



Lohengrin (Richard Wagner). Emma Vetter (Elsa) and Michael Weinius (Lohengrin), Royal Opera, Stockholm, 2012. Photographer: Alexander Kenney. Copyright CC-BY-NC-ND, Royal Opera, Stockholm.

2. No Questions Asked: Wagnerian Love Ban in *Lohengrin*

The fascination of operatic art resides in its abundance. Liberated from the constraints of realism and probability, the spectator can surrender to it or to turn away entirely, and enjoy it like an oyster: either swallowed whole or not at all.¹ The critical operagoer, particularly a feminist one, has many challenging positions to negotiate. Will the confrontation lead to a rejection of the entire genre?

Susan McClary observes that the aspect of music that is most difficult to account for is its almost frightening ability to make our entire body respond to its rhythms.² What, then, would opera be without music? What would remain if the music were stripped away and all that were left was the libretto? Could it stand on its own? The text of an opera or musical drama represents a unique genre. Unlike other dramatic texts, an opera's libretto is made whole only by the musical accompaniment and the events that accompany it on stage. A libretto is generally shorter and more fragmentary than any other type of dramatic text because it takes at least three times longer to sing a piece than to recite it. One needs to leave room for the music: the form demands it.³

Nevertheless, it should be possible to carry out a dispassionate reading of a libretto, as we shall here attempt with Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1848). It seems impossible to consider *Lohengrin* without its music; however, the reverse is also true. Wagner wished to unite the verbal with the musical in order to create a *Ton-Wort-Drama*. Combined with the score and the spectacle that unfolds on stage, this new form of drama was supposed to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (unified work of art) that Wagner hoped would establish stagecraft as a hyper-art.

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In order to examine the fate of *Lohengrin's* female lead Elsa from a feminist perspective we first should consider what that perspective means. Gayle Austin defines it as follows:

A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some 'invisible' mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body. It means paying attention to women as writers and as readers or audience members. It means taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture, and that is not the point of view of women.⁴

One of the basic principles that feminist theory shares with other theories of cultural criticism is that seeing/reading/listening can never be neutral. It is always bound up with a specific historical context and is expressed from a particular cultural perspective. A woman has a dual focus (what has been called a sidelong glance), looking simultaneously in two directions.⁵ Thus, feminist aesthetic analysis must begin with the fact that a woman is defined – to use Simone de Beauvoir's terminology – as “the other” and is taught to regard herself as such. However, “other” here must not be confused with *otherness*, which is a potentially positive marker of gender difference denoting the ordinal position of being second, that is, coming after the first, masculine gender.

The basic rule for a feminist reading of dramatic texts is that the reader must resist the canonized masterpieces of dramatic literature.⁶ The same principle may be applied to their traditional interpretations. A feminist reading is here combined with an empathetic approach, assuming that the assessment of any work must be contextual. The feminist viewpoint clashes undeniably with Wagner's notion of women, whereas a patient, less single-minded reading may help us understand and enjoy *Lohengrin* more fully.

Woman as outsider

A patriarchally constructed and managed theatrical institution assigns women a special position. The long tradition of women appearing on stage has them dancing, singing, undressing, and

dressing in front of the relentless, often admiring gaze of the audience. As Ann Kaplan writes, “Men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it.”⁷ Not being in possession of a subject position and gaze is concomitant with the more general exclusion of women from the sphere of the arts.

Mimesis, as defined by Aristotle, characterizes not only poetry, but encompasses theatre as well. In the fourth chapter of his *Poetics*, he identifies mimesis as an aspect of human nature, and uses the concept to express the step from the social world into the realm of poetry.⁸ According to Aristotle, imitation is a fundamental human need. Although he was probably referring to both women and men, mimesis in ancient Greek theatre excludes women. The concept is a masculine one, defined by and for men. In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case points out that mimesis also bars women from the sphere of aesthetic experience in general. She finds the definitions in the *Poetics* based on a combination of social reality and aesthetic rules that render women outsiders in both areas.⁹

Not only are women excluded from the aesthetic system in general; according to Case their function in drama is to set boundaries for the masculine subject in order to facilitate the plastic definition of his outline, or, alternatively, illustrate ways in which women differ from men. Such a gender difference is expressed by clarifying male characteristics at the expense of women’s. Case concludes that the woman is made invisible, and this invisibility creates an empty space that turns our attention to the masculine subject. The effect is that women are shown as subjects only insofar as they contribute to the definition of the male character.¹⁰

In her 1978 feminist theatre manifesto “Aller à la mer,” Hélène Cixous proclaims that going to the theatre for a woman is like going to her own funeral. The key issue for Cixous is how women can attend the theatre without being complicit in the institutional sadism directed against them. The female spectator occupies the victim’s position within the patriarchal family structure that is repeated ad nauseum in the theatre. Who is this female victim? As examples of women victimized in drama Cixous lists Electra, Antigone, Ophelia, and Cordelia. “In every man,” Cixous writes,

“there is a dethroned King Lear who requires his daughter to idealize him: ‘Tell me that I am the greatest, the me-est, the most like a king, or I’ll kill you!’”¹¹

Women and opera

As stated in Chapter 1, the discourse on women and opera is dominated by two approaches. The first sees women as victims of operatic art – victims who have no voice and no subject position. Catherine Clément analyzes opera as a sacrificial rite in which the entire operation is in the hands of men. Women, however independent or active they may appear, are sacrificed, particularly if they are rebellious women. According to Clément, what is relevant is not that women in operas die (men die, too), but *how* they die. And there are so many ways to die. Carmen, Gilda, Butterfly, and a number of others die from a stab wound, some by their own hand. Violetta and Mimi die of tuberculosis. Norma, Brünnhilde, and Jeanne d’Arc are burned at the stake. Senta and Tosca leap to their deaths. Some drown or are poisoned, others die of a variety of causes, like Antonia, Isolde, and Mélisande.¹²

Carolyn Abbate offers another perspective on women in opera. In contrast to Clément she claims that opera actually gives voice to women. While librettists provide relatively little character leeway for women, vocally the opera offers them much greater latitude than the classical theatre.¹³ It is not the score, but the experience of a voice that has the capacity to overcome the “masculinity” of a piece of music. The voice is able to vibrate and convey new and unexpected meanings.

Wagner’s intense female voices represent a turning point in the history of the theatre. In contrast to the young dramatic *spinto* sopranos in bel canto, Wagner’s women generate a larger volume of sound than any female operatic heroines had done before. The unusually deep orchestra pit in Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth also has the effect of amplifying the singers’ voices, carrying them over and above the sounds of the orchestra. This serves Wagner’s aim of creating a vocal style in which music and language merge, so that the declamation of the dramatic text is enunciated clearly.

Abbate’s idea of opera as an opportunity to give voice to women is based on the musicological texts of Roland Barthes in

which he discusses what he calls, *le grain de la voix*, the grain of the voice.¹⁴ Barthes conceives of the voice as a new kind of author, singing inside every text. Music and voice both take something that is linguistically unarticulated and raise until it becomes a new entity. That articulation resounds in the listener, who is charmed by it. Voice is that elusive element in which body and language meet without merging completely.

In the musical fusion of the abstract and the concrete/corporeal we can glimpse Barthes's dream of an art form that lacks any system of signifier/signified.¹⁵ Questioning the hierarchical and gendered subject-object positions of traditional aesthetics is one way to search for alternative modes of understanding. Barthes, who seldom uses the terms of gender theory in his arguments, ascribes to the voice the power of femininity. According to him, the "grain" of the voice is the materiality of the body speaking in its mother tongue. Setting the voice in opposition to the masculine logos is a common device in French psychoanalytic and feminist theory, which often emphasizes the prelinguistic stage as one of femininity and maternity.

Set against this background, Barthes's arguments can be seen as approaching the Western cliché of the "femininity" of music. In fact, Wagner, in an essay entitled "Oper und Drama," writes that music is a woman.¹⁶ Voice is a singular phenomenon, a non-category. In its vibration it goes beyond the classical linguistic signifier and becomes a throbbing that rises from the depths of the human body. The singer's voice conjures up another realm, a realm of meaning beyond language. Enraptured listening is a path that takes us to this space; but in addition to direct experience, it requires of us knowledge of aesthetic structures that are both gendered and hierarchical.

Women in Wagner's oeuvre

Wagner's writings, his operas in particular, demonstrate a considerable interest in women and femininity. The notion of women that appears in his texts is essentialist: men are active, women are passive. A woman not only receives a man's sperm and bears his children, but her soul and will are completely dependent on him. A woman loves because she must, Wagner declares in an essay on "Oper und Drama."¹⁷ Without love, a woman is nothing.

Impossible and irreconcilable love is a recurring Wagnerian theme. Nearly all the women in his operas take great risks in trying to integrate their loves and their lives; it belongs to their utopian potential. That is why a woman's fall is so profound and her tragedy so great. A good woman is a loving woman, and most heroines in Wagner's operas are good according to his standards of loving and suffering. The only evil woman in Wagner's operas is Ortrud, Elsa's rival in *Lohengrin*. She represents a demonic woman who only has her own interests at heart and does not shrink from political power.

Wagner's female roles can be divided among the following types, some of which overlap:

1. The innocent victim: Ada (*Die Feen*), Senta (*Der fliegende Holländer*), Elisabeth (*Tannhäuser*), Elsa (*Lohengrin*), Brünnhilde (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), Isolde (*Tristan und Isolde*)
2. The self-sacrificing, loving woman: Senta (*Der fliegende Holländer*), Elisabeth (*Tannhäuser*)
3. The mistress: Venusberg women (*Tannhäuser*), Sieglinde and Gutrune (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), Isolde (*Tristan und Isolde*), Eva (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*)
4. The wife: Mariana (*Liebesverbot*), Ortrud (*Lohengrin*), Fricka (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), the noblewomen of the chorus (*Tannhäuser*)
5. The evil, power-thirsty woman: Ortrud (*Lohengrin*)
6. The seductress who longs to be saved: Kundry (*Parsifal*)
7. The witch: Dilmovaz (*Die Feen*)
8. The sister: Lora (*Die Feen*), Isabella (*Liebesverbot*), Irene (*Rienzi*)
9. The loyal maidservant: Drolla (*Die Feen*), Dorella (*Liebesverbot*), Brangäne (*Tristan und Isolde*)
10. A woman dressed as a boy (Wagner's trouser roles): Adriano (*Rienzi*), a messenger of peace (*Rienzi*), four nobles and a young shepherd (*Tannhäuser*), and an esquire (*Parsifal*)
11. Mythological characters:
 - a) Goddesses: Venus (*Tannhäuser*), Erda, Fricka, Freia (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*)

- b) Demigoddesses: Brünnhilde, the Norns, Rhine maidens, other Valkyries
- c) Fairies (Ada, Zemira, Farzana) and other embodiments of nature, such as birds in the forest and flower maidens¹⁸

Wagner almost invariably introduces love on the operatic stage through female characters. In *Der fliegende Holländer*, he describes Senta as “the woman of the future.”¹⁹ She sacrifices herself out of love to save a man. Here Wagner follows the motif of “redemption through the woman,” of which Gretchen is the paradigm in the first part of Goethe’s *Faust*. However, the endless sacrifices and love projects of Wagner’s women are doomed to fail when they come up against men’s actions and power. The same conflict between love and reality is found throughout Wagner’s operas, including *Lohengrin*.

Lohengrin: Synopsis

Lohengrin is an opera in three acts that stylistically lies somewhere between a romantic opera and Wagner’s later conception of a music drama. It is based on the medieval legend of a mysterious knight who arrives in a swan-drawn carriage to rescue a woman in distress. Overcoming the enemy, he takes her as his wife, but forbids her ever to ask him his name or origin. When she eventually does, he leaves her, never to return. The first German language version of the Lohengrin legend is *Parzival*, written around 1210 by Wolfram von Eschenbach, from which the characters in Wagner’s opera are taken.

In Act I of *Lohengrin*, King Heinrich of Germany (bass) arrives in the rich Duchy of Brabant to levy a tax. He notes that disputes have arisen in the town since the death of the late Duke. The Duke’s successor, Friedrich von Telramund (baritone), instead of giving the king an explanation, accuses Elsa von Brabant (soprano) of causing the disappearance of her younger brother, Gottfried (mute role). Telramund, in addition to being Elsa’s and Gottfried’s godfather, is also Elsa’s rejected suitor. When the accusation is compounded by the possibility of fratricide, King Heinrich sees no alternative but to refer the matter to God’s judgment. When no one appears to defend Elsa, she desperately prays that God may

send her a champion in the person of a knight she saw in a dream. Miraculously, that knight (tenor) does appear, borne by a swan. He is ready to do combat for Elsa, but he requires of her that she never ask him his origin or name. Elsa gives her word. The knight confesses his love for her and she has no hesitation in agreeing to be his wife. The unknown knight then defeats Telramund in combat, but spares his life.

Telramund's wife, Ortrud (soprano/mezzo-soprano), is an ambitious woman and in Act II she works her manipulations on Telramund and Elsa. In Act III Elsa poses the forbidden question to her husband by asking him his name. Furious, he accuses her of betraying his trust. Now the knight must disclose his identity. He reveals that he is Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal, known to all from the story of the Holy Grail. After this announcement he must return to the Grail. Grieving, he bids farewell to the forlorn Elsa, leaving her his sword, a silver horn, and the ring of the Grail. Ortrud is overjoyed and convinced that she has now gained ascendancy in Brabant. At that moment Elsa's brother, Gottfried, reappears and is proclaimed the new ruler by Lohengrin.

The story of *Lohengrin* is a mixture of classical tragedy, Christian mythology, and nineteenth century melodrama. Following the latter's conventions, the characters represent polar opposites, such as good and evil or sin and innocence. Antagonists (Ortrud/Telramund) and protagonists (Elsa/Lohengrin) comprise the fundamental dramatic types. The drama begins with a moral conflict, the key theme of which involves sexual identity – particularly female virtue and purity. The virtuous woman suffers more deeply and sings with greater poignancy than all the rest.

Overture

The external story in *Lohengrin* is about combat and other characteristically masculine conflicts, whereas the internal story is about the unhappy love between Elsa, an earthly woman, and Lohengrin, a divine hero. The dramatic precision and consistency of the internal action rests on several elements: the prelude, Elsa's dream, the injunction against questioning, and its violation, and the climactic story of the Holy Grail in Act III.

The music in *Lohengrin* inhabits several worlds: the sphere of military conflict, Lohengrin's quest for the Grail, and, by contrast, the pagan world of black magic represented by Ortrud and Telramund. For the most part, Wagner keeps these worlds apart until the encounter between Elsa and Lohengrin. The pair's solemnity is the mood that pervades the opera.²⁰

In an article on *Lohengrin*, Helga-Maria Palm finds the opera emotionally barren, since feelings are not openly expressed.²¹ However, even if they cannot be seen, the emotions can be heard: the opera is permeated with longing and renunciation. The love of the Grail knight for the virgin Elsa remains unrequited. Pure love does exist between them, but a bodily union never takes place. The earthly and the heavenly cannot become one.

The internal action finds its finest expression in the prelude, built around the Grail theme as a symbol of sublime good. This symphonic poem establishes the emotional climate for the opera. It opens with a long crescendo played by the strings that seem to be holding their breath, accompanied by a few woodwinds alternating with the whispered pianissimo notes of a solo violin. The Grail theme is stated by the woodwinds together with the strings in a lower register, then by an English horn; and the climax is supported by trombones, trumpets, and a tuba.

The dramaturgy of the prelude tells the story of how the miraculous Grail was sent down to the earth, revealed to the people, and then taken up into the heavens again. As the goblet used in the Last Supper, the Grail is possessed of miraculous powers. According to legend, Joseph of Arimathea collected the blood of the Christ in it. Somehow the Grail has come into the possession of knights in distant Montsalvat in the Pyrenees. The sombre mood of the prelude suffuses the music of the internal action of the opera, the love between Elsa and Lohengrin. The Grail leitmotif, used sparingly in Act I, is heard in its entirety in the retelling of the story of the Grail that concludes the opera.

Elsa's dream (Act I, Scene 2)

Following the stately prelude, we are cast into the abrasive, masculine world of political conflict and warfare. A fanfare announces

the royal presence, and a large male chorus backs the heavy voices of the two rulers, King Heinrich and Duke Telramund. When Elsa is called into the King's presence to defend herself from the accusations against her, the music shifts to the pale tones of the woodwinds. For Wagner, the oboe represents ingenuousness, innocence, and chastity, but he also associates it with lament, yearning, and pain.²² Wagner increased the number of flutes, oboes, and bassoons in *Lohengrin*. The oboe is also used in conjunction with Elsa's counterparts, Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer*, and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*.

Elsa's dream state is signaled by a melody in the oboe that evokes her inner world. At her first appearance she approaches men timidly, but without fear. Charges are hurled at her, yet she remains abstracted and introspective. She stands alone, supported only by the female chorus that raises its voices when no one else is willing to defend her.

Elsa's dream is in three parts. The first, *Einsam in trüben Tagen* (Lonely, in troubled days) relates the hopelessness of her predicament. She then describes the knight who appears to her in her dream, *In lichter Waffen Scheine* (In splendid, shining armour), confident that he will come to her rescue. In the third part, she repeats the lines *des Ritters will ich wahren, er soll mein Streiter sein* (I will wait for the knight; he shall be my champion) as the time frame shifts to the future.

<p>Elsa: Einsam in trüben Tagen hab' ich zu Gott gefleht, des Herzens tiefstes Klagen ergoss ich im Gebet. Da drang aus meinem Stöhnen ein Laut so klagevoll, der zu gewalt'gem Tönen weit in die Lüfte scholl: Ich hört' ihn fernhin hallen, bis kaum mein Ohr er traf; mein Aug' ist zugefallen, ich sank in süssen Schlaf.</p>	<p>Elsa: Lonely, in troubled days I prayed to the Lord, my most heartfelt grief I poured out in prayer. And from my groans there issued a plaintive sound that grew into a mighteous roar as it echoed through the skies: I listened as it receded into the distance until my ear could scarce hear it; my eyes closed and I fell into a deep sleep.²³</p>
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<p>Elsa: In lichter Waffen Scheine ein Ritter nahte da, so tugendlicher Reine ich keinen noch ersah: ein golden Horn zur Hüften, gelehnet auf sein Schwert, so trat er aus den Lüften zu mir, der Recke wert; mit züchtigem Gebaren gab Tröstung er mir ein; <i>(mit erhobener Stimme)</i> des Ritters will ich wahren, <i>(schwärmerisch)</i> er soll mein Streiter sein!</p>	<p>Elsa: In splendid, shining armour a knight approached, a man of such pure virtue as I had never seen before: a golden horn at his side, leaning on his sword – thus he appeared to me from nowhere, this warrior true; with kindly gestures he gave me comfort; <i>(in a louder voice)</i> I will wait for the knight, <i>(dreamily)</i> he shall be my champion!</p>
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<p>Elsa: <i>(hat Stellung und schwärmerische Miene nicht verlassen, alles blickt mit Gespanntheit auf sie; fest)</i> Des Ritters will ich wahren, er soll mein Streiter sein! <i>(ohne sich umzublicken)</i> Hört, was dem Gottgesandten ich biete für Gewähr: – In meines Vaters Landen die Krone trage er; mich glücklich soll ich preisen, nimmt er mein Gut dahin – will er Gemahl mich heissen, geb' ich ihm, was ich bin!²⁴</p>	<p>Elsa: <i>(She still looks enraptured; everyone watches her in expectation)</i> I will wait for the knight, he shall be my champion! <i>(without looking round)</i> Hear what reward I offer the one sent by God: in my father's lands he shall wear the crown. I shall consider myself happy if he takes my possessions – if he wishes to call me spouse, I shall give him all that I am!</p>
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In the dream story, the dramatic focus gradually moves away from Elsa's lamentation and increasingly onto the knight whom she is convinced will come to her aid. Elsa's situation is one of utter helplessness: no one is willing to fight for her. In the first part of the dream, this helplessness is expressed, but no male voices are heard. In the second and third parts, there are short interjections

by King Heinrich and the male chorus, and the strings tacitly play the Grail leitmotif in anticipation of the knight's entrance.

Elsa is not the only character in Wagner to draw a man to her telepathically, as it were: in *Der fliegende Holländer* (Act II, Scene 3), Senta recounts a similar dream:

<p>Senta: Versank ich jetzt in wunderbares Träumen, was ich erblicke, ist es Wahn? Weil' ich bisher in trügerischen Räumen, brach des Erwachens Tag heut an? Er steht vor mir mit leidenvollen Zügen, es spricht sein unerhörter Gram zu mir. Kann tiefen Mitleids Stimme mich belügen? Wie ich ihn oft gesehn, so steht er hier. Die Schmerzen, die in meinem Busen brennen, ach! dies Verlangen, wie soll ich es nennen? Wonach mit Sehnsucht es dich treibt – das Heil, würd' es, du Ärmster, dir durch mich zuteil!²⁵</p>	<p>Senta: Am I deep in a wonderful dream? What I see, is it mere fancy? Have I been till now in some false world, is my day of awakening dawning? He stands before me, his face lined with suffering, it reveals his terrible grief to me: can deep pity's voice lie to me? As I have often seen him, here he stands. The pain that burns within my breast, ah, this longing, how shall I name it? What you yearn for, salvation, would it came true, poor man, through me!</p>
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Dramatic *Sprechgesang*, a kind of German *recitative*, is a particular way of treating language and dialogue. *Lohengrin* has his own, distinctive vocal melody, which, Palm suggests, together with the instrumentation, are the most important dramatic means of expression in the opera.²⁶ They both are used to advance the plot, whereas the purely orchestral passages only play a supportive and accompanying role.

Elsa's dream exemplifies vocal melody. The dream story is a coherent, systematically constructed verbal composition in which the evocation of a mood of lamentation is underscored by the choice of lyrics and the use of vowels. The mournful sound is created with vowels, especially the open *A* vowel:

da drang aus meinem Stöhnen / ein Laut so klagevoll, der zu
gewalt'gem Tönen / weit in die Lüfte schwoh.

As Elsa falls asleep, Wagner brings the open *A* sound together with an alliterative phrase based on the *S* sound. The lament weakens and dissipates in sibilants: "Mein Aug' ist zugefallen, ich sank in süßen Schlaf."²⁷

Then the miracle Elsa witnesses in the dream comes true, and a knight approaches in a boat drawn by a swan. Lohengrin's entrance is a choral epiphany in which the knight of the Holy Grail descends from the heavens to defend and save the innocent Elsa. In keeping with the structure of classical Aristotelian drama, many nineteenth-century operas and melodramas included a scene in which a revelation or an act of recognition gives a new, unexpected turn to events. Often the scene is built around the figure of a mysterious stranger. In *Lohengrin* this first takes place with the arrival of the knight, and it occurs once more in connection with the Grail story that brings the opera to a close. Lohengrin's magnificent entrance as the heavens part is a theatrical convention that satisfies the formulaic requirement of visual extravagance.

An important aspect of the emotional dramaturgy of the dream is that Elsa expects to receive not only help, but also gain a husband who will inherit her father's kingdom. In the libretto, her willing subjugation is explicit: *geb' ich ihm alles, was ich bin* (I shall give him all that I am). Elsa's submission is a token of her boundless gratitude for Lohengrin's heroic act and includes agreeing to his injunction against asking his name.

The Forbidden Question (*Frageverbot*) (Act 1, Scene 3)

The love that is kindled between Lohengrin and Elsa signifies the union of the heavenly and the earthly spheres, although it is conditional in Lohengrin's case:

<p>Lohengrin: Elsa, soll ich dein Gatte heissen, soll Land und Leut' ich schirmen dir, soll nichts mich wieder vor dir reissen, musst eines du geloben mir: <i>(sehr langsam)</i> Nie sollst du mich befragen, noch Wissens Sorge tragen, woher ich kam der Fahrt, noch wie mein Nam' und Art! Lohengrin: <i>(gesteigert, sehr ernst)</i> Elsa! Hast du mich wohl vernommen? <i>(noch bestimmter)</i> Nie sollst du mich befragen, noch Wissens Sorge tragen, woher ich kam der Fahrt, noch wie mein Nam' und Art!²⁸</p>	<p>Lohengrin: Elsa, if I am to become your husband, if I am to protect country and people for you, if nothing is ever to take me from you, then you must promise me one thing: <i>(very slowly)</i> Never shall you ask me, nor trouble yourself to know, whence I journeyed, what my name is, or what my origin! Lohengrin: <i>(with passion, very earnestly)</i> Elsa! Do you understand what I am saying? <i>(even more forcefully)</i> Never shall you ask me nor trouble yourself to know whence I journeyed, what my name is, or what my origin!</p>
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This injunction, which also has a musical refrain related to Lohengrin's leitmotif, is the key to the fundamental conflict in *Lohengrin*. After it has been stated, the spectator watches the question begin to grow in Elsa's mind. It comes as a warning from somewhere between the world of the Grail and the realm of Ortrud's black magic, and acts to draw together and force apart. The divine cannot be joined with the human: to try is to commit an act of hubris that contains the seed of disaster.²⁹

The attempts of heroines in Wagner's operas to create a space for love are defeated by the deeds and power of men. In Elsa's case, Telramund, the rejected suitor, conspires with Ortrud to raise a false accusation of fratricide. Although King Heinrich is a benign patriarch, he must judge the matter according to the prevailing norms.

Elsa's unhappy fate is not due to the malicious scheming of

Telramund and Ortrud, but to Lohengrin's severe demand. We know that as a knight of the Grail he must not disclose his true identity, but he can also not reveal to Elsa that, were she only to wait one year, he would be relieved of his obligations toward the Grail and would be able to remain with her forever.

From Elsa's perspective, her beloved's withholding knowledge of his identity is cruel. Since naming is knowledge, and knowledge is power, she is rendered powerless by being excluded from that knowledge. Lohengrin's primary responsibility had been to discharge his duties as knight, and only secondarily, if at all, to become involved with a woman. From a feminist perspective, the story may be turned inside out so that the fairness and justification of Elsa's question to Lohengrin can be made visible.

Elsa's question matures (Act II, Scene 5; Act III, Scene 2)

The light and joy at the end of Act I is soon contrasted with the perfidious nighttime conversation between Ortrud and Telramund that opens Act II. Now the dominant mood is one of darkness, vengeance, and evil. As we enter into the world of Ortrud, we see that she is the dark force of the internal story. While Elsa's temptation does not originate with Ortrud, the latter makes every effort to incite Elsa. In Act II, Elsa makes preparations for her wedding as Ortrud keeps interrupting her. Telramund, disguised as a monk, also appears and insists that the people must know the knight's name, at which point Lohengrin defends himself:

<p>Lohengrin: Ja, selbst dem König darf ich wehren und aller Fürsten höchsten Rat! Nicht darf sie Zweifels Last beschweren, sie sahen meine gute Tat! Nur eine ist's, der muss ich Antwort geben: Elsa . . .</p>	<p>Lohengrin: Yes, I can resist even the King, and the highest counsel of princes! The burden of doubt will not trouble them; they saw my good deed! Only one person must I answer: Elsa . . .</p>
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<p><i>(Er hält betroffen an, als er, sich zu Elsa wendend, diese mit heftig wogender Brust in wildem inneren Kampfe vor sich hinstarren sieht.)</i></p> <p>Elsa! Wie seh' ich sie erbeben! In wildem Brüten muss ich sie gewahren! Hat sie betört des Hasses Lügenmund? O Himmel, schirm ihr Herz vor den Gefahren! Nie werde Zweifel dieser Reinen kund!³⁰</p>	<p><i>(Lohengrin stops in consternation as he turns to Elsa and notices that, with a heaving breast, she is staring in front of herself, torn by a violent inward struggle)</i></p> <p>Elsa! How she trembles! I must protect her from brooding wildly! Has the lying tongue of hatred beguiled her? O Heaven, protect her heart from danger! May this innocent one never be plagued with doubts!</p>
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In the finale of Act II, Lohengrin asks Elsa if she feels she must pose the forbidden question. “Elsa, arise! In your hand, in your devotion lies the pledge of all happiness! Does the force of doubt not leave you in peace? Do you wish to put the question to me?”³¹ Elsa replies:

<p><i>(in heftiger innerer Aufregung und in schamvoller Verwirrung)</i></p> <p>Mein Retter, der mir Heil gebracht! Mein Held, in dem ich muss vergehn! <i>(mit Bedeutung und Entschluss)</i> Hoch über alles Zweifels Macht soll meine Liebe stehn! <i>(Sie sinkt an seine Brust.)</i></p>	<p><i>(deeply agitated and in a state of confused embarrassment)</i></p> <p>My deliverer, who brought me salvation! My knight, in whom I must melt away! <i>(with determination and clarity)</i> High above the force of all doubt may my love stand! <i>(She sinks upon his breast.)</i></p>
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Elsa and Lohengrin are married, but in Act II, Scene 2, the marriage is not consummated, for on the wedding night Elsa asks the forbidden question, and Lohengrin is ensnared in a political plot. The moment of the question is chosen with extreme care. Lohengrin looks at the nuptial bed and says that they are now

alone for the first time. Elsa prepares the ground for her question by innocently asking whether Lohengrin's secret is truly such that he must continue to remain silent. Lohengrin, growing apprehensive, responds:

<p>Lohengrin: An meine Brust, du Süsse, Reine! Sei meines Herzens Glühen nah, dass mich dein Auge sanft bescheine, in dem ich all mein Glück ersah! <i>(feurig)</i> Gönne mir, dass mit Entzücken ich deinen Atem sauge ein: lass fest, ach fest, an mich dich drücken, dass ich in dir mög' glücklich sein! Dein Lieben muss mir hoch entgelten für das, was ich um dich verliess; kein Los in Gottes weiten Welten wohl edler als das meine hiess. Bot' mir der König seine Krone, ich dürfte sie mit Recht verschmäh'n. Das einz'ge, was mein Opfer lohne, muss ich in deiner Lieb' erseh'n! Drum wolle stets den Zweifel meiden, dein Lieben sei mein stolz Gewähr! Denn nicht komm' ich aus Nacht und Leiden, aus Glanz und Wonne komm' ich her!³²</p>	<p>Lohengrin: Come to me, O sweet, pure one! Be near my ardent heart, that the eyes in which I saw all my happiness may shine upon me softly! <i>(passionately)</i> O, grant me that in sweet raptures I may breathe in your breath: O, let me clasp you to me so very firmly, that I may be happy in you! Your love must be the highest recompense for that which I left behind for your sake; no destiny in all God's world could have been nobler than mine. If the king offered me his crown, I should rightfully reject it. The only reward for my sacrifice is your steadfast love! Thus do I ask you to put doubt from your mind, may your love be my proud guarantee! For I come not from darkness and suffering, I come from splendour and delight!</p>
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Lohengrin imposes a great demand on Elsa: “Your love must be the highest recompense for that which I left behind for your sake.” Just as in stating the injunction about his name, Lohengrin here speaks mostly about himself – and Elsa’s debt of gratitude keeps growing. It is not enough that she was placed in a position of total submission in Act I. Lohengrin invokes the splendor and honor he has relinquished on her behalf so she must feel obliged to concede to his terms.

The emotional tragedy is constructed upon Elsa’s uncertainty and desire for knowledge, which contrasts with the Wagnerian paradigm that the woman must love at any cost and redeem the man through her love. With the emotional dissonance of the question growing in Elsa’s mind, the audience is riveted, secretly hoping that Elsa will refrain from asking the fateful question.

But in the end she does: “Nothing can bring me peace, nothing can tear me from my madness, save – even if it should cost me my life – knowing who you are!” Lohengrin cries in reply: “Elsa, what are you saying?” But she persists: “Ill-fatedly noble man! Hear the question I must ask you! Tell me your name!”³³ Posing the question makes inevitable the tragic parting – not only because Elsa has proven incapable of keeping her promise, but because, above all, the knight of the Holy Grail cannot satisfy the conditions of humanity. For Elsa’s part, she is compelled to know the identity of her beloved in order for their love to become a shared project; she wants to be initiated into whatever it is that governs his life.

The forbidden question has grave consequences, not only for Elsa but for Lohengrin as well. Although he has told Elsa that he has come from a region of splendor and delight and abandoned all measure of wonderful things for her, Elsa’s challenge to his identity causes him to abandon her and return to the realm of the Grail. Confronted by human demands, his divine power appears to fail him.

The story of the Grail (Act III, Scene 3)

With the troops summoned for an early morning assembly, and as trumpets sound and the woodwinds play a stirring march, a

heartbroken Elsa and an anguished Lohengrin step before the king. The opera reaches its climax in Lohengrin's story of the Grail, beginning *In fernem Land* (In a far-off land). Lohengrin, who until this moment has only been addressed as a knight or protector, now discloses his true identity, marking the end of the internal action.

<p>Lohengrin: <i>(in feierlicher Verklärung vor sich hinblickend)</i> In fernem Land, unnahbar euren Schritten, liegt eine Burg, die Montsalvat genannt; ein lichter Tempel stehet dort inmitten, so kostbar als auf Erden nichts bekannt; drin ein Gefäß von wundertät'gem Segen wird dort als höchstes Heiligtum bewacht: es ward, dass sein der Menschen reinste pflegen, herab von einer Engelschar gebracht; alljährlich naht vom Himmel eine Taube, um neu zu stärken seine Wunderkraft: es heisst der Gral, und selig reinsten Glaube erteilt durch ihn sich seiner Ritterschaft. Wer nun dem Gral zu dienen ist erkoren, den rüstet er mit überirdischer Macht;</p>	<p>Lohengrin: <i>(gazing forward, solemnly transfigured)</i> In a far-off land, inaccessible to your steps, there is a castle by the name of Montsalvat; a light-filled temple stands within it, more precious than anything on earth; therein is a vessel of wondrous blessing that is watched over as a sacred relic: that the purest of men might guard it, it was brought down by a host of angels; every year a dove descends from Heaven to fortify its wondrous power: it is called the Grail, and the purest, most blessed faith is imparted through it to the Brotherhood of Knights. Whosoever is chosen to serve the Grail is armed by it with heavenly power;</p>
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an dem ist jedes Bösen Trug
 verloren,
 wenn ihn er sieht, weicht dem
 des Todes Nacht.
 Selbst wer von ihm in ferne
 Land' entsendet,
 zum Streiter für der Tugend
 Recht ernannt,
 dem wird nicht seine heilige
 Kraft entwendet,
 bleibt als sein Ritter dort er
 unerkant;
 so hehrer Art doch ist des
 Grales Segen,
 enthüllt muss er des Laien Auge
 fliehn;
 des Ritters drum sollt Zweifel
 ihr nicht hegen,
 erkennt ihr ihn - dann muss er
 von euch ziehn.
 Nun hört, wie ich verbot'ner
 Frage lohne!
 Vom Gral ward ich zu euch
 daher gesandt:
 mein Vater Parzival trägt seine
 Krone,
 sein Ritter ich – bin Lohengrin
 genannt.³⁴

every evil deceit is powerless
 against him,
 once he has seen it, the shadow
 of death flees him.
 Even he who is sent by it to a
 distant land,
 appointed as a champion of
 virtue,
 will not be robbed of its holy
 power,
 provided that he, as its knight,
 remains
 unrecognised there.
 For so wondrous is the blessing
 of the Grail
 that when it is revealed it shuns
 the eye of the uninitiated;
 thus no man should doubt the
 knight,
 for if he is recognised, he must
 leave you.
 Hear how I reward the
 forbidden question!
 I was sent to you by the Grail:
 my father Parzival wears its
 crown,
 I, its knight – am called
 Lohengrin.

The final scene is heartrending. The knight of the Holy Grail, who laid down the conditions of his love with a stern divine injunction and then angrily accused Elsa of betrayal, is now shown to be a deeply suffering man, gathering the last of his strength to depart forever. Elsa had occasioned an opportunity for him to flee from the emotionally alienated, semi-divine life he led as a knight and enter the world of men. However, her posing the forbidden question has made all that impossible. The foundation of trust broken, Lohengrin must withdraw from the human sphere to resume his

life in service of the Grail. In the final scene a forlorn Elsa looks on as her equally forlorn husband slowly recedes, never to return.

Musical seduction: Spiritual missionary position

Lohengrin is a cruel drama. How can it then seduce the spectator? In *Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, Michel Poizat uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore why opera arouses such powerful emotions in an audience. He concludes that operagoers are in search of *jouissance* – eroticized, orgasmic pleasure. A musical-dramatic trajectory from a seductive introduction to a wrenching climax seems to be fundamental to opera, but this may be said of other musical genres as well. From the organ fugues of J.S. Bach to the symphonies of Johannes Brahms, music can call forth enormous libidinal energy, which is then either allowed to well up or is controlled to some degree. This view is supported by Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, and by Sam Abel in *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance*.³⁵

As stated in Chapter 1, the term “body genre” used by Linda Williams to describe the type of film that elicits ecstatic feelings (from *ex-* “out of” and *stasis* “state of being”) seems almost tailored for opera.³⁶ The word *melo(s)* in melodrama refers to an excess of music, while *drama* stands for the action that is performed. Emotion – so powerful that ordinary speech is incapable of expressing it – bursts forth in opera in the form of song, modulated through the intermediary of trained voices. Williams describes the effects of body genre as follows:

A pertinent feature shared by these body genres is the focus on what could probably best be called a form of ecstasy. Contemporary meanings suggest components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture, a rapture which informs even the pathos of melodrama.

Visually ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body “beside itself” with sexual pleasure. Aurally excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries.³⁷

Ecstasy in operatic art is often associated with the union of love, sexuality, and death. The ideal love scene for Wagner is *Liebestod*, a mystical union of two lovers in death. Tristan and Isolde sing as one: "Now banish dread, sweet death – yearned for, longed for death-in-love! In your arms, consecrated to you, sacred elemental quickening force, free from the peril of waking!"³⁸ Isolde dies at the moment of her musical climax. The ecstatic nature of the death is underscored in both the music and the libretto, and the scene ends with the words *höchste Lust* (utmost rapture). The stage directions for the end of the same opera read: "Isolde sinks gently, as if transfigured, in Brangäne's arms, onto Tristan's body. Those looking on are awed and deeply moved. Mark blesses the bodies. The curtain falls slowly."³⁹ We are reminded of Hélène Cixous's funeral metaphor that links women, opera, sexuality, love, and death.

Many popular operas end with a dying tenor who embraces a lifeless, passive soprano or collapses onto her. Such a final gesture is emblematic of despair; it communicates to the audience a combined visual symbol of death/intercourse in a classic missionary position with the man on top and the passive, receiving woman under him. Examples include *Tannhäuser*, *Luisa Miller*, *Rigoletto* (with father and daughter), *La Traviata*, *Aida*, *Otello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Carmen*, *Lakmé*, *La Gioconda*, *Pagliacci* (two men, one alive, one dead, on top of a woman's body), *Manon*, *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, and potentially all three acts of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Abel wryly adds that Richard Strauss pours an entire regiment of soldiers on top of Salome for good measure.⁴⁰

In some cases, the difference between this symbolic union in death and straightforward rape is very subtle. However, what is relevant about the final gesture is not sexuality, but its function as an expression of the woman's submissiveness. According to Susan McClary, the operatic orgasm makes the audience thirst for Carmen's death, to give just one example. The desire is not satisfied until Don José has stabbed Carmen, thereby symbolically raping and vanquishing the rebellious woman.⁴¹

Wagner develops a very systematic emotional drama in *Lohengrin*, making it logical for Elsa to ask the forbidden question, which simultaneously is the worst possible form of betrayal. The dream lays bare the starting point of the love story; the taboo

inquiry reveals the underlying conditions of the relationship; and the disaster triggered by Elsa in the wedding chamber culminates in the story of the Holy Grail. The audience breathes in time to the ineluctable question swelling in Elsa's mind. Although asking the question may be reasonable from a human standpoint, it clashes with the moral dramaturgy of the opera, which requires that at least one head must fall. We need a betrayal and someone who is both victim and scapegoat, or else the operatic orgasm will not be achieved.

Lohengrin links the issue of knowing to Elsa's position as an innocent victim who blames herself for asking the most natural of questions: who are you, my love? A moment before Elsa begins to tell us her dream, the leitmotif of the Grail resounds with a rising interval that in Wagner's music is termed the "defiant fourth." It represents pure faith in which "eyes are fixed on Heaven," whose blue and silver are the colors of the knights of the Holy Grail.⁴² The audience is reminded of the sublime goal of love: the highest good that admits no doubt.

Wagner even denies Elsa a *Liebestod*. Her humiliation is complete. The conclusion of *Lohengrin* marks Elsa's sole destruction, as Lohengrin frees the swan from Ortrud's spell, and Elsa's brother Gottfried is returned to the people. Although Lohengrin does not fall dead over Elsa, she swoons into the arms of her brother as Lohengrin slowly withdraws. Amid the grief over Lohengrin's farewell, the Grail leitmotif sounds a note of consolation and hope. Gottfried becomes the new ruler of Brabant and the triumph of masculine homosociality is complete.

While the opera is named after Lohengrin, its thematic heroine is Elsa. We follow her development and tragedy more closely than anyone else's. Yet all power remains concentrated in Lohengrin, confirming once more, as Teresa de Lauretis has written, "The hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture."⁴³

From a feminist perspective, the emotional dramaturgy of *Lohengrin* promulgates a moral universe in which standards and values are patriarchally defined through the forbidden question and the story of the Grail. A woman's fidelity and loyalty are crucial for the consummation of the love project. However, in keeping with

this ideology, the opera makes no mention of the gendered system upon which its characters are based. It is up to the feminist beholder to use counter-reading to make visible what the opera chooses to ignore.

Notes

1. Walsh, *Keine Angst*, 157.
2. McClary *Feminine Endings*, 36.
3. Nieder, *Von der Zauberflöte zum Lohengrin*, 12. See also Honolka, *Kulturgeschichte des Librettos*; Scherle, *Das deutsche Opernlibretto*; Smith, *The Tenth Muse*.
4. Austin, *Feminist*, 1–2.
5. Weigel, *Der Schielende Blick*.
6. Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*.
7. Kaplan, “Is the Gaze Male?,” 231.
8. Melberg, Aristotle’s *Poetics*.
9. Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 11–12.
10. *Ibid.*, 5–27.
11. Cixous, “Aller à la mer,” 133–136: “Comment, femme, peut-on aller au théâtre? Sauf à s’y trouver en complicité avec le sadisme dont les femmes y sont l’objet. A se voir invité à prendre, dans la structure familiale-patriarcale, que le théâtre reproduit à l’infini, la place de la victime. Qui est elle? Toujours la fille-du-père, son objet à sacrifier, gardienne du phallus et support du fantasme narcissique à l’aide duquel de père pare à la menace de castration.”
12. Clément’s book, *L’opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (1979), did not attract attention until the publication of its English translation, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, in 1988.
13. Abbate, “Opera” and “In search of Opera.” See also Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*.
14. Barthes, “Le grain de la voix.” For an introduction to Barthes’s later writing, see Kolesch, *Roland Barthes*.

15. This pair of semiotic concepts refers to two levels of the sign and can be also regarded as denoting expression/content.
16. Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, 238.
17. Ibid., 114–115.
18. The categories are based on a lecture entitled *The Woman of the Future: Women and Women's Voices in Wagner's Oeuvre* given by German musicologist Susanne Vill at the University of Stockholm in November 1996. See Vill, "Das Weib der Zukunft"; Parly, *Vocal Victories*; Riegel, *Richard Wagner's Women*.
19. Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, 238.
20. Ralf, *Comments on Lohengrin*, 35
21. Palm, *Wagners Lohengrin*, 51.
22. Voss, *Instrumentation Richard Wagners Lohengrin*, 127.
23. English translations of the librettos are taken from <http://www.rwagner.net>.
24. Wagner, *Lohengrin*, 3–4.
25. Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer*, 14 (II 2–3).
26. Palm, *Wagners Lohengrin*, 261.
27. Ibid.
28. Wagner, *Lohengrin*, 8.
29. Tchaikovsky, a great admirer of *Lohengrin*, based the main theme of *Swan Lake* on the *Frageverbot*.
30. Wagner, *Lohengrin*, p. 23
31. Ibid., 24.
32. Ibid., 28.
33. Ibid., 29.
34. Ibid., 29–30.
35. Poizat, *Angel's Cry*; Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*; Abel, *Opera in the Flesh*.
36. Williams, "Film Bodies," 3.

37. Ibid., 4.
38. Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, 27.
39. Ibid., 42–43.
40. Abel, *Opera in the Flesh*, 94.
41. McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 22.
42. Ralf, *Comments on Lohengrin*, 36.
43. de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 118–119.

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