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Helen Simpson's "Opera"

Ailsa Cox

- 1 Helen Simpson is the only contemporary British fiction writer to have built a substantial literary reputation solely on the basis of her short story collections. Amongst the reasons for that success may be the dramatic compression of her work and a comic sensibility which, taken together, give her writing a distinctive drive and immediacy. "The divine Helen Simpson"¹ delivers instant gratification, yet that accessibility is combined with a densely allusive, polyphonic style. She has become especially well known for her insights into women's lives, often through protagonists whose sense of personal autonomy is compromised by marriage and motherhood. What distinguishes her handling of this material is her ability to externalize what are essentially internal conflicts, using wit, irony, striking imagery and the interplay of voices to stage subjectivity.
- 2 The following essay illustrates this ability through a close reading of her story "Opera" (*Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, 2001), which itself describes a theatrical excursion. It is divided into two halves, the first half exploring Simpson's incorporation of dramatic techniques in her work, especially in her approach to narrative structure and use of direct speech; and the influence, especially, of English Restoration comedy. The second half examines the intertextual relationship with Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Eurydice*, making reference to Julia Kristeva's analysis of the Orpheus legend. These two sections are linked by patterns of speech and silence, and the interplay between onstage performance and audience response.

Staging the Story

- 3 There is a pronounced theatricality in all of Simpson's work. This aspect is foregrounded in "Labour" (*Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, 1990), which inscribes the stages of labour as a five act play with dramatis personae including Uterus, Placenta and Perineum; but it is also evident in, for example, the opening paragraphs of a more recent story, "The Green Room":

A fat woman with a frozen shoulder sat sighing by the steady flames of a fake-coal fire. At her feet crowded a congregation of coffee-dregged mugs, dead wine bottles and ashtrays crammed with crushed stubs. Across the room a television chattered gravely, on screen a long face in contre-jour against a scene of bloody devastation; over in the corner crouched a computer caught short mid-document.

"I must get on," said this woman, Pamela, not moving. (*Constitutional*, 92)

- 4 The stage is set with precision, the exact physical disposition of objects in relation to the character made absolutely clear. There is also the suggestion of improvisation in "this woman, Pamela", as if the author is making up a name for her on the spur of the moment.
- 5 Visual storytelling is just one element in Simpson's theatrical repertoire. The influence of Simpson's postgraduate research into English Restoration farce can be traced across her work, most obviously in her fondness for pastiching seventeenth century texts. Other examples, in addition to "Labour," include "Good Friday, 1663"² and "Escape Clauses" (also in *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*) and "To Her Unready Boyfriend" (*Dear George*, 1995). Strategies borrowed specifically from the theatre include extensive passages of direct speech and an approach to structure as a narrative determinant. Simpson's work is always tightly structured; and she often describes herself blocking out a story on paper at an early stage in its composition³.
- 6 "Opera" was originally commissioned by BBC Radio, a reliable patron of Simpson's work and that of many other short story writers in the UK. In this instance, the story was broadcast on Radio 3, the classical music channel. In "Opera" a young woman accompanies her husband on a corporate outing to Gluck's *Orfeo ed Eurydice*. The story explores Janine's growing sense of isolation and loss amongst the boorish businessmen and the other wives.
- 7 "Opera" is divided into five short chronological segments which we might envisage as four acts, prologue and epilogue:
 - Prologue: Getting ready
 - Act 1: Before the show
 - Act 2: *Orfeo Pt 1*
 - Act 3: The Interval
 - Act 4: *Orfeo Pt2*
 - Epilogue: Going home
- 8 This particular structure follows the dramatic unities almost completely, with only the Prologue and Epilogue taking place outside the theatre. Each "act" follows the other in strict succession within a period of less than twenty-four hours. Despite the past tense narration, there is a strong impression of events unfolding within a continuous present – as they might if we were watching them on stage. Simpson represents character externally, largely through direct speech; indeed, the story opens with an extended exchange between husband and wife:
 - "But you love opera," he said. "Particularly the early stuff. I know you do."
 - "Yes," she said. "I do." (*Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, 113)
- 9 This kind of rhythmic, repetitive dialogue could transfer directly to the stage. Speaking about late seventeenth century English comedies such as *The Beaux' Stratagem* and *The Provoked Wife*, Simpson has said "It's the *dialogue* between men and women that makes them great, and it's the first time you really hear that going on – romantic, but not idealised – actually *troubled*, and it's got that unmistakable *sound* of verisimilitude when

you hear it.”⁴ In the opening prologue, Simpson is using that swift, combative exchange of short speeches which in Greek drama is called *stichomythia*:

“Clients aren’t friends,” she said.

“They *can* be,” he said. “You’re so narrow-minded. They can become very *good* friends.”

“No,” she mumbled. “Clients are about money.” (114)

- 10 As in other textual examples of male/female verbal sparring – for instance, the Hollywood screwball comedies of the nineteen-thirties – the battle of wits represents an ongoing, and unwinnable, battle of the sexes. The two points of view are diametrically opposed; yet, while man and woman remain irreconcilable, the rhythmic patterns and the repetitions, weaving together the male and female voices, creates an underlying unity and mutuality. Except, that is, for Janine’s mumbling. We may wonder if Christopher hears the riposte, or if it is the equivalent of the theatrical “aside”.
- 11 Simpson also uses dialogue for exposition, again very much as a dramatist might: “Front stalls, gala performance [...] just right for a wedding anniversary” (113). Carefully handled, dialogue as exposition accelerates the narrative, dispensing with the need for elaborate scene-setting or back-story, and establishing a strong dramatic pace. Simpson explicitly evokes the stock characters of Restoration drama when she describes Christopher’s interest in his wife’s clothes “as keen-eyed on the effect of this or that dress as any old-style libertine” (113). The irony is that Christopher’s interest is not driven by erotic desire, but by the need for display. So far as he is concerned, they are dressing to impress. The whole excursion is designed as a public performance, a performance to which Janine must be dragged “kicking and screaming” (113).
- 12 There are also extended passages of direct speech in Acts 1 and 3, before the opera and during the interval. The clients are lampooned, in robust comic fashion:

Back in the hospitality room at the interval, Christopher was all tenderness and attention, hovering dotingly over Dominic Pilling of Schnell-Darwittersbank and hanging on Dominic Pilling’s wife’s every word.
“London’s getting terribly crowded, isn’t it?” said the wife. “Too many people. I’m afraid I’m a country girl at heart.” (119)
- 13 Comic incongruity subverts reader expectations. “Christopher was all tenderness and attention” – the “tenderness and attention” echoing the words of the chorus “*toujours tendre, toujours fidèle*” (117). The punchline comes in the second half of this long sentence; he is “hovering dotingly” not over Janine but over his client and, secondarily, over the client’s wife.
- 14 On one level, Simpson’s story may be regarded simply as a comedy of manners. Like her Restoration predecessors, Simpson holds a mirror up to contemporary society. As the dramatist Congreve put it:

Men are to be laugh’d out of their Vices in Comedy: the Business of Comedy is to delight, as well as to instruct: And as vicious People are made asham’d of their Follies or Faults, by way of seeing them Expos’d in a ridiculous manner, so are good People at once warn’d and diverted at their Expense. (Congreve, 117)
- 15 While they are not quite as obvious as Congreve’s Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilfull, “Nigel Perkins from Littleboy and Pringle” (115) and “Dominic Pilling of Schnell-Darwittersbank” (119) are marked as comic characters by their grotesque names. (“Pilling” suggests that very English epithet, “pillock”.) The vices of contemporary London are pretty much the same as those held up to ridicule on the Restoration stage – sycophancy, snobbery and social climbing. There are further echoes of the Restoration

era in the division between town and country; "I'm a country girl at heart," says Dominic Pilling's wife. As in previous centuries, running both a London and a country establishment is a sign of bourgeois success, though in the contemporary world the pastoral retreat is more likely to be a weekend cottage than the country estate.

16 In plays such as Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), or Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), London is itself a stage, where rakes and libertines engage in spectacle and masquerade, each attempting to "gull", seduce or outperform the other. Here too, Janine's husband, the clients and their wives are consciously performing, inverting the relationship between stage and audience. The opera is merely a pretext; while some of the clients feign musical interests, their only real concern is how long they will have to endure it.

17 However, in those "Acts" which take place during the opera, the narrative shifts away from social satire, towards something much more ambiguous. While there are still comic elements, the narrative relies less on the external representation of character through dialogue, and more on the evocation of interior states of consciousness:

In the dark listening to the music Janine lifted away from the world of people and things. She forgot about the shadowy pinstripes each side of her, and concentrated on the stage, where mourners like moving white statues tossed flowers on Eurydice's tomb. (117)

18 While Simpson's postgraduate research topic was Restoration farce, her fiction belongs much more to the tragic-comic tradition. The concept of the "tragic-comic" is much contested, not least by the Restoration dramatists themselves, and a further analysis lies beyond the scope of this essay. But, as we shall see, in the intertextual response to Gluck's opera and to the Orpheus legend, the tragic and the comic are interwoven, reflecting the protagonist's shifting states of consciousness.

Orpheus, Speech and Silence

19 The Orpheus myth has been appropriated numerous times, in all of its many facets, by writers, musicians, artists and film makers. Alice Munro refers to Gluck's opera in the title story of *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968); a later story, "The Children Stay" (1998) is an intertext of Anouilh's play, *Eurydice*. Myth has the great advantage for artists and writers of being inexhaustible and ambiguous, capable of multiple and often contradictory retellings.

20 According to the myth, Orpheus is a poet whose music is irresistible, even to wild animals and inanimate objects. When his wife Eurydice dies prematurely he travels to the Underworld to bring her back from the dead. Pluto agrees to free her, on the condition that Orpheus keeps straight ahead on the passage to the upper world, not communicating with her in any way until they are safely back home. Orpheus obeys these instructions until, at the very last moment, he is unable to stop himself responding to his wife's pleas, and Eurydice is lost to him forever. There is more to come, most of which is less familiar in popular culture. According to Ovid, the grief-stricken Orpheus spurns all other women, turning to male lovers instead. As a consequence, he is torn apart by furious Maenads, and his body re-assembled for burial by the Muses – all except his head which floats out towards Lesbos (see Russell Hoban's novel, *The Medusa Frequency*).

- 21 Gluck's eighteenth-century version, with a libretto by Calzabigi, stops short, like most retellings, after Orpheus loses Eurydice again. A happy ending is tacked on, thanks to the timely intervention of "Amor", and the lovers are restored to each other, accompanied by a joyful chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses. This is the story Janine is watching, in a reworking by the French composer Berlioz.
- 22 The onstage performance enacts Janine's private narrative as she watches these opening scenes, reading Orpheus's funeral lament as grief for the death of her own marriage:
- Was it marriage itself which had died, then, she wondered, returning to the other world; was it this ideal of turtle doves and fidelity, of the long-haul flight without betrayal, which had proved unworkable? (118)
- 23 Janine is Orpheus, but she is also Eurydice, baffled by her husband's inexplicable neglect as he refuses to acknowledge her on the way home. Fittingly, it is her own intermittent "return" from the dark, enveloping world of the opera to the "world of people and things" (see above) which enables her to articulate her emotional response in intellectual terms. The dialectic between the "world of people and things" and the more liminal interior state induced by the opera might remind us of the interplay of "semiotic" and "symbolic" modalities within the signifying process, as suggested by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva argues that language is conditioned by its own materiality, originated during the pre-Oedipal phase preceding subject formation. Within this "semiotic" disposition, existence is experienced as a libidinal flow of rhythms, sounds and impulse, channelled through the undifferentiated maternal body. With the emergence of a distinctive self-image, distinguishable from the world of objects, a "symbolic" modality comes into play, introducing syntax, logic and fixed definition. These two modalities, the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" are mutually dependent. The semiotic modality cannot produce coherent meaning unless regulated by the symbolic; but the resurgence of the semiotic is essential to literary and poetic types of discourse.
- 24 Before returning to the story's intertextual relationship with *Orfeo* and, in particular, its handling of speech and silence, it is worth considering Kristeva's own readings of the Orpheus legend, taken from various stages in her career.
- 25 The descent into the underworld may be seen, quite obviously, as a re-submergence in the semiotic. In a 1986 interview, Kristeva explains that the reason Orpheus can return from this "semiotic" underworld, while Eurydice is trapped there, is that women have difficulty detaching themselves from the archaic mother, and from this amorphous realm of purely sensuous impulse. It is much harder for women to forge an autonomous self: "I might lose myself, lose my identity" (Kristeva 1994: 132). As we have seen in the section I have called the "Prologue," Janine is dragged "kicking and screaming" from the netherworld she inhabits (113). Since her children were born, she has given up work, and has "retreated into a shambles of soft leggings and sweatshirts, merely day versions of her pyjamas" (ibid).
- 26 This timeless zone stands in opposition to the "upper" world of social interaction. In this world, clock time is a social necessity. Lives are governed by timetables and schedules, which package the flow of time as discrete and finite units. The clients' pre-occupation with the length of the opera is symptomatic of their clockbound lives in which so-called leisure time must be rationed carefully and holidays are mechanised by Club Med to "recharge the batteries" (120) on almost a factory system.

- 27 Janine has difficulty re-entering this clock-bound social world, engaging in light chit-chat with the clients and their wives. If the social world is a stage, she is failing to play the part she's been assigned or to deliver her lines correctly. When she does speak, reeling off information about Gluck and the opera, she is swiftly reprimanded. In the rest of this collection, and in Simpson's work generally, mothers are running against the clock, their lives dictated by the daily schedules of childcare and servicing the family. But we never see the children in "Opera", and hence Janine's day-to-day existence seems exempt from clock time. Caught like Eurydice in a nebulous "other" realm, she cannot step smoothly back into the upper world, or establish her authority as an autonomous individual, entitled to speak her own mind.
- 28 Janine's voice is muted by her lack of social status. As we saw earlier, she constantly "mutters" and "mumbles", blunting the force of her argument and, in the opening *agon*, tipping the balance of power towards Christopher. Simpson draws a clear parallel between Janine's enforced silence and the instructions imposed upon Orpheus, quoting from the French version of the libretto:

*Soumis au silence
Contrains ton désir
Fais-toi violence. (118)*

- 29 Janine's sensitivity to Christopher's indifference mirrors Eurydice's suffering when Orpheus ignores her entreaties; but it is she who is forced, like Orpheus, to steel herself against weakness. Drawing a comparison with the lovers' ordeal in *The Magic Flute*, she hopes that she will be able to overcome a difficult phase in her marriage by silent endurance.
- 30 In her later interpretations of the Orpheus legend, Kristeva moves away from a potentially reductive reading of an intractable split between the netherworld and the land of the living, with its two main figures on either side of the divide. There is an ongoing identification and transference between Orpheus and Eurydice, and between the male and female principle, the symbolic and the semiotic. In her essay "Joyce 'The Gracehoper' or Orpheus's Returned" (published in *Les nouvelles maladies de l'ame*, 1993), she casts Joyce and his fictional alter egos as the "artist-hero" in a "modern, post-Christian version of Greek myth" (Kristeva 1995: 176) in which the artist is able to turn and gaze at the female without punishment.
- 31 Ultimately Orpheus and Eurydice, and the qualities they represent, are inseparable despite Pluto's injunction; and this interdependency is reflected in Simpson's story. As Janine watches the opera, she switches identification, integrating both roles in her response⁵. But of course Janine's response is not just to the on-stage action and the words in the libretto. She is also listening to music. As a form, opera contains a strong element of signification; however, it derives much of its emotional power from the music itself, which is irreducible to a fixed meaning. One of the many meanings we can take from the Orpheus legend is the tribute to the hypnotic, or even the magical, properties of music. To the listener, music consists of pure, overwhelming sensation, awakening basic instinctual drives and, at its most forceful, threatening the dissolution of the conscious self.
- 32 Simpson stresses these somatic properties through Janine's involuntary physical reactions. "The music had stolen up on her like hot water flooding over her skin" (118). "The music of Elysium came creeping in through her ears, slow, sublime, holding and catching her breath" (120). The "hot water" prefigures the tears which, despite Janine's

best efforts, come flooding down as she listens to the aria *J'ai perdu mon Euridice* sung by Orpheus after he has lost Eurydice forever.

- 33 Regardless of the happy ending, Gluck's opera evokes complex feelings of tragedy and irrevocable loss which, like the music itself, transcend language. But Janine both yields to this drive and resists it, taking deep breaths and self-consciously detaching herself from the music (tactics which, for this reader at least, recall those used to combat labour pains). In the two "Acts" describing the opera, the evocation of a destabilized interior state induced by the music is undercut, not only by intrusions from "the world of people and things" but by Janine's determined resistance and also by elements of irony and self-parody. This is Janine's earlier response to the passage in the opera where Eurydice pleads with her husband to acknowledge her:

Janine felt a hot prickling sensation behind her face, like walking into a rosebush. Almost the worst thing was being frozen into these corny, passive and wifely attitudes of grief and betrayal. The ravishingly sweet quarrel of their voices blended and untangled, pulling air down into her lungs, making her sigh helplessly. (121)

- 34 While the emotional impact of the opera is registered through sensual detail, it is accompanied by a more detached and sardonic commentary from Janine herself. Her reverie is also disrupted by crass remarks from one of the clients, Nigel Perkins. The story's climax comes during the final applause when she calls him a "cloth-eared berk" (122). But the insult is tempered by Janine's habitual softness of speech; Nigel stares at her uncertain that he has heard her correctly. And the moment is over quickly, Janine reverting instantly to superficial pleasantries. Up until now, she has been disempowered by silence but here she is re-appropriating and subverting the traditional female tactics of silence and submission.

- 35 The final short sequence, which I've called the epilogue, follows the myth quite clearly, casting Janine primarily as Eurydice. Once the clients have gone and the couple are alone, Christopher drops his performance, his "hospitality smile" (123), and becomes even more distant, leaving her behind on the street while he wanders off to look for a taxi. But why is Christopher punishing Janine? Does he know what she said to Nigel? Or is he expressing a more generalized annoyance at her incontinent behaviour, her supposedly excessive and inappropriate speech, the display of emotions which everyone puts down to too much champagne? Simpson doesn't explain. Janine's reaction to what we might call his "passive aggression" is to raise her voice:

She went wild. She started to run after him, but he was faster than her.
 "Christopher," she shouted.
 He pretended not to hear.
 "Christopher!" she yelled again.
 He was a dark figure about to melt into the blackness.
 "Christopher!" she bellowed with all her might and lung power. (123)

- 36 The parallels between Janine and Eurydice are unmistakable; but notice it is Christopher who is "about to melt into blackness". And Janine goes "wild". She shouts, she yells and she bellows, reminding us of the Maenads, the frenzied women who tore Orpheus apart in the original legend. (She mentioned the Maenads to Nigel Perkins in a caustic remark on the previous page.) The figures of the Maenads stand for libidinous intoxication and for an excess of sensual pleasure and wilful abandonment – "Women and alcohol. Fatal combination", as Nigel Perkins says (122). Such figures are rather more empowering than the seemingly passive, even masochistic, Eurydice in the opera.

- 37 I have called this final section an "epilogue", but unlike a conventional dramatic epilogue it does not bring closure, sealed with a neat epigram. The final paragraph consists of just one sentence, stopping the narrative in mid-gesture:
- He slowed down gradually, unwillingly, then stopped and stood where he was for a few long seconds before turning to look back at her. (123)
- 38 Christopher is, however reluctantly, re-enacting the Orpheus role fully conscious that, in mythic terms, that look banishes his wife eternally. His first name echoes the full name of the composer – Christoph Willibald Gluck – a detail withheld from the reader, but which emphasises his controlling presence as he devises the corporate event, allocating the wifely role to Janine. However, while the mythological gesture entails permanent separation, we should remember that the gaze is mutual, and that husband and wife, Orpheus and Eurydice, reflect one another. In those few long seconds time stands still. And anything can happen. If we believe Kristeva, Orpheus can hold his gaze without tragic repercussions.
- 39 Like many short story writers, Simpson makes the most of the form's dramatic qualities, especially with regard to structure, direct speech and pictorial elements. But the modern short story also has a strong affinity with the mysterious and indeterminate; and while, as John Gerlach has pointed out, short stories build rapidly towards their endings, they are also resistant to closure. Simpson exploits these generic tensions to the full. The writing itself takes on some of the characteristics of music, evoking that which cannot be fully expressed, at the limits of language.
- 40 Superficially, "Opera" is a very simple story. Its comic and satirical elements, inspired so often by the Restoration stage, invite a straightforward critique of contemporary bourgeois morality, gender relations and social convention. But Simpson's reworking of the Orpheus myth offers multiple interpretations, assigning and re-assigning the key roles to its primary characters. Ultimately, the story's ending draws the reader beyond social observation, into a liminal realm, where she is left to make her own conclusions.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Lezard, "A Wonderful Talent for Misery" (Review of Richard Yates, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*), *Guardian* January 21st 2006. Review section.
2. Simpson has adapted "Good Friday 1663" as a jazz libretto for Mike and Kate Westbrook. The TV opera was screened by Channel 4 TV in 1995.
3. See the *Guardian* "Writers' Rooms" feature, <http://www.books.guardian.co.uk/graphic/0,,2212450,00.html> (accessed 18th January 2008)
4. Interview with Helen Simpson, <http://www.newwriting.britishcouncil.org/all/themes/?theme=24> (accessed 18th January 2008).
5. Simpson does not reveal whether - as is the convention nowadays - Orpheus is a "trouser role", played by a female singer.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article propose une lecture attentive d'une nouvelle de l'auteur britannique, Helen Simpson, et allie une étude de la théâtralité au sein de la technique narrative avec une exploration d'un lien intertextuel avec l'opéra de Glück, Orfeo. L'article commence par une brève exposition de l'utilisation de la théâtralité dans l'œuvre de Simpson avant d'aborder de manière plus précise le caractère dense de la structure dramatique et l'étude des personnages à travers de longs passages de discours direct. L'article aborde également l'influence de la comédie anglaise de la période de la Restauration, évoquant en particulier la parodie et la satire sociale. Par la suite, l'article explore les motifs de la parole et du silence dans le texte en s'inspirant des lectures de la légende d'Orphée que propose Julia Kristeva. La musique de Glück évoque des sentiments complexes de la tragédie et de la perte irrévocable que ne peuvent exprimer les mots. De la même manière, Simpson donne à sa nouvelle une fin indéterminée, employant des images mythiques afin de s'éloigner du domaine de la comédie sociale pour se rapprocher d'un domaine plus liminal.

AUTHORS

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Ailsa Cox is Reader in English and Writing at Edge Hill University in the UK. She is the author of *Alice Munro* (Northcote House *Writers and their Work* series 2004) and *Writing Short Stories* (Routledge 2005); and the editor of *The Short Story* (Cambridge Scholars 2008) and *Teaching the Short Story* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009). Her own fiction has appeared in various anthologies in the UK, including the *London Magazine* and *The Virago Book of Love and Loss*. She organises a regular series of short story conferences in the North West of England. She is also the founder of the Edge Hill Prize, awarded annually to the author of a published short story collection from the UK and Ireland.