“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 Wartburg to the Venusberg and to the Vatican, the gifted bard transforms from self-centered artist to seduced disciple, disillusioned devotee, hopeful lover, self-loathing pilgrim and finally redeemed martyr. He tries everything and everything is trying. These contrasts reach a peak in the opera’s central episode, the song contest at Wartburg. Tannhäuser has just been welcomed at the court, received Elisabeth’s favor and affection, and is ready to compete for the contest’s prize, one as lofty as possibly the princess’ hand. Instead of securing his reintegration to Wartburg with a brilliant performance, however, he spoils the event with insolent remarks and the exhibitionist disclosure of his Venusberg experience. His behavior 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 Wartburg:

Landgraf.  
... Kehrest in den Kreis zurück, den du in Hochmuth stolz verließest?  
... Have you returned to the circle you forsook in haughty arrogance?

Wolfram.  
... als du uns stolz verlassen, ... when, in haughtiness, you left us,

(Act 1, sc. 4, ll. 387-88, 458)

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 with the Virgin Mary (“mein Heil ruht in Maria!” [my salvation rests in Mary!] Act 1, sc. 2, l. 302) is followed by swapping the latter for Princess Elisabeth and then her, too, for a limelight moment of swaggering self-adulation. This, in turn, he publicly regrets preferring penance over sin, a penchant he is no longer sure of when he

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1 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: Schott Music, 2007), 491-524.
finally returns to Wartburg. Thus, Tannhäuser’s irrational behavior 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.

Another explanation points the finger to Wagner himself, 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 (for example, having the big climax just before the end of Act 2) overrode that for dramatic conviction. Whether for structural or philosophical reasons, Wartburg had to appear midway between the Venusberg and Rome, the song contest should stand between a life of sin and one of redemption, and Elisabeth had to become “the woman who, star-like,” leads Tannhäuser “from the hot passion of the Venusberg to Heaven”.  

Both explanations are valid and offer insights into Tannhäuser’s reckless behaviour. Like most exegetical efforts on the opera, however, they take for granted the hero’s hyper-emotional nature, compulsiveness, and spontaneity. Issues of choice, planning and strategy, are left out of the picture.

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3 “Provoked to the utmost by the arrogant impotence of the other court poets” (Dieter Borchmeyer, Drama and the World of Richard Wagner, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 125), Tannhäuser “becomes more and more frenzied, as if forgetting his present surroundings” (Claude M. Simpson, Jr., “Wagner and the Tannhäuser Tradition,” PMLA 63 (1949), 244-61: 259) and acts “Faster than [he] can think” (Joachim Köhler, Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 170), “as if possessed by a demon” (Ernest Newman, Wagner Nights (London: Putnam, 1949), 97) so that “the very decision to sing appears in him as a spontaneous action bringing out the real drama” (Reinhard Strohm, “Dramatic Time and Operatic Form in Wagner’s Tannhäuser,” Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association 104 (1977-8), 1-10: 4) which would not have unfolded had he not been “rash enough to boast that he had known the unholy joys” (D. Millar Craig, “Some Wagner Lapses,” The Musical Times 80 (1939), 17-18: 18). For Carl Dahlhaus, “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”: Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 25. 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”
as if his actions are involuntary responses to external stimuli and his decisions lack any kind of mental processing. Yet his departure from the Venusberg is a conscious choice arrived at through rational thinking. Memories of his past life interlace and clash with his present Venusian experiences, leading to comparison 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 (reminiscent of the Orpheus-Euridice confrontation in Gluck’s *Orfeo*). Tannhäuser abandons the Venusberg fully aware of the privileges he leaves behind and the hardships lying ahead:

Tannhäuser.

nach Freiheit doch verlange ich,  
for freedom, then, I long,
nach Freiheit, Freiheit dürstet’s mich;  
for freedom, freedom, do I thirst;
zu Kampf und Streite will ich stehen,  
for struggle and strife I will stand,
sei’s auch auf Tod und Untergehen: –  
though it be, too, for destruction and death:
drum muß aus deinem Reich ich flieh’n, –  
from your kingdom, therefore, I must fly,

(Act 1, sc. 2, ll. 209-13)

Similarly, in his encounter with the knights, we find him resisting their offer, which shows at least knowledge of two alternative paths. He agrees to join them only when Wolfram reveals Elisabeth’s favorable response to his songs. In what statisticians call Bayesian updating, Tannhäuser revises his beliefs about Wartburg and his decision not to look back (“denn rückwärts darf ich niemals seh’n.” Act 1, sc. 4, l. 424). Learning about Elisabeth’s feelings makes a return to Wartburg into 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 1, sc. 4, ll. 474-75).

Pursuing this line of inquiry, this paper 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.” We also suggest that he consciously disrupts the contest, knowing that only a public disclosure of his sinful past can propel him on the path of redemption.


Wagner’s master plan

The existence of such a strategy emerges from Wagner’s own writings. In his essay “Über die Aufführung des Tannhäuser,” he explicitly identifies the hero’s *crie de coeur* in the Act 2 finale as the opera’s turning point:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tannhäuser.</th>
<th>TANNHÄUSER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zum Heil den Sündigen zu führen,</td>
<td>To lead the sinner to salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Gott-Gesandte nahnte mir:</td>
<td>God’s messenger drew near me!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doch, ach! sie frevelnd zu berühren</td>
<td>But, oh, to touch her wantonly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hob ich den Lästerblick zu ihr!</td>
<td>I raised my dissolute gaze to her!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O du, hoch über diesen Erdengründen,</td>
<td>Oh Thou, high above this land of earth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die mir den Engel meines Heil’s gesandt,</td>
<td>Who sent the angel of my salvation to me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>erbarm’ dich mein, der ach! so tief in Sünden</td>
<td>have mercy on me who, oh, so deep in sin,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schmachvoll des Himmels Mittlerin verkannt!</td>
<td>shamefully failed to recognize heaven’s mediator!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Act 2, sc. 4, ll. 417-24)

“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 awaiting will halt unsatisfied.6

This moment is important because until now Tannhäuser is really a fugitive from the Venusberg, his options being the pilgrimage to Rome or the reunion with Elisabeth. But her saintly response to his betrayal generates so much pain that redemption becomes irrevocable. As Wagner explained to audiences in 1853,

This chastened erstwhile knight of Venus has seized upon the sole path to salvation now pointed out to him, terribly aware of the outrage he committed against his good angel

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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. So important was Tannhäuser’s epiphany for Wagner that he decided to cut the entire passage at the opera’s first run in Dresden after Tichatschek, his lead singer, had failed to meet the dramatic challenges of the role.

If Wagner intended to create such a powerful moment in the drama, one that would engender the utmost sympathy and pity from 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.

The surprise we experience in the opera comes from an anticipated lieto fine turning into disaster. From the closing of Act 1 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 2 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 famous Leonore of her time). (Example 1a-c) Tannhäuser’s volte-face, his failure to perform what everyone (on- and off-stage) 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 the *Flying Dutchman* and *Lohengrin*, the hero needs not only redemption but also a redeemer, a woman that can bear personal responsibility for his salvation. If prior to the contest Elisabeth was a patroness/potential bride, she now becomes a guardian angel,

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the “star-like” object leading the sinner to redemption. 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”. It is true that they will never see each other in this world and their love can only be completed beyond this life, something that post-Tristan und Isolde listeners can figure out from a “Liebestod” moment in the Act 2 finale. (Example 2) 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,” but a sanctioning device for Tannhäuser’s redemption through Elisabeth. But in order for her to reveal her redemptive qualities Tannhäuser has to do something sufficiently unforgivable and offensive to incur universal condemnation. Praising Venus exactly when he was supposed to publicly solicit Elisabeth’s favor (and possibly hand) is an act of dramatic necessity serving the opera’s goals.

Game theory
If Wagner’s strategy is to extract, so to speak, Tannhäuser’s redeemer through an “irrational” choice, what about the hero himself? Is he aware of this master plan? Does he intentionally disrupt the contest to bring about the desired outcome or is he simply irritated by the artistic impotence of his fellow minstrels? To put it differently, does he have to choose between alternatives at the start of the Sängerkrieg? To answer this question, we draw on methodologies from the social sciences, specifically on game theory, which seeks to account for social interaction by assuming that individuals make choices that express some underlying preferences and beliefs. Such an analysis requires two steps, a reconstruction of the choice set (what else might Tannhäuser 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? How would the others have reacted and what would his gains and losses have been in

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10 To emphasize this contrast in her function, Wagner decided to excise Tannhäuser’s Act 1 reference to her as “Engel” in the opera’s first prose draft: Dokumente, 341.
11 Concert program for the May 1853 Zurich concerts, Richard Wagner and His World, 503. “nicht um die Wonne der Entsündigung für sich zu gewinnen, sondern als Begnadigter den Engel zu versöhnen, der ihm die bitterste Thräne des Lebens geweint.” Dokumente, 153.
12 Dahlhaus, Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas, 23.
13 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: Peter Lang, 1992), 165, 174.
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 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 powers. Much of our empathy with a tragic hero predicates 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 Elisabeth instead of Venus.

A staple in the social sciences and the methodological engine in modern economics, games theory has had limited impact in the humanities so far. Unfamiliarity with 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. Yet game theory may better accommodate drama than real-life situations. By its very nature, already analyzed 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.

14 A notable exception is Paisley Livingston’s *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). 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.

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 a person 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 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 behavior 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.

**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.\(^\text{16}\) 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 are here in my heart; through penance I shall find peace] Act 1, sc. 2, ll. 293-94) and sticks to his choice until just before the end of Act 1. Not only is he moved to tears by the pilgrims’ chorus but also he fully adopts, in solo singing, the second stanza of their hymn (Example 3):

**Example 3:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tannhäuser</th>
<th>TANNHÄUSER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ach, schwer drückt mich der Sünden Last,</td>
<td>Alas, the burden of my sins weighs me down,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kann länger sie nicht mehr ertragen;</td>
<td>I can endure it no longer;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drum will ich auch nicht Ruh noch Rast,</td>
<td>I will know neither sleep nor rest therefore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>und wähle gern mir Müh’ und Plagen.</td>
<td>and gladly choose toil and vexation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Act 1, sc. 3, ll. 360-63)

Why then does he decide to return to Wartburg? The view that Elisabeth’s name and memory cast a spell upon him is simplistic if not misleading. Actually, his conversion requires both persuasion and peer pressure. The knights’ first attempt to recruit him meets with strong resistance:

**Example 3:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tannhäuser</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^\text{16}\) Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, 145.
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.

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!

(Act 1, sc. 4, ll. 421-24)

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. (Example 4) And even after Elisabeth’s name is put on the plate, Wolfram launches a second round of discourse, putting a rational case for Tannhäuser’s return to Wartburg:

Tannhäuser. 

TANNHÄUSER

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

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

(Act 1, sc. 4, ll. 459-65)

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

Tannhäuser. 

TANNHÄUSER

Zu ihr! Zu ihr! O, führet mich zu ihr! 
Ha, jetzt erkenne ich sie wieder, 
die schöne Welt, der ich entrückt!

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

(Act 1, sc. 4, ll. 473-75)

It would be unfair, then, to interpret this change of mind as opportunism. Without necessarily betraying his resolve to repent, Tannhäuser embraces a task that is more urgent and close to hand (Wartburg already appears in the background; Rome is far away). In a sense, he is on a rescue mission to restore Elisabeth’s mental health and the court’s proper function. Elisabeth being a princess and heiress, her melancholy and absence from the court’s tournaments are indeed matters of state, and so is Tannhäuser’s return to Wartburg. 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

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Wagner’s first prose draft,\(^{18}\) 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 2, sc. 2, ll. 106-7).

Tannhäuser’s affection for and commitment to Elisabeth are evident in the early scenes of Act 2. Upon seeing her, he throws himself at her feet (“ungestüm zu den Füßen Elisabeth’s stürzend” Act 2, sc. 2, l. 25) and their synchronous cries of joy in their duet leave no doubt of their destined union. (Example 5a-b) 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tannhäuser.} & \quad \text{TANNHÄUSER} \\
\text{Fern von hier,} & \quad \text{Far from here} \\
\text{in weiten, weiten Landen. Dichtes Vergessen} & \quad \text{in broad and distant lands. Deep forgetfulness} \\
\text{hat zwischen heut’ und gestern sich gesenkt.} & \quad \text{has descended betwixt today and yesterday.} \\
\text{All’ mein Erinnern ist mir schnell geschwunden,} & \quad \text{All my remembrance has vanished in a trice,} \\
\text{und nur des Einen muß ich mich entsinnen,} & \quad \text{and one thing only must I recall,} \\
\text{daß nie mehr ich gehofft euch zu begrüßen,} & \quad \text{that I never more hoped to greet you,} \\
\text{noch je zu euch mein Auge zu erheben.} & \quad \text{nor ever raise my eyes to you.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Act 2, sc. 2, ll. 41-47)

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 Elisabeth, 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 1, sc. 2, 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 2, sc. 2, ll. 82-86)

Tannhäuser (in höchster Verzückung).
Dir, Göttin der Liebe, soll mein Lied ertönen!
Gesungen laut sei jetzt dein Preis von mir!
(Act 2, sc. 4, ll. 322-24)

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 1. 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. (Example 6a-b)

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!” (It was a miracle, / an unbelievably sublime miracle! ll. 51-52) (Example 7a). Miracles defy explanation and have no traceable cause. But while he claims ignorance, his music identifies the exact moment that led him to Wartburg. As Carolyn Abbate has found, his musical statement is a recasting of his Act 1 epiphany following the pilgrims’ chorus.19 (Example 7b-c) It was his resolve to repent for his Venusberg years and his decision to seek absolution in Rome 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 pilgrimage to Rome and his return to 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 unite with Elisabeth. What shall he do? By winning the contest, he gets the girl but will be in danger of losing her once his past is revealed (a scenario that Wagner will explore in his next opera Lohengrin). 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 seek absolution 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>make pilgrimage</th>
<th>unite with Elisabeth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Win the contest</td>
<td>NO / PERHAPS</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lose the contest</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO / PERHAPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabotage the contest</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES / PROBABLY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table’s rows show his possible actions, the columns his aims, and the entries where rows and columns meet indicate whether the actions are likely to achieve the 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 behavior at the contest may appear to everybody, on- and off-stage, it actually serves his twin aims of redemption and unity 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 available. Of course, at the start of the competition there are variables he cannot control, namely Elisabeth’s reaction, the punishment of the court, and the Pope’s decision. Still, under the given circumstances his choice of praising 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 to Venus is conscious, premeditated, planned. To be sure, Wagner’s stage directions and the flashes of Venusberg music suggest that Tannhäuser is gradually being overtaken by past memories, exactly as memories of his mortal life had spoiled his

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20 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), 33-35.

21 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.

22 “Tannhäuser... scheint sich in Träumereien zu verlieren” (ll. 195-96); “Tannhäuser (in höchster Verzückung).” (l. 322).
service to the goddess of love in Act 1. (Example 8) A 2007 production of the opera by Robert Carsen at the Paris Opera took another view, however. Turning the Sängerkrieg into an early 20th-century exhibition, Carsen had Tannhäuser calmly choose the “Praise of Venus,” a large (presumably nude) painting he had started working on in Act 1, as his entry for the competition – before he has a chance to see/hear any of the other competitors and to become agitated by their hypocrisy.23 Eliminating temporality makes 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.24 In a radical departure (“a brutal musical interruption” according to Abbate25) from Wolfram’s key E flat major, Tannhäuser launches his praise to Venus on E major. He thus continues the pattern of ascending semitone keys in his Act 1 eulogies (D-flat, D, E-flat), which signaled his renewed efforts to please the goddess of love while pleading for his freedom. (Example 9a) Resuming this sequence after an entire act and in a contrasting environment can hardly be a coincidence; it rather suggests an intensification of the process. Indeed, his tonal alignment with the Venusberg underscores the genuine enthusiasm in his statement. But 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 in each of his previous praises. What is more, the new key is associated with invocations of Maria and Elisabeth in Act 1, and the cadential phrase is a recasting of his liberation shout “mein Heil ruht in Maria!” in Act 1, whose power instantly dematerialised the Venusberg. (Example 9b)

This musical betrayal of Venus is not an accident. Being a master musician, Tannhäuser surely understands the difference between the two keys and has memorised 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 glaring contradiction between the rhetorical and musical aspects of his performance.


25 “Orpheus and the Underworld,” 43.
performance, between his song and his signal. And the fact that he is the only one in the Hall aware of this betrayal renders the scenario of an engineered crisis more likely, not less. (Remember that he wants the disruption, the sabotage, and if everybody else would understand 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 3 comes only after his strategy fails, leaving him without absolution and any hope to return 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.

**Epilogue: Tannhäuser the artist**

This new interpretation of Tannhäuser’s faux pas works not only because he is a full human being—someone who can not only feel and love in this way and that but who is also able to think, reflect, remember, and update—but also because he is a music artist in control of two different informational tracks, verbal and musical. 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 predicates on social context. Tannhäuser is unable to get roots in any establishment because his artistic self is constrained by convention and repetitiveness. The eternity he is offered at the Venusberg becomes as torturous as living 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 is stuck as an artist, he keeps repeating himself like an industrial worker and no renewal of sensual ecstasy can revitalise his art. In Wartburg, too, he finds an institutionalised setting with pompous rituals and a strong division between acceptable and forbidden themes. As long as these external forces restrict his 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 art.

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26 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).

27 As James Garrat 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: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 49.
Thanks to his musical track, however, we are able to see through his mind and detect a strategy of redemption and artistic rebirth. The remarkable thing about Elisabeth is that she turns from a romantic pursuit to a means of redemption for him. She came to love him because of his art, but unlike Venus she is pure and spiritual enough to sacrifice her love, nay her life, for his salvation. Her intervention in the Act 2 finale is what revitalises Tannhäuser’s mission and becomes his source of inspiration. It is the epiphany of realising the pain he has caused to her that sanctifies his Act 1 resolve to expunge the impurities of sensuality from his art. This is why his two cries in Act 1 and 2 are identical musical gestures yet of different musical content. (Example 10) They are signposts in his progress towards redemption and artistic renewal.

Artistic truth predicates on what Wagner calls “the high tragedy of renunciation”28 – sacrifices, conflict and clash with anything that keeps the artist attached to the phenomenal world, be it the sensual parlor of Venus or the pious Wartburg culture. Like Jesus flogging the Temple’s money lenders, Tannhäuser has to spoil the Sängerkrieg in order to achieve redemption, to expose the perils of institutionalised art, and, not least, to warn Wagner himself as he was entering his own Wartburg castle, the Dresden Court Theatre.29

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29 See Köhler, Richard Wagner, 161-62.
Example 1a

Allegro. \( \text{d} = 100 \)

Elisabeth.

Oh blessed
Ge-priessen

foot!
Allegro. \( \text{d} = 100 \)

Wind sustain.

P

Example 1b

Allegro vivace.

Leonora. \( \text{d} = 100 \)

O nam-en,
O joy-ful,

Str., W. Wind & Horns

viola. crec.

Oh blessed pow-
ge-priessen sei

Oh blessed pow-
ge-priessen sei

of love;

die Macht!

of love;

die Macht!

so ü-ber-grosse Lust! nach un-nenn-ba-ren
Our hearts are whol-ly blest! Our name-less woes are

so ü-ber-grosse Lust! nach un-nenn-ba-ren
Our hearts are whol-ly blest! Our name-less woes are

Adagio.

Wind
Now life renewed anew.

Oh blessed Ge-priesten.

Strings & t.Horn.

Drums 

Wakest Within this heart of mine, within this

Geben lacht mir der Sonntagschein, lacht mir der

Power of love! Now life renewed anew.

Denn neuer kann nicht

Cresc. Bassoon.

Heart of mine; The cloud of sorrow

Sonntagschein; erwacht zu neuem

Waketh The hope that once was mine

Leben darf ich mich mutthig weihn, ich nenn in

Cresc.
namenlose Freude,

o nam-en, naam-enlo-se Freu-de, mein Weib, mein Weib an meiner

brust,

du wie-der mein, an meiner Brust,

o Dank dir,
Example 2

him, oh spare him, I implore ye, oh spare him, I implore ye, oh spare him, I implore ye, To

Le - ben, ich fle - he für sein Le - ben! Der

Life re - newed his sink - ing faith re -

Muth des Glau - bens sei ihm neug -

dim.

ff trem.

ff dim. p piu p
wo-genden Schwall, in dem tö-nenden Schall, in des

molto cresce.

Welt A-.... tems

we-hen dem All,

er-trin-ken, ver-

\textit{dim.}

2111
Tannhäuser. (on his knees, sunk in fervent prayer.)

Oh see my heart by
Ach, schwer drückt mich der

(Here the Pilgrims have quitted the stage.)

have gun - stig gun! sein!

2nd Flü. pizz.
Flü. & Tenor.
Viola.

(Silence. The Pilgrimages are gone; the crowd sinks down in despair.)

guilt opp - ress'd, I faint, I sink be
Sün - den. Last, kann län - ger sie nicht

(Flutes and clarinets.)

pit p

neath the bur - den, Nor will I cease, nor will I
mehr er - tragen; drum will ich auch nicht Ruh' noch.

(Tears choked his utterance.)

rest Till heav'n - ly mercy grants my pardon.
Rast, und wäh'le gern mir Müh und Plägen.
Pilgrims. (far distant)

At thy august and
Am höhen Fest der
lone, un-blest!
rück-wärts sehn!

mid friends and home thou shalt find rest.
Nach solchem kurzen Wieder sehn?

I'm doom'd to roam a lone,
Nein! Rückwärts draufich nie-

ours, we must not sever.
uns sollst du verwie- len!

seve-rer, mid friends thou shalt find rest.
bei uns verwei-le jetzt!

So soon we Warum so

uns, we must not sever.
uns sollst du verwei-le!

We must not Warum end.

ours!
Bei uns verwei-le!

soon, we must not seve-re.
uns sollst du verwei-len! Oh stay, oh

We must not sever.

O bleib, o bleib;
Ex. 4

not, I must a-way, I must a-way!

Oh stay, be ours! Oh stay, be ours! stay, be ours!

Oh stay, be ours! Oh stay, be ours! stay, be ours!

Moderato.

Taunhäuser. (in violent and joyful agitation, stands entranced.)

li-sa-beth!
li-sa-beth!

E-li-sa-beth!
E-li-sa-beth!

Oh, ruth of
Macht des

Wolfram.

heaven, that name ador’d once more I hear?
Himmels, rufst du den süssen Namen mir?

He is no
Nichts sollst du
(He remains at the back, leaning against a mural projection.) Tannhäuser throws himself impetuously at Elisabeth's feet.)

naught your meeting shall disturb.

na - he dich ihr un - ge-stört!

Tannhäuser.

Oh Princess!
Oh Fürstin!

Wind.

Allegro.($d = 100$)

Elisabeth.

Oh Bless-ed
Ge-prie-sen

foot.

führt!

Allegro.($d = 100$)

Wind sustain.

P Cello
cresc.

hour of meeting, Oh bless-ed powr.

hour of meeting, Oh bless-ed powr.

of meeting, Oh bless-ed powr.
Example 6a

stay! and let me kneel for ever
bleib; und lass' zu deinen Füssen

Elisabeth.

here! mich! I pray thee, rise!

So sehet auf!

'Tis not for thee to kneel where thou hast con quer'd, this hall is thy do-
Nicht sol-let hier Ihr knien, denn die se Hal le ist Euer König-

main. Rise, I implore! Thanks be to heav'n
reich. O, sehet auf! Nehmt meinen Dank

that thou re-turn'st to us!
dass Ihr zu-rück-ge-kehrt.

So long, wherest thou
Wo weiltet Ihr so
Far away, in strange and distant regions—
and between yesterday and today oblivion's veil hath fall'n.
Every remembrance hath for ever vanished: Save one thing only,
holding from the darkness: that I then dared not hope I should be—
hold thee, nor ever raise my eyes to thy perfection. How wert thou
must ich mich ent-sinnen, dass ich nie mehr ge-hofft Euch zu be—
grüssen, noch je zu Euch mein Auge zu er-he-ben. Was war es
Landgrave.

Also welcome thy return!
So sei willkommen denn auch mir!

But say, where tarriedst thou so
Sag', an, wo weitest du so

Moderato.

Tannhäuser.

long?
lang?

In strange and distant
Ich wanderte in

realms I wandered far,
wei ter, wei ter Fern!

Where neither peace nor
da, wo ich nimmer

rest were ever found. Ask not! At enmity I am with
Rast noch Ruhe fand. Frag nicht! Zum Kampf mit euch kam ich nicht

none; we meet as friends, let me in peace depart!
her, seid mir versöhnt, und lasst mich weiter zieh'n!
Was war es dann, das Euch zurückgeführt?

Ein Wunder war, ein un-ben.
Wunder deiner Gnad,

Der Zug der Pilger biegt von hier an auf dem Bergwege bei dem Mutter-Gottes-Bildelinks ab und verläßt so die Bühne; der Hirte entfernt sich ebenfalls mit der Schalmei rechts.

Zu dir will ich, mein Jesus Christ, der du des Pilgers Hoffnung bist! Gelobt sei Jungfrau süß und rein! Der

Ach, schwer drückt mich der Sündenfahrt wollte günstig sein!
Example 7c

"Elisabeth ist's wahr! Fedor Tamms es bringt uns"
Tannhäuser. Menu allegro \((d = 66)\)

the end of Wolfram's song seems to start from a dream, rises.)

\[\text{Tannhäuser rises impatiently.}\]

Oh minstrel, it is thus thou singest, Thou ne'er hast known or tasted

0 Walther, der du also sangest, du hast die Liebe arg ent-

\[\text{Chorus of Nobles and Ladies. (with loud approbation.)}\]

Allegro \((d = 88)\)

Hail, Bi-te-rolf!
Heil, Bi-te-rolf!

Hail, Bi-te-rolf!
Heil, Bi-te-rolf!

Hail, Bi-te-rolf! come, draw thy sword!
Heil, Bi-te-rolf! Hier unser Schwert!

Hail, Bi-te-rolf! Hier unser Schwert!

\[\text{Tannhäuser. (with rising resentment.) Menu Allegro \((d = 66)\)}\]

Yea, i-dleboaster,
Ha, thörgérPrahler,
All praise be thine! Im
töne. Lob! Die
Harp only.

mortal fame attend thee, Paeans of joy to thee be ever
Wunder sein gepriesen, die deine Macht mir Glücklichem er

Tannhäuser. Allegro. (d=73.)

Oh, gracious
Dank deiner
Harp & Str. pizz.

fair, in numbers sweet I'll praise thee, Thrice blessed he who thy de-
Hold! gepriesen sei dein Lieben! Be-glückt für immer, wer bei

Allegro. (d=73.) (Tannhäuser, in the greatest agitation, raises his harp and sings with a rote
expression.)

While I have life, a lone my harp shall praise thee, No
Stets soll nur dir, nur dir mein Lied er tönen, ge

Tannhäuser.
(Tannhäuser starts from his seat.)

Thou, goddess of love, shalt now inspire my measure, in Dir, Göttin der Liebe, soll mein Lied erkönnen, ge-

joyful strains thy praise be ever sung! Thou art the source of

all in life we treasure, Thy sweet de-

lights are ever fair and young! Whose
Wagner — Tannhäuser, Act II

**Ex. 9a**

- Burning soul once hath with ardor em-
- brae'd thée, Can speak of love, none
- else, its joys can prove! Dull mor-tals, who of
- er, nur er al-lein! Arm sich, die ihr
- love have nev-er tast-ed, Go
- Lie-be nie ge-nos-sen, zieht
- forth! Ve-nus a-lone can show ye
- hin! Zieht in den Berg der Ve-nus
Wagner — Tannhäuser, Act II

lovel ein! (General consternation; all rise from their seats.)

Walter.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Schreiber.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Wolfram.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Biterolf.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Reinmar.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Landgrave.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Chorus of Nobles and Ladies.

SOPRANO.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

ALTO.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

TENOR.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

BASS.

Ah! hear the mis - creant!
Ha! Der Ver-ruch - te!

Tutti, without Basses. — Basses.
Wagner — Tannhäuser, Act I

Venus.

heart for - lorn! Ne - ver to thee will Heav - en
Buss' er - löst! Nie wird Ver - ge - bung dir zu

opel Theil! Re - turn, then, if there is no hope! No
Kehr' wie - der, schliesst sich dir das Heil! Mein

hopel Heil! Mein hope rest - eth in Ma - ry! Mein Heil ruht in Ma -

ry! al! (Venga, with a cry, shrinks away and vanishes. The scene instantaneously)

Tutti except Cymbals & Triangles.

56
Ziemlich fließendes Tempo.

Walther.

Woh! Woh mir Unglück - sel'gen!

Der Schreiber.

Ein Engel stieg aus

Wolfram.

Ein Engel stieg aus

Biterolf.

Ein Engel stieg aus

Reinmar.

Ein Engel stieg aus

Landgraf.

Ein Engel ward ge-

Völ.

(ohne Dämpfer)

K.B.