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Talking About Virtue: Paisiello's "Nina," Paër's "Agnese," and the Sentimental Ethos

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Diane Long Hoeveler, "Talking About Virtue: Paisiello's "Nina," Paer's "Agnese," and the Sentimental Ethos"

This essay will examine how sentimentality and its valorization of virtue spread through one particular intersection of opera and literature; that is, the seduced maiden narrative is enacted in these operas, once as a comedy of sorts, once as a tragedy. Giovanni Paisiello's "Nina" (1789) was clearly influenced by the works of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne, while Fernando Paër's "Agnese" (1809) is a direct adaptation of Amelia Opie's popular novella "The Father and Daughter" (1801). Furthermore, both of the operas spin in and out of ideological orbit with Richardson's novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740-41), which in turn was rewritten by the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni in his dramatic adaptation *Le Pamela Nubile* (1753), the Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe as the comic opera *The Maid of the Mill* (1765), and which then was later adapted and transformed by François de Neufchâteau into the opera *Paméla* (1793). And certainly we can detect sentimental familial concerns in Denis Diderot's dramas, particularly "Le Fils Naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu" ("The Natural Son; or, The Trials of Virtue," 1757). What I hope to suggest is that music and literature have collaborated in constructing a few fairly basic cultural scripts (domestic, familial, painful, and cathartic: recall Oedipus or Demeter/Persephone) that are then retold endlessly, continually readjusting the particulars to accommodate changing social and political conditions. Sentimentality as a value system, a potent ideology, almost a secularization of religion was spread throughout eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European culture not simply through novels and dramas, but also by being performed in opera houses from London to Rome and Naples.

[Art] should move me, astonish me, break my heart, let me tremble, weep, stare, be enraged.

— *Denis Diderot, qtd. Solomon, 309*

1. Gustav Mahler once observed that listening to his own work performed caused "a burning pain [to] crystallize" in him. He went on to note that he was compelled to write his symphonies at the point where the narrative power of words failed him, "at the point where the dark feelings hold sway, at the door which leads into the 'other world'—the world in which things are no longer separated by space and time" (qtd Nussbaum 265). I want to begin with Mahler's comments because they place music-- like literature-- in the realm of the emotions, but emotions so deep and dark that they cannot be fully articulated in words. I would assert that music is not essentially ephemeral, it simply attempts—in Mahler's words again—"to get to the bottom of things, to go beyond external appearances" (qtd Nussbaum 266). In this essay I hope to suggest that music erupted in new religious, political, social, and cultural ways throughout Europe in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. As a number of literary genres increasingly sought to moderate religious and political reform and secularize and nationalize public and private consciousnesses, music was enlisted as a potent ideological and aesthetic force, a

manifestation of the residue of a culture that still clung to the power of oral-based methods of communication. And the pain that Mahler speaks about—pain that I would identify as essentially political, social, religious, and economic—was the subtext of the dominant popular discourses during the romantic period. In short, virtue was put on trial during the mid to late eighteenth century throughout Europe, and opera emerged to mediate the pain and dislocation that occurred when a secularized notion of virtue emerged to displace a theologically based system of values and beliefs.^[1]

2. It is necessary to begin, however, by defining "virtue" as a concept and briefly tracing its history as a public source of value. As Pocock has noted, virtue has traditionally been synonymous with "nature," "essence," or "essential characteristic," but within the republican vocabulary it took on the additional meanings of "devotion to the public good," or "the relations of equality between citizens engaged in ruling and being ruled." Understood as *virtù* by Machiavelli, the concept also increasingly began to be understood as something like citizenship, "a code of values not necessarily identical with the virtues of a Christian," and expressed instead in the notion of justice or "a devotion to the public good" (41-42). Distinguishing between abstract rights (*politicum* like equality, citizenship) and rights to bear arms and own property (*commercium*), Pocock argues that as "the universe became pervaded by law, the locus of sovereignty [became] extra-civic, and the citizen came to be defined not by his actions and virtues, but by his rights to and in things" (43). By the mid-eighteenth century, "the ideals of virtue and commerce could not be reconciled to one another" as long as virtue was seen as purely civic, and so virtue was redefined with the aid of a concept of "manners":

The effect was to construct a liberalism which made the state's authority guarantee the liberty of the individual's social behavior, but had no intention whatsoever of impoverishing that behavior by confining it to the rigorous assertion of ego-centered individual rights. On the contrary, down at least to the end of the 1780s, it was the world of ancient politics which could be made to seem rigid and austere, impoverished because underspecialized; and the new world of the social and sentimental, the commercial and cultural, was made to proliferate with alternatives to ancient *virtus* and *libertas* Now, at last, a right to things became a way to the practice of virtue, so long as virtue could be defined as the practice and refinement of manners. (50)

3. The sweeping historical trajectory that Pocock charts here can be glimpsed in miniature by examining the operas of *Nina* and *Agnese*. Both works present the struggle of the heroines' virtue to assert itself against a force of paternal domination that is figured as an antiquated imperial power. In the heroines' struggles to control the possession of goods (family jewels in *Nina* and property in *Agnese*) the operas enact the performance of public virtue as it intersects with private trials and tribulations.
4. Secondly, the term "sentimental" needs to be defined in the context of these operas, although clearly it is beyond the scope of this essay to develop fully all of the permutations of its use in a variety of different national literary traditions.^[2] "Sentimental" in these operas tends to suggest the privileging of the authenticity of the emotions, combined as this action is with tropes of interiority and the use of objects that provoke memories and their association with identity or personal history (Howard 65).

As Howard notes, when we use the term "sentimental" we can be understood to be suggesting that the work "uses some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible" (76). Straddling the divide between the visible and the interior, the social and the natural, sentimental artists tend to construct cultural artifacts that will portray humans as thinking and feeling beings, or rather, individuals who feel and live in their bodies as much as in their psyches. Within the British tradition, Lord Shaftesbury has been seen as the originator of this ideology, but his class prejudices have recently been interrogated, as have those of such erstwhile followers as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Laurence Sterne, and Addison and Steele. As Markley has noted, literary historians have attempted to understand Shaftesbury's formulation of sentimentality as either a manifestation of latitudinarianism or deism, both vaguely secularized systems of advancing self-sufficient virtue as the means by which manners dominated and controlled behavior in the public realm.

5. For instance, Smith as well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau theorized that human benevolence and morality could only be understood by acknowledging an innate disposition to sympathy or empathy in human nature. For these theorists, emotions lead to manifest acts of virtue or, what Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) defines as the empathetic imagination: "By the imagination we place ourselves in [another man's] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (9). There can be no question that by attending the performances of operas such as *Nina* and *Agnese* audience members were forced into a participatory and empathetically imaginative posture. Given the hyperbole of the theatrical and musical action, the audience is virtually hurled into the emotional maelstrom being enacted on stage and thus participates in the empathetic display of sentiment.
6. Finally, it is also important to recognize that as literary critics we are invested in believing that ideologies primarily spread through cultures by means of print media, and for many centuries we have deceived ourselves that male-authored, canonical poetry, preferably epic or lyrical, spread those ideologies most effectively. But increasingly, literary historians are recognizing that the ideologies that they detect within literature themselves have been reflected, affected, adapted, and transformed through musical genres. This essay will examine how sentimentality and its valorization of virtue spread through one particular intersection of opera and literature; that is, the seduced maiden narrative is enacted in these operas, once as a comedy of sorts, once as a tragedy. Giovanni Paisiello's *Nina* (1789) was clearly influenced by the works of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne, while Fernando Paër's *Agnese* (1809) is a direct adaptation of Amelia Opie's popular novella *The Father and Daughter* (1801). Furthermore, both of the operas spin in and out of ideological orbit with Richardson's novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740-41), which in turn was rewritten by the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni in his dramatic adaptation *Le Pamela Nubile* (1753), the Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe as the comic opera *The Maid of the Mill* (1765), and which then was later adapted and transformed by François de Neufchâteau into the opera *Paméla* (1793). And certainly we can detect sentimental familial concerns in Denis Diderot's dramas, particularly *Le Fils Naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu* ("The Natural

Son; or, The Trials of Virtue," 1757). What I hope to suggest is that music and literature have collaborated in constructing a few fairly basic cultural scripts (domestic, familial, painful, and cathartic: recall Oedipus or Demeter/Persephone) that are then retold endlessly, continually readjusting the particulars to accommodate changing social and political conditions. Sentimentality as a value system, a potent ideology, almost a secularization of religion was spread throughout eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European culture not simply through novels and dramas, but also by being performed in opera houses from London to Rome and Naples.

7. Sentimental novels and operas most frequently took as their subjects the dysfunctions of the patriarchal family under siege, or the trials and tribulations of the seduced maiden and the alternately tyrannical (*Nina*) or betrayed (*Agnese*) father. They frequently employed, as Markley has noted, talismanic exchanges of money or property in order to reify the bourgeoisie's attempt to assert "the 'timeless' nature of a specific historical and cultural construction of virtue and to suppress his reader's recognition of the social and economic inequalities upon which this discourse of seemingly transcendent virtue is based" (210). Most of these works read now like little more than crude wish fulfillments or fairy tales, but they were extremely popular in their own day and, as such, deserve our critical attention as important ideological markers for their culture. Why and how did the sentimental as a discourse system evolve as one of the most popular public displays of emotion on the stage? The sentimental as a genre, whether manifest in literary fiction or opera, clearly attempts to mediate between members of a family that found themselves at odds over the shape and power structure of the newly evolving bourgeois society.
8. André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's sentimental opera *Lucile* (1769) is a case in point. Staging a wedding day celebration, the ensemble sings "Where can one feel better than within the bosom of one's family?," while later the characters reply, "The names of spouse, of father, and of son, and of daughter, are delightful." With its heavy use of gnomic sentences and moral tags, *Lucile* reminds us that sentimental opera, like sentimental fiction, enacts Diderot's recommendation to avoid intricacy of plot in order to "allow emotional expansion in the characters and similar responses in the readers or spectators. Such ritual displays of emotion [within the domestic sphere] are often meant to show the power of human benevolence as a driving communal force between people both on and off stage" (Castelvecchio, 141-43). They also place religious sentiments, which were once in evidence in the public church into the private, domestic sphere of the home, thereby transmuting religious practices and beliefs into filial, familial displays. Although this is a matter that clearly requires more space than an essay allows, it could be suggested that as belief in a universal and traditional Christianity was breaking down, opera and literature stepped in to claim displaced religious sentiments for their own. And for this reason we can, I think, see sentimental discourses participating in the larger secularist movement of a post-Enlightenment Europe.

II

Music which has not been heard falls into empty time like an impotent bullet.
—Theodor Adorno, 133

9. The works of Giovanni Paisiello (1740 -1816) epitomize the sentimental strain in opera, which may explain the waning of his popularity by the 1820s. Rossini, however, praised Paisiello's operas by stating that "the genius of the simple genre and naïve gracefulness . . . realizes the most astonishing effects with the utmost simplicity of melody, harmony and accompaniment," while Mozart, who knew and admired Paisiello's works, once commented that "for light and pleasurable sensations in music [one] cannot be recommended to anything better" than Paisiello. For all the praise he received in his lifetime, including the patronage of Napoleon who called him "the greatest composer there is," Paisiello's best-known opera *Nina o sia la pazza per amore* (*Nina or the love-distressed Maid*) fell on hard times (Robinson; Hunt). Dent, for instance, has accused it of being "sentimental comedy at its worst . . . Its sentimentality is to modern ears perfectly unbearable, and we cannot understand how the whole of Europe was reduced to tears by these infantile melodies" (Dent, 111). *Nina's* British premier occurred in London on April 27, 1797, although by that date the opera was already close to a decade old and was widely known throughout Europe. We might note that *Nina's* contemporary status is beginning to improve as evidenced by the growing number of modern revivals, including one at the Oxford Playhouse (March 1982), one by the Zurich Opera now available on DVD (July 1998), one at La Scala, Milan (1999), and one by the Bampton Opera Company, Oxfordshire (1999).
10. As a *sentimentale* opera distinct from the other Italian operatic "mixed" genres of *semiserio* and *mezzo carattere*, *Nina* was a highly idealized portrait of how a family achieves happiness after suffering has redeemed all of its members of their excesses (read: sins). In the eighteenth-century Italian operatic tradition the term *sentimentale* did not have the negative connotations that the word assumed in British works fairly early on: excessive, morbid, affected, or indulgent. Instead, within the Italian tradition a concept of *sentimentale* was predicated on portraying people who were ideally sensitive to understanding and feeling the highest emotions in harmony with the physical senses. These people were also capable of feeling compassion for others, or the quality of empathy, which marked them as practitioners of a new, humanized religion of the heart: sensibility.
11. The source for Paisiello's *Nina* was the version of the opera by the same name written by Benoît-Joseph Marsollier and Nicolas Dalayrac, a one-act *opera comique*, which premiered in Paris in 1786.^[3] But this opera itself was based, according to Marsollier and Dalayrac, on "an anecdote reported by our newspapers a few years ago, and already employed by M. Bécular d'Arnaud in his *Délassements de l'homme sensible*, under the title *La Nouvelle Clementine* [vol. I, 1783]" (qtd Castelvechchi 149). The stories of D'Arnaud were very much in the contemporary French *larmoyants* tradition, sentimental tales that resemble the earlier British works of Eliza Haywood and Samuel Richardson. D'Arnaud's short story, however, is not an accurate version of a newspaper account of a suffering young woman suddenly reunited with her lost lover, but actually is an adaptation of the Clementina episode from Richardson's *History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54). Ironically, the actual historical woman from the newspaper died having never been reunited with her lover, while the episode in Richardson looks toward a happy ending when Clementina accepts the marriage proposal of Count Belvedere in lieu of her original suitor Sir Charles. As d'Arnaud once observed—apparently unaware of the contradiction in the various Clementina stories—"Richardson's immortal writings

- put the original itself under our very eyes, not its representation" (qtd Castelvechi 163). Once again, we return to the continuously intersecting and overlapping nature of French and British works of sensibility as they recur to a limited number of tropes and concerns.
12. Resoundingly popular throughout Italy and France, *Nina* exploited the motif of a young, beautiful, and virtuous woman suffering unjustly at the hands of a greedy aristocratic and patriarchal tyrant. Such a theme was particularly popular given the thunderous reception of the translation of Richardson's *Pamela* and its adaptation for the stage by Goldoni in 1753. In fact, Goldoni was in the audience for a performance of *Nina* and observed that "when the opera of *Richard* [Sedaine and Grétry's *Richard Coeur-de-lion*] was withdrawn, it appeared difficult to supply its place with any thing which would be equally successful. This miracle was affected by *Nina, or the Distracted Lover*; and if the success of this piece did not surpass the preceding, it at least equaled it . . . [because of the public's sympathy] for an unfortunate being without crime and without reproach" (*Memoirs* II, 333). By the autumn of 1788, *Nina* was being produced in Italy, thanks to an Italian translation and libretto by Giuseppe Carpani, who staged the first Italian production in Monza. Paisiello set this version to music and first performed his *Nina* on the occasion of Queen Maria Carolina's visit to the new village of San Leucio, near Caserta.
 13. Originally commissioned by King Ferdinand, the opera was to be performed at the opening of Ferdinand's "model village," San Leucio, a community of silk manufacturers who were to live in blissful harmony and productivity, a sort of proto-communist haven. As Stefano Castelvechi argues, the success of the opera's premiere had everything to do with the presence of "a powerful female figure, and Nina's role would be sung by celebrated *prime donne* for decades to come" (134). The presence of Queen Maria Carolina, a strong female ruler of an Italian city-state, even one the size of Naples, in conjunction with the persecuted daughter-heroine of the piece, brought together two of the central tenets of sentimentality as a political ethos: that is, the notion of the family as a microcosm of the nation, and of the parent as a deity of the city-state that is finally understood and experienced as a family. Such a *topos* highlights the sentimental political ideology operating at the time: parents know best, and all subjects, like occasionally wayward children, need to obey their strictures and prop up the structure that was the patriarchal family and state.
 14. Castelvechi has provided the following summary of the source of Paisiello's *Nina*, the opera of Marsollier and Dalayrac:

Nina and Lindoro [Germeuil in the French version] love each other, and are betrothed with the consent of Nina's father, the Count. Yet, when Nina's hand is requested by a wealthier suitor, the Count favours the latter, thus breaking the pact with Lindoro. A duel between the two suitors ensues; when Nina sees her beloved lying in his own blood, and her father asks her to accept as her spouse Lindoro's slayer, she loses her reason. The Count cannot bear the sight of his daughter's sorry state: he leaves Nina in his country estate, entrusting her to the benevolent care of the governess Susanna [Elise in the French version.] Nina—having lost all memory of the recent, tragic events—spends her days thinking of Lindoro and waiting for his return, surrounded by the affection and compassion of servants and peasants. On one occasion she falls into a delirium, and believes she sees Lindoro. Some time later the Count comes back, stricken with sorrow and

remorse; but his daughter does not recognize him. When Lindoro, whom everyone thought dead, returns, the Count welcomes him with open arms, and calls him son. At first, Nina does not recognize Lindoro. Father and lover 'cure' Nina by showing her that Lindoro is back and still loves her, and that she can marry her beloved with her father's consent. (Castelvecchi 138)

15. Somewhat anti-climactically for modern tastes, the opera stages only the events that occur after Nina's mental breakdown, providing a long exposition that prepares us for the appearance of the mad Nina in the opera's first scene. As Castelvecchi notes, such a structure erases "narrative complexity" and instead puts its entire focus on the "emotions" of the principals, Nina, Lindoro, and the Count. This technique, lending itself to hyperbolic displays of madness, grief, confusion, and disorientation, became a staple of most eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sentimental literature and theater. Such a device in this particular instance suggests that *Nina* needs to be "read" in many ways as *tableaux vivant*, with a few characters in a series of static almost pantomimic poses, reciting their past actions in highly stylized, hyperbolic scenes. And such a technique reveals how closely sentimental opera remained in touch with its sources in the pantomimes of classical stories and fairy tales of the Boulevard Theatre, which themselves had a fragmentary, abrupt, and incomplete quality (recall Rousseau's *Pygmalion*). As melodrama relies on the mute hero or the wound on the hand to identify the villain, sentimental works rely on the blush, the sigh, the gasp, the interrupted speech, the telling silence. Sensibility as an ideological discourse was predicated on the belief that the body spoke through tears, through blood, through sweat, and that such primitive, physical markers were more reliable than writing or print in conveying the truth of a person or situation.[\[4\]](#)
16. Further, it is necessary to emphasize that, unlike melodrama, which developed slightly later, there is no active villain in this opera. The Count, having seen the devastation that his greedy motives have had on his daughter's sanity, has already been reformed by the time the action begins on stage. Throughout Nina's interactions with Lindoro, whom she persists in not recognizing after his return, she continues to privilege the sentiments above reason as a means to truth. Lindoro returns to the village disguised as a shepherd and she fails to recognize him, although noting something vaguely familiar about him. She questions him about the dead Lindoro, and is confused that this shepherd knows so many details about the dead Lindoro. It is only when Lindoro shows her a ring that he had given to her as a souvenir of their "passionate embraces" and then kisses her that she is able to remember and then recognize him. But then Lindoro pretends not to recognize Nina, and she must produce a waistcoat that she had embroidered for him before he is able to accept her identity (1790 version of the opera). In both versions of the opera the emphasis is on the physical talismanic object (either ring or waistcoat) that had been exchanged between the two lovers, foregrounding for the audience the importance of the body's purchase of sentimental currency. The doubled and quite extensive recognition scene between the lovers, such a staple of both sentimental and melodramatic literature, occurs literally over the bodies of both the heroine and Lindoro, or rather, over their bodies' remembrance and reenactment of sexual passion and bodily emotion.
17. I cite here the climactic duet performed in Act II during the recognition scene in order to point out its rhetorical investment in a pedagogy of virtue:

Lindoro:

Then, Lindoro took your hand:
He tightly held it to his bosom,
And in this same place,
I pressed on you, O my treasure,
My kiss of fire,
My soul—like this.

Nina:

You!...Heaven . . . ah, what a moment!
That which I feel in my heart,
I would like to explain to you,
Yet I know not how to explain it still.

In the Quattro that immediately follows, the Count and his servants observe:

Ah, it is taking a favorable course, oh God,
She is following the motives of her heart.
Quiet: she speaks in the language of love.

18. Immediately after the reconciliation of the lovers, Nina sings that she is now able to "talk about virtue," and she does so by sitting down to be transformed from the "mad" and suffering woman into the virtuous, controlled heroine. In order to convey on a performative level the transformation of Nina's character from "mad" to virtuous, the 1998 Zurich performance presents Nina (Cecilia Bartoli), whose hair had been disheveled and unkempt during her "mad" scenes, now sitting calmly while her maids carefully arrange her hair on her head. At exactly the point at which her hair has been brought into control, Nina sings of "virtue." We cannot know exactly how the performances of 1790 staged the same scene, but it is instructive to compare Nina's hair scene with the presentation of Sterne's *Maria de Moulines*, perhaps one of the most famous "mad" women in literature. In his *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), Sterne first presents Maria sitting on the bank of a river with "her hair, all but two tresses, drawn up into a silk net, with a few olive-leaves twisted a little fantastically on one side" (529). He revisits Maria in his *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) presents Maria as driven mad by the desertion of her lover as well as her beloved goat: "She was dress'd in white, and much as my friend described her, except that her hair hung loose, which before was twisted within a silk net." As Maria cries for the loss of her father, lover, and goat, all of apparent value to her, the narrator wipes away her tears "with my handkerchief. I then steep'd it in my own—and then in hers—and then in mine—and then I wip'd hers again—and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion. I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pester'd the world ever convince me of the contrary" (Vol. II, ch. 64). This passage is both comic and pathetic, ironic and sentimental in its presentation of the exchange and intermingling of bodily fluids, all the while the narrative voice protests the claims of the material. But it is the emphasis on Maria's hair, its earlier neat style contrasted to its later chaotic appearance, that performs in a very physical way the

transition from sanity to madness, or, in Nina's case, from madness to sanity. The audiences of late eighteenth-century Britain and France would certainly have recognized in Nina's performative gestures the similarity of her conduct to that of Maria de Moulines.

19. But what I would call a pedagogy of virtue also is enacted in the opera through the presence of the townspeople throughout the action. The initial scene consists of a chorus of villagers retelling Nina's tragic story, providing a very public explanation for her current, lamentable state, which is also a very public spectacle: "Who can endure such pain? Our heart cannot, and melts into tears" (I. 1). Like a Greek chorus, the townspeople of *Nina* witness and are instructed by the series of sentimental scenes that gradually unfold: the Count's frustrations, his kindness toward Nina, Nina's sufferings and confusions as she continues to dispense the family jewels to a variety of servants, the reappearance of the long-lost Lindoro, and finally the reunions and reconciliations of Nina with her father and lover. Like a morality tale, the opera performs a sort of pedagogy of public virtue for the townspeople, who are accepted by Nina and her father as extended family throughout the action.
20. The erasure of class differences is yet another ideological move that sentimental opera makes, as it argues for the state as an extension of the family, thereby eradicating the appearance of class inequalities (and highlighting the fact that the original premiere of the Italian version of the opera occurred at a totally constructed and artificial classless village of silk workers). An almost feudal notion of the father-Count ruling over his daughter-subjects is perpetuated by the opera, which performs its cultural work by suggesting that servants are just working members of an extended and happy family. As Lawrence Stone has observed:

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the restricted patriarchal nuclear family was modified by the loss of a sense of trusteeship to the lineage, by the decline of kinship and clientage, and by the concurrent rise of the power of the state and the spread of Protestantism. The most important consequence was the substitution of loyalty to state or sect for loyalty to lineage or patron. This weakened the diffuse affective network of kin and neighbours which had surrounded and sustained the loosely bound family structure, and tended to isolate the nuclear core. (653)

By continuing to foreground the chorus of peasants as if they lived within the family and were actually members of the nuclear family, *Nina* functions as a nostalgic discourse, persuading its audience members that a radical social and domestic transformation has not occurred.

21. The issue of marital choice is also emphasized in the opera as Nina, the beleaguered heroine, goes mad, much like the later Lucia di Lammermoor, when she is not allowed to marry the man of her choice. The evolving nature of the increasingly popular companionate marriage, as well as the rights of women, is certainly at issue here. As Stone has noted,

in France in the second half of the eighteenth century there was some intensive propaganda, both in writing and in art, in favour of the affective family type, free

marriage choice, marital love, sexual fulfillment within marriage—the alliance of Cupid and Hymen—and close parent-child bondingDespite this, however, there is strong evidence that the practice of marriage arranged by parents for material advantages was reinforced by the legal code of both the *Ancien Régime* and Napoleon's Code Civil. (390)

European families at all class levels were undergoing tremendous changes in attitudes toward love, lust, and the need to procreate, and *Nina* enacts that familial transformation in a highly stylized, ritualistic manner for its audience. The opera also stages the vexed and contentious issue of the treatment of the insane by presenting a series of "mad scenes" in which Nina gives away family jewels to a variety of servants. We can recall here Foucault's discussion of the "disciplinary" society and the increased need during this period to define insanity in order to institutionalize it. But we can also recall that what Markley calls a "theatrics of sentimentality" relies on the actions of upper-class characters who must manifest signs of sentimental distress in order to display their moral worthiness, their right to possess the class status and privileges that they inherited at birth (220). By dispensing the family jewels, Nina in effect is performing her sentimental guilt, her rejection of her father's status, and her heightened awareness of class inequities.

22. But these serious issues dissolve as the Count, motivated by simple and misguided greed, is reformed by witnessing the sufferings of his daughter and subjects. Later we are informed that the bloody duel which had precipitated Nina's mental crisis did not actually result in Lindorno's death, but only his wounding, and the piece ends happily, one might say magically, for all concerned. Given the date of this opera's performance in Italy, 1789, the political implications could not have been lost on a population that itself was agitating for reform. The "happy ending" of this opera occurs not because the audience wanted to believe that they too lived in a nostalgic political-state that functioned as a family, but because the sentimental ethos demands it. In the sentimental universe, virtue became the most highly valued quality or characteristic of the bourgeois, secularized community, because this is clearly a public sphere in which private values must accommodate public sentiments just as public displays of emotions must conform to the reality of private relationships.

III

The transgressive element in music is its nomadic ability to attach itself to, and become part of, social formations, to vary its articulations and rhetoric depending on the occasion as well as the audience, plus the power and the gender situations in which it takes place.
—*Edward Said, 70*

23. During the eighteenth century the British stage, like the French, was flooded with works that employed sentimental categories clearly derived from Samuel Richardson's tremendously popular and influential novels *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. The Irish playwright Issac Bickerstaffe (1733-?1812), for instance, adapted *Pamela* as a light comic opera with music by Samuel Arnold in 1765. With 35 performances at Covent Garden, Bickerstaffe's *Maid of the Mill* had to be "divested of the coarse scenes and indecency of the original"

(Kavanaugh, 365), but it was so popular that it was credited with bringing comic opera back into popularity in London after *The Beggar's Opera* fell out of fashion. After the importation and adaptation of Pixerecourt's *Coelina* onto the London stage by Holcroft in 1801, however, sentimental drama veers off to become melodrama, a distinctly hybrid genre, one that splits tragedy and comedy into something that we would recognize today as tragicomedy, an amalgam of "tears and smiles," an uncomfortable mixture of bathos and pathos. [5] The conventions of sentimentality are a curious mixture, then, of musical forms, literary genres, and conservative political and social sympathies all bound up in a strikingly visual manner, suggesting the high-toned, moral origins of the genre. What I am calling the sentimental ethos is an ethical system that seeks to shore up the faltering claims of the *pater-familias*, primarily through exerting control of the family's bloodlines, and reifying the daughter's choice of a husband (in conformity with the father's wishes). In sentimental operas and fictions the dominant threat is the unsuitable secret marriage, the disputed inheritance, or the seduction plot, while in gothic works dynastic, public, political issues figure more prominently.

24. But why did sentimental opera and fiction become so popular before, during, and after the French Revolution, and what does such a cultural phenomenon reveal about the vexed and ambivalent cultural relationship between France and England during this period? In an attempt to answer those two questions I have briefly tried to suggest the cultural fluidity of the sentimental as a genre and pointed to the increasing interaction between librettists, composers and artists of the two countries who "borrowed" ideas, ideologies, acting styles, and even scripts and libretti from each other. Another important constituent of the genre's success was how audience dynamics changed, because after the Revolution the French audience started to resemble the British tradition of a diversified audience. With working citizens increasingly attending the theater, and with Shakespeare's growing popularity in France, spectators' tastes were altered, and this called for a theatrical experience full of emotional appeal and involvement. In opposition to theatrical performances that adhered to the Aristotelian, classical three-unities rule of forbidding actions on stage, this new audience was interested in action-packed scenarios and rapidly developing intrigues rather than the slow building *tableaux* that had been popular earlier. Even though some theater critics considered the new theater to be a blatant pandering to the lowest elements, with its heavy reliance on grotesque prison scenes, dramatic escapes, wild crowd scenes, and the simplistic triumph of the just over the unjust, the public that sought entertainment rather than edification nevertheless expected to witness recognizable personal experiences that could serve as a means to self-knowledge (Kennedy 19-21). Sentimental operas developed, then, within the general categories of *opera semiseria*, or *opéra comique*. *Opera semiseria*, combining comic and horrible events with both aristocratic and lower-class characters, was well suited to the sentimentality of the period. Ironically, in a manner reminiscent of Sade, these operas specialized in juxtaposing the pathetic with the appalling without having to carry through the action to a tragic conclusion. Ferdinando Paër (1771-1839), an Italian who spent most of his productive life in Germany and France, is remembered today as one of the major practitioners of *opera semiseria*.
25. Moving Shakespeare's royal personages out of the palace and into domestic hearth and home was actually the major strategy of Amelia Opie when she rewrote the *Lear* story as *The Father and Daughter*. Coincidentally, Opie shared with David Garrick a distinct

fascination with visiting insane asylums. We are told by her biographer that when she was not attending murder trials, she was visiting insane asylums in Norwich and London. [6] An astute student of human passions in extreme situations, her sentimental novella traces the history of the motherless Agnes and her devoted father. Adored by her successful father and worshiped by the community, Agnes falls prey to a seducer, who persuades her to elope with him. Thinking they are on their way to be married in London, Agnes is pregnant before she knows it, and her lover has disappeared in order to marry—at the request of his corrupt aristocrat father—a woman with a larger estate. Thus far, the plot is a virtual copy of *Nina*, with the heroine Agnes being replaced in the affections of her lover by a wealthier woman, thus doubling the victimization of the damsel in distress. Seduced by a wealthy aristocratic man, Agnes is powerless against his family, reminding us of Julie Ellison's observation, that "as sensibility's social base becomes broader, its subject paradoxically becomes social inequality. Sensibility increasingly is defined by the consciousness of a power difference between the agent and the object of sympathy" (18). Class inequities provoke our sympathy for Agnes, but the father's humiliation stirred the strongest emotions in Opie's readers. The loss of his daughter's virginity as a piece of valuable property that the father himself rightly possessed was what most incensed the contemporary male readers of this text.

26. The climactic recognition scene between father and daughter occurs after Agnes returns with her son Edward to her birthplace, and encounters a chained madman roving around in the woods, claiming that he is there to visit his daughter's grave:

At the name of 'father,' the poor maniac started, and gazed on her earnestly, with savage wildness, while his whole frame became convulsed; and rudely disengaging himself from her embrace, he ran from her a few paces, and then dashed himself on the ground in all the violence of frenzy. He raved, he tore his hair; he screamed and uttered the most dreadful execrations; and with his teeth shut and his hands clenched, he repeated the word father, and said the name was mockery to him (93).

The hyperbole here, the frenzy, the gnashing of teeth and violence of display, all of these actions code emotional excess as dangerous, insane, and unacceptable behaviors in the new bourgeois British citizen. And to cause such extravagance of feeling in another person, and that person being one's father, is an unforgivable sin in the new middle-class emotional economy. Agnes must pay for her error and she does so promptly: as her father gazes on her with "inquiring and mournful looks," Agnes begins to cry, "tears once more found their way, and relieved her bursting brain, while, seizing her father's hand, she pressed it with frantic emotion to her lips" (94). The father is led by Agnes to shelter in an insane asylum that he himself built in his prosperous days, before the ruination of his business which was brought about by his depression over his daughter's disastrous elopement. Here Agnes patiently serves as his attendant, while he spends his days sketching charcoal drawings of her tomb on his wall. His madness consists in telling Agnes that his daughter—standing in front of him—is dead. After seven years of such penance, Agnes is rewarded finally with her father's recognition of her, quickly followed by the father's death and then Agnes'. They are ultimately buried together in the same grave.

27. The climactic pathetic scene, in which father and daughter both recognize each other for the first time since her fall and the last time before both of their deaths, is dramatically framed by Opie with the use of an aria adapted from Handel's oratorio *Deborah*, and transformed into a popular parlor song which the father and daughter sing to each other about paternal love and hope (113). The use of the aria at this particular point in the novella is telling, for what it suggests is that at points of high emotional intensity we turn to staged recitals of our feelings, hence the distancing effect of the Handel piece at the precise moment when the emotional intensity overwhelms both father and daughter.
28. The libretto for the Handel oratorio was written by Samuel Humphreys and was based on the gruesome story of Jael in the Old Testament's Book of Judges, chapter four. The Israelites, who have been under captivity for the past twenty years, have been told by the prophetess Deborah that Sisera, the Canaanite commander, would be assassinated by a woman. After the battle in which the Israelites are victorious, Sisera flees the battlefield and seeks sanctuary in the tent of Jael, wife of Heber. Jael accommodates him, but while Sisera sleeps she nails his head to the ground with a tent peg. The challenge for the librettist was to make this violent murder demonstrate the goodness of God.
29. The passage that is cited by Opie comes in Act 3, scene 2:

Abinoam [the father's] recitative:

My prayers are heard, the blessings of this day
All my past cares and anguish well repay;
The soldiers to each other tell
My Barak has performed his duty well.

Barak [the son]:

My honored father!

Abinoam:

O my son, my son,
Well has thy youth the race of honor run.

Abinoam's air:

Tears, such as tender fathers shed,
Warm from my aged eyes descend,
For joy to think, when I am dead,
My son shall have mankind his friend.

30. In E flat major, the air adds the distinctive color of two solo flutes to soft strings and a pair of organs. This aria is generally considered a welcome moment of humanity in a relentlessly nationalistic, bellicose libretto, and like other such airs written by Handel, an accolade to good sons by loving fathers, beautifully composed, simple, lyrical, a touching rich bass aria considered by Winton Dean to be "as beautiful as anything of its length (18 bars) in Handel's work." Dean points out that it was adapted from an earlier Chandos Anthem, but in this version the Israelite father weeps for joy in the knowledge that his son's future fame is assured because of his success in battle (228). Most significantly, however, *Deborah*, like *Lear*, presents an earlier patriarchal period of masculine warfare

and domination that is actually sustained by the presence and power of women. Not seen as daughters or even wives, the women in this biblical narrative are either prophets or assassins.

31. *Deborah* was performed seven times in 1733, and then revived again ten times over the next 15 years. Dean tells us that the oratorio was revived many times in the twenty years after Handel's death (1759-79). We might legitimately ask, however, how would Opie know the aria if the oratorio had not been performed since 1779, at which time she would have been only ten years old? And how would she even have had the opportunity to see one of the revivals if she did not travel to London until she was an adult? Interestingly, Dean claims that "there is no record of favourite songs [from the oratorio] being sung at concerts" (237), which suggests that the air could not have circulated as a publicly-performed concert song during the period. But such airs did not need large forces to perform, so could become parlor songs and therefore had wide popular distribution in private, home performances. I think that we have to assume that the aria would have been familiar enough to Opie and other middle-class Britons to allow her to quote lines from the piece in her 1801 novella. Strongly melodic and very direct in its emotions, the airs were the most popular and accessible music in Handel's oratorios and contributed to the perception that the biblical oratorios were actually sentimental dramas and nationalist panaceas. One could argue, in fact, that Opie's deployment of Handel stands as the crucial mediating moment between a print-based economy and a competing oral-based culture. In the emerging market for printed sheet music to be performed in the home, we can glimpse how print and performance culture began operating in close conjunction with one another.
32. The use of the Handel piece further prepares us for Ferdinando Paër's later adaptation of the novella into an opera he entitled *Agnese* (1809), an opera that follows in almost virtual detail its source material in Opie, although the action is set in Italy and the opera has a happy ending, with Agnese marrying Ernesto and moving in with her suddenly recovered father. Like *Nina*, *Agnese* centers on insanity caused within the family by the greed or lust of one family member, setting off an illness that metaphorically suggests the interconnectedness of all members within the familial circle. In *Nina* the daughter magically regains her sanity and the opera can conclude happily in marriage, but in Opie's novella the father gains his sanity only long enough to recognize the horror of his daughter's situation, and to die almost immediately as a result. Clearly, Paër did not want to present such a conclusion to his operatic adaptation, so, like Nahum Tate revising Shakespeare's *Lear*, he tidied up the story and presented the happy ending that he knew his audience would demand.
33. Even so, his light touch did not please everyone in the audience. In his *Life of Rossini*, Stendhal recorded his disgusted reaction to seeing a performance of Paër's *Agnese*: "Even the remarkable popularity of the opera cannot shake my conviction that it is profoundly wrong for art to deal with purely horrifying subjects. The madness of Shakespeare's *Lear* is made tolerable by the most touching devotion of his daughter Cordelia; but I personally feel that there is nothing to redeem the ghastly and pitiable condition of the heroine's father in *Agnese*"...[which] has always remained with me as a thoroughly disagreeable memory" (qtd. Commons).
34. *Agnese* is, apart from its conclusion, an almost literal adaptation of the Opie novella, with Luigi Buonavoglia writing the libretto and adding for comic relief the character of the

director of the insane asylum, who treats the inmates as laughable and easily cured if they would just stop indulging in their extreme emotional responses to a variety of life's typical events. *Agnese* was the first opera to take its audience literally into a lunatic asylum and to depict in almost clinical detail the behavior of a madman. Was its blatant depiction of insanity a cheap attempt to exploit the sensibility of the era? Certainly visits to observe the inmates of Bedlam had become a sort of sport for people like Garrick and Opie, not to mention the general bourgeois population.

35. Paër, however, transforms the Handel aria, "Tears, such as tender fathers shed," and instead has Agnese play the harp and sing a favorite song so that her father will finally recognize her through her voice. And instead of using the Handel piece, taken as it was from a gruesome Old Testament story, Paër has Agnese sing a decidedly New Testament lament that figures the daughter as a lost lamb seeking for her father, the good shepherd: "If the lost lamb/Finds her good shepherd once more,/Grief quickly/Changes to joy;/With her harmonious bleating/She sets the hill ringing;/Nor from her face could you tell/How dismayed she has been./So to her father/Return Agnese." The change in imagery is significant, in that the Old Testament patriarch is replaced in Paër by the father as a forgiving Christ-figure, a shepherd seeking his lost lambs, not a vengeful deity.
36. Although composed in 1809, Paër's *Agnese* was not performed in London until 1817, and was unfortunately competing directly with *Don Giovanni* that particular season. Despite a fine production and enthusiastic reviews, the opera only had five performances before it was suspended "on account of some similitude which was thought to exist between the situation of Hubert [the father's insanity] and that of his majesty [George III]" (qtd in Fenner, 131). But what is most striking about the use of Handel in Opie and later in the popular melodramas written by Marie Therese Kemble in 1815 (*Smiles and Tears; or, The Widow's Stratagem*) and Thomas Moncrieff in 1820 (*The Lear of Private Life, or the father and daughter*), is that the music is used in all of these pieces at what we would recognize as the "moment of desire" in the text. The aria is used to frame what I would identify as the oedipal crisis of the narrative: the moment at which the father struggles to recognize his daughter as a sexual woman, an individual who has defied him and allowed herself to enter into an illicit passion with a seducer who has no intention of making her his wife.
37. The recognition scene is so painful to the father that he distances it by performing its pain in a stylized, almost ritualized manner, couching it in distinctly Old Testament biblical imagery. Such a move emphasizes Opie's emotional pathos in order to suggest that the sexual disgrace of the daughter is equivalent to the warfare between rival Old Testament tribes. To lose one's virginity is tantamount to losing national honor and one's standing as God's chosen people. I am reminded here of Žižek's response to the question, why do we listen to music? His answer is: "in order to avoid the horror of the encounter of the voice qua object. What Rilke said for beauty goes also for music: it is a lure, a screen, the last curtain, which protects us from directly confronting the horror of the (vocal) object....voice does not simply persist at a different level with regard to what we see, it rather points toward a gap in the field of the visible, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze. In other words, their relationship is mediated by an impossibility: *ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything*" (93). Although this is obviously a large topic that needs further development in a larger venue, I would claim that what the music screens from view is the father's fantasized vision of his daughter in the sexual act. The

music blocks, in other words, a reversed primal scene so that what cannot be imagined or viewed by the culture at large is the daughter's seduction, the daughter's uncontrolled sexuality.

38. What I am suggesting is that Handel's oratorios were secularized when his arias were sung as popular parlor songs and eventually made their way into the sentimental novels of the day, as emotional touchstones of sorts. But *Lear* and indeed all of Shakespeare's dramas were also domesticated so that the national and dynastic issues that Shakespeare explored became transformed into popular novels and dramas that moved the action from the public to the private realm. The shifts that we see in the secularization and domestication of high cultural artifacts to popular ones says a good deal about the construction of the national as well as the romantic ethos in this period. I think therefore I am seems to have been transformed to I cry therefore I am, or I suffer therefore I am, or I am guilty and in pain therefore I am. Provoking intense suffering and displaying that suffering in stylized, almost ritualized ways became the dominant mode for this culture to define personal and civic virtue, as well as universalized humanity. Citizens of Britain were able to recognize their shared humanity—their shared "Britishness"—only when they could see demonstrated intense guilt about failed filial duty, intense shame about sexual license, and intense grief about causing madness or suffering in one's family members.

IV

Music therefore quite literally fills a social space, and it does so by elaborating the ideas of authority and social hierarchy directly connected to a dominant establishment imagined as actually presiding over the work.

—*Edward Said, 64*

39. What ideological role did sentimental operas and fictions play, then, in the evolution of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European culture? I would contend that these works, like all cultural discourses, served a bifurcated ideological function, both liberal and conservative causes. To some extent dramas and operas—like their classical Greek sources—enact ancient fertility rituals, complete with symbolic castrations (mutes) and besieged virgins, in order to perform a quasi-religious function in an increasingly secular society. Stories from the Bible, Shakespeare, and Greek or Roman mythology were no longer presented as models to a population that clamored for tales of secular heroism, a populace that was now drawn to psychological dramas rather than depictions of spiritual journeys. The poetic psychomachias of Blake, Byron, Wordsworth and Coleridge found their theatrical equivalents in the dramatic agonies of suffering daughters and guilt-ridden fathers, who in turn were metaphorical equivalents to a British populace ruled by a periodically insane King. As Fredric Jameson notes, the "political unconscious" (*passim*) of a nation is revealed in its symbolic enactments of a social narrative, and the master narrative of this particular society was repression, long-suffering, and acceptance of a flawed political system that was preferred over the chaos that could result from revolution. Romantic drama spoke to the "political unconscious" of bourgeois Britons because it enacted their own "mixed" and ambiguous feelings toward an insane ruler and a society committed finally to incremental change.

40. So we might ask, what does it mean that both French and British citizens flocked to a number of largely forgotten operas before, during, and after the French Revolution? What was at stake in staging and viewing the performances? As I have suggested, the opera and its mutations/manifestations embodied a public space in which French and British citizens could vicariously experience the threats of violent political, social, and economic revolution. But ultimately the operas were radically nationalistic for each nation, even though, ironically, they used the same tropes and told the same narratives. Each country was trying to use the theater and the opera house to impose a form of nationalism on its emerging bourgeois populace. As Gerald Newman observes, Britain sought to see itself and its citizens in national and secular terms rather than in religious or tribal ones during the mid-eighteenth-century. This shift was made possible, according to Newman, because of cultural rather than political activity (56). Benedict Anderson has also discussed the growth of secularism as allowing for a new sort of "imagined community," a country with a "national imagination" that would replace the religious construction of the medieval and renaissance communities (6; 36). There is no question that the institutionalization of the sentimental, hybridized opera during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a central development in the growth of the new British and to some extent the French "national imagination."