter, with many writers lamenting the decline in national poetry and art. On 5 December, 1732 Aaron Hill wrote an open letter to Handel begging him:

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...<sup>126</sup>

This was part of a genuine attempt to reinvigorate the English tradition.<sup>127</sup> In 1737, Hill wrote an even more impassioned plea, this time directed at the Prince of Wales, and explicitly linking political and cultural decline together.<sup>128</sup> *The Tears of the Muses* tells of Prince Germanicus, son and heir apparent of Augustus, discovering the nine muses in a sacred grove, whence they are preparing to leave for the north. This is a clever analogy; it can be read as meaning the transfer of the culture of the Roman Empire north to Britain, but it can also be read as the potential disappearance of the arts from Britain now.<sup>129</sup> Frederick is Germanicus, the patriotic son of the emperor. In a clear reference to Walpole, Clio is determined to leave a land where titles are bought rather than earned, and 'SMOTHER'D in *Self*, there breathes no

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<sup>124</sup> 'Rule Britannia', vv3-6; J. Thomson, *Alfred: a masque. Represented before Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, at Clifden, on the first of August, 1740* (London, 1740), pp42-3

<sup>125</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p154

<sup>126</sup> Aaron Hill to Handel, 5 December 1732, in *HHB IV*, p205

<sup>127</sup> Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector*, p158

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, p132

<sup>129</sup> A. Hill, *The Tears of the Muses* (London, 1737)



public soul.<sup>130</sup> Significantly, Germanicus is shown in opposition to the prevailing mores:

She ceased – The Prince, his Patriot Eyes withdrew  
Weigh'd the long charge, and wish'd it, Half, untrue  
Sigh'd at the Waste domestic Discord made:  
And mourn'd unfriended Arts, by Spleen betrayed.

Moreover, the effects of this corruption have spread throughout society and permeated the arts. The effects of the luxurious and debilitating import of opera on the national character have persuaded Terpsichore to leave too:

NEAR *Opera's* fribling *Fugues*, what Muse can stay?  
Where wordless Warblings winnow *Thought* away!  
Music, when *Purpose* points her not the Road,  
Charms, to betray, and softens, to corrode.  
Empty of Sense, the Soul-seducing Art  
Thrills a slow poison to the sick'ning Heart.  
Soft sinks *Idea*, dissolute in Ease  
And all Life's feeble lesson is, to please.  
Spirit, and Taste, and generous Toil, take Flight:  
And lazy Love, and indolent Delight,  
And low luxurious Weariness of Pain,  
Lull the lost Mind, - and all its Powers are vain.<sup>131</sup>

This draws on the tradition of 'sound and sense' anti-opera rhetoric which went back to the beginning of the century, wishing rather that:

...Music's meaning Voice exalts Desire.  
There, Harmony not drowns, but quickens, thought;  
And Fools, unfeeling words, by Notes are caught.<sup>132</sup>

Prince Germanicus persuades the muses to stay, but they insist that they will remain hidden until he makes society appreciate them again. Here is a quite explicit call for Frederick to become a patron of English arts and English national culture.

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p14

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, p24

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, p25

London theatres remained deeply reactive to the political climate, and the 'Patriot' movement was reflected in a range of plays and oratorios. The Prince of Wales was also the dedicatee of the last of Handel's oratorios before he composed *Semele*. *Samson* (1741) is an explicit Patriot King drama.<sup>133</sup> It features a national hero, who faces hostility and potential annihilation from the foreign, heathen invaders that surround him. This is a clear analogy for Britain being surrounded by hostile Catholics, both French and Scots.<sup>134</sup> Rather than submit to them, or compromise, he makes the ultimate self-sacrifice to destroy the invaders and give his own people the chance of victory:

Mess. Unwounded of his enemies he fell,  
At once he did destroy, and was destroy'd;  
The edifice, where all were met to see,  
Upon their heads, and on his own he pull'd!

Man. Oh, lastly overstrong against thyself!  
A dreadful way thou took'st to thy revenge:  
Glorious, yet dearly bought!<sup>135</sup>

The immediate source for *Samson* was John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. However, it was adapted with care, skill and no small amount of creative input by Newburgh Hamilton. Hamilton, who had also adapted *Alexander's Feast* from Dryden, took the tone of the oratorio from the biblical book of Judges rather than Milton. In compressing the original epic poem he used material from no fewer than fourteen of Milton's other works.<sup>136</sup> Jennens was unflattering about the quality of the libretto:

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<sup>133</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p61. The other example of a Patriot King character in Handel's oratorios is Cyrus in *Belshazzar*. James Miller, author of *Joseph and his Brethren* was a vocal member of the Patriot opposition. R. Smith, 'Handel's English Librettists' in Burrows, D., (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge, 1997), p98

<sup>134</sup> The Scots were of course by no means all Catholic, but as perceived supporters of James were considered as such.

<sup>135</sup> N. Hamilton, *Samson*. HWV 57/78

<sup>136</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p330

The Name of Heathen will suit him better, yet a sensible Heathen would not have prefer'd the Nonesense foisted by one Hamilton into Milton's Samson Agonistes, to the sublime Sentiments & expressions of Isaiah & David, of the Apostles & Evangelists, & of Jesus Christ'.<sup>137</sup>

But as is evident from the context of his remarks, what galled him was that he felt that Handel had given more care to it than to *Messiah*.<sup>138</sup> It is in fact a highly skilful adaptation, with Milton's original poem seamlessly blended with the other sources to create a performable drama. Its politics were not disguised – it was lavishly dedicated to the Prince of Wales, only a year after *Alfred* had glorified not only Frederick as a king-in-exile, but also the ancient British constitution.<sup>139</sup> Both works share a charismatic leader who is capable of setting an inspiring example to his people. Significantly, therefore, in *Samson*, Hamilton removed all references to the internal divisions of the Israelites. The hero is thus the leader of a threatened but fundamentally united people, just as Frederick promised to be. The battle that they are fighting is for liberty, which was a key anti-Walpole rallying cry.<sup>140</sup> That 'liberty' though, includes a freedom from foreign threat, which means defeating the external enemies decisively. *Samson* is therefore an open call both for patriotic unity and a robust attitude to Spain.<sup>141</sup> By 1743 however, it was not the Spanish, but the French who were surrounding Britain, and the tone of the work shares with its successors (the *Occasional Oratorio* and *Judas Maccabaeus*), a call for divine aid in time of emergency.<sup>142</sup> *Semele* lacks any reference to this agenda, which may be significant in explaining its lack of success.

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<sup>137</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 21 February 1743, in *HHB IV*, p357

<sup>138</sup> And possibly he resented the skill of Hamilton's adaptation after his own addition to Milton, *II Moderato* had been mocked by critics. Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth (I) 4 February 1742 in *HHB IV*, p344

<sup>139</sup> Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred*, p10

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p 183

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, p292. Samson may originally have been modelled on the English 'martyrs' Admiral Vernon and Brigadier-General Thomas Wentworth who would have been known to Hamilton as a kinsman of his master, Lord Strafford. *ibid.*, p 297

<sup>142</sup> Victory was still believed to depend on God's favour, earned by religious virtue. R. Smith, 'The Meaning of Morell's Libretto of "Judas Maccabaeus"', *ML* lxxix (1998), p65

## **Newburgh Hamilton**

Whilst it has not been, and is unlikely to be, decisively proved, Newburgh Hamilton remains the most likely adapter of *Semele*.<sup>143</sup> Hamilton was steward to the Earl of Strafford, a courageous but arrogant soldier and diplomat, who had served under Marlborough and had risen to become ambassador to the United Provinces in 1714, serving with Bolingbroke.<sup>144</sup> Impeached for his role in the Peace of Utrecht and excluded by George I from the Act of Grace in 1717, Strafford never again held political office and in frustration turned to the Pretender, involving himself in the Atterbury plot of 1722.<sup>145</sup> The Pretender granted him a dukedom in 1722 and he retained his seat in the House of Lords, but as far as British politics was concerned he was excluded from public life. Lord Hervey described him as a: 'loquacious, rich, illiterate, cold, tedious, constant haranguer in the House of Lords, who spoke neither sense nor English ... in short there was nothing so low as his dialect except his understanding, nor anything so tiresome as his public harangues except his private conversation.'<sup>146</sup> From 1722, until his death in 1739, Strafford devoted himself to his family and his estates. However, his papers show that the family was by no means absent from court. They clearly waited on the Prince and Princess of Wales and this perhaps would explain how Hamilton came to dedicate *Samson* to Frederick.<sup>147</sup> Winton Dean described him as a kinsman of the Duke of Hamilton.<sup>148</sup> This would further place him on the opposition spectrum, as the Duke was a prominent Scottish Jacobite who had led opposition in the Edinburgh parliament to the Act of Union. Such a relationship would have been very distant as Hamilton's family had been in

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<sup>143</sup> Hamilton was born Co. Tyrone 1691-2, and entered Trinity College Dublin in 1707-8, leaving without a degree. Thereafter he seems to have spent his life in the service of Strafford and the Dowager Countess. His family had been in Ireland since 1616 and were professional, rather than aristocratic. E. Hamilton, *Memoirs* (Dublin, 1891, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1920), pp24-5. See also Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p192

<sup>144</sup> Thompson, *Britain, Hanover, and the Protestant Interest*, p59

<sup>145</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p411

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Dickinson, 'Bolingbroke', *ODNB Online*

<sup>147</sup> For instance, Lady Strafford reports the kind attentions of the Prince and Princess in 1737 whilst waiting on them at court. BL Add. MS 31145, 131v

<sup>148</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p270

Ireland since 1616, and no further evidence for this link has been found.<sup>149</sup> Hervey mentions a 'Mr Hamilton', brother (presumably in law) of Lady Archibald Hamilton, in the Prince of Wales' circle.<sup>150</sup> If he were related to this circle, however distantly, it would make sense in the context of his dedication of *Samson* to the Prince. Hamilton seems to have served Strafford for most of his life, but little concrete evidence has been found for Hamilton's own political leanings, and of course the first Earl was dead by the time Hamilton was adapting *Samson*.

Hamilton can be definitely identified as the adapter of *Alexander's Feast*, *Samson*, and *The Occasional Oratorio*, and tentatively the *Ode for St Cecilia's Day*.<sup>151</sup> All of these works are close adaptations of earlier works by the acknowledged masters of English literature.<sup>152</sup> *Alexander's Feast* and the *St Cecilia Ode* are very respectful adaptations of Dryden, *Samson* a skilful reworking of Milton, and the *Occasional Oratorio* takes verses from Milton and Spenser. Taken as a group, they do not share a coherent political view. Whilst there may have been a Jacobite subtext to Dryden's works,<sup>153</sup> *Samson* is oppositional, but not Jacobite, and the *Occasional Oratorio* is decisively loyalist. References to Hamilton in the Strafford papers are either matters of estates management, or references to his insatiable enthusiasm for Handel's music.<sup>154</sup> Hamilton's likely authorship of *Semele* rests primarily on its similarity in

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<sup>149</sup> W.A. Speck, *The Birth of a Britain, A New Nation 1700-1710* (Oxford & Cambridge Mass., 1994), pp38, 75. The Strafford papers only mention meeting the Duke once, and none of the other references to him show any kind of intimacy or knowledge. BL Add. 31145, 330r; J. Cartwright (ed.), *The Wentworth Papers 1705-1739* (London, 1883), pp72-3, 144, 204, 224, 242, 257-8, 295, 309. However, the Duke was an enthusiastic patron of Italian opera, as was James Hamilton, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Limerick. It is possible that Newburgh was distantly related to one or more of these families, but this has not been established, and it is a common surname. See Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London*, p102

<sup>150</sup> Hervey, *Memoirs*, p246

<sup>151</sup> HWV 75. Fp. 17 January 1736; HWV 57. Fp. 12 October 1742; HWV 62, Fp. 14 February 1746; HWV 76. Fp. 22 November 1739

<sup>152</sup> '...being persuaded, that it is next to an Improbability, to offer the world anything in those Arts more perfect than the United Labours and utmost Efforts of a Dryden and a Handel.' [N. Hamilton], *Alexander's Feast; or, the Power of Musick, an ode, wrote in honour of St. Caecilia by Mr. Dryden. Set to musick by Mr. Handel* (London, 1739), preface

<sup>153</sup> R. Smith, 'Handel's English Librettists', p97

<sup>154</sup> '[the opera] was so applauded that Mr Hamilton, who would not doe less then another body when Mr. Hendel was in the case, Clapp'd till his arms ake'd.' Lucy Wentworth to Lord Strafford, 7

approach to these other works. Like all of them, it is an adaptation of an earlier work by a great English literary figure. Like *Samson*, it supplements the original work with other poetry by the same author and his contemporaries. Like *Alexander's Feast*, it has a final chorus which cannot be traced to the source material and was probably written by the adapter himself. Finally it comes from a period when Handel and Hamilton were clearly working closely together.<sup>155</sup>

Hamilton also wrote two plays, *The Doating Lovers* (1715),<sup>156</sup> and *The Petticoat Plotter* (1720).<sup>157</sup> Both are conventional marriage comedies and neither gives any hint of his deeper political ideas, or indeed any deep talent as a writer. However, a pamphlet of 1711, entitled *The Changes, or Faction Vanquis'd*, offers a positive insight into his political principles, at least as they were at the end of the controversial first decade of the century.<sup>158</sup> Dedicated to the 'Defenders of their Country, and Supporters of the Crown', it is a virulent and bitter attack on the whig administration of 1708-9.<sup>159</sup> Taking the form of an epic poem, it casts 'Faction' as the evil spirit bent on destroying Queen Anne, faction in this case being synonymous with an unapologetically whig administration. It directly equates whig rule with a curtailment of the monarchy, the collapse of the established church, quasi-republicanism, and the threat of renewed civil war. Faction declares:

But May triumphant Whigs for ever reign  
Their power know no mound,

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Jan, 1737/8, BL. Add MS 31145, p206, for Hamilton's duties, see *ibid.* pp114, 46, 149, 173, 224

<sup>155</sup> The internal evidence for Hamilton's authorship is considered in B. Trowell, 'Congreve and the 1744 *Semele* Libretto', *MT*, cxi (1970), pp993-4; Anthony Hicks responded that whilst Hamilton is the most likely librettist, the internal evidence does not constitute proof. Hicks, A., 'Letter', *MT*, cxi (1970), p1219

<sup>156</sup> Anon. [N. Hamilton], *The Doating Lovers: or, the Libertine Tam'd* (London, 1715)

<sup>157</sup> Anon. [N. Hamilton], *The Petticoat Plotter; A Farce in Two Acts* (London, 1720)

<sup>158</sup> Anon. [N. Hamilton], *The Changes: or, Faction Vanquished. A Poem.* (London, 1711)

<sup>159</sup> Though published anonymously, a variant copy in New York prints the author's name as Newburgh Hamilton. Given that no other pamphlets of his survive from this time, that he was not a prominent controversialist, and that his name is not easily confused, it seems unlikely that there could be any mistake over the attribution. D F. Foxon, *English verse 1701-1750*. (Cambridge, 1974), p323

Let *Britain* ever wear their servile Chain,  
And Monarchy be bound;  
A Commonwealth then shall appear once more,  
My lov'd Confusion we'll again restore,<sup>160</sup>

The poem tells of how Queen Anne entrusted government to too small a section of the whigs, who quickly exploited their dominance to force through legislation on the toleration of dissenters, threatening the entire edifice of church and state. It is an uncompromisingly high-church tory view which sees any weakening of the established church's power and monopolies over appointments as destructive of the whole fabric of society. The tone is angry and unremittingly hostile to the whigs.

Those [religious] Laws that were not for them, they did break  
But then that shoul'd in their favour speak  
The old were burnt, that they might better make  
The greatest Rakes, but Saints by starts  
They'll Whore and Rant,  
And Preach and Cant,  
With Heaven in their Mouths, but never in their Hearts.<sup>161</sup>

The poem continues with an account of the Sacheverell trial, when the population and electorate turned violently against the government's policies of religious toleration towards non-Anglican protestants. As a consequence of the crushing tory victory at the subsequent election, occasional conformity was outlawed in 1711, the 1710 General Naturalisation Act was repealed, excluding foreign protestants, and in 1714 the Schism Act attempted to stamp out dissenters' schools.<sup>162</sup> In Hamilton's poem, Sacheverell is cast as the hero whose martyr-like suffering brings the junto down.

A holy Priest (by Heav'n alone inspir'd)  
Beheld our Wounds with grief,  
By's Country's Wrongs his noble breast was fir'd  
To die or bring relief;

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<sup>160</sup> Anon [N. Hamilton], *The Changes*, p7

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, p8

<sup>162</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p223-4

The threat'ning Storm did not his Soul affright,  
But like the radiant Sun with dazling Light,  
He rescu'd *Albion* from eternal Night:  
    He boldly did maintain his Cause,  
        He knew it just,  
        And put his trust  
In him that cou'd protect, and not the World's applause<sup>163</sup>

Harley then appears as the saviour of government, forming a broad ministry of moderates ending the spirit of faction which the whigs had brought – a prototype 'Patriot Warrior'. For the first time, then, we can establish at least some of the thoughts of *Semele*'s likely adapter, albeit thirty years earlier. They are the views of a stridently high-church tory, temperamentally opposed to the whigs, but certainly not a Catholic. The pamphlet also shows a definite preference for moderate, coalition government, and a deep hostility to rule by a narrow clique – or a least a narrow whig clique.

The situation in the 1730s must have seemed to both tories and moderates like a return to factional government, but more powerful and arrogant than anything under Queen Anne. Government was dominated by Walpole's court whigs in spite of the broad oppositional movement.<sup>164</sup> There were a range of reasons why *Semele* might have attracted a writer steeped in oppositional rhetoric. Many Patriot plays of the time concerned the fall of a royal favourite – an obvious analogy with Walpole.<sup>165</sup> *Semele* has this element, and the reading of Walpole as a grasping mistress would not have been impossible given the heat of the political debate. However, in this context, it was perhaps not the figure of *Semele* herself that caught the imagination of Hamilton (if he was the adapter) but the portrayal of Jupiter. We know that Hamilton was close to the Prince of Wales in the early 1740s,<sup>166</sup> and conversant with the rhetoric and iconography of the Patriot King. From a political point of view, *Semele*

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<sup>163</sup> Anon [N. Hamilton], *The Changes*, p9

<sup>164</sup> Plumb, *Walpole*, p80

<sup>165</sup> Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England*, p119

<sup>166</sup> Especially if his link was via Sir Archibald, whose wife was the Prince's mistress around 1735. R. Sedgwick (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1715-1754* (2 vols, London, 1970), II, pp98-9



can be seen as a cautionary tale of the qualities *least* desirable in a monarch. *Semele* is not only *not* a Patriot drama;<sup>167</sup> it is a drama whose central royal figure is actually the antithesis of the ideal of the Patriot King.

Patriot King literature idealised the monarch as possessing near-divine qualities.<sup>168</sup> Bolingbroke stressed that it was possession of these qualities which legitimised a monarch, rather than heredity bestowing them. He mocked playwrights and apologists who built kings up into 'Divine-right Jupiters'.<sup>169</sup> The central hereditary monarch of *Semele* has this the wrong way round. Despite being *actually* divine, he is lacking in the highest moral qualities, being far more concerned with entertaining his mistress:

Jup. I must with Speed amuse her:  
Lest she too much explain,  
It gives the Lover double pain,  
Who hears his Nymph complain,  
And hearing must refuse her.<sup>170</sup>

Moreover he has no interest in administration, nor does he appear to have ministers. The one reference that Congreve makes to his applying himself to the business of government was removed from the 1743 libretto.

Jup. You are Mortal, and require  
Time to rest and to respire.  
Nor was I absent,  
[Tho' a while withdrawn,  
To take Petitions  
From the needy World.]<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Which all the Israelite oratorios are to a greater or lesser extent. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, passim

<sup>168</sup> Bolingbroke said that the king must 'reflect divine light'. St John, H. [Viscount Bolingbroke], *The Idea of a Patriot King*, in *Bolingbroke's Political Writings* ed. B. Cottret (Hants & London, 1997), p49

<sup>169</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p207

<sup>170</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p814

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, p811

Bolingbroke had counselled that a monarch must, at least in outward appearance, be morally upright and have decorum in his personal affairs.<sup>172</sup> Handel's Jupiter is an amorous fop who openly discards his royal duties in favour of amours in distant castles. These were precisely the criticisms most frequently made of George II, who was routinely criticised for his lengthy stays in Hanover. These sojourns away from Britain were seen by the opposition as intrinsically unpatriotic, particularly when they were due to the allure of German mistresses.<sup>173</sup> By the late 1730s and 1740s, one mistress in particular dominated his affections.

### **Amalie Von Wallmoden**

In 1735, on a visit to Hanover, George II met Amalie von Wallmoden, daughter of the Hanoverian general Johann Franz Dietrich von Wendt, and wife of Adam von Wallmoden, Oberhauptmann of Calenberg.<sup>174</sup> She and the King began a love affair almost immediately. According to Lord Hervey, George reported the progress of the liaison in detail to Queen Caroline who, anxious about the beautiful newcomer's potential influence, insisted that she not come to England.<sup>175</sup> Caroline was deeply upset by this infatuation, whilst Robert Walpole worried about her potential influence over George, and moreover that she might become an incentive for him to remain in Hanover, impeding the effectiveness of the British government. In 1736 she had a son, Johann Ludwig, who was widely assumed to be the King's, though he was never acknowledged.<sup>176</sup> According to Hervey, 'Pasquinades were stuck up in several quarters of the town, and some practical jokes and satires...were likewise

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<sup>172</sup> Bolingbroke, *The Idea of a Patriot King*, p111. The personal affairs of Samson, Hercules and Solomon were considerably cleaned up for their appearance in Handel's music dramas.

<sup>173</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p192

<sup>174</sup> M. Kilburn, 'Wallmoden, Amalie Sophie Marianne von [née Amalie Sophie Marianne von Wendt], suo jure countess of Yarmouth (1704-1765)', *ODNB Online*

<sup>175</sup> Hervey, *Memoirs*, p132

<sup>176</sup> Johann Ludwig von Wallmoden (1736-1811). M. Kilburn, 'Wallmoden, Amalie', *ODNB Online*

exhibited.’<sup>177</sup> Even Pulteney wrote epigrams on the King’s sexual preoccupations, and Lord Chesterfield wrote a particularly crude satire, casting George as the adulterous, vacillating, Mark Anthony.<sup>178</sup>

What! Just escaped from Cleopatra’s charms  
To souse at once into your Fulvia’s arms?  
With equal violence of haste to run  
From blooming twenty to fat fifty-one.  
Was it for this the youth abroad was sent,  
And so much gold unprofitably spent?...<sup>179</sup>

However, whilst a man was arrested for toasting George’s ‘Hanover whore,’<sup>180</sup> the King was by and large quite happy for the relationship to be known. In 1737, following Queen Caroline’s death, Walpole suggested that Wallmoden come to Britain in order both to maintain the King’s emotional well-being and to act as a hostess on formal occasions. It is also likely that Walpole preferred a political outsider as mistress, rather than someone influential within the British aristocracy.<sup>181</sup> Initially unfamiliar with British politics, she seems to have abstained from using her influence over the King for several years.<sup>182</sup> However, by the early 1740s her position was perceived to have grown enormously, and she:

became an important channel of communication between the King and the politicians and seemed to work equally well with all of them... She seems never to have been suspected of intrigue or double-dealing. It is remarkable that she should

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<sup>177</sup> Hervey, *Memoirs*, p201. According to Lord Egmont, George had pictures of her ‘hung up opposite to his bed’s feet.’ M. Kilburn, ‘Wallmoden, Amalie’, *ODNB Online*

<sup>178</sup> This was particularly brutal as Anthony was frequently cited in eighteenth-century satire as the debauched opposite to the upright and regal Augustus. Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*, p122

<sup>179</sup> Hervey, *Memoirs*, p242

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, p229

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, p43. Lord Wentworth saw her at court for the first time in January 1739. He did ‘not think her a beauty, but very well.’ Lord Wentworth to the Earl of Strafford, 2 Jan, 1738/9, BM Add. MS 31145, 312v

<sup>182</sup> In June 1738 she arrived in London, and was naturalised on 8 February, 1740. She was created Countess of Yarmouth on 24 March with an income of £4000 p.a. Her husband divorced her that summer, leaving her free to assume the more formal role that Walpole had suggested. See Kilburn, ‘Wallmoden, Amalie Sophie’, *ODNB Online*

not have given way to temptations to which other royal mistresses had succumbed...<sup>183</sup>

Whatever the reality of the situation, Yarmouth was certainly perceived by the public to wield a strong influence over the King. In 1741, she was alleged to have been allocated the fees for the peerage creations.<sup>184</sup> Then, around 1743, she was the subject of the anonymous pamphlet: *A court intrigue: or, The statesman detected* which congratulated her on engineering Walpole's fall the previous year.<sup>185</sup> The virulence of these satires illustrates a fundamental change in attitudes towards the idea of royal mistresses during this period. Before the 1730s it was positively required for the monarch to have a mistress as proof of his manliness. Queen Caroline had accepted this and tried to engineer conquests for her husband who would not wield excessive personal or political influence.<sup>186</sup> George 'was not a lustful man although he took a certain pride in his virility.'<sup>187</sup> However, there was always a fine line in the public's perception between natural virility and being in thrall to women. In *Great News for St. James* George was satirized as a once-powerful horse on heat, now an old nag:

...Some say he has been a Stallion bold,  
Tho' to speak the truth he is now grown old  
He has often strolled in F\_r\_\_\_\_n Fairs,  
And inticed away our neighbours mares.<sup>188</sup>

In *The Court Spy*, the satirist suggested that George had become

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<sup>183</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp208-9

<sup>184</sup> Walpole, *Correspondence*, vol. 18, p51n. It also seems that she took £12,000 in 1747 to create Viscount Folkestone. In an age before government salaries, such sales were not seen generally seen as 'corruption'. R. Hatton, *George I, Elector and King* (London, 1978), p148

<sup>185</sup> Anon., *A court intrigue: or, The statesman detected. A genuine story, delivered by the oraculous ship. Addres'd to his Honour and the Countess of Y-R-H* (London, 1743?)

<sup>186</sup> Hervey, *Memoirs*, p43; Plumb, *Walpole*, p159

<sup>187</sup> Plumb, *Walpole*, p158. See also Hervey, *Memoirs*, p202

<sup>188</sup> Anon., *Great News from St. James, Or, a dialogue that passes between M\_\_\_\_a W\_\_\_\_le and Madam Y\_\_\_\_h, concerning the white Horse who broke loose, and run away with another man's Dun Mare* (London, [1740?])

totally vanquished by the powerful charms of the lovely Viola, a celebrated French *salatrix*, imported this season tho' contrary to Act of P\_\_\_\_\_, by the mighty Directors of the Op\_\_\_\_\_, for the Embellishment of their Entertainments.<sup>189</sup>

In using 'vanquished' the satirist was equating sexual appetite with mental weakness, not virile strength. The satire also explained that Viola had obliterated his passion for Yarmouth, but that he had kept it secret because of the influence Yarmouth wielded over his friends. Annotations to the copy held in the British Library identify Viola as Eva Veigel, later Mrs Garrick. It suggests that she was also courted by Iulius (Cumberland) and that Cumberland was deliberately dispatched to war earlier than necessary to get him out of the way.<sup>190</sup> Lord Middlesex appears as the foppish 'Pyropus' – similarly ruled by his priapic lust for La Muscovita. The satire ends with Garanomia (Yarmouth) violently upbraiding Monarchus (George).<sup>191</sup> The implication is that George is letting his lusts – and his fear of getting caught by his mistress – drive political decisions. The anonymous pamphlet *A Court Intrigue* suggests that Medea (Yarmouth) was being used by Gomorrah (Walpole), to manipulate Hiram (George II). This celebrates the fall of Walpole and predicts a renewal of Britain's glory.<sup>192</sup> It is a reminder that until 1743 the figure of a manipulative power behind the throne could equally have signified Walpole or Yarmouth.<sup>193</sup> Significantly, the fall of Walpole effectively ended mythological satire.<sup>194</sup>

In this context, a clear and possible reading of *Semele* would be a representation of the ambitious royal mistress who uses her sexual power to manipulate a monarch, who is himself too driven by lust to resist and lets his passion for her overrule his

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<sup>189</sup> Anon. [Lord Hervey?], *The Court Spy; or, Memoirs of St J\_m\_s's* (London, 1744?), p11

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*, p22. BL 8133.b.32.

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, p35

<sup>192</sup> Anon., *A Court Intrigue*, pp28, 46-8

<sup>193</sup> This is also found in *Great News from St. James*:

'The Groom he is sadly grieved God knows  
Cause he is run away with his Master's cloathes'

<sup>194</sup> Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, p181

judgement.<sup>195</sup> The parallel stretches to the fact that when she arrived, Wallmoden was a foreign outsider with no connexions in the court, just as Semele is a mortal transported out of her own realm to Jupiter's. And yet there is a potential double meaning here. If George was tiring of Wallmoden and seeking romance elsewhere, then the Countess could easily have seen herself as *both* the royal mistress, and the wronged wife. George was by this time a widower, and she was therefore the closest thing to his legitimate partner. Moreover, the triumphant ending celebrating the fruit of the royal union might well have reminded Yarmouth of her unacknowledged son.

George had been a patron of Handel throughout his career and it is hugely unlikely that Handel would have deliberately set out to insult his monarch, indeed the changes made by Handel to the libretto show that he deliberately lessened some of the obvious parallels between characters in *Semele* and the current royal family. Of course these parallels would have to be to some extent accidental as the libretto was thirty five years old. However, that does not rule out the librettist discovering parallels with present political affairs which he found amusing. Nor does it rule out audiences perceiving parallels which had escaped the authors. In chapter four, the changes made to the libretto will be examined, which will demonstrate that Handel and the librettist were well aware of the sensitivity of the subject matter. Meanwhile, George's shameless flaunting of his infidelities to the general public increasingly looked to belong to a different age, and though this survey also shows that it was unlikely that George himself would have taken huge offence at any perceived similarities, this is not to say that such an attitude would have been shared by those around him.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Porpora had treated the subject of royal adultery in *David and Bathsheba* (1734-5). L. Lindgren, 'Oratorios sung in Italian at London, 1734-82' in Besutti, P. (ed.), *L'oratorio Musicale Italiano e I Contesi (secc. XVII – XVIII)* (Firenze, 2002), p529

<sup>196</sup> Recent research by Ellen Harris suggests that the pension was not, in fact, withdrawn. E.T. Harris, 'Handel the Investor', *ML* 85 (2004), p534. George's general lack of prudishness is illustrated by the story that he had the (extremely explicit) courtesan scenes restored for a performance of Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*. T. Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick Esq.* (London, 1780), p186

### The Politics of the Georgian Theatres

Several authors have pointed to Handel's rivalry with the Middlesex opera company as a possible reason for his setting of an operatic libretto.<sup>197</sup> What has been less studied is Handel's relationship to the composers and impresarios in London who continued to compose and promote English-language opera and theatre. Several authors have noted that the majority of Londoners 'took no interest whatever in Italian Opera. They found their liking for music satisfied by the mixed repertoire at Drury Lane and, from 1732, at Covent Garden',<sup>198</sup> and singers who appeared for Handel one night might be in spoken plays, ballad operas, or English masques on the other night of the week.<sup>199</sup>

The main musico-dramatic genres popular in England at the turn of the eighteenth century were the masque and the dramatic opera. Originating in France, masques had originally been court entertainments, which presented a mythological story through music and dance, ending with a glorification of the monarch, who in the French versions would join the final dance, along with members of the court. They were the representational genre *par excellence*. Masques had come to Britain as early as 1513.<sup>200</sup> They had first taken substantial hold in the early seventeenth century, but became more popular during the Restoration. In Britain, however, the absence of a full-time court theatre meant that the direct glorification of the monarch and the participation of the audience in the final dance were dropped and masques became effectively miniature operas on mythological subjects. The most famous examples were the Lockes' *Cupid and Death*, Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, the various settings of Congreve's *The Judgment of Paris* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. The origins of

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<sup>197</sup> The best of these is C. Taylor, 'Handel's Disengagement from Italian Opera' in S. Sadie, & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), pp165-81

<sup>198</sup> Johnstone R. Fiske, *Music in Britain – The Eighteenth Century*, p16. By far the most comprehensive study of the anglophone tradition is Fiske, *English Theatre Music*.

<sup>199</sup> In particular, John Beard, Kitty Clive and Susannah Cibber were noted theatre actors.

<sup>200</sup> E. J. Dent, *Foundations of English Opera* (Cambridge & London, 1928), p10

dramatic opera are harder to establish, but it was effectively a fusion of spoken theatre with the masque. Unlike all-sung opera, the main action took place in dialogue. Musical episodes in the form of miniature masques were then interpolated – usually performed by minor or unnamed characters. These episodes were generally ceremonials, such as the pagan sacrifice in Act One of *King Arthur*, or self-contained masques given as entertainments to characters in the play at weddings or feasts. When the Italian *opera seria* style had first come to Britain in 1705 with Thomas Clayton's *Arsinoë*, several composers responded with works in the English masque tradition. Aaron Hill and John Hughes collaborated on a libretto for *Calypso and Telemarchus*, which was set to music by Galliard. Colley Cibber wrote a new libretto of *Venus and Adonis* for Pepusch.<sup>201</sup> None of these were commercially successful against the new fashionable Italian style and the last, and perhaps most enduring, example of the genre was composed for private rather than theatrical performance. This was Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, written at the Duke of Chandos' palatial house at Cannons.<sup>202</sup>

The masque was therefore effectively dead as a genre by 1718.<sup>203</sup> However, Italian opera still did not rule unchallenged. In the 1720s, pantomime enjoyed a burst of considerable popularity, particularly between the years 1723 and 1728 – the years of the Royal Academy's decline. The dancer and theatrical producer John Rich took the classical form and turned it into a genuinely populist genre.<sup>204</sup> This is important to the study of *Semele* for two reasons. Firstly, unlike *opera seria*, most of the pantomimes were based on classical myths and works such as *Jupiter and Europa* (1723) kept audiences familiarised with the background stories of Greek and Roman

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<sup>201</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, pp52-56

<sup>202</sup> HWV 49a. F.p. 1718, possibly staged. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p605. According to Beeks, *Acis* 'transcended' English masques, while Ellen Harris has pointed out that, via the Pastoral form he had mastered in Italy, they were Handel's first way into English music. A. Hicks, 'Handel and the idea of an oratorio' in D. Burrows, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge, 1997), p150; E.T. Harris, *Handel and the Pastoral Tradition* (Oxford, 1980), pp117, 199

<sup>203</sup> There was a viable market for masques up to 1717. See Dean, & Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, pp162-6

<sup>204</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p72



myth. Secondly, the pantomimes consciously mixed 'high' and 'low' elements in a way not acceptable in contemporary opera or spoken theatre. Rich's pantomimes generally contained two plots, one from classical mythology, and one harlequinade. In this they were very much like the older English traditions of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. These, like *Semele*, (unlike *opera seria* or most of the biblical oratorios) mixed high drama and comedy, high and low characters, spectacular visual effects, music, dance and songs, graphic hell scenes and heavenly transfigurations.<sup>205</sup>

### **The revival of English-language theatre**

In 1728, as the popularity of the pantomimes waned, John Gay scored the 'greatest theatrical success of the century.'<sup>206</sup> *The Beggars' Opera* was a viciously satirical attack on both the political establishment, in the person of Walpole, and the cultural establishment in the shape of Italian Opera. It ran for years, and was even given in novelty performances, once as a classical tragedy, and even by a cast of children. Handel's favourite tenor, John Beard, appeared in it opposite Susannah Cibber in 1736,<sup>207</sup> and Thomas Lowe, another of Handel's tenors, also appeared as Macheath. For the first time since the death of Purcell there was a genuinely popular vernacular musical theatre. Moreover, because the music consisted entirely of well-known tunes, making the words the most important element, it was a perfect vehicle for satirical attacks – in contrast to 'senseless' Italian music.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*, p79. Though divine, Somnus is, dramatically speaking, a figure of low comedy.

<sup>206</sup> *ibid.*, p94

<sup>207</sup> *ibid.*, p102. 'Rich's first great success of the 1720s, *The Necromancer, or, Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, performed on 20 December 1723 in response to John Thurmond's *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* at Drury Lane on 26 November 1723, brought the house 260. Within the decade Lincoln's Inn Fields developed an enviable record of additional pantomimes, including *Jupiter and Europa* (1723), *Harlequin a Sorcerer* (1725), *Apollo and Daphne* (1726), *The Rape of Proserpine* (1727), *The Loves of Damon and Clemene* (1727), *Harlequin Anna Bullen* (1727), *Italian Jealousy* (1729), and *Perseus and Andromeda, or, The Spaniard Outwitted* (1730).' P.T. Dircks, 'Rich, John (1692-1761)', *ODNB Online*

<sup>208</sup> In particular, the senselessly forced happy ending. A.V. Berger, 'The Beggar's Opera, The Burlesque, and Italian Opera', *ML* XVII (1936), p95

The success of *The Beggars' Opera* brought renewed attempts to create serious English opera. Over fifteen months in 1732-3, seven English-language full-length operas were given in London.<sup>209</sup> However, none of these made any move away from the style of *opera seria* and they thus appealed neither to traditional opera audiences, nor to a vernacular audience who expected an earthier and more openly satiric style.<sup>210</sup> Hill's open letter to Handel did not for the moment bring about a successful vernacular opera. The breakthrough for English opera, but hardly what Hill had in mind, came when Henry Carey and John Frederick Lampe combined high-quality music with earthy satire in their burlesque opera *The Dragon of Wantley*.<sup>211</sup> Lampe was a professional bassoonist and was a member of Handel's orchestra. He had therefore absorbed the *opera seria* style thoroughly and was able to pastiche Handel fluently and effectively. The young Lord Wentworth reported:

We was at Covent garden Play House last night my mother was so good as to treat us with it & the Dragon of Wantcliffe was the farce; I like it vastly & the music is excessive pretty, & tho' tis a burlesque on the opera's, yet Mr Handel owns he thinks the tunes very well compos'd.<sup>212</sup>

Henry Carey's libretto took an old poem about a rapacious dragon attacking a Yorkshire village and treated it to all the inflated language and characterisation of the Italian operas.<sup>213</sup> The comedy came from the mismatch between the crude vulgarity of the plot and music which was 'as grand and pompous as possible'.<sup>214</sup> It included a hero who prefers drinking to fighting, and two rival sopranos (based originally on the Faustina-Cuzzoni rivalry but now immortalised in *The Beggars' Opera*), both of whom the hero promises to love. The opera was immediately successful, running for

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<sup>209</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, pp127-133

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*, p142. Dean suggests that it was the revivals of *Acis* from 1732-43 that finally destroyed vernacular opera. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p173

<sup>211</sup> H. Carey & J.F. Lampe, *The Dragon of Wantley, An Opera* (London, 1737)

<sup>212</sup> Lord Wentworth to Lord Strafford, January 19, 1737/8 BM Add. 31145, 226r

<sup>213</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p148

<sup>214</sup> Carey & Lampe, *The Dragon of Wantley*, preface. Burlesques often kept the music of the works they were mocking and substituted satirical words. See Berger, 'The Beggar's Opera, The Burlesque, and Italian Opera', p96

sixty-nine performances at Covent Garden.<sup>215</sup> This, rather than *The Beggar's Opera*, seems to have been what finally turned London audiences away from Italian opera.<sup>216</sup> Neither of Lampe's subsequent burlesques, *Margery, or Worse than the Dragon*, nor the even more brutally satiric *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1744) proved nearly so popular, but by then opera in London was on the wane.

By this time, however, a further challenge to Italian opera had arisen. Thomas Arne (1710-1778) had been born in Covent Garden and trained for the law, but after meeting Michael Festing had studied music and became an ambitious composer and promoter.<sup>217</sup> His pirate performance of *Acis and Galatea* in 1732 had been key to persuading Handel of its commercial merits, and his *Rosamond* had been one of the slew of English operas performed in 1733. In 1736 he married the soprano Cecilia Young, whose sister was married to John Frederick Lampe. His sister was Susannah Cibber, the leading tragedienne of her day, and one of Handel's favourite English singers. His first major success was *Comus*, based on Milton and performed at Drury Lane in 1738. Having come to the attention of the Prince of Wales he wrote two further masques in 1740, this time for private performance at Cliveden. Most famously he wrote the overtly patriotic *Alfred* which apostrophised both the Patriot King (Frederick) and the English nation (in *Rule Britannia*). Like *Comus*, it returned to the specifically English conventions of 'dramatic opera' with spoken dialogue and with only minor characters singing.<sup>218</sup>

More importantly for this study, he also set *The Judgment of Paris* using the 1700 libretto that Congreve had written for the 'Prize' competition between London's

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<sup>215</sup> C. Hogwood, *Handel* (Bath, 1984), p144

<sup>216</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p130, Johnstone & Fiske, *Music in Britain – The Eighteenth Century*, p144

<sup>217</sup> D.J. Golby, 'Arne, Thomas Augustine (1710-1778)', *ODNB Online*. Given his association with the Patriot circle, it is interesting to note that Arne was a Roman Catholic (though also baptised into the Church of England).

<sup>218</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p180

leading theatre composers.<sup>219</sup> In both dramatic structure and musical style these works deliberately look back to the English tradition of Purcell. *Alfred* also follows dramatic opera conventions, whilst *Judgment* is a traditional masque of the late seventeenth century, which tells of the shepherd prince Paris' attempt to judge which of Juno, Pallas or Venus is the most beautiful. Moreover, Arne cultivated the harmonically daring style of the English Restoration, delighting in abrupt changes of tonality and daring false relations.<sup>220</sup> He combined this with infectious melodies to create a musical style which was undoubtedly vernacular, to complement the Englishness of the libretto. Significantly, in his version, Venus finally melts Paris with a simple strophic song, *Nature fram'd thee sure for loving*, utterly unlike the Italianate arias of her rivals (one of which, 'Hark, hark! the glorious Voice of War', is a direct pastiche of Handel's martial style).<sup>221</sup>

Meanwhile, a resurgence of serious English music seemed underway. Greene wrote several short masques, including *Song of Deborah and Barak* (1732), *Jephtha* (1737) and *The Judgement of Hercules* (1740).<sup>222</sup> While these were only ever given in private performances at music clubs (and were never published), they represent a clear attempt to set a new musical agenda, with a focus on vernacular, unstaged, biblical drama.<sup>223</sup> Meanwhile Hayes set another masque, *Circe*, for the Three Choirs Festival in 1742. What these collectively demonstrate is that from the very beginning of Handel's career, there was always a commercially strong and artistically lively

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<sup>219</sup> This 'prize' competition involved London's leading theatre composers competing by setting the same libretto. It was won by the comparatively unknown John Weldon with Eccles coming second.

<sup>220</sup> J. Herbage, 'The Vocal Style of Thomas Augustine Arne', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 78 (1951-2), pp83-96

<sup>221</sup> T.A. Arne, *The Judgment of Paris*. ed. I. Spink (London, 1978), p75

<sup>222</sup> Johnstone & Fiske, *Music in Britain – The Eighteenth Century*, p147, Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p45. These were certainly known about amongst Handel's friends, particularly through John Hoadley. D. Burrows, & R. Dunhill (eds), *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris 1732-1780* (Oxford, 2002), pp81-2

<sup>223</sup> H.D. Johnstone, 'Handel's London – British Musicians and London Concert Life' in D. Burrows (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge, 1997), p67

vernacular rival to Italian opera, which Handel would have known.<sup>224</sup> The same performers, producers and composers were often active in more than one sphere, and Handel would have been as aware of these traditions as he was of his more obviously direct rivals in Italian opera. Moreover, these different genres would have had considerable overlap of audiences. Handel's experiments with English genres in the 1730s and 1740s should therefore not be seen simply as a disengagement with opera, but as a set of engagements with the different musical traditions active in the metropolis.

### **Arne's *The Judgment of Paris***

At the same time that Lord Middlesex's opera company was opening its first season, Thomas Arne's company were preparing to perform a double-bill of *The Judgment of Paris* and Handel's *Alexander's Feast*.<sup>225</sup> It is possible that Handel knew of this before he left for Dublin, and John Beard stayed in London to perform in it, rather than go to Ireland. Handel arrived in Dublin on 18 November, 1741.<sup>226</sup> He opened a subscription for his first season on 12 December, and, after its success, a second on 6 February, 1742. In London, Arne's double bill was performed in March and April 1742, where Lord Radnor described it as 'much crowded; the ode as but badly performed, the other proved much as I expected'.<sup>227</sup> John Upton, presumably in reaction to a disparaging comment by Handel's friend Thomas Harris, wrote: 'I find you envy T. Arne's merit; so I say nothing to that article of infamous, & malicious revealing. You cannot bear his eclipsing Handel: hinc illae lacrimae. I wish you more grace.'<sup>228</sup> Hearing it for a second time, Radnor was more measured: 'I think upon the

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<sup>224</sup> Fiske, *English Theatre Music*, p175

<sup>225</sup> The possibility of *Judgment's* influence on the choice of the *Semele* libretto has been raised, but not explored in detail, by several writers. See Herbage, 'The Vocal Style of Thomas Augustine Arne', pp89-90; Burrows, *Handel*, p274; Hogwood, *Handel*, p183

<sup>226</sup> *HHB IV*, p337

<sup>227</sup> Radnor to James Harris, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1742, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p134

<sup>228</sup> John Upton to James Harris, 4 July, 1742, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p138

whole Arn is the best (even allowing his thefts from Handel) of the young composers.<sup>229</sup> Clearly contemporaries perceived Arne's English masque to be a serious rival to Handel's dominance. This perception is illustrated not only by the fact that *L'Allegro* appears to have been a response to the success of *Comus*, but also by the fact that Handel's decision to set *Samson* came shortly after reports that Arne was planning a work on the same subject. In both cases the choice of subject matter was clearly Handel's.<sup>230</sup>

Handel could have learned in detail about *The Judgment of Paris* from a number of sources. Firstly, Arne followed Handel to Dublin in April 1742 and arranged a benefit concert for his wife (included many pieces by Handel), at which his sister, Susannah, sang. It seems plausible that Handel would have attended, or known of their plans. Secondly, John Beard had sung in the new work and resumed his close relationship with Handel on the latter's return to London.<sup>231</sup> Beard could easily have related the success of *Judgment* – and possibly shown Handel some of the score. The libretto for *Judgment of Paris* was Congreve at his suave, risqué, best. It abounds with richly sensuous phrases, and is littered with double-entendres. If Handel had searched out a copy, two editions were available. In London he could have acquired the 1710 complete works (the fifth edition was published in 1730), or, if he had begun to look whilst still in Ireland, there was a 1736 edition of the two sung dramas, *Judgment*, and *Semele*. In either case he would quickly have discovered in *Semele* a ready-made libretto for an opera that would appeal to vernacular tastes. It therefore seems likely that, far from simply being an attack on Middlesex, Handel's choice of libretto may have been an attempt to steal *both* sets of rivals' audiences, combining sensuous music with a libretto by one of the acknowledged greats of English literature.

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<sup>229</sup> Radnor to James Harris, 23 March, 1742, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p134

<sup>230</sup> Katherine Knatchbull to James Harris [5 December 1738], in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p66; R. Dunhill, *Handel and the Harris Circle* (Hampshire, 1995), p6

<sup>231</sup> Beard sang the eponymous hero in *Samson* and also the London premier of *Messiah*, before creating the role of Jupiter.

### **The Middlesex controversy**

In 1741 Charles Jennens reported that 'Six extravagant young Gentlemen have subscrib'd 1000£ apiece for the Support of an opera next winter, The Chief Castrato is to be Monticelli, the chief Woman Visconti...' <sup>232</sup> In addition, Middlesex installed his mistress, 'La Muscovita', on a large salary, though she does not seem to have been remotely of the same calibre as her colleagues. The new company immediately ran into financial difficulties:

The new opera people are already alltogether by the ears about their parts[;] they begin the 30<sup>th</sup> of this month, and I believe will finish before the end of the next[.] The expence of this affair may amount to about 1600 pound, half of which is to be allotted to dancers[;] we may therefore expect a gig as well as a song for our money[.] <sup>233</sup>

By 5 November 1741 it was evident that the venture was dangerously out of control:

...The music displeases everybody, and the dances. I am quite uneasy about the Opera, for Mr. Conway is one of the directors, and I fear they will lose considerably, which he cannot afford [he goes on to list the extravagant payments being made to the poet, designer and singers]. I am quite uneasy for poor Harry, who will thus be to pay for Lord Middlesex's pleasures! <sup>234</sup>

During this time, Handel remained safely in Dublin. <sup>235</sup> The new company began with a pasticcio, *Alexander in Persia*. On 26 November, 1741, George Harris reported dejectedly that

The diversions now going on in town are not very extraordinary; those of the musical kind are sadly sunk for want of Handel; the new opera is kept up, as it were, by mere force, against every body's opinion...the King, with his retinue, & the

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<sup>232</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 10 July 1741, in *HHB IV* p334

<sup>233</sup> Radnor to James Harris, Oct, 1741, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p123

<sup>234</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 5 November 1741, in *HHB IV*, p337

<sup>235</sup> This included the first performances of both *Messiah* and *Samson*.

Prince with his too, go both to the opera, but never the same night: - there has been some talk of burlesquing it with a farce under the title Alexander in Drury Lane, instead of, in Persia: - but the managers of the opera are too powerful for the playhouses to venture quarrelling with them.<sup>236</sup>

From this we can conclude four things: firstly, the Middlesex opera was not commercially successful, even with Handel out of the country; secondly, it is highly probably that Lady Yarmouth was a regular visitor to the Middlesex opera as part of the King's retinue; thirdly, that the opera managers did not have a sense of humour regarding any attacks made on them; and finally, that the managers and supporters of the opera were perceived to be sufficiently powerful to make life very difficult for anybody who challenged them.<sup>237</sup>

The Middlesex Opera followed *Alexander* on 23 December with Galuppi's *Penelope*. According to Horace Walpole, it fared little better: 'The house is excessively full every Saturday, never on Tuesday: here, you know, we make everything a fashion.'<sup>238</sup> News of the operas reached Handel in Dublin:

...as for the News of Your Opera's, I need not trouble you for all this Town is full of their ill success, by a number of Letters from Your quarters to the People of Quality here, and I can't help saying but that it furnishes great Diversion and laughter. The first Opera I heard my Self before I left London, and it made me very merry all along my journey, and of the second Opera, call'd Penelope, a certain noble man writes very jocosly, il faut que je dise avec Herlequin nôtre Penelope n'est qu'une Sallôpe....<sup>239</sup>

Handel's evident enjoyment at the new company's misfortunes requires careful examination. Coxe's admittedly sympathetic biography describes him as 'irascible,

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<sup>236</sup> George Harris to Thomas Harris, 26 November 1741, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, pp127-8

<sup>237</sup> Although not specific to this period, Carol Taylor has shown that of Italian opera subscribers between 1700 and 1745, 70% were titled, and 53% university-educated. Their wealth was overwhelmingly landed. This gives an indication of the level of social and economic power they wielded. Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London 1700-1745*, p62

<sup>238</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 24 December 1741, in *HHB IV*, p340

<sup>239</sup> Handel to Charles Jennens, 29 December 1741, in *HHB IV*, p341



impatient of contradiction, but not vindictive.<sup>240</sup> It is therefore necessary to be absolutely clear on the chronology of events. *Alexander* opened on 31 October, 1741, and Handel left for Dublin the following week.<sup>241</sup> He therefore probably saw *Alexander* on its first night, but is unlikely to have had any direct contact with the Middlesex Company until his return to London on 13 August, 1742.<sup>242</sup> He is unlikely to have heard *Penelope* himself. Handel was therefore at this stage not in direct competition with Middlesex. However, even in his absence, there was evidently already a polarisation into 'Middlesex' and 'Handel' camps. Charles Jennens remarked to Edward Holdsworth on 4 Feb 1742: 'Handel's Friends are very well pleas'd with Conti, but the Favourers of the opposite Opera lik'd neither him nor any other who sung for Handel, & for that very reason, because they sung for Handel.'<sup>243</sup> Thus there was a perceived rivalry even before the two companies commenced direct competition, when Handel was not even in London. Although there were genuine disagreements, there is also a degree to which this was simply a continuation of the 'taking sides' which had been integral to the experience of patronising the Royal Academy.<sup>244</sup>

Whatever the financial problems of its first season, the Middlesex opera embarked on a second. Horace Walpole reported:

We have got another opera, which is liked. There was to have been a vast elephant, but the just directors, designing to give the audience the full weight of one for their money, made it so heavy, that at the prova it broke through the stage. It was to have carried twenty soldiers, with Monticelli on a throne in the middle. There is a new subscription begun for next year, thirty subscribers at two hundred pounds each. Would you believe that I am one? You need not believe it quite, for I am but half an one; Mr Conway and I take a share between us. We keep Monticelli and Amorevoli, and to please Lord Middlesex, that odious Muscovita; but shall discard Mr.

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<sup>240</sup> [W.Coxe,], *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith* (London, 1799), p26

<sup>241</sup> *HHB IV*, p336

<sup>242</sup> *HHB IV*, p352

<sup>243</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 4 February 1742(II), in *HHB IV*, p344

<sup>244</sup> Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London*, p128

Vanneschi. We are to have the Barberina and the two Fausans; so at least, the singers and dancers will be equal to anything in Europe.<sup>245</sup>

Unfortunately, in commercial terms the second season was little better than the first, and by May 1742 Walpole reported that 'Our operas are almost over; there were but three-and-forty people last night in the pit and boxes. There is a simple little farce at Drury Lane, called *Miss Lucy in Town* in which Mrs. Clive mimics the Muscovita admirably, and Beard, Amerovoli tolerably.'<sup>246</sup> The play satirised Middlesex as Lord Bawble, an outlandish and extravagant fop.<sup>247</sup> It also featured a comic argument between an English ballad singer and an Italian opera star.<sup>248</sup> In spite of the shared personnel, the attacks on Middlesex were therefore not coming from Handel, but from the writers of English masque, burlesque opera and vernacular comedy, who were pursuing the anti-Italian rhetoric which had been ongoing throughout the 1730s.

At this point, Handel had still not returned from Dublin. He came back in August 1742. According to Lord Radnor 'I beleive he wil give us some oritorios after Christmus, for I understand by him he has voices enough at command for that purpose...'<sup>249</sup> On 23 December he played *Samson* through to the Earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>250</sup> On 10 January 1743, he and Rich applied to the Lord Chamberlain for permission to perform it.<sup>251</sup> The success of Dublin had clearly persuaded Handel to change his business plan. In direct imitation of what he had offered there, on 12 February, he announced a subscription for the first six concerts of a twelve-concert

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<sup>245</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 4 March 1742, in *HHB IV*, p346

<sup>246</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 26 May 1742, in *HHB IV*, p350. Mrs Clive was Handel's singer, Kitty Clive, the Muscovita, Lord Middlesex's mistress.

<sup>247</sup> Anon. [H. Fielding], *Miss Lucy in Town. A Sequel to The Virgin unmasqued. A farce; with songs. As it is acted at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, by His Majesty's Servants* (London, 1742). See also C. Taylor, 'From Losses to Lawsuit: Patronage of the Italian Opera in London by Lord Middlesex, 1739-1745', *ML* 68 (1987), p10

<sup>248</sup> Played by Handel's two favourite tenors, Thomas Lowe and John Beard.

<sup>249</sup> Radnor to James Harris, 21 October 1742, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p143

<sup>250</sup> [4<sup>th</sup> Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 23 December 1742, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p152

<sup>251</sup> *HHB IV*, p355

Lenten season. There were to be no staged operas and nothing in Italian.<sup>252</sup> He opened on 18 February with a cast including the erstwhile mimics of the opera, John Beard, Thomas Lowe, and Kitty Clive, together with Susannah Cibber (née Arne), Henry Reinhold and William Savage, with Avoglio and Miss Edwards in minor roles. With the exception of the last two, these were theatre singers rather than opera stars, but as Horace Walpole stated on 24 February, 'Handel has set up an Oratorio against the Operas and succeeds. He has hired all the goddesses from farces and the singers of Roast Beef from between the acts at both theatres...'<sup>253</sup> In spite of the lower quality of the voices (though probably not their acting), by 12 March Handel was able to offer the further six concerts, and the *Dublin Journal* reported from London 'more People being turned away for Want of Room each Night than hath been at the Italian Opera.'<sup>254</sup> Handel was now in direct competition with Middlesex. However, by performing wholly unstaged works, in Lent,<sup>255</sup> with no sets, no costumes and much cheaper native performers, his costs were a great deal lower than his already overspent rivals.<sup>256</sup>

### **Interlude: the *Messiah* controversy**

In the midst of the already highly-charged atmosphere of London concert life a new controversy emerged, with Handel at its centre, which interrupted his growing commercial success. It reflected a resurgence of the moral panic that had surrounded Collier's attacks on Congreve, exacerbated by growing unease as the international situation became less stable. Britons' belief in themselves as God's people

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<sup>252</sup> *HHB IV*, p356

<sup>253</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 24 February 1743, *HHB IV*, p358

<sup>254</sup> 'Letter from London' in *Faulkener's Dublin Journal*, 15 March 1743, in *HHB IV*, p359

<sup>255</sup> The theatres were cheaper to hire on evenings in Lent when they couldn't be used for theatre performances as the resident company were not then entitled to a fee.

<sup>256</sup> Ellen Harris has estimated the total cost of the 1744 season at £2000, as opposed to opera seasons of between £9000 and £11,000. E.T. Harris, 'Handel the Investor', *ML* 85 (2004), p543

surrounded by powerful enemies, meant that at times of tension, they became particularly sensitive to whether or not they remained worthy of divine aid.

In Dublin, *Messiah* had been performed to enormous acclaim for the benefit of debt-prisoners, and it was scheduled for performance in London on 23 March, 1743.<sup>257</sup> The score was published four days before, but on the same day there appeared a scathing attack in the *Universal Spectator*. The anonymous author's argument was, briefly, that oratorios were either theatrical entertainments or they were acts of worship. If they were acts of worship they should be performed in churches by ordained clergy (or at least those of high moral standing); if, however, they were entertainments, they should not profane holy texts by performance in theatres by actors and theatre-musicians, and:

...if it is not perform'd as an Act of Religion, but for Diversion and Amusement only (and indeed I believe few or none go to an Oratorio out of Devotion), what a Prophanation of God's Name and Word is this, to make so light Use of them? I wish every one would consider, whether, at the same Time they are diverting themselves, they are not accessory to the breaking the Third Commandment. I am sure it is not following the Advice of the Psalmist, Serve the Lord with Fear, and rejoice unto him with Reverence: How must it offend a devout Jew, to hear the great Jehovah, the proper and most sacred Name of God (a Name a Jew, if not a Priest, hardly dare pronounce) sung, I won't say to a light Air (for as Mr. Handel compos'd it, I dare say it is not) but by a Set of People very unfit to perform so solemn a Service. David said, How can we sing the Lord's Song in a strange Land; but sure he would have thought it much stranger to have heard it sung in a Playhouse...

How will this appear to After-Ages, when it shall be read in History, that in such and Age the People of England were arriv'd to such a Height of Impiety and Prophaneness, that the most sacred Things were suffer'd to be us'd as publick Diversions, and that in a Place and by Persons appropriated to the Performance not only of light and vain, but often prophane and dissolute Pieces?<sup>258</sup>

The most serious point, and the one which made *Messiah* more problematic than its dramatic predecessors, was that 'the *Old Testament* is not to be prophan'd alone, nor

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<sup>257</sup> *HHB IV*, p361

<sup>258</sup> Anon. in *The Universal Spectator*, 19 March 1743, in *HHB IV*, pp359-60. Similar reservations had been expressed about *Israel in Egypt*. H.E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, (3 vols. North Carolina, 1977), II, p227

*God* by the Name of *Jehovah* only, but the *New* must be joined with it, and *God* by the most *sacred* the most *merciful Name* of *Messiah*'. This concern for the name of God is redolent of Collier and Bedford's strictures against cursing of forty years earlier.<sup>259</sup> It serves as a reminder that the Anglican Church was the only institution in England which had a specific and exclusive *locus* for its own self-representation.<sup>260</sup> The monarchy represented itself through the church on state occasions, and in the theatres through cultural patronage, but the propagation of the Christian message and the political role of the Anglican Church was the sole preserve of church buildings. This allowed the church a considerable cultural hegemony over the arts, as found in liturgical music and the decorative arts.<sup>261</sup> When allied to royal representation it had even greater power.<sup>262</sup> It was not a monopoly to be ceded lightly.

Despite the criticism, the first performance went ahead as planned. Jennens reported that:

Messiah was perform'd last night, & will be again to morrow, notwithstanding the clamour rais'd against it, which has occasion'd it's being advertis'd without its Name; a Farce which gives me as much offence as any thing relating to the performance can give the B<sup>s</sup>. & other squeamish People.<sup>263</sup>

A week later, there was a poetic response in the *Daily Advertiser* which argued that:

These hallow'd Lays to Musick give new Grace,  
To Virtue Awe, and sanctify the Place;  
To Harmony, like his, Celestial Pow'r is giv'n,

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<sup>259</sup> See above, Chapter One. It also recalled the Blasphemy Act of 1697.

<sup>260</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger with F. Lawrence (Cambridge and Oxford, 1989), p8

<sup>261</sup> J. Gregory, 'Anglicanism and the Arts: religion, culture and politics in the eighteenth century' in J. Black & J. Gregory (eds), *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain, 1660-1800* (Manchester, 1991), p101

<sup>262</sup> Shaftesbury had seen this power as psychologically domineering, as the church could use its awe to dazzle, and thus inhibit rational discourse about religion. L.E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness* (Cambridge, 1994), pp169-75

<sup>263</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 24 March 1743, in *HHB IV*, pp360-1. The 'B's' may have been the bishops. These were largely whig appointees, and as such not congenial to the tory Jennens. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, p195

T' exalt the Soul from Earth, and make, of Hell, a Heav'n.<sup>264</sup>

However, this was not sufficient for the original author, who would not accept that a stage could be sanctified when people:

use the same Place one Week as a Temple to perform a sacred Oratorio in, and  
(when sanctify'd by those hallow'd Lays) the next as a Stage, to exhibit the  
Bufooneries of Harlequin....<sup>265</sup>

This is of huge importance to the history of *Semele* because it shows how quickly Handel's supporters were forced to justify oratorio in terms of its 'spiritual' qualities.<sup>266</sup> This in turn led to the growing perception of oratorio as a generically distinct form from other theatre and more analogous to sacred performances. By emphasising those qualities, there is an implicit acknowledgement that the secular works could not carry such an uplifting message. This was to be significant for *Semele*'s reception in an age when 'like the readers of *The Spectator* and *Pamela*, eighteenth-century men and women...liked to have a sound moral excuse for their enjoyment.'<sup>267</sup> The controversy clearly hurt the popularity of *Messiah*. The commercial success of 1742-3 was rather due to the success of *Samson*, which allowed Handel to bank £2000 for that season.<sup>268</sup> This religious controversy was therefore raging in April and at the end of the month Jennens reported that 'Handel has a return of his Paralytick Disorder, which affects his Head & Speech. He talks of spending a year abroad, so that we are to expect no Musick next year...'<sup>269</sup> It seems possible that Handel was exhausted, but it also appears likely that he faced a very difficult decision as to his future artistic direction. Oratorios on religious subjects had

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<sup>264</sup> *The Daily Advertiser*, 31 March 1743, in *HHB IV*, p361

<sup>265</sup> *The Universal Spectator*, 16 April 1743, in *HHB IV*, p362

<sup>266</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p136; Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, p228

<sup>267</sup> N. McKendrick, J. Brewer & J. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982), p283

<sup>268</sup> Elizabeth Harris snr. to James Harris, 20 March 1743, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p156. However, this was probably receipts rather than profits. See Harris, 'Handel the Investor', p534

<sup>269</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 29 April 1743, in *HHB IV*, pp362-3. Dean thinks that this was a stroke. W. Dean, *Handel* (New Grove, London, 1980), p57

seemed the best way to co-exist successfully with a rival opera company, but if these became morally unacceptable, he would have to find a whole new approach. His breakdown may therefore also have been caused by a collapse in self-confidence. The *Messiah* controversy was surely therefore an important contribution towards his decision to compose a work in the oratorio style which was on a secular, dramatic subject, which could attract no criticism for its profaning of Christianity, and yet still compete with the rival opera company. The libretto must have been prepared during the controversy itself, alongside the distinctly Old Testament *Joseph and his Brethren*.<sup>270</sup>

### **The 'Opera Party' and *Semele***

However, events were moving quickly. The Middlesex venture continued to limp on, with the directors finding subscribers amongst their erstwhile Italian connexions. Horace Walpole reported that 'There is a new subscription formed for an Opera next year, to be carried on by the Dilettanti,<sup>271</sup> a club for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk: the two chiefs are Lord Middlesex and Sir Francis Dashwood, who were seldom sober the whole time they were in Italy.'<sup>272</sup> It seems that Middlesex's father, the Duke of Dorset, tried to oppose the plans, even petitioning the King not to make his annual subscription, owing to the increasing debts that his son was contracting.<sup>273</sup> In spite of this, in June 1743, at the very moment that Handel was composing *Semele*, John Branson wrote to his master, the Duke of Bedford to report that:

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<sup>270</sup> Handel began to compose *Semele* on 3 June 1743.

<sup>271</sup> The Dilettanti were a dining society founded in 1736 by Dashwood and Middlesex to promote Italian culture. See L. Cust & S. Colvin, *History of the Society of Dilettanti* (London, 1898), p4 & passim

<sup>272</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 14 April 1743, in *HHB IV*, p361. Dashwood was the subject of Hogarth's satirical portrait *Sir Francis Dashwood at his devotions* (1750), where Dashwood meditates like St Francis, but on a naked woman rather than a crucifix.

<sup>273</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 4 May 1743, in *HHB IV*, p363

The Opera is bankrupt. The Directors have run out £1,600, and called this General Meeting to get the consent of the subscribers to take this debt upon themselves. This I opposed, as they seemed to look upon it as a right, and by the great weight and interest I appeared with I reduced their motion, I think, to nothing, which, as it now stands, is that a letter should be wrote to every one of the two hundred pounds subscribing to desire them to pay their share of this deficiency if they think proper. Thus this important affair ended.

But the distress of the Directors is the most diverting thing I ever saw. The Duke of Rutland, whose name is signed to every contract, is as pale as death and trembles for his money. Lord M... is retired into the country to think of ways and means and Mr. Frederick is absconded. Lord Middlesex is only afraid that the credit of the English Operas should be hurt, and, though his name is to no contract would be glad to pay a share with the other four.<sup>274</sup>

Perhaps this explains why, in spite of his illness, Handel was suddenly filled with sufficient energy to write the whole of *Semele* between 3 June and 4 July, immediately followed by *Joseph and his Brethren*. His friend Thomas Harris, meeting him in the park on 18 June 1743 – half way through the composition – reported that his ‘head does not seem so clear as I could wish it to be.’<sup>275</sup> However, the situation was in fact even more complicated. According to a letter to Lord Shaftesbury from Handel’s secretary John Christopher Smith dated 28 July, 1743, Lord Middlesex had approached Handel to write for the company.

It seems that Mr. Handel promised my Lord Middlesex that if he would give him for two new operas 1000 guineas and his health would permit, He would compose for him next Season, after which He declined his promise and said that He could – or would do nothing for the Opera Directors, althou’ the Prince of Wales desired him at several times to accept their offers, and compose for them, and said that by so doing He would not only oblige that King and the Royal Family but likewise all the Quality.<sup>276</sup>

There is no indication of exactly when this had occurred, but by ‘next season’ Smith would have meant the fast-approaching autumn and spring of 1743-4 (Handel was intending to perform *Semele* and *Joseph* during his own season in Lent 1744). This is supported by the fact that that is when they *did* give a Handelian pasticcio. Therefore

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<sup>274</sup> John Branson to John, Duke of Bedford, June 1743, in *HHB IV*, p363

<sup>275</sup> Thomas Harris to James Harris, 18 June 1743, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p163

<sup>276</sup> John Christopher Smith to AA Cooper, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, 28 July 1743, in *HHB IV*, pp363-4



the conversation is likely to have been some time after Handel's return to England. Lord Middlesex was evidently not willing to let the matter rest:

When my Lord Middlesex saw that no persuasion would take place with Him, and seeing himself engaged in such an undertaking without a Composer He sent for one from Italy, of whom nobody has any great opinion. Nevertheless He would still make some fresh proposals to Mr. Handel, and let Him know how much regard He had for his composition, and that he would put it in his power to make it as easy to Himself as He pleased. I was charged with the Commission, and the offer was that He should have 1000 Guineas for two, or 500 Guineas for one new opera, and if his health would not permit Him to compose any new one at all, and would only adjust some of His old operas, that he should have 100 Guineas for each...<sup>277</sup>

Galuppi had by this time returned to Italy, and clearly Middlesex had no composer of standing to call upon. Middlesex's offers demonstrate either that he wanted to claim that they were not rivals, or that he was in no position to negotiate – clearly Handel could ask what he liked. Middlesex appears to have resorted to crude threats:

But in case Mr. Handel should refuse all these offers, that my Lord would have some of his old operas performed without Him and to let the Publick know in an advertisement what offers was made to Mr. Handel and that there was no possibility to have anything from Him.<sup>278</sup>

There was evidently rancour on both sides, but this disagreement occurred after two seasons of rivalry which Jennens had remarked on a full fourteen months earlier.<sup>279</sup> It is therefore likely that this was an effect rather than a cause. Smith was understandably concerned, because Handel:

...has been composing for himself this two months, and finished (as I hear) a piece of Music from Drydens words, the subject unknown to me, tho' they tell me that I was to do for Him as I did before, but my Son is to see Him and take his instructions.

He is now upon a Grand Te Deum and Jubilate, to be performed at the King's return from Germany (but He keeps this a great secret and I would not speak of it to any Body but to your Lordship) and by the Paper he had from me I can guess

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<sup>277</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 4 February 1742 (II), in *HHB IV*, p344.

that it must be almost finished. This I think perfectly well Judg'd to appease and oblige the Court and Town with such a grand Composition and Performance.<sup>280</sup>

The work from 'Drydens words' cannot have been *Alexander's Feast* (1736), or the *Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1739), which were the only times Handel set texts by Dryden. It is more likely then that Smith confused Dryden for Congreve, understandable given the breakdown in relations. From the date of these letters, it is impossible to date the argument conclusively to before *Semele's* composition. From what we know about the lightning speed at which Handel worked, he would have been very unwilling to break his concentration to work on something completely different if he had already begun work on *Semele*. However, Smith's incredulity that Handel should offer such an insult to the aristocracy reveals a huge amount about social attitudes:

But how the quality will take it that He can compose for Himself and not for them when they offered him more than ever He had in His life, I am not a judge and could only wish that I had not been employed in it either Directly or Indirectly....<sup>281</sup>

One explanation that no writers have suggested, but which seems plausible, is that Handel distrusted Middlesex's ability to pay him. There was ample evidence that the opera company was collapsing financially, so every reason to suspect that the promised thousand pounds would never materialise.<sup>282</sup> Walpole was describing the opera as 'bankrupt' before Handel started to compose. Handel, being that much closer to events, must have been aware of the scale of difficulties even before that. Handel may also have been psychologically averse to returning to the status of a hired musician after fifteen years as his own manager,<sup>283</sup> but it seems far more likely that this astute businessman did not believe that the Middlesex Opera was a viable long-term venture.

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<sup>280</sup> John Christopher Smith to Anthony Ashley Cooper, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, 28 July 1743, in *HHB* IV, p363-4.

<sup>281</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Miller satirised the fashion for aristocrats to not pay tradesmen in *The Man of Taste*, p58

<sup>283</sup> Handel's name now appeared on all word-books. Under the Royal Academy it never did. See below (Chapter Four)

However, although the Middlesex company was clearly failing and therefore could not possibly have had the support of a wide section of the aristocracy or gentry, Smith absolutely assumes that an aristocrat – especially when supported by the Prince of Wales – should be obliged, and that Handel's snub is to the entire 'Quality.' Moreover it assumes that producing entertainments for the same audiences on his own account was not only no substitute, but an open insult. In an age when for tradesmen, 'presentation of self as sober, reliable, candid and constant was not merely a question of genteel manners, but a matter of economic survival,'<sup>284</sup> Handel was clearly seen as asserting himself far above his social status in his dealings with both Middlesex and the Prince.

Middlesex, as we have seen, opened his season on 15 November 1743 with *Roxana, or Alexander in India*, an unauthorised pasticcio on Handel's *Alessandro*. Horace Walpole was not impressed:

The Opera is begun, but not so well as last year. The Rosa Mancini, who is second woman, and whom I suppose you have heard, is now old. In the room of Amorevoli, they have got a dreadful bass, who, the Duke of Montagu says he believes, was organist at Aschaffenburg.<sup>285</sup>

Handel clearly did not share Smith's concerns, especially once the opera company's season was underway, and a week later, on 22 November 1743, Lord Shaftesbury reported him 'better in spirits than I ever saw him'.<sup>286</sup> It was in this context that on 9 January 1744 he advertised the twelve concert subscription season for that Lent to

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<sup>284</sup> McKendrick et al., *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, p214; C. Erlich, *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1985), p32

<sup>285</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 17 November 1743, in *HHB IV*, p367

<sup>286</sup> [4th Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 22 November 1744, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p178

include the premieres of both *Semele* and *Joseph and his Brethren*.<sup>287</sup> Even before the season opened, Lord Shaftsbury was aware of a mounting opposition to Handel:

Yesterday he had already got an hundred and fifty six subscriptions though it was only the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of its being opened. The Opera people take incredible pains to hurt him. It is said (and I believe true) but why Handel is shy of owning it I cant well guess, I had it from very good hands, that last Saturday the two hundred pounds a year additional to Queen Anne's pension (for teaching the princesses) was taken away from Handel, and that he and several others are turn'd out. He has poor man very powerfull enemies. So the sooner you send an order for your subscription the greater kindness will you do Handel.<sup>288</sup>

It seems that the point where a general opposition to Handel crystallised into concerted efforts to destroy his audience dates from the same moment that the Middlesex opera went into terminal decline – in spite of the fact that it was clearly collapsing before Handel did anything. Either Handel was blamed for its demise, or its collapse meant that people previously involved in the production of its operas now had time on their hands to pursue the argument. The depth of bitterness should not be underestimated. Nor should the power of his opponents – as the reference to his royal pension makes clear – be underestimated.<sup>289</sup> In the meantime the Middlesex directors tried to take their subscribers to court, arguing that they were liable for the company's debts as *de facto* shareholders.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> The precise financial arrangements between Handel and Rich are still unclear. Lady Shaftesbury's account of their negotiations in October 1743 shows the two men in deadlock, but it also makes clear that Rich had only limited faith in the profitability of Handel's season. The Countess of Shaftesbury to James Harris, 31 [October?] 1743, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p175

<sup>288</sup> [4th Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 12 January 1743, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, pp182-3. Though as Harris has shown, this didn't actually happen. See above.

<sup>289</sup> David Hunter has argued persuasively that Margaret Brown's opposition to Handel has been misrepresented, and that it was not as directly personal as reported. D. Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown: "Preserving Enemy to Handel" but "Otherwise unknown to History"', *Women in Music* 3 (1999), pp53-5 & passim. This does not, however, rule out other patrons of the opera taking 'incredible pains to hurt him.'

<sup>290</sup> C. Taylor, 'From Losses to Lawsuit: Patronage of the Italian Opera in London by Lord Middlesex, 1739-1745', *ML* 68 (1987), p17

*Semele* was first performed on 10 February 1744. Mrs Delany found it charming, but her reports confirm Shaftesbury's concerns about the growing clique against it:

...the house full, though not crowded; I believe I wrote my brother word that Mr. Handel and the Prince had quarelled, which I am sorry for. Handel says the Prince is quite out of his good graces! there was no disturbance at the play-house and the Goths were not so very absurd as to declare, in a public manner, their disapprobation of such a composer.<sup>291</sup>

Opposition was well enough established that she could refer to 'the Goths' without explanation.<sup>292</sup> However, Mrs Delany did not necessarily think that Handel's quarrel with the Prince of Wales was part of the same controversy. It may well have been the original dispute over writing for Lord Middlesex, or it may instead have been for not writing an appropriately patriotic drama in the manner of *Samson* to please Frederick. Either way, it indicates the high-handed way in which Handel sometimes dealt with members of the upper classes, and may give some indication as to the kind of behaviour that had alienated Lord Middlesex, quite aside from his refusal to write operas for him. However, the most interesting comment about the opposition to Handel comes from Mrs Delany's next letter:

They say Samson is to be next Friday, for Semele has a strong party against it, viz. the fine ladies, petit maîtres, and ignoramus's. All the opera people are enraged at Handel, but Lady Cobham, Lady Westmoreland, and Lady Chesterfield never fail it.<sup>293</sup>

The implication of this is that whilst Handel himself was the object of their animosity to begin with, something about *Semele* incensed them particularly, and that *Samson* – a patriotic, pro-Frederick drama – might appease them. The opera people therefore resented him not only for failing to write for them, but also specifically for the work

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<sup>291</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 11 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p372

<sup>292</sup> Lord Shaftesbury coined the term originally to mean the Opera of the Nobility, several of whose directors had gone to Germany to bring back the Princess (from Gotha). See D. Burrows, 'Handel and the London Opera Companies in the 1730s', *GHB X* (2004), p161

<sup>293</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 21 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p373

he had chosen to perform as soon as their venture failed. However, the strength of the campaign against Handel should not be overestimated in early 1744:

The oratorios fill very well, notwithstanding the spite of the opera party: nine of the twelve are over. Joseph is to be performed (I hope) once more, then Saul and Messiah finishes; as they have taken very well, I fancy Handel will have a second subscription...<sup>294</sup>

Therefore, *pace* Newman Flower and Paul Henry Lang,<sup>295</sup> Handel's season, *Semele* included, proved perfectly successful; according to Jennens, he gained £1,600.<sup>296</sup> Walsh sold the songs from *Semele* in three volumes, and summing up the season, Mary Smith wrote to James Harris:

I rejoice very much at the defeat of Handel's opposers, & should be heartily glad, if he could get a large quantity of money in the oratorio way, but should be really grieved if Italian operas again took place. There seems to be a fair opportunity at present, of throwing aside all foreign nonsense, resolving our own good from ourselves...<sup>297</sup>

It was *Hercules* and the 1745 season that would ultimately suffer from concerted opposition to Handel. Yet it seems from Mrs Delany's comments that if we are to find a reason for the violence of opposition to Handel, we must also look also at *Semele* itself.

In addition to its lack of patriotism, the most obvious reason that *Semele* might have felt provocative was its own operatic quality. *Semele* was a setting of a libretto adapted from that written by Congreve and already set as a full-length opera by Eccles. Handel called it neither an oratorio nor an opera but 'The Story of

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<sup>294</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 10 March 1744, in *HHB IV*, p374

<sup>295</sup> N. Flower, *George Friderick Handel* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1947), p303; P.H. Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (London, 1966), p417

<sup>296</sup> Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 21 February 1745, in *HHB IV*, p386; However, as Handel made no investments that year, it is likely that this reflected the income rather than profit, which would therefore have been minimal based on Harris' estimation of £1100-£2000 costs. Harris, 'Handel the Investor', pp542-4

<sup>297</sup> Mary Smith to Thomas Harris, 3 April, 1744, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p191

Semele'.<sup>298</sup> Like many of Handel's operas, and unlike his oratorios to date, it had a classical rather than a biblical plot. Fourteen out of its twenty five arias were in *da capo* form, and in the soprano Elisabeth Duparc, *La Francesina*, it had a heroine more redolent of the age of divas of the 1720s than the 'singers of Roast Beef'.<sup>299</sup> *Semele*, as much as any opera, had a true *prima donna*. Handel had used oratorios to compete with the Middlesex Opera, in part because they were cheaper to perform. It could easily be argued that once Middlesex was crushed, Handel then wrote in a neo-operatic style in order to win back the audience from the opera.

There seems to have been one lady in particular who engineered the opposition to Handel: Lady [Margaret] Brown, wife of a successful city banker.<sup>300</sup> On 6 November, 1744, Lord Radnor went to see *Deborah*:

... where I found the Prince and Princes[s] [of Wales], but a very empty house below stairs... Am told it was better above. I attribute this in great measure to the early season, but Captain [George?] Bodens tells me of ten assembly's made against him, as also Lady Brown, who engaged every soul she knew at the play the same night. This is but an ill requital for the great additional expence he has lately put himself to; in short Lady Brown and such fine Italian ladeys, wil bear nothing but Italian singers, and composers, and I hope wee may be able when the town fills to muster up a large party of another opinion.<sup>301</sup>

On 27 November, John Walsh, Handel's publisher, confirmed that although 'Mr Handel has perform'd twice, the gallery [was] very full[,] the pit & boxes almost empty[:] a strong party against him [is] supported by Lady Brown &c, & I am afraid but a small subscription.'<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> This is how it appears on the title page of the original word-book

<sup>299</sup> 56% of the arias in *Semele* are in the *da capo* form. Whilst this may have been perceived to be 'operatic', it is a far lower percentage than the original versions of *Acis* (85%, 11 out of 13), and *Esther* (75%) and of course all of the Royal Academy operas where the form was near-ubiquitous.

<sup>300</sup> Mainwaring reported that in 1744 Handel 'fell under the displeasure of a certain fashionable lady' but he does not name her. [J. Mainwaring], *Memoirs of the Life of the late George Frederic Handel* (London, 1760), pp134-5

<sup>301</sup> Radnor to James Harris, 6 November 1744, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p204

<sup>302</sup> John Walsh to James Harris, 27 November 1744, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p207

David Hunter has gone some way to rescuing Margaret Brown from being known only for her opposition to Handel.<sup>303</sup> During the 1737-8 season when Handel was co-operating with the remnants of the Opera of the Nobility, she helped raise subscriptions. After not subscribing to Middlesex's first season, she subscribed in 1741-2 and 1743-4.<sup>304</sup> Whilst Hunter argues that both pro-Handelian writers at the time and subsequent biographers have exaggerated both her malice and its effect, he is nevertheless not able to offer a convincing reason for why she opposed Handel, other than her genuine admiration for Italian opera. Citing an anonymous pamphlet of 1739 he suggests that her opposition may go back that far, which would suggest that the seeds were sown during the 1738-9 opera season when they were, effectively, working together. This would be consistent with the fact that Handel had clearly made some kind of *faux pas* against a group of the nobility as early as 1741 as demonstrated by the letter of defence published on the *Daily Post* on 4 April 1741.<sup>305</sup> However, the pamphlet's reference to 'The fiend, who stops her ears to sounds like thine'<sup>306</sup> could equally be a personification of envy, so this helps little in establishing any motivation for her hostility.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Born Margaret Cecil on 12 June 1692, the daughter of an MP, she had a considerable fortune of her own when she married the successful merchant banker Robert Brown in 1725. For the next ten years they lived in Venice, where she appears to have been deeply involved in the arts, and opera in particular. They returned to England, arriving in 1735 (Brown having been knighted, and elected an MP *in absentia*). In England she renewed her friendship with Farinelli, and Middlesex's first venture, Peschetti's serenata *Angelica e Medoro* was dedicated to her cousin, Lady Margaret Cecil. Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown', pp43-58

<sup>304</sup> Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown', pp43-7

<sup>305</sup> *ibid.*, pp48-9; *The Daily Post* on 4 April 1741, in *HHB IV*, pp332-3. It is of course possible that this was a rejection of an initial approach by Middlesex. However, as the dedication of *Samson* to Frederick followed this, so it is more likely that the two events are separate.

<sup>306</sup> Anon, *Advice to Mr. Handel: Which may serve as an Epilogue to Israel in Egypt* (London, 1739), quoted in Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown', pp48-9

<sup>307</sup> Lady Brown was related by marriage to the Cibbers and remained on good terms with the Harris family. It is possible that she simply enjoyed being patron of the arts in her own right. Hunter, 'Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown', pp54-5



It is possible, however, that her opposition to Handel may have been for more personal reasons. Back in 1739, Katherine Knatchbull had mentioned her as a very useful and influential friend:

I hear our friend Lady Brown is become a great friend of Madam Walmuds so hope we shall be preferred[;] she is one thought to study her own interest as cleverly as any one.<sup>308</sup>

The Madam Walmuds who was the source of her influence is of course Amalie von Wallmoden, by 1744 Countess of Yarmouth, and still the King's mistress. It is therefore clearly possible either that Yarmouth perceived herself to have been portrayed in the character of *Semele*, or that Lady Brown and her friends perceived such a connexion and took offence, whether or not the King himself did.

The collapse of the Middlesex opera inflamed opposition to Handel, and in the following season it took increasingly direct and vindictive forms. Again, Handel had opted to premiere one secular drama and one biblical, which further supports the view that he was ambivalent about how audiences would react to overtly religious works in the theatre. In the event, it was the secular works which fared worse. Lord Shaftesbury reported of the opening night of *Hercules* on 5 January 1745:

There was a saving house and no more, a dismal prospect to all lovers of music of what is to be expected. A lady bespoke fifty places (one Miss Matthews) at Drury Lane, in order to hurt Handel; and the solicitations against him increase and gain ground every day... The musicians are charmed with Hercules. However, seeing things go on so horribly, the poor man must to save himself from ruin think of retiring, and his friends have it now under consideration (with great privacy) what step he ought to take. I am quite provoked to see people behave so partially.<sup>309</sup>

The withdrawal of the Middlesex Opera had allowed Handel to take over the King's Theatre on the Haymarket. Perhaps over-estimating the capacity of his audience, and

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<sup>308</sup> Katherine Knatchbull to James Harris, [22 Nov, 1739], in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p79

<sup>309</sup> [4th Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 8 January 1745, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p210

in contrast to previous seasons, he increased the number of performances from twelve to twenty-four and began the season well before Lent. However, by the middle of January, after only six performances, it was clear that he could not continue and he published the following apology in the *Daily Advertiser*:

Sir,

Having for a Series of Years received the greatest Obligations from the Nobility and Gentry of this Nation, I have always retained a deep Impression of their Goodness. As I perceived, that joining good Sense and significant Words to Musick, was the best Method of recommending this to an English Audience; I have directed my Studies that way, and endeavour'd to shew, that the English Language, which is so expressive of the sublimest Sentiments is the best adapted of any to the full and solemn Kind of Musick. I have the Mortification to find, that my Labours to please are become ineffectual, when my Expences are considerably greater. To what Cause I must impute the loss of the publick Favour I am ignorant, but the Loss itself I shall always lament. In the mean time, I am assur'd that a Nation, whose Characteristick is Good Nature, would be affected with the Ruin of any Man, which was owing to his Endeavours to entertain them.....<sup>310</sup>

It is surely significant that Handel emphasises the 'sublimest Sentiments' and a 'full and solemn kind of Musick' when presenting his defence, qualities very much associated with oratorio and church music rather than opera. This suggests that his target audience was that for English-language drama, not Italian opera. However, it is also interesting that he seems sincere in his ignorance of why his works have become unpopular. This suggests that he genuinely misjudged the tenor of the times and the tastes of his audience. The reaction of his patrons was nevertheless so overwhelmingly supportive that Handel was able, on 25 January, 1745, to publish a second letter promising to continue the season at a later point.<sup>311</sup> However, the opposition did not stop, even stooping to the lowest of pantomime entertainments:

To supply Handel's place, the fine ladies and delitanti's have substituted two entertainments which are soon to be exhibited: one is an opera at the Little Haymarket house under the direction of Geminiani, though I don't find he is to

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<sup>310</sup> Handel in *The Daily Advertiser*, 17 Jan, 1745, in *HHA IV*, pp383-4

<sup>311</sup> Only a handful actually took back their subscriptions.

compose anything new. The other is to be a puppet-show of which Russell is the impresario...<sup>312</sup>

Why under these circumstances was Handel not supported by Hill and other advocates of English-language opera? The answer may well lie in the work's tone and subject matter.

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<sup>312</sup> Thomas Harris to James Harris, 31 January 1745, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p212. Hunter suggests that this was in fact coincidental and not part of the concerted campaign against Handel. However, the *perception* clearly was that a large portion of his potential audience were hostile to him at this point. Hunter, D., 'Puppet Politics: Tobias Smollett, Charlotte Charke, and Theatrical Opposition to Handel', *Theatre Notebook* 58 (2004), pp12-14

## The Moral Context

### **Introduction**

As we have seen, the increasing threat of a Jacobite invasion, and the related anti-opera rhetoric brought together in contemporary minds the issues of personal morality, religious conformity and national well-being. Britain defined itself against its enemies through its Anglicanism, and a country in need of God's blessing against the heathen invaders needed to show itself constantly worthy of the Deity's support. The late 1730s and 1740s saw a religious revival in reaction to the growing deism, natural religion and controversial freethinking of the 1720s and 1730s, which encompassed both high church and evangelical Christians.<sup>313</sup> Christianity was not merely a religion, but in the shape of Anglicanism was an entire social order which contemporaries believed crucial to stable society.<sup>314</sup> Although the Society for the Reformation of Manners published its last report in 1738,<sup>315</sup> there was a continuing concern about corruption of both public and private morality. Gin consumption reached 8.2 million gallons in 1743 (as against 1.23m in 1700).<sup>316</sup> Crime was popularly believed to escalate from minor vices to major and so no misdemeanour was exempt from concern.<sup>317</sup> The Societies had justified their prosecutions on moral and political grounds, not religious, and they always prosecuted their victims through the secular law rather than ecclesiastical courts.<sup>318</sup> Between 1690 and 1720 there were thirty new houses of correction built, which provided doses of hard labour and

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<sup>313</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p235

<sup>314</sup> Handel's sometime collaborator, Thomas Broughton, described Christianity as necessary to man because he was a 'depraved and sinful creature.' T. Broughton, *Christianity distinct from the Religion of Nature* (1732), p9

<sup>315</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p128

<sup>316</sup> Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p229

<sup>317</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p463

<sup>318</sup> S. Burt, *Virtue Transformed: Political Argument in England, 1688-1740* (Cambridge, 1992), pp43-5

corporal punishment to a range of petty thieves and vagrants, but also to prostitutes and 'bastard bearers'.<sup>319</sup> There was a belief that prostitution was increasing – it was perhaps becoming more visible.<sup>320</sup> Increasingly, chastity was seen as *the* Christian virtue. The expression of this morality in art reached its climax in 1740 with Richardson's *Pamela* and eight years later *Clarissa*.

Reforming societies focused almost exclusively on personal morality, earning the scorn of Defoe, Swift and Sacheverell for ignoring, the far more socially destructive, political corruption.<sup>321</sup> For many commentators, Walpole was believed to have brought unprecedented corruption to government, made possible by the sale of honours to an increasingly fluid elite, which now included many wealthy social climbers. Here snobbery and genuine political concerns coalesced. With new money came people who wanted to buy their way into society, and who could therefore be manipulated by politicians.<sup>322</sup> The political order was thus believed by conservatives to rest on the security of the old social order, where men of wealth and lineage were 'independent' from the temptations of graft, or the need for social advancement. For high-church Anglicans, morality was coequal with political and therefore ecclesiastical conformity. The popular press exaggerated both the number of Catholics and their danger to society, but there was equal concern with the political ramifications of freethinking.<sup>323</sup> The most radical challenge to the moral-political orthodoxy, however, came from Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, written and published in 1705, and more fully with explanatory notes in 1714. In it he firmly separated political and private virtue from public good, arguing that society converts

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<sup>319</sup> In *Tom Jones*, the hero is described as a 'base-born infant, to which all charity is condemned by law as irreligious.' H. Fielding, *Tom Jones* (Penguin Popular Classics, London, 1994), p37. The first Magdalene Hospital was built in 1758. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp144-5. See also Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p487.

<sup>320</sup> It was made extremely visible in the popular mind by the popularity of Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress* (1733).

<sup>321</sup> Burt, *Virtue Transformed*, pp40-2

<sup>322</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp20, 65

<sup>323</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, England*, p40

private vices into public benefits.<sup>324</sup> The impact of this was huge, and writers queued up to provide refutations, including John Dennis, Lord Hervey, and Adam Smith.<sup>325</sup> Thus the most powerful effect of Mandeville's thesis at the time was to galvanise educated thought around the traditional belief that the business of government was to promote morality. This of course meant that politicians and peers must promote by example and writers such as Fielding and Hogarth voiced common fears that 'luxury' and 'vice' would spread down from the leisured classes to society at large.<sup>326</sup>

### **The moral reaction to *Semele***

*Semele* itself received a cool reception from several of Handel's closest friends and supporters, apparently for sincere moral reasons.

...I am sorry to hear (for I have heard) that you are no further advanc'd in your Miltonicks. For shame[,] don't be so lazy. For want of them we might have had another *Semele*: but it happens, (luckily, I hope) that Mr Broughton of the Temple has given Handel a *Hercules*. I hope it is the Judgement of Hercules.  
... Deborah has been perform'd twice to very thin audiences, & *Semele* comes forth to morrow, I hope to a thinner.<sup>327</sup>

Charles Jennens' view of *Semele* has been well documented. Not only did he refuse to subscribe to it – going so far as to ask for a subscription to Handel's complete works *except* for that<sup>328</sup> – he also caustically referred to it in his copy of Mainwaring's *Memoirs* as 'no oratorio but a bawdy opera'.<sup>329</sup> Whilst this has often been taken as Jennens view of Handel's work it is important to note that he may

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<sup>324</sup> Burt, *Virtue Transformed*, p61

<sup>325</sup> Ten refutations were published between 1724 and 1729. McKendrick et al., *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, p16

<sup>326</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p127. This view was the directly opposite of the Reforming Societies, who saw vice as spreading up through society from those at the bottom.

<sup>327</sup> Charles Jennens to James Harris, 30 November 1744, in Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p208.

<sup>328</sup> Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p208

<sup>329</sup> Dean, W., 'Charles Jennens' marginalia to Mainwaring's *Life of Handel*', *ML*, liii (1972), pp160-4. Mainwaring classed *Semele* as an oratorio in the appendix of Handel's works. Handel himself called it 'The Story of *Semele*'.

never have heard Handel's version nor seen its libretto. Jennens owned a copy of Congreve's *Complete Works* of 1710.<sup>330</sup> It is perfectly possible that on hearing that Handel had set *Semele* he read his copy of the earlier version, or did not see Handel's until after his judgement had already been influenced by reading Congreve. Congreve's original was considerably more 'baudy' than Handel's, and does not include Handel's choral interpolations.

One possibility for such hostility is that Jennens was still angry with Handel for putting more effort into *Samson* than *Messiah*.<sup>331</sup> *Samson* and *Semele* probably shared a librettist, in which case this feeling of personal slight would have been exacerbated. But it is more likely that Jennens' religious views were the cause of his hostility. 1688-9 had given him a 'genuinely agonizing conflict.' He believed deeply both in orthodox Anglican Christianity, and in the sanctity of the oaths of loyalty sworn to the Stuarts, and he openly patronised non-jurors and Jacobites.<sup>332</sup> His explicitly stated aim in acting as Handel's librettist was to propagate a morally improving Christian message.<sup>333</sup> His most famous libretto, for *Messiah*, was directly scriptural, bringing the prophecies of the Old Testament together with their fulfilment in the New. This aimed to vindicate orthodox Christianity against the claims of latitudinarians and freethinkers.<sup>334</sup> He also privileged direct scripture in his libretto for *Israel in Egypt*, and would later return to orthodox biblical history with *Belshazzar*. It is therefore hardly surprising that he should have been so outraged at Handel's use of the oratorio form to produce something so explicitly secular and

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<sup>330</sup> His extensive library also contained the *Metamorphoses*, in both English (the 1717 version) and Latin, as well as Collier's *Ecclesiastical History*. [Anon.], 'Fine Antique and Modern Furniture in the Mansion', Gopsall Hall, Leicestershire. Sales Catalogue, 14-30 October, 1918. London, National Art Library, NAL 23.G, pp126, 124, 128, 138.

<sup>331</sup> And possibly for receiving more approbation than Jennens' work on *L'Allegro*. See above.

<sup>332</sup> R. Smith, 'The Achievements of Charles Jennens', *ML* lxx (1989), pp172-4

<sup>333</sup> In place of a preface, *Messiah* was published with the quotation: 'And without controversy, great is the Mystery of Godliness, God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the World, received up in Glory; In whom are hid all of the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge'. [C. Jennens], *Messiah, A Sacred Oratorio* (Dublin, 1745), p1

<sup>334</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p149

flamboyantly theatrical. Jennens' actual views on *Semele*, however, are non-specific in their negativity, nor are there any explicit discussions of its subject matter extant amongst contemporary correspondence. However, as a lifelong supporter of Handel, and as a subscriber to all of his Italian operas, it was unlikely to have been its 'operatic' style alone which incensed him. This suggests that that it was the 'bawdy' element which led to his extreme reaction, possibly exacerbated by its being yoked to the 'oratorio' manner of performing.

This theory is supported by the fact that *Semele's* general subject – or at least its performance in Lent – was also a cause of some concern to another of Handel's friends and supporters:

Semele is charming; the more I hear it the better I like it, and as I am a subscriber I shall not fail one night. But it being a profane story D.D. does not think it proper for him to go; but when Joseph or Samson is performed I shall persuade him to go – you know how much he delights in music.<sup>335</sup>

D.D. was Mary Pendarves' new husband, Patrick Delany, Doctor of Divinity, and also recently raised to be Dean of Down. The couple were both ardent supporters of Handel, and Mary clearly did not share her husband's reservations, enjoying the work at every performance (and the dress rehearsal):

I was yesterday to hear Semele; it is a delightful piece of music. Mrs. Donellan desires her particular compliments to all but to my brother; she bids me say "she loses half her pleasure in Handel's music by his not being here to talk over the particular passages". There is a four-part song that is delightfully pretty...<sup>336</sup>

Yet Dr Delany did 'not think it proper for him to go' because it was 'a profane story'. It is worth breaking down the precise level of Delany's objection. He did not think it was inappropriate for his wife to go, since he subscribed for her.<sup>337</sup> This

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<sup>335</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 21 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p373

<sup>336</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 11 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p372

<sup>337</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 7 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p371



suggests that it was either as a clergyman that he felt unable to attend; or perhaps as a clergyman in Lent. This raises the question of exactly what material was deemed appropriate for performance in Lent and why.<sup>338</sup> Handel had in fact been presenting oratorios, odes and serenatas on Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent for several years, when plays were prohibited under ecclesiastical law.<sup>339</sup> However, it was their unstaged nature, not their subject matter, which allowed Handel's concerts to circumvent the ban on 'theatrical' performances. No similar comments are recorded regarding works such as *Acis and Galatea* (performed in February 1741) or *Alexander's Feast* (performed in February 1739 and 1741), so by 'profane' Dr Delany therefore seems to mean something more than just 'secular'. Dr Johnson's dictionary gives four definitions of 'profane': '1. Irreverent to sacred names of things, 2. Not sacred; secular, 3. Polluted; not pure, 4. Not purified by holy rites.' Three out of the four definitions imply something actively anti-religious.<sup>340</sup> Sabbath-breaking was still illegal, and whilst these performance days were not the Sabbath, they held a similar status for pious Christians.<sup>341</sup>

Although there is no further discussion of this aspect of the oratorio in the correspondence, it is possible to make a reasonable conjecture of Dr Delany's views because in the same year he published his *Fifteen Sermons on Social Duties*, which give an explicit account of his opinions on matters of personal and social morality.<sup>342</sup> Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that his decision not to attend was based on more than the work's title. Not only did his wife go three times, but it is also highly

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<sup>338</sup> Lenten laws had been strengthened in 1737. See Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p269. Certainly by the late eighteenth century it was perceived to have been inappropriate as Hawkins described it disapprovingly as 'not a sacred composition but an opera founded on a poetical fiction, was suffered to be performed in that season, during which theatrical performances are forbidden.' J. Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776, reprint 1963 ed. C. Cudworth), p910

<sup>339</sup> Handel's first Lenten season was 1737. Burrows, *Handel*, p193

<sup>340</sup> 'Profane' in S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1756)

<sup>341</sup> Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty?*, p487. Wednesdays and Fridays were particularly sacred because of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In Roman Catholicism the interdiction on meat was absolute on Fridays during Lent.

<sup>342</sup> P. Delany, *Fifteen Sermons on Social Duties, by the Author of the Life of David* (London, 1744)

likely that she would have bought a word-book.<sup>343</sup> As an educated man, he would also have known the original story from Ovid.

By using the *Fifteen Sermons*, it is possible to interrogate the text of *Semele* and thus to make a plausible reconstruction of what Dr Delany's reaction to it might have been. The purpose is not to ascertain Delany's specific views, but to gauge a more general set of attitudes amongst a strata of learned, pious, metropolitan Anglicans. Collier's, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* was being reprinted with Congreve's defences as late as 1738,<sup>344</sup> and Handel's two other collaborators in 1744-5, Thomas Broughton and James Miller, were clergymen whose social views were published. In the following analysis Delany's *Sermons* will be used as a structured moral critique of *Semele* by comparing his conclusions and injunctions with the stage action (both text and stage directions) of *Semele*. Where appropriate this will be supported by other literary and moral writings to construct a picture of which aspects of the libretto would have touched on areas of concern to contemporary writers, and how many of Delany's concerns they might have shared. As we have seen, the morality of *opera seria* was not perceived by audiences to be that of 'real life' but was rather a set of exemplary lessons in the proper behaviour of the monarch. In a similar way, novels and plays had extended these lessons further down the social scale. It is possible, therefore, to advance a plausible hypothesis as to how audiences might have interpreted the situations presented to them in *Semele*.

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<sup>343</sup> There is various evidence for the reading of word-books. Benjamin Victor advised obtaining a copy of *Messiah* several days before hearing it to digest the words; O.E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London, 1955), p729. Moreover, as Ruth Smith has pointed out, the word-books themselves were carefully printed, often under the librettists' supervision and frequently contained text not set by Handel, all of which argues that they were widely read in themselves. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, pp23, 31

<sup>344</sup> This was the fifth edition and was printed with Collier's responses to Congreve and others.

*Universal Righteousness*

In his first sermon, Delany addressed the topic of *Universal Righteousness*. His aim was to show that although its manifestations are diverse, all sin is fundamentally the same and all sins beget further sin. He explicitly rejected the notion that it is possible to be generally moral but have a single, contained, vice. His example was particularly unfortunate with regards to Handel's 'profane' story:

...let a man resolve to renounce every other sin, and yet allow himself the single vice of drunkenness: In allowing himself...this vice, he must be idle and extravagant, he must neglect his family, impair his reason, his health, and his fortune, and hasten his end: he is incapable of discharging, as he ought, any more duty to himself, his Creator, or his country; he is at the same time in the power of every vice imaginable; lewdness in it's worst forms and abominations; wrath, revenge, blasphemy;...So that we may say of this vice as of the evil spirit in the gospel; it is not a single devil, but it is legion.<sup>345</sup>

Delany's perspective was not that of an ascetic puritan, but of a social observer. He was concerned that addiction to alcohol by those who cannot afford to sustain the habit is destructive of a wide circle of people around them. Moreover, its power to loosen self-control brings forth other vices, which in other circumstances people can suppress.

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<sup>345</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, pp14-15

Congreve's libretto ends with an uncritical praise of wine.<sup>346</sup> In Handel's version this is considerably toned down, which supports the conclusion that composer or librettist (or both) were aware that the morality expounded in these lines would cause offence. The meaning of the original ending is quite explicit. When relationships break up, the consolations of drink have a more powerful effect over human emotions than love. The final quatrain is thus a rollicking chorus in praise of the alcohol and its power over 'the Blind Boy' (Cupid). Nor is Congreve referring to drink in restrained moderation, but rather 'Each day and Each night you shall revel in Joy.' Like Dr Delany, Congreve's text suggests that wine frees the drinker from a range of social responsibilities – but unlike Delany, without any hint of moral disapproval.

In Handel's version, *all* explicit mention of alcohol has gone.<sup>347</sup> Even before he re-set the finale, Handel (or his librettist) had removed the reference to a 'sovereign juice...which antidote pure/ The sick lover shall cure'. Although the classically literate would understand any reference to Bacchus as including wine, Handel could argue that the personal morals of the corruptible masses were spared any open encouragement to debauchery. Moreover, Dionysus was not only god of wine, but also the god of theatre. Handel could argue that it was his operas and oratorios that prevented 'sighing and sorrow', not simply a crude resort to drink. Yet even in this

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<sup>346</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp831-2

Apollo comes to relieve your Care,  
And future Happiness declare.  
From Tyrannous Love all your Sorrows proceed,  
From Tyrannous Love you shall quickly be freed.  
From Semele's Ashes a Phænix shall rise,  
The Joy of this earth, and Delight of the skies:  
A God he shall prove  
More mighty than Love,  
And a Sovereign Juice shall invent,  
Which Antidote pure  
The sick Lover shall cure,  
And Sighing and Sorrow for ever prevent.  
Then Mortals be merry, and scorn the Blind Boy;  
Your Hearts from his Arrows strong Wine shall defend:  
Each Day and each Night you shall revel in Joy,  
For when Bacchus is born, Love's Reign's at an end.

<sup>347</sup> See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of these changes.

toned-down text there is moment of dangerous hubris: 'A God he shall prove / More mighty than love' was surely too redolent of the Christian equation of God with love.<sup>348</sup> The suggestion, especially during Lent, that drink, or the theatre, is greater than the Christian god, would have caused offence and concern to far more people than just Jennens and Delany. It is one thing for a plot to have a pagan setting, but quite another to conclude it with a chorus implying the superiority of pagan values over Christian. This was exactly what Bedford had accused Congreve of, and even in Handel's edited version the sentiment remains intact.<sup>349</sup>

This illustrates a fundamental change not only in moral outlooks but also in theatrical and literary approaches between Congreve's libretto of 1706/7 and Handel's composition of 1743. The world of Congreve and Eccles' opera is still that of the carefree, moneyed, libertine environment of Restoration comedy, where wife-swapping (planned or accidental), carousing and lost inheritances were portrayed as potentially dangerous but not (if undetected!) socially destructive.<sup>350</sup> Patrick Delany's perspective instead has much more in common with Fielding's satirical stories, which focused on couples from a less exalted social strata, where social and sexual vices really do have the potential to destroy lives.<sup>351</sup> These views were also echoed by Miller, Hill and Broughton.<sup>352</sup> Such sensibilities were also reflected in the world of the emerging novels and increasingly popular sentimental dramas. *Pamela* had been published in 1741 and quickly adapted for the stage.<sup>353</sup> Handel seems to have been aware enough of this change to make careful revisions to his text, but the

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<sup>348</sup> 1 John 4

<sup>349</sup> A. Bedford, *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays: shewing their natural tendency to destroy religion, And introduce a General Corruption of Manners* (Bristol, 1706), p48

<sup>350</sup> Congreve's own comedies were very much part of this world, as were those of Farquhar, Vanbrugh, and Cibber.

<sup>351</sup> For example H. Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (London, 1742) and H. Fielding, *Tom Jones* (London, 1748)

<sup>352</sup> In his 1738 sermon to the army, Broughton castigated their 'drinking, whoring and lawlessness'. T. Broughton, *The Christian Soldier; or the Duties of a religious life, recommended to the army: in a sermon* (London, 1738), pp10-11. In addition, Thomas Morell, Handel's main collaborator from 1746 onwards, was a clergyman who championed religious orthodoxy against fashionable deism. R. Smith, 'Thomas Morell and his Letter about Handel', *JRMA* 127 (2002), pp206-7

<sup>353</sup> S. Richardson, *Pamela* (London, 1741)

carefree tone remains very much at variance with these popular works, the views of his own collaborators, the 'exemplary' morality of *opera seria*, and indeed with his own biblical oratorios.<sup>354</sup>

### *Adultery and the Duties of the Married State*

There is something so gross and shocking in this vice of corrupting women, that it is hardly possible to expose it as it ought.<sup>355</sup>

In his second sermon Dr Delany considers the *Duties of the Married State*, taking a predictably severe view of adultery, and particularly of male seducers.<sup>356</sup> He defines the married state both as the rational way of avoiding the enormities of fornication, and more idealistically as a state of perfect equality, friendship and union.<sup>357</sup> He is therefore adamant that the bond must be lifelong, or the worst social consequences follow:

And indeed if this union were to continue only at the discretion of either party or for any terms less than life, the evils that would be devolved upon society, from such a limitation, would be infinite: the great engagement to peace, and mutual love, would be dissolved: all the trust and confidence of the perfect friendship would be utterly destroyed...<sup>358</sup>

Accordingly, husbands owe their wives absolute fidelity according to both natural and divine law. In *Semele*, however, the divine law, which is represented by the persons of the king and queen of the gods, could hardly be further from Dr Delany's ideal. Of course classical gods represent something very different from the Judæo-Christian idea of the deity, but writers such as Bedford insisted that by portraying them, an author was implicitly acknowledging their divinity. Moreover, an

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<sup>354</sup> Alcohol is instrumental in the downfall of Belshazzar and the Philistines of *Samson*.

<sup>355</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p18

<sup>356</sup> Fielding echoed this in *The Wedding Day*: 'for what can be more ridiculous than to make it infamous for women to grant what it is honourable for us to solicit.' H. Fielding, *The Wedding Day* ed. W.E. Henley, (The Complete Works of Henry Fielding Esq, New York, 1967), Vol. 5, pp130-1

<sup>357</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, pp31-5

<sup>358</sup> *ibid.*, p39

eighteenth-century audience would instinctively see the divine monarchs on stage as analogous to their earthly counterparts. Baroque opera, especially as developed in continental Europe was the representative genre *par excellence*.<sup>359</sup> Despite the Georges' marked distaste for Baroque kingship and self-identification with classical deities,<sup>360</sup> there remained an inherent assumption that a classical god on stage was in some sense a representation of earthly political power.

Monarchs on stage did not, of course, need to be moral. There were plenty of tyrants – repentant or otherwise – on the theatrical and operatic stage.<sup>361</sup> However, they were traditionally expected to be moral exemplars in the sense that they would conclude the evening either punished for their vices or rewarded for their new-found virtues. The repentant tyrant was as much a stock figure of opera<sup>362</sup> as the repentant rake was of Restoration comedy.<sup>363</sup> However, in *Semele*, Jove's only punishment for his seduction, abduction and debauching of one of his subjects is to lose her. We may sympathise with his dejection, but the loss of one of many mistresses is hardly a major punishment for his destruction of the 'perfect married state' of two couples.

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<sup>359</sup> Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, p63. Grand, formal, classicist and elitist, it represented the qualities of the sovereign to the people in 'essentially ideal expressions of the ruler's grandeur'. Beales, 'Religion and Culture', p146

<sup>360</sup> In a contemporary loyalist pamphlet George is identified as Henry V and Xerxes, and only as Mars in the martial sense. Anon., *A Joyful Ode inscribed to the King on the Late Victory at Dettingen* (London, 1743), p4. The Augustans were occasionally portrayed as gods on medals, but otherwise they preferred identification either as the protestant soldier-king, or with Augustus (and the 'good-emperors') as the epitome of constitutional monarchy. H. Smith, *Georgian Monarchical Culture in England, 1714-60* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2001), pp26; 80-84.

<sup>361</sup> Equally, the Earthly monarch might therefore appear as a deposed monarch regaining the throne (as in *Rodelinda*), or as one of several monarchs in conflict (as in *Julius Caesar* or *Tamerlano*).

<sup>362</sup> For instance Grimoaldo in *Rodelinda*.

<sup>363</sup> Repentant rakes appear in the plays of Cibber, Congreve, and Hamilton, and of course Richardson's *Pamela*. In H. Fielding, *The Wedding Day* (1743), the rakish hero only gets his true love after seeing errors of his life. Unrepentant rakes were figures of satire and burlesque such as More, in *The Dragon of Wantley*, and Macheath.

Delany is quite adamant that there is no place for adultery in the Christian life and described mistresses as victims of male corruption and debauchery.<sup>364</sup> By this standard, Semele herself is corrupted from the very beginning of the piece until just before her death. She is not, however, presented as a victim until the end. The emphasis for most of the opera is on her revelling in the erotic experience, ably assisted by Handel's most sensuous music. Semele also participates in producing a bastard offspring. This was a repeated concern of moralists in the eighteenth century, and it justified for many the harsher line taken against female over male adultery.<sup>365</sup> By bearing Jove a divine son, who will eventually take his place amongst the Olympians, Semele has in effect secured an illegitimate succession. This was at a time when many people still held to the belief that James Edward Stuart (the 'Old Pretender') had been smuggled into Mary of Modena's confinement in a warming pan, to secure a Roman Catholic succession in a protestant country.

Congreve's libretto dates from the years after Collier's attack on the morality of the theatre, when Congreve was attempting to justify the moral purpose of art by arguing that, in his works, wicked characters *are* punished. However, although Semele is ultimately destroyed, both composer and playwright pay more attention to the enjoyable nature of her sin than to its eventual punishment, and whilst Handel cuts some of the most explicit sensuality from his text and increases the gravity of her destruction,<sup>366</sup> the balance of interest remains tilted towards the former. Moreover, musically Handel yields nothing to his predecessor in harmonic and melodic eroticism and arguably increases the sexual charge in his reworking of 'With fond desiring'. A marriage, of course, has two partners, and in *Semele* Juno plays a decisive, destructive role. According to Dr Delany, whilst unfaithful husbands are not in any way condoned, wives (with perhaps a nod to the recently deceased Queen

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<sup>364</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p38. His attitude to adultery is hardly unusual – it is after all one of the Ten Commandments – but his severe line with *men* is worth noting.

<sup>365</sup> Congreve's prologue to the *Double Dealer* mentioned the frequency of undetected bastardy. W. Congreve, *The Complete Plays of William Congreve* ed. H. Davis (Chicago, 1967), p125

<sup>366</sup> For example, the addition of the chorus 'Nature to each allots her proper sphere.'



Caroline) are solemnly instructed of their duty to win them back to the purity of marriage by their forgiving and demure behaviour.

Virtue that is adorned with all the graces of prudence and good humour, is virtue in its highest and loveliest perfection...<sup>367</sup>

Two wrongs do *not* make a right. Sentimental drama as well as Restoration comedy abounds with abandoned wives who engage audiences' sympathy, and not infrequently win back their erring husbands and lovers. Juno, however, is the very image of the hellish fury of a scorned wife. Whilst never directing her anger at her own husband, she ruthlessly plots a most un-Christian revenge.<sup>368</sup> Not only does she swear 'by hell' – precisely the sort of bad language that outraged Collier and Bedford – she also extends her fury beyond the present mistress to the whole of Agenor's race, reminding the classically educated that, according to Ovid, she was still furious with Jove for his previous affair with Europa.<sup>369</sup> In dramatic terms she is much more like the destructive witch plotting the destruction of the heroine. In this she is also redolent of Fielding's Mrs Partridge (although Mrs Partridge is wrong about her

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<sup>367</sup> P. Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, pp56-7. The poet James Thomson concurred in a letter to his sister on her impending marriage: 'The economy and gentle management of a family is a woman's natural province, and from that her best praise arises.' James Thomson to Elizabeth Thomson [1740], in *James Thomson (1700-1748), Letters and Documents* ed. A.D. McKillop (Kansas, 1958), p132

<sup>368</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p807  
Awake, Saturnia, from thy lethargy!  
Seize, destroy the cursed Semele!  
Scale proud Cithaeron's top,  
Snatch her, tear her in thy fury,  
And down to the flood of Acheron  
Let her fall, let her fall, fall, fall,  
Rolling down the depths of night,  
Never more to behold the light.  
If I th'imperial scepter sway, I swear  
By hell –  
Tremble, thou universe, this oath to hear!  
Not one of curst Agenor's race to spare!

<sup>369</sup> J. Collier, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage &c* (1698, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1738), p36 A. Bedford, *The Great Abuse of Musick* (London, 1711), p127

husband's supposed adultery) than an operatic queen.<sup>370</sup> The language of 'Seize, destroy the cursed Adulteress' seems to have been too strong for 1743, but the change to 'curséd Semele' has the effect of increasing her personal vindictiveness (highlighting her rival's name) rather than her righteous indignation at her husband's crime. Moreover, she never repents her anger, and the references to hell and fury are perfectly balanced in her triumphant aria after Semele's destruction with the heavenly joy of vengeance.<sup>371</sup> This is not only un-wifely; to take pleasure in revenge is deeply sinful in itself, and doubly so for Dr Delany who is quite clear that spouses have an absolute duty to save their partners from the moral destruction of adultery:

...let the woman always remember, not only to be faithful to her husband, but agreeable, and observant; not querelous, not contentious...<sup>372</sup>

Yet in spite of her serious moral failings, Juno is one of the few victors of *Semele*, because Congreve omitted Semele's apotheosis. At the end of Act Three, Semele is dead, Ino and Athamas are somewhat hastily married, and Cadmus has lost a daughter.<sup>373</sup> The gods by contrast have fared rather better. For his treachery to Jove, Somnus has gained a wife; through his adultery, Jove has secured another heir; and through deception, Juno has taken her revenge. This constitutes a *leito fine* of sorts

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<sup>370</sup> Mrs Partridge destroys her husband's reputation by publicly accusing him, incorrectly and without evidence, of being Tom's father. Fielding, *Tom Jones*, p70. Fielding goes on to suggest (p88) that some couples actually enjoy violent sparring and inflicting pain on each other. Juno perhaps fits this image, but it is hardly Dr Delany's ideal!

<sup>371</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p829  
Above measure  
Is the Pleasure  
Which my Revenge supplies.  
Love's a Bubble  
Gain'd with Trouble:  
And in possessing dies.  
With what joy shall I mount to my Heav'n again,  
At once from my Rival and Jealousie freed!  
The Sweets of Revenge make it worth while to reign,  
And Heav'n will hereafter be Heav'n indeed.

<sup>372</sup> P. Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p72

<sup>373</sup> Again the classically literate would be aware that further misery awaited them.

perhaps, but not a morally satisfying ending of baroque opera, Restoration drama, or biblical oratorio.

As *Semele* spends the majority of the story as a kept mistress, it is necessary at this point to say something about the attitudes of the 1740s to chastity in general. Whilst Restoration comedy and its eighteenth-century successors tended to present marriage as the ultimate ideal, they also tended to treat extra-marital and non-marital relationships fairly lightly. By the 1740s, chastity was becoming the paramount Christian virtue. Samuel Richardson published *Pamela* in 1741, and the story of chastity in peril struck an immense chord with the reading public. The fact that Fielding opposed the simplicity of this increasing tendency to equate 'virtue' with 'chastity' so resolutely is a demonstration of how powerful the countervailing sentiment was (and indeed *Joseph Andrews* also turns on the hero's rejecting sexual advances from a social superior). Moreover, even Fielding was not suggesting that extra-marital sex was something to be taken lightly, and he consistently showed its emotionally destructive effects.<sup>374</sup> When Handel came to set *Hercules* the following year, his librettist, Thomas Broughton, followed Ovid rather than Sophocles so that Hercules is *not* having an affair with Iole. It thus becomes a tragedy about Dejanira's false suspicions. Fielding also strongly criticised the view that marriage should be used to secure social advancement, as it was in *Pamela* (albeit delayed), and as it might have been by *Semele*. His consistent view throughout the novels was of a high ideal of marriage, which, whilst often not lived up to, should never be taken lightly.<sup>375</sup> This is equally implicit on the comic stage. Whilst contemporary comedies contain feisty independent and intelligent heroines who outwit their father's choices

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<sup>374</sup> Joseph's positive ideas on the virtues of male chastity are taken by the other characters to be symptoms of delirium. H. Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*, ed. D. Brooks-Davies (Oxford, 1966 & 1970), p52

<sup>375</sup> *Joseph Andrews* ends with an ideal marriage; *Tom Jones* more significantly ends with the heroine unwilling to marry Tom because of his past libertine behaviour; *Amelia* shows an ideal wife and an errant husband, entirely to her credit and his discredit.

of husband, they do so in order to secure better husbands themselves, not to live as the kept mistresses of married men.<sup>376</sup>

### *Parents and Children*

Having considered the duties of couples to one another, Dr Delany goes on to address the *Duties of Parents to their Children*. Several of his injunctions have a direct bearing on the plot of *Semele*. Parents, he instructs, have an absolute duty to settle their children with a properly advantageous marriage, not only in financial terms, but emotionally and socially,

And as perfect obedience is required of the children, parents should be very cautious in their commands; and impose nothing on them (particularly in relation to marriage) but with a proper regard to their true interest and happiness...<sup>377</sup>

The opening tableaux of *Semele* could hardly be further from this ideal. Cadmus' first words to Semele are: 'Daughter, obey/ Hear and obey! / With kind consenting/ Ease a parent's care; /Invent no new delay...' <sup>378</sup> The implication is clearly that he is forcing her into a loveless marriage against her will, and that she has been temporising, and considering rebelling. Cadmus' intentions may be honourable, and his judgment with hindsight just, but he does not appear to be 'cautious in [his] commands' or skilled in his persuasion. The failed forced marriage was a stock plotline of Restoration marriage comedy.<sup>379</sup> In these comedies audience sympathies were invariably with the potential bride, and the first act is constructed so that we identify entirely with Semele rather than Cadmus. However, her choice of lover,

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<sup>376</sup> C. Cibber, *Love's Last Shift* (London, 1721); H. Fielding, *The Wedding Day* (London, 1743), passim. There was a very fine line between kept mistresses and prostitutes. Fanny Hill spends most of her 'career' being kept by rich men, rather than in a brothel.

<sup>377</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p134

<sup>378</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p794

<sup>379</sup> Just such an attitude was satirised by Newburgh Hamilton in the character of Mr Thrifty: 'My Daughter is my Daughter; who can claim any power over what is mine? By me she came into the World, and I shall send her out again, should she disobey.' [Hamilton, N.], *The Petticoat Plotter; A Farce in Two Acts* (London, 1720), p2. There are examples in many of the plays of Congreve, Fielding and Cibber, as well as the earlier Restoration writers.

consequent overweening ambition, and ultimate destruction make this far more ambiguous than many other marriage dramas. Perhaps for once the father did have 'a proper regard to [Semele's] true interest and happiness'. In which case she might be seen as having earned her destruction by her disobedience – but as audience, we do not feel that this is the case. The emotional tragedy of *Semele* is the failure of her relationship with Jupiter, not the missed opportunity with Athamas.

Delany subsequently asserts that, although parents have a duty of care in choosing their children's spouses, equally the children have an absolute duty of obedience – especially with regards marriage:

...for as long as children continue a part of their parents family...they are absolutely in their parents power...<sup>380</sup>

Old Testament law gave parents the right to stone disobedient children to death,<sup>381</sup> whilst Roman *patria potestas* continued this even after the children were grown up. Delany subscribes to a patriarchal understanding of power and sees the head of the family, like the political rulers, as part of a larger system of delegated divine authority.<sup>382</sup> The head of the household is the conduit of God's authority in that sphere, as the king is in the political and the bishop in the ecclesiastical. At the centre of Act One of *Semele* is the heroine's disobedience to her father on her wedding day (in which Ino is in some sense complicit). Moreover, at the story's fringes are further acts of filial impiety. According to mythology, Jove killed his own father, whilst in the bloody sequel to the *Semele* story, Pentheus will disobey his grandfather Cadmus with dire consequences for all of his family. The great act of filial piety that classical mythology offered – Bacchus' rescue of Semele and her apotheosis as Thyone –

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<sup>380</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p153

<sup>381</sup> *Deuteronomy* 18:18-23

<sup>382</sup> The classic expression of this view was Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, published in 1680, but written during the Civil War. Although disputed by both Hobbes and Locke, the theory still influenced political thinking on the right of kings, especially tory concepts.

could easily have provided an appropriately spectacular operatic finale.<sup>383</sup> It is very likely that its omission by Congreve was so as not to seem too immoral in rewarding *Semele* for her adultery with divinity.<sup>384</sup> However, its absence leaves *Semele* depicting a world where parents fail in their duties to their children, and children profit best – at least in the short term – from disobeying their parents.

### *Masters and Servants*

The patriarchal view naturally extends from the family to the larger social structure, seeing rulers, both secular and ecclesiastical, as ‘parents’, and ministers of God, appointed for the good of mankind.<sup>385</sup> Delany demands that rulers ‘not only do good by the exercise of their power; but also by the influence of their example.’ In *Semele* we see a ruler and his consort who have become so preoccupied with their private vices and consequent internecine conflict that they not only fail to give a moral example, but also fail to govern. In Congreve’s libretto, there is only one reference to Jove’s royal duties, but even this small mention is absent in Handel.<sup>386</sup> Handel’s intention in removing the lines may have been to put a tactful distance between Jove and the image of an earthly monarch. The effect, however, is to reduce him entirely to the role of an amorous fop, and makes him an exemplar of Dr Delany’s dictum that a single vice easily multiplies into a catalogue of others.

The notion of behaving in a manner appropriate to one’s station was as much part of theatrical decorum as political life.<sup>387</sup> In Restoration stagecraft, the characters’ positions on stage were regulated entirely by their social rank. Moreover, as the eighteenth century progressed, scenes were not expected to mix ‘high’ and ‘low’

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<sup>383</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 940; Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p106

<sup>384</sup> It would be no less consistent with the unities than the ending as it exists, which apostrophises a god as yet unborn, whose triumph is thirty or forty years away.

<sup>385</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, p275

<sup>386</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p811

<sup>387</sup> This was a major issue for Collier who was appalled at the lack of decorum in *Amphitryon* in portraying Jupiter, the Supreme Being, as full of weakness and lewdness. Collier, *A Short View*, pp116-22

characters and therefore 'high' and 'low' plot and language (the most extreme example being Metastasio, whose opera libretti removed low elements completely). Although many Restoration plays were still performed regularly, they often had to be edited to remove such elements as servants and masters appearing too much in the same scenes, or 'low' speech from high-born characters, or even 'low' speech from servants to their masters' faces.<sup>388</sup> The only place where such mixing persisted in London's theatres was in the pantomimes of John Rich. In *Semele* though, there is not only low speech (Juno's curses) in the mouths of noble characters, there is low comedy and farce (Juno and Somnus; Juno, Semele and the mirror) amongst the gods. Moreover, the moral behaviour of the mortals (especially the patient and suffering Ino and Athamas) is far more exemplary than that of their social betters, completely inverting stage decorum.<sup>389</sup> This decorum was also inverted in the more acerbically satirical parts of Fielding's novels, the most obvious example being *Tom Jones*, where with the exception of Allworthy, almost all of the morally wicked characters are upper class. James Miller also took it to its satirical extreme with master and servant exchanging clothes to woo a snobbish girl in *The Man of Taste* in 1735.<sup>390</sup> Therefore, what perhaps seemed frivolous for Congreve in the 1700s was now hard-edged social criticism which looked on aristocratic foibles with far less indulgence. We have seen how Carey lambasted the aristocracy for their collapse into effeminacy. Middlesex himself had been caricatured as the priapic Pyropus in *The Court Spy*,<sup>391</sup> and the foppish Lord Bawble in Fielding's *Miss Lucy in Town*.<sup>392</sup> If *Semele* gave the appearance of satirising the aristocracy's morals and mores, then

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<sup>388</sup> For instance a 1756 edition of Dryden's *Amphitryon* (1690) contains the following apology: '...so tainted by the Profaneness and Immodesty of the Time in which he wrote, that the present Time, however selfish and corrupt, has too much Regard to the external Decorum to permit the Representation of it upon the Stage, without drawing a Veil, at least, over some part of its Deformity.' Congreve's comedies had already been cut by the publication of his *Complete Works* in 1710. See Chapter One for a full discussion of this.

<sup>389</sup> This is not to suggest that the Prince and Princess are socially 'low', but they are beneath the dignity of Gods and therefore the Gods would be expected to manifest the greater qualities.

<sup>390</sup> Miller, *The Man of Taste*, p26

<sup>391</sup> Anon. [Lord Hervey?], *The Court Spy; or, Memoirs of St J\_m\_s's* (London, 1744?)

<sup>392</sup> Anon. [H. Fielding], *Miss Lucy in Town. A Sequel to The Virgin unmasqued. A farce; with songs. As it is acted at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, by His Majesty's Servants* (London, 1742)

when considered in the context of Handel's rebuffs to, and subsequent rivalry with, Lord Middlesex's opera company, it may have been perceived as a direct insult to the sponsors and audience of the company.<sup>393</sup>

Delany also counsels rulers not to abuse their authority by involving servants in their wrongdoings.<sup>394</sup> Juno not only involves Iris in her destructive revenge, but also bribes Somnus into complicity by the promise of a wife. Here is a clear example of a person using social power to manipulate and corrupt their social inferiors. If social position and power is a divine responsibility given for the moral benefit of mankind, then its misuse is doubly sinful. Finally, Dr Delany reminds servants that their duties include knowing and respecting their divinely-ordained place in society.<sup>395</sup> At the heart of Congreve's drama is a woman who is destroyed by her ambition to raise herself to divine status. This element was explicit in Eccles' opera, but was considerably softened in the editing of Handel's version, with several key passages describing Semele's ambitions excised.<sup>396</sup> The effect of their removal is to shift much more of the responsibility for Semele's destruction on to Juno. However, it remains a drama about a socially aspirant woman who forsakes the prudent marriage arranged by her father for an affair with a much more elevated man, which she then tries to use to enhance her status permanently through sexual manipulation. In the *Metamorphoses*, Semele is persuaded to trick Jove into revealing himself because he might be an impostor. Even in Handel's softened version, the text is quite explicit that her motivation in demanding 'a boon without a name' is to become a goddess herself.

Eighteenth-century writers were often anxious about the idea of women using their sexuality to achieve social advancement. Not only were there the royal mistresses

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<sup>393</sup> Patronage of the opera was still overwhelmingly aristocratic. Taylor, 'Italian Operagoing', p77

<sup>394</sup> Delany, *Fifteen Sermons*, pp207-38

<sup>395</sup> *ibid.*, p204

<sup>396</sup> See below, Chapter Four



behind the scenes, there also were actors and actresses who married aristocrats<sup>397</sup> and, in Richardson's *Pamela*, there was a servant girl who married her master. Lucy Wentworth's comment on John Beard's marriage to Henrietta Herbert serves as a reminder of the deep divisions between the social classes, and where actors and singers stood on that scale:

I own I'm disturbed to think what Ladys of Quality are come to when Lord Waldegrove's daughter is married to such a creature.<sup>398</sup>

Henry Fielding viciously attacked the idea of marriage as a means to naked social ambition in the character of Mr Weston in *Tom Jones*.<sup>399</sup> He also criticised those men who, like Captain Trent in *Amelia*, advanced themselves by prostituting their wives 'like Semele' to influential patrons.<sup>400</sup> However, for many conservative writers and commentators, marriage was the *only* legitimate means of social advancement – the alternative being through mercantile wealth.<sup>401</sup> Semele, however, cannot marry Jupiter, and she is therefore more like a kept woman who aspires to be a legitimate wife, and that was a social bridge too large for contemporary audiences to contemplate.

The result of Semele's ambition however, is her destruction, and the stunned chorus which greets this, taken not from Congreve's libretto, but from *Of Pleasing, an Epistle to Sir Richard Temple*,<sup>402</sup> echoes sentiments that for once in the drama could have been written by the Dean himself:

Chor. Nature to each allots his proper sphere,  
But that forsaken we like meteors err:

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<sup>397</sup> The most notorious case was Anastasia Robinson, who married Lord Peterborough (initially in secret).

<sup>398</sup> Lucy Wentworth to Lord Strafford, 6 January 1738/9, BM Add. 31145, pp322-3

<sup>399</sup> Fielding, *Tom Jones*, p268

<sup>400</sup> Fielding, *Amelia*, p470

<sup>401</sup> Loftis, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding*, p44; The marriage of titled poverty to mercantile wealth was satirised mercilessly by Hogarth in *Marriage a la Mode* (1724).

<sup>402</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p1063

Toss'd through the void, by some rude shock we're broke,  
And all our boasted fire is lost in smoke.

In adapting his version, Handel was clearly aware of how sensitive some of its passages had become, and how he took steps to mitigate the likely offence caused is the subject of Chapter Four. However, in terms of wider attitudes to sexual politics, marriage and political power, he seems to have misjudged the degree of feeling, and underestimated the change in moral climate between 1707 and 1744. This might not have been enough to damn the work on its own, especially given the inspired musical setting, but when added to Lady Brown's hostile campaign, rivalry with Lord Middlesex, Handel's strained relations with the Prince of Wales, and the questions over its performance in Lent, this makes a compelling case for why Handel never again performed *Semele* after 1744.

## Conclusions

What emerges from this account is a picture of how intimately Handel's decision to set *Semele* and reactions to it were related to both national political concerns, and the internal politics of the London musical world. Because of the intimate relationship between politics and theatre, this encompassed the high politics of the 'Patriot' opposition (and the vicious satires on the government which led to the Licensing Act), and the personal lives of George II and the Countess of Yarmouth. It also related to the ongoing debate of sound and sense in musical theatre which was heavily moral in tone, associating opera with an effeminacy which would not only destroy native culture, but in doing so would undermine the nation's moral and political virtues, making it both easy prey for the absolutism and Catholicism which Jacobitism threatened, and potentially undeserving of divine support to resist any invasion.

It was also related to the specific circumstances of 1743-4, and the competition that Handel faced from masques, English operas, plays, and pantomimes. In particular, Arne's *The Judgment of Paris* seems to have been a particular trigger for Handel's choice of Congreve's libretto. *Semele*'s more operatic character can be explained at least in part by his rivalry with the Middlesex Company. However, his choice of libretto had embarrassing resonances for the royal family and Amalie von Wallmoden, but the depths to which these were felt are too tied up with the other rivalries to quantify precisely. Handel's choice of *Semele* also demonstrates how aware he was of changing tastes in London, and how ready he was to adapt at every stage. The relationship between the metropolis and Italian opera was going through a difficult phase and Handel had been experimenting with both opera and oratorio styles to see what would be a success.<sup>403</sup> However, to call this vacillating to fill

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<sup>403</sup> Burrows, *Handel*, p275

niches implies too great a degree of randomness.<sup>404</sup> Rather it is clear that Handel's choices were based on a considered but complex relationship with his artistic and political environment.

It is also clear from Delany's sermons and from the writings of several of Handel's collaborators that the moral and social attitudes found in *Semele* would have been extremely problematic for a large range of Handel's natural supporters. In turning away from Italian opera, he had turned not only to more middle-class audiences, but also to collaborators with a much more socially conservative world view. *Messiah* had taken oratorio into new and controversial territory with its lack of explicit story, and its overtly Christian expression. The controversy surrounding it may have influenced Handel's choice of a secular libretto for 1744. Thus in attempting to steal the clothes of both the opera party and English masque-opera he fell between three irreconcilable points. The morality of his libretto would not have appealed to his English collaborators and audience, his refusal to co-operate with Middlesex alienated opera audiences, and his decision to use a secular text during Lent caused difficulties for many of those who found in his oratorios a comfortable blend of entertainment and religion.

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<sup>404</sup> Taylor, 'Handel's Disengagement from Italian Opera', p173

### Chapter Three: Predecessors, Sources, and other inspiration for Handel's *Semele*

In eighteenth-century opera, originality of plot was not required, indeed, it was positively frowned upon.<sup>1</sup> Italian opera texts were literary documents, and were often re-set by subsequent composers. Originality and invention were expected in the treatment of the story, but the plot should be from one of the great classical, historical and mythological canons, which meant that it should not only have an established source, but should also have precedents on stage. This was particularly true in the case of Handel's operas, many of which were based on earlier works, either adapted or re-versified by his librettists. Many of the oratorios had predecessors either in Italy or from amongst Handel's English contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst Congreve and Eccles' setting was the only existing version likely to have been available to Handel, the *Semele* story was also popular with French composers in the early eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century there were dramatic cantatas by Destouches and de La Guerre and a full length *tragédie lyrique* by Marin Marais. At the same time, Handel's friend and correspondent Telemann wrote a German opera *Jupiter und Semele* around 1713, though unfortunately the music for this has been lost.<sup>3</sup> The following survey illustrates two things: firstly, that the *Semele* story was not unusual in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p24

<sup>2</sup> For instance Joseph was based on Zeno's *Giuseppe* (itself modelled on a French original). D. Chisholm, 'New Sources for the Libretto of Handel's *Joseph*', in S. Sadie & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), p182; *Deborah* seems to have been in response to Greene's *The Song of Deborah and Barak* (1732), and *Jephtha* was based on Carissimi's much earlier *Jephtha*. In addition, Handel's early oratorios were based on Corneille and Racine. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p15

<sup>3</sup> Telemann also wrote a sequel, the dramatic cantata *Ino*. This, however, postdates Handel's opera.

secondly that Congreve and Handel's changes to Ovid appear in sharper relief when compared to the approaches of some of their continental contemporaries.

### **Previous Settings of Semele**

#### **French settings**

Boyer's *Tragedié* of 1666 has already been discussed.<sup>4</sup> The early eighteenth century also saw several musical settings of *Semele* in France. Elisabeth-Claude Jaquet de La Guerre (1665-1729) published her *Cantates françoises sur des sujets tirez de l'Ecriture* in three volumes between 1708 and 1715, including a cantata based on the *Semele* legend.<sup>5</sup> It is scored for solo voice and continuo, with a separate treble line in some of the movements.<sup>6</sup> The cantata is divided into *Simphonie – Recitatif – Air 'lentement et gracieusement' – Prelude bruit – Sinfonie – Air 'gracieusement' –bruit – Recitatif – Dernier Air 'gracieusement'*. The most interesting section of this from the point of view of Handel's setting is the emphasis she places on the death of *Semele* in the final recitative and the line 'je me sens consumer' with its echoes of 'I feel my life consuming' and *Semele*'s final moments 'Quel horrible torment. Je succombe, Je meurs.'<sup>7</sup> This is the first of several settings which dwell on the *Liebestod* of the heroine, of which Handel's is the culmination. However, the cantata was published only in 1710, and was therefore several years too late to have been a source for Congreve and Eccles. Nor does it show any sign of having been a direct musical influence on Handel. Its interest is therefore as a reminder that the subject of *Semele* was a popular one in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and that in many versions the heroine's death was represented in dramatic and emotive terms.

André Cardinal Destouches' (1672-1749) dramatic cantata, *Sémele*, was written in 1719 for solo voice and a lavishly scored instrumental ensemble.<sup>8</sup> Whilst it was

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<sup>4</sup> See above, Chapter One

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth-Claude Jaquet de La Guerre, *Cantatas Francoises* (Paris, 1710?). See also C. Cessac, 'Jaquet de La Guerre, Elisabeth' *New Grove Online*

<sup>6</sup> There is no scoring indication but it was possibly intended for flute or violin.

<sup>7</sup> de La Guerre, *Cantatas Francoises*, pp16-17. Congreve, *CW*, p830

<sup>8</sup> André Cardinal Destouches, *Sémele, Cantate A voix seule Avec Symphonie, Par Monsieur Destouches, Sur-Intendant de la Musique du Roy, & Son Inspecteur general en l'Academie Royale de Musique* (Paris, 1719). Destouches was the son of a wealthy Parisian merchant. The

published in short score (mostly on three staves, but occasionally two), the accompaniment indicates violins (plural), oboe and bassoons (also plural). It is a concise drama which follows the shape of the Ovid episode closely, sung throughout in the third person. Like de La Guerre it dwells frequently on the tragic consummation of 'death by love':

Elle finit, elle tout embrasée  
Son Ombre va dans l'Elizée,  
Quel spectacle pour un Amant  
Son imprudent complaisance  
Amis sans aucune espérance.<sup>9</sup>

Like de La Guerre's setting, it demonstrates how the *Semele* myth was used by other composers. However, once again its publication date of 1719 suggests that it was too late to have been an influence on Congreve. Nor does its music suggest that it had a direct bearing on Handel's work.

Marin Marais (1656-1728) completed his operatic treatment of *Semelé* in 1709, at almost exactly the same moment as de La Guerre published her cantata.<sup>10</sup> Coincidentally, like the Eccles opera composed only two years earlier, its failure led to the composer's effective withdrawal from active composition.<sup>11</sup> He composed four *tragédies en musique*, the most famous of which was *Alcyone* (1706). A dramatic and innovative composer, he used the trumpet and the German (transverse) flute in *Sémélé* and also depicted an earthquake in the final act.

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combination of his father's patronymic and an early career in the musketeers gave him an aristocratic manner and consequent ease around the French court. In 1713 he was appointed *inspecteur général* of the *Académie Royale de Musique*. J.R. Anthony, 'Destouches, André Cardinal', *New Grove Online*

<sup>9</sup> Destouches, *Semele*, p8.

<sup>10</sup> M. Marais, *Semelé, Tragedie, Mise en Musique Par M. Marais, ordinaire de la Musique de la Chambre du Roy* (Paris, 1709?) The composers vary in their accenting of Semele's name.

<sup>11</sup> Marais was one of the best viol players of his time, and in 1676 he became a member of the orchestra that performed Lully's operas at the royal court at St-Germain-en-Laye. It is not clear whether he studied with Lully officially, but he thoroughly absorbed the older master's style. J. De La Gorce, 'Marais, Marin', *New Grove Online*



Marais' opera was written on a libretto by La Motte<sup>12</sup> and follows the French five-act structure, with a prologue depicting the worship of Bacchus *after* the events of the main plot.<sup>13</sup> Since Congreve's libretto was written first but had not been published, the similarities between this and the end of his and Eccles' drama must be assumed to be coincidental, but they are nevertheless striking. Both apostrophise Bacchus in nearly identical terms:

Priest. Il fit le Bonheur de la terre  
Il fera la gloire des cieux<sup>14</sup>

Apollo. From Semele's Ashes a Phaenix shall rise,  
The Joy of this earth, and Delight of the skies:

As in Boyer's play and Congreve's libretto, Semele is on the point of being married to a suitor of her father's choosing,Adraste. He is not known to Greek mythology, but his name means 'He whom none can escape.' As in Congreve, Jupiter opposes the marriage vows in Act One, but unlike in Congreve, the cheated lover then becomes the instrument of revenge. Adraste discovers Semele and 'Idas' (Jupiter) in a grove full of fauns, nymphs and nyads that Jupiter has created for them, again echoing Congreve's Act Two conclusion. Adraste initially challenges Jupiter to a duel, but then, unable to resolve matters by force, summons Juno, who reassures him 'Ne doutes pas de ta vengeance.'<sup>15</sup> In the shape of Beroë (following Ovid) she persuades Semele to doubt Jupiter's identity and at the end of Act Four, Semele sends the 'perfide imposteur' away. Act Five shows the influence instead of Boyer's *Tragedie*. Semele is alive and well but desperate to see Jove again and is calling for him to 'quittez les Cieux',<sup>16</sup> and return to her. This he duly does in an earthquake

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<sup>12</sup> Antoine Houdar de la Motte (January 18, 1672 - December 26, 1731), French author and playwright.

<sup>13</sup> The libretto was published separately as well in *Recueil General Des Opera REPRESENTÉZ Par l'Academie Royale De Musique depuis son établissement. TOME NEUVIEME MDCCX* (Paris, 1710), pp378-435

<sup>14</sup> Marais, *Semelé*, p12

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p129

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p223

which scatters the chorus much like Congreve's thunder and lightning in the temple of Juno.<sup>17</sup> 'Tout fuit et se derobe a l'incendie'<sup>18</sup> and Semele thinks that she is bound for hell, but Jupiter, who has been hiding in the flame, declares that (as in Boyer's version) she is to be raised to 'L'eternelle gloire des Dieux.' Ignoring the erotic death preferred by de La Guerre and Destouches:

On eleve Jupiter et Semele, taudis qu'une pluye de feu acheve de detruire le Palais de Cadmus<sup>19</sup>

### **Telemann: *Jupiter und Semele***

Georg Phillip Telemann (1681-1767) was a contemporary of Handel and, despite the large geographical distances that often separated them, remained a close friend.<sup>20</sup> Telemann's trio sonatas and several of his vocal works had provided Handel with incipits for a number of his own compositions, and so Telemann's previous setting of the same story is of huge potential interest.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, all the music from Telemann's opera is lost. It was performed (according to the title page of the libretto) at Leipzig at some point before 1713, when it was published. It contains a large cast of Gods (Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Aurora, Amor, Hymen, Momus) who come close to outnumbering the mortals (Cadmus, Hermione, Semele, Alcmeon, Dirce [Ovid's Beroë], Fama and Mercurius). Like Boyer, it gives Alcmeon as Semele's fiancée. It contains a greater proportion of recitative to aria than Handel would have used, but was clearly visually spectacular with liberal use of 'machines'.<sup>22</sup> However, without the music, it is quite impossible to establish with any certainty a relationship between

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp150-4

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p269

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p273

<sup>20</sup> Telemann was a keen gardener, and Handel's letters to him make reference to various specimens that he had sent from England. See Handel to Telemann, 25/14 December, 1754, in E.H. Müller (ed.), *The Letters and Writings of George Friderick Handel* (London, 1935), pp61-2

<sup>21</sup> G. Cummings, 'Handel and the confus'd shepherdess: a case study in stylistic eclecticism', *EM* XXXIII/4 (2005), p584

<sup>22</sup> Anon. [& Telemann], *Jupiter und Semele* (Leipzig, 1713). The extant libretto is not paginated.

this and Handel's setting. Though written in German, the libretto seems to be closely modelled on Boyer. Congreve's version preceded Telemann's by eight years, and therefore any similarities between the two are likely to derive from common use of the earlier source rather than mutual interdependence. Only a fraction of the text in Handel's version is not attributable either to Congreve or Alexander Pope, and so any literary relationship is unlikely. It does not appear that any contemporary score was published, and so in order to have known the music, Handel would have had to have seen a manuscript copy or attended a performance. No such copy exists today, nor is there any information about whether there were subsequent performances. Handel was in London for all of 1713, so is unlikely to have heard its original presentation. Should a score or any fragments come to light in the future, these should be studied with care to see if there might have been any verifiable relationship between these two works.

### **John Eccles: *Semele***

The setting of *Semele* that was most likely to have been available to Handel was that of John Eccles.<sup>23</sup> However, it is difficult to establish a plausible explanation for how Handel might have had access to Eccles' score. There is no compelling evidence that the work was ever publicly performed, so it is unlikely that anybody not intimately involved in the production would have heard it, much less remembered it thirty-five years later.<sup>24</sup> Only three individual arias from Eccles' setting were published, those of Cupid, and Semele's 'O Sleep Why dost thou leave me,' so there was no printed score available in the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>25</sup> The only surviving contemporary score is

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<sup>23</sup> J. Eccles, *Semele, An Opera* ed. R. Platt (London, 2000)

<sup>24</sup> The libretto was reprinted in 1736 (in Dublin) and 1752, which may suggest that there had been performances. The latter could not have influenced Handel, who did not perform his own *Semele* after 1744. However, a Dublin performance in 1736 would have been fresh in the minds of performers when Handel visited. This remains entirely conjectural – there is no conclusive evidence of it ever having been performed.

<sup>25</sup> Eccles, *Semele*, xxviii

in Eccles' own hand, which implies (though it does not prove) that there were no additional manuscript copies made at the time of rehearsals.<sup>26</sup> William Congreve died in 1729 and Eccles in 1735, so neither was available for consultation. There is no record of where Eccles' score went between its composition and its purchase by the Royal College of Music in 1883 from the Sacred Harmonic Society. At some point it was owned by a T. Bennett Elcon in Avignon, but other than this its history is unknown.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore certainly possible that it was in circulation in London amongst Eccles' erstwhile colleagues in the theatres, and therefore accessible to Handel and his adapter. Likewise it is possible, but not very likely, that individual singers' parts may have survived. Just four years earlier, in *Serse*, Handel had taken an older composer's setting of a libretto and thoroughly re-worked it whilst retaining many of the musical ideas.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore worth examining the two works carefully to ascertain whether Handel might have been aware of the earlier setting, and if so whether he had a detailed, or even a superficial, knowledge of Eccles' score.

There are naturally a large number of places where the rhythmic contours of the recitative are near identical in both settings. This is to be expected from two composers aiming at a naturalistic rendering of English speech and does not necessarily indicate anything other than Handel's increasing fluency with English word-setting.<sup>29</sup> However, several arias and ensembles also show fascinating similarities between the two versions. Given the very different musical styles of the two composers, this may suggest that Handel either knew the earlier setting or had at least heard something about it. What is noticeable, however, is the way in which

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<sup>26</sup> London, Royal College of Music, MS 183; Eccles, *Semele, An Opera*, xxvi

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, xxvi

<sup>28</sup> W. Dean, 'Handel's *Serse*', in Bauman, T & McClymonds, M.P. (eds), *Opera and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995), pp133-9 & *passim*. The composer was his erstwhile rival, Bononcini. Lindgren, L., 'To Be a Bee in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, as exemplified by Handel's *Xerxes*', *GHB* vii (1998), p60; R. Strohm, 'Handel and his Italian opera texts' in R. Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 1985), p76

<sup>29</sup> '...he was intimate with the English, and master of the Latin, French, and Italian languages.' [W. Coxe,], *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith* (London, 1799), p27

Handel's general stylistic approach seems on occasion to have absorbed the 'Englishness' of Eccles' writing. Several writers have commented on the influence of both Purcell and Arne on Handel's English music.<sup>30</sup> There are reasons to suspect that Eccles might be added to that list.

Many commentators, including Handel's contemporaries, pointed out Handel's remarkable dramatic skill in creating one of the earliest dramatic quartets in opera in Act One of *Semele*.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly interesting as Congreve's libretto instead indicates an aria for Cadmus, followed by recitative:

Cad.    *Why dost thou thus untimely grieve,  
          And all our solemn Rites prophane?  
          Can he, or she, thy Woes relieve?  
          Or I? Of whom dost thou complain?*

Ino.    Of all; but all, I fear, in vain.  
Ath.    Can I thy woes relieve?  
Sem.    Can I assuage thy Pain?  
Cad. Ath. and Sem.  
          Of whom dost thou complain?  
Ino.    Of all; but all, I fear, in vain.<sup>32</sup>

However, Eccles in his version also grasped the dramatic potential for this situation and also turned the passage into a quartet with Cadmus, Semele and Athamas, each repeating their questions to Ino's silence. Finally, with lines presumably written by Eccles himself, Ino answers each of them in the affirmative:

Ino.    Of thee  
Sem.    Of me!  
Ino.    Of thee

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<sup>30</sup> E.J. Dent, 'English Influences on Handel', *Monthly Musical Record*, (August, 1931), pp225-8; W. Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting, A Study of the Relationship between English Music, Poetry and Theatre* (London, 1965), p245; W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p201, 373-4; W. Dean, *Handel* (New Grove, London, 1980), p18

<sup>31</sup> 'There is a four-part song that is delightfully pretty.' Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 11 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p372. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p377. Lang described it as 'entirely new'. P.H. Lang, *Handel* (London, 1966), p412

<sup>32</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p796

Ath. Of me  
Ino. Of all  
Cad. Of me!  
Ino. Of all, all, all, all, but all I fear in vain.<sup>33</sup>

Handel's setting also follows this interleaving of puzzled questions with Ino's silent misery. There are further similarities. They are both in E minor, which was a dark and mournful key for both composers. This might therefore be purely coincidental, but for Handel, it was a very long way from the tonal centre of the rest of Act One, which is strongly dominated by C minor and then F major. There are also distinct similarities between the contours of Ino's melody in both Eccles' and Handel's settings, both frequently based on a descending scale and on descending pairs of semiquavers:

Ino

Semele

Athamas

Cadmus

Continuo

<sup>33</sup> Eccles, *Semele*, No. 6. pp14-16. In all musical examples, clefs and musical spelling have been modernised. A piano brace indicates an orchestral reduction. The orthography of the texts has been retained without modernisation.

Pain? Of whom do'st thou com - plain? Can

I thy woes re - lieve? Of whom do'st thou com plain?

Of whom do'st thou com plain? Of whom do'st thou com plain? Can I thy woes re -

I as-swage thy Pain? Of whom do'st thou com - plain?

Can I as swage thy Pain? Of whom do'st thou com - plain?

lieve? Of whom do'st thou com plain? Of whom, Of whom do'st thou com - plain?

J. Eccles, 'Why dost thou thus untimely grieve', *Semele* No. 6 bb12-20

*The Historical Context of Handel's Semele*  
*Chapter Three: Predecessors, Sources, and other inspiration for Handel's Semele*

First system of the musical score. It includes four vocal staves and a simplified orchestra. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics for Semele are: "Can I as- suage thy pain? of whom dost thou com". The lyrics for Athamas are: "Can I thy woes re- lieve? Of whom dost thou com -". The lyrics for Cadmus are: "of whom dost thou com -".

Continuation of the musical score. It includes four vocal staves and a simplified orchestra. The lyrics for Semele are: "plain?". The lyrics for Athamas are: "of all, of all, of all but all I fear in vain, but all I fear in". The lyrics for Cadmus are: "plain? can I thy woes re -". The lyrics for the simplified orchestra are: "plain? Of whom dost thou com plain?".



can I as - suage thy pain? can I as - suage thy  
 vain, but all I fear in vain but all I feel in vain, but all, I fear, in  
 lieve? can I thy woes re - lieve?

G.F. Handel, 'Why dost thou thus untimely grieve' *Semele*, HWV 58/8, bb 25-35

It is possible that Handel had heard that Eccles set it as a quartet, but otherwise knew no more about the earlier setting. It is also possible that the two composers simply responded imaginatively to the same text in similar ways. However, the similarities of construction and tonality stretch coincidence and so it may be that Handel had at least a passing knowledge of the Eccles, even though his own imagination seems to have been fired sufficiently that he did not at any point make direct borrowings.

Another interesting aspect of Handel's setting is two bars which were crossed out of the autograph. In Congreve's libretto the lines 'Avert these omens all ye powers' was originally given to a single priest in recitative followed by a short chorus:



J. Eccles, 'Avert these Omens', *Semele*, bb1-2

In Handel's autograph he began the chorus in D major and in 4/4. He only composed four bars before deleting this and starting again in D minor, this time in 3/4. The interesting point here is how close this rejected idea was to Eccles' setting. Both are 'fanfare' arpeggios starting on the off-beat followed by a harmonically identical progression to the dominant:

A musical score in 3/4 time, key of D major. It features three staves: Chorus (bass clef), Orch (treble and bass clefs), and Timp (continues). The Chorus part begins with a rest, followed by a melody that matches the Eccles setting. The Orch part provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios. The Timp part continues with a rhythmic pattern. The lyrics "A-vert these O-mens all ye Pow'rs" are written below the Chorus staff.

G.F. Handel, *Semele autograph manuscript* RM 20.f.7, p27

Handel's second version is undoubtedly more dramatic, and the change may have been motivated by musical dissatisfaction. It is nevertheless interesting that he quickly rejected an idea which was so close to Eccles' setting.

Other similarities are equally noteworthy. At the entrance of Apollo, Congreve did not specifically indicate any instrumental music, though arguably it is implied by the grandeur of the occasion, and was necessary for the scene-change. Both Handel and Eccles wrote Apollo a symphony. Both wrote it in the style of a French overture. Although Eccles' quickly acquires some very English chromaticism, both versions therefore make more than a nod to Lully. For both composers the Sun-God seems to have conjured an image of the Sun-King, quite possibly in deliberate mockery of the continental absolutist tradition.



G.F. Handel, 'Sinfonia', *Semele*, HWV 58/53, bb1-4

Eccles' setting lacks the flourishes, but is very similar in character:



J. Eccles, *Semele*, 51a, bb1-4

Where there are melodic similarities between the two versions they are extremely subtle, and where melodic cells from the Eccles appear in Handel's score, they are often in the accompaniment rather than the melody. For instance, Eccles' setting of Jupiter's 'Tis Past recall' is based on a simple descending scale:

Jup. *'Tis past, 'tis past Re-call Shemust a Vic-tim fall, Shemust a Vic-tim fall, — Shemust a vic-tim fall.*

Cont.

J. Eccles, *Semele*, 47a, bb12-16

Handel's melodic line instead arches upwards in pain, but the same four-note descending motif (the 'falling victim?') is heard in the accompanying strings:

Jup. *Tis past, 'tis past re-call she must a vic-tim fall*

Orchestra

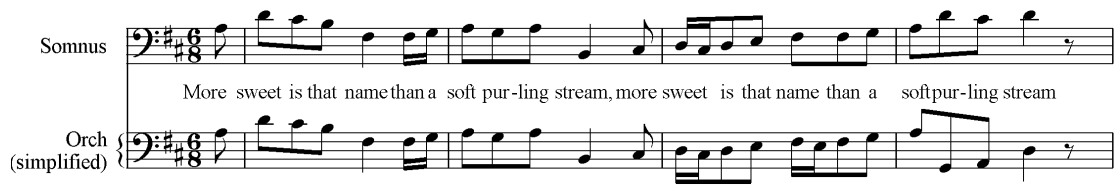
G.F. Handel, *Semele*, 'Ah, whither is she gone', *Semele*, HWV 58/48, bb 6-9

Handel did not set Juno's 'away let us haste' at the end of the Cave of Sleep scene, preferring to end with the knockabout comedy of 'Obey my will'. Eccles' setting of the aria, however, is in D major and 6/8 and bears a striking similarity to Handel's version of Somnus' aria 'More sweet is that name', particularly in the descending D major of its opening phrase:

Juno *A - way let us haste, a -*

B.C.

J. Eccles: 'Away let us haste', *Semele*, No. 37, bb1-5



G.F. Handel, 'More sweet is that name', *Semele*, HWV 58/36, bb5-8

This was not the only occasion on which Handel was drawn to the same tonal centres as Eccles. Given the limited availability of keys in the eighteenth century, this should not be overstated, but it is interesting to note that for the chorus of priests' praise of Cadmus in Act One, both composers chose F major (which Handel originally used for the Finale of the whole work). For Handel this took him out of the C minor centre of Act One. Handel takes the opportunity to add horns to one of the most bacchanalian choruses in his score.<sup>34</sup> This he could not have got from Eccles, who had only strings at his disposal. However, the ceremonial braying of horns is certainly implied by the fanfare-like harmonies in Eccles' voice parts:

J. Eccles, 'Hail, Cadmus Hail', *Semele*, No. 13, bb 18-23

Similarly, both composers characterized the Cave of Sleep with D, in Eccles' case D minor, and in Handel's D major.<sup>35</sup> Handel's sketch for this movement in the

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, this deprives him of the more regal D major with trumpets and timpani, which is thus reserved for Jupiter.

<sup>35</sup> Although Handel's choice was influenced by his borrowing from Scarlatti at this point. See D.R. Hurley, *Handel's Muse* (Oxford, 2001), p 201; W.H. Patterson, *Semele: Structure in Baroque Opera* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Washington, 1982), p24

Fitzwilliam Museum shows that it cost him some effort and that he originally had the voices entering directly out of the opening *sinfonia*.<sup>36</sup> In the revised version he inserted an *allegro* for the entrance of Juno and Iris. Eccles did exactly the same thing, beginning with a slow movement for pizzicato strings, followed by driving semiquavers on the entrance of the two goddesses. This makes a stronger impression and both versions' *allegros* share a similar rhythmic profile, emphasising the quaver – two semiquavers driving rhythm:



J. Eccles, *Semele*, No. 33, bb13-16

G.F. Handel, 'Somnus Awake', *Semele*, HWV 58/34, bb1-4

<sup>36</sup> Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MU.MS.259

One instance where both men found a very similar expressive texture was in Juno's fury at the beginning of Act Two. Both composers characterised Juno's call to 'Tremble thou Universe this oath to hear' with forceful, tremulous semiquavers in the accompaniment and Juno's voice declaiming above. This was a common *affekt*, and the similarity is not surprising. However, both versions also share a characteristic downwards leap on the word 'hell', and also the dramatic repetition of 'tremble':

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows Juno's vocal line and the beginning of the orchestral accompaniment. The second system continues the vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment. The third system shows the end of the vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'If I th'im-per ial Scep-ter sway I swear by Hell Trem-ble thou U - ni-verse this Oath to hear. Not one, Not one of curst Ag - en - or's Race I'll spare I swear by Hell I swear by Hell. Trem-ble'.

J. Eccles, *Semele*, No. 19 bb18-19; No. 20, bb 1-6

Juno

I swear by hell\_ trem-ble trem-ble

Orchestra

trem-ble, thou un-ni-verse this oath to hear not one of curst A-ge-nors race to spare!

G.F. Handel, 'No more...Awake Saturnia', *Semele*, HWV 58/21, bb20-27

In a number of other places, without directly using material from the earlier score, Handel seems to have taken a very similar approach to parts of the libretto as Eccles. The two men had a considerably different musical style, which makes these similarities both noticeable and noteworthy. For instance at the conclusion of 'You've undone me,' both composers bring Ino and Athamas together in thirds and sixths, dropping the orchestra out of the way. Both composers treat the ending like a minor key love duet, perhaps prefiguring their eventual marriage:

Ino

Athamas

Orch

Love a-lone, Love a-lone, Love a-lone Has both, Has both un-done, Love a

done.





J. Eccles, 'You've undone me', *Semele*, No. 12, bb56-68

Handel's setting also keeps the sense of continuous thirds, though decorated with intensely emotional semiquaver passages.

Ino

love a-lone has both un- done, love a-lone has both un - done love a- lone, —

Athamas

love a-lone has both un- done, love a-lone has both un- done, love a- lone —

Orchestra (simplified)

G.F. Handel, 'You've undone me', *Semele*, HWV 58/14, bb34-43

At a broad stylistic level as well, some of the characteristic contours of Eccles' word setting seem to have permeated Handel's score. Eccles' version abounds with dotted rhythms. For Eccles it is very much a feature of the arias, especially those conveying agitation.<sup>37</sup> Such repeated use of dotted rhythms is not at all characteristic of

<sup>37</sup> This has already been seen in 'Why dost thou thus untimely grieve,' but is also prominent in 'Turn hopeless lover,' 'You've undone me,' the Symphony which introduces Juno in Act Two, 'Thy needless fears remove,' the entry of Juno with the mirror, 'Thus let my thanks be paid,' 'Come

Handel's score in general, which is more lilting and lyrical in its treatment of underlay. However, they are used in *Semele* to great emotional effect, particularly in the more emotionally intense arias such as 'Your tuneful voice', 'You've undone me,' 'My racking thoughts,' and 'Come to my arms' as well as the comic 'Obey my will'.

Winton Dean described *Semele* as 'the most Purcellian of all Handel's works'.<sup>38</sup> He rightly points to the similarity of the opening to Purcell's sacrificial episodes, though this is due as much to the way Congreve wrote the scene as to any direct influence of Purcell's. He also identifies the tendency of the recitatives towards arioso, the opening of 'Prepare then ye,' the harmonic and rhythmic texture of 'How engaging, how endearing' and the modal hornpipe of 'Now Love that Everlasting Boy.' In particular he sees the Purcellian influence in the verbal and musical accents off the beat at points of emotional intensity.<sup>39</sup> These influences can also be found in Eccles' setting, and it is possible that the 'English' sound of Handel's *Semele* is due to the influence of Eccles as much as of Purcell. The rich chromaticism and false relations of 'How engaging, how endearing' also recall Eccles' setting of Cupid's aria 'Sleep forsaking':

Cupid

Sleep for - sa - king, Seize him wak - ing, Love has sought him, back has brought him;

Orchestra

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to my arms,' and finally 'Speak your desire.' Eccles, *Semele*, pp14-16; pp21-3; pp27-9; pp70-3; p91; p113

<sup>38</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p396. Also see above n31.

<sup>39</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p374

Might-y Jove tho' he be, And tho' Love can-not seee, Yet by  
feel - ing a - bout, Yet by feel - ing a - bout He has found him out and has caught him.

Might-y Jove tho' he be, and tho' Love can-not seee, Yet by

J. Eccles, 'Sleep forsaking', *Semele*, No. 25, bb9-17

This use of the minor key for erotic and sensuous music is also common to both settings, as it is to Purcell.<sup>40</sup> Handel's score uses the minor key for no fewer than nineteen movements and it dominates the love material between Semele and Jupiter, including 'With fond desiring,' 'How engaging, how endearing,' and 'Come to my arms' even before the relationship turns fully sour in Part Three. In this, Handel reflects not only Purcell, but also Eccles' settings of 'Thither Flora the fair' and 'See, she blushing turns her eyes'.

<sup>40</sup> Dent, *Foundations of English Opera*, p204. The minor mode also seems to be associated with mortality in Eccles' setting, opposed to the 'immortal' major. Patterson, *Semele: Structure in Baroque Opera*, p20

Thi-ther Flo - ra the Fair with her Train must re - pair, Her am - or-ous Ze - phyr, Her am - or-ous Ze - phyr, Her am - or-ous Ze - phyr at - tend - ing. Thi-ther

J. Eccles, 'Thither Flora', *Semele*, No. 19, bb4-

10

See, see, see, She blu - shing turns her eyes, She blu - shing turns her eyes. she blu - shing turns her eyes.

J. Eccles, 'See, see, she blushing', *Semele*, No. 5a, bb11-14

This comparison between the two works indicates several things. Firstly, Handel did not borrow melodies directly from Eccles' score. Very few settings of the same words show close melodic or tonal similarities, nor does Eccles' score seem to have provided direct incipits for any of Handel's. However, this does not rule out a more indirect influence. The significant number of incidental similarities suggests that Handel may well have glanced over or played through the score at some point. Handel and Eccles may simply have come to similar approaches to the text because

of the power of Congreve's characterisation. However, the similarities between the Act One quartet, Apollo's French Overture, and Jupiter's 'Tis Past recall' in particular, are strongly coincidental if Handel did not have any acquaintance with the earlier setting.

The other possibility is that Handel did not see Eccles' score, but nevertheless spoke to someone who had either seen, or been involved with, the original production's rehearsals. If he had simply been told that Eccles had introduced a quartet in Act One, or a French *sinfonia* in Act Three, or indeed had made a particularly evocative scene in the Cave of Sleep, then this might well be sufficient to explain the similarities. If Handel knew the Eccles or had heard about it, it could have been through a number of people. Colley Cibber (1671-1757) had been active in the London theatres at the same time as Congreve and by the 1740s had risen to the post of Poet Laureate (much to Pope's disgust).<sup>41</sup> His daughter-in-law, Susannah, was one of Handel's favourite singers, appearing in the first performances of *Messiah* and *Samson*, and in particular *Hercules* for which Handel created the part of Lichas for her. She might easily have heard of the Eccles through Cibber and transmitted a description to Handel. Alternatively, the theatrical manager Christopher Rich had apparently considered and then rejected *Semele* for Drury Lane in 1707 and his son John was one of the leading *impresarios* of Handel's London.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, amongst the younger Rich's company at Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields was the singer-composer Richard Leveridge (1670-1758) who had sung for Henry and Daniel Purcell, for Jeremiah Clarke, and also for Handel in his first London period, appearing in *Il pastor fido*, *Teseo* and *Rinaldo*. In 1723 he had published the airs from the masque *Jupiter and Europa* which was Ovid's immediate prequel to *Semele*. In 1731, he played the role of Polyphemus in the pirate performance of *Acis and Galatea*, and had sung and published songs adapted from

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<sup>41</sup> E. Samon, 'Cibber, Colley', *ODNB Online*

<sup>42</sup> Eccles, *Semele*, pxxiv

Handel's arias.<sup>43</sup> Leveridge was therefore a living and musically active link to the theatre world of Congreve and Eccles.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the opera of *Semele* had been intended for the Queen's Theatre, which (as the King's Theatre) was subsequently the venue for many of Handel's operas. Any copies held in the building would have been accessible to Handel. None of these constitutes proof, but they demonstrate that it is entirely possible that Handel knew of the earlier work.

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<sup>43</sup> For instance R. Leveridge, *Bacchus God of mortal Pleasure. A two part Drinking Song sett and sung by Mr Leveridge [or rather, the words by Leveridge, the music adapted to the gavotte in the overture to "Ottone" by Händel]*(London, 1730?). The choice of text suggests that Leveridge would have very much enjoyed Congreve's finale if he had heard it.

<sup>44</sup> O. Baldwin and T. Wilson, 'Leveridge, Richard', *New Grove Online*

## Borrowings

### **Self-borrowings**

The relatively small number of identified borrowings within *Semele* has been taken as evidence of Handel's energy and inspiration during 1743.<sup>45</sup> Winton Dean suggested in 1959 that *Semele* contained only one self-borrowing.<sup>46</sup> Research over the last forty years has expanded this slightly, but *Semele* remains low in borrowings, and whilst this should caution us to the possibility that there may be more that have simply not yet been identified, it is more likely a testament to how much the libretto inspired Handel's imagination. Handel's setting of *Semele* contains three clearly identified self-borrowings, which is to say borrowings of incipits from previous works. In addition he moved material between *Semele*, *Joseph and his Brethren* and the *Dettingen Te Deum*, as he was working on all three nearly simultaneously during the summer of 1743.<sup>47</sup> The self-borrowings are of three distinct types.<sup>48</sup> The first is an almost direct quotation of an earlier melody. The second is the use of a small melodic cell which characterises a certain emotion, but is not large enough to be classified as a melody in its own right, and is woven seamlessly into its new context. The final example is a melodic idea which Handel had used at least five times in his career, moulding it in each case to the character of the new dramatic situation.

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<sup>45</sup> John Roberts, the foremost expert on Handel's borrowings suggests that Handel used earlier material usually when he had difficulties *beginning* a composition. J.H. Roberts, 'Why did Handel Borrow?' in S. Sadie & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), p88. Dean also points to the exceptionally large variety of style and tempo markings (23, many new to the English-language works) as evidence for Handel's enthusiasm for this composition. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p373

<sup>46</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p389. Lang suggested, incorrectly, that there were none. P.H. Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (London, 1966), p410

<sup>47</sup> D.R. Hurley, 'The Summer of 1743': Some Handelian Self-Borrowings', *GHB* IV (1991), p175 & passim.

<sup>48</sup> They fit exactly into the three different types identified by Buelow who classified them as 1) Fitting a new text to an existing melody, 2) Use of an expressive idea to characterise a particular emotional state, and 3) Using a small incipit to begin either a melody or accompaniment figure. G.J. Buelow, 'The Case for Handel's Borrowings: The Judgement of Three Centuries' in S. Sadie & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), p79



Firstly, Iris' aria, 'There from mortal cares retiring' was based on the same musical figure as Achilla's aria 'Da Fulgor di questa spada' in *Giulio Cesare*.<sup>49</sup>



G.F. Handel, 'Dal Fulgor di questa spada', *Giulio Cesare*, HWV 17/32 bb17-22

It seems unlikely that the original context of this music had any special relevance for Handel at this point in *Semele*. Achilla's aria comes at the beginning of Act Three, when he has deserted Ptolemy for Caesar. It is an aria of anger, vengeance and wounded honour.<sup>50</sup> Despite the almost verbatim re-use of the melody and retention of the original key signature, it has little in common with Iris' teasing and needling description of Semele's palace and pleasures, demonstrating Handel's dramatic skill at adapting material to new contexts:

<sup>49</sup> Itself based on 'Febro in cielo' from Keiser's *Claudius*. J.H. Roberts, *Handel Sources: Materials for the study of Handel's Borrowing* (9 vols, New York, 1985-7), Vol. 3, p21

<sup>50</sup> *DG Archiv* 474 210-2, cond. M. Minkowski (2003). Liner notes, translation by Lionel Salter, 1970.  
By this bright sword  
I shall humble  
And bring low that wicked heart.  
He should not suffer such insults,  
Who has defended  
his own kingdom with honour

Iris

There from mor - tal cares\_ re - si - ding

Orch

Iris

There from\_ mor - tal cares re - si\_ ding she\_ re-sides in sweet\_ re treat

Orch

G.F. Handel, 'There from moral cares retiring', *Semele*, HWV 58/20, bb7-13

The second self-borrowing is from Cleopatra's aria '*Da tempeste*', also from *Guilio Cesare*, as a source for 'Myself I shall adore.'<sup>51</sup> Unlike the previous example, this is not a case of a melody being re-used, but rather an emotive figure being used to conjure the same ecstatic character. The upwards jump of a sixth followed by the long melisma signals the same level of excitement of joy. Handel is therefore not so much borrowing as using a common *affekt* to characterise a similar emotional state:

<sup>51</sup> *HHB II*, p231

Semele

[ga]

Orchestra

3

zing

G.F. Handel, 'Myself I shall adore', *Semele*, HWV 58/39 bb45-48

Cleopatra

[desi]ar

Orchestra

4

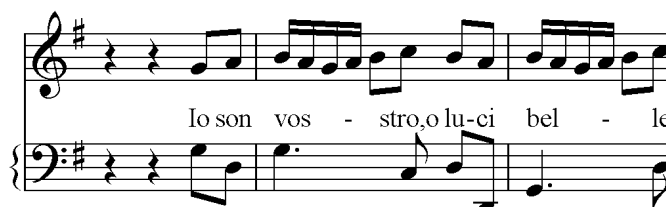
G.F. Handel, 'Da Tempeste', *Guilio Cesare*, HWV 17/40, bb52-7

The final type of borrowing was for Juno's aria, 'Above measure.' Baselt, Dean and Ellen Harris have all suggested that it is a reworking of an earlier Italian cantata, though in fact Handel used it so many times that it is impossible to establish a direct

relationship with a single previous setting. The melody first appeared in the cantata *Fra pensieri quell pensiero*.<sup>52</sup>



However, it was a particularly fertile idea for Handel and appears five further times between its first composition in 1707/8 and its use in *Semele*. The aria ‘*Io son vostro o luci belle*’ from *Rodrigo* is almost contemporaneous and so Handel was really using an idea twice in quick succession rather than borrowing from himself. In this instance the theme has been stretched over a 3/4 bar so the stresses now lie completely differently and the melodic line was softened accordingly by changing the leap of a fourth to a simple scalar movement (and is here a tone higher, in G major):



The text at this point (‘I am yours, sweet orbs’) is clearly very different from the sentiments of the victorious Juno. It is in this rhythmic guise that the melody next appears, in the aria ‘*Secondaste al fine, oh stele*’ in the tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido* of 1712.<sup>53</sup> This time it has none of Juno’s energy and malicious vitality, as is appropriate to its text (You supported me to the end, O stars).

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p231; HWV 115

<sup>53</sup> *HHB II*, p231; HWV 8a



In this rhythmic shape (in D major) it also appears in the aria ‘*Col Valor d’un braccio forte*’ in the cantata *Io languisco fra le gioje*, written in 1710.<sup>54</sup> Winton Dean suggests that this is the most likely source for *Semele* as the aria is sung by Juno, and it has plenty of majestic force behind it.<sup>55</sup> However, this is far from conclusive as the material was to go through several more transformations in the intervening years.<sup>56</sup> In its last appearance before *Semele* the melody appears with blazing horns and righteous indignation in Oronte’s aria ‘*Dell’onor giuste impresse*’ from *Riccardo Primo*.<sup>57</sup> Here the melody returns exactly to its original 3/8 shape and strongly accented offbeats conveying the young prince’s desire for vengeance against his corrupt former master:



This survey of Handel’s earlier uses of this incipit demonstrates that, whilst it may have drawn on a common melodic idea, Juno’s aria is in no sense a simple reworking of earlier material. Firstly, ‘Above measure’ is in 3/4 with a driving pulse quite absent from even the most energetic of the other versions. Secondly, the characteristic four-semiquaver motif is inverted in this version so that it is even more

<sup>54</sup> *HHB II*, p231; HWV 119

<sup>55</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, pp389-90

<sup>56</sup> In *Tamerlano*, the shape of the melody appears in the aria ‘*Cerco in vano di piacere*.’ In this guise it starts on the mediant rather than the tonic and does not include the driving semiquavers, producing a more restrained and lyrical effect

<sup>57</sup> HWV 23

restless. Finally, Handel has also changed the opening three notes from a rising scale to a falling fourth which gives the melodic line an additional grittiness and sharper characterisation:

Handwritten musical score for 'Above Measure' from Handel's *Semele*. The score is in 3/4 time, key of D major. It features a vocal line for Juno and a simplified orchestral accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a falling fourth (A4-G4) and continues with a melodic line. The lyrics are: 'A-bove mea - sure is the plea - sure which my re-venge sup-plies'.

G.F. Handel, 'Above Measure', *Semele*, HWV 58/49, bb1-5

This 'borrowing' has been taken apart and reassembled so completely that in fact it barely resembles any of its sources, further testament to the fertility of Handel's imagination in the Summer of 1743, and a reminder that for Handel, borrowing did not necessarily mean any lack of creativity.

### **Borrowings from other composers<sup>58</sup>**

In addition to incipits from Keiser and Porta, one group of borrowings is particularly important to *Semele*. These are from Scarlatti's *Il Pompeo*.<sup>59</sup> Roberts has identified

<sup>58</sup> It is neither necessary nor productive in this context to discuss the propriety or otherwise of borrowing amongst baroque composers. For a balanced discussion and survey of opinions, see G.J. Buelow, 'The Case for Handel's Borrowings: The Judgement of Three Centuries' in S. Sadie & A. Hicks (eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), pp62-4 & passim. The attitude of Handel's erstwhile friend and colleague Mattheson is often taken as a good illustration of the contemporary attitude. Borrowings were perfectly permissible, provided they were returned 'with interest.' J. Mattheson, *Johan Mattheson's Der Vollkommene Capellmeister*, ed. and tr. E.C. Harriss (Ann Arbor, 1981), p298

<sup>59</sup> Roberts has identified three further sources for *Semele* arias, but in each case these involved substantial recomposition, and the links may have been subconscious. These are 'Despair no more shall wound me' (Porta: *Numitore*), 'Avert these omens' (Keiser: *La Forza della virtù*), 'Hymen Haste' first version, and 'O Jove' (Keiser: *Adonis und Janus*). J.H. Roberts, *Handel*

in its sources for the original 'Behold in this mirror', the introduction to 'My racking thoughts', 'I ever am granting' and the *symphony* in the Cave of Sleep which begins as a close parody of '*Sono placido nume*'.<sup>60</sup> The interesting point about this last example is that Handel here does seem to have been inspired by the fact that the music already embodied the atmosphere he was looking for. It conveys an almost static calm, with the bassoons adding a dark woody colour to the sound, hinting at sepulchral depths.<sup>61</sup> In addition, I suggest that Handel also used Scarlatti's setting of '*toglietemi*' as a source for 'Come to my arms':<sup>62</sup>



The use of older material was not unusual for Handel. The older Scarlatti (1659-1725) was roughly contemporaneous with the likes of Francesco Urio (1631-1719),<sup>63</sup> whom Handel used in the *Dettingen Te Deum*, *Saul*, *Israel in Egypt*, and *L'Allegro* and the otherwise barely-known Dionigi Erba (fl. 1692-1727) who also supplied material for *Israel*.<sup>64</sup> What is worth noting is that in these other instances, Handel borrowed from earlier ecclesiastical music, often it seems with the deliberate

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*Sources: Materials for the study of Handel's Borrowing* (9 vols, New York, 1985-7), Vol.4, p44, Vol.2, pp4-5, Vol.1, pp28, 239.

<sup>60</sup> Roberts, *Handel Sources*, Vol. 6, pp90, 180, 124v. For a full analysis of Handel's compositional method in this last passage, see D. R. Hurley, *Handel's Muse* (Oxford, 2001), pp201-9

<sup>61</sup> For Handel's original recitative, see Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MU.MS.259

<sup>62</sup> Roberts, *Handel Sources*, Vol.6, pp30-33

<sup>63</sup> Francesco Urio (b Milan, ?1631/2; d Milan, 1719 or later) was an Italian composer and Franciscan friar. He is now best known for his *Te Deum*, from which Handel borrowed material for *Saul*, *Israel in Egypt*, *L'Allegro il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, and the *Dettingen Te Deum*. C. Timms, 'Urio, Francesco', *New Grove Online*

<sup>64</sup> Dionigi Erba (d. 1730) was *maestro di cappella* of S Francesco, Milan, and S Maria presso S Celso. He is now remembered largely for the *Magnificat* that was once mistakenly attributed to Handel. M. Donà (with D. Borroni), 'Erba, Dionigi', *New Grove Online*

intention of drawing on their archaic grandeur.<sup>65</sup> For *Semele*, he drew entirely on secular operas. This may perhaps indicates how he thought about the genre of *Semele*'s arias. However, it should equally be noted that he does not appear to have borrowed directly in any of the choruses. *Il Pompeo* also contains a large number of dramatic accompanied recitatives.<sup>66</sup> One of *Semele*'s features is the large number and high quality of these. None of them show signs of having been direct sources, but as Handel clearly went through the Scarlatti opera during or just before the composition of *Semele*, they may well have influenced his approach.

Roberts has identified a borrowing in 'Bless the glad earth' from one of Telemann's sonatas.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the opening motive of 'Myself I shall adore' is an almost direct borrowing from Telemann's *Sonata in D-dur für Violin oder Querflöte und G.B.*<sup>68</sup> The characteristic falling sixth and rising seventh is found in the opening bar of the bass, as is the flourish at the opening:



G. P. Telemann *Sonata in D-dur für Violin oder Querflöte und G.B.* bb1-2



G.F. Handel, 'Myself I shall adore' *Semele*, HWV 58/39, bb1-3

Then within the movement, Handel shows the influence of Telemann again:

<sup>65</sup> Exemplified by the fact that he returned to Urlo for the *Dettingen Te Deum*. D. Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal* (Oxford, 2005), p392

<sup>66</sup> For instance see Roberts, *Handel Sources*, Vol. 6, pp174-8

<sup>67</sup> J. H. Roberts, 'Handel's Borrowings from Telemann: An Inventory', *GHB I* (1984), p163

<sup>68</sup> George Philipp Telemann, *Thematische-Systematisches Verzeichnis seiner Werke* ed. Martin Ruhnke (Basel & London, 1984), I, p154





G.P. Telemann, *Sonate A-dur für 2 Violen und G.B.*, bb53-4.<sup>69</sup>



G.F. Handel, 'Myself I shall adore' *Semele*, HWV 58/39, b43

It is appropriate that an aria about reflection seems to reflect at least three other pieces of music. Thus modern scholarship has expanded the number of identified borrowings from Dean's original one, and it is therefore no longer possible to see *Semele* as exceptional in terms of Handel's use of earlier material. However, the highly inventive way in which he treated these suggests that he was strongly inspired by his libretto, and was in no sense reliant on borrowed ideas when composing *Semele*.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Telemann, *Thematische-Systematisches Verzeichnis seiner Werke*, p109. Handel's use of triplets to quicken the surface tempo is also a common one in Telemann's music.

<sup>70</sup> By comparison, borrowings have been found in sixteen of the thirty five numbers in *Israel in Egypt*. J. Herbage, 'The Oratorios' in G. Abraham, (ed.), *Handel, A Symposium* (Oxford, 1954), p91

### Other Inspiration for *Semele*

#### ***Semele* and visual images**

A possible explanation of why Handel felt such inspiration was the wealth of tangible, graphic images that the story of *Semele* contains. Handel was extremely sensitive to the visual arts and was a devoted art collector.<sup>71</sup> Throughout his career his imagination was strongly fired by graphic imagery, and *Semele* abounds with vibrant, theatrical images.<sup>72</sup> In Act One there is the solemn ritual and ceremony at the temple of Juno, the dramatic appearance of the swooping eagle which leads quickly into the bacchanalian celebrations of the priests, and finally the heavenly voice of Semele proclaiming her 'endless pleasure.' Act Two is no less rich, including Juno's descent from the skies, Iris' description of Semele's palace, Jupiter's magical transformation of the palace into an Arcadia, and finally the vision of the music of the spheres. Act Three then moves from the comic slumber of the Cave of Sleep to the most enduring image associated with Semele – her dramatic immolation. All of these have a strong *visual* power.

The dramatic image of Semele's destruction and the rescue of Bacchus was found in many illustrations from the beginning of the early modern period. In addition to illustrated *Metamorphoses*, many artists published sets of prints of the key episodes of an epic which lent itself well to the visual.<sup>73</sup> That quality of dramatic transformation also appealed to artists working in oils, and the image of Semele's

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<sup>71</sup> P.M. Young, 'Handel the Man' in G. Abraham (ed.), *Handel, A Symposium* (Oxford, 1954), p5. In 1750 Lord Shaftesbury reported his purchase of five pictures, including a Rembrandt. See T. McGeary, 'Handel as Art Collector: His Print Collection', *GHB* VIII (2000), p157. His collection in 1760 totalled 67 lots (more than the wall space at Brook St). Burrows, *Handel*, p369

<sup>72</sup> McGeary, 'Handel as Art Collector', p166. Jensen describes the stage directions in *Semele* as reading like paintings. Surely, however, this is because paintings depict dramatic actions, not vice-versa. H.J. Jensen, *Signs and Meaning in Eighteenth-Century Art* (New York, 1997), p302

<sup>73</sup> For a list of Ovid illustrations from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, see  
<<http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/others.html>>

destruction was a common one in western art.<sup>74</sup> To plot the depiction of Semele in art would require a separate thesis; however the following brief survey demonstrates the visual impact of the plot, and perhaps points to one of the psychological reasons, aside from politics and economics, why Handel was able to recover so quickly from his breakdown and compose this work.

One of the earliest depictions of Semele is this fifteenth-century illustrated *Metamorphoses* from France. The use of contemporary dress and un-magical presentation emphasises the political overtones of the relationship:

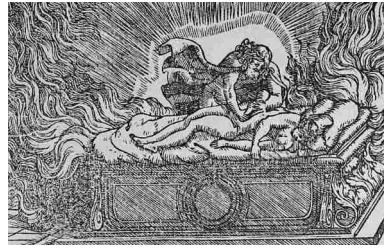


‘Jupiter and Semele. Jupiter kisses Semele, the daughter of Cadmus’, in Ovidius Naso, Publius, *Metamorphoses* (Antoine Vérard: Paris, 1494), XXVIII

The illustration in Lodovico Dolce’s Italian translation instead shows Semele and Jupiter just before the point of immolation. Semele is asleep and Jupiter is about to wake her with death. This is of course how Ovid presents the event and it is a useful reminder that Semele’s anticipation of her death-pains was Congreve’s invention.

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<sup>74</sup> And in fact decorated the King’s Drawing Room at Hampton Court. H. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy, Politics and Culture, 1714-1760* (Cambridge, 2006), p197



Lodovico Dolce, *Le Transformationi*, 5th ed. (Venice, 1553)

Tintoretto painted the scene of Semele's destruction at least twice. The less dramatic of the two surviving now hangs in the National Gallery in London. Jove approaches Semele in a cloud of thunder and lightning. As in Congreve she is awake and watches him, but with little impression of either terror or regret. Perhaps at this stage the horrible implications of his divine state have not yet become apparent to her. Here Semele is naked, as in the majority of illustrations, conveying the implicit eroticism of the encounter:



attributed to Jacopo Tintoretto, *Jupiter and Semele* (1550s),  
National Gallery, London

His second painting is in the Tintoretto Octagon in the *Galleria Estense di Modena*. Here, the viewer looks upwards at the two characters. As Jove sweeps down, only Semele's legs are visible and she is already surrounded by divine light. Jove is either riding on the back of a huge eagle, or he is in the process of changing shape

between divine and avian form. This prefigures the abduction in Congreve's Act One.



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Semele incenerita da Giove*, Galleria Estense di Modena

The widest circulation of images was, of course, by woodcut, usually as illustrations to printed editions of Ovid. Vergil Solis (1514-62) was a German engraver based in Nuremberg. He was a prolific artist and he produced his *Illustrated Ovid* with a verse commentary by Johann Spreng at the end of his life. His woodcut shows Semele in her death throes whilst Jove makes his escape from the flames with the infant Bacchus (presented as a fully-grown child). This is one of a number of images which depict Semele's death with a real sense of suffering.





Virgil Solis, 'Semele, Jove, Dionysus', *Ovidii Metamorphoses Illustratae* (Frankfurt, 1563).

Another treatment of this image by a truly great artist was Rubens' *The Death of Semele* which now hangs in the *Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts* in Belgium. Like Tintoretto, he has Jupiter holding his lightning bolt and appearing over Semele's bed. Semele herself is falling back from him clearly in fear and possibly pain.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Death of Semele*  
*Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique*.

The illustrator Krauss (1655-1719) followed the design of Solis for his late seventeenth-century engraving, with Bacchus almost a toddler. Jupiter seems to have set Semele alight and then retreated to a safe distance, but there is no doubt of the fate that she is suffering, given pointedly in the print's title:



Johann U. Krauss, *Die Verwandlungen des Ovidii: in zweyhundert und sechs- und zwanzig Kupffern* (Augsburg, 1690)

J.W. Bauer's picture returns to the moment before Jupiter's appearance to Semele while she sleeps. However, in this she is already raised to the heavens and lies naked on a cloud. This imagery of Semele already inhabiting a kingdom in the skies is a common feature of the illustrations, and of Congreve's libretto, but is of course not from Ovid or the French dramas, where she is visited by Jupiter in her own palace.



Johann Wilhelm Bauer, *Bellissimum Ovidii Theatrum* (Nuremberg, 1703)



Finally Bernard Picart's fine engraving dates from between Congreve's libretto and Handel's composition. Picart was a French illustrator based in Amsterdam from 1710. His engravings on classical subjects were immensely popular and his *Zeus and Semele* went through many editions between 1733 and 1754. As in Rubens' painting, Jupiter appears in crown and robe holding his lightning in his right hand. Semele pulls away in horror as fireballs pour down from above.



Bernard Picart, *Zeus and Semele*  
(Chatelain, Amsterdam and Leipzig, 1733, reprint. 1754)

What makes the preponderance of Semele images of particular interest is the fact that in 1723, during improvements to Kensington Palace, William Kent was paid £5000 by George I for a full-size oil painting of the death of Semele to decorate the ceiling of the King's private drawing room, the 'most striking and baroque of all Kent's



work in the palace.’<sup>75</sup> The painting follows the established iconography closely, with Jupiter appearing, as in Tintoretto’s painting, as both man and eagle amid a thundercloud above a naked, reclining, Semele. In addition, the main room of the Banqueting House at Hampton Court had been decorated in 1701-2 by Talman with a series of murals on the loves of Jupiter, including Semele.<sup>76</sup> This suggests that the Hanoverians were familiar with the image of Semele’s destruction and that in its choice for Kensington it may well have had a specific meaning for them. Any precise reading must remain conjectural, but it possibly represents a cautionary tale about the use of power, and the possibility of accidental destruction. It may also have been a specific warning for the king against powerful mistresses, or indeed it may have been intended as a warning to any women in the palace with that ambition. Its presence at Kensington of course increases the likelihood that George II might have seen himself in the person of Jupiter in Handel’s work.

It is clear, therefore, that the image of Semele’s destruction was well known to European culture and had an intrinsically inspiring and visual quality for artists. Therefore, there was a wealth of images available across Europe to an eighteenth-century metropolitan composer, any one of which might have fired his imagination and inspiration. As a man easily inspired by a graphic image, Handel’s enthusiasm for this libretto and the speed of his recovery to work on it could well have been due to this viscerally dramatic and visual quality within the subject matter. However, this also illustrates the essential paradox at the heart of Handel’s setting. The very graphic nature of these images and the startlingly evocative music that they drew from Handel rendered *Semele* quite impossible to stage. Even without the physical representation of the action, Congreve’s *Semele* was both too sexually explicit and too emotionally raw for the eighteenth-century theatre. This was why Handel was

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<sup>75</sup> J. Hayes, *Kensington Palace* (London, 1985), p30

<sup>76</sup> L. Worsley & D. Souden, *Hampton Court Palace, The Official Illustrated History* (London, 2005), p78. William Kent would also have seen Hampton Court, where he was responsible for refurbishing the Cumberland suite and the Queen’s staircase. *ibid.*, p92

able to approach it so successfully in the oratorio form, where his imagination could encompass the unstageable.

### Handel's cast

Handel was extremely sensitive to the vocal abilities of his singers, and he crafted arias carefully round his cast.<sup>77</sup> The quality of the two leading performers must have been a strong attraction for Handel to this libretto, and they in turn may have been partially responsible for the easy inspiration of his composition.

For his eponymous heroine, Handel had the soprano Elisabeth Duparc, called *La Francesina* (the Frenchwoman).<sup>78</sup> Between 1737 and 1741 she had sung in four Italian operas.<sup>79</sup> In English she had sung Michal in *Saul* and the soprano parts in *Israel in Egypt* and *L'Allegro*.<sup>80</sup> She was clearly a *prima donna* of considerable talent and charisma, though Mrs Delany's remark that on her return in 1744 she was 'much improved' suggests that perhaps she had not been seen as being in the class of Cuzzoni and Bordoni. Handel clearly valued her as in the 1744 and 1744-5 seasons she went on to sing a huge variety of roles, from the seductive Dalila (*Samson*) and the innocent and pure Iole (*Hercules*) to the wise and able Dowager Queen Nitocris in *Belshazzar*. This variety shows that she had considerable skill, both technical and dramatic. The part of Semele allowed Handel to compose a role of huge emotional and dramatic variety and he surely would not have written it without knowing that he had a singer and actor capable of realising it.

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<sup>77</sup> W. Dean, *Handel* (New Grove, London, 1980), p83. However, La Rue, in his study of the Royal Academy operas points out that this was the beginning, rather than the end, of the creative process. C.S. LaRue, *Handel and his Singers, The Creation of the Royal Academy Operas, 1720-1728* (Oxford, 1993), p190

<sup>78</sup> W. Dean, 'Duparc, Elisabeth', *New Grove Online*

<sup>79</sup> As Clotilda (*Faramondo*), Romilda (*Serse*), Rosmene (*Imeneo*), and the title role of *Deidamia*.

<sup>80</sup> Her roles for Handel included Asenath (*Joseph*) 1744; Iole (*Hercules*) 1745; Nitocris (*Belshazzar*) 1745, Deborah (*Deborah*) 1744, Michal (*Saul*) 1739, Soprano (*Israel*) 1739, Penseroso (*L'Allegro*) 1740, Dalila (*Samson*) 1744, Soprano, (*Messiah*) 1745, Clotilda (*Faramondo*), 1737, Romilda (*Serse*), 1738, Rosmene (*Imeneo*), 1740, Deidamia (*Deidamia*), 1741.

Opposite *Francesina*, Handel had one of the most talented and versatile singer-actors of the age, the tenor John Beard.<sup>81</sup> He created the roles of Samson, Hyllus (*Hercules*), Belshazzar, Judas Maccabaeus and Jephtha.<sup>82</sup> This was all the more remarkable because first-man roles traditionally went to castrati.<sup>83</sup> Beard was one of the first English singers to appear as a principal man in Italian opera, and the parts written for him reveal a formidable technique which encompassed controlled lyricism together with a rapid coloratura. In casting such a charismatic and dominant musical personality as Jupiter, Handel elevated the relationship between his central couple above even that written by Congreve. In giving him the most memorable aria in the work, 'Where e'er you walk', Handel decisively tipped the balance of audience sympathy in his favour. Jupiter may be a rogue, but in Handel's hands he remains a deeply attractive one.

Handel was fortunate to have another truly great English character singer in Henry Theodore Reinhold, singing Cadmus, Somnus and the High Priest.<sup>84</sup> Like Beard, his catalogue of performances for Handel is too extensive to list,<sup>85</sup> and the creator of Saul, Harapha, Hercules and Valens must have been an actor and singer of huge personality and power. His roles show a distinct leaning towards 'big' characters given to bluster, in Hercules' case benign, in Harapha and Valens' case largely vicious. He will thus have been well placed to portray the bemused, bullying

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<sup>81</sup> W. Dean, 'Beard, John', *New Grove Online*

<sup>82</sup> In English he sang Sisera (*Deborah*) 1744, Mathan (*Athalia*) 1735, Tenor (*Alexander's Feast*) 1736, Jonathan (*Saul*), 1739, Tenor (*Israel*) 1739, Allegro (*L'Allegro*) 1740, Tenor (*Messiah*) 1743, Samson (*Samson*), 1741, Simeon/Judah (*Joseph*) 1744, Hyllus (*Hercules*) 1745, Belshazzar (*Belshazzar*) 1745, Judas (*Judas Maccabaeus*) 1746, Jonathan (*Alexander Balus*) 1747, Jephtha (*Jephtha*) 1752; In Italian, Silvio (*Pastor Fido*) 1734, Emilio (*Partenope*), 1737, Lurcanio (*Ariodante*), 1735, Oronte (*Alcina*) 1735, Aminata (*Atalanta*) 1736, Varo (*Arminio*) 1736, Vitaliano (*Giustino*) 1737, Fabio (*Berenice*) 1737

<sup>83</sup> An obvious exception was Francesco Borosini, as well as Fabri and Pinacci.

<sup>84</sup> O. Baldwin & T. Wilson: 'Reinhold, Henry Theodore', *New Grove Online*

<sup>85</sup> In English he sang Abinoam (*Deborah*) 1744, Saul (*Saul*) 1740, Bass (*Israel*) 1739, Bass (*L'Allegro*) 1740, Bass (*Messiah*) 1743, Harapha (*Samson*) 1743, Pharoh/Ruben (*Joseph*) 1744, Hercules (*Hercules*) 1745, Simon/Eupolemus (*Judas*), Caleb (*Joshua*), Ptolomee (*Balus*), 1747, 2<sup>nd</sup> Elder (*Susannah*), 1748, Levite (*Solomon*) 1749, Valens (*Theodora*) 1750; in Italian, Mercurio (*Atalanta*) 1736, Segeste (*Arminio*) 1737, Polidarte (*Giustino*, 1737, Aristobolo, (*Berenice*) 1737, Argenio (*Imeneo*) 1740, Lycomedes (*Deidamia*) 1741

Cadmus, and his turn as the priapic Somnus will have prepared him for his role as the Second Elder in *Susanna*.

Unfortunately, the counter-tenor Daniel Sullivan does not seem to have been of the same calibre.<sup>86</sup> Mary Delany described him (apparently reporting Handel's opinion) as 'a block with a very fine voice.'<sup>87</sup> He only sang one season with Handel, in the title role of *Joseph and his Brethren* and as Micha in *Samson*. Delany's comment also points to something suggested by Handel's casting of the three principal roles, namely that acting was an integral part of unstaged performances. The comment may of course have been referring to a lack of musicianship, an inability to learn the part, or the changes that Sullivan's casting required, but the word 'block' has the same connotations as 'wooden' and it is more likely that his performances lacked personality. This may account for the rather routine workmanship of 'Despair no more shall wound me'.

In the strenuous dual role of Juno and Ino, Handel had the contralto Esther Young.<sup>88</sup> She was the sister-in-law of both Thomas Arne and J.F. Lampe, for whom she had created the role of Mauxalinda in *The Dragon of Wantley*.<sup>89</sup> During the 1744 season she also played the Witch of Endor and possibly Phanor (in *Joseph*).<sup>90</sup> She did not sing for Handel again. Although her name appears on Handel's music for *Alceste* (1750), this was not performed and the music was used for *The Choice of Hercules*. Her presence is a reminder of how close the ostensibly rival companies were in the 1740s.

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<sup>86</sup> W. Dean, 'Sullivan, Daniel', *New Grove Online*

<sup>87</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 25 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p373

<sup>88</sup> O. Baldwin & T. Wilson, 'Young: (5) Esther Young', *New Grove Online*

<sup>89</sup> See above, Chapter Two.

<sup>90</sup> See above, Chapter Three.

Handel's Iris was Christina Maria Avoglio. She sang with Handel in his Dublin Season in 1742 and was clearly popular with him there.<sup>91</sup> She played the Israelitish/Philistine woman in *Samson* in 1743 and sang in the London premiere of *Messiah*. After June 1744 little certain is known about her, so she may well not have sung in the revival of *Semele* in December 1744. The published version of the score indicates that she was allocated Cadmus' lines in the quartet and Ino's in 'Prepare then ye.' This suggests that she was of sufficient calibre to have her part expanded.

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<sup>91</sup> 'Sig<sup>ra</sup>. Avolio, which I brought with me from London pleases extraordinary [sic]'. Handel to Charles Jennens, 29 December 1741, *HHB IV*, p341; W. Dean & D.E. Freeman, 'Avoglio, Christina Maria', *New Grove Online*

### Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated that Handel's *Semele* had a number of predecessors, sources and points of inspiration within the artistic world of the early eighteenth century. Its predecessors included dramatic cantatas by de La Guerre and Destouches, as well as operas by Marais and Telemann. However, despite the influence of *tragédies lyriques* on Handel's early oratorios and his close friendship with Telemann, it is unlikely that any of these were sources for his setting of *Semele*. Eccles' setting, on the other hand, may well have been known to Handel, which is strongly suggested by the similarity of approach in the Act One quartet, Apollo's French overture, and Juno's Act Three entrance, as well as many other stylistic and melodic similarities. The Purcellian character of Handel's work perceived by many scholars may also be due in part to the influence of Eccles.

Recent scholarship and the present study suggest that it is necessary to revise the older view of *Semele* as being exceptional in its small number of borrowings. Aside from the possible influence of Eccles, Handel appears to have borrowed directly from his own earlier works three times, from Scarlatti's *Il Pompeo* five times, and from Telemann twice. In addition he seems to have drawn freely on incipits taken from Keiser and Telemann. However, it does not alter the fact that Handel composed *Semele* with energy and inspiration in three weeks. This thesis suggests that as well as the undoubted quality of Congreve's libretto, Handel was also inspired by the particularly graphic and dramatic images that the *Semele* story encompassed, as well as the strong cast of singers and actors available to him in 1744. The next chapter will consider the changes that Handel made to the libretto and some aspects of his musical setting to see how his version reflected the historical and cultural context of the 1740s.

## Chapter Four: The Development of Handel's Libretto for *Semele*

We have seen that *Semele* offered Handel an opportunity to present a 'great' English literary figure, to compete simultaneously against the Thomas Arne and Lord Middlesex, and also temporarily to avoid the controversy over religious music in the playhouses which had engulfed *Messiah*. In its poetry, dramatic structure and varied characterisation, there can be little doubt about what appealed to Handel about *Semele*. Congreve, perhaps more than almost any other librettist of his era, strove to invest his operatic characters with the same range of weaknesses, contradictions and foibles that he gave to their theatrical counterparts. Nobody in this libretto is idealised, nobody is unquestionably heroic, and the two most obviously virtuous characters (Ino and Athamas) are relegated from focus for much of it, finding only conditional happiness at its conclusion.

The libretto was controversial in its aesthetic, moral and political outlook in 1707. These inherent tensions remained within the work when it was performed in the 1740s, and within the new political and social context they became even more complicated. Congreve remained an imposing figure on the London stage, but he was far from an uncontroversial figure. In 1737, supporting the Licensing Act, the *Daily Gazetteer* said of *The Way of the World* that 'All the characters in that play are immoral, immodest, and shocking in sobriety of Thinking...Tickling a man's ear is no excuse for corrupting his mind.'<sup>1</sup> Four years after Handel's *Semele*, Edmund Burke added:

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<sup>1</sup> A. Lindsay & H. Erskine-Hill (eds), *William Congreve, The Critical Heritage* (London & New York, 1989), p216



Mr. Congreve, who, to the Chorus of a lively wit, solid Judgement and rich invention, has added such Obscenity, as none can, without the greatest danger to virtue, listen to; the very texture and groundwork of his Plays is Lewdness, which poisons the surer, as it is set off with the Advantage of wit...'<sup>2</sup>

Aaron Hill criticised the portrayal of genuinely evil characters in *The Double Dealer*, and cited *The Way of the World* as an illustration that the British theatre was far more libertine than had been the Athenian.<sup>3</sup> This again illustrates how unlikely it was that the advocates of English opera would be enthusiastic about *Semele*.

The degree to which Handel was sensitive to these tensions inherent in the libretto can best be seen through his changes to Congreve's text. These illustrate political tact, an awareness of changing social attitudes towards sexuality and alcohol, and the aesthetic differences between opera and a work presented 'after the manner of an oratorio.' The copy of *Semele* submitted to the Lord Chamberlain is of huge value in showing the chronology of the development of Handel's libretto, as it provides evidence as to when during the creative process various changes were made. Between 1737 and 1757, the Chamberlain was Charles Fitzroy, Duke of Grafton, a supporter of Handel. Therefore all changes made are likely to have reflected a sincere view of public morals and decency.<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines Handel's changes to Congreve and aspects of his musical setting to illustrate how he tried to adapt *Semele* to the temper of the time.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Burke, *The Reformer* (1748), in *ibid.*, pp219-10

<sup>3</sup> E.L., Avery, *Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (London, 1951), pp5-6. Hill was an active supporter of the moralising Richardson, especially during the composition of *Clarissa*. See C. Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector 1685-1750* (Oxford, 2003), pp202-14

<sup>4</sup> L.W., Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824* (San Marino, 1976), p25 and for Grafton's offer of help to Handel during the difficult season of 1745 see [4<sup>th</sup> Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 12 Feb, 1745, in D. Burrows & R. Dunhill (eds), *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris 1732-1780* (Oxford, 2002), p214. The Chamberlain's need to be sensitive to public opinion was demonstrated by attacks on Grafton for licensing French players in the late 1730s. Peter Wentworth to Lord Strafford, 25 October, 1738, BL Add. MS 31145, p291r

### The Adaptation of Handel's Libretto

In preparing Handel's libretto from Congreve's opera, the adapter made a number of changes. These fell into three basic categories: cuts, interpolations, and re-writings or re-attributions. The cuts were clearly made for a variety of reasons. The most obvious was to reduce the length of the text. Congreve and Eccles' opera had not included any *da capo* arias and so assumed the minimum of textual repetition. In Handel's version, fourteen out of the twenty-five arias are *da capo*,<sup>5</sup> and even without these, his melismatic style was more expansive with the text than that of his English predecessor. These cuts are generally sensitive and remove chunks of scenes, which did only minimum damage to Congreve's verse. However, they necessarily changed the shape and emotional structure of several episodes, and the portrayal of several characters. Secondly, some cuts, whilst not necessary for the overall length of the work, removed repetition within scenes and streamlined some of the dialogue. Finally, there are a number of cuts of individual lines, couplets, and occasionally single words which indicate that they were felt to be particularly inappropriate or unacceptable.

There are a number of interpolations from other sources. Mainly these were taken from Congreve's other poetry, but one came from Pope's *Pastorals* and several from untraced sources. These include seven arias and five choruses. In addition, Handel created two additional choruses by reassigning lines from minor characters in Congreve's libretto. The main purpose of these insertions was in the first case to provide sufficient arias for his principals, and in the second to create a role for the chorus. A major attraction of Handel's oratorios was their sublime and grand

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<sup>5</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p373. The precise number would obviously change depending on which version performed.

choruses.<sup>6</sup> Handel needed the chorus to create not only gravity, but also spectacle to compensate for the fact that there was no scenery.<sup>7</sup> In addition, at least one aria text was re-written to fit better with Handel's music. *Semele* shows very few infelicities of stress and metre and demonstrates that Handel had reached a strong level of competence in setting English speech rhythms. However, occasionally, his musical ideas appear to have run ahead of the text, necessitating subtle re-writing of the words. This suggests that both he and his adapter were concerned that the fluent Englishness of the work should remain unquestioned.

It is important to remember that if the only issue was duration, Handel was completely at liberty to not set dialogue but leave it in the printed word-books. There were several works where Handel left lines unset with the audience left to fill in the gaps using the published version so that the plot made sense.<sup>8</sup> However, in *Semele*, the cut lines were suppressed completely which suggests that the changes were made for more substantial musical, moral, and political reasons.

### **The chronology of adaptations**

Congreve's libretto was adapted for Handel before he began working. The result was the libretto that Handel used when composing his autograph score (A). This version

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<sup>6</sup> John Brown located the greatness of Handel's church music in its 'sublime' qualities. J. Brown (D.D.), *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (London, 1763), p214

<sup>7</sup> Spectacular scene changes were an integral part of opera in the eighteenth century. Handel had already experimented with representing them in music with the symphonies in *Saul*. W. Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (London, 1970), p124; Dean, *Handel* (New Gove, Oxford, 1980), p108

<sup>8</sup> He did precisely this in the productions either side of *Semele*: *Samson* and *Joseph and his Brethren*. D. Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford, 1994), p306; Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, pp347, 399

of the libretto does not survive, but it can be reconstructed through a comparison between the existing sources. It will be referred to hereafter as the 'U' libretto.<sup>9</sup>

Handel made several changes to the libretto during the course of the initial composition and filling up stage. After that, the Larpent Manuscript libretto ('L') was copied by J.C. Smith for submission to the Lord Chamberlain's office. The evidence suggests that for L, Smith was working from both U and A, since stage directions appear in L which are not in A and there are also occasionally variant readings of the text which seem to reflect the Congreve version rather than what Handel set, and which therefore most likely derive from the intermediate version.<sup>10</sup> L includes Handel's re-written final chorus which suggests that it was made after the filling up stage, as Handel dated the completion of the score on the last page of this version of the chorus. However, L also shows a set of corrections to the text on the face of the manuscript which were also made on the face of A. All the corrections but two are extremely neat and appear therefore to have been made well before the manuscript was submitted. Two, however, show signs of being done in haste. This therefore suggests that these changes were made not during the filling up, but after L had been copied. This might either have been before the conducting score was copied, or during that process.

Then the conducting score was made ('C'). Probably at around the same time, a fair set of parts was copied ('P').<sup>11</sup> P contains additions to the score not found in L (e.g.

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<sup>9</sup> Barclay Squire suggested that Handel's inclusion of stage directions not in the printed libretto meant that he was working partly from Congreve's original libretto. However, the fuller directions in L suggest that this need not be the case. W.B. Squire 'Handel's *Semele*', *MT* lxvi (1925), p138

<sup>10</sup> L also includes a number of innocent copyists errors which will not be discussed here. The one interesting insertion for which there is no source is just before 'You've undone me'. Two lines were subsequently inserted, possibly Congreve's original 'What, had I not despair'd / You never shou'd have known.' These lines have been deleted so completely that they are illegible, in contrast to the neat strikings through of the rest of the manuscript. The lines do not appear in Handel's Autograph, even unset.

<sup>11</sup> There are a number of variants in P which are clearly copyists errors, such as Jove's 'Too well I guess her meaning' for 'Too well I read her meaning', and Iris' 'Thyself forbear' for 'Thyself forsake.'

the insertion of 'Despair no more shall wound me') which suggests that they were made slightly later. Subsequently, Handel made changes to C. Finally, the word-book ('W') was prepared for the first performance, which included several further minor changes. Both L and C were copied out by Smith, and he and Handel clearly worked closely together on the changes. This makes ascertaining a precise chronology difficult. However, the following sequence can be established.

*Changes made during the draft composition process, and therefore reflected in L*

The autograph manuscript shows that Handel made several changes during the draft stage of the composition process. Initially, 'See, she blushing turns her eyes' was given to Ino as an aria with the words of the final line altered from Congreve:

See, she blushing turns her eyes  
See with sighs her bosom panting  
If from love those sighs arise  
My rest ever will be wanting.<sup>12</sup>

In the autograph, Handel assigns 'Endless Pleasure' to Semele herself.<sup>13</sup> This is not supported by any of the other sources which simply give it as 'air'. However, in *Semele* (unlike several of the oratorios) there are no other arias sung by anonymous characters, so this would be strikingly anomalous. Moreover, the evidence of the printed scores suggests that Avoglio had her part increased with lines from Ino and even Cadmus.<sup>14</sup> If Handel had been thinking of this as sung by anyone but Semele, this would surely have been the most appropriate aria to give to her. Clearly, in Handel's mind, these were Semele's lines.<sup>15</sup> In Act Two, scene two, Handel followed Congreve's 'Cursed adulteress' without any corrections. The text of 'with fond

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<sup>12</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele* libretto, Larpent Collection, 43. San Marino, Huntingdon Memorial Library;  
G.F. Handel, *Semele* autograph manuscript. London, British Library RM.20.f.7, 19v-20

<sup>13</sup> Handel, *Semele* autograph manuscript, 44r

<sup>14</sup> Avoglio sang Iris, but she also seems to have sung Ino's part in the duet 'Prepare then ye' and Cadmus' part in the Act One quartet.

<sup>15</sup> They were sung by Duparc according to Walsh's published score.

desiring' is in its final form already in the autograph so the changes must have been made by the adapter for the U libretto.

In Act Two, Handel inverted the first two lines of 'I must with speed amuse her' in the autograph, but the lines appear in Congreve's form in L which suggests that the copyist was working from both U and A, and failed to spot this subtle change. The whole Act Two ending is exactly as in both L and W, though Handel added an extra syllable to 'Where e'er you walk' which was not spotted by the copyist of L or W (or perhaps this was a tactful decision to not draw attention to Handel's freedom with Pope's scansion).

In Act Three, there were several changes made by Handel during the draft composition. His adapter had given Semele the sexually explicit culmination of her demands to Jupiter:

Sem. When next you desire I shou'd charm ye,  
As when Juno you bless,  
So you me must caress,  
And with all your omnipotence arm ye.

Handel wrote these lines into the autograph intending them as recitative, but never set them to music.<sup>16</sup> Whilst the motivation for the cut may have been their overt sexuality, it may also have been purely musical. Congreve intended this to be an aria and the lines therefore have a rather convoluted sentence structure for recitative. Handel may have felt that 'And Jove since you are / Like Jove too appear' made a more dramatic conclusion to the dialogue.

The autograph also shows Handel's grappling with 'I'll be pleased with no less' and his corrections indicate the dissatisfaction he felt with the mismatch between the underlay and his melodic idea. The corrections made to the manuscript show clearly

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<sup>16</sup> Handel, *Semele* autograph manuscript, 97v

that Handel changed the last four lines of Congreve's text during the composition itself.<sup>17</sup> They undoubtedly fit his setting better, though at this stage he left the first two lines as in WC (and U):

**Congreve (WC)**

I'll be pleas'd with no less,  
Than my Wish in excess:  
Let the Oath you have taken alarm ye:  
Haste, haste and prepare  
For I'll know what you are;  
So with all your Omnipotence arm ye.

**Autograph (A)**

I'll be pleased with no less  
Than my wish in excess  
~~Let the~~ Your oath it may alarm you  
Yet haste and prepare,  
For I'll know what you are  
~~So with all your omnip~~  
With all your powers arm you

*Changes made during the filling up*

The filling up process produced several changes of its own. The main change was that between the first draft and the filling up stage, Athamas was recast from a tenor to an alto. In most of the recitatives and ensembles Handel simply wrote the new part over the old one. For Athamas' arias and for most of 'You've undone me' he inserted fresh sheets with the new part. This resulted in new keys for several of the arias, and Handel took the opportunity to improve and extend his first recitative with Cadmus, adding a final ritornello which leads into Semele's 'Ah Me!' A recitative version of 'turn hopeless lover' was inserted for Ino, and the second half of 'Hail, Cadmus Hail' was revised with the new sheets stuck over the old ones. At some point, Handel wrote 'Un mezzo tono piu basso ex D sharp' over 'O sleep' – i.e. that it should be in E flat. This would have made a more expressive key change from the G major of 'Come Zephyrs, Come'. The excision of 'Come Zephyrs' rendered it pointless, however, as the previous movement was in F minor and the original key of E therefore provided an equally expressive change of tonality and C suggests that this

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<sup>17</sup> Handel, *Semele* autograph manuscript, 99v-101

was the key in which it was performed. Handel also inserted a new version of 'Bless the glad earth',<sup>18</sup> to conclude Part Two.

In Part Three, Handel re-composed the entrance of Juno and Iris in the Cave of Sleep and this was inserted into A.<sup>19</sup> The first draft of the autograph concluded with Congreve's original finale 'Now Mortals Be Merry.' This was replaced at the filling up stage by the new finale 'Happy, Happy!' This change is extremely significant, as we shall see, but it also clarifies the chronology of events. L has the new ending, but not the re-writing of Athamas. It was therefore made before the crossings-out of text and re-writings shown above. This suggests that the following corrections, made to the face of L and A, were all made *after* composition was completed, rather than during the drafting or filling up process.

*Changes made subsequently (shown as corrections on L and A)*

Having originally set Congreve's lines 'by this conjunction / With entire divinity / You shall partake of heavenly essence', Handel crossed out the first two and changed the last to 'partake of immortality.' Exactly the same crossing out appears in L which suggests that the change was made after Handel had completed the filling up.<sup>20</sup> The correction here is hurried and messy. The handwriting looks like that of the copyist, but it is much less tidy than elsewhere in L. This suggests that the change was made at the last minute, perhaps after objections from the Chamberlain.

'Leave me, loathsome light' still had its *da capo* in P and L. Its crossing out in A is therefore probably later. 'Behold in this mirror' on the other hand remains an aria in L, but by C and P it has been changed to a recitative, which would suggest that P was based on C.

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<sup>18</sup> The original music was then used in *Joseph and his Brethren*. D.R. Hurley, 'The Summer of 1743: Some Handelian Self-Borrowings', *GHB* IV (1991), pp175, 191

<sup>19</sup> Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MU.MS.259

<sup>20</sup> Though it was made before the copying out of C; Handel, *Semele* autograph manuscript, 92v



Handel clearly continued to make changes to the opening of 'No no I'll take no less'. In P, it has the same words as were originally in A. However, after this, A, C and L were corrected to give the final version. Again the writing is much less neat than the rest of L and it looks very much like the correction was made by Handel himself in his own handwriting, which would confirm that he took a direct part in managing the Larpent libretto's submission and alterations.

Air  
Semele – No no! I'll take no less  
~~I'll be pleas'd with no less,~~  
Than all in full Excess  
~~Than my Wish in excess:~~  
Your oath It may alarm you  
Yet haste and prepare,  
For I'll know what you are;  
With all your powers arm you.

In L, 'See, she blushing turns her eyes' has been corrected on the face of the manuscript, giving it as a recitative for Athamas, with Congreve's original words. This was also made on the basis of C. It is in the copyist's hand and has been changed neatly. In addition, Handel changed 'comets' to 'meteors' in the penultimate chorus and this also had to be corrected on the face of L.

#### *Changes made after the correction of A*

The autograph does not show any changes to 'See, she blushing turns her eyes', but this had been changed to a recitative for Ino by the time P was copied and was retrospectively changed in L, presumably on the basis of C. Similarly, 'Curs't adulteress' stands in A but was actually scratched out of L and replaced by 'Curséd Semele.' The correction appears to have been made by Smith (the writing is cramped between two lines, but his characteristic d and S are the same).

*Changes made after the correction of A and L*

Finally, Athamas' aria 'Despair No more shall wound me' was inserted into A. It is not included in L at all, which further suggests that L was prepared either during Handel's revisions to A, or very shortly after, and that 'Despair no more shall wound me' was a very late addition to the work. Before C was prepared, 'Come Zephyrs Come' was removed completely. Several movements were then transposed for the first performance.

### **The role of the chorus**

In addition to the rivalry with Middlesex and Arne, *Semele* was also composed in the wake of King George's victory at Dettingen, in celebration of which Handel was writing his 'Te Deum'.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that whilst preserving the character of an opera in the *da capo* arias and florid coloraturas, Handel was also aiming at something specifically English in character. Ten years after Aaron Hill's open letter, his arias showed that all of the best of the Italian vocal style was compatible with English words. However, he also ensured that in the adaptation from Congreve he had the means to out-English Arne using the resource of which he was the acknowledged master: the chorus. It was in his Chapel Royal anthems that Handel had demonstrated his assimilation, which he had done to great effect in the coronation service.<sup>22</sup> This style in itself may have derived from the theatrical choruses of Purcell as well as the latter's church compositions.<sup>23</sup> The chorus was an essential feature of Handel's English oratorio style, and its role in the structure of *Semele* should not be overlooked.

This addition was the most fundamental structural change that he made to Congreve's libretto, and it completely changes the character of the drama. *Semele* contains ten choruses (two of which segue directly from arias and use the same melodic material). This is a comparatively small number compared with *Messiah* (twenty), or even *Samson* (twenty), but it is nevertheless two more than *Hercules* and considerably more than the opera seria (which generally had just the single concluding *coro*, sung by the soloists, not a separate chorus). The choruses in *Semele*

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<sup>21</sup> G.F. Handel, *Te Deum* ("Dettingen") in *D major*, HWV 283

<sup>22</sup> D. Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal* (Oxford, 2005), pp55, 255

<sup>23</sup> F.B. Zimmerman, 'Purcellian passages in the compositions of G.F. Handel' in C. Hogwood & R. Lockett (eds), *Music in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1983), pp49-58; J. Herbage, 'The Secular Oratorios and Cantatas' in G. Abraham (ed.), *Handel, A Symposium* (Oxford, 1954), pp137-40; E.J. Dent, 'English Influences on Handel', *Monthly Musical Record*, (August, 1931), p228

bring both gravity and a sense of explicit moral commentary to the libretto which is not fully developed in Congreve's original.

In Part One, all of the choral elements are linked to religious ceremonial.<sup>24</sup> The chorus are characters in the drama, and are identified as 'Chorus of Priests and Augurs.' In 'Lucky omens' they set up the joyfulness of the wedding day and the contrapuntal writing of 'Attend the pair' lends an ecclesiastical weight to proceedings.<sup>25</sup> In the two choruses 'Avert these omens' and 'Cease, cease your vows' Handel masterfully paints the thunder, lighting and sheets of rain in the orchestral accompaniment as the chorus convey through the sheer weight of sound a sense of terror and group panic. In 'Hail Cadmus Hail', Handel comes as close as he ever did in *Semele* to painting a bacchanalian pagan society. The compound rhythm and braying horns anticipates the uninhibited 'Endless pleasure' with which Part One concludes. The chorus in the first scene therefore reinforce the gravity and religiosity of the occasion whilst at the same time characterising it as an earth-bound and even earthy society.

In Part Two the chorus appear as 'Loves and Zephyrs' and this change emphasises the change in tone between Parts One and Two. This takes place entirely in the heavenly realm and the first two choruses emphasise the erotic innocence of this world. Their final contribution, 'Bless the glad earth', is an astonishing evocation of the music of the spheres, which brings to life the theories of Cicero, Aristoxenus, Pythagoras and Boethius, which held that music is the force that holds the universe together in peace and harmony. This is the first of two choruses in *Semele* which might properly be called anthem-choruses.<sup>26</sup> The subject matter is suitably awe-

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<sup>24</sup> This reflects the influence of the English masque tradition, and in particular Dryden and Purcell's *King Arthur*. See Chapter One.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Exhibition of the choir and accompanying Band is not only decent, but grand and striking: A becoming Gravity attends it, both among the performers and the Audience.' Brown, *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power... of Poetry and Music*, p221

<sup>26</sup> Here I take issue with Larsen who claims that neither *Semele* nor *Belshazzar* contains true anthem choruses. J.P. Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origin's Composition, Sources* (London, 1957), p89

inspiring, and Handel's treatment, beginning with a weighty homophonic passage and followed by a double fugue, raises the music and dramatic tone to the religious, if not Christian, sublime.<sup>27</sup>

In Part Three, the chorus' shocked reaction to Semele's destruction, 'O Terror and astonishment'<sup>28</sup> was part of Congreve's original libretto, but the moral drawn ('Nature to each allots his proper sphere') was an addition. At the close of the story the chorus bring out the meaning like the commentators of a Greek tragedy. Collier had criticised Congreve for not making explicit the morality of his plays, and here the use of a solemn and dignified chorus makes it quite clear for the audience that the entertainment that they are enjoying is a moral and upright one. This leads on to the final and most important chorus in the work and the second which might justly be classified as an anthem. For this final chorus the singers become again citizens of Thebes and the setting is again one of a royal, religious ceremonial: the marriage of Ino and Athamas, and the crowning of Bacchus.

This raises the fundamental but vexed question of *Semele's* genre.<sup>29</sup> Many writers, encouraged by both Mainwaring's description of it as 'An English opera, but called an oratorio and acted as such,' and Jennens' scathing 'no oratorio but a bawdy opera,'<sup>30</sup> have tended to emphasise its operatic qualities, especially in the context of the rivalry with *Middlesex*. Burrows has called it 'virtually an opera', while Dean says it is 'clearly an opera'. Lang went further and called it 'The first full-length

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<sup>27</sup> The implicit religiosity of the sublime is illustrated by Baillie's description that we often 'confess the sublime as the Deity.' J. Baillie, *An Essay on the Sublime. By the late Dr. Baillie* (London, 1747), p5. The explicit religiosity of choral music has been demonstrated in A.H. Shapiro, "'Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature": Handel's Early English Oratorios and the Religious Sublime', *ML* 74 (1993), p226

<sup>28</sup> Given to Cadmus and Athamas.

<sup>29</sup> Hurley surely understated the fact when he said that *Semele* causes generic confusion. D.R. Hurley, *Handel's Muse. Patterns of Creation in his Oratorios and Musical Dramas, 1743-1751* (Oxford, 2001), p3

<sup>30</sup> [J. Mainwaring,], *Memoirs of the Life of the late George Frederic Handel* (London, 1760), p152; Dean, W., 'Charles Jennens' marginalia to Mainwaring's *Life of Handel*', *ML*, liii (1972), pp160-4

English Opera' and Mellers a 'full-scale heroic opera.'<sup>31</sup> The arias are clearly operatic in style and the string-based orchestration of much of the score also points towards opera.<sup>32</sup> However, this is to ignore the importance to the work of one of the most popular elements of Handel's style. Since the *Coronation Anthems* of 1727, Handel's sublime choral music had brought him widespread popularity at both state occasions and their public rehearsals.<sup>33</sup> These anthems had been an important part of the popularity of Handel's early oratorios,<sup>34</sup> and he continued to refer to his oratorio choruses as anthems, for instance in his correspondence with Jennens over *Belshazzar*.<sup>35</sup> In the preface to *Samson* (1742), Newburgh Hamilton defined oratorio as a drama '...in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage.'<sup>36</sup>

Oratorios were supposed to be if not religious, then certainly virtuous. Mattheson described oratorio in very broad terms as 'nothing other than a sung poem which presents a story or virtuous adventure in a dramatic way.' Modern writers have tended to follow the later development of oratorio and emphasise their explicitly religious nature, as when Larsen asserted that 'Oratorio acknowledges two masters,

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<sup>31</sup> D. Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford, 1994), p274; W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p365; P. H. Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (London, 1966), p417; W. Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting, A Study of the Relationship between English Music, Poetry and Theatre* (London, 1965), p243. E.J. Dent, *Foundations of English Opera* (Cambridge & London, 1928), p231; Smither omitted it from his history of oratorio on the same grounds. H.E. Smither, *History of the Oratorio*, (3 vols. North Carolina, 1977), Vol. 2, p280. See also H. Serwer, 'Dramatische und szenische Aspekte von Händels *Semele*' *HJB* 37 (1991), 163-9

<sup>32</sup> As do the borrowings from Scarlatti, who was a major influence on Handel's operatic style. W. Dean & J.M. Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726* (Oxford, 1987), p87; Smither cites the reliance on string ensemble as well as the prevalence of *da capo* arias as the reason for Susanna's operatic feel, and this is equally applicable to *Semele*. H.E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, (3 vols. North Carolina, 1977) Vol.2, p327.

<sup>33</sup> D. Burrows, 'Handel, Stuarts and Hanoverians: Handel's English Church Music and the Image of the British Monarchy' *HJB* 49 (2003), p99

<sup>34</sup> *Esther* was advertised as 'after the manner of the coronation service.' Burrows, *Handel*, p168; G. Beeks, 'Handel's use of Anthems in his oratorios to Portray the People of Israel', *HJB* 52 (2006), p29

<sup>35</sup> Beeks, 'Handel's use of Anthems' p26. However, these were specifically in praise of the almighty, and so were dramatically more akin to liturgical anthems.

<sup>36</sup> N. Hamilton, *Samson* (London, 1743), preface. This preface was included in the 'A' and 'B' versions of the first issue, held at the Huntingdon and Rowe libraries.

the church and the theatre.’<sup>37</sup> However, this did not render them undramatic. The strength of *Semele* in fact comes from its seamless fusion of operatic and oratorio elements.<sup>38</sup> In it, Handel brought the strengths of oratorio and anthem-chorus to an operatic libretto and fused from them an art form which encompassed the best of both worlds. To the opera audience he offered florid, Italianate, *da capo* arias of rich and varied drama.<sup>39</sup> To his oratorio audience he offered the religious sublime of ‘Bless the glad earth’ and the coronation splendour of ‘Happy, happy!’.<sup>40</sup> Carole Taylor asked whether *Semele* ‘so surprising in isolation, made more sense when looked at as an attempt to find a compromise between English choral music and Italianate dramatic music.’<sup>41</sup> Chapter Two has shown that this was clearly part of Handel’s aim; the following section assesses the artistic and political impact of his approach.

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<sup>37</sup> J. Mattheson, *Johann Mattheson's Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, ed. and tr. E.C. Harriss (Ann Arbor, 1981), p446. J.P. Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins Composition, Sources* (London, 1957).

<sup>38</sup> In 1739 Handel had attempted a similar fusion with *Jupiter in Argos*, based on Lotti's 1717 opera which Handel heard in Dresden in 1719. Here he had also taken an opera libretto (in Italian) and made a *pasticcio* of his own music, but also interpolated large chorus numbers. Coincidentally, it also featured the *amours* of Jupiter, this time lost in an Argive forest. The work was not, however, a success. J.M. Coopersmith, ‘The Libretto of Handel's ‘Jupiter in Argos’’, *ML* XVII (1936), pp289-90 & passim; C. Taylor, ‘Handel's Disengagement from Italian Opera’ in Sadie, S. & Hicks, A.(eds), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (London, 1987), p167

<sup>39</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, *Semele* has a far lower percentage of *da capo* arias than the original versions of *Acis* (85%, 11 out of 13), and *Esther* (75%) and all of the Royal Academy operas. Of *Semele*'s successors *Alexander Balus* had 40%, *Hercules* and *Theodora* both 52%, and *Susanna*, 62%. However, all of these have many more than the immediate predecessors *L'Allegro* (8%) *Samson* (11%), *Saul* (17%) *Judas*, *Joshua* and *Belshazzar* all had 23-4%). This supports the theory that with *Semele* Handel tried to fuse the choral and *da capo* elements out of which came a distinct genre in the later dramatic oratorios.

<sup>40</sup> The anthem-like character of the choruses is illustrated by the fact that Handel re-used material from his first version of ‘Bless the glad earth’ not only for ‘Zaphanath, Egypt's fate foresaw’, but also ‘And Why’ in the 1743 *The King Shall Rejoice*. D.R. Hurley, ‘“The Summer of 1743”: Some Handelian Self-Borrowings’, *GHB* IV (1991), pp175-81

<sup>41</sup> C. Taylor, *Italian Operagoing in London 1700-1745* (Unpublished PhD, University of Syracuse, 1991), p305

### The Impact of the Changes for Handel's *Semele*

Handel's *Semele* encompassed the themes that Congreve had already set out. However, his changes to the libretto and his musical approach fundamentally altered some of Congreve's emphases, and in several cases brought out new ideas and new interpretations of the original material.

Some of the changes were purely to give the soloists sufficient material. Semele's first aria 'The morning lark' was an addition to Congreve's libretto. It was taken from Congreve's poem *To Sleep*,<sup>42</sup> which also yielded the text for 'My racking thoughts' in Part Three. It has little dramatic function except to separate Semele from the ceremony that is going on around her. However, given how important sleep and dream imagery is in Congreve's libretto, it can hardly be coincidental that it comes from a poem about sleep, waking, and dreams. Beneath the traditional imitation of birdsong, the aria shows Semele locked in the dreamy world which plays such a strong role in this work, in opposition to that of pain and suffering for love:

Sem.    The morning lark to mine accords his note,  
          And tunes to my distress his warbling throat.  
          Each setting and each rising sun I mourn,  
          Wailing alike his absence and return.<sup>43</sup>

Though dramatically superfluous it is musically charming, adds a dimension to Semele's character otherwise lacking, and gave Duparc a spectacular aria in Part One.

Other changes were made to alter the dramatic pacing. The opening dialogue between Juno and Iris contains a number of cuts from Congreve's libretto. Several of these were clearly for length, and they make little or no change to the sense of the

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<sup>42</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp196-9

<sup>43</sup> HWV 58/6



scene and often simply remove repetition.<sup>44</sup> Similarly their opening scene of Part Three with Somnus contains a number of minor cuts for length. Amongst these is Juno and Iris' duet 'Only love on sleep has power', an example of Congreve's deliberate contrasting of sleep and love. Its removal allows Juno to move straight from revealing her plan to bribe Somnus with Pasithea, to his excited waking at the nymph's name. This speeds up the action, mirroring Somnus' priapic energy in the pacing of the dialogue:

Juno. Peace, Iris, Peace, I know how to charm him:  
Pasithea's Name alone can warm him.  
Somnus, arise,  
Disclose thy tender eyes;  
For Pasithea's Sight  
Endure the Light:  
Somnus, arise.  
Som. More sweet is that Name  
(rising) Than a soft purling Stream;  
With Pleasure Repose I'll forsake,  
If you'll grant me but her to soothe me awake.<sup>45</sup>

Athamas' final aria 'Despair no more shall wound me' was interpolated into Congreve's libretto when L was copied and was added to Handel's manuscript after his first draft. The aria has no dramatic purpose, and it was clearly a provision for the singer. It is one of only two additions whose sources are as yet unidentified, but its poetic quality does not rule out a hasty scribbling by Handel himself, or by whoever was preparing the libretto:

Ath. Despair no more shall wound me,  
Since you so kind do prove.  
All joy and bliss surround me,  
My soul is tun'd to love.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For instance, only the first line survives of Juno's:  
Say, where is Semele's Abode?  
'Till that I know,  
Tho' thou hadst on Lightning rode,  
Still thou tedious art and slow.  
Congreve, *CW*, p806; HWV 58/25

<sup>45</sup> HWV 58/48-9

No one has proposed a convincing source or predecessor for this text. However, it bears a striking resemblance in its language, sentiments and scansion, to a passage in Motteux's opera *Camilla* – which was almost exactly contemporaneous with Congreve's *Semele*:

Despair no more pursues me  
My fancy fears are flown  
My thoughts no joy refuse me  
My torments adieu.<sup>47</sup>

It also bears a strong resemblance to the published translation of *Etearco* by Handel's one-time collaborator, Nicola Haym:

Despair no more shall wound my heart  
But future joys atone  
For all the pains I have endur'd.<sup>48</sup>

Either Handel or his librettist could easily have had access to either source.

However, many of the changes were not related to the length of the drama, and made deliberate and profound changes to the way in which themes of love, sexuality, power and politics were developed in Handel's production of *Semele*.

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<sup>46</sup> HWV 58/72

<sup>47</sup> P. Motteux, *Camilla. An opera. As it is perform'd at the Theatre Royal in Drury-Lane, by Her Majesty's servants* (London, 1706), p13

<sup>48</sup> N.F. Haym. *Etearco. Opera. Da rappresentarsi nel' Reggio Teatro D'Hay-Marke* (London, 1711), p12. There is a similar poem, dedicated to Cuzzoni in *The hive. A collection of the most celebrated songs. In three volumes. Vol. III. The third edition, with alterations and additions* (London, 1726-29), p47. There is also a poem in the play *The amour of Palavino and Eleonora*, anonymously translated from the French, but this does not have the same similarities of scansion. [Anon.] *A select collection of novels. Volume the fifth. Containing, The little gypsy. Ethelinda. The amour of count Palviano and Eleonora. Scanderbeg...* (London, 1722), p219

### *Female Sexuality*

Congreve gave 'Endless Pleasure' to the second augur and Eccles' arioso setting made a good deal of the implicit eroticism.<sup>49</sup> In the Larpent manuscript, this is simply marked 'air' with no character attribution. Handel's autograph manuscript, however, gives it to Semele herself,<sup>50</sup> and the jaunty gavotte that he sets it to, with its ecstatic coloraturas, makes the kind of 'endless pleasure' being enjoyed abundantly clear.<sup>51</sup> Because the aria is in the present tense and now sung by the heroine of herself, the implication is that it is describing something which is actually happening at that moment. This is the first of several changes which show Handel bringing a level of sensuality to the music which would have been unacceptable had there been staging. To show on stage what is implied in this music would have been totally unacceptable in the 1740s.<sup>52</sup> Although the librettist toned down many of the references to sex and sexuality throughout *Semele*, Handel frequently made up for it with the explicit eroticism of the music.<sup>53</sup> This change also allowed Handel to present the relationship at an unambiguously happy moment, making its collapse all the more powerful.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p804; HWV 58/23

<sup>50</sup> Donald Burrows has shown that specific character attribution could be more elastic in the oratorios because of the absence of staging. However, in this instance, it is surely a quite deliberate dramatic device to make the 'Endless Pleasure' more immediate. D. Burrows, 'Handel's use of soloists in *Samson*: Characterisation versus practical necessity', *HJB* 52 (2006), p37

<sup>51</sup> According to Dean (presumably on the internal evidence of the oratorios), Handel regarded sexual love as source of 'unequivocal joy'. *Semele* would certainly seem to confirm that thesis. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p42

<sup>52</sup> Rockstro, reflecting his own time as much as Handel's said: '*Semele* could never, by any possibility, have been tolerated upon the English Stage.' W.S. Rockstro, *The Life of George Frederick Handel* (London, 1883), p315

<sup>53</sup> The additional eroticism in this case comes from the change to the implied first person, and consequent reflexive nature of the description. However, we have seen elsewhere in the thesis a range of other ways in which Handel heightens the erotic charge of situations through the music. These include long melismas ('O Sleep'), repetition of the most innuendo-laden lines ('There from mortal cares retiring'), moving from soloists to chorus at the point of reconciliation – rather like a film-maker panning away from the couple ('How engaging'), and finally through rich chromaticism, which combines the twin senses of pain and ecstatic pleasure (in particular the diminished intervals sung during Semele's death).

<sup>54</sup> In Congreve's opera, the relationship has already begun to sour by the beginning of Act Two.

Handel also changed the character of the Part One finale through his cutting of the final chorus. Congreve had passed on from Semele's erotic pleasures to 'Haste, haste, haste, to Sacrifice prepare,' which emphasised that Semele was now to be worshipped as an equal of the gods, followed by a return of 'Hail, Cadmus, Hail'. Both of these emphasise the prestige and majesty of Semele's union with Jove. The wit of Congreve's version comes from presenting the adulterous affair with a completely straight face and solemn pomp.<sup>55</sup> Handel's version cuts both of these and instead the chorus join in with a climactic, fugal, version of 'Endless Pleasure'. Thus the erotic is raised to the sublime, both musically, and through being the finale of the the first part. This leaves Semele's ecstasy, rather than her divine ascension, as the dominant image in the audience's mind during the interval. This is the first appearance of the sublime in *Semele* and not the last to manipulate conventional expectations.

In a similar change, Handel's librettist cut the second and third verses of 'There from Mortal cares' leaving one verse set as a *da capo* aria. The cut changes Semele's status as her eventual apotheosis is not mentioned. It also lessens the sexual delight that Iris describes:

Iris.     Thither Flora the Fair  
             With her Train must repair,  
             Her amorous Zephyr attending,  
             All her sweets she must bring  
             To continue the Spring,  
             Which never must there know an Ending.<sup>56</sup>

However, once again Handel more than compensated for the missing lines in the mischievous sensuality of the 'sighing' phrases, and repetitions of 'in sweet retreat.' Moreover, the *da capo* repeat in itself gives a sense of the unending pleasures that the cut verse had described.

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<sup>55</sup> Exactly what Burke was criticising. See the introduction to this chapter.

<sup>56</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp806-7

The next scene originally opened with Cupid serenading Semele as she awoke. In adapting the libretto for Handel, the first four lines were cut. They made explicit reference to her post-coital 'panting' and the fact that in her dreams she is fantasising about her lovemaking with Jupiter. It is therefore likely that these were removed because they were far too directly sexual for the 1740s:<sup>57</sup>

Cup. See, after the Toils of an amorous fight  
Where weary and pleas'd, still panting she lies;  
While yet in her Mind she repeats the Delight,  
How sweet is the Slumber that steals on her eyes!<sup>58</sup>

Handel set the remainder of the aria, 'Come, Zephyrs Come',<sup>59</sup> but this was also cut before the first production. Handel clearly felt that the music was strong as it was subsequently adapted and included in *Hercules* as 'How blest the maid.' It is therefore possible that even these words were felt too risqué, especially the 'wounding' of 'pleasure', which carried direct connotations of sexual penetration.

However, it is also plausible that the cut was made to improve the dramatic flow. In Congreve's libretto, Jupiter is then led in by the blind Cupid. The dramatic effect of this is completely lost without staging and so that probably accounts for the shortening of Cupid's role. The effect of the removal of Cupid's aria is to move the action straight from Juno's fury to Semele's unwary repose, a juxtaposition

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<sup>57</sup> 'Panting' was one of the words specifically excised from Fielding's *The Wedding Day* by the Lord Chamberlain. L.W. Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824* (San Marino, 1976), p141

<sup>58</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p809

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p809

Come Zephyrs, come, while Cupid sings,  
Fan her with your silky wings;  
New Desire  
I'll inspire  
And revive the dying Flames;  
Dance around her,  
While I wound her,  
And with Pleasure fill her Dreams.

heightened musically by the expressive key change from F minor to E major, which Cupid's G major aria would have softened.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Cupid is rather redundant to the plot, and his lines would have been sung by one of the other singers – probably the same singer as Iris. This could have become unnecessarily confusing.

'With fond desiring' shows the only example of a thoroughgoing revision of the existing text to have been made before Handel began composing:

<b>Congreve</b>		<b>Handel</b>	
Sem.	If chearful Hopes And chilling Fears, Alternate Smiles, Alternate Tears, Eager Panting, Fond Desiring, With Grief now fainting, Now with Bliss expiring; If this be Love, not you alone, But Love and I are one.	Sem.	With fond desiring, With Bliss expiring Panting Fainting If this be Love, not you alone, But Love and I are one, Causless doubting Or despairing Rashly trusting Idly fearing If this be love, not you alone But Love and I are one. (Da Capo) <sup>61</sup>
Both.	If this be Love, not you alone, But Love and I are one.		

Handel's version removed the duet element from the last two lines. The sense in Congreve's libretto is that by the end of the aria the two are to some extent reconciled. By removing Jupiter's contribution, the aria becomes more about Semele's desire and her fears. It is also far more sexually explicit, in both words and music, than the original. Congreve's first four lines alternate 'hopes', 'fears', 'smiles' and 'tears' before only then moving on to erotic desire. Handel reverses the order of the sentiments beginning with 'desiring', 'bliss expiring', 'panting', and 'fainting'. By paring down the language to the essentials, he puts the focus on the physical and sensuous aspects of her desire, and in language which was at the very extremes of

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<sup>60</sup> Though as we have seen, Handel's subsequent indication that the following aria should be in E flat may have been intended to create a similar effect.

<sup>61</sup> Congreve, CW, pp811-2; HWV 58/34

what was allowable.<sup>62</sup> Only then does he introduce the idea of love. However, almost immediately he introduces a note of doubt: 'doubting', 'despairing', 'rashly trusting' and 'fearing'. This transition is an example of the adapter's skilful economy as a writer. The lines 'causeless doubting, or despairing / Rashly trusting, idly fearing' are actually taken from a subsequent section of recitative dialogue which was cut. Because of the *da capo*, the aria ends with a return to the eroticism of the opening, suitably heightened by the obligatory vocal ornamentation. This sensuality is increased by the direct segue into a chorus; the second interpolation from Congreve's other works:

Chor. How Engaging, how endearing  
Is a Lover's Pain and Care  
And what Joy the Nymph's appeasing  
After absence or Despair.<sup>63</sup>

Appropriately for the context, this is taken from Congreve's poem *The Reconciliation*.<sup>64</sup> By removing the element of reconciliation from the aria but at the same time giving it to the commenting chorus, it suggests that the described rapprochement it is taking place in a non-verbal, physical, manner. Again it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Handel is taking advantage of the unstaged performance convention to portray in music something which would have been totally impossible to stage, and thereby extend further the erotic boundaries of his text, and by implication stretch the sensibilities of his supporters.

The most interesting revision is one which was made after the fair copy was written to be sent to the Lord Chamberlain, and therefore appears to be the product of a debate between the various parties. The changes were made either by the creative

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<sup>62</sup> That Handel was allowed at least some vocabulary that was prohibited to Fielding may indicate the more supportive attitude of the Duke of Grafton to his friend Handel as opposed to the overtly political Fielding.

<sup>63</sup> HWV 58/35

<sup>64</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p909. This had been set by Galliard in 1716. A. Hicks, 'Letter, *MT*, cxi (1970), p1219

team after it had been copied out and before it was sent, or by the censor himself. In this passage, Juno is advising Semele to demand that Jupiter appear in his own form:

Juno. And with ineffable Delights  
Fills her encircling Arms,  
And pays the Nuptial Rites.  
**By this Conjunction**  
**With entire Divinity**  
You shall partake of heav'nly Essence.<sup>65</sup>

The words highlighted above were set by Handel in his autograph, but the couplet was roughly crossed out and 'Heavenly essence' changed to 'immortality' exactly as in the Larpent copy. Given the text of 'Endless Pleasure' and even the reference to 'Nuptial Rites' it seems hard to see why these gave particular offence. However, they are extremely graphic, referring in the first case to the sexual act itself and in the second case to divine semen. Moreover, in a theatre without staging and with the written text available, the visualisation of each line is left to the individual audience member, unfettered by the decorum of staged presentation.

In the following scene, between Jupiter and Semele, a considerable proportion of dialogue was cut before the autograph was composed. The effect of this is a massive emotional concentration because much more is emoted with far fewer words. It emphasises the impression (also seen with Ino and Athamas in Part One) of a couple who are no longer able to talk to one another. Their pent-up ideas and frustrations are largely unsaid. They behave like a couple who each expects the other to know what they are thinking, and then are frustrated when they do not. They are thus reduced to communicating in uncontrolled soliloquies. In addition, the clearly sexual motivation for Jove's capitulation to Semele was softened:

Jup. Speak, speak, your Desire,  
**I'm all over Fire.**  
Say what you require,

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<sup>65</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp823-4; HWV 58/55



I'll grant it—**now let us retire**. (highlighted words cut)<sup>66</sup>

When poetry of this quality is cut by half a line, ruining the scansion and rhyme scheme, then the reason was unlikely to be length. Presumably, therefore, the issue was one of morality and decorum. The brevity of the single couplet may have appealed to Handel's sense of drama, but it is again a sexually explicit passage that was excised.

After Jove's desperate refusal, Semele launches into the furious 'No, no, I'll take no less' which shows two separate instances of direct manipulation of Congreve's lines (see above). As shown above, reference to Jupiter's 'omnipotence' was removed during the composition process, though in this instance metrical rather than moral considerations seem to have been paramount.

In what was probably a final nod to the sensibilities of audiences, the stage direction after Semele's death was altered in the published word-book. In Congreve's libretto it reads:

As the Cloud which contains Jupiter is arrived just over the Canopy of Semele, a sudden and great Flash of Lightning breaks forth, and a Clap of loud Thunder is heard; when at one instant Semele with the Palace and the whole present Scene disappear, and Jupiter re-ascends swiftly. The Scene totally changed represents a pleasant Country, Mount Citheron closing the Prospect.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas the published version for Handel's reads simply:

Dies. The cloud bursts, and Semele with the palace instantly disappear.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p826; HWV 58/61

<sup>67</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p830

<sup>68</sup> G.F. Handel, *The Story of Semele, as it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden, alter'd from the Semele of Mr. William Congreve, set to Musick by Mr. George Frederick Handel* (London, February 1744), p26. This is also how it appears in L and C.

The difference is that there is no explicit reference to Jupiter having reached Semele at the point of death, let alone been *in flagrante* with her. Musically, however, it is not difficult to hear in Semele's last moments the combination of agony and sexual ecstasy that is the natural conclusion of the theme of passion and pain that underpins the libretto from the beginning (particularly the leap of a diminished fifth to G flat on 'for pity'). The sexuality of the language here is in the same vein as the imagery of pain and pleasure that pervades the work and its erotic implications for contemporary audiences can easily be seen by comparison with an unambiguously sexual passage from the novel *Fanny Hill*, published just four years later. Here, Fanny's friend Polly is at the point of orgasm, but feigning virginity to her client:

Oh!...Oh!...I can't bear it...It is too much...I die....I am going.<sup>69</sup>

Compared to Semele's:

Sem.    I burn, I burn I faint for pity I implore  
          O help, O help, I can no more

If that is what Handel had in mind then the adjustment of the stage direction adds a layer of ambiguity. This is another instance of Handel taking advantage of the fact that it was performed as an oratorio to conjure up an image that could not be realised on stage. He did not need to specify what was happening or where.

Handel also suppressed the reference to incest. In the midst of her tirade against Semele, Congreve's Juno exclaims:

Juno.    If I am own'd above,  
          Sister and Wife of Jove;  
          (Sister at least I sure may claim,  
          Tho' Wife be a neglected name).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> J. Cleland, *Fanny Hill, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Wordsworth Classics, London, 2000), p35. Later Fanny uses almost identical language in a similar situation. *ibid.*, p128

This disappears in Handel's version, quite possibly for its perceived relevance to the royal family. According to Lord Hervey, Walpole had been concerned that, after Caroline's death, George II had been contemplating an incestuous relationship with his niece.<sup>71</sup> However, the sensitivity towards incest was not specific to that situation. Ptolemy and Cleopatra being married was removed from *Giulio Cesare*, and Saturn and Vesta's relationship was removed from *L'Allegro* by Jennens.<sup>72</sup> Even when presented in myth, in pagan societies, between pagan gods, this was clearly a very serious taboo, and points to a hardening attitude to forms of 'deviant' sexual behaviour mirrored by the removal of homoerotic overtones from *Saul* by Jennens.<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion, Handel's librettist toned down a number of references to sexuality and to adulterous sexual pleasure.<sup>74</sup> However, in most cases some element of this remained and elicited very evocative music from Handel. This is strikingly at odds not only with the attitudes found not only in other works of the period, but also Handel's own oratorios of the same time. *Theodora*, *Susanna* and *Jephtha* all hinge, like Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, on female sexual virtue, which is to say chastity.<sup>75</sup> In those, both *Susanna* and *Theodora* suffer for their sexual resistance.<sup>76</sup> Whilst *Susanna* and *Solomon* both celebrate romantic love, in both cases it is firmly conjugal. The celebration of uninhibited sexuality in the Venus music of *Theodora* is sympathetic to its characters as Handel always is, but it is also part of a train of

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<sup>70</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p807

<sup>71</sup> [John, Lord] Hervey, *Lord Hervey's Memoirs*, ed. R. Sedgewick (London, 1952), p355

<sup>72</sup> 'I have likewise made some omissions; one of 8 lines upon Zephyr and Aurora, another of 6 upon Saturn's incestuous commerce with Vesta...I see no great propriety they have for musick; though 'tis true Mr Handel can joyn 'em with very good notes.' Charles Jennens to James Harris, 15 January 1740, in D. Burrows, & R. Dunhill (eds), *Music and Theatre*, p88

<sup>73</sup> R. Smith, 'Biblical Heroes amended in Jennens' and Handel's *Saul*', *HJB* 52 (2006), p101. In the same context, Congreve had removed references to Orpheus' homosexuality in his translation of the *Metamorphoses*, and Pope removed homoeroticism from 'Autumn'. E.T. Harris, *Handel as Orpheus* (Cambridge Mass., 2001), p241. Even the heroine of *Fanny Hill* sets out to report a male couple to the authorities. Cleland, *Fanny Hill*, p150

<sup>74</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p367

<sup>75</sup> R. Smith, 'Comprehending Theodora', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/I (1995), pp72-3

<sup>76</sup> Hurley, *Handel's Muse*, p265; Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, II, p326

destruction.<sup>77</sup> Powerful female sexuality is portrayed in *Samson* as dangerous and destructive to the hero and therefore his state, whilst female sexual jealousy is at the heart of the crisis in *Hercules*. Broughton's decision to follow Ovid rather than Sophocles in making Hercules innocent of adultery radically alters his libretto's moral trajectory. Rather than being about Hercules' sexual flaw undermining his indubitably great achievements, it makes Dejanira guilty because she succumbs to jealousy – presented as a particularly female weakness. In this she is a more rounded version of Juno, who seeks destruction when confronted with her perceived husband's infidelities. Similarly, Dalila brought destruction on Samson through her sensuality and manipulation. In *Semele*, of course, this manipulation rebounds on the heroine herself and she is the one destroyed. However, it is worth noting that, just as Handel and his adapter softened the characters of both *Semele* and Juno, so Dalila was softened considerably from the misogynistic presentation in *Samson Agonistes*. Dean called her a 'sketch for *Semele*,'<sup>78</sup> and whether or not this is attributable to a common librettist or Handel's own attitude, it definitely marks a further point of continuity between *Semele* and its predecessor, and illustrates another key theme in Handel's adaptation, the softening of characters' moral flaws and failings.

#### *Moral softening of characters*

The Part Two interchanges between Juno and Iris were carefully trimmed to streamline the scene. However, the omissions also remove certain specific aspects of Juno's character. Firstly, her matrimonial jealousy is toned down by the removal of the second half of her opening speech:

Juno. Iris, impatient of thy Stay,  
From Samos have I wing'd my Way,  
To meet thy slow Return;  
[Thou know'st what Cares infest

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<sup>77</sup> Percy Young saw it as a satire on the court of Charles II. P. M. Young, *The Oratorios of Handel* (London, 1949), p185

<sup>78</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p331

My anxious Breast,  
And how with Rage and Jealousie I burn:  
Then why this long Delay?]<sup>79</sup>

The pains of love and jealousy form an ongoing theme in Congreve's libretto, but the queen of the gods is allowed not to admit to such mortal weakness. It is possible that this was deliberate tact in not mentioning a queen's pain at her husband's mistresses – as Queen Caroline had reportedly been pained by the appearance of Amalie von Wallmoden. This is supported by a further pair of cuts from Juno's snobbish fury at being supplanted by a mistress of a lower social status:

Juno. No more—I'll hear no more.  
How long must I endure?—  
[How long with Indignations burning,  
From impious Mortals  
Bear this insolence!]  
Awake Saturnia from thy Lethargy;  
Seize, destroy the curst Adulteress.<sup>80</sup>

From Congreve's speech, the third to fifth lines were removed, and the seventh re-written.<sup>81</sup> The combined effect of these changes is that Juno never actually says what Semele's crime against her is. Whilst the meaning is not changed in the slightest, there is a great deal more decorum in its expression. Later, by removing Juno's Act Three aria 'Away let us haste,' Handel delays her revelling in malicious victory until 'Above Measure.' This not only maintains the dramatic suspense but also again softens the character of Juno by removing a reference to her lust for vengeance:

Juno. Away let us haste,  
Let neither have rest,  
'Till the sweetest of Pleasures we prove;  
'Till of Vengeance possess'd  
I doubly am bless'd,

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<sup>79</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p805

<sup>80</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p807

<sup>81</sup> As shown above, 'curst' Adulteress' was crossed out and replaced by 'curséd Semele' on the Larpent copy, which was then printed in the published word-book.

And thou art made happy in Love.<sup>82</sup>

The open expressions of Jove's serial philandering are considerably toned down in Handel's libretto. His warning to:

Jup.    Beware of Jealousie:  
          Had Juno not been jealous,  
          I ne'er had left Olympus,  
          Nor wander'd in my Love.<sup>83</sup>

is removed, as is his brief reference to the transience of his affairs:

Jup.    Thy needless Fears remove.  
          My fairest, latest, only Love.<sup>84</sup>

Handel also treats him more sympathetically in the music than the libretto requires. The sheer beauty of 'Where e'er you walk' makes him charming and charismatic beyond any words, whilst the arching pain of 'Come to my arms' shows him sensitive and vulnerable, made the more so by the excision of 'I'm all over fire' from the subsequent recitative. Handel had profound sympathy with characters' human weaknesses, refusing to make the righteous more sympathetic than the unrighteous.<sup>85</sup> Thus whilst Jove remains a serial adulterer, attention to this is repeatedly played down and we are encouraged to focus on him as a lover in a developing, but ultimately tragic, relationship.<sup>86</sup>

This again parallels changes made to characterisation in Handel's other oratorios. In *Hercules*, the eponymous hero is acquitted of the adultery that he is certainly guilty

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<sup>82</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p820

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, pp812-3

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p815

<sup>85</sup> Dean, *Handel*, p108

<sup>86</sup> According to Wilfred Mellers his crime is wanting to be human. This is a very good way of summing up Handel's changes, as it is certainly not true of Congreve's original rake. Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting*, p253

of in Sophocles.<sup>87</sup> The same was true of *Samson*, where Hamilton retained Milton's change to the Bible, making Dalila his wife rather than one of many casual conquests.<sup>88</sup> Shaftesbury had declared Joshua and Moses equal to classical heroes, but unrepresentable so not fit for stage, and in Ruth Smith's words, 'Both God and his chosen people are far more admirable than their Biblical originals.'<sup>89</sup> According to Winton Dean, the god of the oratorios is an Aeschylean Zeus, not the God of the atonement.<sup>90</sup> The Zeus of *Semele* is not even that. He is a rather charming gentleman, almost out of one of Congreve's comedies.

*Greek Tragedy: Ambition, hybris, nemesis*

Handel and his librettist also softened the portrayal of Semele herself, largely through their treatment of her ambition. We have seen that the removal of the final Act One chorus moved the emphasis from Semele's divine status to her sexual pleasure. The same is true of the cut in Iris' 'There from mortal cares retiring.' The greater expansiveness of *da capo* arias probably accounts for the disappearance of the second two verses, but this excision has a further dramatic effect. The last verse ran:

Iris.     Bright Aurora, 'tis said,  
            From her old Lover's bed  
            No more the grey Orient adorning,  
            For the future must rise  
            From the fair Semele's eyes,  
            And wait 'till she wakes for the Morning.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p416

<sup>88</sup> R. Smith, 'Intellectual contexts of Handel's English Oratorios' in C. Hogwood & R. Luckett (eds), *Music in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1983), p125; Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p327. The same is true of Solomon, whose wives and concubines are omitted from Handel's treatment.

<sup>89</sup> A.A. Cooper, [Shaftesbury, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl], *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* ed. L.E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999), p159; R. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), p234

<sup>90</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p40

<sup>91</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp806-7

Whilst it retains Congreve's anticipation of Semele's luxurious existence, this version omits the foreshadowing of her ultimate victory as mother to Bacchus. Alongside the cut of 'Haste, haste, to sacrifice prepare' in Part One, it therefore emphasises Semele's human frailty rather than her divine lineage and successors. This in turn heightens the sense of her tragic ambition and demise, and makes the work more moral and exemplary as she ends punished for her affair, without any explicit reference to her subsequent redemption and apotheosis.

Handel then omits thirty-three lines of dialogue between Jupiter and Semele. This cut removes Semele's first explicitly stated jealousy of her mortal state and her first open reproach to Jupiter:

Sem.    At my own Happiness  
          I sigh and tremble;  
          [Mortals whom Gods affect  
          Have narrow Limits set to Life,  
          And cannot long be bless'd.  
          Or if they could—  
          A God may prove inconstant.]<sup>92</sup>

This makes it easier for Jupiter to feign ignorance of what Semele really desires (in Handel's version he only has to ignore one hint rather than several). It also makes Semele's ambition develop more slowly, and only as an outcome of the relationship.

Handel's version also removes the most explicitly political lines in the scene. Originally, Jupiter perceived the full extent and potential impact of Semele's ambition:

Jup.    She wou'd dethrone Saturnia  
          And reigning in my Heart  
          Would reign in Heav'n.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p812; HWV 58/36

<sup>93</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p814



This brief cut, which makes little difference to the length of the drama, suggests that Handel and collaborator were fully alert to the controversial image of the over-mighty mistress ready to usurp the Queen's role, overturning not only royal precedence but the natural ordering and stratification of society. In 1743, the Countess of Yarmouth had in effect taken the place of the deceased Queen Caroline. The editing therefore shows political tact as well as dramatic expediency.

Jupiter reacts to Semele's hints with an explicit recognition that he cannot grant her the full desires of her ambition. The lines 'I must with speed amuse her' were originally recitative, but in Handel's libretto, they were cast as an aria.<sup>94</sup> Not only does setting this as a fast-paced aria add to the sense of mounting tension, but also Handel inverted the first two lines to give it both a greater sense of urgency and to make the sense of the text flow more straightforwardly (subordinate clauses are all very well in recitative, but make very confusing arias). In Congreve's version, Semele reacts scornfully to Jupiter's long aside, requiring him to conciliate her:

Sem. Why do you cease to gaze upon me?  
Why musing turn away?  
Some other Object  
Seems more pleasing.<sup>95</sup>

Handel's version removed this interchange and replaced it with the chorus 'Now love that everlasting boy', taken from Congreve's *Imitations of Horace*.<sup>96</sup> It is a lively hornpipe, with more than a little Purcell about it,<sup>97</sup> and it returns Semele and Jupiter to their roles as lovers:

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p814; HWV 58/37

I must with speed amuse her  
Lest she too much explain.  
It gives the lover double pain  
Who hears his nymph complain,  
And hearing, must refuse her.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p815

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p906

<sup>97</sup> Dent, 'English Influences on Handel', p227

Chor. Now Love that everlasting Boy invites  
To revel while you may in soft Delights.<sup>98</sup>

The dramatic effect of these changes is to make Semele's ambition develop much more slowly, and at the same time to remove all serious discord from their relationship in Part Two. In Congreve's libretto, things had soured almost immediately, except in Semele's dreams. This, supported by the strong vein of 'dream' imagery, gives a much clearer sense that the relationship was always going to be more successful as an idea than as reality. In Handel's version, the tensions in the relationship are considerably softened in Part Two, so that the disintegration does not really begin until Part Three.<sup>99</sup> For Winton Dean this weakened the drama as it left Semele's ambition too little prepared.<sup>100</sup> In fact what it does is place the emphasis more on her desire for love and constancy, rather than on her wish for power and position. At the same time it heightens the emphasis on sexual delight in Act Two, thus making the effect of eventual *nemesis* even more powerful.

The influence of classical drama is also seen in the comic treatment of the scene just before Semele's duping and final confrontation with Jupiter, in the Cave of Sleep. In a stroke of musical and dramatic genius, Handel recast the last four lines of the Juno and Somnus' recitative dialogue as a duet:

Juno: Obey my Will, thy Rod resign,  
And Pasithea shall be thine.

Som: All I must grant, for all is due  
To Pasithea, Love, and you.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> HWV 58/38

<sup>99</sup> The portrayal of this breakdown musically is handled with incredible skill as Jove's oath in accompanied recitative is followed by the ominous timpani strokes, then Semele's accompanied recitative 'Then cast off', followed by two arias of increasing hysteria, and finally Jupiter's 'Whither is she gone?'. Handel portrayed a family breakdown with a similar collapse in musical decorum in *Saul*. See Smith, 'Biblical Heroes amended', p92

<sup>100</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p372

<sup>101</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p819-20; HWV 58/51

By interlacing the lines rather than have Somnus meekly obeying, Handel created a comic battle of wills.<sup>102</sup> This increased both the sense of Somnus' resistance and the power of Juno in overcoming it. This is the first of two highly comic scenes just before the onset of tragedy. This dramatic technique, well known from Shakespeare, goes back to Sophocles.<sup>103</sup> Handel had shown his ability to balance comedy and tragedy with Mozartian wit in the late operas, especially *Serse*.<sup>104</sup> The effect here is to sharpen the dramatic contrast between the comedy of the situation and the seriousness of its effects.

Act Three, scene two, originally opened with Semele alone, lamenting the fact that whatever Jupiter's gives her, she still desires more.<sup>105</sup> This idea that ambition becomes self-perpetuating also seems to have been too politically potent for Handel and his collaborator, and also out of keeping with their approach of highlighting Semele's romantic, rather than her political, ambition. The lines were replaced by another aria, using Congreve's idea of opposing love and sleep. By returning to Congreve's poem, *On Sleep*, the adapter has transformed the image so that, unlike in the earlier 'O sleep', now the nights and dreams are painful, the days happier. The hopes of the early relationship have turned to pain and disappointment:

Sem. My Racking Thoughts by no kind Slumbers free'd  
But painful Nights do Joyful Days succeed.<sup>106</sup>

This change is crucial in terms of characterisation. By removing references to Semele's insatiable ambition for divinity until *after* she has been beguiled by Juno's

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<sup>102</sup> And here gives yet further testimony to his freedom of invention when composing *Semele*.

<sup>103</sup> *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* both have 'comic' messengers just before the final climax. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the porter's speech precedes the discovery of Duncan's murder, while in *Hamlet*, the gravediggers and Osric precede the two confrontations between Hamlet and Laertes.

<sup>104</sup> W. Dean, 'Handel's *Serse*', in Bauman, T & McClymonds, M.P. (eds), *Opera and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995), p141

<sup>105</sup> Congreve, CW, pp820-1. 'I love and am lov'd, yet more I desire....'

<sup>106</sup> HWV 58/52

magic mirror, Handel makes her more a victim of Juno's manipulation than the author of her own destruction. Contrary to Dean's view, this does not make her ambition less plausible, rather it changes her character from a royal mistress driven by ambition to power, to someone who is tricked into her own destruction by a far more adept political operator.<sup>107</sup> She is still guilty of the over-reaching that the Greeks defined as *hybris*, but it is an over-reaching love for someone her judgement and morals should have told her was unattainable, not an ambition for power.

This softening of Semele's character is also seen in the following scene, in which Juno beguiles her with the magic mirror. In Congreve's libretto, Semele takes several looks at the mirror:

Sem. O Ecstasy of Happiness!  
Celestial Graces  
I discover in each Feature!  
*Myself I shall adore,*  
*If I persist in gazing;*  
*No Object sure before*  
*Was ever half so pleasing.*  
How did that Glance become me!  
But take this flatt'ring Mirror from me.  
*Yet once again let me view me.*  
*Ah charming all o'er!*  
[Offering the Glass, withdraws her hand again.]  
Here—hold, I'll have one Look more.  
Tho' that Look I were sure would undo me.<sup>108</sup>

Congreve characterises her as drawn by stages into the power of the mirror, propelled by her vanity and ambition. She is shown as able to pull her attention away from the mirror, but ultimately drawn by her ambition to the image it offers. This suggests that the driving force is within her and the mirror simply acts to show her that her desires might be possible. Handel instead gives her only the first aria, which is overwhelming in its intoxication. It creates a comic (though not ridiculous) effect

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<sup>107</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p372

<sup>108</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p822

from its huge length (over seven minutes) with Semele's self-adoration increasing and increasing throughout, finding voice in coloratura of ever more extreme proportions. By making it a single, overwhelmingly powerful experience, and not having her look again of her own volition, Handel suggests that the mirror has played a more substantial role in actually magnifying Semele's ambitions. This change, alongside the numerous other suppressed references to her ambition, makes Semele a far more innocent and sympathetic character than in Congreve's opera. This reflects the moral changes that had occurred in both society and literature since 1707. For Congreve, it was still possible to portray a character with manifold flaws in a sympathetic light. Handel was undoubtedly of a similar temperament, but after *Pamela* and the increasingly moral tone of contemporary novels, characters to be regarded as heroes and heroines were required to demonstrate more conventional forms of 'virtue.' Although, Semele is ultimately an adulteress, Handel's setting makes that much more an outcome of love and innocent sensuality than of naked ambition. In Act One she is genuinely torn between obedience to her god and her father.<sup>109</sup> Whilst she is not herself entirely innocent, more than in Congreve here she is also the victim of others.

The return of the chorus in Part Three reminds the audience that this is an oratorio, and despite its comic elements there is a serious underlying purpose. For the first time in the work the chorus appears in a semi-detached role as commentators in the manner of Greek Tragedy. Their text was taken from Congreve's *Of Pleasing, an Epistle to Sir Richard Temple*, in which it appears as a self-standing quatrain.<sup>110</sup>

Chor. Nature to each allots his proper Sphere  
But, That forsaken, we like Comets err:  
Toss'd thro' the Void, by some rude Shock we're broke

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<sup>109</sup> Her lines are: 'Incline me to comply / Or help me to refuse.'

<sup>110</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p1065

And all our boasted Fire is lost in Smoke.<sup>111</sup>

The gravity of the situation is powerfully reinforced by the full choral forces. The point could not be clearer: people should not aspire to positions above their station. If Handel had softened Semele's ambition during the rest of the oratorio, he is absolutely clear about its consequences. This provides a more explicit moral commentary on the action than anything in Congreve's libretto. In the original, Semele is punished by her death, but this is relatively brief and quickly followed by the apotheosis of Bacchus. Here, the audience are required to dwell on the tragedy of her punishment, for both adultery and ambition, for considerably longer. Thus forty years too late Handel answered Bedford's call that the moral consequences of sin be spelled out unambiguously on stage.<sup>112</sup>

It is this treatment of *hybris* and *nemesis* which makes Semele 'one of the purest recreations of the Greek spirit in modern European art.'<sup>113</sup> Greek tragedy was the supreme dramatic model for oratorio, being both elevated and morally instructive. It was in this recreation of primitive art that oratorios were seen as dramas 'of an infinitely superior nature'.<sup>114</sup> This strongly classical flavour was central to *Samson* and was continued with great effect in Handel's subsequent drama *Hercules*. There, the chorus appears both as courtiers at Dejanira's court, but also as commentators on the action, very much in the Greek manner, particularly the famous 'Jealousy, Infernal pest'. *Semele* and *Hercules* were the two full-length classical dramas presented by Handel in the oratorio manner, whilst *Samson* and *Hercules* are both

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<sup>111</sup> HWV 58/70. The change from 'comets' to 'meteors' makes no difference to the sense and is surely a purely musical change to avoid the double k sound on 'like Comets'. However, it has specific allusions for *Semele* because it was one of the forms in which Jupiter often appeared.

<sup>112</sup> A. Bedford, , *The Great Abuse of Musick* (London, 1711), p25

<sup>113</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p370

<sup>114</sup> J. Lockman, *Rosalinda, A Musical Drama...Set to Music by Mr. John Christopher Smith. To which is prefixed, An Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of Operas and Oratorios, with some reflections on Lyric Poetry and Music* (London, 1740), pxx. *Esther* was advertised 'after the manner of the ancients.' C. Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon...in Commemoration of Handel* (London, 1785), p22. See also Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p56; Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, piii

classical tragedies in tone and structure.<sup>115</sup> *Samson* had considerable influence over *Semele* in the chorus element, which was strongly derived from Greek tragedy.<sup>116</sup> This tone was part of Milton's original design and flavour, and Hamilton used it to introduce choruses which comment, without preaching, on the tragedy as it unfolds. The idea of *hybris* was also central to *Belshazzar*, where the king's arrogant treatment of the Jewish sacred vessels brings divine vengeance.<sup>117</sup> It is surely this quality which led Lang to describe *Semele* as a 'sombre drama.'<sup>118</sup>

### *The Sentimental*

The scene between Athamas and Ino in Act One is one of the parts of Congreve's libretto that most clearly shows the influence of sentimentalism.<sup>119</sup> It was drastically shortened for Handel's oratorio, but this increases rather than diminishes its sentimental impact. Here it is in full, with the dialogue cut from Handel's version in square brackets (*italics indicate proper names, and passages that Congreve intended to be set as arias*):<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> W. Dean, 'The Dramatic Element in Handel's Oratorios', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 79 (1952-3), p41; G. Highet, *The Classical Tradition, Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (corrected ed. Oxford 1967), p130

<sup>116</sup> The composition of the *Samson* libretto, however, was more complicated by far. Lines had to be adapted from the third person narrative to the first, and it had to be condensed from the original with clear delineation between aria, recitative and chorus. Preserving the structural unity of Milton's plot, Hamilton interwove passages from no fewer than fourteen of Milton's other poems. It is therefore in the approach rather than details that *Samson* resembles *Semele*.

<sup>117</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p438

<sup>118</sup> Lang, *George Frideric Handel*, p417

<sup>119</sup> The various versions of 'See, she blushing turns her eyes' are discussed above, and also in the section on performance, below.

<sup>120</sup> Congreve, *CW*, pp798-801

<p>Ath. O <i>Athamas</i>, what Torture hast thou  <span style="padding-left: 150px;">born!</span>          And O, what hast thou yet to bear!          From Love, from Hope, from near          Possession torn,          And plung'd at once in deep Despair.</p> <p>Ino. <i>Turn, hopeless Lover, turn thy eyes,</i>  <i>And see a Maid bemoan,</i>  <i>In flowing Tears and aking Sighs,</i>  <i>Thy Woes, too like her own.</i></p> <p>Ath. She weeps!          The gentle Maid, in tender pity,          Weeps to behold my Misery!          So <i>Semele</i> wou'd melt          To see another mourn.  <i>[Such unavailing Mercy is in Beauty</i>  <span style="padding-left: 150px;"><i>found,</i></span>  <i>Each Nymph bemoans the Smart</i>  <i>Of every bleeding Heart,</i>  <i>But where she herself inflicts the Wound.</i></p> <p>Ino. Ah me, too much afflicted!</p> <p>Ath. Can pity for another's Pain          Cause such Anxiety!</p> <p>Ino. Cou'dst thou but guess          What I endure!          Or cou'd I tell thee—          Thou, <i>Athamas</i>,          Wou'dst for a while          Thy Sorrows cease, a little cease,          And listen for a while          To my Lamenting.</p> <p>Ath. Of Grief too sensible          I know your tender Nature.          Well I remember,          When I oft haue su'd          To cold, disdainful <i>Semele</i>;</p>	<p>When I with Scorn have been rejected; ]          Your tuneful Voice my Tale would tell,          In Pity of my sad Despair;          And, with sweet Melody, compel          Attention from the flying Fair.</p> <p>Ino. Too well I see          Thou wilt not understand me.          Whence cou'd proceed such  <span style="padding-left: 150px;">Tenderness?</span>          Whence such compassion?          Insensible! Ingrate!          Ah no, I cannot blame thee:          For by effects unknown before          Who cou'd the hidden cause explore?          Or think that Love cou'd act so strange a  <span style="padding-left: 150px;">Part,</span>          To plead for Pity in a Rival's Heart.</p> <p>Ath. Ah me, what have I heard!          She does her Passion own.</p> <p>Ino. [What, had I not despair'd,          You never shou'd have known. ]  <i>You've undone me;</i>  <i>Look not on me;</i>  <i>Guilt upbraiding,</i>  <i>Shame invading;</i>  <i>Look not on me;</i>  <i>You've undone me.</i></p> <p>Ath. <i>With my Life I wou'd attone</i>  <i>Pains you've born, to me unknown.</i>  <i>Cease, cease to shun me.</i></p> <p>Ino. <i>Look not on me;</i>  <i>You've undone me.</i></p> <p>Ath. <i>Cease, cease to shun me:</i>  <i>Love, love alone</i>  <i>Has both undone.</i></p> <p>Ino, Atha. <i>Love, love alone</i>  <span style="padding-left: 150px;"><i>Has both undone.</i></span></p>
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The effect of the first cut is to compress and concentrate twenty five lines of recitative dialogue, by setting just the last four of them. Moreover, Handel takes advantage of the fact that this last quatrain is in rhymed verse to set it as a *da capo* aria, 'Your tuneful voice'. There were a number of possible practical reasons for this, though none of them explains the revision satisfactorily. The most obvious reason is that *da capo* arias take more time to sing than recitative dialogue and Handel's setting of 'Your tuneful voice' runs at around five minutes, which is roughly the



same duration as the whole scene in Eccles' uncut version. Moreover, although *Semele* was in English, Handel's approach to recitative was still strongly influenced by his twenty years of writing Italian operas for the London audiences. Writing in a language that few of the audience understood, he restricted his recitatives to the essentials of the plot, placing much more of the movement in the arias themselves.

With the previous cut, the libretto only provided Athamas with one aria ('Hymen Haste');<sup>121</sup> the singer (at that point a tenor) may well have required a second. Therefore, Handel converted a piece of recitative verse into aria, but here with such skill and tenderness that it is this number which is usually retained in modern performances. However, this alone will not explain Handel's modification of the scene, because, as can be seen from the italicisation of the original libretto and supported by Eccles' setting, Congreve intended the quatrain 'Such unavailing mercy' to be set as an aria. Why therefore did Handel cut an existing aria in rhymed verse and its surrounding dialogue, only to replace it with an aria constructed from the tail end of a piece of dialogue in blank verse?

The aria, like Ino's which precedes it, 'Turn hopeless lover', is a masterpiece of controlled anguish. Perhaps it simply suggested a more powerful musical idea to Handel than Congreve's intended text. Moreover, Handel uses the *da capo* form as an integral part of the dramatic design and emotional structure of the aria. Athamas begins in B minor,<sup>122</sup> a highly affective and emotional key for Handel, with a melody which seems unable to escape the repeated dotted figure which opens the aria. It is as if he is emphasizing that Athamas, though speaking to Ino, is in reality completely unable to move his mind away from Semele and 'my sad despair'. The music of the 'b' section 'and with sweet melody compel' looks like it might escape Athamas' self-pity, rising quickly through G major and A major to the distinctly more optimistic

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<sup>121</sup> 'Despair no more shall wound me' was a later addition, after the original tenor had been replaced by the counter-tenor, Daniel Sullivan.

<sup>122</sup> Although this was not Handel's first choice of key, as he began writing Athamas as a tenor, and so the aria was initially in G minor. See Appendix Two.

regions of D major. However, the music remains there for a mere seven bars before a wrenching G sharp in the bass sets in motion a richly chromatic modulation returning to B minor even before the recapitulation of the 'a' section. By bringing the aria back to the original key, melody and text in the *da capo*, Handel emphasises Athamas' inability to escape from his self-imposed misery.

This changes the shape of the scene as a whole. In Handel's version, five minutes of introspection replaced five minutes of dialogue. Handel was perfectly capable of writing powerfully dramatic dialogue, demonstrated moments later in their explosive 'You've undone me'. Therefore it seems clear that he actively wanted to change the shape of the scene. By having Ino serenade Athamas in 'Turn hopeless lover' and Athamas reply not with dialogue but with an aria reflecting on himself, Handel instantly conveys the sense of two people who are unable to speak to one another. Ino 'cannot utter' her thoughts to Athamas because he is engaged to her sister and so it would be unthinkable for her to declare her love. Athamas on the other hand is so consumed by his unrequited love for Semele that he does not hear what Ino is saying. By casting their interactions with one another in this form, Handel is able to set up with great effect the moment when Ino's 'Too well I see thou wilt not understand me' suddenly propels them into having to deal with one another. By suppressing most of their dialogue in the scene, Handel has made them even more unable to communicate with each other, and thus Ino's aria comes as an explosion from her frustration with the situation. Then, by cutting the explanatory two lines 'What, had I not despair'd / You never shou'd have known,' Handel has Ino burst into 'You've undone me' as if it is an uncontrolled outburst. This paring down of dialogue also has the effect of concentrating all of the audience's attention on the personal and 'inward burning' of loves that dare not speak. Handel thus increases the sentimental impact of the scene.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See P. Brett & G. Haggarty, 'Handel and the Sentimental: The Case of *Athalia*' *ML* 68 (1987), p117

### *The Pastoral*

Several of these themes have also been identified as part of the pastoral tradition in both English and Italian poetry. Guilt and silence over love was a strong element in Handel's early Italian cantatas, and pastoral love was often characterised as contrary to duty, involving tragic courtship, mythic elements and Ovidian transformations.<sup>124</sup> This is clearly applicable to Semele and Jupiter themselves, whose love is adulterous, tragic, and ends in Semele's transformation through immolation. The most memorably pastoral moment was of course, 'Where e're you walk', which was taken from Alexander Pope's *Pastorals*<sup>125</sup> and replaced Congreve's Act Two ending which ran:

Jup.     There without the Rage of Jealousie they burn,  
           And taste the Sweets of Love without its Pains.

#### SCENE IV.

*Jupiter retires. Semele and Ino meet and embrace. The Scene is totally changed, and shews an open Country. Several Shepherds and Shepherdesses enter. Semele and Ino having entertain'd each other in dumb Shew, sit and observe the Rural Sports, which end the second Act.*<sup>126</sup>

In Handel's version, the ballet is replaced by a new literary-musical scene and the magical transformation from palace to Arcadia is conjured through the music of the aria.<sup>127</sup> In terms of plot it is, of course, redundant. However, it illustrates in music the fantastical scene change that would have taken place at this point, had it been staged. Eighteenth-century opera-goers were used to visual spectacle, with scene changes an

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<sup>124</sup> E.T. Harris, *Handel and the Pastoral Tradition* (Oxford, 1980), pp2-6. The Pastoral tradition also featured abandoned women vacillating between forgiveness and vengeance, Juno, however, never seems in any danger of forgiving. *ibid* p62

<sup>125</sup> HWV 58/40; A. Pope, *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope* (London, 1717), p21  
Where e'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;  
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade.  
Where e'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs shall rise,  
And all things flourish where'er you turn your eyes.

<sup>126</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p816

<sup>127</sup> The music from Eccles' version is missing. But it is probably that he did not compose the dances himself in any case.

integral part of the drama. Here Handel illustrates in music the growth of flowers, trees and foliage completely transforming the atmosphere of the scene, and conjuring for the audience the visual images that they were denied. The pastoral idyll, based on Virgil's second *Georgic*, was a powerful and ever-present idea in eighteenth-century sensibility.<sup>128</sup> As a poetic device, it conflates the image of an idealised past with earthly reality, just as Jupiter's Arcadia bridges the divine and mortal worlds which otherwise stand opposed in *Semele*.<sup>129</sup>

The pastoral tradition was extremely strong in the English theatres when Handel arrived and its influence can be seen in his own works from that period, especially *Il Pastor Fido*, and *Acis and Galatea*.<sup>130</sup> Ellen Harris has argued that it was a pervasive presence in all the operas after the 1732 production of *Acis*,<sup>131</sup> and that this genre provided a bridge for Handel between opera and oratorio.<sup>132</sup> If *Acis and Galatea* embodies his idea of English pastoral, then *Semele* certainly carries some of this forward.<sup>133</sup> It is the natural successor to *Acis* in that it is a secular English-language drama based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, featuring a doomed love affair, destroyed by the intervention of a malicious third party. The musical 'transformation' during 'Where e'er you walk' thus heightens a theme here already present in the original text, and also prefigures the tragic 'transformation' of *Semele* at the drama's close.

### *The Patriot Agenda*

We have seen that Handel's version removes the only reference to Jupiter actually attending to his royal duties. By cutting the lines, the librettist has achieved a neat poetic juxtaposition between 'absent' and 'present':

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<sup>128</sup> M. Mack, *The Garden and the City, Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope 1731-1743* (Toronto & London, 1969), p20

<sup>129</sup> D.C. Mell, *A Poetics of Augustan Elegy: Studies of poems by Dryden, Pope, Prior, Swift, Gray, and Johnson* (Amsterdam, 1975), p15

<sup>130</sup> HWV 8a, HWV 49a

<sup>131</sup> Harris, *Handel and the Pastoral Tradition*, pp176, 195 & 211

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, p267-9

<sup>133</sup> W.S. Rockstro, *The Life of George Frederick Handel* (London, 1883), p112

Jup. Nor was I absent  
[Tho' a while withdrawn  
To take Petitions  
From the needy World.]  
While Love was with thee I was present.<sup>134</sup>

However, it has the effect of diminishing the sense of him as a responsible governor and makes him merely a rakish lover. It may have been felt that these lines came too close to suggesting a monarch neglecting matters of state for his mistress in a distant land.<sup>135</sup> As we have seen, the popular monarchical ideal being propounded (and one which finds expression in many of Handel's oratorios) was of someone who put affairs of state above those of the heart or bedroom.<sup>136</sup> Like Juno's jealousy, it is one of a series of cuts which made little difference to the length or flow of the work, and therefore suggests that Handel and his librettist knew that there were potential political readings in the work, which they endeavoured to soften.<sup>137</sup>

However, this further emphasises the point: there was no Patriot element to *Semele* at all. *Samson* was an explicitly Patriot King drama. In *Belshazzar*, the Patriot element is there in the form of the oppressed Jews and the character of Cyrus,<sup>138</sup> and the Patriot element comes to dominate the oratorios of 1745-8.<sup>139</sup> *Semele* is neither a Patriot drama, nor an outright satire on the Stuarts.<sup>140</sup> Rather it simply does not engage with this agenda at all. Given the degree to which Patriot themes dominated rhetoric and the arts during the period, this, as much as its overt sexuality, may explain why it dropped from the repertoire in the late 1740s.

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<sup>134</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p811

<sup>135</sup> For the unpopularity of George's visits to Germany see Chapter Two. Handel's version also cut the lines where Jupiter says that he has 'left Olympus' because of Juno's jealousy, which again would have given the impression of an absentee monarch.

<sup>136</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, pp335, 344-5; H. St John [Viscount Bolingbroke], *Bolingbroke's Political Writings* ed. B. Cottret (Hants & London, 1997), pp111-4

<sup>137</sup> On Handel's sensitivity to the political implications of librettos, see Hurley, *Handel's Muse*, p192

<sup>138</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p317

<sup>139</sup> In particular the *Occasional Oratorio*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Joshua*.

<sup>140</sup> As the tyrannical Saul may have been meant to indicate James II. R. Smith, 'The Achievements of Charles Jennens', *ML* lxx (1989), p187

*Public Religion and Ceremonial*

Congreve's libretto opens with three priests officiating in the temple of Pronubial Juno.<sup>141</sup> Handel immediately changes the atmosphere by giving their lines to his full chorus. This is in one sense purely a practical change based on their different resources. However, the character of a duet differs considerably from even the relatively modest choruses of Handel's day. With two or three singers, the ceremony remains essentially a private event, with the principal characters and the officiating clergy as an intimate group. By attributing this to the full chorus, Handel has conjured in music the image of a large public event, as described in the stage direction, reprinted without change from Congreve:

The Scene is the Temple of Juno, near the Altar is a Golden Image of the Goddess. Priests are in their Solemnities, as after a Sacrifice newly offer'd: Flames arise from the Altar, and the Statue of Juno is seen to bow.<sup>142</sup>

On the one hand this is the traditional ceremonial of the English masque. On the other hand, for audiences in both 1707 and 1744 this image could have had very specific associations. With the Brest fleet poised to attack and the Pretender and Jacobite rebellion expected, this may well have reminded audiences of Roman Catholic ceremonial, characterised in a recent pamphlet as:

'Incense, Holy Water, Lamps and Candles, Votive Offerings, Images, Chapels on the Way-Sides...'<sup>143</sup>

The anonymous author argued that the rituals of Catholicism were derived from pagan rites, and in the Israelite oratorios, 'heathen' was often used to indicate

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<sup>141</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p793

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, p793. Congreve's scene is more emphatically masculine than Handel's, who uses a four-part-chorus rather than the male priests and augurs of the original libretto.

<sup>143</sup> Anon., *A Popish Pagan, The Fiction of a Protestant Heathen. In a Conversation betwixt a Gentleman of the States of Holland, a Deist by Profession, and a Doctor of Heathen Mythology Faithfully translated from the Dutch* (London, 1743), p9

Catholic.<sup>144</sup> Ruth Smith has suggested that Theodora's poor reception may have been because audiences perceived uncomfortable parallels with both Catholicism and nonconformity in the oratorio's Christians.<sup>145</sup> If this is so, then the same discomfort may have been registered with *Semele*.

However, it is likely that such a parallel was unintentional. Handel has been described as 'free from bigotry', and he shows complete sympathy and affection for the Thebans throughout.<sup>146</sup> It is therefore likely that he did not perceive these parallels, but rather wanted to create in music the sort of visual spectacle that Congreve and Eccles may have imagined with non-singing supernumeraries. Handel takes full advantage of the fact that his chorus did not need either to memorise the music, nor to move whilst singing, to write fearsomely complex and highly dramatic music. Just as Handel used music to convey images too erotic to stage, here he uses music to convey power, grandeur and spectacle that would have tested the resources of even the best-equipped Georgian theatre.<sup>147</sup>

At the roll of thunder, it is the chief priest in Congreve who warns Cadmus to:

Chor. Avert these Omens, all ye pow'rs!  
Some God averse our holy Rites controlls,  
O'erwhelming with sudden Night, the Day expires!  
Ill-boding Thunder on the Right Hand rolls,  
And Jove himself descends in Show'rs,  
To quench our late propitious Fires.<sup>148</sup>

Handel had this sung, with great power, by the whole chorus. Again, the effect of a whole people in fearful panic contrasts with Congreve's personal communication

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<sup>144</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p217

<sup>145</sup> R. Smith, 'Comprehending Theodora', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/1 (1995), pp65-9

<sup>146</sup> Dean, *Handel*, p74. Young described him as having a human and humane view of religion. P.M. Young, 'Handel the Man' in Abraham, G. (ed.), *Handel, A Symposium* (Oxford, 1954), p9

<sup>147</sup> He had already done this with the symphonies in *Saul* and the plagues in *Israel in Egypt*, and thus forty years too late effectively proves Addison's point that grand occasions and battles are better reported than staged. See Chapter One.

<sup>148</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p797; HWV 58/11

from cleric to monarch. The same is true of the more insistent 'Cease, cease your vows' which clears the stage a few moments later. The return of the priests to congratulate Cadmus is again given by Handel to the full chorus rather than to a single augur (even Eccles had increased this to two).<sup>149</sup> This emphasises the public and mortal sphere of Part One which is then contrasted with the private, divine setting of Part Two.<sup>150</sup> Thus again whilst acknowledging *Semele's* operatic elements, it must be recognised that this type of dramatic choral writing was reliant on a static group of trained singers with the music in front of them, which allows them to conjure up a truly visual effect in music.

### *The Sublime*

The end of Part Two, the Ino/Semele duet and the final chorus were additions to Congreve's libretto. We have seen the use of the chorus at the opening to imply ceremonial spectacle, and it occurs again with the *deus ex machina* entrance of Apollo. What these choral episodes therefore have in common is the musical evocation of the sublime.<sup>151</sup>

'In England, the eighteenth century is far more the age of the sublime than the age of reason.'<sup>152</sup> Whilst Milton was the great, though controversial exemplar, Handel was the contemporary master, and it was one of the qualities most admired in his oratorios by contemporaries.<sup>153</sup> Handel ended Part One of *Semele* with the erotic

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<sup>149</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p803; HWV 58/22  
Hail Cadmus, hail! Jove salutes the Theban King.  
Cease your Mourning,  
Joys returning,  
Songs of Mirth and Triumph sing

<sup>150</sup> Mellers suggests that all the oratorios turn on difference between human and divine law. Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting*, p244

<sup>151</sup> See A.H. Shapiro, "'Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature": Handel's Early English Oratorios and the Religious Sublime', *ML* 74 (1993), p215 and passim

<sup>152</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p109

<sup>153</sup> Lady Shaftesbury even found it in the operas. Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p66. See also J. Shawcross, *John Milton, The Critical Heritage* (London & New York, 1972) Vol. 2, p2.



sublime, Part Two with the pagan sublime, and Part Three with the Anglican sublime. This quality was expounded in Longinus' *On the sublime*, which was reprinted in 1739 with biblical examples, and by Lockman in his *Enquiry*.<sup>154</sup> Ballie conjured up the quality with his description:

Thus in a clear Evening Heaven, each star awakens the imagination to new creation,  
and the whole firmament is extended out into systems of worlds.<sup>155</sup>

Nothing could better describe the conclusion to Part Two. Ino's account of her journey was adapted from Congreve's *Homeric Hymn to Venus*, and the remainder from his *Ode On Miss Arabella Hunt*.<sup>156</sup> The sheer beauty of the poetry, and of the musical images conjured up, makes this an extremely powerful conclusion to the act. Ino's encounter with the music of the spheres and their subsequent invocation of the immortal choir makes the scene, in Juno's words, 'Heaven indeed'. The effect is to conclude the act with an apotheosis of the divine power of music as celebrated by classical writers going back to Aristotle, Cicero and Boethius:<sup>157</sup>

Ino. But hark! The heavenly sphere turns round,  
And silence now is drown'd  
In Ecstasie of sound.  
How on a Sudden the still air is charm'd  
As if all harmony were just alarm'd!  
And ev'ry soul with Transport fill'd,  
Alternately is thaw'd and chill'd

Duet. Prepare then, ye Immortal Choir  
Each Sacred Minstrel tune his Lyre,  
And all in Chorus join.

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'Few Augustans escaped Milton's influence.' R.M. Myers, *Handel, Dryden and Milton* (London, 1956), pp45, 77

<sup>154</sup> Lockman, *An Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of Operas and Oratorios*, passim. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p108; Aaron Hill also advocated the use of the Bible for sublime poetry. C. Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector 1685-1750* (Oxford, 2003), p106

<sup>155</sup> Ballie, *An Essay on the Sublime*, p12

<sup>156</sup> B. Trowell, 'Congreve and the 1744 Semele Libretto', *MT*, cxi (1970), pp993-4

<sup>157</sup> The classic expression is found in Cicero, *De Republica* Book 6. Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, ed. J.E.G. Zetzel (Cambridge, 1999), pp99-102. See also Boethius, *The Fundamentals of Music* ed. and tr. C.M. Bower (New Haven, 1989), passim

Chor. Bless the glad Earth with heav'nly Lays,  
And to that Pitch th'Eternal Accents raise,  
That all appears Divine<sup>158</sup>

This conclusion draws very clearly the distinction between the mortal world of Part One, and the divine realm of Part Two, and in the magnificence of its vision has the moral purpose of reminding Semele of her mortality.<sup>159</sup> Where Congreve took them to the pastoral idyll of Arcadia, Handel raises them to the harmony of the heavens. Several writers have noted that, in presenting heathen societies, Handel made great play with dance rhythms, but not counterpoint.<sup>160</sup> His portrayal of the divine in *Semele* is a clear exception to this. The final chorus is a fugue, doubtless inspired by the 'eternal accents' described. This form had overwhelmingly ecclesiastical associations in the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. Here, therefore, Handel resolutely refuses to demean the pagan world and its religion. He presents in Jupiter's court a paradise of awe, majesty, and unrivalled musical sophistication.

Musical score for the final chorus of *Semele*, featuring Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. The music is in 4/4 time and D major. The lyrics are: "Bless the glad earth with heav'nly lays, bless the glad earth with heav'nly lays! And to that pitch th'e".

<sup>158</sup> HWV 58/42-4

<sup>159</sup> Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting*, p250

<sup>160</sup> J. Herbage, 'The Oratorios' in Abraham, G. (ed.), *Handel, A Symposium* (Oxford, 1954), p127

S. that all ap-pear di

A. And to that pitch the'e

T. ter - nal ac - cents raise, - - -

B.

G.F. Handel, 'Bless the Glad Earth...And to that pitch', *Semele* HWV 58/32, bb1-10  
 (Orchestra col canto)

In Part Three, the chorus first conjure up the awful sublime of mortality, describing the inexorable order of the universe in which all has its place, and those erring, 'lost in smoke'. The stark homophony of their opening exclamation ('O terror') is followed by the long drawn out pedal points over which their lament flows. This quality of long notes and static harmonies embodies the dark grandeur of the religious sublime:

SOPRANO Oh ter - ror oh ter - ror and a - sto - nish-ment!

ALTO

TENOR Oh ter - ror oh ter - ror and a - sto - nish-ment!

BASS

S. smoke, is lost in smoke, is lost, is lost, in smoke, is lost in smoke

A. smoke, is lost in smoke, is lost in smoke is lost in smoke, in smoke

T. smoke, is lost in smoke, in smoke, \_\_\_\_\_ is lost is lost in

B. smoke, is lost in smoke, is lost, - - in smoke - is

G.F. Handel, 'O Terror and Astonishment...Nature to Each', *Semele*, HWV 58/51,  
bb1-4; 66-71 (Orchestra col canto)

However, the entrance of Apollo heralds a very different form of the sublime, and one which resulted in a major departure from Congreve's text. Firstly, as we have seen, Handel removed all explicit reference to alcohol from Apollo's annunciation of Bacchus' reign.<sup>161</sup> Although the classically-educated nobility and gentry would have known that Bacchus was god of wine, he was also the god of music and the theatre.<sup>162</sup> Thus Congreve's praise for the victory of wine-induced reverie over love (his final closure of the opposition between dreams and real love that runs through *Semele*) is excised. The danger of drunkenness is a theme found in several of Handel's other works. In *Belshazzar* it is excessive drink that leads to the king's fatal *hybris*.<sup>163</sup> Likewise, despite Hamilton's toning down of Milton's temperance, The Philistines praise Dagon with 'high cheer and wine' at the climax of the celebrations

<sup>161</sup> The drinking of toasts was in fact a key part of Hanoverian loyalist ritual, but the patriotic drink was *beer*. Wine may have had continental and tory overtones (port was the drink of whigs). This would have had an additional overtone. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, p158

<sup>162</sup> The most famous exposition of this idea was by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He saw Apollo as representing images and poetry, Dionysus, imageless music. The artistic achievement of the Athenians was to transfigure the Dionysiac without succumbing to it. Tragedy thus cannot continue once the spirit of music declines. F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, tr. R. Speirs, ed. R. Geuss (Cambridge, 1999), pp14, 20, 76 & passim.

<sup>163</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p447

that bring about their demise.<sup>164</sup> Whilst Congreve introduced Bacchus as the bringer of a 'sovereign juice' that would cure the 'sick lover' of the sorrows of 'tyrannous love,'<sup>165</sup> Handel's version merely announces him as:

Apollo    A God he shall prove  
              More mighty than Love,  
              And Sighing and Sorrow for ever prevent.<sup>166</sup>

This paves the way for a drastically changed final chorus, which is also unattributed. Congreve's final aria and chorus was a rollicking dance number in praise of Bacchus:

Apollo:    Then Mortals be merry, and scorn the Blind Boy;  
              Your Hearts from his Arrows strong Wine shall defend:  
              Each Day and each Night you shall revel in Joy,  
              For when Bacchus is born, Love's Reign's at an end.<sup>167</sup>

Handel drafted a setting of this but rejected it and re-set the chorus to a new text:<sup>168</sup>

Chor.       Happy, happy shall we be,  
              Free from care, from sorrow free.  
              Guiltless pleasures we'll enjoy,  
              Virtuous love will never cloy;  
              All that's good and just we'll prove,  
              And Bacchus crown the joys of love!<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Hamilton's own attitude is more likely to be that found in his own ode *The Power of Musick*:

Be Airy, Be Gay  
Be wise while you may;  
'Tis music and wine  
Make mortals divine  
Else life would steal dully away.

N. Hamilton, *The Power of Musick. An Ode for St Caecilia's Day* (London, 1720), p4

<sup>165</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p832

<sup>166</sup> HWV 58/75

<sup>167</sup> Congreve, *CW*, p832

<sup>168</sup> The fact that it was altered for the Chamberlain's copy indicates that this was changed before Handel had filled in the orchestration. See above.

<sup>169</sup> HWV 58/76

With this change of text he radically re-casts the entire final chorus. However, the effect is to replace an operatic dance-chorus (complete with a dance of satyrs) with an oratorio anthem-chorus.

Aside from 'Despair no more shall wound me,' this is the only part of Handel's work which cannot be attributed to either Congreve's original libretto, the same author's miscellaneous poetry or to Alexander Pope's *Pastorals*. However, it is one of the strongest indications that the adapter was Newburgh Hamilton, as he had written a strikingly similar finale for Handel when adapting *Alexander's Feast*, especially its final couplet:

And may this evening ever prove,  
Sacred to harmony and love<sup>170</sup>

As we have seen, on the other occasions that Handel made changes to Congreve's libretto he did so either to add something (usually a chorus or an aria), or to remove lengthy recitative dialogue. Occasionally he made minor changes either to adjust the metre of a passage to bring it in line with his musical ideas, or to tone down a passage which was too suggestive. However, nowhere else does he *replace* Congreve's text with something that is almost identical in dramatic function, but is poetically completely different.

Although the Society for the Reformation of Manners had effectively ended its campaign of prosecutions, attitudes towards alcohol were very much more

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<sup>170</sup> [N. Hamilton], *Alexander's Feast; or, the Power of Musick, an ode, wrote in honour of St. Caecilia by Mr. Dryden. Set to musick by Mr. Handel* (London, 1739), p7

Your voices tune, and raise them high,  
Till th'echo from the vaulted sky  
The blest Cecilia's name;  
Music to Heav'n and her we owe,  
The greatest blessing that's below;  
Sound loudly then her fame:  
Let's imitate her notes above,  
And may this evening ever prove,  
Sacred to harmony and love

circumspect in 1744 than in 1705. Handel and his collaborator may have wished to soften the explicit praise of alcohol over love in the original. However, this was more than simply a change in text. Handel's setting of the two versions was completely different and therefore the substitution has strong *musical* implications as well. The original text mixes iambic and amphibrach metres and implies a sense of triple time and when Handel made his first draft of the music, he set it in 6/8.<sup>171</sup> Unfortunately only the first six bars survive in short-score:<sup>172</sup>

The image displays a musical score for Soprano and Bass parts from Handel's *Semele*. The first system consists of two staves: a Soprano staff in treble clef and a Bass staff in bass clef, both in 6/8 time. The lyrics for the first system are: "Then mor-tals be mer-ry and scorn the blind boy, Your hearts from his arr-ows strong". The second system also consists of two staves, with a first ending bracket over the first two measures. The lyrics for the second system are: "wine will de-fend, Then wine will de-fend, Each day and each night you shall re-vel in joy".

G.F. Handel, *Semele* (autograph), BM RM 20.f.7, 111v

However, when Handel came to fill up and orchestrate the work he rejected this ending and composed a completely fresh one, to the new text. It is not clear where the new text came from. There is of course the possibility that Handel wrote it himself and its similarity to the chorus 'Happy We' in *Acis and Galatea* may point in this direction. The manuscript here is even less tidy than usual, with the words often crammed in and with so many corrections that Handel may even have composed the

<sup>171</sup> John Eccles set the text in a bouncing compound meter (12/8 in fact). J. Eccles, *Semele, An Opera* ed. R. Platt (London, 2000), pp131-4

<sup>172</sup> RM RM 20.f.7. The absence of inner parts indicates that Handel changed his mind about this movement before beginning to orchestrate it. The subsequent pages were removed and new version inserted into the autograph.

music before the text was finalised.<sup>173</sup> In Handel's final setting the first five lines all begin with trochees, and are only four feet:

Chor. Happy/, happy/ shall we/ be,  
Free from/ care, from/ sorrow/ free.

To understand the possible musical reasons for this change, we need to return again to Hamilton's definition of oratorio and remember that it was not just an opera out of costume, but that audiences expected their entertainment to be given both ceremonial spectacle and a moral dimension by the addition of 'The Solemnity of Church Musick.' In 1732, when Handel first adapted his early English-language dramas for public performance as oratorios, he added a new element, guaranteed to increase their popularity and solemnity – parts of his *Coronation Anthems* of 1727. In particular, *Zadok the Priest* was frequently inserted into ceremonial scenes to add gravitas.<sup>174</sup> Dean described such performances as 'in effect a double-bill – Italian opera from the soloists and a splendid choral concert to boot.'<sup>175</sup> A very similar compositional style had brought Handel huge success in Dublin less than a year before *Semele*'s composition in the anthem-like choruses for *Messiah*, especially the second part's 'Hallelujah'.<sup>176</sup>

Throughout the 1720s and 1730s, Handel's religious music had remained consistently popular, especially for its grand, manly, patriotic and sublime qualities. Moreover, whilst the Hanoverian monarchs did not 'represent' their power to the public through opera, they certainly did so through public religious ceremonials; the

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<sup>173</sup> Handel's speed of composition can be seen in his correspondence with Jennens over *Belshazzar*. *HHa IV*, pp377, 379. Coxe said that during *Rinaldo*, Rossi observed 'that Handel scarcely allowed him time to write the words; and that, to his great astonishment; he set the whole to music in the short space of a fortnight.' [W. Coxe], *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith* (London, 1799), p14

<sup>174</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, pp207-14; Burrows, *Handel*, p168

<sup>175</sup> W. Dean, 'The Dramatic Element in Handel's Oratorios' *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 79 (1952-3), p37

<sup>176</sup> As shown above, this success had not been repeated in London.



church was the most important form of court display.<sup>177</sup> In these, the religious image of the divinely ordained monarch was brought together with Handel's most sublime and uplifting music. Written defences of the Hanoverians stressed their legitimacy through parliament and their protestantism.<sup>178</sup> The Chapel Royal and national religious celebrations provided one of the most overt ways in which the royal family presented themselves their piety, magnificence, and legitimacy to the nation.<sup>179</sup> Exemplified by the *Coronation Anthems*, this 'royalist sublime' in Handel's anthems was a hugely popular part of his output.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, in an era which regarded theatrical, ecclesiastical and chamber music as separate styles, these invested the oratorios with a specifically religious gravity and grandeur.<sup>181</sup>

By altering the text of the libretto at the end of Part Three, Handel was therefore able to conclude this 'secular' work with what is, musically speaking, a coronation anthem.<sup>182</sup> This was probably simply intended to add a popular and celebratory element. However, intended or not, this had a profound political effect in that it invites explicit comparison between the royalty on stage and their earthly counterparts in England. Moreover, far from stigmatising his pagans as crude and unsophisticated, the use of Anglican-royalist musical grandeur invests the Thebans and their gods with the full panoply of Judaeo-Christian royal representation, and thus invites open comparison between them and the reigning monarch.

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<sup>177</sup> D. Burrows, 'Handel, Stuarts and Hanoverians: Handel's English Church Music and the Image of the British Monarchy' *HJB* 49 (2003), p95; Beales, 'Religion and Culture', p132

<sup>178</sup> Apologists also pointed out their direct descent from the Plantagenet kings: G. Ballantyne, *A Vindication of the Hereditary Right of His Present Majesty King George II to the Crown of Great Britain* (London, 1743), pp8, 39; However Ballantyne, bolstered his argument with a discussion of parliament's right to offer the crown in 1688 based on the precedent of Henry III. Ballantyne, *A Vindication*, p58

<sup>179</sup> For instance, the Georgian year was celebrated and maintained by Churches through both prayers, and more publicly, by bell ringing on festal days. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, p144

<sup>180</sup> A.H. Shapiro, "'Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature'", p233

<sup>181</sup> J. Mattheson, *Johann Mattheson's Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, ed. and tr. E.C. Harriss (Ann Arbor, 1981), p190. Significantly, Handel referred to the choruses in *Belshazzar* as 'anthems'. Handel to Charles Jennens, 2 October 1744, in *HHA IV*, p379

<sup>182</sup> That Handel was not dissatisfied with his original draft *per se* is clear from his verbatim re-use of the material in the cantata 'The Morning is Charming', HWV 226 (1743).

The high religious ambiance is established in the preceding recitative. A *sinfonia* in the French style is heard, heralding the appearance of Apollo. Both Congreve and Handel's librettos describe the scene: 'A bright Cloud descends and rests on Mount Citheron, which opening, discovers Apollo seated in it as the God of Prophecy.'<sup>183</sup> The purpose of Apollo's visit is to announce the coming of a god greater than himself, or to coin a more explicitly Christian phrase, it is an annunciation:

Apollo

A-pol-lo comes to re-lieve your care and fut-ure hap-pi-ness de-clare

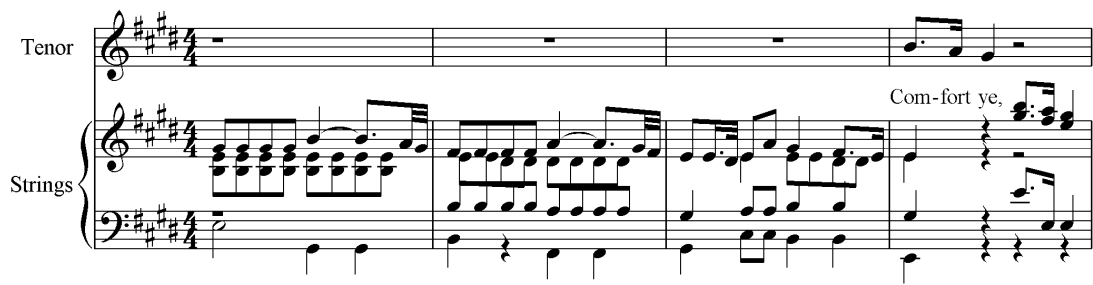
Strings

G.F. Handel, 'Apollo Comes', *Semele*, HWV 58/54, bb1-4

The first four repeated notes of the accompaniment are set in sharp relief against the sustained chords that follow. Whether or not Handel was making a deliberate quotation, and whether or not his audience were aware of hearing it before, the figure bears a striking resemblance to another 'annunciation' motif, heard in London for the first time shortly before *Semele*'s composition and also sung by the same tenor, John Beard:

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<sup>183</sup> Congreve assumed that this would *actually* be staged. Handel's audiences, however, had the stage directions in the word-book.



G.F. Handel: 'Comfort ye', *Messiah*, HWV 56/2, bb1-4

In this opening recitative from *Messiah*, the four-note 'annunciation' idea is omnipresent, alternating between the first and second violins. It is heard eight times in the first six bars of the movement, and continues to dominate the accompaniment texture throughout the recitative. The vocal line is dominated by falling thirds, first heard on the opening injunction 'Comfort ye!'. The same falling third can be seen underlying Apollo's melody on the words 'Apollo comes to relieve your care'.

Music is a non-propositional language, but one of the most effective ways it communicates is by association, either by quoting melodies, or through the specific style of music.<sup>184</sup> Whilst these figures appear in other accompanied recitatives in the operas and oratorios, they clearly share a certain style and gravity. Handel was not necessarily making a conscious point here, but he was extremely gifted at characterising people with great individuality. In the way he set the passage, Handel assimilated the pagan deities into the same musical way of speaking that he used to present the Christian message. The musical similarity of the two settings increases the link between their dramatic senses. The stylistic language is therefore not telling us that this is a lesser, pagan, deity. Rather it is ignoring distinctions of religion to present in music the foretelling of the great saviour. In this instance however, the god that is being foretold is not the Christian god of love, but is in fact 'more mighty than

<sup>184</sup> The most crude examples would be for instance the use of national anthems in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. But it is not necessarily an unsophisticated technique. The use of melodies to create mental and emotional associations is at the heart of Wagner's *leitmotif* technique. This can also be seen in most film music, where composers frequently pastiche other styles to trigger specific emotional reactions.

love'. He is the god of theatre, of choral music (according to Nietzsche), dionysiac frenzy, and of course of wine.<sup>185</sup>

Julian Herbage, characterising Handel's musical treatment of different peoples in the oratorios stated that stylistically: 'Handel's pagans always have an ear for a catchy tune, and an almost complete ignorance of counterpoint.'<sup>186</sup> This clearly holds good for the Philistines in *Samson*, and perhaps even for the Trachinians of *Hercules* (note the droning open fifths in the bass):

SOPRANO  
ALTO  
TENOR  
BASS  
Orchestra (simplified)

Crown with festal pomp the  
Crown with festal pomp the  
Crown with festal pomp the  
Crown with festal pomp the

G.F. Handel: 'Crown with festal pomp', *Hercules* HWV 60, bb1-4

But it simply is not true of *Semele*, where the chorus have only two pagan dance movements ('Hail, Cadmus Hail' and the hornpipe 'Now Love that Everlasting Boy'). Instead, they display a virtuosic command of counterpoint. It is certainly the

<sup>185</sup> It is possible that Handel has his own reasons for investing this with particular dignity. In *The Session of Musicians* (1724), Apollo had bestowed the crown of supreme musician on Handel: 'Him *Phoebus* saw with Joy – and did allow  
The laurel only t'adorn his Brow'

Anon., *The Session of Musicians, in imitation of the Session of Poets* (London, 1724), pp10, 12

<sup>186</sup> J. Herbage, 'The Oratorios', p127

case that Handel made a musical contrast in the Israelite operas between the Jews (who are analogous to the British) and the 'enemy' pagans, to distinctly characterise two separate ethnic and cultural groups who would both have to be performed by the same singers.<sup>187</sup> However, in *Semele* and *Hercules* no such contrast is presented, and instead the dramatic and musical contrast is between the earthly society and the heavenly one, both of whom speak the same musical language, further 'humanising' the divine figures in a piece of musical social levelling.

The issue of counterpoint is important. In baroque music, counterpoint, and specifically the strict fugue, was thought of as the height of musical sophistication. Because of its ability to create a harmonic sense of completeness from multiple, disparate lines (order from chaos; peace from conflict) it was seen as analogous to the divine ordering of the universe, and was thus the height of religious expression. Fugal writing remained a staple of ecclesiastical music throughout the nineteenth century, even when it had all but disappeared from the mainstream secular musical language.<sup>188</sup> Handel uses fugue at the end of Act Two to conjure the music of the spheres, but in doing so he accepts for dramatic purposes that the pagan theology is true. The beauty of the heavenly harmony was not only an originally pagan idea, but it was presented as being available to Jupiter and Semele in a way that it would never be to the priests of Baal. In *Semele*, the Thebans are the only earthly society represented, and they also speak with a sophisticated musical voice. From the very outset in 'Lucky Omens' they speak in counterpoint within six bars of entering. Even in the celebratory gavotte 'Endless Pleasure' they do not forget themselves to such an extent that musical sophistication breaks down:

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<sup>187</sup> E. Rosand, 'Handel's Oratorical Narrative', *GHB* VIII (2000), p45

<sup>188</sup> For instance the two huge fugues in Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (1867)

SOPRANO  
End-less plea-sure, end-less love, Se-me

ALTO  
End-less

TENOR  
End-less, end-less plea-sure, end-less

BASS  
Se-me

G.F. Handel: 'Endless Pleasure', *Semele*, HWV 58/17-18, bb 130-2

For a work with a plot centring on royal amorous intrigues, this choice of musical language has thoroughgoing consequences. Far from characterising the Thebans musically as 'other', Handel actually encourages the implied comparison with the British monarchy to develop by his use of music which is not only sophisticated, but is in a style peculiarly associated with royal ceremony. In 'Happy! Happy shall we be' it is not simply that Handel uses counterpoint, though he does with great skill. It is that he uses several musical motives whose character is distinctively associated with an Anglican ceremonial style first found in the 'Utrecht' canticles, and later in both the *Coronation Anthems* – particularly *Zadok the Priest* – and *Messiah*.

Although there are clear antecedents in the music of Purcell and his contemporaries, the impact of the *Coronation Anthems* of 1727 was such that Handel can be plausibly credited with creating the eighteenth-century ceremonial style of English church music. Such was its popularity that Arne apparently imitated it in his *Judgment of Paris* in 1740, the work which may well have inspired Handel's choice of the *Semele* libretto.<sup>189</sup> The 'Englishness' of this style resided in certain key elements. The first was powerful, homophonic declamations (e.g. the entry of the chorus in *Messiah's*

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<sup>189</sup> Unfortunately the choruses for this are lost, and so no comparison is possible.

‘Hallelujah’). Though this was not specifically particular to him, Handel handles the technique with particular flair. The second is held monotone declamations punctuated by rhythmic interjections from the other parts. The third is long melismas in one or more vocal parts, punctuated by short, usually one-note patterns in the other voices. The overall effect was that muscular grandeur that contemporaries found so appealing in Handel’s ceremonial style. Consider these latter two techniques in more detail as they appear in the final chorus of *Semele*.

The held declamation over contrapuntal lower parts was a technique that Handel seems to have taken from Purcell’s anthem style.<sup>190</sup> It consists of one or two of the voice parts declaiming a particularly important piece of text on a monotone while the other parts continue to have either running or punctuating material. The most famous example of this is the passage in the ‘Hallelujah’ chorus of *Messiah* where sopranos and altos declaim ‘King of Kings, and Lord of Lords’ over tenor and bass interjections of ‘For Ever, Hallelujah.’:

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<sup>190</sup> For the more general influences of Purcell on Handel’s music see Dent, ‘English Influences on Handel’, pp225-8; See also D. Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal* (Oxford, 2005), pp11-12, 47

S. Declamation: AND LORD OF LORDS, - - - - - KING OF

A.

T. lu-jah! for e-ver for e-ver Hal-le lu-ja! Hal-le - lu-jah!

B. Falling fourths:

Orch (Simplified) Trumpet Strings

Handel: 'Halleluiah' *Messiah*, HWV 56, bb 54-57

In 'Happy! Happy shall we be' an almost identical musical phrase is used on the word 'And Bacchus Crown our joys with love':<sup>191</sup>

<sup>191</sup> See also the 1736 Wedding Anthem, *This is the day*, *HG* vol. 26, pp74-5



S. sor - row free, free, from care, from-sor-row free, and

A. **Declamation:** And Bacchus Bac - chus crown And Bac -chus crown the joys of love, and

T. and Bac chus crown the joys of-love and

B. **Falling fourths:**

Orch (Simplified) **Trumpet:**

G.F. Handel, 'Happy, Happy', *Semele*, HWV 55/58, bb80-4

The falling fourth on 'Hallelujah' in the final chorus of the second part of *Messiah* is also familiar as the repeated cries of 'Amen' from *Zadok the Priest*. It is characterised by an emphasis on the first syllable giving it a strong rhythmic character. In this chorus from *Semele*, the same figure appears, harmonically and rhythmically almost identical to the 'Hallelujah' chorus. This time though it insistently proclaims 'and Bacchus!' Handel is giving the crowning of Bacchus the same style of ceremonial treatment as he offered George II in 1727, and almost identical treatment to the music which George famously stood for because of its clear reflection on himself. This extends even down to the characteristic trumpet fanfare of a held top A running down in semiquavers to a D – and of course by employing trumpets and timpani, Handel is restricted to using the same key, D major, as was *de rigueur* for royal ceremonial. All of these elements were present in both the *Semele* finale and the 'Hallelujah' chorus.

There is also another musical figure in this movement that is specifically redolent of Handel's ceremonial style. In *Zadok the Priest* Handel gives various voices, but

particularly the basses, long melismatic runs on the word 'Amen' whilst the upper voices punctuate it with single notes on each beat:<sup>192</sup>

SOPRANO  
A-men, Hal le lu ia, Hal le - lu ja, A - men, A - - - - -

ALTO  
A-men, Hal le lu ia, Hal le - lu ja, A - men, A - - - - -

TENOR  
A-men, Hal le lu ia, Hal le - lu ja, A - men, A - - - - -

BASS  
A-men, Hal le lu ia, Hal le - lu ja, A - men, A - - - - -

G.F. Handel: *Zadok the Priest*, HWV 258, bb68-72 (orchestra col canto)

Exactly the same musical configuration can be found in bars 33-36 of 'Happy Shall we be' with the upper voices reiterating 'Crown!, Crown!' as the basses sing a long melisma on 'joys'.

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<sup>192</sup> The same figuration appears in the *Dixit Dominus* (No. 1) and *Laudate Pueri* (No. 8). Though not English, both were ecclesiastical, ceremonial works. Burrows, *Handel and the Chapel Royal*, pp11-13

Soprano  
Bac - chus crown, crown, chrown, crown, chrown, crown, and Bac-chus crown,

Alto  
crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, and Bac - chus

Tenor  
Bac-chus crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, crown, and Bac-chus crown,

Bass  
[joys] - - - - - and Bac-chus crown

Orch (simplified)

G.F. Handel: 'Happy, Happy', *Semele*, HWV 58/55, bb 33-36

The similarities between the musical styles shown in these two short examples are unmistakable, and it is clear that Handel could not have set Congreve's dance-like original text in this way. Moreover, Handel's chorus would have consisted of a significant number of Chapel Royal singers.<sup>193</sup> In his choice of musical language, therefore, Handel is making as big a contribution to this finale's meaning to, and emotional reception by, contemporary audiences as the change in text. Although Congreve denied *Semele* her classical apotheosis, Handel provides one, not to her perhaps, or even to alcohol, but to the god of music, crowned in glory like an English monarch.

The musical language of this scene transmits a meaning to its audience every bit as clear as the text by appropriating a highly popular set of musical ideas, familiar to audiences, which carried a very specific set of mental and cultural associations. It also demonstrates why it is excessively reductionist to try to characterise Handel's

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<sup>193</sup> Though not the ordained ones, who were not permitted to participate.

musical approach to *Semele* as either 'operatic' or 'secular' in any sense of being different to his other oratorios. Handel was a master of a wide range of musical styles and he used whatever he needed to develop the plot and character of a work. It may be that we must accept that it is not possible to categorise this work convincingly as either an opera or an oratorio, but it clearly existed within the oratorio convention, which was less rigid than it was to become even five or ten years later. Whilst the arias may well have been more light and operatic than in previous and subsequent works, and may indeed have been directly aimed at Handel's rivals in the Middlesex opera company, the use of grand ceremonial choruses shows that Handel was still working within the same generic framework. *Semele* is a very different story from that of *Samson* or *Deborah*, and it is not surprising that it elicits music of a different tone and character, but this does not mean that it is in another genre. Handel still intended it to be performed in Lent, and despite its profane text he still intended it to contain *all* the musical and dramatic elements that had made his previous works popular.

### Semele's early performances

#### **Introduction**

Audiences in 1744 were able to purchase the libretto or word-book in advance of the performance; for many it was 'an indispensable part of attendance at the oratorio'.<sup>194</sup> However, there is very little evidence of exactly what proportion of the audience would buy a copy, and less still of how many would actively follow it during the performance.<sup>195</sup> The *Semele* libretto cost one shilling,<sup>196</sup> and was published by J. and R. Tonson, who had published Congreve's *Complete Works*. Soon afterwards, Handel ceased to sell word-books for performances, which suggests that the demand for reading them during performances was declining.<sup>197</sup> They had been invaluable for appreciating Italian operas because they provided the translation.<sup>198</sup> With English-language works in (by modern standards) a small theatre, there would have been much less difficulty in hearing the words, and therefore they perhaps became a luxury rather than a necessity.<sup>199</sup> However, there was clearly a possibility of reading whilst listening, pre-reading, and re-reading the words. This allowed audiences to follow the words, understand them clearly, engage fully with the sung text, and enjoy the benefit of the detailed printed stage directions.

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<sup>194</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p23. Also see above, Chapter Two.

<sup>195</sup> In fact the only picture showing an audience member reading the word-book is W. Hogarth, *A Scene from the Beggar's Opera* (1731), London, Tate Galleries. I am grateful to Michael Burden for pointing this out.

<sup>196</sup> The subscription for the whole season was four guineas for a box, i.e. 84 shillings. The word-book was therefore 1/7 of the cost of a pair of tickets (though the same work might be repeated several times).

<sup>197</sup> In Fielding's *Amelia*, the heroine is approached by a gallant who procures a word-book and candle for them to share. This illustrates both that it was not automatic to have one, and that it was a sign of cultivation. H. Fielding, *Amelia*, ed. M.C. Bate (Oxford, 1983), p188-9

<sup>198</sup> In addition, Italian opera libretti were regarded as literary texts in their own right.

<sup>199</sup> For a scale reconstruction of the theatre, see R. Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse* (London, 1973), p108

The design of the *Semele* word-book illustrates several important aspects of Handel's approach and intentions. Its title on the front page is 'THE STORY OF SEMELE', an important reminder that Handel himself made no claim that it was an oratorio. More importantly, underneath it reads:

Alter'd from the SEMELE of Mr. WILLIAM CONGREVE.  
Set to Musick by Mr. GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL.

This billing, which also appeared in the *Daily Post*,<sup>200</sup> is in stark contrast to the Royal Academy operas which never gave composer or librettist on the title page.<sup>201</sup> For the English-language oratorios, however, Handel was generally given on the front page as the composer. Whether or not Handel oversaw the publication of these, they illustrated publicly that he was operating under his own *imperium*, rather than as an employee of the aristocracy, and that his name was perceived to be a positive draw for audiences. This public display of independence may well have been one of the reasons why he felt unwilling to take up Middlesex's offer to become an employee again after nearly twenty years as his own master.<sup>202</sup>

What is equally, if not more, important is the prominence given to Congreve's name. Almost all opera libretti were based on older originals, and yet these authors were never cited. Moreover, at no time during Handel's lifetime was the current librettist or adapter billed on the title page, although they might be identified by the dedication.<sup>203</sup> For only two works was an author given equal prominence to Handel. These were Dryden for *Alexander's Feast*, and Milton for *Samson*.<sup>204</sup> The only authors cited in his works, therefore, were the most prominent and admired English

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<sup>200</sup> *London Daily Post*, 10 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, pp371-2

<sup>201</sup> See E.T. Harris (ed.), *The librettos of Handel's operas: a collection of seventy librettos documenting Handel's operatic career* (13 vols, London & New York, 1989), passim. The emphasis was on the 'fable' or occasion of performance, rather than authorship.

<sup>202</sup> See above, Chapter Two

<sup>203</sup> There was an occasional exception, such as the 1731 word-book for *Rinaldo*, which credits Humphreys with the new translation. Harris, *The librettos of Handel's operas*, Vol. 12, p1

<sup>204</sup> Though not for the early editions of *L'Allegro*.

writers. Moreover in Tonson's 1739 edition of *Alexander's Feast*, the word-book was prefaced with a quotation from an *Essay on Criticism* by Alexander Pope, one of the most prominent living masters of English verse.<sup>205</sup> The prominence given to these authors suggests that their status was an integral part of the oratorios' marketing. It is also another piece of evidence supporting the attribution of the *Semele* adaptation to Newburgh Hamilton, as Hamilton was the adapter of *Alexander's Feast* and *Samson*, and in the three works the original was treated with great reverence with supplementary material taken from works of the same era and preferably the same author. In addition the inclusion of the quotation from Pope on the title page of *Alexander's Feast* indicates that Hamilton was sympathetic to Pope's work, which fits with the inclusion of 'Where e're you walk' in *Semele*.

The question of performance practice in the oratorios remains unsettled.<sup>206</sup> What is clear from contemporary reports is that they were felt to be 'acted'. John Upton said in January 1744 that 'Handel is going to act Joseph and Semele'.<sup>207</sup> The eighteenth-century vocabulary of dramatic gestures was highly stylized and aimed to give clarity and precision to the words.<sup>208</sup> They were deemed equally applicable to the stage, pulpit or law-courts,<sup>209</sup> and there is no reason to think that these were not applied equally to performances with or without a backdrop. However, this is not to say the effect was the same. Mainwaring said that *Semele* was 'acted' as an oratorio, but he also questioned whether 'the same arguments which prevailed for admitting oratorios [were not] sufficient to justify the acting them?'<sup>210</sup> This does suggest that there was no movement. This is a further reminder of the visual aspect that was lost in oratorio-

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<sup>205</sup> [N. Hamilton,], *Alexander's Feast; or, the Power of Musick, an ode, wrote in honour of St. Caecilia by Mr. Dryden. Set to musick by Mr. Handel* (London, 1739)

<sup>206</sup> There is no pictorial evidence of Handel's operas in performance (though there is some for contemporary productions by his rivals). W. Dean & J.M. Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726* (Oxford, 1987), p23; Performance practice in the oratorios is even less certain.

<sup>207</sup> John Upton to James Harris, 19 January 1744, in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, pp183-4

<sup>208</sup> D. Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The practices and principles of Eighteenth Century acting* (Heidelberg, 1987), p147

<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*, p10-11

<sup>210</sup> [Mainwaring], *Memoirs*, p128

style performance and again serves as a reminder that Handel was working without the constraints of staged performance.

### **Evidence of audience reactions**

Commentators on *Semele* face the problem that it received a comparatively small number of performances over Handel's lifetime and was not revived after 1744, and yet the surviving evidence of audience reactions is overwhelmingly positive. This makes it difficult to gauge its general reception. The Earl of Shaftesbury called the overture a 'delightful thing,'<sup>211</sup> whilst George Harris called 'You've undone me' 'as fine a thing of the kind, as I've ever heard.'<sup>212</sup> Mrs Delany twice called the whole work 'a delightful piece of music,'<sup>213</sup> whilst Mary Smith thought 'the music mightily adapted to the words.'<sup>214</sup> This set of reactions is neither large nor representative. Mary Delany was a very close friend of Handel, and Mary Smith was part of the Harris circle, as well as being firmly opposed to Italian opera.<sup>215</sup> These voices were all Handel partisans. The only dissenting opinion was that of Charles Jennens and his reaction makes no mention of *Semele*'s music, only the work's lack of decorum.

In terms of its commercial success, Mrs Delany described the house as 'full, though not crowded,'<sup>216</sup> and while Jennens wished a 'thinner'<sup>217</sup> house on *Semele*, there is no evidence that he received his desire. The fact is that on 9 January, 1744, Handel advertised a twelve concert subscription series during Lent of that year costing four guineas for a box for the whole series. The series opened with *Semele* on 10

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<sup>211</sup> [4<sup>th</sup> Earl of] Shaftesbury to James Harris, 17 December 1743, in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p180

<sup>212</sup> George Harris to James Harris, 11 March 1744, in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p180

<sup>213</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 24 January 1743/4, in *HHB IV* p370; Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 11 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p372

<sup>214</sup> Mary Smith to James Harris, 21 March 1744, in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p188-9

<sup>215</sup> Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p191

<sup>216</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 11 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p372

<sup>217</sup> Charles Jennens to James Harris, 30 November 1744, in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p208



February, and on 14 February Handel deposited £650. On 16 February the King paid £1000 to the 'Opera',<sup>218</sup> and on 21 February Handel paid the £650 to 'Chambers.'<sup>219</sup> *Semele* was performed four times out of the twelve, and on 25 February, just after its final night, Part One went on sale, priced 4s. The series concluded with *Saul* on 21 March. Whilst *Semele* may have had 'a strong party against it',<sup>220</sup> there is no evidence that it suffered serious commercial harm. Indeed the evidence suggests the contrary, because on the basis of this season, on 20 October 1744, Handel advertised a 24 subscription season to begin in November, twice the number of performances as the previous season. This doubling of activity and performing outside Lent was of course also because the Middlesex Company was not offering any competition and Handel had taken over their theatre. However, such a huge increase in performances surely suggests that the previous season had not been a commercial disaster. Moreover, he included two performances of *Semele* in the forthcoming season, again not something he would have been likely to do if he perceived opposition to it to be broadly based.

### **The December 1744 revival**

An examination of Handel's changes to the performing version of *Semele* given in December 1744 offers an even better insight into the work's relationship to its audience than those for the opening night, as Handel would have been reacting to feedback, both formal and informal, from his friends, colleagues and audiences.

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<sup>218</sup> It remains unclear as to whether this was Handel. In previous seasons it had gone to Middlesex (which his father had opposed), Although Middlesex did not in the end offer a season in 1744, he had done at the end of 1743, and may still have been intending to mount another season in February.

<sup>219</sup> Harris, 'Handel the Investor', p543. Chambers was one of his brokers. *ibid.*, p528. That he was able to make investment deposits suggests that he was not in dire financial need at this point.

<sup>220</sup> Mrs Delany to Mrs Dewes, 21 February 1744, in *HHB IV*, p373

There were in the first instance several alterations necessitated by a change of singers. In this production, Miss Robinson sang Ino. As she was a mezzo-soprano, some material was transposed upwards.<sup>221</sup> In addition, she was given the original aria version of 'See, she blushing turns her eyes.'<sup>222</sup> This was probably because she was not also singing Juno as Esther Young had in February, and therefore needed an extra aria by way of compensation. The singer for Iris is not recorded, and has generally assumed to have been Avoglio again.<sup>223</sup> She was given an additional aria, 'Somnus rise' whose music has unfortunately been lost.<sup>224</sup> The aria begins with a close paraphrase of the recitative it replaced. It is not remarkable poetry and does not seem to have come from Congreve, but it integrates the ideas and imagery of the surrounding text and the finale of Part Two with great sensitivity, and is strongly redolent of Newburgh Hamilton's approach to Milton's text in *Samson*:

Iris.    Somnus rise, thy self forsake  
          Lift up thy heavy lids of Lead  
          Raise thy dull reclining Head  
          A Goddess calls, awake, awake  
          How quiet all around!  
          No noise, no jarring Sound  
          Lethe's Streams lull the God  
          And Silence rules th' Abode  
          Murmurs and soft Repose  
          His drowsy Eyelids close  
          So fast he scarce does breathe

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<sup>221</sup> For a complete list of musical changes see H.D. Clausen, *Händel's Direktionspartituren* ('*Handexemplare*') (Hamburg, 1972), pp225-6. The changes to the vocal lines were made in pencil in the conducting score.

<sup>222</sup> Although the libretto gives the revised (i.e. Congreve's original) words, this is almost certainly a typesetting error. These words would not fit Handel's setting and only make dramatic sense when sung by Athamas. There is a similar error on p17 where 'I must with speed amuse her' is given with the original word order rather than Handel's changed version.

<sup>223</sup> In the original production it seems that she was given Cadmus' line in the Act One quartet and Ino's part in 'Prepare then ye' to compensate for her comparatively small role. This is shown in the published score of 1744. G.F. Handel, *SEMELE, as it is perform'd at the THEATRE ROYAL in Covent Garden Set to Musick by Mr. HANDEL* (London, 1744)

<sup>224</sup> Dean suggests that it could have been 'Come Zephyrs Come' but there is no indication of this in the conducting score. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p394

But sleeps the sleep of Death.<sup>225</sup>

The singers for Athamas and Juno were not recorded in the conducting score<sup>226</sup> but it seems that Athamas was the castrato Angelo Maria Monticelli and Juno the contralto Caterina Galli. This is suggested by the fact that for this version Juno was transposed into the soprano register, and that for both characters, Italian arias were inserted in place of their originals. Thus instead of 'Your tuneful voice' Athamas sang '*Mi lusinga il dolce afetto*' from *Alcina*;<sup>227</sup> and instead of 'See, she blushing' (which had gone to Ino) he sang '*Posso morir*' from *Arminio* just before 'See see, Jove's priests and holy augurs come.' Juno sang '*Fatto scorta*' from *Arminio* instead of 'Hence, Iris hence away,' '*Non si Vanti*' from *Giustino* instead of 'Behold in the mirror', and '*Verdi lauri*' also from *Giustino* in place of 'Above measure.'<sup>228</sup> It is possible that Handel's substitution of Italian arias was an indication of *Semele*'s poor reception, and that they were intended to increase the work's popularity as a concession to the opera party. However, a simple explanation is surely more likely. Handel was playing to the strengths of his cast. Neither singer had sung in English oratorios for Handel before (though Galli would become a popular oratorio singer later) and in each case the substituted aria matches the character and general sense of the item it is replacing.<sup>229</sup> In each case the words of the original aria rather than a literal translation of the Italian were given in parallel text. Handel's own easy-going attitude to mixing English and Italian was illustrated in his bilingual *Acis* and *Esther*, but also more recently in the 1738 *Pasticcio*.<sup>230</sup> However, this cavalier treatment of the text would not have endeared him to those who wished to see 'sound and sense' united.

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<sup>225</sup> G.F. Handel, *The Story of Semele, With Additions, as it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden, alter'd from the Semele of Mr. William Congreve, set to Musick by Mr. George Frederick Handel* (London, [December] 1744), p19

<sup>226</sup> Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek. MA/1050

<sup>227</sup> Though this had impeccable English pedigree as it borrowed extensively from 'Would you gain the tender creature?' from *Acis and Galatea*.

<sup>228</sup> *HHB II*, p231

<sup>229</sup> '*Verdi lauri*' in particular. Dean regarded '*Mi Lusinga*' as a positive improvement.

<sup>230</sup> D. Burrows, 'Handel's 1738 Oratorio: A Benefit Pasticcio' in K. Hortschansky, K. Musketa &c (eds), *Georg Freidrich Händel, ein Lebenshalt, Gedenkschrift für Bernd Baselt* (Halle, 1995), pp24-7

Of far more importance to *Semele*'s relationship to contemporary audiences are four substantial cuts in the recitative in Part Three.<sup>231</sup> In three out of the four cases the cuts involved dialogue for Juno, and may have been because Galli had problems with English. It is also possible that Handel had to reduce the duration of the performance having effectively added three arias.<sup>232</sup> However, the cuts barely remove two minutes of material and none of them is musically elegant. Moreover, the normal practice at the time would have been for the dialogue to be printed in the published word-book with the lines not sung appearing in inverted commas. Instead, the sections were removed completely from the published libretto. It is likely to be significant, therefore, that in every case the text included material of an explicitly sexual nature. This suggests that it was felt inappropriate for people to read, as much as hear, it. The first is from Juno's instructions to Morpheus:

Juno. [And more to agitate his kindling fire  
Still let the phantom seem to fly before him,  
That he may wake impetuous, furious in desire,  
Unable to refuse whatever boon  
Her coyness shall require.]<sup>233</sup>

This cut is particularly unmusical as the preceding recitative cadences in F# and the following aria is in A minor. The following two are from Juno and Semele's dialogue just after Semele's intoxication by the mirror, and are equally implausible musically:

Juno. Be wise, as you are beautiful,  
Nor lose this opportunity:  
[When Jove appears, all ardent with desire,  
Refuse his proffer'd flame  
Till you obtain a boon without a name.

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<sup>231</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p394

<sup>232</sup> Ino's 'See, she blushing' replaced recitative; 'Mi lusinga' is much longer than 'your tuneful voice'; 'Posso morir' was an addition, and 'Somnus rise' replaced recitative.

<sup>233</sup> G.F. Handel, *The Story of Semele, With Additions, as it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden, alter'd from the Semele of Mr. William Congreve, set to Musick by Mr. George Frederick Handel* (London, December 1744), p20

- Sem. Can that avail me? ]  
But how shall I attain  
To immortality?
- Juno. Conjure him by his oath  
Not to approach your bed  
In likeness of a mortal,  
But like himself, the mighty thunderer,  
In pomp of majesty  
And heav'nly attire,  
[As when he proud Saturnia charms,  
And with ineffable delights  
Fills her encircling arms,  
And pays the nuptial rites.]<sup>234</sup>

This last cut is particularly ugly as it comes in the middle of a dramatic accompanied recitative, and requires the omission of a concluding cadence. The fact that Galli sang the rest of this (with a slightly revised melodic line) strongly suggests that the issue of singing in English was not the barrier.<sup>235</sup> The final cut is from Jupiter's despairing arioso before Semele's death. The loss of the final third of the music unbalances one of the most beautiful sections of the whole work, and its omission cannot possibly have been on musical grounds. Moreover, it barely removes a minute of music, a fraction of what might have been saved by the cutting of an aria or even 'b' section:

- Jup. [My softest lightning yet I'll try,  
And mildest melting bolt apply;  
In vain, for she was fram'd to prove  
None but the lambent flames of love.  
'Tis past, 'tis past recall,  
She must a victim fall.]<sup>236</sup>

Overall, these changes do not suggest that there was an adverse reaction to the music of *Semele* at its first performance. Rather the opposite, as Handel increased its length. Every musical change can be more than adequately explained by the requirements of

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<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*, pp22-3

<sup>235</sup> G. F. Handel, *Semele* conducting score, pp19-20

<sup>236</sup> Handel, *The Story of Semele, With Additions*, p25

the new cast. However, the cuts in dialogue and their complete removal from the published libretto support the thesis that there was an adverse reaction to some of the language and subject matter. This is supported by the suppression of material from Congreve's libretto by Handel's adapter, and indicates that whilst Handel was freed from some constraints by the absence of staging, the free availability of the libretto produced others.

However, there is evidence that it was one particular reaction which Handel was appeasing. In the intervening months, Handel had been working with Charles Jennens on *Belshazzar*.<sup>237</sup> Jennens' adverse reaction to *Semele* has been considered elsewhere, and it is clear from his letter of 30 November that he had taken the matter up with Handel himself:

I sent one to Mr Handel to subscribe for me to his entertainments, with an exception to *Semele*, upon which he refus'd to take my subscription. I have since given him a 2<sup>nd</sup> dose. Deborah has been perform'd twice to very thin audiences, & *Semele* comes forth to morrow, I hope to a thinner.<sup>238</sup>

Clearly at some point during the summer of 1744, Jennens had given Handel a first 'dose' and taken him to task for the 'baudiness' of *Semele*. Only Handel's side of this correspondence survives for that summer and does not mention it. However, all evidence suggests that Jennens was fearless in criticising Handel. Handel needed to appease Jennens, who was writing his next libretto, and so it seems possible that Handel made the cuts as a concession to his author.<sup>239</sup> However, the cuts are not dramatic improvements, and Handel's perfunctory attitude shows little care in

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<sup>237</sup> This reconciliation was motivated, or at least hastened, by the death of James Miller on 27 April, 1744. Burrows, *Handel*, p277. If not for his death, Miller, whose conservative social views were discussed in Chapter Two, would also have been a likely influence in the toning down of *Semele*.

<sup>238</sup> Charles Jennens to James Harris, 30 November 1744, Burrows & Dunhill, *Music and Theatre*, p208

<sup>239</sup> Handel makes this clear when he says: 'This new favour [*Belshazzar*] will greatly increase my obligations'.... And later in the summer he famously asked Jennens 'to point out these passages in the *Messiah* which you think require altering...' Handel to Charles Jennens, 9 June 1744, in *HHB IV*, p377; Handel to Charles Jennens, 19 July 1744, in *HHB IV*, p377

making the result musically satisfying. They may even have been made at the very last minute, after the second 'dose'.<sup>240</sup> Whilst Handel trusted Jennens' judgement over revisions to *Messiah*, these look much more like temporary excisions to suit a particular situation, and it is likely that Handel regarded the uncut version as the true text. However, it is unlikely that Handel would have acquiesced if he did not think that Jennens' views represented a wider feeling. Unfortunately, there were no further performances under Handel and so it is not possible to trace the further development of these ideas under their composer.

### **The 1762 revival**

*Semele* was never again performed by Handel, but there was a brief revival in 1762 under J. C. Smith the younger. The changes for this production are not directly relevant to the circumstances of 1744, but the sheer volume of cuts is an illustration of how far tastes had moved in eighteen years, and perhaps explain something of why *Semele* dropped out of the repertoire so completely.

Again there were some transpositions, in this case to accommodate a tenor as Athamas. However the most noticeable difference is the drastic reduction in duration. Under the *dramatis personae* in the libretto is the following note:

N.B. The Lines marked thus “ ” are omitted in the Representation on account of the Length of the Piece.<sup>241</sup>

The cuts were substantial. In addition to the recitative cuts made for December 1744, 'b' sections were cut from 'The Morning Lark', 'See, she blushing' (the aria version), and 'Your tuneful voice.' 'Behold in this mirror' returned to a recitative,

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<sup>240</sup> They were only made in pencil on the conducting score.

<sup>241</sup> G.F. Handel, *The Story of Semele, as it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden, alter'd from the Semele of Mr. William Congreve, set to Musick by Mr. George Frederick Handel* (London, 1762)

and 'I ever am granting' and 'Despair no more shall wound me' were removed completely. The section after Jupiter's thunderstorm was also removed from the end of 'Avert these omens' to the end of 'Cease, cease your vows.' The first section of Cadmus' long recitative describing Semele's abduction was also cut, from 'Ah, wretched prince' to Athamas' '...yet another punishment?'.

With the exception of 'Despair no more shall wound me' all of the cuts in arias were indicated by inverted commas and not removed from the libretto. At the same time all the recitative cut for December 1744 was completely omitted from the printed libretto. This is the more remarkable given that the 1762 libretto was freshly typeset.<sup>242</sup> It is possible that the 1762 libretto was compiled from the December 1744 version, in which case the omissions might have been unintentional, but it would have to have been prepared against the changes made in the conducting score and so the performers must have known of the additional dialogue. The comment about the piece's duration is also illuminating. *Semele* runs at approximately 170 minutes. This is much the same as *Judas Maccabaeus*, and a little shorter than *Saul*, though admittedly longer than *Messiah*. *Semele* has a high proportion of *da capo* arias and perhaps this approach to cutting indicates that audiences were becoming impatient with the length of individual airs rather than the duration of the oratorios as a whole. However, the suppression of dialogue from the printed libretto further supports the conclusion that these cuts were considered to be in a different category from the usual changes made either for new singers or for duration. It also suggests that in 1762 the lines were felt to be no more acceptable.

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<sup>242</sup> It is in a different font with completely different decorations.



## Postscript

The published musical edition for the first part of *Semele* went on sale on 25 February, 1744.<sup>243</sup> Walsh advertised the *Second set of Songs in Semele* on 2 March and the third on 10 March. Shortly afterwards, Walsh brought out a complete score (less the recitatives and choruses).<sup>244</sup> It follows the manuscripts rather than the printed word-book in dividing the work into 'Acts' rather than 'Parts', and following the usual practice, gives the performers' names rather than the characters'. It also shows that Avoglio sang Cadmus' lines in the Act One Quartet and Ino's part in 'Prepare then ye'. There was a second edition of the score published around 1750, which perhaps suggests that there was a commercial demand for the music, even if Handel was no longer interested in performing it.<sup>245</sup> The records of the Oxford Music Society show that it was probably performed there at some point during the eighteenth century, but there is no clear indication of exactly when.<sup>246</sup> After Walsh's 1750 score, there were no further printed editions in Handel's lifetime. Arnold published it in 1788 and a German translation with keyboard reduction was published in 1820.<sup>247</sup> It is not clear whether there were performances associated with either of these.

In 1755, Handel re-used 'Hail, Cadmus Hail' and 'Endless Pleasure' in a revival of *Susanna*. This is interesting not only because *Susanna* is arguably the most operatic of the oratorios, but also because in this version it becomes a hymn of praise to the married love of Susanna and Joachim, conforming more fully to the mores of mid-

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<sup>243</sup> This was the songs from Part One.

<sup>244</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele, as it is perform'd at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden Set to Musick by Mr. Handel* (London, 1744)

<sup>245</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele, as it is Perform'd at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, etc. Printed for I. Walsh* (London, 1750)

<sup>246</sup> J. Burchell, *Polite or Commercial Concerts? Concert Management and Orchestral Repertoire in Edinburgh, Bath, Oxford, Manchester, and Newcastle, 1730-1799* (New York & London, 1996), p218

<sup>247</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele. Ein dramatisches Gedicht von Congreve ... nach dem englischen Original bearbeitet, und der Musik im Klavierauszuge untergelegt von J. O. H. Schaum* (Berlin, 1820)

eighteenth century society.<sup>248</sup> Several of *Semele*'s arias developed their own lives as concert pieces. 'O Sleep' was particularly popular in Handel's lifetime,<sup>249</sup> as was 'Myself I shall adore.' Burney commended Francesina's singing of *Semele* arias in 1745,<sup>250</sup> whilst a pencil indication in the Conducting Score suggests that Frasi sang 'There from Mortal cares retiring' at some point.<sup>251</sup> 'Where e're you walk' grew in popularity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to eclipse all the others, but as a complete work, *Semele* disappeared after 1762 for more than a century.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> G. F. Handel, *Semele* conducting score. Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, MA / 1050, I, 89r-103

Hail Virtue Hail / Flame shall bear thee on its wing  
Cease your mourning, joys returning / Songs of Mirth and Triumph Sing  
Endless Pleasure, Endless Love / Joachim will ever prove  
On her bosom soft reclining / Useless now his Glory lies  
To her Arms his fame resigning / Find his Triumphs to her eyes

<sup>249</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, p394. There were performances by Francesina, Frasi, and Faulkener.

<sup>250</sup> C. Burney, *Memoirs of Dr. Charles Burney 1726-1769*, ed. S. Klima, G. Bowers, K.S. Grant (Nebraska, 1988), p2

<sup>251</sup> G.F. Handel, *Semele* conducting score, II, pp4-5. This almost certainly relates to 1762.

<sup>252</sup> There were performances in Cambridge in 1878 & 1925. *ibid.* p394, and W. Dean, 'The recovery of Handel's operas' in C. Hogwood & R. Lockett (eds), *Music in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1983), p104

## Conclusions

In adapting *Semele* for his Lenten season, Handel did not simply present ‘an English opera without action.’<sup>253</sup> He presented the ‘Story of Semele’ after the oratorio manner, adapting his material to suit that genre and taking full advantage of all the possibilities it offered that opera – particularly at that time – did not. This included describing in music a range of things too erotic or too spectacular to realise successfully on stage.<sup>254</sup> It also included grand and sublime choruses and an infusion of the English Purcellian style, neither of which appear in Handel’s operas.<sup>255</sup> Therefore, ‘instead of action to the music, we experience action by music...the three functions of staging, action and singing are amalgamated into one.’<sup>256</sup> Calling *Semele* an opera ignores the huge differences between it and both the Italian and English opera traditions before it. It fails to appreciate its roots in classical tragedy, its dark sublime grandeur, and the deliberate dramatic ambiguities inherent in a work whose action was not intended to be realised on stage. Generically, of course, it led to *Hercules*, *Alexander Balus*, *Belshazzar*, *Jephtha* and *Theodora*.<sup>257</sup> However, as we have seen, in both its secularity and its implicit social and moral attitudes, it sat uneasily within this tradition for contemporaries, and continued to do so throughout the nineteenth century, when Schoelcher opined that ‘without being very puritanical, one has some difficulty in classifying the daughter of Cadmus, who was burnt to death in the arms of that stupid Jupiter, among the worshipful company of the oratorios.’<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Young, *The Oratorios of Handel*, p129

<sup>254</sup> Rosand points out that this was a great advantage in battle scenes in the other oratorios, which became more vivid because presented without the constraints of the baroque stage. E. Rosand, ‘Handel’s Oratorical Narrative’, *GHB* VIII (2000), p37

<sup>255</sup> Dean & Knapp, *Handel’s Operas 1704-1726*, p140

<sup>256</sup> S. Leopold, ‘Semele von John Eccles und Georg Friedrich Händel’ in H.J. Marx (ed.), *Händel auf dem Theater* (Laaber, 1988), p38

<sup>257</sup> Hurley, *Handel’s Muse*, pp4-5

<sup>258</sup> V. Schoelcher, *The Life of Handel* (London, 1857), p287

This survey of Handel's adaptations from Congreve's original libretto therefore highlights the important dramatic, moral and political changes that were deemed necessary when setting the work in 1743. However, whilst the oratorio was not disastrous in the 1744 season, it was never revived and cannot therefore be accounted a success. One of the reasons for this may well have been that the adapters were not acute enough in their judgment of how far to tone down references to sexuality, alcohol, adultery and ambition, particularly in the characterisation of the two female leads; especially as music not only replaced the overt sexuality removed from the text, but also uncomfortably juxtaposed grand Anglican and royal ceremonial images alongside a story that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable for an audience which was more and more interested in English-language works as a moral alternative to the sensuous and foreign Italian operas.

## Conclusions

In choosing the *Semele* libretto to set in the 1743 season, Handel was using a work which contained a range of internal political, social and moral tensions which grew out of its relationship to the events of the first decade of the eighteenth century. In openly rejecting the agenda of Christian moralists, Congreve's *Semele* had delighted in the sensuous and the erotic at a time when society was becoming more censorious and openly upright. At the same time it was an Italianate opera by an English creative team written to forestall the advance of imported opera. The likely political readings within the libretto contained unanswered questions about the succession and when combined with the uninhibited libertinism of the plot, produced tensions which remained unresolved during the thirty-five years which separated it from Handel's setting.

The tensions inherent in the libretto were sharpened by both the political and theatrical context of 1743. As an English-language opera libretto it must be seen as part of the discourse on 'sound and sense' which dominated the London theatres. However, whilst it made sense, it reflected an attitude to morality – particularly sexual morality – which was at odds with British society in general, and with the enthusiasts for English-language opera and oratorio in particular. As an English work by a highly regarded literary figure, it offered Handel the opportunity to compete with Arne's masques, and simultaneously as a clearly operatic drama, it allowed him to appeal to the supporters of opera. With *Semele*, Handel combined the English qualities of the libretto, choruses, and some delightfully Purcellian musical language, with Italianate arias.

However, in seeking to appeal to such a wide range of groups, the work ultimately fell between irreconcilable points. Handel and his adapter were clearly aware of the

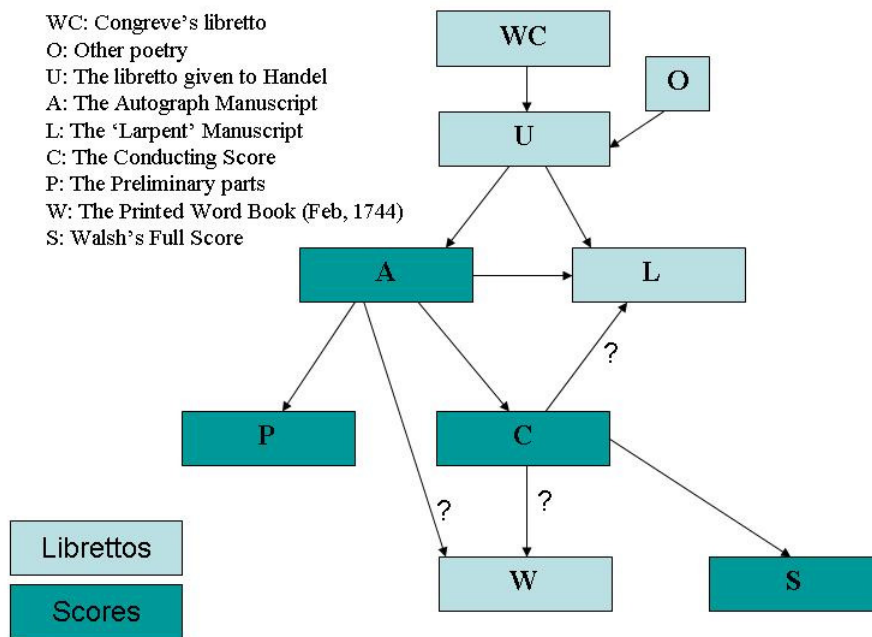
problems and made a range of attempts to mitigate them, but ultimately without success. As it was not in Italian, it does not appear to have won over the opera audiences, who rather took it as an open insult to Middlesex, and possibly Frederick. Since it was not on a biblical text it clearly gave great problems to religiously conservative audiences, who did not feel comfortable seeing a ‘profane’ story during Lent. Its implicit morality was such that it would not have appealed to the enthusiasts for English opera, such as Hill, who in any case had largely abandoned such ambitions by the 1740s.

Handel’s changes to the libretto illustrate that he was aware of these concerns, but his adaptation clearly did not go far enough. Furthermore its political themes also seemed tactless in the 1740s as the Countess of Yarmouth was publicly visible as the King’s consort. This reading was sharpened by Handel’s use of Anglican, royalist sublime in the final chorus, which openly courted identification between the pagan gods and the royal family. With the Jacobite invasion seemingly imminent, the portrayal of Jupiter as a charismatic lover may have seemed too close to traditional images of the Stuarts for comfort. Moreover, *Semele* contains absolutely no message of patriotism which was a mainstay of the political opposition in the 1730s and 40s and would become a nationally unifying sentiment as the threat of invasion became real in 1745.

Both settings of *Semele* seem to have missed narrow windows of opportunity for widespread success in the eighteenth century. In both cases, but particularly Handel’s, this illustrates not only the ways in which this piece of art reflected prevailing social, political and religious mores, but also the very sensitive ways in which it did not. This in itself illustrates how mercurial and dynamic that period was, and how richly Congreve and Handel’s libretto related to a wide and varied range of concerns, moral, religious, aesthetic, and political. Just as a negative picture sometimes illustrates an image more clearly than the original, so *Semele*’s dissonances with the world of 1744 place the temper of the time into sharp relief.

## Appendix One: Tabulation of sources for Handel's *Semele*

## Sources for Handel's *Semele*



## Appendix Two: Handel's Original Tonal Structure for *Semele*

The re-writing of Athamas as a tenor and the transposition of some of Francesina's arias before the first performance and the 1762 revival obscured Handel's careful original tonal design.<sup>1</sup> Whilst it is important not to over-generalise about Handel's key associations, what is most remarkable here is the predominance of the minor in a work which most people remember as light and predominantly sunny. This also points to his debt to Purcell who also had a strong preference for the minor,<sup>2</sup> and to the minor key eroticism in Eccles' setting. In its original form, there were 21 numbers in minor keys.<sup>3</sup> This lends Handel's setting a sense of melancholy and impending disaster from the outset, which imparts another level of gravity to the score.

Act One has two tonal centres. The first is C minor, where the overture and action proper begin. It is the key of Semele's first aria, Athamas' second aria and Athamas and Ino's explosive duet. Dean has suggested that this and F minor (the key of Semele's death) were Handel's keys of 'profound gloom.'<sup>4</sup> The entire first act is dominated by the related keys of Bb, Eb and C minor's dominant, G. This use of G, normally a relaxed, pastoral key, for ostensibly happy arias undercuts their surface cheerfulness in this tonal context by its harmonic pull back towards C minor. The other strong tonal centre in Act One is that around F. This is the key of the consummation of Semele and Jupiter's relationship. It is in F minor that Cadmus recounts the tale of Semele's abduction and it is the chorus (Hail, Cadmus Hail) and then Semele herself who take this and transform it into the major key for the

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<sup>1</sup> The original structure can be seen in the table below.

<sup>2</sup> E.J. Dent, *Foundations of English Opera* (Cambridge & London, 1928), p204. Dent contrasts this with Lully who uses the minor much more sparingly. As shown in Chapter Three, it is very much a feature of the Eccles setting.

<sup>3</sup> After the completion of the Manuscript score but before the changes made for the first performance.

<sup>4</sup> W. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford, 1959), p60



celebrations which conclude the Act. F major was a favourite key for Handel both for pastoral joy and to portray pagan celebrations.<sup>5</sup> It also allowed liberal use of horns, and it is clear that Handel originally intended Act One to prefigure the conclusion of Act Three's harmonic transformation from F minor to F major. Both Semele's death and the chorus' terror-struck reaction are in F minor, with Apollo's *sinfonia* rather abruptly turning sorrow to joy and the tonality to F major with his annunciation of Bacchus' victory. Handel's draft of 'Then mortals be merry' followed this tonal scheme, but when he re-wrote the finale as 'Happy shall we be,' the triumphant conclusion is in D major and has a quite different character. Handel thus set up an opposition between the dark C minor and F minor perhaps representing fate, set against the pastoral idyll of F major which only exists in fiction.

Juno in Act Two begins in B flat, Handel's key for extrovert tyrants, but she concludes in F minor, appropriately prefiguring the death of Semele's as she plans it. The remainder of Act Two was originally structured around G major, but the removal of 'Come Zephyrs Come' left it without a strong centre. The most noticeable feature of the tonality the D minor of Semele's 'With fond desiring' which again emphasises both the eroticism and melancholy of their love. The main body of Act Three is dominated by D, both major and minor. Most of the Cave of Sleep takes place in D major with the opening *sinfonia* unable to drag itself away, ending in G minor and quickly returned to D by Juno's entrance.<sup>6</sup> Likewise the recitative only manages to cadence on A, effectively functioning as an imperfect cadence in D. D is therefore the key of both Somnus' arias. The scene ends with an abrupt and comically dark turn to A minor for 'obey my will', but even this is really only the minor form of the dominant. The following scenes, between Semele and Juno and then Semele and Jupiter, by contrast cannot settle on a tonal centre at all. Mirroring

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<sup>5</sup> According to Mellers, Handel's key of the Pastoral Golden Age, but interestingly not used at the end of Act Two. Mellers, W., *Harmonious Meeting, A Study of the Relationship between English Music, Poetry and Theatre* (London, 1965), p247

<sup>6</sup> As shown in Chapter Three, this is due to the borrowing from Scarlatti. Handel generally preferred E or E flat major for sleep and serenity, as seen in 'O sleep' in Act Two. Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, *ibid.*

Semele's agitated confusion and Juno's manipulation of her the music moves restlessly from F to E minor and from G to F# minor. In each case the major tonality is undercut by the minor key a semitone below. The use of G for 'Myself I shall adore' may also be a deliberate echo of Act One, where G major appeared mainly as the dominant of C minor and was thus an agent of ill-fated relationships. With Jupiter's arrival, Semele pulls the music back towards D minor, the key of 'With fond desiring', and the relative minor of F - the key in which their relationship was consummated. Jupiter's attempts to move the music into F with 'speak speak your desire' are brushed aside as Semele makes her demands in the dark, doom laden D minor 'Then cast off this human shape'. Handel originally moved through a cycle of fourths in the following arias, but marked in the manuscript for 'No no I'll take no less' to be transposed from E into D minor. This may have been to alleviate the hugely demanding coloratura and top As that he had written for Francesina, but its effect is also to give the impression of Semele 'wedded' to the key and stubbornly refusing to move. As we have seen, none of this impedes the work concluding in a triumphant D major.

**Table: The tonal structure of Handel's version (original draft)**

**Act I**

	Item	Key	Character
1	Ouverture	<b>Cm</b>	-
2	Accomp. 'Behold! Auspicious Flashes'	Cm – Eb	Cadmus
3	Lucky Omens	<b>Bb</b>	Chorus
4	Daughter, obey	Eb - Bb	Cadmus
5	Ah Me! – 'O Jove'	Cm	Semele
6	The Morning Lark	<b>G</b>	Semele
7b	See, she blushing turns her eyes	<b>Eb</b>	Ino
[8]	Hymen Haste	<b>G</b>	Athamas (tenor)
9	Alas she yields...	Gm - B	Ino - Athamas
10	Why dost thou thus untimely	<b>Em</b>	Quartet
11	Avert these omens	<b>Dm</b>	Chorus
12	Again auspicious flashes rise	A - E	Cadmus
13	Thy aid pronubial Juno	A – F#	Athamas/Semele
14	Cease, cease your vows	<b>D</b>	Chorus
15	O Athamas	F# - Gm	Athamas
16	Turn Hopeless Lover	<b>Dm</b>	Ino
17	She weeps	B - D	Athamas

*The Historical Context of Handel's Semele*  
*Appendix Two: Handel's Original Tonal Structure for Semele*

18	Your tuneful voice	<b>Cm</b>	Athamas (tenor)
19	Too well I see	G - ?	Page of orig. lost
20	You've undone me	<b>Cm</b> <sup>1</sup>	Ino/Athamas

21	Ah Wretched Prince	Fm - D	Cadmus etc.
22	Hail, Cadmus Hail	<b>F</b>	Chorus
23	Endless Pleasure	<b>F</b>	Semele? + Chorus

**Act II**

24	Sinfonia	<b>Bb</b>	-
25	Iris, impatient	Bb - D	Juno- Iris
26	There from mortal	<b>Bb</b>	Iris
27	Accomp. No more...	Gm - Ab	Juno
28	Hence, Iris Hence away	<b>Fm</b>	Juno

29	Come Zephyrs come	<b>G</b>	Cupid
30	O sleep	<b>E</b> (b)	Semele
31	Let me no another moment	C# - F#	Semele
32	Lay your doubts	<b>A</b>	Jupiter
33	You are mortal	D - A	Jupiter
34	With fond desiring	<b>Dm</b>	Semele
35	How engaging	<b>Dm</b>	Chorus
36	Ah me....	Bb - F#	Semele - Jupiter
37	I must with speed	<b>D</b>	Jupiter
38	Now Love that everlasting	<b>G</b>	Chorus
39	By my command	- C	Jupiter etc.
40	Where e'er you walk	<b>Bb</b>	Jupiter
41	Dear Sister	D - E	Semele - Ino
42	But hark	<b>A</b>	Ino
43	Prepare then ye	<b>A</b>	Ino/Semele
44	Bless the glad earth	<b>D - G</b>	Chorus

**Act III**

45	Sinfonia	<b>D - Gm</b>	-
46	Somnus awake!	<b>D</b> - (A)	Juno - Iris
47	Leave me, loathsome light	<b>D</b>	Somnus
48	Dull God	B - A	Iris - Juno
49	More sweet is that name	<b>D</b>	Somnus
50	My will obey	D - C	Juno - Somnus
51	Obey my will	<b>Am</b>	Somnus / Juno

52	My racking thoughts	<b>F</b>	Semele
53	Thus shaped like Ino	C-B	Juno - Semele
53a	Behold in this mirror (aria)	<b>Em</b>	Juno
53b	O ecstasy	A - D	Semele
54	Myself I shall adore	<b>G</b>	Semele
55	Be wise as you are beautiful (accomp)	<b>A</b>	Juno - Semele
56	Thus let my thanks be paid	<b>F#m</b>	Semele
57	Rich odours	F# - D	Juno - Semele
58	Come to my arms	<b>Gm</b>	Jupiter
59	O Semele	C - A	Jupiter

*The Historical Context of Handel's Semele*  
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60	I ever am granting	<b>Dm</b>	Semele
61	Speak, speak your desire	<b>C</b>	Jupiter
62	You'll grant what I require?	<b>Bb – F</b>	Semele - Jupiter
63	Then Cast off this human shape	<b>Dm</b>	Semele
64	Ah! Take heed	<b>Am</b>	Jupiter
65	No No! I'll take no less	<b>Em</b>	Semele
66	Ah, whither is she gone	<b>Bm</b>	Jupiter
67	Above measure	<b>G</b>	Juno

68	Ah Me! Too late I now repent	<b>Fm</b>	Semele
69	Of my ill-boding dream	<b>Ab</b>	Ino
70	Oh terror!	<b>Fm</b>	Chorus
71	How I was hence removed	<b>Bb– Dm</b>	Ino – Cadmus - Athamas
73	See from above	<b>F - C</b>	Cadmus
74	Sinfonia	<b>F</b>	-
75	Then Mortals be merry	<b>F</b>	Chorus

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