

WRITING FOR THE LEGS: THE ROLE OF THE LIBRETTO  
IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FRENCH BALLET

by

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The 19th century marked changes for ballet at the Paris Opera that contributed to its development as a well-regarded independent genre. One such change was the emergence of the librettist who wrote original narratives for ballets, inherently connecting the silent art of ballet with the written word. From choreographers and composers to set designers, many involved in the production of the ballet tended to use the libretto to render the narrative onstage. Spectators, in turn, relied on the libretto to comprehend the narrative content of the dance, whether watching it in the theater or reading the story on its own. In either of these cases, the libretto linked the world of the stage and that of the text, generating meaning across various interrelated media. This thesis delineates the types of language used to appeal to these different constituencies of readers, and it explains how the libretto uses these varying narrative registers to fulfill its role as a hybrid text, intended for both pre- and post-production readings.

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## Introduction

Audiences at the Paris Opera expected ballet pantomime to tell a narrative. As renowned ballet enthusiast, critic, and librettist Théophile Gautier writes of the Paris public, they “require, a clear-cut meaning, a theme, a logical dramatic development, a moral, a well-defined ending,” all conveyed without spoken words.<sup>1</sup> Yet, just because language was absent from the stage does not mean it was absent from ballet entirely; it “lurked just beneath the surface of the ballet pantomime”<sup>2</sup> in the form of a libretto, a short written sketch that outlined the main components of a narrative like the characters, plot, setting, etc.<sup>3</sup> Librettos for ballet were written before any other theatrical aspect was conceived and “guided the construction of choreography, music, and scenery,” cementing language, and narrative, at the heart of ballet’s conception.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the centrality of language to ballet vis-à-vis the libretto, there is relatively little work done probing the literary construction and function of the libretto as a text. Even though it is connected to literature in its form and content<sup>5</sup>, Gautier considered the libretto “the least literary form there is”<sup>6</sup>. Notwithstanding its cadre of literary qualities and evocative storylines, Gautier scoffed in one of his theater reviews that “literature for the legs is hardly a subject for contention,” indicating that he would not expend effort evaluating its strengths and weaknesses as a text.<sup>7</sup> In another review he elaborates on his attempts to decipher one ballet in vain and describes his struggles

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<sup>1</sup> Ivor Guest, *Gautier on Dance* (London: Dance Books, 1986), 204.

<sup>2</sup> There were other linguistic elements as well, including banners acting as captions and music that brought to mind popular lyrics.

<sup>3</sup> Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography & Narrative: Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 265.

<sup>7</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 15.

as those “difficulties that attach to this futile pastime that is called a ballet and *is not even literature*” (emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

For a text that was so widely read by producers and audiences, the fact that the libretto was held in low esteem as a sub-literary form, despite the developing prestige of ballet as an independent art, points to its inability as a form to meet literary standards. The libretto in trying to cater to both of these reading audiences becomes a hybrid pre- and post-production work. In examining the discrepancies in the text between the modes of dance and writing, my argument alludes to an explanation of the low opinion of librettos and outlines the components that appeal to the two unique major constituencies of readers—producers and spectators. The libretto as a text presents the semblance of a methodology through which to impart information relating to the stage, but then it does not always maintain the distinction between the worlds of the text and the stage. Its tendency to act as a literary text is the cause of some of these problems, because in doing so it seemed to downplay what the narrative really was—a performance.

### *The Literary Nature of the Libretto*

The libretto’s duality of form, through which discourse the story comes through, that of text or of dance, caters to the libretto’s two major constituencies of readers, ballet producers (choreographers, composers, set designers, etc.) and audience members. The former utilizes the text to bring the ballet to life through its discourse of performance and the latter assists spectators in their need to decipher the onstage action, as well as feeds their consumption of entertainment. It was common practice for

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 98.

spectators to peruse librettos at performances, even appearing to read more than they watched, and in this way the audience had ample opportunity to receive the story through both the media of text and of ballet, each simultaneously informing the other.<sup>9</sup> Ballet audiences also read the libretto outside of the theater, to the effect of what Romantic playwright Alfred de Musset calls *un spectacle au fauteuil*, or the idea of experiencing theater exclusively through reading at home, as evidenced by the production and sale of printed librettos.<sup>10</sup> In addition, readers could encounter the ballet's narrative in contemporary newspapers like *La Presse* and *Le Journal de Débats*, and "*liseuses de feuilleton*" could experience a ballet exclusively through a written account of a live performance.<sup>11</sup> These three different reading practices raise the issue of how the story of a ballet is communicated—both through writing and performance. To approach this question, the terms story and discourse<sup>12</sup> prove useful; in the ballet libretto, the main body of text is story, "the formal content element" and the medium of ballet is discourse, "the formal expression element."<sup>13</sup> Yet, the distinction is not imminently clear because the libretto, as a text, can also function as discourse, since it relays the story through written language, in addition to the ballet performances.

The libretto asserts its status as a narrative based on the presence of a story that has events, actions and happenings, existents, characters, and setting, and it then uses

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Davis Cordova, "Romantic Ballet in France : 1830-1850," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Marian Smith, "'Poésie lyrique' and 'Chorégraphie' at the Opéra in the July Monarchy," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Mar., 1992): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Lucia Ruprecht, "The Romantic Ballet and its Critics: Dance Goes Public," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 175.

<sup>12</sup> Seymour Chatman identifies two terms that he states comprise narrative: story and discourse; story is *what* is being told and discourse is *how* it is being told.

<sup>13</sup> Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 31.

these elements to develop dramatic action.<sup>14</sup> Through these aspects, the reader enters their narrative world as they would for any written story. For the most part, the libretto reads like a literary narrative, unaware of, or unconcerned with, the theatrical components of its discourse. In the narrative body of text, the sense of the stage space and the discourse of ballet fade away, because the presentation of the characters' activities and feelings correspond to many of the elements necessary for the text to feel narrative.

Action strongly drives ballet narratives with occasional dialogue and even more rarely interjections from the narrator in the libretto. In this way, characters' personalities develop primarily through action rather than dialogue or introspection, though there is plenty of dialogue, with quotation marks, written into librettos. A comment from Gautier explains this phenomenon as the necessity that a ballet's action "must never cease to be visual."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is no coincidence that librettos privilege descriptions of actions over thoughts and dialogue because they are the easiest to portray through ballet. So, unlike other types of narratives, the vast majority of sentences in a libretto feature a character as its subject, drawing the reader's attention to their actions, highlighting how their activities drive the plot. These types of action sentences are process statements, or statements that expresses doings and happenings.<sup>16</sup> Process statements function as performative speech acts to be rendered on stage because they were written for a choreographer and composer to translate them into the medium of ballet.

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<sup>14</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 32.



The reader does receive a degree of characterization through mediated stasis statements, which are sentences that qualify the mode of “is” delivered by the narrator.<sup>17</sup> When the reader encounters a stasis statement in a ballet libretto, it breaks from the overwhelming presence of the process statements and, as a result, draws attention to the stasis statements. However, even with this highlighting effect, the small presence of stasis statements downplays role of the narrator as if to seem as if there is none, giving librettos an “unnarrated” feel because of the minimized presence of an interpretive voice, a feature common in drama scripts.<sup>18</sup> But they only comprise a small portion in comparison to the preponderance of process statements, which on one level reinforces the libretto’s role in the production of ballet and on another makes for an imbalanced reading experience.

The libretto’s literary aspects speak to its role as a mediator between audience and story, and they indicate that librettists intended their work to be more than just ancillary notes for production.<sup>19</sup> These are elements that could never be directly portrayed onstage but are in the text nonetheless, perhaps to embellish the text for the reader’s enjoyment. Some examples of these embellishments include epithets, which serve to avoid endless repetition of character names, which happens frequently because of the overwhelming presence of process statements. To give one of countless examples, in *Le Diable Amoureux*, the main character Frédéric is often called “*le jeune comte*.”<sup>20</sup> With the character as the subject of so many sentences, the substitutions for their names add interest for the reader. Another type of example is the use of

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<sup>17</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Wiesstein. “The Libretto as Literature,” *Books Abroad*, Vol. 35. No. 1 (1961): 16.

<sup>20</sup> Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint Georges, *Le Diable Amoureux* (Brussels: J.A. Lelong, 1840), 8

superlatives to describe emotions. To choose one instance from *Télémaque dans l'isle de Calypso*, Calypso in reaction to seeing her love Télémaque dancing with another, is described as showing “*la plus grande incertitude et le désespoir le plus cruel.*”<sup>21</sup> While portraying emotions is one thing, a dancer cannot express the *cruelest* hopelessness or the *most* doubt as distinct from simply hopelessness or doubt. That comparative element, while extant in the text, does read the same onstage, indicating its role as figurative language for the benefit of the reader.

Noting a few of the literary aspects of the libretto make it clear that it was not simply a provisional document for production, unlike rehearsal scores, *répétiteurs*. The fact that these texts were printed for public sale and distribution supports the notion that the libretto had a life of many phases with differing readerships and consequently the need to fill differing functions.<sup>22</sup> Despite gestures made toward literariness through figurative language, the general opinion of the libretto as a text was so low that it barely a topic of discussion in ballet criticism of the times. The story of a ballet, however, was almost always recounted and commented on in the *feuilleton*, reinforcing the necessity of its presence in ballet as an entire production. The discourse of the libretto as a genre and written medium was deemed insufficient and insignificant, diminishing the possibility of the written text of the libretto functioning as one of the main discourses for the story.

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<sup>21</sup> Pierre Gardel, *Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso* (Paris: La Salle de l'Opéra, 1790), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Marian Smith, “‘Poésie lyrique’ and ‘Chorégraphie’ at the Opéra in the July Monarchy,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Mar., 1992): 4.

*Tableau Description as Paratext—the Threshold Between Story and Discourse*

In conjunction with understanding the story as the “what” and the discourse as the “how,” the paratextual material concerns itself with the discourse of theater, specifically the medium of ballet, and the text that falls inside these thresholds is story. So to this degree, the libretto has the mechanism of paratextual material, or “liminal devices” that surround the text in order to mediate and present it to the reader<sup>23</sup>, to sort out which text corresponds to elements of story and which to discourse. Yet, without clear demarcations between which portions of text apply to the story and which to the discourse of ballet, the libretto reads as part play, part story, and part stage directions. Other types of theater arts, like drama, sport a mechanism for distinguishing stage cues and instructions from the narrative, often through italics, parentheses, font size, spacing, or some combination, cumulatively called *la didascalie* in French. In a libretto, the programmatic front matter listing roles and their dancers; the intertitles of “*acte*,” “*scène*” and “*tableau*”; and descriptions of the tableaux, or the visual components of *mise-en-scène*, all fall under the category of paratext because they act as a threshold to the narrative body of text. These sections are “without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text).”<sup>24</sup> As such, they demarcate the portions text related to discourse and outward expression and those related to the story and internal development.

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<sup>23</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Genette, *Paratexts*, 2.

The one section of text where it is always clear which reality is being represented—that of the story or the stage—is the tableau descriptions. They are the sections in which concrete descriptions of the physical surroundings and layout of the stage are given and establish the setting for the following scenes within the tangible bounds of the theater. Often written as strings of phrases rather than complete sentences, dissimilar to the narrative body of the text, they directly reference the physical space of the theater and describe how the stage looks. As a type of direction set for the set designers, there are almost no attempts to be poetical with language in these sections; they are plainly descriptive with the clear purpose of literally setting the stage.

The tableau descriptions are not only separate from the scenes in terms of spacing, but they are offset in italics or a smaller font, indicating that they are a type of paratext. Returning to this concept of *la didascalie*, the italics distinguish the information of these sections similarly to how italicized directions in a script do, and the smaller font seems to subordinate the importance of the information they give with respect to the narrative bodies of text. In either case, the change in font and spacing is the only way the text indicates a separation of the narrative information from the discursive, physical information of the theater. In a script, this kind of information is strewn throughout in italics, showing a distinction and this is a consistent mechanism. But beyond the tableau font size and the separate pacing there exists no other conscious differentiation. These changes in formatting gesture at differentiation between the necessities of the theater and of the narrative, but one to which the text does not strictly adhere.

Despite having this sorting mechanism, the libretto does not always follow it, making for a blurred experience for the reader encountering the ballet through the libretto. The permeations of discourse into the story space suggest that the libretto does not self-regulate well because the interruption of discourse puncture the appearance of a closed system. Not only that, but such disruptions occur in an inconsistent manner. While it seems that the libretto relegates the story exclusively to the space under the intertitles, beyond the threshold of paratext, it occasionally allows the elements of discourse, primarily occupying the paratextual space, to seep into the story space. Because of this seeming separation, the crossover of registers from story to discourse feels jolting to the reader, because the text jumps between the two realms. When this occurs, it demeans the text's ability to self-regulate, or the ability of the structure to maintain and close itself and is integral to the legitimacy of a narrative.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, readers will find that "the narrative is 'ill-formed' if the relevance of phenomena does not become clear."<sup>26</sup>

Having established this boundary, the text follows it—for the most part. There are a handful of instances in each libretto that break through this boundary and consequently read as jarring because they ignore the structures of *la didascalie*, working as convention, proposed by the text. While the producers of a ballet needed these discursive cues to render the story onstage, their presence outside of the paratextual material ruptures the flow of the story. The resulting effect is one equivalent to breaking of the fourth wall, because the text displays a self-awareness of its discourse that it only exposes at certain moments, which distracts from the delivery of the story if we hold the

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<sup>25</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

text up to the standard of self-regulation which Chatman describes. References to the stage, the theater, the audience, do not seem jarring in the tableau descriptions because that seems to be the designated space it, a place for *la didascalie*. But when in the narrative body of the text this happens, it is off-putting to readers. However, at other times, this line between the fictive reality of the characters and the reality of the theater goes is crossed other times in other ways that feel less abrupt and serve to strengthen the connections between the two worlds through a sharing of sensory experiences—primarily of sight and sound.

## ***Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso, 1790—Choreographer as Librettist***

The ballet *Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso* adapts the Classical story of Telemachus and the goddess Calypso to ballet-pantomime in a full-length and independent production. The creator of this work, Pierre Gardel, the ballet master of the Paris Opera from 1787 to 1820, was trained as a dancer—not as a writer—yet he is attributed with writing the libretto and staging the choreography for *Télémaque* in addition to a swath of other successful ballets throughout his long tenure.<sup>27</sup> During the late 1700s, ballet strove to become a professionalized art distinct from opera that excluded amateur dancers, a turn away from the social ballet practiced at the French courts as a result to Louis XIV's great personal passion for the art. Gardel's work helped to manifest this change in the status of ballet, through the inclusion of advanced dance technique along with pantomime and a stringent training program for his dancers, showing that only professionals could achieve such a level of skill as witnessed onstage.<sup>28</sup>

Gardel's *Télémaque* is of the tradition of the *ballet d'action* championed by Enlightenment ballet theorist, Jean-Georges Noverre, whose style of ballet privileged pantomime over dancing and strongly adhered to the principle of telling a story through movement without words. Noverre strongly influenced, the development of the “dramaturgically conceived ballet”<sup>29</sup> through which he conceptualized his belief that

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<sup>27</sup> Maureen Needham Costonis. "Gardel, Pierre Gabriel." *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 3, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Chapman, “Forgotten Giant: Pierre Gardel,” 18.

<sup>29</sup> Dorion Weickmann, “Choreography and Narrative: The Ballet D'action of the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.

“any situation can be turned into dance.”<sup>30</sup> Noverre’s influence on ballet turned the genre definitively towards the narrative and helped develop the expectation for “dramaturgically conceived” narrative content to be conveyed through pantomime, if not actually through dance.<sup>31</sup> While Gardel’s work forwards Noverre’s principles, he diverged from Noverre’s vision of ballet through his increased inclusion of dance.<sup>32</sup> The significance of narrative and of ballet being a genre with a narrative implies that not only is there a story to be conveyed, but that there is a story for the audience to receive and understand. In this way, the role of the libretto as the arbiter between the narrative and the audience becomes paramount.

The libretto of *Télémaque* is unique among the three ballets examined here because only Gardel is credited with both the creation of the libretto and the choreography, contrasting with the later practice of having these two roles filled by different people. Indeed, until the 1820s, the libretto was not written by a professional librettist, as would become standard, but by ballet masters themselves.<sup>33</sup> Although Gardel was not a professional librettist, his libretto employs many of the formal conventions of structure seen in ballet librettos from this period and onward produced throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the Paris Opera and it confirms the inclusion of important conventions for the libretto as a theatrical text that evince their longevity through their presence in succeeding librettos. In particular, the intertitles and the descriptions of the tableaux follow the typical organizing principles of a libretto that relate the text to theater. Yet, the narrative body of text leaves much to be desired in

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<sup>30</sup> Weickmann, “Choreography and Narrative: The Ballet D’action of the Eighteenth Century,” 57.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>32</sup> John V. Chapman, “Forgotten Giant: Pierre Gardel,” *Dance Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1987): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*, 8.



terms of semantic finesse if held up to literary standards, and it conveys the story in a utilitarian manner, without excessive detail or an abundance of figurative language. This sparseness in figurative language is most likely the result of the familiarity that audiences had with the story and characters; they would not have needed much detail to grasp the particulars of the story. Yet, despite its plain writing, this libretto reveals the existence of discursive paratextual conventions at this early point in ballet's life as an independent genre and it confirms an establishment of the divide between story and discourse, or at least a gesture of it.

The text that falls under the heading "*tableau*" proves itself to be exclusively concerned with matters of discourse as it anchors itself in the theater space, and not the story space. With the set descriptions delivered as such, they set the ballet narrative in a world contained by the physical boundaries of the stage. All three tableaux descriptions in *Télémaque* start with the phrase "*Le théâtre représente . . .*" the habitual manner in which to introduce tableaux descriptions across the oeuvre of librettos.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the text first and foremost describes how the stage appears, how it is set up, what décor it has, and where each item is positioned within the boundaries of the stage. For example, in the description of the first tableau, the librettist mentions the wing, or "*la coulisse*," as parameters to designate the length of the set representing mountains, firmly grounding the text of the tableau description in the physical space of the theater, as it highlights the wings as part of the building blocks for the illusion of the set.<sup>35</sup> Such language enforces that the discourse of the text is one of performance since it evokes the setting of the stage as the place where the setting of the story will be represented.

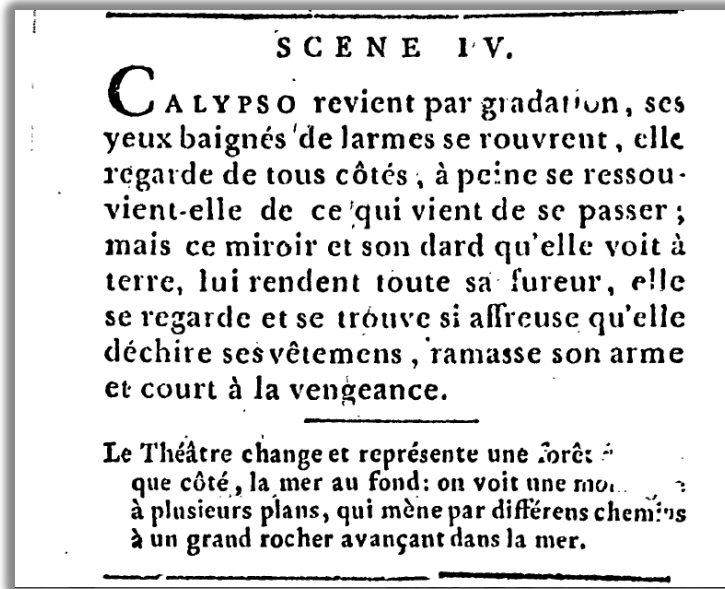
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<sup>34</sup> Gardel, *Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso* 5, 11, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

However after these discursive orientations and images are established in the tableau description, the awareness of the discourse of theater diminishes, almost entirely. Because of the paratextual material, primarily the tableaux descriptions discussed above, there is a designated textual space where the story is happening, distinct from the discursive information pertaining to the theater space. A confirmation of this divide between discourse and story manifests as a set change in the middle of Act 3 at the end of Scene 4. The description is not woven into the narrative, but is set apart by a long dash and a decrease in font size, making it feel distinctly separate from the story space (see Figure 1). It is written in the style of the tableau descriptions—loose sentence structure, references to the theater space, detailing of physical set elements, etc.—which again points to its role in discourse as distinct from story. For the reader, the visual separation marks a pause in the main action of the story and allows them to understand the changes that must be made on the stage to accommodate the narrative’s presentation as a performance.

Figure 1



However, at other points, the librettist did not take such care to distinguish discursive stage cues from the story. The librettist includes the directions in the text same as all the narration delivering the story to the reader, melding the theater space and the story space without any sort of differentiation. For example, directions relating to the raising and lowering of the curtain occur within the narrative body of text with no special demarcation, despite the fact they are performative speech acts that relate exclusively to discourse. In Act 1, Scene 1, after some figurative language to set the scene, of the stage and the story both, the text announces, “*la toile se lève*” which reorients the reader away from the story space and into the theater space right after the text is trying to introduce the reader to the story.<sup>36</sup> The direction to raise the curtain is not the very first line of the text under the intertitle, but rather comes after a detailed description that further sets the scene by elaborating on the information given by the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.

tableau that reads: “*L’ouverture doit peindre le sifflement des vents déchaînés, le mugissement des flots irrités, le plus affreux orage, et par progression, le calme le plus voluptueux.*”<sup>37</sup> “*L’ouverture*” and the successive details that construct the setting could just as easily apply to discourse as to story, since the following details help to create the aesthetic object, in either form. In any case, the cue for the curtain breaks the flow of the story that the first line established. The second, and only other curtain cue in the text, occurs in the very last line of the text Act 1, Scene 12, “*La toile se baisse.*”<sup>38</sup> Here, the effect of the discursive cue is less disruptive because the narrative is over, but it does act to securely tie the text back to its discourse of theater, again without any kind of special designation in neither spacing nor font.

The depictions of music and sound in the libretto also seem to straddle the line between story and discourse. For example, Act 2, Scene 4 begins with, “*Une symphonie douce et céleste annonce une divinité.*”<sup>39</sup> While the sentence is undeniably a musical cue for the composer when writing the score and it would have been heard by the dancers onstage, it is unclear if the characters hear this music, because there is no logical source for it. If it is sound only heard in the theater space and not the story space, then this is another example of a cue that in other types of text, like scripts, tend to offset in italics to separate it from the story. But since librettos do not have, nor did they seem to need, an equivalent mechanism, the cue is casually mixed in with the story elements. It serves as a reminder in the text that the libretto details a performing art, and must address both the aspects of discourse and story.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 12.

On the other hand, diegetic sounds disrupt the narrative less because they have a natural space within the story. In Act 2, Scene 8, the *Nymphes* of Calypso's island pick up musical instruments, and "*elles forment un concert.*"<sup>40</sup> Since the characters have instruments and play music in the story space, when "*Le cor se fait entendre et annonce aux Nymphes qu'il faut se préparer pour la chasse,*" it is clear that the characters hear this sound, because it happens in the story space.<sup>41</sup> It is an example of a source sound, or sounds that have an identifiable cause within the story. While it is not completely certain who hears the sound because of the use of passive voice, the *Nymphes* do react to the sound, indicating that they do indeed hear it. But the sounding of the horn occurs in the discourse as well, since the orchestra will produce a sound recognizable as that of a hunting horn, meaning that both the characters and the audience hear it. This sharing of sensory details across the bounds of story and discourse is less jarring than the other disruptions described above because it fosters a sense of shared experiences between the audience and the characters, a sense augmented by seeing the performance live rather than experiencing it as *un spectacle au fauteuil*.

Returning to the question of passive voice, in the tableau descriptions, it is common to write "*on voit,*" or "one sees," or "it is seen," and so the question of "who" or "whom" naturally arises. With the audience of a libretto comprised of both spectators and readers, two types of groups receive the narrative and both have the potential to be referred to vis-à-vis the use of passive voice. Concerning spectators, members of a live audience form a key component of the discourse of ballet, since their role as a spectator is critical to how ballet is experienced and communicated. In the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 15.

tableau sections, it seems that the “*on*” refers to the audience because it is the space for discursive material and because it describes the space of the theater, which houses the audience as well as the onstage action. In the second act, the tableau description portrays the setup of the stage as, “*Un groupe d’arbres détaché des autres est sur un des côtés, et sur l’autre, l’ouverture d’une grotte, où l’on voit Télémaque endormi.*”<sup>42</sup> Since it comes from paratextual material, and is therefore external to the narrative portion, it seems that this “*on*” refers to the audience, or at least includes them, and is not referring to the characters because it is unclear if anyone else is onstage to see him. The “*on*” here also alludes to the sense of omniscience wielded by the audience, who see all, even the portions of the production where the story pauses to accommodate for the discourse of theater.

While reference to the audience may be commonly inferred from the use of “*on*” found in tableau sections, it is rare for the narrative body of the text to refer to the audience directly because of the jump in narrative register from story to discourse. However, there is one incident of this in *Télémaque* which occurs in Act 3, Scene 7: “*celui-ci furieux suit de près la chasse qui passé à la vue des Spectateurs sur differen[t]s<sup>43</sup> plans de la Montagne. On voit Télémaque et Eucharis prendre un autre chemin, et s’éloigner.*”<sup>44</sup> What is truly remarkable about this sentence is that it references the audience directly, by name, “*Spectateurs,*” and how the characters/dancers pass in front of *their* perspective. Referring to the point of view of the audience within the narrative body breaks the boundaries set between story and discourse because

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>43</sup> The “t” was not present in the text. This libretto has many typographical errors that may be the result of anything from trying to conserve letters to plain negligence and such mistakes were fairly common.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 21.

this is the only point in the story where the text directly mentions the audience. Because of its rarity, this mentioning feels out of place. Not only that, but “*Spectateurs*” is capitalized, drawing even more attention to the audience, and highlighting their importance as the receivers of the narrative, despite the fact this is the only place they are undeniably present in the text. That it is an audience member, and not a reader, that receives the text again points to the story’s predominant discourse— theater—which will rear its head even during some of the most intriguing parts of the story.

Because it seems that the discourse of theater was granted more energy than the discourse of the written word for the story of this ballet, *Télémaque* is not a very rich text neither in terms of complexity of plot nor imagery. But this is not to say that the story is not at all rich. Being taken from Antiquity, the audience would likely have been very familiar with the story and they would therefore have needed less prompting from the libretto to understand the onstage action. However, for ballets with original stories, much more will need to be explained. As the trend in ballet narratives shifted to express the themes of Romanticism, original stories were created, necessitating that librettos more fully evoked the world of the ballet’s story so that audiences and readers had a source from which they could gain all the insight they required about the story.

## ***Le Diable Amoureux*, 1840—The Professional Librettist at Work**

*Le Diable Amoureux* serves as a representative of the librettos written by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint Georges, a prolific librettist at the Paris Opera during the height of Romantic ballet. During this time, ballet developed into a thriving, independent genre with its own celebrity dancers, dedicated audience, and cadre ballet critics. Along with the surge in ballet's popularity, its production methods changed to hire a professional to write the libretto to ensure the quality of the ballet's narrative. With de Saint Georges, author of a dozen librettos for both ballet and opera, his command of his craft shows through in this work and his abundance of experience. As a text, the libretto of *Le Diable Amoureux* contains many of the same formal features found in *Télémaque*, despite the fifty intervening years between the two works and the emergence of the role of the librettist. The perpetuity of these formal conventions implies that the libretto maintained the same gestures, and the same inconsistencies, in the separation between story and discourse.

The story of *Le Diable Amoureux*, based on the acclaimed novel of the same name written by Jacques Cazotte in 1772, was an originally conceived adaptation by de Saint Georges, and it demonstrates how ballet strove to increase its legitimacy as an art by connecting itself to “popular fiction.”<sup>45</sup> Gautier described de Saint George's adaptation<sup>46</sup> as one through which he managed to demonstrate “so much wit of his own, to make a ballet out of all the fantasy and whimsy of *Le Diable Amoureux* of Cazotte.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cordova, “Romantic Ballet in France,” 123.

<sup>46</sup> De Saint George's version features a young count and his two human love interests, one of higher social standing than the other, who summons the devil to help him escape his gambling debts. The demon he summons falls in love with him to create a love-square, full of passion and confusion.

<sup>47</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 94.



With this melodramatic premise, de Saint Georges successfully includes practically all of the tropes of ballet stories of the period: a love conflict, a supernatural element, pirates, and folk dances, representing the necessary categories of social conflicts, expectations of the metaphysical, the exotic, and folk, respectively. *Le Diable Amoureux* experienced great success with its immense in scale of no less than eight tableaux and Pauline Leroux charmed audiences with her portrayal of the demon, Urielle.<sup>48</sup> The popularity of this ballet, the positive critical reviews it received, as well as the characteristically Romantic themes of the story all position the libretto of *Le Diable Amoureux* as a good representative of successful ballets during this time period and as such is a work whose text provides an access point to the questions of story and discourse.

De Saint Georges' work features a strong sense of the role of the audience as part of the discourse of ballet that particularly comes through in the paratextual tableau descriptions. These sections similarly exclude themselves from the reality of the story by explicitly delivering information relating to the theater; unsurprisingly mentioning the physical space of the stage. Across the tableau descriptions, there is a greater sense of stage as a unit of space and how the stage appears to the audience. Furthermore, the audience's increased presence in the text shows how their role has grown with regard to the discourse.<sup>49</sup> However, dissimilar to the techniques used in *Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso*, the descriptions typically orient themselves using the directions *à gauche* and *à droite*<sup>50</sup>, and often with respect to the audience. Thus, through the text, the reader

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<sup>48</sup> Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*, 193.

<sup>49</sup> Ruprecht, "The Romantic Ballet and its Critics," 175.

<sup>50</sup> Left and right respectively.

receives a more concrete depiction of the setup of the stage and how different elements are situated with respect to each other as well as with respect to the audience. In the first tableau, the reader encounters the description of “*quelques marches*<sup>51</sup> *place en face du spectateur*,” detailing the orientation of the market stalls as facing the audience, indicating that their positioning caters specifically to the audience’s perspective.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the spectator is present in the text from the first few lines of the text, and their early acknowledgment speaks to their role in the discourse as receptors of the ballet’s narrative. Later, in the fourth tableau description, “*une petite maison de pêcheur*” is situated “*à droite du spectateur*.”<sup>53</sup> The privileging of the audience’s perspective, or the orientation of sets with specific regard their perspective, speaks to the changed role of the audience, who as paying patrons who were part of a public that could influence what type of works were produced, now had clout with the Paris Opera. The reference to the audience, the acknowledgment of their receipt of the narrative is appropriate within the tableau description, since as paratext it more gracefully deals with elements of discourse; it is where the reader can expect to deal with aspects exclusively of theater.

However, there is one instance where the audience is directly mentioned within the narrative body of the text. In Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 9 when the demon Urielle clandestinely takes the place of Lilia at the wedding planned for the young lovers Lilia and Frédéric, the text describes how, “*la fausse fiancée lève son voile et laisse voir aux spectateurs le malin diable qui a pris la place de le mariée et s’applaudit sa ruse*.”<sup>54</sup> Through lifting her veil, Urielle fosters direct contact with the audience for great

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<sup>51</sup> This should read as *marchés*.

<sup>52</sup> De Saint Georges, *Le Diable Amoureux*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

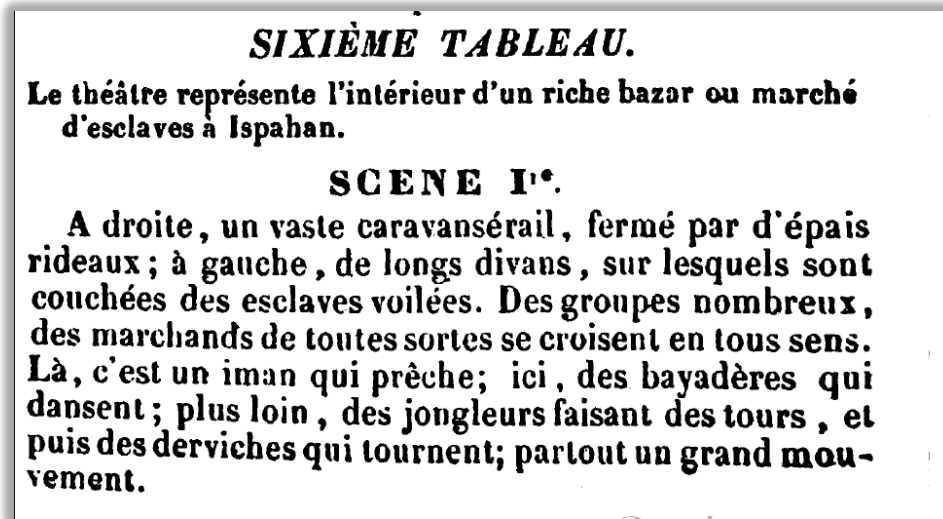
<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

dramatic effect, since through this reveal only the audience, and none of the characters, know the true identity of the bride Frédéric is about to marry. The spectator is not only mentioned by name but a character interacts with them, unlike when simply their point of view is referenced. In this instance, de Saint Georges makes great use of the audience as an unspoken entity of constituents of the story through the discourse of ballet, although he breaks the boundary between story and discourse to do so because he includes the audience in the same way as the characters. Outside of the examples from the tableau descriptions mentioned above, this is the only place in the text where the audience is mentioned by name and without ambiguity.

A different type of presence of discursive elements in the narrative space is an instance where there seems to be a spillover of the sixth tableau description into the text. There is a sparse, one sentence description in the smaller font of the sixth tableau, but then in the main text under the scene heading, there are details given that seem like they should be in the separate tableau description and not in the narrative body (See Figure 2). There is the inclusion of the phrases of orientation like “*à droite*” and “*à gauche*” that conventionally are in the tableau’s section and not in the main body of text. There is the fact that the scene has not one complete sentence, which again is unlike all the other scenes of this libretto. In addition, there is no action directly related to the story; there is just a random hustle and bustle of activity, background information about what the scene looks like. While this technique is not entirely uncommon in librettos, it is a jarring anomaly since this information seems better suited to the tableau description. Or, it could have been written in a style that better matched that of the

story. As such, it reads more like discourse than story, creating the feeling of discrepancy.

Figure 2



De Saint Georges also allows a sense of discourse to seep into the narrative body of text in another way—through the inclusion of references to prior scenes, acts, and episodes in terms coherent to the audience but not to the characters. His practice of including theatrical references within the text appeals to the audience's sense of reality, and not that of the characters. Four times in the work, the text refers back to its intertitles by referencing previous scenes or acts by name. Because of the delineation posed by the paratextual material between discourse and story, this mentioning of the text's structure is a clear shift in narrative register that takes the reader out of the story's reality and back to that of the stage and its discourse. It also posits a disconnection between the audience and the characters because the intertitles are not sensible demarcations for the characters. For example, in Act 3, Tableau 7, Scene 2 de Saint Georges refers back to "*le rosaire et la croix que la jeune fille lui a donnés au premier*

*acte*,” recalling a rosary and a cross that Lilia gave to Frédéric in the first act.<sup>55</sup> The designation of the first act appeals to the structural logic of the text, but it does so in a space that primarily deals with elements of the story. These items not only carry forward the details of the scene in which they were given, which was a tender moment of love, but they are referenced in terms understandable to the audience—by the intertitles. The text references this exchange as a specific point in time according to the audience’s understanding of it because the annotations of “act” and “scene” have no meaning to the characters. The terms of the intertitles represent the discursive elements of the text and as such they interrupt the story.

Another reference to an intertitles found in Act 3, Tableau 8, Scene 2 to the same effect is: “*l’on aperçoit la montagne et l’église du deuxième acte*” where readers encounter the same phenomenon of a reference framed in terms of the intertitles, or in a way that makes sense for the audience through their reception of the story. But here de Saint Georges seems to be conserving his resources by calling up a previously detailed image, rather than rehashing its particularities since this occurs in the very last scene.<sup>56</sup> De Saint Georges could have just as easily framed these references with respect to the characters’ experiences and knowledge but instead he draws the reader out of their world and references prior events the way an audience member would. As such, it fosters a discrepancy in point of view, and by referencing the paratextual material and the organization it provides, the narrator lifts the reader out of the story world and into the realm of its discourse—that of performance.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 34.

The lack of distinction between story and discourse also significantly manifests itself through the use of the pronoun “*on*” and the passive voice, whose recurring usage shows how the audience could sometimes be included in the story in a way that blurs the lines between story and discourse. Since the passive voice is void of a subject, it seems that at times, “*on*” refers to either the audience, a mixed group of the audience and the characters, or just the characters. The passive voice is sometimes more relevant to the reading constituency of the producers than the audience and vice versa. Determining who is included, or referred to, in different cases of passive voice helps to delineate various reading experiences of the libretto and to understand who the text addresses.

Like in *Télémaque*, the “*on*” indicating who hears diegetic sounds includes both characters and the audience. Consider this example from Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 7, “*On entend tinter au loin a cloche de la chapelle.*”<sup>57</sup> The “*on*” refers to the characters in the scene who hear the church bell and then react to it, but the audience watching the performance also hears the bells ring, because this sentence functions as a sound cue for the composer in addition to sound’s role in driving the plot. The sound and who hears it permeates these different levels of reality from story through discourse to the audience. Another example to the same effect is in Act 3, Tableau 6, Scene 3 which reads, “*Tout-a-coup, on entend le canon.*”<sup>58</sup> All of the characters and constituents of the story hear the cannon and the sound connects the spectator’s experience to that of the characters’. So while discursive, these sounds also have a function in the story as plot catalysts.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 27.

On the other hand, there are examples of sound cues that are purely discursive, directed to the composers, again similar to *Télémaque*. The descriptions of music serve as cues for the composer as he reads the libretto to compose the score. When the composer reads a phrase like “*Une musique infernale éclate,*” in Act 1, Tableau 2, Scene 3 to cue the exit of Belzébuth, he understood it as part of their role in creating the elements of discourse of ballet.<sup>59</sup> The music maintains a critical role in setting the mood of the stage and, to an extent, narrating the visible action, showing the responsibilities taken on by the composer in his capacity as a ballet producer. So when in Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 9 the libretto declares “*la musique devient plus sombre et plus lugubre*” it is part of the discourse to create the right feeling for the stage, which in this case an ominous tone.<sup>60</sup> It does not seem like the characters hear this sound, as there is no indication that it is happening in the story itself, yet it is vital to the overall experience of the live production. Cues like this, when read at home, still help the reader envision the story on the stage as a live performance.

On a different note, the passive voice, particularly the pronoun “*on*” can illicit the impression of what the audience sees, which readers do not encounter in the narrative body of text of *Télémaque*. Consider the example in Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 10, where Urielle descends to hell in flames while the other characters of the scene pray nearby. The scene reads:

“*Thérésine et toutes les femmes tombent a genoux, et, pendant leur prière au ciel, on voit le banc de gazon, sur lequel repose Urielle, s’abimer lentement, et disparaître, au milieu des flammes, dans les entrailles de a terre.*”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 25.

The word “*pendant*” indicates simultaneity, so at the same time the other women characters engage in prayer, and are therefore occupied, Urielle descends into the depths of the earth. Since it seems like the other characters do not see this descent because their attention is elsewhere, the “*on*” seems to refer mostly, if not exclusively, to the audience who watching this scene. This instance raises the notion of the privileged view of the audience, which is similar to that of the semi-omniscient narrator, maybe even totally omniscient because they see all the action that transpires onstage.

But, in other cases, the audience sees and reacts to people and objects that characters see too. Consider the example from Act 3, Tableau 7, Scene 1, “*l’on voit paraître Urielle.*”<sup>62</sup> The audience sees the entrance of Urielle, and is probably also cued to it musically. The reader knows that Frédéric shares in this view because “*le comte reste frappe de terreur à cette vue.*”<sup>63</sup> In this case both the audience and the character see the event occur, and it is clear that Frédéric sees Urielle because of his strong emotional reaction to her, that of fright. Another instance utilizing the phrase “*l’on aperçoit*” is when Urielle gives Phœbée a privileged view of Lilia’s wedding preparations in Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 4 where the text describes the view seen by the characters and the audience: “*l’on aperçoit dans l’intérieur le tableau de la toilette de noce de Lilia.*”<sup>64</sup> Like Frédéric, Phœbée reacts “*à cette vue*” so it is clear that she is consciously aware of her vision. Urielle gives Phœbée this secret insight, to show her that her lover is going to marry Lilia, but also for the audience to see too, to be included

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 22.



in the conspiratorial exchange between Urielle and Phœbé in their dealings to foil Lilia.

But just to be clear, there are many instances where the passive voice almost irrefutably refers to the characters and not to the audience, showing that it can also function solely on the level of story. For example in Act 2, Tableau 3, Scene 7 when the text reads, “*on emporte Lilia évanouie,*” it is inferred that there is a collective group carrying the fainted Lilia, and even if it’s not directly identified as characters it is certainly not the audience helping this group in their travails.<sup>65</sup> Or in Act 2, Tableau 4, Scene 9 where the characters’ exit is described as, “*on fuit l’église avec horreur.*”<sup>66</sup> The characters and dancers flee the scene and, obviously, the audience does not flee the theater while watching this transpire onstage. But because of the action incited by the storyline, it is possible the audience felt as if they were running away with the cast or that they empathize with their feelings of horror because they are themselves horrified by the turn of events.

Who is included in the shifting referent “*on*” matters because when the audience may be included, this constitutes a breaking of the boundary between story and discourse, because the audience, who are not characters, is included in the elements of the story. While it provides a unique sense of connection to and inclusion in the story, it forwards discursive elements outside of their designated paratextual space. The passive voice shows that the discourse of ballet can come through in different ways that are relevant to the two major constituencies of readers of a libretto. The increased sense of discourse within this libretto indicates a change in how people related to the libretto

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 24.

as a text, along with the development of the role of the librettist. While it seems that the paratextual material sets boundaries between elements of story and discourse, such distinctions are often disregarded. In some cases, the effect is disconcerting because no steps are taken to separate the discursive stage cues from the story and the delivery of the narrative. Yet, at other times, the blurring of the boundaries between story and discourse serves to create a sense of shared experience between the audience and the characters because thanks to the discourse of theater both groups can hear the same sounds and the same privileged view. Across almost all the examples, breaks in the flow of the story in favor of the discourse relate to the audience member and their experience of the piece or to the producer, showing how the libretto worked to fulfill its multiple roles.

## *La Péri*, 1843—Fan Becomes Librettist

The author of this libretto is just that—an author and not a librettist. Written by renowned Romantic thinker, writer, and ballet critic, *La Péri* is the product of Théophile Gautier's second foray in writing librettos. While there is a relative paucity of information regarding Pierre Gardel and Jules Henri Vernoy de Saint Georges's approach to writing librettos, in the case of Gautier there is ample access to many of his reflections about his writing process through his collected ballet reviews. For example, he writes that his inspiration for *La Péri* came to him from a poem he attempted to write and instead manifested itself as a two-act ballet.<sup>67</sup> More than anything, this libretto is a work of fan-fiction meant to show-off his favorite ballerina, Carlotta Grisi, for whom he had a major infatuation. Gautier's preoccupation with dance as its own self-contained art<sup>68</sup> and influences the story he chose to write, in which he prioritized "devising situations that would develop naturally within a framework of dance and movement" and, consequently, has a much simpler plot.<sup>69</sup>

In comparison to *Télémaque dans l'Isle de Calypso* and *Le Diable Amoureux*, *La Péri* features fewer extraneous episodes that contribute to the main action—the focus remains on dance and situations that lead seamlessly into dance throughout. Furthermore, his approach to the style of writing and the subject matter is markedly different than the previous two works because his understanding of ballet is significantly inflected by his experience of the art as an audience member first and foremost. While his writing skill is undeniable, he admits his "ignorance of theatrical

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<sup>67</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> One of his most famous aesthetic principles is "*L'art pour l'art*," or that art needs only to exist for its own sake.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, xxi.

devices and the demands of the stage” and that he learned much from his prior partnership de Saint Georges to create *Giselle*.<sup>70</sup> Reading his reviews in total to accumulate his philosophy of ballet enlightens a reading of *La Péri* by allowing the reader to see how he put his aesthetic principles into practice on his own ballet, after his wildly successful collaboration with de Saint-Georges which was somewhat of a test-run for his libretto writing experience.

Gautier’s theater reviews constitute epitext<sup>71</sup>, and so his journalistic ventures are an element of paratext, with his writings influencing how readers approach his librettos. Through the theory of ballet he posits in his reviews, where dance is preeminent over story, one can see how he puts these principles into practice through his librettos, including *La Péri*. His newspaper writings also fully develop his persona as an audience member, a perspective that can easily be read through his librettos. There is less dallying with story and discourse—he more clearly delineates where the story occurs and limits the disruptions of theatrical elements like cues and performative speech acts by framing the whole story around dance, more firmly cementing the text in the realm of discourse. Because so much of the story is dance, it is really a long description of the discourse of ballet and its techniques. His preoccupation with dance, and therefore its discourse, precludes the development of a narrative as complex as *Le Diable Amoureux*. This correlates to Gautier’s belief that “Dancing has no other purpose but to display beautiful bodies in graceful poses and develop lines that are

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<sup>70</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 98.

<sup>71</sup> Genette’s term meaning “the distanced elements [that] are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media.”

pleasing to the eye. It is silent rhythm, music made visible.”<sup>72</sup> His rather unusual stance that dance is all that ballet needs to be appreciated as an art was forward-thinking in comparison to some of his other contemporaries who were still preoccupied with the story of ballet over its dance elements.

Dance, as a more prominent focus of the text, lends itself to the increased presence of the discourse of the stage in the text of *La Péri*. The awareness of the theater comes not so much from performative speech acts in the form of process statements, although this still occurs, but from the reader feeling like they are watching dance that is the same in the story as the text. The descriptions of dance both forward the plot and help the reader create an image of what transpires onstage, an effect not rendered as lucidly in the other two librettos where often one sentence will indicate that dancing occurred without further detail. Because of this dance-centric focus, the framing of the piece is more suited to being thought of as pertaining theater than as story. While the literary elements are more elegantly executed because of Gautier’s writing expertise, they do less to create the feeling that the text is a story more than a ballet. It is a story that is highly conducive to many dance scenes that seem to arise naturally as part of the story itself, as opposed to being supplementary, secondary, or even extraneous to the story and the onstage action, as was sometimes the case in other ballet-pantomimes.

Dance drives the plot in *La Péri* more than in the other two works here on multiple occasions because the plot is simpler, more theme-based, and the fact that “supernatural characters, however, seemed to require less rigorous explanations” for

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<sup>72</sup> Guest, Gautier on Dance, 68.

why they danced and “their movements were implied to be natural to their species.”<sup>73</sup>

Featuring a fairy as a main character allows for more opportunity for dance than in other works more heavily populated by human characters, whose characters were understood to actually be dancing in the story.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the text doesn’t expose itself to discourse so much as it frames itself with it, because of the contextualization of the theater realm, and the consistent allusions to it, through dance.

Gautier’s conception of this ballet contributes not only to crafting a scenario conducive to many opportunities for dancing with only a few major episodes but one whose themes echo the those he finds integral to ballet itself—the line between illusion and reality. He writes: “For a ballet to be at all convincing it must be entirely unrealistic. The more fabulous the action, the more chimeric the characters, the less will be the shock to authenticity.”<sup>75</sup> *La Péri* meets these criteria as the whole story revolves around Achmet’s boredom with the earthly world and the *Péri* who seeks to pull him into her ethereal realm. These two characters and their amorous relationship demonstrate well the juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural that prevails in this ballet. The whole ballet hinges on the blurring of the boundaries between the fantastic fairyland of the *Péris* and the exotic reality of Achmet’s Cairo harem, but in the text this all clearly happens within the theater. The first tableau description begins with “*Le théâtre représente*”, following the convention seen in the other two librettos; then Gautier proceeds to describe scenery “*à la gauche du spectateur*” so he quickly orients the onstage setup with respect to the audience, corresponding to how he always

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<sup>73</sup> Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 9-10.

experienced ballet, as a spectator.<sup>76</sup> This makes sense given his extensive attendance as an audience member and how that informs his libretto writing practice. So far, this is all on par with all other ballet librettos.

However, rather than describing the setting at length, he simply writes: “*La scène est au Caire*,”<sup>77</sup> grounding the ballet in a specific time and place which is not necessarily common because the inexact nature of pantomime, as Gautier expresses, “is unable to indicate the name of a town or country in a gesture, its sole means of expression.”<sup>78</sup> Despite such shortcomings of pantomime, he aims to represent a real place, which contrasts with the strong thread of the supernatural in this ballet. He elaborates at length in his review of *La Péri* the details of the setting and his relationship to it, noting that he feels as if the theatrical depiction is correlates well with reality, or at least his personal perspective of Cairo. He comments in the *feuilleton* “you would not believe that neither M. Philastre nor M. Cambon<sup>79</sup> have ever been in Egypt.”<sup>80</sup> Overall, there is a preoccupation not only with place but with a specific place that holds special personal meaning to Gautier; setting is not incidental but paramount. Sets and backdrops served as one of the semiotic systems of the theater through which audiences received a great deal of information and viewing pleasure. Gautier’s attention in setting for the stage shows its significance to his story, which in turn is appropriate for the discourse because the Cairo harem allows for dance to naturally

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<sup>76</sup> Théophile Gautier, *La Péri* (Paris: Charpentier et Cie, 1872), 382.

<sup>77</sup> Gautier, *La Péri*, 382.

<sup>78</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 95.

<sup>79</sup> M. Philastre and M. Cambon were scene-painters.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

arise out of situations and for it to occur often, since it falls within the cadre of an odalisque's duties.

For the second of only two tableau descriptions, again a nod towards simplicity and streamlining the production to concentrate on dance, Gautier outlines a bird's eye view of Cairo. He describes it as "*Au delà, vue de Caire à vol d'oiseau*," a point of view unique amongst these three ballet librettos, which assume a point of view on the same plane.<sup>81</sup> He comments in his review, "on the terrace of Achmet's palace [that] the action of the ballet takes place, being deliberately simplified to give full scope to the choreographer."<sup>82</sup> It is an isolated space far above the city where it can self-contain all the action and dancing. The balcony is also an intimate space that relegates the hubbub of the city to another realm beyond the reach of the characters and audience. It fits thematically too, because it shows Achmet's perspective separate from the earth below, he is physically above the ground and closer to the heaven he wants to inhabit with his Péri. The setting of the balcony is a way to manifest the divide, and also the intermediate space, between heaven and earth. Again, Gautier's construction of the story lends itself perfectly to the major themes of the narrative and to the discourse of ballet, because the balcony as a setting highlights the dancing and through it, the tenuous relationship between Achmet and the Péri.

With regard to the main body of text, to begin the first scene of Act 1, Gautier uses the introduction "*Au lever du rideau*," immediately referencing physical parts of the theater and cementing the reader in the discursive stage space.<sup>83</sup> Rather than

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<sup>81</sup> Gautier, *La Péri*, 391.

<sup>82</sup> Guest, *Gautier on Dance*, 118.

<sup>83</sup> Gautier, *La Péri*, 381.



piercing through the story, this reference frames it by anchoring the narrative in the discourse of theater and performance from the outset. The way the narration describes this moment sets the scene specifically through the lens of an audience member rather than just a reader. This introduction informs how the rest of the text is read because of this beginning and its awareness of the text as part of the production of a visual performance. This contrasts with *Télémaque* where the description of the curtain rising reads as less significant, and not as a significant moment of framing, because it is not the very first line of the work and it does not work to set the scene in the same way; that task is left to the other text concerned with story. In *Télémaque*, it reads as a cue, a performative phrase, rather than as a setting that frames how the reader interacts with the story. Comparing back also to *Le Diable Amoureux*, there are no curtain cues given at all, because the text seems more concerned with story than with discourse in the main body of the text. Gautier's piece lacks the performative speech acts that the other texts have for the benefit of the producers, notably any descriptions of music. He does not include these aspects of discourse that pierce through the story as seen in the other two librettos, allowing his text to read more seamlessly than the others.

An example demonstrating how the process statements meld discourse and story can be found in Act 2, Scene 4 where Gautier writes, "*Quatre des plus jolies exécutant un pas jouant des cymbales. Au pas de quatre succède un pas de trois.*"<sup>84</sup> The specific designation of the number of people dancing speaks to his conception of the components of dance production, which is to say discourse. The specificity of how many people are dancing is information that is not usually found in the narrative body

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 394.

of text but in the list of roles and dancers found in the front of the libretto. Yet this logistical information also pertains to the story, showing how Gautier's awareness of the discourse of ballet informs the conception of the whole story, rather than the other way around. But because of the discursive framing and the dance subject matter, it still does not read as much like a story as a description of a performance.

Consider the following example as one that shows Gautier's privileging of dance as a story element, over say potential pantomiming scenes. To introduce four new odalisques to Achmet's harem, he writes: "*L'espagnole exécute un boléro, l'Allemande une valse, l'Écossaise une gigue, la Française un menuet.—Achmet, qui a paru d'abord prendre quelque plaisir à ces danses, retombe dans sa mélancolie.*"<sup>85</sup> He indicates not only the nationality of the odalisques but also has each of them perform a dance representative of their country to establish their character. In this way, Gautier includes four different types of dances and he incorporates a wonderful excuse into the fabric of the story to show off a variety of popular dances. Even more unique, Achmet watches the dance and he reacts to it in two ways, first taking some pleasure in it, but then falling back into his melancholy with the natural world. In a later scene, the dance of the Péri, the *pas de songe*, actually does have the power to rouse him from his ennui as he "*Il se lève et la suit dans le tourbillon capricieux de sa danse.*"<sup>86</sup> Achmet's reactions to dance establish it as a significant catalyst for plot. To have characters react to dance was not totally novel, but it was not necessarily the norm, and was definitely not the case in *Le Diable Amoureux*, where the dancing did not generally affect the characters' emotional states. Achmet sees and reacts to dance, occurring in story and

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 383.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid 385.

discourse, and are the main focus of the scene in both registers, which is the major difference between the construction of *La Péri* and *Le Diable Amoureux*.

In Act 2, dance completely drives the plot of Scene 4. Even the sheer amount of space devoted to dance is unique, as it comprises practically the entire scene. The drama and appeal of the scene certainly lies within the dance portion, famously known as the *pas de l'abeille*, or the dance of the bee. As the *Péri*, disguised in the human form of the runaway harem slave Leila, she struggles with a bee as she dances and in the process loses many items of clothing in a sensual yet tender scene. Gautier writes:

*Elle s'avance au milieu du théâtre, se débarrasse de son manteau et s'appête à danser un pas national connu au Caire sous le nom de pas de l'abeille—La danseuse cueille une rose : —l'insecte irrite sort en bourdonnant du calice de la fleur et poursuit l'imprudente, qui tache de l'écraser tantôt entre ses mains, tantôt sous son pied . . . la lutte continue, l'abeille bourdonne, la jeune fille tourbillonne, augmentant toujours la vivacité de sa danse.*<sup>87</sup>

First, Gautier sets the scene by having Leila move to the center of the stage, putting all of the focus on her and her dancing. The “national dance known in Cairo,” as Gautier writes, was said to be popular among harems but was eventually banned, giving it the semblance of being based on reality.<sup>88</sup> A critical indication of the dual role of dance for story and discourse, Gautier referring to Leila as “*la danseuse*” makes it so the passage can also read as instructions to the actual ballerina dancing this role, in this case he had in mind Carlotta Grisi. The references to specific parts of the body, her hands and her feet, show a degree of detail not always seen in descriptions of dance in the other two librettos. The line explaining that the vivacity of her dance amplifies

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 394-295.

<sup>88</sup> Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*, 224.

throughout the scene is also working in both the register of story and discourse because it shows the drama building as she dances but also serves as directions for the ballerina in how to approach this part. The *pas de l'abeille* shows the vulnerable femininity of Leila, and on a discursive level the dance skill of Carlotta Grisi, and causes Achmet to fall in love with her because of her dancing.

The text engages with and describes the emotions of the dance in detail not seen in the other two librettos because dance is not as central to their plots. The description of this *pas* is more than a one-line description announcing that dance is happening and comprises more than a few adjectives that comment on the character of the dance. Descriptions of the theater, like where Leila places herself onstage, relate the narrative register to the stage space because it is not vaguely representative or indicative of what is happening as with the other two but it is directly descriptive and instructive—it's a specific image to emulate rather than an off-handed comment that dance is occurring.

In this way, Gautier breaks the seeming conventions of using the paratextual tableau descriptions as the main place to deliver information pertaining to the discourse of the narrative because through his focus on dance he is able to address the story and the discourse aspects of the narrative at the same time. In doing so, he minimizes the interruptive nature of the discursive elements as seen in the other two texts through more seamless integration.

## Conclusion

19<sup>th</sup> century audiences expected ballet to tell a story and as a nonverbal art, ballet struggled to meet the standards of narrative intelligibility. One method through which ballet as a genre could be appreciated as a narrative form was the production and distribution of librettos, whose role in audience comprehension, and often consequently enjoyment, was vital. Perhaps as the libretto strove to fulfill the dual role of conveying the narrative first to the creators of a ballet and then to its audience, its two major constituencies of readers, its writing was too practical to be poetic and too poetic to simply be practical. Or perhaps the denigration of the libretto and of ballet narrative in general stems from ballet's struggle to gain artistic autonomy and legitimacy within the greater context of the performing arts.

The link between dance and language lies the longevity of the libretto as a book-object opens its doors to textual analysis, since the fact that it was printed and sold speaks to an expectation that it will be read by a variety of people across time. While I address these issues in three librettos spanning many decades at the Paris-Opera, there are dozens more works waiting to be analyzed through a literary lens, which will elucidate more clearly the themes and approaches discussed here. There is a good body of scholarship extant on the dance aspects of ballet, on its music, on its *mise-en-scène*, but little relating to the formal literary elements of the libretto. A comprehensive study will likely reinforce the gesture of the paratextual conventions and the frequent but not quite consistent breaking of them. There is also much to be revealed regarding how specific types of actions are portrayed in writing, like how characters exit, how their movements are rendered in language their spacing in relation to one another, etc.

Examining the libretto as a text allows insight into dimensions of 19<sup>th</sup> century ballet that elucidate the relationships among the many semiotic systems at work in a ballet including dance, music, scenery, and of course, the narrative. It also alludes to how different groups related to the work, whether as producers or as spectators, which relates to the greater question of how art communicates, what is conveyed, and to whom. While for many works, much of the information, especially pertaining to choreography, has been lost, the existence of the librettos provides a window into the world of ballet at this time that is wide open for further exploration.

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