

Tannhäuser's Dilemma

A Study in Rational Choice Hermeneutics*

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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 unfolding drama,¹ and there can indeed be little doubt that the tournament of song in the last scene of the middle act is the linchpin of its story. It is Tannhäuser'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 the scene poses a puzzle that has led some authors to the conclusion that the opera's conception is fundamentally flawed. Here we argue that such a conclusion can be avoided by analysing Tannhäuser's apparently inconsistent behaviour in act two from a *rational choice* perspective.

At first sight Tannhäuser's behaviour in the song contest is indeed puzzling. Departing from all courtly rules he interrupts the songs of his fellow knights, harshly attacking their views of the nature of love. As such this would already be disturbing but Tannhäuser goes 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.

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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 Tannhäuser* and E.T.A. Hoffman's *Der Kampf der Sänger*.)

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 here.

In this article we shall introduce an analysis that lets the inconsistency vanish. In fact, we shall argue that Tannhäuser's apparently erratic actions are perfectly in line with entirely logical and rational reasoning. Subscribing to this reasoning, there is neither anything weird in Tannhäuser's actions nor is there any flaw in Wagner's libretto. On the contrary, in the light of our arguments Wagner's construction of the libretto and, in particular, the tournament scene must be seen as rather subtle and logically tight.

Our study is an exercise in *rational choice hermeneutics*, henceforth, RCH. The core idea of RCH is to investigate whether the behaviour of an actor in a story can be viewed as the consequence of a rational choice. It is important to notice here that saying that an action *can be viewed* as stemming from rational choice is different from saying that an action does actually *stem from* rational choice. This difference may appear minuscule but is, in fact, crucial. We shall discuss this in more detail in Section 2 that introduces and defines RCH more formally and contains a brief discussion of related literature. Section 3 contains the detailed analysis of Tannhäuser's behaviour, positing that he faces a terrible dilemma once the tournament is under way that he *solves* by his outburst. Finally, we conclude in Section 4.

2 *Rational Choice Hermeneutics*²

The rational choice approach to empirical phenomena examines whether observed behaviour can be viewed "as if" following from an individual rational maximization calculus, for example, from a rigorous cost-benefit analysis (see, for example, Friedman 1953). There are several important ingredients in this definition. Firstly, behaviour is attributed to the

² We use the term hermeneutics in its simple, ancient greek meaning being fully aware that, by coupling it with the precise instruments of rational choice theory, we add to it a certain anti-Diltheyian flavour.

individual. There is no act that is driven by a supraindividual force. Secondly, behaviour is in some way or other “optimal.” This does not necessarily mean that it is driven by pure self-interest. Traditionally, rationality is often confused with egoism but, in fact, there is nothing in the definition of rationality that requires selfishness. A pure altruist can be perfectly rational. This is just a matter of *preferences*. But given some preferences a rational actor chooses the best alternative, the alternative that maximizes his preferences. Thirdly, the approach does *not* posit that actors choose rational acts fully consciously. As such it is similar, say, 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 Similarly, economists who analyse, say, purchasing behaviour do not have to assume that the consumers’ actual decisions taken while strolling through supermarket aisles stem from conscious deliberation (see, for example, Blundell, Browning, and Crawford 2003 or Hargart 2006).⁴

As an approach to the phenomenal realm, the rational choice paradigm 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. The first step in any such analysis is to recreate the actor’s choice set—to think carefully about what other opportunities the actor had. These opportunities may be explicitly mentioned in the text but more often than not a full recreation of the actor’s choice set will require the search for implicit clues in the text. The second step requires a rigorous analysis of the possible consequences of each possible action in the choice set. In the context of a literary story or an opera libretto this requires purely logical deduction based on whatever information

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.

⁴ Of course, we might argue that there is something about the underlying cognitive processes of human decision making that lends the “as if rational” a certain credibility that it not has with animals or plants. In such a discussion an important role could be assumed by the concept of judgement. However, such a discussion would inevitably lead into difficult philosophical territory that is beyond the natural boundaries of this paper. For a recent philosophical discussion of the notion of judgement and how it relates to rationality, see Healy (1993).

we have about the actor's environment.⁵ Finally, by virtue of the rational choice assumption, we can infer important information about what made the actor choose his actions—about his motives or preferences—information that may not be directly accessible in the literary text itself because it is not spelled out. This is, of course, exactly the step at which the H in RCH comes into play.

The rational choice approach has gained a stronghold throughout the social sciences over the last few decades. Post-war economics—enriched through the important contributions of game theory in the late 1970s and 1980s—has been built entirely on the paradigm. But 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 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 also changed the style of teaching.

However, despite the rise of rational choice in the social sciences its tools have been rarely applied to studies in arts and humanities, perhaps, for the obvious reason that some of the core motives featuring in the great tales of humanity, such as the mysteries of love and death—or hints into the noumenal—are beyond the grasp of “cool” rational analysis. However, while this is obviously true the conclusion that the rational choice approach is, hence, not appropriate to analyse works of art does not follow. Clearly, such a conclusion would be a violation of the principle of sufficient reason.⁶ And, after all, there have been some attempts to utilize the rational actor paradigm for studies in arts and humanities.

Paisley Livingston (2001) has written an entire monograph on *Literature and Rationality*. He 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. Much

⁵ Such information will typically come from the main text but can in other cases also stem from earlier versions of the text or comments made elsewhere by the author on his text.

⁶ More specifically, a case of a *fallacia a dicto secundum quid ad dictum simpliciter*.

of Livingston's thought is based on the assumption that a rational act requires intentionality ("no intentionality, no rationality", p. 16). It is important to notice, however, that in Livingston's framework "intentionality" does not require conscious awareness of a specific act's underlying aims and goals—otherwise it would be in sharp contrast to how rationality is viewed in the "dismal science" that most heavily relies on it, economics. For an empirical economist it does not matter whether a consumer's choice of, say, a particular piece of cheese was a conscious, deliberate, fully intentional act or whether it was driven by impulses, emotions, or habits—all that does matter is whether the choice can be viewed *as if* made by a rational agent who carefully thought about the cheese's price and characteristics and how they relate to his or her taste. Livingston's view is in line with this principle. But he emphasizes that rationality requires that agents operate at a level of systems of functionally relevant propositional content such as attitudes, beliefs and desires. On the other hand, Livingston's assumptions on what constitutes an intentional rational act are far less strict than the axiomatic systems typically imposed in rational choice theory. Following Cherniak's (1981) ideas about minimal rationality and Simon's (1957) about satisficing Livingston advocates a moderate *heuristic* form of rationality.⁷

Roughly speaking, Livingston 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 also contribute to the advancement of concepts of rationality in philosophy or the social sciences.

Some of the most influential contributions to the last type of enquiry have been made by political scientist cum game theorist Steven Brams. Brams' (2003) monograph *Biblical Games* examines games between various central characters of the Hebrew Bible. He shows, for example, what we can learn about Adam and Eve's preferences in the games they play

⁷ While at the surface such relaxed conditions on rationality may make it easier to apply ideas of rational choice to literary stories (simply because rationality will be harder to reject), it will also make life more complicated when it comes to reaching precise inferences about agents' motives, as now less structure is imposed. This mirrors the problem of weaker identifying assumptions in structural econometrics where relaxations of rationality or equilibrium assumptions typically imply that parameters of interest can no longer be pinned down with the same precision, see for example Manski (2003).

with god and the serpent. But he also examines the portrayal of family conflict between Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau or Joseph and his brothers. As can be expected, there are several careful analyses of counterfactuals in many of his examples. In one of the later chapters he raises, for example, the question what would have happened if Abraham had refused to sacrifice Isaac. But Brams has also written about games played by other literary characters, for example between Percy Grimm and Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* where the celebrated "minimax theorem" features (see, Brams 1994). Brams' studies are mainly addressed to a social science audience—clever applications of game theory, they highlight interesting modelling problems and often suggest new ways of thinking about rationality.⁸ One particularly interesting case of this are his writings about omniscience (Brams 1983)—a concept that when coupled with rationality raises fundamental issues about free will and easily leads into tricky problems that border on the paradoxical. One of his main contributions here is to demonstrate how rigorous rational thought can resolve the seemingly paradox.

A survey of applications of game theory (the multi-person decision equivalent to rational choice) to literature is contained in Brams (1994). He lists twenty-two works of fiction (including two opera libretti) that have been subjected to game-theoretic analysis. In most cases, however, these applications serve as mere illustrations of simple game-theoretic concepts. Two exceptions stand out, Howard's (1971) analysis of Pinter's play *The Caretaker*, and O'Neill's (1990) study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In both cases, the game-theoretic analysis helps to reveal underlying structures (the circularity of coalition formation in case of Pinter's play, the subtle informational problems and reputation concerns in case of *Sir Gawain*) that, once uncovered, help to explain the core of the human dramas depicted.

In his introduction, Brams (1994) stresses that strategic rational choice analyses of literary plots can help "making tighter the linkage between motives and actions in plot construction" and that they are useful to examine "whether the ordinary calculations of fictional characters can help to explain their extraordinary actions." While this comes rather close to what we pursue here, Brams' article does not explicitly spell out what we believe the two core features

⁸ Other contributions in that small literature include Aumann and Maschler (1985), Fudenberg and Levine (2005), Harmgart, Huck, and Müller (2006), or Mehlmann (2000).

of RCH to be: the systematic reconstruction of counterfactuals and the role of the “as if” for making inferences about agents’ goals.⁹

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. Wolfram and Walther go first, praising courtly love, but are interrupted by outbursts from Tannhäuser who, almost in rage, 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 to having spent time at the Venusberg when he comments on Wolfram’s and Walther’s songs: “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 spontaneous 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 song is seen as a deeply emotional, irrational response to what he had to listen to in the others’ songs and, accordingly, many are surprised that just a few minutes later he calmly accepts the verdict of the court and goes off on his march to Rome to do penance. Thus, Strohm (p.6) calls him the “epitome of abruptness” and

⁹ A recent, almost detective-like enquiry into a literary actor’s true (but hidden) goals that makes use of arguments that implicitly are very similar to ours (without identifying them with rational choice theory though) is Jenny Davidson’s (2004) study of *Mansfield Park* where she uncovers the strategies of deceit and concealment employed by Fanny Price as instruments for seizing power and winning the prize of marriage.

laconically 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 shall argue, by observing that Tannhäuser’s outburst, although highly emotionally charged, can, in fact, be seen as a rational act. In doing so, we shall not posit that Tannhäuser chooses this rational act consciously (he clearly does not), rather we claim that Tannhäuser acts *as if* he were fully rationally weighing his options, picking the best one.¹⁰ 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, too, singing a song praising courtly love or, perhaps, his love to Elisabeth. Such an analysis conveys that Tannhäuser, once the tournament is under way, faces a terrible dilemma. And his only way out of this dilemma 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 act¹¹ 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 promise¹²

¹⁰ 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. See also fn. 18.

¹¹ We will follow the Paris version, premiered in 1861.

¹² 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 shall I loudly sing!”]¹³

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 quite different mood. First he tells Venus that he shall 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 transformation of the scenery 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:

¹³ 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 fulfilment of an irrefutable claim made by a soul seeking an ultimate decision.”*¹⁴

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 again at the Wartburg. And in what follows, in particular, in Tannhäuser’s conversation with Elisabeth in the minstrel’s hall at the beginning of the second act, there is not the slightest indication that Tannhäuser’s 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 a sin and, clearly, nothing to boast about. Hence, of course, the shock the audience feels in the opera house when his outburst comes just moments later.

So, let us now turn to the central question we want to raise. 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 over him just minutes later? As indicated above, we believe the answer to be no on both accounts.

¹⁴ *“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-SuD Bd. 8, 181pp.

The crucial question is: 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 have little doubt that, if he wants to win the tournament, he can. Hence, *if* he plays by the rules Tannhäuser must simply make up his mind about whether or not he wants to win the tournament. In what follows we shall argue that both options are bad options, confronting Tannhäuser with a terrible 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 as his prize must be appalling. But winning the contest is not a good idea either and it is quite straightforward to see why. 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. By asking for her hand and marrying her without having been granted absolution first, he would act against his own beliefs about Elisabeth's nature and betray his own decision to repent. Moreover, he would significantly add to his sins. The Catholic Church is very clear on this point: Before getting married, spouses must approach the sacrament of penance because marriage is itself a sacrament; see, for example, the code of canon law (*codex iuris canonici* 1983, 1065§2) or Hörmann's encyclopaedia of Christian morality (1976, 190-214).¹⁵

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.

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 and this is really the best

¹⁵ 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.

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 is that his emotions solve his 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, 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).¹⁶

Tannhäuser's outburst is an act of creative destruction and as such an 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; Schumpeter's entrepreneur who destroys a monopoly through radical innovation; or Luke Skywalker who triumphs over his father's dark side not by wounding him but by being wounded.

Tannhäuser's heroic act fulfils 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. But at this stage it is useful to re-examine the counterfactuals in some more detail, in particular, 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 terribly unsuccessful. Instead of granting him unconditional absolution

¹⁶ 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 prove here is that, from the viewpoint of RCH, 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.

the pope requires a miracle to occur for Tannhäuser's salvation.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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? Surely not. From all we know Wolfram would probably have won the contest and gladly taken Elisabeth's hands. And Tannhäuser would not have 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

¹⁷ The pope's harsh decision has in itself been reason for much debate and some critics have argued that it violates canon law. Again, a careful analysis from the perspective of rational choice can resolve the pope's apparently strange verdict. By requiring a miracle he can balance two conflicting aims—to deter potential sinners who have not yet sinned *and* to open those who have fallen and sinned a path back to a decent god-fearing life. Neither quasi-automatic absolution nor strict denial of it can achieve both these aims. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see Harmgart, Huck, and Müller (2006).

¹⁸ 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.

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

4 Conclusion

The rational choice approach that we adopted here to resolve the mysteries of the Sängerkrieg in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* is based on a set of simple but stringent principles. These principles are neither *ad hoc* nor in any way specific to the example that we analyse. Imported from the social sciences they remain here fully unaltered and intact. Consequently, they can be used in the same fashion in other contexts. Doing so 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 of rational choice, the force of maximizing one's goals (be it in full conscience, cunningly perhaps even, or in the case of Tannhäuser quite unwittingly) does indeed provide such Aristotelian inevitability (whether desired or not).

RCH can, thus, be seen as a simple and easily applicable toolbox to analyse plots. In many cases this will require the study of multi-person decision making—true interaction of different characters which we have avoided here (more or less by implicitly assuming certain fixed goals and behaviours of those who interact with Tannhäuser). In cases where such simplifications are not warranted some elementary game theory (the multi-person equivalent to individual rational choice) will be helpful. But, for now, we prefer not to speculate too

much about such possible further applications of RCH, nor do we deem it appropriate to engage here in a detailed discussion of how RCH relates to different schools of thought in literary theory and criticism. Such a broader discussion of RCH, its potential and its limitations, shall be attempted elsewhere.

However, we do hope that we demonstrated what potentially could be the main strength of RCH. Where previous authors have argued that Wagner's *Tannhäuser* libretto suffers from serious logical blunders, RCH is able to restore coherency. In fact, if one is willing to accept the premises of RCH, we have shown that there is not the slightest flaw in Wagner's conception of the opera. On the contrary, the construction of the opera with the centrally located tournament of song and its ensuing high drama must then be viewed as an immensely ingenious *coup de théâtre*.

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