Tannhäuser's Dilemma
A Counterfactual Analysis[*]

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1 *Introduction*

Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg is Richard Wagner's only opera whose title points the audience to a particular scene of the enfolding drama,[1] and there can be little doubt that the tournament of song in the last scene of the middle act is the story's linchpin. It is Tannnhäuser's confessional outburst that sets in motion the irresistible chain of events that, ultimately, leads to his and Elisabeth's deaths and redemption. At the same time some authors have argued that Tannhäuser's behavior in this scene is inconsistent (swinging as it does from fervent praise of Venus to quiet acquiescence to his punishment) and that, thus, the opera's conception is fundamentally flawed. Here we argue that such a conclusion is not warranted if one carefully analyses Tannhäuser's *choice problem* once the tournament is under way.

On the surface, Tannhäuser's behaviour in the tournament appears indeed puzzling. Departing from all courtly rules he interrupts the songs of his fellow knights, harshly attacking their views on the nature of love. As such this would already be disturbing but Tannhäuser goes

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[1] Of course, the title also indicates the dual source of the opera that draws on both, the Tannhäuser and the Wartburg legend (that received literary treatments, for example, in Ludwig Tieck's *Der getreue Eckart und der Tannenhäuser* and E.T.A. Hoffman's *Der Kampf der Sänger*.)

one step further: He praises Venus, the goddess of erotic love, and confesses to having spent time at her grotto of sin, the Venus mountain, upsetting the entire court and deeply hurting Elisabeth. This apparently self-damaging behaviour is attributed to Tannhäuser's high-rising emotions, his inability to exert self-control. Yet, a few minutes later this stir of emotions seems to have subsided and Tannhäuser falls in line with the verdict of the court and, calmly accepting his fate, decides to go on a pilgrimage to Rome. This sudden change of heart has been viewed as inexplicable and some authors (as we shall discuss in more detail below) have argued that Wagner's libretto simply does not make sense.

In this article we introduce an approach that offers a different perspective—an approach that reveals that, after all, Tannhäuser's behaviour can be viewed as fully consistent. Why does he ruin his chances of winning the contest and thereby the hand of his beloved Elisabeth in marriage?[2] Because it is the only solution to a dilemma he faces once the Landgraf announces the competition. Showing that there is such a dilemma forms the core of our article. Methodologically, this requires an analysis of unobserved *counterfactuals*. What would have happened if Tannhäuser had won or lost the tournament? We shall carefully examine the libretto and its historical context to deal with these questions. Our answers suggest an alternative view of the tournament of song according to which there is neither anything crazy in Tannhäuser's outburst nor the slightest flaw in Wagner's libretto. On the contrary, in the light of our arguments, Wagner's construction of the libretto appears as rather subtle and logically tight.

In the remainder of this article we proceed as follows. In Section 2 we discuss some general aspects of our methodology—which is largely borrowed from the social sciences—and argue why we consider it useful for the analysis of literary and operatic plots. In Section 3 we carry out the counterfactual analysis, carefully shedding light on Tannhäuser's predicament in the tournament scene. In Section 4 we discuss whether our argument can be supported by the opera's genesis, Wagner's own reflections, and, crucially, the opera's music. In Section 5 we conclude.

[2] While the libretto makes no explicit mention of Elizabeth's hand as first prize there can be little doubt that at least Tannhäuser and Wolfram would claim her hand in marriage if they were to win the contest. What else would be "as great and bold as can be conceived" to paraphrase the Landgraf.

2 *The Methodology*

Our methodology is formally related to methods employed in economics and *rational choice theory* (RCT). The basic idea is to treat observed behaviour as if taken through an individual act of rational choice. Doing so we can attach *meaning* to the observed behaviour, that is, we can *interpret* it. While, at first sight, this reference to economics and RCT may sound surprising many common sense interpretations of observed behaviour, be it in real life or in stories, make use of the implicit assumptions RCT is based upon—that an observed choice is the outcome of an individual rational act. Take for example, Paris' choice of awarding Eris' golden apple to Aphrodite. How can we say that this choice reveals that Paris, in contrast to Wagner's Alberich, prefers love over power and wisdom? Obviously, such an inference requires the assumption that Paris' choice can be viewed as an individual goal-oriented act. If we alternatively assume that the decision was not his but rather driven by social forces, we cannot infer anything about Paris himself (other than that he is subject to such forces). Similarly, if we assume that his choice was not rationally goal-oriented but simply followed from adhering, say, to the alphabetical order, we cannot learn anything about what Paris really *prefers*. Thus, we can only say that Paris prefers love over power and wisdom if we are willing to view his action "as if" following from an individual rational act.

The "as if" is important here. Interpreting Paris' action in the way above does not require the assumption that he consciously carried out some maximization calculus or cost-benefit analysis. This is similar to the physics of aviation that provide a coherent framework for modelling and understanding the flight of birds without positing that birds solve systems of differential equations in the same way the physicist who models their flight does.[3] The interpreter is never confined to the same restrictions as the object of interpretation. This holds as much for the physicist who interprets the flight of birds, the economist who interprets purchasing behaviour or the literary critic who interprets the actions of a deranged hero in a Dostojevsky novel.

[3] Friedman (1953) tells the tale of expert billiard players who, mainly guided by intuition and experience, behave as if they computed the trajectories of billiard balls applying the principles of Newtonian physics—which would provide an appropriate framework for a scientific study of billiards.

As an approach to the phenomenal realm, RCT imposes an immensely tight structure. If what we observe could stem from an optimal individual act we have to pay careful attention to what the alternatives were from which the actor chose. We need to analyse the *counterfactuals*—the unobserved consequences of the unchosen acts that the actor might have chosen. This requires a recreation of the actor's original choice set—to think carefully about what other opportunities the actor had and to which consequences her other choices might have led. In social science applications the difficulty of this task ranges from the almost trivial but computationally laborious (a consumer in a supermarket with £100 in his pockets to spend) to the exceedingly complex (the US president deciding about how to deal with a 'rogue state'). In literature and opera, on the other hand, the task is of a much more circumscribed nature. First of all, the alternatives might be explicitly mentioned in the text ("He was at a crossroads—should he go left or right?") or there may be many direct hints that make it easy to reconstruct the relevant choice set ("In the morning while brushing his teeth he thought about quitting his job"). In other cases a full recreation of the actor's choice set will require the search for implicit clues in the text. Often this will be aided by considering the type of *genre* the story or opera belongs to. As de Sousa (2007) puts it: "Polygamous marriage is a live option for biblical characters, but not for the protagonists of Jane Austen novels; by contrast, refusing to sacrifice Isaac is perhaps not a live option for Abraham. Yet one can imagine a postmodern, satirical or parodistic bible in which Abraham makes God a counteroffer he can't refuse. Thus different genres presuppose different ranges of possibilities, and hence of rational action."

Thus, on many levels, counterfactual analyses might be more easily applicable in the context of fiction or opera rather than in the context of real-life decision making. Yet, while RCT has gained a stronghold throughout the social sciences over the last few decades—post-war economics has been built entirely on it[4]—it has been rarely applied to studies in the arts and

[4] Rational choice has also entered the mainstream in sociology and political science over the last two and a half decades, for example through analytical marxism (also sometimes referred to as "no-bullshit marxism") which has fruitfully drawn on rational choice and game theory; see, in particular, Roemer (1986), Elster (1985), and Przeworski (1985). Another field that absorbed ideas from rational choice around the same time is education. Armstrong (1980) and Rowland (1984) introduced it into a field that for decades had been stressing the limitations of children's reasoning capabilities the notion that a proper understanding of children's behaviour in the classroom does require the appreciation of children's rationality—a revolutionary move that had profound effects on classroom teaching.

humanities.[5] It is not entirely clear to us why this is the case. Perhaps a certain overly aggressive and rather naive 'economic imperialism' that in many instances has simply produced tautological statements is to blame. While we acknowledge the boundaries of rational choice based approaches—there would be little point in applying such tools to interpret works that investigate the absolute depths of love and death and the mysteries of the noumenal such as Wagner's Schopenhauerian *Tristan und Isolde*—we do not think that the acknowledgement of such boundaries implies a general non-applicability of the toolkit to the humanities.

As the object of interest in our case is an opera, a few more remarks on the methodology are in order. While the ideal of classical drama as set out in Aristotle's *Poetics* lends itself very naturally to counterfactual analysis,[6] opera libretti might suffer from small imperfections such that the music can play a more integral part and is not just mere accompaniment, a point vigorously argued in the context of Wagner by Magee (2001). Thus, a full analysis of an opera's drama will never be complete without an analysis of its music as well.

From the perspective of our undertaking this warrants a few comments. First, even if a purely libretto-based analysis of counterfactuals can never reveal the full picture this does not imply that such an analysis has nothing to contribute. A full understanding of an opera might necessitate a heterodox mixture of interpretative tools. Second, any insights gained by a counterfactual analysis of the libretto's plot alone might have their counterparts in the music itself, in particular, when musical ideas are as tightly linked to meaning as in Wagner's operas

[5] A notable exception is Paisley Livingston's (2001) monograph on *Literature and Rationality*. Livingston examines works by Theodore Dreiser, Emile Zola, and Stanislaw Lem and offers a broad discussion of why and how the assumption of rationality can advance literary analysis. Roughly speaking, he pursues three lines of enquiry. Firstly, he shows how the taking into account of characters' (as well as authors') intentions and rationality can improve our understanding of literature. Secondly, he argues that many rather ordinary statements made in literary criticism do, in fact, presuppose intentions and rationality. And, thirdly, he tries to illustrate how the analysis of literature can contribute to the advancement of concepts of rationality in philosophy or the social sciences.

[6] Aristotles' ideas about the necessity and probability of incidents are implicitly based on there being alternatives in actions. In chapter 25 [Bekker number 1461a] he explicitly demands that actions should be judged by considering the counterfactuals: "(vi) As for whether someone's saying or action is fine or not so fine, one must consider not only what was said or done itself, to see whether it is good or inferior, but also the person saying or doing it, and to whom, at what time, by what means and to what end, e.g. whether it is to bring about a greater good, or to avert a greater evil."

where leitmotifs are identified with non-musical topoi. In other words, the richness of the mixed-media realm of opera renders the art form particularly well-suited to our approach as interpretations and lines of argument pertaining to the plot itself may be mirrored in the musical and visual dimensions. In turn, this implies that studying opera may contribute to an analysis of RCT itself, shedding light on the question whether and how the "purely rational" is connected to the emotional and visceral in some of the great tales of humanity.

3 *Tannhäuser's Dilemma*

The key scene in *Tannhäuser* that we investigate here is, as mentioned above, the tournament of song towards the end of the act two. Tannhäuser who has just rejoined his fellow knights at the Wartburg finds himself suddenly taking part in a tournament the winner of which will get to marry the Landgrave's beautiful daughter Elisabeth, Tannhäuser's old and new love.[7] Wolfram and Walther go first, praising courtly love, but are interrupted by outbursts from Tannhäuser who, almost in rage, finally confesses to having spent time at the Venusberg, a grave sin according to the laws of the medieval court as well as the rules of the catholic church. After his confession Tannhäuser is quickly ostracized and sent off to Rome, a verdict he calmly accepts.

Tannhäuser's outburst and his subsequent acquiescence are at the core of our analysis. The literature so far takes a rather consensual view of why Tannhäuser confesses: "Provoked to the utmost by the arrogant impotence of the other court poets," (Borchmeyer 2004, p.125) Tannhäuser "becomes more and more frenzied as if forgetting his present surroundings" (Simpson 1948, p.259) and acts "faster than he can think" (Köhler 2004 p.226), "as if possessed by a demon" (Newman 1949, p.88) so that "the very decision to sing appears in him as a spontaeneous action bringing out the real drama" (Strohm 1977, p.4) which would not have unfolded had he not been "rash enough to boast that he had known the unholy joys" (Millar Craig 1939, p.18). Tannhäuser's praise of Venus is seen as a deeply emotional, irrational response to the others' songs and, accordingly, many are surprised that just a few minutes later he quietly accepts the verdict of the court and goes off on his march to Rome to do penance. Accordingly, Strohm (p.6) calls him the "epitome of abruptness" and laconically

[7] See footnote 2.

adds that "his decisions seem to come to himself as a surprise." Borchmeyer (p.145) summarizes his concerns about the whole scene as follows.

> *"Wagner had good reasons for drawing a veil over the motivation behind the tournament in the libretto* […], *as it would have revealed all too clearly the fundamental contradiction at the root of the opera's conception. For how are we to explain the fact that following his homage to Venus, Tannhäuser suddenly falls in line with the values of Wartburg society and sets off, in a spirit of penance, for Rome—the selfsame man who, on leaving Venus, had sworn that he would face the world unflinchingly as Venus's 'valiant champion'?"*

This apparent inconsistency in Tannhäuser's behaviour can be resolved, we argue below, by observing that his outburst, although highly emotionally charged, can, in fact, be seen as a rational act solving a dilemma. In doing so, we do not posit that Tannhäuser solves his problem consciously (he clearly does not), rather we claim that he acts *as if* he were fully rationally weighing his options, picking the best one.[8] The core of our argument is that a proper understanding of Tannhäuser's choice necessitates a proper analysis of the counterfactuals. That is, we have to ask ourselves what would have happened had Tannhäuser acted differently, for example, by, just as the others do, singing a song praising courtly love or, perhaps, his love to Elisabeth. This analysis reveals Tannhäuser's dilemma and shows that his only way out of it is to *sabotage* the tournament which, in effect, he does very successfully.

But before we get into the details of this argument, let us go one step back to the end of the first act[9] and Tannhäuser's idea to become Venus's 'valiant champion.' While his praise of Venus later on in the tournament appears to be the fulfilment of this promise[10]

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[8] On a technical level, we shall basically proceed by dealing with Tannhäuser's actions as if they were taken by a real person (and, of course, as if taken rationally) but this does not and must not imply that we forget that Tannhäuser is a character *in an opera*—that what we analyse is a piece of art that perhaps only other literary characters can rightfully claim as a representation of their own destiny—Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* being one of those who feel, while listening to the overture *in rapt pleasure*, such kinship.

[9] We will follow the Paris version, premiered in 1861.

[10] Brinkmann (1970) argues how Tannhäuser's praise of Venus in act two is also the logical *musical* conclusion of the first three stanzas of his song from act one.

> *"Stets soll nur dir, nur dir mein Lied ertönen/gesungen laut sei nur dein Preis von mir!"*
> *["For you alone my song shall always sound!/Your praise alone I shall loudly sing!"]*[11]

it is important to notice that, when Tannhäuser actually leaves Venus at the very end of the second scene of act one, he does so in a rather different mood. First he tells Venus that he will seek peace through penance and atonement

> *"Den Tod, das Grab hier im Herzen ich trag/durch Buß und Sühne wohl find ich Ruh für mich!"*
> *[My death, my grave I carry in my heart/through penance and atonement will I find myself repose!]*

and when she replies that rest shall never be for him

> *"Nie ist Ruh dir beschieden"*
> *[Repose will never be for you]*

and that his only way to salvation will be in his return to her

> *"Kehr wieder mir, suchst du dein Heil!"*
> *[Come back to me if you ever seek salvation!]*

Tannhäuser's last words before the scene change are:

> *"Göttin der Wonn und Lust, Nein,/Ach, nicht in dir find ich Frieden und Ruh! Mein Heil liegt in Maria!"*
> *[Goddess of pleasure and delight, no!/Oh, not in you shall I find peace and rest! My salvation is in Our Lady Mary!]*

Wagner himself leaves little doubt about the significance of this conclusion. In his reminiscences of his work with the tenor Ludwig Schnorr (who had given the first Tannhäuser Wagner was really happy with) Wagner calls the line "decisive" and then continues:

[11] All translations from Wagner's libretto by Steffen Huck.

> *"I told him the outcry »Maria!« would have to come with such force that the miracle that is happening then and there, the disenchantment of the Venusberg and the transcendence to the ancestral vale, can be understood as the necessary fulfillment of an irrefutable claim made by a soul seeking an ultimate decision."* [12]

Despite its Germanic convolutions, the statement is crystal clear. Tannhäuser's decision is *ultimate*, his transformation *necessary*. It is in the same mood that Tannhäuser watches the older pilgrims in the ensuing scene, finally falling to his knees, "as if sunk in fervent prayer:"

> *"Ach, schwer drückt mich der Sünden Last,/kann länger sie nicht mehr ertragen;/drum will ich auch nicht Ruh und Rast/und wähle gern mir Müh und Plagen."*
>
> *"Alas, heavy is the burden of my sins,/Endure them I can no more;/I must not sleep nor rest/shall gladly suffer toil and pain."]*

These are Tannhäuser's last words before his old companions find him and, after mentioning Elisabeth, persuade him to join them at the Wartburg again. And in what follows, in particular, in Tannhäuser's conversation with Elisabeth in the minstrels' hall at the beginning of the second act, there is not the slightest indication that his repentant mood has changed (and how could it, given the irreversible nature of his earlier decision?). On the contrary, his love to Elisabeth is renewed which, if anything, must strengthen his newfound conviction that the lust he experienced with Venus was sinful and, surely, nothing to boast about. Hence, the shock the audience feels in the opera house when his outburst comes just moments later.

So, is Tannhäuser's emotional outburst as irrational as it seems? And does the depth of his emotions contradict the absence of any resistance once the others have reached their verdict

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[12] *"Ich sagte ihm, dieses »Maria!« müsse mit solcher Gewalt eintreten, daß aus ihm das sofort geschehende Wunder der Entzauberung des Venusberges und der Entzückung in das heimische Thal, als die nothwendige Erfüllung einer unabweislichen Forderung des auf äußerste Entscheidung hingedrängten Gefühles, schnell sich verständlich mache."* Meine Erinnerungen an Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Wagner, Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen, Vol. 8, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1911, p.181.

over him just minutes later? As indicated above, we believe the answer to be no on both accounts.

What are Tannhäuser's options once the tournament has begun? If he plays by the rules, he simply has to put some effort in conjuring up a song. And since we who are in the audience have reason to believe that Tannhäuser is the most talented of all the Wartburg poets, we can be almost certain that, if he wants to win the tournament, he can.[13] Hence, *if* he plays by the rules Tannhäuser must simply make up his mind about whether or not he wants to win the tournament. The problem is that both options, winning and losing, are bad options. Tannhäuser is confronted with a dilemma—a dilemma he can only solve by breaking out of the boundaries set by the courtly rules, by sabotaging the contest—by an act of creative destruction that exemplifies the true hero.

Losing the contest is a bad outcome for obvious reasons. Having just rediscovered his love for Elisabeth the thought that somebody else might claim her must be appalling. But winning the contest is not a good idea either. As we have seen Tannhäuser does understand that he has gravely sinned and there is also no doubt that he has a keen sense of Elisabeth's purity. Hence, if he were to win and marry Elisabeth without having been granted absolution first, he would not only act against his own beliefs about Elisabeth's nature he would also betray his own decision to repent. Moreover, he would significantly aggravate his sins as according to ecclestial law spouses must approach the sacrament of penance before getting married since marriage is itself a sacrament; see, for example, the code of canon law (*codex iuris canonici* 1983, 1065§2) or Hörmann's encyclopedia of Christian morality (1976, 190-214).[14]

So, what can Tannhäuser do? Both possible outcomes of the tournament have bad consequences. And, of course, the whole tournament, right here and right now, was not Tannhäuser's idea. In fact, given his predicament, he must feel quite gulled by the sudden announcement of the tournament shortly after his arrival at the Wartburg.

[13] While *Tannhäuser* is, in contrast to *Meistersinger*, not really concerned with the representation of its hero's artistic mastery and Tannhäuser's songs rather reflect on his psychological predicament, his reprise of the Praise to Venus does raise the musical-emotional temperature significantly, displaying talent that clearly exceeds his fellow minnesingers'.

[14] Of course, before 1917 the laws of the Roman Catholic Church were not codified in the CIC. However, the church rules about marriage as a holy sacrament can be traced back to the 12th century.

As with many dilemmas, the way out requires a creative, unusual solution—requires not to play by the rules. And this is what Tannhäuser does. His outburst sabotages the tournament and it does so very effectively. The first prize is never awarded which is the best outcome Tannhäuser could have hoped for. Of course, it might be his emotions that make Tannhäuser praise Venus after listening to the tame Wolfram and Walther, but the point then is that his emotions solve the dilemma for him—and in a rather brilliant way. Not only does he not lose Elisabeth, he also gains time to do penance and seek absolution. Further, if one is willing to accept this view there is absolutely no surprise in Tannhäuser's reaction once chaos has broken out and the angry knights and singers, along with the Landgrave, turn on him and send him away, off to Rome. This is precisely what, on some deeper level, he had wanted (and, prior to his reunion with the Landgrave and his knights, had planned).[15] By his seemingly irrational outburst Tannhäuser succeeds (a) in sabotaging the contest and postponing anyone's marital liaison with Elizabeth (his or another's); (b) in forcing himself to seek absolution for his previous sins so as (c) to make himself fully eligible to marry Elisabeth—a rather impressive achievement given the dim outlook on his perspectives once the tournament starts. The outburst is an immensely successful act of creative destruction and as such a truly heroic act—lighting, in Emily Dickinson's words, *the Possible's slow fuse*—solving the apparently unsolvable. Heroes of all times and cultures committed such acts or, rather perhaps, were *made* through such acts: Heracles who captures Cerberus by treating it with kindness instead of enmity; Alexander who severs the Gordian knot instead of trying to untie it; Columbus who breaks the egg's shell to make it stand up; Siegfried who does not mend Nothung but pulverizes it before forging it anew; or Luke Skywalker who triumphs over his father's dark side not by wounding him but by being wounded.

Tannhäuser's heroic act fulfills a double function. Crucially, it resolves his dilemma. It leaves open a path to salvation *and* to a union with Elisabeth. Of course, as things turn out, he achieves both only in (and through) death. However, to understand how his sabotage is

[15] Of course, the whole scene also makes good, exciting drama and some might be tempted to argue that this is why what happens happens. We are sympathetic with this point of view inasmuch as it appears obvious that Wagner would not have set a dull and boring story to music. But in the universe of exciting stories there are those that are consistent and those that are not and what we show here is that the Tannhäuser libretto is indeed fully consistent. Another question is then whether Wagner would have set it to music had it not been? We shall leave the answer to the reader.

interlinked with the opera's further story it is useful to re-examine Tannhäuser's option to lose the contest. If he were to win, we have already seen that he would aggravate his sins which would set him on a straight path to eternal hell. Without doubt, this is the worst of his options. But what about losing the tournament? While this would imply the dreaded loss of Elisabeth it would still leave him with the option to march to Rome and seek penance. Sacrificing his love to pure Elisabeth he would still have a shot at redemption. But would he really? As we know his pilgrimage to Rome is unsuccessful. Instead of granting him unconditional absolution the pope requires a miracle to occur for Tannhäuser's salvation. While it appears initially unlikely that the papal staff will bring forth leaves again, we know that the miracle eventually occurs and it occurs precisely at the moment when Elisabeth dies heartbroken, suffering Tannhäuser's pains for him, pleading for him at God's throne.

Crucially, the course for Elisabeth's sacrificial death is set at the tournament of song, through Tannhäuser's outburst. It is when all others fall into rage that Elisabeth makes her stand and opens up the path to Tannhäuser's salvation.

> *"Und gebt Gehör der reinen Jungfrau Wort!/Vernehmt durch mich, was Gottes Wille ist!/(…)Ich fleh für ihn, ich flehe für sein Leben;/reuvoll zur Buße lenke er den Schritt!/Der Mut des Glaubens sei ihm neu gegeben,/daß auch für ihn einst der Erlöser litt!"*
>
> *["Listen to a pure maid's words!/Learn through me what is God's will!/(...)I plead for him, plead for his life/may he turn ruefully towards atonement!/May he regain the courage to believe /that for him, too, the Saviour suffered once!"]*

Tannhäuser's salvation requires Elisabeth's sacrifice.[16] So, the last counterfactual question we have to raise is whether she would have offered this to him had he simply sung a lame song and lost the contest? The answer is: surely not. From all we know, Wolfram would probably have won the contest and gladly taken Elisabeth's hands. And Tannhäuser would not have

[16] Elisabeth's sacrifice completes Tannhäuser's journey to death and salvation and a full appreciation of Wagner's work is impossible without thinking about its symbolic and metaphysical character. And Tannhäuser's completion (as a male who wants, both, sexual pleasure *and* renunciation) through the death of a girl invites, of course, also a dialectical as well as a feminist reading. We should, therefore, emphasize that we understand our analysis as a complementary reading that, focussing on a stripped down plot, helps us to check the inner consistency of its construction and sharpens the focus on the inner motives that drive the characters' actions.

received a different verdict from the pope. For the pope's decision it does not matter what song Tannhäuser sang. So, had he decided to lose the tournament on purpose and to seek absolution afterwards, he would have returned in much the same way as he does in scene three of the final act. But this time there would have been no Elisabeth waiting for him, let alone dying a sacrificial death. In fact, without Tannhäuser's outburst she would not have even known about his predicament. Venus would have reappeared and there would have been nothing to hold Tannhäuser back from falling into sin again.

Thus, Tannhäuser's salvation in the Virgin Mary *necessitates* his public praise of Venus—seemingly a paradox but only seemingly. It is this tension between the outward appearance and the inner logic of the drama that makes the tournament such a riveting scene.

4 *Wagner's Intentions, the Opera's Genesis, Its Music, and a Recent Production*

So far, we have analysed Tannhäuser's actions very much in the same way as we could have analysed the behaviour of a real person in real life. While we think that taking such a stance can have its own merits (who is to tell that fictional characters behave in a way entirely different from real characters?) we will in what follows discuss additional evidence that in the case of non-operatic characters is typically missing: comments of the author/composer, the story's/opera's characters' genealogy, and—perhaps most importantly when it comes to an opera as opposed to a drama or novel—its music. Finally, we will briefly examine a recent production of the opera that in its interpretation goes even one step further than we do—by claiming that Tannhäuser's outburst is not only a choice but also conscious and premeditated.

Tannhäuser's Antecedents

Over a hundred years of Wagner scholarship the sources of *Tannhäuser* have been discussed in great detail (see, for example, Borchmeyer 2004). The two key sources are Ludwig Tieck's short story *Der getreue Eckart und der Tannenhäuser* and ETA Hoffman's *Der Kampf der Sänger* from his *Serapionsbrüder*. It is the latter that is of interest here as it provides the model for the tournament of song. In Hoffman's tale, Heinrich von Ofterdingen falls in love with the Landgrave's daughter—Matilda, the beloved of Wolfram von Eschenbach. A song

contest ensues and the contest ends in very much the same manner as the tournament in Wagner's opera does. Heinrich breaches the rules of courtly conduct and is vilified by his peers. However, there is one key difference: in Hoffman's tale there is no Venus and Heinrich's praise is simply for his one and only, his true love, Matilda. In this tale it is merely the heathenish style he resorts to that provokes his peers. But there is no other woman. When Heinrich sings, he sings to win the Landgrave's daughter. His genealogic successor, Wagner's Tannhäuser, does the same.

Wagner's Comments

In the previous main section we have already summoned Wagner himself as a witness to our cause. In his reminiscence of Ludwig Schnorr he comments on the irreversible nature of Tannhäuser's decision for purity once he leaves the Venusberg. But there is more in Wagner's writing that supports our theory—that Tannhäuser is, in fact, solving a dilemma when he has his outburst in the contest. In *Über die Aufführung des 'Tannhäuser'* he comments on his hero's heedlessness in the contest saying that he forgets all his surrounding and looses all his respect. Then Wagner adds: "Und doch kämpft sein Gefühl nur für seine Liebe zu Elisabeth, als er endlich hell und laut sich als Ritter der Venus bekennt."[17] ("And yet his feelings fight only for his love for Elisabeth when he, finally, declares himself loud and clear a champion for Venus.") This quote provides important evidence for our argument for two reasons. First, Wagner leaves little doubt that Tannhäuser's outburst, ultimately, serves his love for Elisabeth. Second and perhaps even more importantly for our "as if" perspective, Wagner seems to acknowledge the peculiar transmission from emotion to self-serving goals.

The Music[18]

The crucial piece of music for our analysis is, of course, Tannhäuser's praise of Venus in the contest. As is well known, his song in act 2 builds upon his earlier praises in act 1. There his praises consists of three 16-line strophes, each symmetrically organized, with a musical and rhetorical contrast between the first and second eight lines. While in the first eight lines he really does praise Venus, the second eight lines ("Doch ich, ...") are, in each case, speaking of his inability to stay in her cavern. These rhetorical turns are matched up in the music where

[17] Wagner, Schriften und Dichtungen, Vol.5., p.153.
[18] We are extremely grateful to Tom Grey who helped us writing this section.

lines 9-16 are more varied in melodic, harmonic, and orchestral setting from one strophe to the next than the first eight lines which retain essentially the same musical content each time. The important difference between these three act 1 strophes is, as has been often noted, that each one is a semi-tone higher than the previous one: strophe 1 is in D flat, strophe 2 is in D natural, strophe 3 is in E flat. The vocal cadential formula is the same at the very end, but each time a semi-tone higher. Then, in act 2, Tannhäuser starts the song yet one more semi-tone up: in E major—the key generally associated with the Venusberg but also, crucially, the key in which the opera begins with the first solemn appearance of the pilgrims' chorus (that only later is generally played in E flat major). Thus, we witness the confluence of both, the fulfilment of Tannhäuser's promise to Venus—to sing her praise—and the sign of a (new) beginning. As we have said earlier, at this stage any new beginning *necessitates* this praise.

There is one more rather minute but still notable aspect of the composition that is worthy of note here. In act 2 there is no rhetorical switch in the song and the verses end after the original eight lines. However, now the last line of Tannhäuser's song ends on the same basic vocal cadence as the 16th (rhetorically reversing) line of his earlier attempts. More specifically, the final line 16 of the act 1 originals reads in each case "O Königin, Göttin, lass mich ziehn!" ("O Queen, o Goddess, set me free!") while the final line eight in act 2 reads "zieht hin! Zieht in den Berg der Venus ein!" ("away! Go away to Venus' mountain!"). While the two vocal lines are not identical it is interesting to note that the three notes on "lass mich ziehn!" and "...Venus ein" resemble each other closely. It is the same basic vocal cadence: 5th degree dropping to leading tone and resolving up to tonic. Yet again, we have musical assurance that, while on the surface Tannhäuser seems to fall back to the realm of sins he is, in fact, bound towards repentance and salvation. The final notes of his praise for Venus are the notes of his resolve to leave her and his sin behind. One might say this is the moment when praise and renunciation merge into one—the musical equivalent of salvation necessitating the scandalous song.

Robert Carsen's 2007 Production

In a recent production for the Paris Opera and Barcelona's Liceu, Robert Carsen remodels the medieval minnesingers as early twenty-century painters. The tournament of song is transformed to a competitive exhibition of paintings. This allows Carsen a take on Tannhäuser that radically departs from the traditional reading of the opera and in a similar way as our

analysis does, only that Carsen goes one step further than we. While we argue one should interpret Tannhäuser's outburst as a choice, Carsen shows it as such and, in fact, as coldly planned, premeditated one. When the exhibition is prepared Tannhäuser *chooses* his 'Praise of Venus', a large nude painting he started to work on in act 1. Thus, even before the tournament begins Tannhäuser knows what he is going to do. He will create a scandal. In fact, as he can't replace the painting once the exhibition is opened, he has no choice but to unveil it. Once the paintings are gathered, he is committed to sabotaging the contest.

4 *Conclusion*

We have offered a reinterpretation of Tannhäuser's behaviour in the tournament of song in the second act of Richard Wagner's eponymous opera. Instead of subscribing to the generally held view that Tannhäuser's praise of Venus is an irrational emotional act that only does him harm we have carefully analysed the counterfactuals. What would have been Tannhäuser's alternatives? We have shown that both alternatives—winning or losing the contest—lead to outcomes that are even worse. Tannhäuser's outburst solves a dilemma. We have also shown how this interpretation preserves the libretto's logical coherence that sometimes has been criticized as flawed.

While the principles of our analysis are borrowed from the social sciences (closely related to rational choice theory, predominant in economics) we have also tried to argue that it could prove more generally useful in the analysis of drama, fiction and opera. The method may be particularly appealing when one is confronted with other apparently illogical plots. In his *Poetics* Aristotle argues over and over again that incidents in a plot have to happen in accordance with "probability or necessity." But what establishes such probability or necessity? There may be many answers to this question, mirroring the full complexity of human motivations and emotions and there is no obvious hierarchy in their different virtue. But, clearly, the logic we have applied here, the force of pursuing one's goals (be it in full conscience, cunningly perhaps even, or in the case of Tannhäuser perhaps unwittingly) does provide such Aristotelian inevitability.

We have also investigated how other material can be used to contrast or support our analysis, the story's sources, Wagner's own writing, the opera's music and production. This

demonstrates how counterfactual analysis can be embedded in a multifaceted, interdisciplinary interpretative approach to drama and opera.

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