

## ‘THOUGH THIS BE MADNESS, YET THERE IS METHOD IN’T’: A COUNTERFACTUAL ANALYSIS OF RICHARD WAGNER’S ‘TANNHÄUSER’

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MUCH LIKE WAGNER HIMSELF, the eponymous hero of *Tannhäuser* treads a path of stark contrasts and rapid swings. From the Wartburg to the Venusberg and eventually to Rome, the gifted bard is transformed from self-centred artist to seduced disciple, disillusioned devotee, hopeful lover, self-loathing pilgrim, and finally redeemed sinner. He tries everything and everything is trying. These contrasts reach a peak in the opera’s central episode, the song contest at the Wartburg. Tannhäuser has just been welcomed at the court, received Elisabeth’s favour and affection, and is ready to compete for the contest’s prize, one as lofty as her hand. Instead of securing his reintegration within the Wartburg with a brilliant performance, however, he spoils the event with insolent remarks and the exhibitionist disclosure of his Venusberg experience. His behaviour offends his peers, scandalizes the court, breaks Elisabeth’s heart, and brings him to the edge of death. Why would Tannhäuser sacrifice everything for nothing?

Character flaws may be one answer. By this time in the opera, we know that his pride led him away from the Wartburg (Landgraf: ‘Kehrest in den Kreis zurück, den du in Hochmuth stolz verliebest?’ [Have you returned to the circle you forsook in haughty arrogance?]; Wolfram: ‘als du uns stolz verlassen’ [when, in haughtiness, you left us]; Act I, sc. iv, ll. 387–8, 458).<sup>1</sup> In the Venusberg, we find him incapable of fulfilling his duties (all attempts to praise the goddess end up in complaints and self-pity) and his betrayal of Venus for the Virgin Mary (‘mein Heil ruht in Maria!’ [my salvation rests in Mary!]; Act I, sc. ii, l. 302) is followed by swapping the latter for Elisabeth and then her, too, for a moment in the limelight of swaggering self-adulation. This, in turn, he publicly regrets, committing himself to penance for sin, and even after his unsuccessful visit to Rome he briefly relapses into fascination with Venus. Thus, Tannhäuser’s irrational behaviour in the song contest is not surprising; indeed, it prepares us for the opera’s tragic end. A man of such swings of mood and action will never find peace in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the libretto are from Wagner’s *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (1871), reprinted in Richard Wagner, *Dokumente und Texte zu Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, ed. Peter Jost and Cristina Urchueguía (Mainz, 2007), 491–524.

Another explanation lies with Wagner himself, Tannhäuser's creator and model, who forged a story out of two loosely connected tales, recorded in the opera's title (*Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*). The need for formal discipline—i.e. adhering to conventions, such as the big climax in the Act II finale—overrode that for dramatic conviction. Whether for structural or philosophical reasons, the Wartburg had to appear midway between the Venusberg and Rome, the song contest should stand between a life of sin and a quest for redemption, and Elisabeth had to become 'the woman who, star-like', leads Tannhäuser 'from the hot passion of the Venusberg to Heaven'.<sup>2</sup>

Both explanations are valid and throw light on Tannhäuser's reckless behaviour. Like most exegetical efforts with the opera, however, they take for granted the hero's hyper-emotional nature, compulsiveness, and spontaneity: 'Provoked to the utmost by the arrogant impotence of the other court poets',<sup>3</sup> he 'becomes more and more frenzied, as if forgetting his present surroundings',<sup>4</sup> and acts '[f]aster than [he] can think',<sup>5</sup> 'as if possessed by a demon',<sup>6</sup> so that 'the very decision to sing appears in him as a spontaneous action bringing out the real drama',<sup>7</sup> which would not have unfolded had he not been 'rash enough to boast that he had known the unholy joys'.<sup>8</sup> For Carl Dahlhaus, in particular, 'Tannhäuser's feelings and actions . . . are marked by impulsiveness and an extraordinary amnesia. He appears to be not completely in control of himself, a prisoner of the moment and of the emotion that happens to have hold of him. Events take place in abrupt oscillation between extremes.'<sup>9</sup> Even a sympathetic reader of the opera like Carolyn Abbate understands Tannhäuser's relation to Venus as a 'compulsion' and calls his interruption of the contest a 'rebellion against the platitudinous serenades of the other singers' prompted by 'frustration, pride, and the inescapable memories of Venus'.<sup>10</sup>

So entrenched is the Romantic hero trope that issues of choice, planning, and strategy are left out of the picture, as if his actions were involuntary responses to external stimuli and his decisions lacked any kind of mental processing. Yet Simon Williams reminds us that Tannhäuser parts company from contemporary portrayals of operatic heroes by being 'a protagonist in conflict with himself' to a point that his 'mental conflict . . . is the action'.<sup>11</sup> Such conflict emerges through incompatible thoughts and choices. Indeed, a close reading of the opera reveals, for example, that his departure from the Venusberg is a conscious choice arrived at through rational thinking. Memories of his past life interlace and clash with his Venusian experiences, leading to

<sup>2</sup> 'A Communication to my Friends', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892–9), i. 340. 'das Weib, das dem Tannhäuser aus den Wohllusthöhlen des Venusberges als Himmelsstern den Weg nach Oben wies'; *Dokumente*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton and Oxford, 2003), 125.

<sup>4</sup> Claude M. Simpson, Jr., 'Wagner and the Tannhäuser Tradition', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 63 (1949), 244–61 at 259.

<sup>5</sup> Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven and London, 2004), 170.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights* (London, 1949), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhard Strohm, 'Dramatic Time and Operatic Form in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 104 (1977–8), 1–10 at 4.

<sup>8</sup> D. Millar Craig, 'Some Wagner Lapses', *Musical Times*, 80 (1939), 17–18 at 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), 25.

<sup>10</sup> 'Orpheus and the Underworld: The Music of Wagner's "Tannhäuser"', in Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser* (Opera Guide, 39; London and New York, 1988), 33–50 at 34, 39. More recent interpretations of the opera focus on its female characters and the role of sexuality in Wagner's life and work: Nila Parly, *Vocal Victories: Wagner's Female Characters from Senta to Kundry* (Copenhagen, 2011); Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women*, trans. Chris Walton (Woodbridge, 2011); Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge, 2004), 50.

comparison with and, ultimately, preference for the one over the other. His longing for change and freedom in Act I shows an active mind capable of choosing between alternatives. This is indeed the subject of his lengthy argument with Venus. Tannhäuser abandons the Venusberg fully aware of the privileges he leaves behind and the hardships lying ahead:

nach Freiheit doch verlange ich,  
nach Freiheit, Freiheit dürstet's mich;  
zu Kampf und Streite will ich stehen,  
sei's auch auf Tod und Untergehen: –  
drum muß aus deinem Reich ich flieh'n, –  
(Act I, sc. ii, ll. 209–13)

for freedom, then, I long,  
for freedom, freedom, do I thirst;  
for struggle and strife I will stand,  
though it be, too, for destruction and death:  
from your kingdom, therefore, I must fly,

In another example from Act I, we find him resisting the knights' offer to bring him back to the Wartburg, which shows at least knowledge of two alternative paths. He agrees to join them only when Wolfram reveals Elisabeth's flattering response to his songs. Based on this new information, Tannhäuser revises his beliefs about the Wartburg and his decision not to look back ('denn rückwärts darf ich niemals seh'n'; Act I, sc. iv, l. 424). Learning about Elisabeth's feelings makes his return there a compelling choice ('Ha, jetzt erkenne ich sie wieder, / die schöne Welt, der ich entrückt!' [Ha, now I recognize it again, the lovely world that I renounced!]; Act I, sc. iv, ll. 474–5).

Pursuing this line of probing the hero's mental state, this essay offers a new reading of the *Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*. We propose that Tannhäuser's seemingly irrational behaviour is actually consistent with a strategy of redemption, in ways that recall Polonius's famous diagnosis of Hamlet 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't'.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, we suggest that he consciously disrupts the contest, knowing that only a public disclosure of his sinful past can propel him onto the path of redemption.

#### GAME THEORY

The key question we pose is: does Tannhäuser have to *choose* between alternative outcomes at the start of the *Sängerkrieg*? To answer it, we draw on methodologies from the social sciences, specifically game theory, which seeks to account for social interaction by assuming that individuals' choices express some *underlying* preferences and beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Such an analysis requires two steps, a reconstruction of the choice set (what else Tannhäuser might have done) and an analysis of unobserved counterfactuals, namely potential outcomes of the alternative unchosen actions. What would have happened if Tannhäuser had won or lost the tournament instead of interrupting it? What would his gains and losses have been in each case? Comparing these potentialities with the outcome of his real action helps us reconstruct the strategic context at a particular point in time and evaluate the significance of the decisions we observe on stage.

Although not every action results from strategic thinking, the interpretation of human behaviour becomes hardly possible without assuming some form of goal-orientation on the part of its agent. For example, the conclusion that Paris *prefers* love to wisdom, when he awards Eros's golden apple to Aphrodite and not to Athena, lies in the assumption that he is making a conscious goal-oriented choice. Had his action

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II. ii. 206.

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction to the topic, see Ken Binmore, *Game Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2007).

been determined by social forces (protocol) or biochemical processes (genetic factors, use of controlled substances), we would have been unable to infer anything about his values and preferences. This is particularly important in drama, which typically explores the clash between human free will and external forces. Much of our empathy with a tragic hero is predicated on our knowledge or inference of alternative scenarios. Adam and Eve could have refrained from eating the forbidden fruit; Antigone could have obeyed Creon; Elsa could have honoured her marital oath to Lohengrin; and Tannhäuser could have praised divine love instead of Venus.

A staple in the social sciences and the methodological engine in modern economics, game theory has only recently begun to be applied in the humanities, chiefly by non-humanists.<sup>14</sup> Misconceptions of the ‘rationality’ assumptions and concerns about a universalism that favours statistical averages and downplays historical variables perhaps explain the unwillingness of scholars and literary critics to engage with the theory. As Herbert Lindenberger frankly admits, ‘Most of us [humanists] feel uncomfortable accepting the possibility that our responses to art can be charted by science; even when such charting seems plausible, we prefer to add a *je ne sais quoi*’.<sup>15</sup> Yet game theory may accommodate drama better than real-life situations. By its very nature, already analysed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, drama telescopes and reconfigures reality in ways that make it meaningful to an audience. Formal divisions (three or five acts) and time–space unities allow for the creation of short and long arcs emphasizing the causality of human action. Unlike history, Aristotle insists, poetry (including drama) not only describes events but also imbues them with character, helping us understand their origin and probable consequences as a class of phenomena.<sup>16</sup>

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. . . . Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how [people] of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. [9/51a–b]

Critical for the success of drama is the absence of irrationality (‘Within the action there must be nothing irrational’ [15/54b]). To achieve this the poet has to describe a person’s preferences: ‘Character [*ethos*] is that which reveals moral purpose, showing

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Cohen, ‘Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know that You Know’, *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2010, p. C1. Pioneer studies include Steven J. Brahm’s *Biblical Games: A Strategic Analysis of Stories in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980) and *Game Theory and the Humanities: Bridging Two Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); George Butte’s *I Know that You Know that I Know: Narrating Subjects from Moll Flanders to Marnie* (Columbus, Ohio, 2004); and, more recently, Michael Suk-Young Chwe’s *Jane Austen, Game Theorist* (Princeton, 2013). Among the few humanists engaged in game theory-based criticism, Paisley Livingston (*Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (Cambridge, 1991)) examines works by Theodore Dreiser, Émile Zola, and Stanislaw Lem, and offers a broad discussion of why and how the assumption of rationality can advance literary analysis. Roughly speaking, Livingston pursues three lines of enquiry. First, 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. More recently, Lisa Zunshine has offered readings of Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Nabokov’s *Lolita* using theories of mind or metarepresentation (how to think about other people’s thoughts and to distinguish informational layers in literary genres): *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, Ohio, 2006), and ‘Why Jane Austen Was Different, and Why We May Need Cognitive Science to See It’, *Style*, 41 (2007), 273–97.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Lindenberger, ‘Arts in the Brain; or, What Might Neuroscience Tells Us?’, in Frederick Luis Aldama (ed.), *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts* (Austin, Tex., 2010), 13–35 at 33.

<sup>16</sup> <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>>; translation by S. H. Butcher.

what kind of things a man chooses or avoids' [6/50b]. As preference and probability are key concepts in game theory, one could understand drama as the first social science laboratory in history, a controlled space where human behaviour is exhibited, observed, and studied in optimal cognitive settings. By applying game theory to Tannhäuser's behaviour at the song contest we will be able to test the rationality of his actions and enrich the opera's hermeneutic tradition by offering a counterintuitive interpretation of his seemingly incomprehensible attitude.

#### WAGNER'S MASTER PLAN

While redemption is a conventional dramatic goal, the existence of a redemption strategy (extracting, so to speak, Tannhäuser's redeemer through an 'irrational' choice) requires a high level of dramatic craftsmanship. Such a strategy emerges from Wagner's own writings. In his essay 'Über die Aufführung des *Tannhäuser*', he explicitly identifies the hero's *cri de coeur* in the Act II finale as the opera's turning point:

Tannhäuser.

Zum Heil den Sündigen zu führen,  
die Gott-Gesandte nahte mir:  
doch, ach! sie frevelnd zu berühren  
hob ich den Lästerblick zu ihr!  
O du, hoch über diesen Erdengründen,  
die mir den Engel meines Heil's gesandt,  
erbarm' dich mein, der ach! so tief in  
Sünden  
schmachvoll des Himmels Mittlerin  
verkannt!

(Act II, sc. iv, ll. 417–24)

TANNHÄUSER

To lead the sinner to salvation  
God's messenger drew near me!  
But, oh, to touch her wantonly  
I raised my dissolute gaze to her!  
Oh Thou, high above this land of earth,  
Who sent the angel of my salvation to me,  
have mercy on me who, oh, so deep in sin,  
shamefully failed to recognize heaven's  
mediator!

'These words', Wagner declares,

contain the pith of Tannhäuser's subsequent existence, and form the axis of his whole career; without our having received with absolute certainty the impression meant to be conveyed by them at this particular crisis, we are in no position to maintain any further interest in the hero of the drama. If we have not been here at last attuned to deepest fellow-suffering with Tannhäuser, the drama will run its whole remaining course without consistence, without necessity, and all our hitherto-aroused awaitings will halt unsatisfied.<sup>17</sup>

This moment is important because until now Tannhäuser is really a fugitive from the Venusberg, his options being atonement for his sins or the reunion with Elisabeth. But her saintly response to his betrayal generates so much pain that redemption is no longer a choice, but rather fate that he can neither embrace nor resist. As Wagner explained to audiences in 1853,

This chastened erstwhile knight of Venus has seized [without discrimination] upon the sole path to salvation now pointed out to him, terribly aware of the outrage he committed against

<sup>17</sup> 'On the Performing of *Tannhäuser*', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. Ellis, iii. 179. 'Diese Worte, mit dem ihnen verliehenen Ausdruck und in dieser Situation, enthalten den Nerv der ganzen ferneren Tannhäuserexistenz, die Axe seiner Erscheinung, und ohne den durch sie hier, an diesem Orte, beabsichtigten Eindruck mit vollster Gewissheit empfangen zu haben, sind wir gar nicht im Stande, ein weiteres Interesse an dem Helden des Dramas zu bewahren. Wenn wir hier nicht endlich zum tiefsten Mitleiden mit Tannhäuser gestimmt werden, ist das ganze übrige Drama ohne Zusammenhang und Nothwendigkeit in seinem Verlaufe, und alle bis dahin angeregten Erwartungen bleiben unbefriedigt'; *Dokumente*, 127.

his good angel Elisabeth. He is stung with remorse and animated solely by the desire to perform the direst acts of penance for the deadly blow dealt to the pure heart of this loving maiden.<sup>18</sup>

So crucial was Tannhäuser's epiphany for Wagner that, when his lead singer Tichatschek failed to meet the dramatic challenges of the role, he preferred to cut the entire passage at the opera's premiere rather than to suffer an embarrassing performance.<sup>19</sup> To further stress its importance, he silenced all other voices in the final (Vienna) version of 1875 (bb. 907–26).

If Wagner intended to create such a powerful moment in the drama, one that would engender the utmost sympathy and pity in the audience, he may well have remembered his Aristotle. We read in the *Poetics* that 'tragedy is an imitation . . . of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect.'<sup>20</sup> The surprise we experience in the opera comes from an anticipated victory turning into disaster. From the closing of Act I and until the disruption of the contest the theme of redemption disappears altogether and we are prepared for Tannhäuser's reunion with Elisabeth. To make their Act II duet even more suggestive, Wagner draws on the Leonore–Florestan reunion duet in *Fidelio* (perhaps influenced by the presence in his cast of Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, the most celebrated Leonore of her time). Tannhäuser's volte-face, his failure to perform what everyone (on- and offstage) has been expecting of him, is a brilliant coup that makes the opera work as drama. We will discuss later whether or not there is causality involved here.

Far from a cheap diversion to renew the redemption plot, Elisabeth's sacrificial rescue is meant to be the catalyst for Tannhäuser's salvation. As in *Fliegender Holländer* and *Lohengrin*, the hero needs not only redemption but also a redeemer, a woman who can bear personal responsibility for his salvation. If prior to the contest Elisabeth was a patron or potential bride, she now becomes a guardian angel, the 'star-like' object leading the sinner to redemption. (To emphasize this contrast in her function, Wagner decided to excise Tannhäuser's Act I reference to her as 'Engel' in the opera's first prose draft.<sup>21</sup>) Indeed, for Wagner, Tannhäuser embarks on the pilgrimage 'not for the pleasure of his own redemption, but only so as to be able to return with a pardoned soul and thereby conciliate the angel who has wept for him the bitterest tears of her life'.<sup>22</sup> It is true that they will never see each other in this world and their love can only be completed beyond this life. But this is secondary to the fact of their spiritual bonding as redeemer and redeemed.

The *Sängerkrieg* is thus not 'merely a façade . . . filling the second act with theatrical parades and noisy disputes', as Carl Dahlhaus asserts,<sup>23</sup> but a sanctioning device for

<sup>18</sup> Concert programme for the May 1853 Zurich concerts, in Thomas S. Grey (ed.), *Richard Wagner and his World* (Princeton and Oxford, 2009), 502–3. 'Vom Innwerden seines Frevels an Elisabeth, dem Engel seiner Noth, auf das Furchtbarste ergriffen, zerknirscht von Reue und beseelt von dem einzigen Verlangen, durch Martern aller Art den Todesschmerz zu sühnen, mit dem er das reinste Herz der liebenden Jungfrau traf, ergreift der entnüchertete Venusritter wahllos das Heilmittel, das die Welt ihm zeigt'; *Dokumente*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> See *Dokumente*, 127, and Patrick Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2006), 34–5.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 9, [52a]. For Wagner's knowledge of the work, see Jeffrey L. Buller, *Classically Romantic: Classical Form and Meaning in Wagner's Ring* (Philadelphia, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Dokumente*, 341.

<sup>22</sup> Concert programme for the May 1853 Zurich concerts, in Grey (ed.), *Richard Wagner and his World*, 503. 'nicht um die Wonne der Entschuldigung für sich zu gewinnen, sondern als Begnadigter den Engel zu versöhnen, der ihm die bitterste Thräne des Lebens geweint'; *Dokumente*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 23.

Tannhäuser's redemption *through* Elisabeth.<sup>24</sup> (The fact that his identity as an artist practically disappears in Act III supports this view.) In order for Elisabeth to reveal her redemptive qualities, however, Tannhäuser has to do something sufficiently unfor-givable and offensive to incur universal condemnation. Praising Venus exactly when he was supposed to publicly solicit Elisabeth's favour (and possibly her hand) is an act of dramatic necessity serving the opera's goals.

#### TANNHÄUSER'S DILEMMA

According to Dieter Borchmeyer, Wagner draws 'a veil over the motivation behind the tournament in the libretto' in order to cover the 'fundamental contradiction at the root of the opera's conception', namely Tannhäuser's incoherent behaviour.<sup>25</sup> Yet a close reading of the score provides clues about the hero's state of mind—what he knows, what he is aware of, and what he hides—which help us understand his seemingly incomprehensible actions. To begin with, Tannhäuser leaves the Venusberg determined to repent for his sinful life there ('Den Tod, das Grab im Herzen, / durch Buße find' ich Ruh' [Both death and the grave they are here in my heart; through penance I shall find peace]; Act I, sc. ii, ll. 293–4) and sticks to his choice until just before the end of Act I. Not only is he moved to tears by the pilgrims' chorus but also he fully adopts, singing solo, the second stanza of their hymn (see Ex. 1):

Tannhäuser.

Ach, schwer drückt mich der Sünden Last,  
kann länger sie nicht mehr ertragen;  
drum will ich auch nicht Ruh noch Rast,  
und wähle gern mir Müh' und Plagen.  
(Act I, sc. iii, ll. 360–3)

TANNHÄUSER

Alas, the burden of my sins weighs me down,  
I can endure it no longer;  
I will know neither sleep nor rest therefore  
and gladly choose toil and vexation.

Why then does he decide to return to the Wartburg? True as it may be that Elisabeth's name and memory cast a spell upon him, we find that his conversion actually requires both persuasion and peer pressure. The knights' first attempt to recruit him meets with strong resistance:

Tannhäuser.

Laßt mich! Mir frommet kein Verweilen,  
und nimmer kann ich rastend steh'n;  
mein Weg heißt mich nur vorwärts eilen,  
denn rückwärts darf ich niemals seh'n.  
(Act I, sc. iv, ll. 421–4)

TANNHÄUSER

Let me be! Delay avails me naught,  
and never can I stop to rest!  
My way bids me only hasten onward,  
and never may I cast a backward glance!

The intensity of their effort is evident in the multiple renderings of the concluding two lines in diminished-seventh chord arpeggiation leading to a rhythmic stretto. And even after Elisabeth is invoked, Wolfram launches a second round of discourse, putting a rational case for Tannhäuser's return to the Wartburg:

verschloß ihr Herz unsrem Lied;  
wir sahen ihre Wang' erblassen,  
für immer unsren Kreis sie mied. –

her heart closed to our song;  
we saw her cheeks grow pale,  
she ever shunned our circle.

<sup>24</sup> Mary A. Cicora, too, finds that the song contest 'helped realize or "redeem" the Tannhäuser legend' by providing 'the crucial *plot* element' in the opera: *From History to Myth: Wagner's Tannhäuser and its Literary Sources* (Bern, 1992), 165, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, 145.

Ex. 1. *Tannhäuser*, from Act I, sc. iii

TANNHÄUSER (*auf den Knien, wie in brünstiges gebet versunken*)

*p* 112(122)  
Ach, schwer drückt mich der Sün - den Last, kann  
*pp* R.H.  
län - ger sie nicht mehr er - tra - gen;  
Ped. \* Ped. \*

O kehr' zurück, du kühner Sänger,  
dem unsren sei dein Lied nicht fern, –  
den Festen fehle *sie* nicht länger,  
auf's Neue leuchte uns ihr Stern!  
(Act I, sc. iv, ll. 459–65)

Oh, return, you valiant Singer,  
let not your song be far from ours.  
Let her no longer be absent from our festivals,  
let her star shine on us once more!

Only after Wolfram's long and eloquent narrative, reinforced with a new round of pleas by the knights, does Tannhäuser shout:

Zu ihr! Zu ihr! O, führet mich zu ihr!  
Ha, jetzt erkenne ich sie wieder,  
die schöne Welt, der ich entrückt!  
(Act I, sc. iv, ll. 473–5)

To her! To her! oh, lead me to her!  
Ha, now I recognize it again,  
the lovely world that I renounced!

It would be unfair, then, to interpret this long discourse as an 'instant' change of heart. Without necessarily betraying his resolve to repent, Tannhäuser embraces a task that is more urgent and close to hand (the Wartburg is visible in the background;<sup>26</sup> Rome is far away). In a sense, he is on a rescue mission to restore Elisabeth's mental health and, we may assume, the court's proper function. Elisabeth being the Landgraf's next-of-kin, her melancholy and absence from the court's tournaments are indeed matters of state, and so is Tannhäuser's return to the Wartburg.

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser-Szenarium*, ed. Dietrich Steinbeck (Berlin, 1968), 87.

Indeed, the brilliance of the festivities' music leaves no doubt of the significance of the song tournament. Statements by both Elisabeth and the Landgraf create high anticipation for Tannhäuser's appearance. Never explicitly stated in the libretto, yet present in Wagner's first prose draft,<sup>27</sup> the idea of a marital union sealing the contest hovers in the air (hence Wolfram's regret 'So flieht für dieses Leben / mir jeder Hoffnung Schein!' [Thus vanishes, for this life, my every gleam of hope!]; Act II, sc. ii, ll. 106–7).

Tannhäuser's affection for and commitment to Elisabeth are evident in the early scenes of Act II. Upon glancing at her, he throws himself at her feet ('ungestüm zu den Füßen *Elisabeth's* stürzend'; Act II, sc. ii, l. 25) and their synchronous cries of joy in their duet leave no doubt of their destined union. But there is a shadow. When Elisabeth inquires about his past ('Wo weiltet ihr so lange?'; l. 39), Tannhäuser's singing freezes to recitation and the haziness of his statement is matched with descending lines in the lower register, as if the heathen forces of his past drag him down to the cavernous Venusberg:

<p>Tannhäuser. Fern von hier, in weiten, weiten Landen. Dichtes Vergessen hat zwischen heut' und gestern sich gesenkt. – All' mein Erinnern ist mir schnell geschwunden, und nur des Einen muß ich mich entsinnen, daß nie mehr ich gehofft euch zu begrüßen, noch je zu euch mein Auge zu erheben. – (Act II, sc. 2, ll. 41–7)</p>	<p>TANNHÄUSER Far from here in broad and distant lands. Deep forgetfulness has descended betwixt today and yesterday. All my remembrance has vanished in a trice,  and one thing only must I recall, that I never more hoped to greet you, nor ever raise my eyes to you.</p>
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Either his memory is clouded or he just lies to protect Elisabeth from damaging knowledge of his past. The second seems to be the case. Elisabeth is absent from his deliberations and longings at the Venusberg, and his surprise at hearing her name from Wolfram suggests that his memories of her were deeply buried. Even more suggestive of his concealment is the use of the masculine form 'Gott der Liebe' before Elizabeth, when everywhere else in the opera we encounter the feminine 'Göttin':

Venus.  
Die Liebe fei're, die so herrlich du besingst,  
daß du der Liebe Göttin selber dir gewannst!  
Die Liebe fei're, da ihr höchster Preis dir ward!  
(Act I, sc. ii, ll. 111–13)

Tannhäuser (hingerissen).  
Den Gott der Liebe sollst du preisen,  
er hat die Saiten mir berührt,  
er sprach zu dir aus meinen Weisen,  
zu dir hat er mich hergeführt!  
(Act II, sc. ii, ll. 82–6)

<sup>27</sup> [6 July 1842:] 'so bleibe hier und wirb um Elisabeth!' the Landgraf urges the hero in Act I. Wagner notes 'Die folgende Schilderung von der Entdeckung der Liebe Elisabeths zu Tannh. trägt Wolfr. vor.—Der Landgr. nimmt dann das Wort u. gestattet Tannhr um Elisabeths Hand zu werben.' Immediately after the reunion scene, the Landgraf says 'Was der Gesang Wunderbares weckte u. anregte, soll er denn heute krönen u. zur Vollendung führen! Tannhäuser, dir zeig' ich den Weg auf dem du diese Edle erringen kannst. / Ein Fest hab' ich bereitet, du, Elis., sollst seine Fürstin sein! Die Sänger alle berief ich,—meine Ritter u. Edlen sind geladen. Sie nahen': *Dokumente*, 34f, 342. The explicit references to their impending marriage disappear in the second prose draft dated 8 July.

Tannhäuser (in höchster Verzückung).  
 Dir, Göttin der Liebe, soll mein Lied ertönen!  
 Gesungen laut sei jetzt dein Preis von mir!  
 (Act II, sc. iv, ll. 322–4)

Most importantly, his lie is exposed by his music, which shifts from A flat major to C major with descending lines in the bass linking his statement to a similar denial of his past in Act I. In particular, the claim ‘All’ mein Erinnern ist mir schnell geschwunden’ receives swinging chromatic semitones in the bass line, a harmonic challenge to the solidity of his claim (Ex. 2).

Actually, Tannhäuser remembers very well, as we discover in his next statement. To Elisabeth’s question ‘Was war es dann, das euch zurückgeführt?’ (What was it then that brought you back?; l. 49) he answers: ‘Ein Wunder war’s, / ein unbegreiflich hohes Wunder!’ (ll. 51–2) (Ex. 3(a)). Miracles defy explanation and have no traceable cause. But while he claims ignorance, his music identifies the exact moment that led him to the Wartburg. As Carolyn Abbate has observed, his musical statement is a re-casting of his Act I epiphany following the pilgrims’ chorus (Ex. 3(b–c)).<sup>28</sup> It was his resolve to repent for his Venusberg years that brought him back. In other words, in the middle of his reunion scene with Elisabeth, when all attention goes to the lovely couple and the redemption plot is about to be forgotten, Tannhäuser shows awareness of the causal link between his salvation and his return to the Wartburg.

At the start of the *Sängerkrieg*, then, Tannhäuser faces a dilemma. He has a past that he cannot reveal, an obligation waiting to be fulfilled, and a present desire to be united with Elisabeth. What should he do? By winning the contest, he gets the girl but will be in danger of losing her once his past is revealed (an outcome that Wagner explores in his next opera *Lohengrin*).<sup>29</sup> If he loses, he is free to make the pilgrimage but Elisabeth’s hand may well be offered to the winner. Both options are problematic because Tannhäuser participates in a high-profile competition while still being a sinner, and therefore vulnerable. Since there is no time to atone before the contest, his best option is to cancel or postpone the event and avoid the danger of Elisabeth being committed to another minstrel. His strategic situation can then be described as follows:

	make pilgrimage	unite with Elisabeth
Win the contest	NO / PERHAPS	YES
Lose the contest	YES	NO / PERHAPS
Sabotage the contest	YES	YES / PROBABLY

The table rows list his possible actions, the columns his aims, and the entries where rows and columns meet indicate whether the actions are likely to achieve the specific aims. The table shows that both winning and losing the contest have undesirable consequences—consequences he can avoid by sabotage. So, however irrational and self-defeating his behaviour at the contest may appear to everybody, on- and offstage, it actually serves his twin aims of redemption and union with Elisabeth better than any other choice. Like Hamlet, he may have ultimate goals that only the semblance of madness can help him realize. Praising Venus creates a scandal, interrupts the competition, generates public pressure for his repentance, and keeps Elisabeth

<sup>28</sup> ‘Orpheus and the Underworld’, 45–6.

<sup>29</sup> Ilias Chrissochoidis and Steffen Huck, ‘Elsa’s Reason: On Beliefs and Motives in Wagner’s *Lohengrin*’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 22 (2010), 65–91.

Ex. 2. (a) Elisabeth–Tannhäuser duet (Act II, sc. ii); (b) Act I, sc. iv

(a)

35 ELIZABETH

daß Ihr zu-rück - ge-kehrt! Wo weil - tet Ihr so

40 TANNHÄUSER (*sich langsam erhebend*)

lan - ge? Fern von hier, in wei - ten, wei - ten Lan - den; -

45

dich - tes Ver - ges - sen hat zwi - schen heut' und ge - stern sich ge - senkt.

49

All mein Er - in - nern ist mir schnell ge - schwun - den,

Ex. 2. Continued

(b)

64 LANDGRAF **Moderato** TANNHÄUSER

Sag an, wo weil-test du so lang? Ich wan-der-te in wei-ter,wei-ter

70 Fern, - da wo ich nim-mer Rast noch Ru-he fand. Fragt nicht!

available. As in all games, of course, at the start of the competition there are variables he cannot control, namely Elisabeth's reaction, the punishment imposed by the court, and the Pope's decision.<sup>30</sup> Still, under the given circumstances his choice of Venus is strategically superior to any other, and as we find in the end, it is the only one that can lead him to salvation because Elizabeth's pain and sacrifice will become his path to freedom, peace, and spiritual union with her.

The question here is whether Tannhäuser's praise of Venus is conscious, premeditated, planned.<sup>31</sup> To be sure, the flashes of Venusberg music suggest that Tannhäuser is gradually being overtaken by past memories,<sup>32</sup> exactly as memories of his mortal life had spoiled his service to the goddess of love in Act I. Yet Wagner's stage direction describing him in a trance-like state was an afterthought resulting from the elimination of Walther's song in the last two versions of the opera.<sup>33</sup> In the Dresden version of 1845, the deterioration of the contest from competing statements on love to

<sup>30</sup> For a game-theoretic treatment of the latter (in particular, the use of the staff miracle), see Heike Harmgart, Steffen Huck, and Wieland Müller, 'The Miracle as a Randomization Device: A Lesson from Richard Wagner's Opera *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*', *Economics Letters*, 102 (2009), 33–5.

<sup>31</sup> While economists would typically be agnostic about whether decision-making is conscious or not, content with 'as if' approaches, it appears to us that applying these instruments to drama and opera requires a fuller approach, taking into account mental processes.

<sup>32</sup> '*Tannhäuser* ... scheint sich in Träumereien zu verlieren' (ll. 195–6); '*Tannhäuser* (in höchster Verzückerung)' (l. 322).

<sup>33</sup> For the problem of the opera's multiple versions, see Barry Millington, *Wagner*, rev. edn. (Princeton, 1992), 177–8.

Ex. 3. Tannhäuser's 'cries': (a) Act II, sc. ii; (b) Act I, sc. iii; (c) melodic and harmonic comparison of Tannhäuser's two 'cries'

(a)

67 TANNHÄUSER

Ein Wun - - -

*cresc.* *ff* *mf*

Ped. \* Ped. \*

69

der war's, ein un - - be -

*p* *f*

Ped. \* Ped. \*

71

- greif - lich ho - hes Wun - - - - - der!

*p* *pp* *mf*

*ad hominem* attacks appears much more gradual, thus more controlled and rational. Impatient to reach the scene's climax much earlier, Wagner 'stages' him, in 1875, as a spontaneously possessed artist.

The idea of a premeditated choice has already been suggested in a 2007 production of *Tannhäuser* by Robert Carsen at the Paris Opéra. Turning the *Sängerkrieg* into an early twentieth-century exhibition, Carsen had the hero calmly choose the 'Praise of Venus', a large (presumably nude) painting he had started working on in Act I, as his entry for the competition—before he has a chance to see or hear any of the other competitors and to become agitated by their hypocrisy.<sup>34</sup> Eliminating temporality makes

<sup>34</sup> [unsigned], "Tannhäuser", frère de Wagner; Lyrique. Le metteur en scène Robert Carsen fait du héros un artiste incompris. L'opéra, à Paris, est porté par des voix et un Seiji Ozawa très inspirés; *Le Temps*, 29 Dec. 2007.

Ex. 3. Continued

(b)

TANNHÄUSER (*Tannhäuser, der in der Mitte der Bühne wie festgewurzelt gestanden, sinkt heftig erschüttert auf die Knie.*)

88(98) *ff*

All - mächt' - - - ger, dir sei Preis! Groß

*molto cresc.* *ff* *p* *p* (*stacc.*)

92(102)

sind die Wun - der dei - ner Gna - - - de!

*ff* *dim.* *p* *più p* *pp* *p*

(c)

Act II

I iv<sup>6</sup> I VI<sup>7</sup> ii ii<sup>5</sup> V<sup>+3</sup> I

Act I

I iv I VI ii ii<sup>5</sup> I<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7+3</sup> I

things easier, of course, as each contestant makes a decision prior to the event. But is there anything in the score that could support the idea of premeditation? The answer is yes: we do find signs of thinking and calculation in Tannhäuser's performance.<sup>35</sup> In a radical departure ('a brutal musical interruption' according to Abbate<sup>36</sup>) from Wolfram's key of E flat major, Tannhäuser launches his praise of Venus in E major, the two keys representing the 'opposing spheres' of the divine and the sensual in the

<sup>35</sup> Many of the musical similarities below have already been discussed in Reinhold Brinkmann, 'Tannhäuser's Lied', in Carl Dahlhaus (ed.), *Das Drama Richard Wagners als musikalisches Kunstwerk* (Regensburg, 1970), 199–211; Abbate, 'Orpheus and the Underworld'; and ead., *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001), 117.

<sup>36</sup> Abbate, 'Orpheus and the Underworld', 43.

Ex. 4. Tannhäuser's four verses in praise of Venus: (a) Act I, sc. ii; (b) Act II, sc. iv

(a)

**Allegro**  $\text{♩} = 69$   
TANNHÄUSER

108

Dir tö - ne Lob! Die Wun - der sei'n ge - prie - sen,

*ff*

**Belebt**  
TANNHÄUSER

199

Dank dei - ner Huld, ge - prie - sen sei dein Lie - ben!

*f*

TANNHÄUSER  
*(auf das Äußerste hingerrissen, nochmals die Harfe ergreifend)*

425(334)

Stets soll nur dir, nur dir mein Lied er - tö - nen,

*ff* *p*

6 \* 6 \* 6 \* 6 \*

opera.<sup>37</sup> He thus continues the pattern of ascending semitone keys in his Act I eulogies (D flat, D, E flat), which signalled his renewed efforts to please the goddess of love while pleading for his freedom (Ex. 4).<sup>38</sup> Resuming this sequence after an entire act

<sup>37</sup> Millington, *Wagner*, 177.

<sup>38</sup> This point is not affected by the opera's different versions, since Wagner began with a single strophe in E flat major (1845) and kept adding extra strophes a semitone lower each time (D major in 1861 and D flat major–D major in 1875).

Ex. 4. Continued

(b)

**accelerando**

769(668/698) (Tannhäuser springt auf.) TANNHÄUSER (in äußerster Verzückung)

Dir, Göttin der

Lie - be, soll mein Lied ertönen,

and in a contrasting environment can hardly be a coincidence; it rather suggests an intensification of the process. The fact alone that he never reached tonal alignment with the goddess while at the Venusberg (actually, the one-strophe praise in the Dresden version is in E flat major) invites us to probe the sincerity of his statement. Indeed, exactly when his words prepare us for the climax ('zieht in den Berg der *Venus* ein!') his music swerves away from the initial key and concludes in D major. This is unexpected and breaks the pattern of tonal consistency represented by his previous praises. What is more, the new key is associated with invocations of Maria and Elisabeth in Act I, and his closing phrase, however conventional it may sound, is a recasting of his liberation shout 'mein Heil ruht in Maria!' in Act I, whose power instantly dematerialized the Venusberg (Ex. 5).

This musical betrayal of Venus is not an accident. Being a master musician, Tannhäuser surely understands the difference between the two keys and has memorized enough music to know which cadence is attached to which text. Had he been genuinely transported and sincerely enthusiastic, he could not have produced such a glaring contradiction between the rhetorical and musical aspects of his performance, between his song and his signal.<sup>39</sup> And the fact that he is the only one in the Hall aware of this

<sup>39</sup> For Carolyn Abbate, the recurring musical references in the opera represent the hero's 'conscious memory': 'the orchestra is the sound of Tannhäuser's mind. . . . The music is what is inside his mind as he recovers the past' ('Orpheus and the Underworld', 44, 47).

Ex. 5. (a) Tannhäuser's self-dedication to Mary in Act I, sc. i; (b) the conclusion of his praise of Venus in Act II, sc. iv

(a)

565 TANNHÄUSER

Mein Heil! Mein Heil ruht in Ma-

*ff* *p*

*ff* *p* *ff*

569

- ri - - - - a!

(Venus sinkt mit einem Schrei zusammen und verschwindet.  
Mit Blitzesschnelle verwandelt sich die Bühne.)

betrayal renders the scenario of an engineered crisis more, not less, likely. (Remember that he wants this disruption and if everybody else understood the double entendre his strategy might become effectless.) Within a few bars, Tannhäuser succeeds in sabotaging both the contest and his own attachment to Venus. While everyone hears him praising the goddess of sensual love, he himself reaffirms his denial of her. (His decision to rejoin her in Act III comes only after his strategy fails, leaving him without absolution and any hope of returning to Elisabeth.) It is a brilliant coup that tricks both the Wartburgians and the audience. It also helps resolve the chronic complaint about his swift (and thus unconvincing) change of heart from praising Venus to submitting to Wartburg's strict morality.

This new interpretation of Tannhäuser's faux pas works not only because he is a full human being—someone who cannot just feel and love but who is also able to think, reflect, remember, and revise his beliefs—but also because he is a music artist in control of two different informational tracks, verbal and musical.<sup>40</sup> Thus he is able to produce statements of varying truth depending on the convergence of musical and rhetorical content. A musical gesture and phrase already associated with a thought or decision can later be used for the exact opposite claim, as we saw above.

When and why this happens is predicated on social context. Tannhäuser is unable to put down roots in any establishment because he is constrained by convention and re-

<sup>40</sup> As James Garratt puts it, Tannhäuser is 'highlighting the predicament of art' and his story is 'that of art itself': *Music, Culture and Social Reform in the Age of Wagner* (Cambridge, 2010), 49.

Ex. 5. Continued

(b)

TANNHÄUSER

Lie - - - - - be nie ge - nos - sen, zieht

hin! Zieht in den Berg der Ve - - - - -

*p*

*cresc.*

*ff*

♩ = 84 (*allgemeiner Aufbruch und Entsetzen*)

nus ein!

petitiveness. The eternity he is offered at the Venusberg becomes as torturous as reliving the same winter day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania in Danny Rubin and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993). What the recurrence of his Venus aria tells us is that he keeps repeating himself like an assembly-line worker and no renewal of sensual ecstasy can revitalize him. In the Wartburg, too, he finds an institutionalized setting with pompous rituals and a strong division between acceptable and forbidden themes. As long as these external forces restrict his self-expression, Tannhäuser is compelled to be untrue to others and to make contradictory statements. The semblance of irrationality is his only shield against attachments that threaten his ultimate goal of redemption.

Thanks to his musical track, however, we are able to see into his mind and detect a strategy of redemption. The remarkable aspect of Elisabeth is that she turns from a romantic pursuit to a vehicle of salvation for him. She came to love him because of his art, but unlike Venus she is pure and spiritual enough to sacrifice her love, even her life, for his salvation. Her intervention in the Act II finale is what revitalizes Tannhäuser's mission and becomes his source of inspiration. It is the epiphany of realizing the pain he has caused to her that sanctifies his Act I resolve to expunge the impurities of sensuality in his life. This is why his two cries in Acts I and II are identical musical gestures yet of different musical content. They are signposts in his progress towards redemption and spiritual renewal. Spoiling the *Sängerkrieg* is a strategic choice that leads from the one to the other. Unsure as Wagner had been through to the end of his life about the dramatic perfection of *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, he may, in the end, have produced an opera that works better if approached from a cognitive perspective than from a historical, formal, or stylistic one.

### ABSTRACT

The eponymous hero of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* treads a path of stark contrasts and rapid swings that culminate in the opera's central episode, the song contest at Wartburg. Instead of securing his reintegration within the court with a brilliant performance, Tannhäuser spoils the event with insolent remarks and the exhibitionist disclosure of his Venusberg experience. His behaviour offends his peers, scandalizes the court, breaks Elisabeth's heart, and brings him to the edge of death. Why would he sacrifice everything for nothing? Existing interpretations of Wagner's Tannhäuser blame either the hero's flaws or the young composer's unconvincing dramaturgy, and take for granted Tannhäuser's hyper-emotional impulsive nature. This essay offers a radically new perspective on the opera by drawing on game theory, the dominant methodology in the social sciences. Through a detailed analysis of the hero's decision-making, it argues that his seemingly irrational behaviour is actually consistent with a strategy of redemption. Musical evidence in the score indeed suggests that Tannhäuser may have consciously disrupted the contest, knowing that only a public disclosure of his sinful past can force him to make the pilgrimage to Rome and secure a permanent union with Elisabeth.