

Women's Bodies: God and Jules Massenet's Historical Context

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In the 19th century, the Catholic Church drifted away from discourse and ceremonies dedicated to an ineffable mystical union with God and instead focused on moral dogma. The Church largely did this by exercising control over women's bodies and sexuality through the pulpit and confessional. Yet resistance to this also came through women's bodies. In "Visual Pleasure – Musical Signs," Annegret Fauser describes the female ballet dancer as an object of erotic desire for male audience members in French grand opera from its inception (101). However by the late 19th century, this presentation of the female body changed. While maintaining the eroticism, the dancers took on a spiritual tint. Jules Massenet's operas were a major part of this trend. *Thaïs* put ballet dancers and *Thaïs* herself on erotic display for the audience, yet the opera also presents Athanaël and *Thaïs*'s spiritual longing. Beyond simply a way of symbolizing religious yearning, Massenet uses erotic desire to create a path to spiritual satisfaction. This spiritualized eroticism was quite common in French artistic and intellectual circles of this time. In this article, I use studies such as Peter Brooks's *Body Work* and J.B. Bullen's *Byzantium Rediscovered* that analyze cultural artifacts of the time to demonstrate how many creative artists were re-imagining the female body as a vehicle for spiritual discourse. I do not claim that my argument applies to all French artistic movements in late 19th century. I do, however, assert that my argument puts *Thaïs* and other Massenet operas squarely within the period's cultural discourse about sexual desire and spirituality. This discourse has its roots within France's historical and political context.

In 1870, France's Third Republic emerged with the birth pains of violent clashes between Catholic monarchists and anti-clerical republicans. After the demise of the *ancien regime*, the victorious French Revolution and the subsequent terror had left France in schizophrenic disrepair. The revolution had offered republican ideals of "liberté, égalité et fraternité," yet it also deteriorated into the violence of the terror, during which mutual suspicion was widespread and executions rampant. Napoleon Bonaparte eventually grabbed power and re-established order in France while also setting up the First Empire. Throughout the 19th century, French politics was torn among the yearning for egalitarian republicanism, fear of the chaos that perhaps only a powerful king could prevent and Catholic thirst for a monarchical religious state. Catholics also feared republican leadership because it sought to secularize the country and end the Pope's political influence. Ultimately the republicans won, and the Catholic Church attempted to maintain whatever place it could in French society (Price 99-230). The republic's overwhelming alliance with positivist values gave the Church the opportunity to welcome and nurture the souls of those disillusioned with positivism. However, the 19th century Church had also disaffected its flock with strident dogma about moral rectitude in lieu of discourse on divine love. The dominance of scientific and moral law turned the French people during the Third Republic to mystical experiences of which women's bodies were often the focus. However, before the Third Republic's secularism, emotion had often been the path to truth.

In the latter 18th century, Romanticism became the dominant movement in European arts. Romanticism emphasized supernatural themes, nature, an individual's interior life and knowledge gained through intuition. The movement began as a rebellion against the enlightenment's rationality and the gritty mechanization of industrialization. During much of Romanticism, the Catholic Church stressed pious meditation on Christ's wounds and, in that vein, knowing Christ through his and one's own suffering (Corbin 522-23). Meditating on pain would arouse strong emotions in the penitent worshiper. Thus, the arts and the Church

both stressed knowledge through pathos. For the Romantics and the Catholics, the understanding they gained constituted divine knowledge. The Church followed the *Bible* and Christian tradition as the beacon of God and truth; whereas, the Romantics were often pantheists, finding and experiencing God through nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, however, warned that “Every thing God, and no God, are identical positions” (McFarland 228). Pantheism’s greatest weakness is that if one combines God and nature, eventually, God becomes unnecessary. This is exactly what occurred.

In the 1820s, Auguste Comte began publishing his theories on social evolution and positivism. In *The Legacy of Positivism*, Michael Singer explains that Comte posited three stages through which human civilization would develop: theological, metaphysical and positivist. In the theological stage, people attribute the various occurrences in the world to intelligent beings guiding their reality. The metaphysical stage transforms the intelligent beings into abstract energies or forces within nature and material reality. This is what the Romantics had done. Comte hoped to usher in the positivist stage, which consisted of universal laws that all reality obeyed and that were simply awaiting discovery. To find these laws, Comte promoted knowledge gained solely through the “objective” observations of the five senses (Singer ix-13). Moreover, Comte also advocated governing societies through scientific principles. The masses would not choose their own destiny but rather trust science to choose wisely for them (37-40). By emphasizing only those things directly perceivable, Comte undermined spirituality, yet he also saw positivism as humanity’s new religion (3). Though Comte was by no means the first to use or promote rationality and privilege the five senses, he became this perspective’s most important advocate and was highly respected and influential during his lifetime and beyond. Among positivism’s ideological children, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) encouraged intellectuals to think of nature as materialistically evolved rather than divinely created and to apply the same notion to humans as well. Comte and Darwin encouraged humans to think of the world, their place in it and their own origin “rationally.” While positivism privileged logos over pathos, the arts also changed.

Nineteenth century European naturalism also developed as a reaction against Romanticism. Rather than the interior life, naturalist writers like Emile Zola depicted their protagonists within society. They focused on the concrete actions in their stories, describing people and events objectively. Darwin’s positivistic approach to nature is quite evident in this literary genre. Darwin described how animals’ habitats determined their physiology and behaviors. Similarly, naturalist authors depicted characters in their “natural” social environments to demonstrate those conditions directing their lives. This materialist determinism clashed heavily with Catholic belief in free will. Naturalists often depicted characters driven towards tragedy by social forces outside their control. The mere act of describing a world in which God never intervenes subtly tells the readers that observable forces constitute the sole reality. Thus, social rather than spiritual phenomena merit attention. This clearly displeased the Catholic Church, and in 1864, Pope Pius IX issued his edict *Quanta Cura* condemning naturalism (Rowlands 43). However, like positivism, 19th century Catholicism also became highly concerned with the knowable world and the people in it. The Church unwittingly embraced many of positivism’s traits.

Popular Catholicism had incorporated aspects of mysticism such as cults of the dead, magic spells and magic fountains into the Church’s teachings (Gibson 137). People, thus, had direct experiences of the divine in their daily lives. These practices declined during the *ancien regime* when most priests were from the elite, educated under the enlightenment and felt that “superstitions” needed to be eliminated. The popular traditions began to return in 1830s with the new priests who came from a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds (139). The new clergy tolerated popular religion more than its predecessor and sometimes

saw it as “an excellent slap in the face” to the positivist anticlerical (141). However, the new clergy also took actions that ironically aligned the Church with positivism.

The new priests eliminated many traditions and replaced them with a focus on confession and mass, thus creating “a rigorous separation of the sacred and the profane” (Gibson 142). French Catholicism became particularly concerned with morality and fear. This largely began during the Second Empire, and sexuality was most important among the Church’s preoccupations (Corbin 555). As Michel Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, the confessional brought sexuality under analysis to be morally judged, categorized and eventually controlled (20-21). This is ironically similar to positivism, which sought to categorize and control observable phenomena. Thus, the Catholic Church and positivism subscribed to similar world views at this point in history. They both focused on categorizing and controlling observable phenomena while deemphasizing mystical transcendence. The clerics’ attempts to control the sexual body were expressed in ways beyond the confessional; for example, the clerics condemned the new dance forms entering France from Germany:

The waltz, however, had a bad reputation. Introduced into France at the end of the eighteenth century, in 1820 it was still banned at court. In 1857 Flaubert was prosecuted for describing a waltz without hiding its sexual component. At the end of the nineteenth century the tango met with similar disapproval. (Corbin 284-85)

The previous traditional dances had been performed in groups, but dances like the waltz were practiced in pairs, and thus, the clergy saw them as overtly erotic and therefore sinful (Gibson 93). The Church morality separated spiritual life from the body; life of the spirit was to be celebrated and that of the body feared. However, the priests also took this distinction further by indoctrinating congregations with *contemptus mundi* or absolute disdain for the world. Within the binary of body and spirit, the Church attempted to drive people to God by making the body and its urges hateful. The Church frequently depicted this world as irremediably painful and taught that happiness only exists in the afterlife. Men were the first to react to this new morally dogmatic religious practice by abandoning the Church (Gibson 153). In fact, most men stopped attending confession after their first communion (Corbin 554). Previously, men made up the majority of those attending religious pilgrimages, but with the growing division between the sacred and the profane, women soon predominated (Gibson 153). Women’s greater presence in the Church allowed it to exercise greater control over them.

In this patriarchal society, women were objectified by men’s erotic desires. By controlling women’s bodies, the Church exercised control over the expression of male desire. Comte wanted to eliminate social chaos by categorizing and scientifically controlling the masses. Similarly, sexual desire threatens chaos, and the Church wanted to subdue it by controlling female bodies largely through the confessional. Many men became suspicious and believed “they [priests] used their confessional to seduce their more attractive penitents” (Gibson 75). This is apparent in *Thais*’s Athanaël who lusts after the priestess of Venus and in Massenet’s opera *Hérodiade* in which John the Baptist sexually desires Salome:

Indeed the opera mirrors contemporary [Third Republic] anticlerical debate on both social and political levels. One of the central portrayals of the opera is that of a corrupt religious man, carnally straying from his prophetic vocation, whilst his provocative, protectionist and regressive Catholic dogma is shown to be in complete contradiction. (Rowden, *Hérodiade* 15)

This public suspicion of the Church is centered on erotic desire. Men were bothered by the Church interfering with their wives. The Church often maintained authority over others through fear of God, the Son and their wrath (Gibson 242-55). This ultimately separated bodily life from spiritual life, which further allied the Church with positivist values.

Maintaining moral order through fear alienated many Catholics from sensuality and God. The Virgin Mary's increased importance in the latter 19th century provided one accessible avenue to the God they feared (Gibson 256). Yet as a desexualized figure in Christianity, she also symbolized and exacerbated the divide between the body and spirit. The Church also began to use communion as a "reward for virtue," and the practice became increasingly infrequent. Catholic theology subscribes to transubstantiation in which the believer literally consumes Christ's flesh and blood; thus, ordinary substances and divine essences co-mingle. This enables the faithful to partake of the divine. Infrequent communion demonstrates the separation of physical and spiritual life. Seeking something more, many French looked to mysticism, which occurred through the growing importance of the private sphere.

Foucault describes sexuality and the discourse around it as drifting from public life to the privacy of the home. This change was true for religion as well. To remain spiritually relevant, the Church worked to diminish the fear of a castigating God and Son. It also sought to renew the direct connection with God through more frequent communions (Gibson 255-59). Yet this was largely too little too late, and private life grew more important. By mid-century, mothers were encouraged to pray with their children at home and were told how that should be done (Corbin 522). This planted the seeds for religion within private life and no longer only in the public sphere of the Church. This trend of home prayer began among the upper classes and spread to others between 1850 and 1880: "Ultimately in 1910, it resulted in the papal decree *Quam singulari*, which authorized private communion" (Corbin 522-23). Though Corbin says home prayer changed domestic religion "about which we still know very little," one may speculate on its influence over public life. By democratizing spirituality, the Church ironically was following the republican principle of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. Thus, the Catholic Church exacerbated the loss of its own social and political relevance in 19th century France. The state's rapid secularization also occurred within this struggle between public and private life. Secularization is not only the division of religion from public affairs, but it also decides what ultimately constitutes public versus private.

The Church's political power quickly began to wane in January 1872 when Catholic parliamentarians presented a bill dedicating France to the sacred heart of Jesus and also proposing to construct a basilica dedicated to the Pope. The bill was easily defeated, and the decision finalized the relegation of the Church and religion to the private sphere. Then in March 1882, the Jules Ferry law was passed establishing secular education in the republic. The anticlerical republicans were firmly in control of the state, and through education, they were then able to instruct others in what constituted public and private life. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* told French Catholics to support the republic. The Church's political decline culminated on February 16, 1896 with the "Au milieu des sollicitudes" announcing the Church would no longer interfere with other governments (Gibson 56). However, most Catholics did not accept this and continued to oppose the republic, yet their power was fading (Gibson 99-100). The Pope had officially withdrawn from public life. The Church had regulated male desire through women's bodies, but with its shrinking influence, the men also sought to escape moral dogma and positivism through the re-sexualization of women's bodies.

"Mysticism" signifies a direct, transcendent experience of God or of some form of the absolute other (OED). Clair Rowden writes:

During the 1880s, religious mysticism infiltrated a large sector of society tired of positivist, scientific, industrial, urban society which, in its rejection of the unknowable, had established implacable laws reducing existence to intelligible facts. (*Republican Morality* 261)

While mysticism was a reaction against positivism, it was also a response to the Church's insistence upon dividing the sacred from the profane, which prevented direct experience of the divine. The mystic hoped to merge the two, and to do so, the female body was always the focus.

In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks writes that the 19th century European mind was highly fixated on the image of the nude female body. Previously, academic art had largely focused on the male body. Yet:

Inevitable there came a crisis in representation, beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century, when Realism, then Impressionism and its sequels, forced a consideration of the contexts in which nudity could plausibly be displayed. (Brooks 16-18)

The artistic questions considered in what manners could and should the nude female be portrayed. Brooks's discussion of representations of the female body goes beyond painting and also considers visual descriptions in literature. Brooks states of Emile Zola's *Nana*:

There is a conflict between Zola's artistic aesthetic, which is predicated on the need to strip bare, to denude, to break the academic mold and let in *plein air*, and his ideal aesthetic of the woman, which is more sentimentalized and reassuring, conceiving the feminine as something essentially innocent that is barely, not quite willingly or quite consciously, entering the world of adult sexuality. (159)

The 19th century wondered how to encounter the female. In *Republican Morality and Catholic Tradition at the Opera*, Clair Rowden says the Virgin Mary and the republican symbol Marianne represent two 19th century French ideals of the submissive woman. Mary was the religious woman submitting body and soul to a patriarchal deity. Marianne, on the other hand, embodied republican ideals such as family, educating one's children and patriotism. Nineteenth century France feared the liberated woman and typically saw her as highly promiscuous, which might bring down the family and the social order, a major concern to those who feared a return of the chaos of the terror. Both the Church and the state demonized female sexuality. For moral and national security, women's bodies had to be controlled, and Marianne and Mary were key figures in accomplishing this, because both were desexualized (Rowden, *Republican* 257-59). The two represented different sources of control: political and ecclesiastical. Foucault writes about the Catholic and scientific discourses around sexuality not as social repression of it but rather a proliferation of sexualities and discourses about them. These discourses create knowledge and power in which identities and sexualities are defined and controlled. Brooks's discussion of a crisis of female representation was precisely a question of controlling and understanding sexual desire. The state and Church sought to control sexuality in order to control families and social order. Zola embodies this struggle to understand the female other: "A woman's nudity is never completely representable for Zola because her final denuding is part of a scenario that brings fear and uncertainty" (Brooks 159). At one level, he fears the social chaos her sexuality might release; however, the problem more accurately concerns his own psychology. For Zola, the issue truly is his own desire. He struggles with looking directly at the nude female and, thus, acknowledging his desire and her sexual power. In this way, the fear of social chaos means a fear of what the male will become if he recognizes his desire. On the other hand, Zola often describes women as the pure innocent; this is the politically and/or religiously controlled body. Brooks explains that in Zola this is the woman whose body is totally or partially covered. After Kant, "Concealed identity was posed, in other words, as a noumenal limit beyond which human, phenomenal knowledge might not range" (Tomlinson 105). Phenomenal knowledge entails the material reality perceived through one's senses, but the noumenal is something spiritual and secret. For many during the latter nineteenth century,

noumenal knowledge lies in the female. She is the Lacanian *objet a*, the concept signifying the object of desire that can never truly be reached (*Four* 76-77). Late 19th century Europeans still believed they could find answers and reach truth. Echoing Foucault, Brooks writes, “In a patriarchal culture, uncovering the woman’s body is a gesture of revealing what stands for an ultimate mystery” (12). Zola fears the answer to that mystery about himself. Gustave Courbet’s realist painting *L’Origine du monde* directly depicts a woman’s vulva and pubic hair (Brooks 143). It suggests an unwavering wish to look directly into the mystery and understand it. In this search, many artists turned to the “exotic” other.

In *Metaphysical Song*, Gary Tomlinson writes, “The tantalizing suggestion of knowledge beyond its Kantian limits took on inter societal dimensions in the vogue of exotic subjects – of orientalist opera – in the latter nineteenth century” (106). Many operatic works of the period, such as Massenet’s *Le Roi de Lahore* and Leo Delibes’s *Lakmé* are orientalist works. The first presents love in Hindu Pakistan and the latter, a Westerner’s forbidden love for a Hindu woman. While the Catholic Church seemed empty of transcendental mysticism, the growing information on Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist beliefs suggested to Europeans other places and possibilities where mystical life still thrived. They also suggested a veil beyond which mysterious, lost knowledge awaited. This mystical knowledge was often represented through “exotic” women. Artistically, we find this representation of “exotic” women in Paul Gauguin’s paintings

Like Courbet, Paul Gauguin also looked directly at the nude, and he typically did so by looking to the “exotic” other. Gauguin, like many others during the 19th century, was fascinated by the bodies of women from “exotic” places and equated orientalism with the spiritual mysticism he longed for.¹

Gauguin largely focused on Tahitian women: “In the terms that Gauguin has set for himself, only the body of a woman untouched by European civilization will answer to the needs of the primitivist myth” (Brooks 174). The idyllic myth described here is the pastoral. As with Zola and others, Gauguin’s art has nothing to do with the nature of women but rather the reality of his own desire and male desire in general. Gauguin uses the projection of his sexuality on women, whom he perceives as distant and pure yet also sexual, in order to connect with an Eden-like time in humanity’s unknown past, a time when life was effortless and one communed with God. According to Brooks, Zola looked at the Western woman and could only see her as either sexual or pure. Through Gauguin’s exotic woman, Western male desire escapes the virgin/whore complex, and the desired woman becomes simultaneously sexual and pure. These artists used eroticism to gaze into the unconscious mind.

Many of France’s latter 19th century avant-garde movements sought to return through their art to a time before positivist and Church values alienated them from a “true” self. To do this, they gazed at the female and their own unconscious desire. Rowden states that at this time “the unconscious was viewed by wider society as a dangerous domain which allowed individuals false identification with the ‘other’ through the suppression of the (male) regulators of reason” (*Republican Morality* 201). Without reason, chaos reigns. Though society saw this as dangerous, Rowden explains that because of the Symbolists, “this foray into the feminized region of one’s unconscious was something idealized as an enriching, desirable and creative process, as an alternative life experience.” When creative artists delved into the unconscious, they discovered the Freudian “id.” By connecting with the unconscious mind, one also finds a mystical union with the “other,” which includes human beings as well as the absolute Other or God. To better understand this, I will discuss erotic religious art.

In the late 19th century, a common artistic motif in Albert Von Keller’s paintings often “combined the fetishized emaciation of the tubercular woman with the theme of crucifixion” (Dijkstra 34). His painting *A Martyr* shows a naked woman tied and nailed to a cross. Her

expression and pose carefully blur the line between death and post-orgasmic peace. One is reminded of the French expression “la petite mort”² that also blurs the two. Bram Dijkstra says the paintings debuted at a time in Europe when men feared the “new woman” who sought life outside the home and Church. Part of the fear was that without patriarchal control, women would become highly promiscuous and social chaos ensue (Rowden, *Republican* 257-58). The late 19th century constantly returns to this fear of the feminine. Describing von Keller’s work, Dijkstra states that the male voyeur enjoys the visual pleasure of the erotic female and also delights in her “sacrificial submission” to patriarchal order (34). Thus, the threat of female empowerment is subdued within the male mind. Dijkstra correctly argues that Keller’s work reflects a common fear among men at the time; however, he mistakenly states that religious feeling has nothing to do with it. The combination of an objectified image of erotic desire juxtaposed with Christian symbolism links sexuality with spirituality or at least reflects a yearning for that union. In “the little death,” one might pull back the sexual and spiritual veil of mystery and find God, thus, uniting profane pleasure with sacred spirituality. The Church and positivism had effectively severed the union of the body and spirit. To approach the intersection between religion and sensuality, some artists embraced France’s Byzantine revival.

In *Byzantium Rediscovered*, J.B. Bullen writes that Neoclassical rationalism held Byzantium in contempt: “Its religious skepticism despised the whole history of the Middle Age, but special contempt was reserved for the conservative and religiously minded Byzantine Empire” (7). He adds that “Throughout Europe, however, the choice of neo-Byzantine murals and neo-Byzantine architecture was closely caught up with political and theological issues” (9). The aesthetic of Byzantine art always suggests ancient Christian beliefs and practices. For many French artists, Byzantine art was a way to reject positivism and naturalism. Though the movement had some roots in the 1830s, it truly began to flourish in France in the 1870s. Thomas Rowlands states that this neo-Byzantine aesthetic was a “desire to create a style of painting that reflected the immutability of religious dogma” (236). For Rowlands, this eliminates the possibility of the viewer negotiating a meaning and puts the work in the position of “dictating the meaning,” which consists of Catholic dogma. Bullen agrees with similar assessments of Byzantine art in the Catholic Church (63 -65). Naturally, the Catholic Church would want art that advocates its beliefs rather than contradicting them. Yet France’s Byzantine revival did not only occur within the Church. The Byzantine revival painter Gustave Moreau “was religious, but in a strongly metaphysical way.” Bullen says that “Moreau’s affinities were not with the rational elements of Thomist philosophy [scholasticism] that the Church was trying to reintroduce, nor with Pius IX’s call for support for the Third Republic” (99). Though Bullen states that sexuality disturbed Moreau, he also points out that it is quite apparent in his paintings, such as *The Apparition* in which the bloody head of John the Baptist appears floating before a barely dressed Salome. Bullen says the paintings create both “misogynistic loathing and erotic fascination” (100-01). Both Zola and Moreau have complicated relationships with their female subjects. Zola gazes ambivalently upon women who are pure versus sexual, while Moreau’s women are often alluring and dangerous. Moreau sought the direct, mystical experience of the divine. His paintings suggest a spiritual search via sexuality while at the same time fearing it as antithetical to spiritual life. Massenet absorbed the Byzantine revival into his operas as well, but he is more comfortable addressing the female than is Moreau or Zola.

Massenet’s *Esclarmonde* (1889) opens with the Byzantine princess Esclarmonde framed by an iconostasis and looking like a Byzantine icon. In this way, the opera immediately gives her spiritual significance. The work presents the story of Esclarmonde evading her father’s prohibition of Roland, the man she loves, by magically transporting him every night to a fantasy realm where they make love. Thus, the religious icon is sexualized.

She is veiled so that Roland cannot see her and is, therefore, his path to mystical knowledge. The primordial paradise where he meets Esclarmonde cannot be attained through worldly senses but rather through unconscious drives and decadent pleasures. One day, Roland tells the Bishop of Blois of his love, and the cleric condemns it as something evil. The Bishop and some monks wait and that night grab Esclarmonde and tear away her veil. The opera demonstrates that by standing in the way of sexuality, the Church eliminates transcendent spiritual experiences. Massenet, like many French creative artists, endowed erotic desire with spiritual importance. In 1872, this is exactly what Friedrich Nietzsche called upon opera to do.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche depicts opera as embodying the Apollonian values of limits and calm, quiet contemplation (19). Dionysian values, on the other hand, embody the intoxicating ecstasy of unrestrained pleasure. Discussing ancient Greek theater, he describes the chorus's music as emerging from the libertine intoxication of Dionysian ecstasy and the spoken and acted tragedy as a dream that limits and orders the desires into a comprehensible narrative (Nietzsche 58-59). This balance, according to Nietzsche, made Greek theater great. Nietzsche saw opera, which at its inception was meant to recreate Greek theater, as often outside both Dionysian and Apollonian values and more a product of his Socratic society. He believed that opera traditionally privileged the words over the music through the recitative, and thus, "Having not the faintest conception of the Dionysiac profundity of music, he transforms musical enjoyment into a rationalistic rhetoric of passion [...]" and not passion itself (113-17). In Wagner, Nietzsche believed he had found a composer incorporating Dionysian virtues into opera. However, as time passed, he felt Wagner remained Apollonian, always reaching for an esoteric ideal. *Parsifal* cemented Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner because it celebrates denying oneself the pleasures of the flesh while it also embraces Christianity (Durant 409-10). Yet Nietzsche quickly found Dionysian hope. George Bizet's *Carmen* enraptured Nietzsche, and he saw it performed numerous times. He found it sensual, exotic and by no means Christian. Unlike Wagner, the opera sought no ideals but rather dwelt in sensual human reality. Nietzsche then called for opera to be "Mediterraneanized" (McClary 117-18). Nietzsche was basically seeking what Roland Barthes calls the "text of bliss." Such a text breaks the common comfortable codes and "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes 14). By doing so, it also induces *jouissance*. This is particularly true when the text imposes a state of "loss" on the reader yet also demands the reader to help construct its meanings. Like the mother/child relationship in Lacan, the reader and text complete each other. *Carmen* delighted and unsettled Nietzsche by breaking with past codes and forcing a new encounter with opera. Massenet composed during Nietzsche's philosophical drive for Dionysian sensuality and was quite aware of his opinion of *Carmen* and Wagner. In *My Recollections*, Massenet writes of Giuseppe Verdi's death in 1901: "I cannot think of Verdi without recalling that famous phrase of Nietzsche, who had come back from Wagnerism and had already turned against the composer: 'Music must be Mediterraneanized'" (203). Massenet attended the March 3, 1875 premier of *Carmen* at the Opéra-Comique, and Mina Curtiss writes that he sent Bizet a note calling *Carmen* a 'great success' (qtd. in Irvine 84). Like Bizet, Massenet was a product of the Dionysian rejection of positivism and Christian morality, which he achieves through the erotic representation of women. In *Thais*, he provides the erotic sensuality, and in 1894, critic René de Récy described *Thais* as the inverse of *Parsifal*, which presents redemption from sexual desire; whereas, in *Thais*, Athanaël loses his faith in succumbing to it. Massenet provides the Dionysian tragedy that Wagner would not. Nietzsche was calling for opera to move desire to the forefront of theater and the public sphere. Yet this creates tragedy because desire is always unsatisfiable. The Palais Garnier,

more often known as the “Opéra,” was a perfect place for Massenet’s Dionysian work to debut. With the dissolution of the monarchy and the Church’s influence, opera houses became an important part of the new public sphere for the moneyed classes.

After the Second Republic, the “Opéra,” and the Opéra Comique were the two primary opera houses in Paris (Huebner 1). During this period, the Opéra Comique largely appealed to bourgeois audiences. The Opéra’s audience was typically aristocratic and *nouveau riche* (McClary 15-16; Huebner 7). About sixty percent of the Opéra’s revenue came from the *abonnés* or the subscribers who were not only interested in the Opéra’s repertoire but its social life as well: “The theater or opera box was an extension of the salon, a fact that may seem paradoxical because the box, though a public space, was treated as though it were private” (Corbin 278). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas describes the salon as a place in which numerous political and philosophical ideas were debated openly (36). It was an environment in which the nobility and bourgeois spoke without regard to social class.³ The opera functioned similarly. The state subsidized both opera houses to ensure that “the higher interests of Art reigned over those of business,” but this also gave the Beaux-Arts ministry more control over the works. The ministry exercised this control mostly by dictating how many new French operas per year the houses must produce (Huebner 1-3). As the republic’s politics moved left, the repertoire also liberalized. Massenet’s early opera, *Le Roi de Lahore*, debuted at the Opéra in 1877 and fits perfectly within the tradition of French grand opera. This operatic genre, which insisted upon tragic endings, ballets, large casts and narratives of political, religious or institutional forces clashing, dominated the Opéra’s French repertoire for much of the 19th century. The works rarely challenged political or cultural norms. *Le Roi de Lahore* also follows this operatic tradition without challenging French social or religious values. It contributed little new to the Opéra’s salon conversations. Contrarily, “it is difficult to imagine that Massenet’s *Thaïs* based on a novel by the notoriously anti-clerical Anatole France, could have been produced at the Opéra twenty or thirty years earlier” (Huebner 9). Massenet’s opera imparted a message the Third Republic would like, and the state subsidies also tended to give works produced at the theaters “the seal of official support at some level of public perception” (Huebner 1). *Thaïs* validated secular republican hegemony by not only returning sexuality and spirituality to the public sphere but by positing spirituality through eroticism and not the Church. *Thaïs* addresses a deep cultural desire for something mystical discovered through women’s bodies. Like previous composers, Massenet puts erotic female ballet dancers on stage representing erotic pagan rites. However, he makes them a spiritual distraction because they experience spirituality through sexuality. Yet, Athanaël loses his faith through his desire for *Thaïs* because he can feel and experience his desire while his faith consists of distant codes without any mystical feeling. Ideally, desire and spirituality should complement one another, but religious dogma kept the monk from merging the two.

Positivism and the Church in the 19th century encouraged people to focus on observable reality. At the same time, the Church and state began to delineate sharply between public and private behavior. The Church and state frequently focused on controlling women’s bodies and male desire. This created a tremendous divide between the sacred and the profane, and for many, created a spiritual crisis. Many creative artists working in a variety of media focused on images of women’s bodies and unconscious desire in order to connect with spirituality and the divine. Massenet’s operas, including *Thaïs*, are a major part of that intellectual discussion of how to find meaning in a world where sexuality and spirituality have been pushed out of the public sphere by religious dogma and secularism.

¹ I recognize that I gloss over the diverse artistic movement to which these creative artists belonged. Rather than diminishing their importance, I wish to show how many artists in late 19th century France were looking at the female body across movements and disciplines.

² This literally means “the little death” but is also a euphemism for orgasm.

³ Calling this the public sphere, as Habermas does, is problematic because the poor and working classes were excluded.

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