



7-1-2004

The Queen of the Night: A Mother Betrayed

Victoria A. Webb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Webb, Victoria A. (2004) "The Queen of the Night: A Mother Betrayed," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol43/iss3/14>

This Characters is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



© Rowan University Opera Theatre

Although often portrayed as the foil of Sarastro and the embodiment of evil, the Queen of the Night can also be read as a more benevolent character: a mother who feels betrayed by her daughter. Seen here in a production by Rowan University Opera Theater, the Queen appears majestic but not evil.

The Queen of the Night

A Mother Betrayed

Victoria A. Webb

It may be difficult for some to understand how any mother could sincerely sing both arias assigned to the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*. Indeed, most critics assume she is insincere, at best. In her first aria, the Queen expresses desperate suffering caused by the abduction of her daughter, Pamina. In the second, Pamina has safely returned to her mother's embrace, only to be confronted with her "wrath of hell." I recently gained some insight into this inconsistency when I came face to face with a mother's wrath. On a long train ride, I sat next to an older woman who was a politically active teacher and the mother of two daughters; she spoke to me as if I were one of them. She was very interested in my academic achievements and asked about my professional intentions. I told her that I enjoyed teaching and would continue to do so, but that my highest aspiration was to use my education as a wife and mother. I could not have foreseen her reaction. She screamed at me, "How dare you! I burned my bra for you!"

The Queen of the Night is traditionally portrayed as the villainess of the opera and an enemy of the powerful Sarastro. Tamino's progression is clear: he grows and matures in an opera that could be conceived of, in a general way, as a *Bildungsroman*, a story of development in which the male hero develops morally as he learns discipline, duty, and his responsibility to society. When seen in this light, Sarastro is a kind of father figure to Tamino as Tamino prepares to take Sarastro's place and lead the temple order into a new age. But the relationship of actual family members—of Pamina to her mother, the Queen of the Night—is often glossed over. Their relationship should be of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers, who have a deep respect for filial piety.

The Queen is usually associated with defiance of Enlightenment principles; she, her ladies in black, and the night setting are interpreted as the foil to Sarastro, the temple priests, and the sun. Indeed, a Latter-day Saint audience might even tend to superimpose its own religious beliefs on the order of priests and their temple, which would make the Queen's insubordination an act of pride and ultimately wicked. Nevertheless, a purely textual reading of the libretto can shed a different light on the queen. The words are often not understood by audiences that do not speak German and that are more interested in the Queen's tremendous arias, usually accompanied by theatrical spectacle. A purely textual reading is, of course, reductive for an opera but necessary because the text tends to be neglected. A close textual reading undercuts a dichotomous "black and white" interpretation of the opera and allows a sympathetic view of the Queen to emerge: she can be seen as a benign but fallible woman stripped of her power because of her gender and as a mother who feels betrayed by her only daughter.

Betrayed by Both Husband and Daughter

In the Queen of the Night's discussion with Pamina in act 2, scene 8, just before her second aria, I cannot help but hear the wrath of the woman I met on the train, outraged at patriarchal oppression: "What do I hear! How could you, my daughter, defend the scandalous principles of these barbarians?" (2.8). The comparison becomes all the more acute as I am reminded of the reasons inspiring the Queen of the Night's wrath. In her husband's last mortal act, she was rendered ineffectual as he gave the source of their power, the sevenfold disk of the sun, to Sarastro and the initiates, only advising her, "Do not seek to understand matters that are beyond the grasp of the female mind" (2.8). Of course, in the twenty-first century, sensibilities immediately pick up on the sexism here, but it must at least be acknowledged that, in Mozart's eighteenth-century context, these words would have been less inflammatory and in keeping with prevailing views. Nevertheless, for the Queen, who has been stripped of her power and excluded from knowledge on the basis of gender, her husband's explanation becomes the foundation for the hostility expressed in the famous second aria, "The Wrath of Hell Boils in My Heart."

Although the Queen's passionate response may be motivated partly by what she perceives as the mistreatment of women, it strikes me that the real anger arises from her daughter's rejection of her passion. The Queen feels betrayed by Pamina, whose focus is not on destroying the power of Sarastro and the initiates but on her potential ties to them as Tamino's betrothed. The Queen justifiably wonders about her daughter's allegiance

to her, and it is this suspicion that connects her two arias. The Queen now fears something far worse than her daughter's physical abduction, described in her first aria. The Queen expresses horror that Pamina does not see a conflict of interest in her relationship with Tamino; she fears that her daughter is being "mentally abducted," swayed from her beliefs. It is primarily this fear that drives her rage in the second aria.

Loving Mother and Benevolent Queen

Pamina's sympathy with her mother's enemies is particularly frightening for the Queen because, until this confrontational scene in the opera, she has had little reason to suspect that her daughter would ever disagree with her; she and Pamina have been of one mind. Both Pamina's and the Queen's first words in the opera are of how troubled they are because of their separation, and they both work toward their reunion. As the Queen instigates her daughter's rescue through Tamino and Papageno, Pamina attempts to escape (1.9). Even the slaves who guard the Princess know where her heart lies: "Ah, how [she . . .] flees to her loving mother's palace" (1.10). The focus of both mother and daughter is the same—seeing each other again.

Pamina and her mother are also concerned for each other. Like many parents, the Queen feels that her own well-being is interconnected with her daughter's; she tells Tamino that after her daughter's abduction "all [her] happiness was lost" (1.6). Pamina believes that her mother is concerned for her welfare: "I am not afraid of death; I grieve only for my mother, for she will surely die of sorrow." (1.11). Likewise, the Queen, concerned with her daughter's "future happiness"¹ (1.5), fulfills Pamina's secret wish for love by sending her Tamino. It is no wonder that Pamina associates her mother with joy and goodness, rejoicing even to see the Queen's representative: "My mother, Oh joy! You know my dear sweet mother?" (1.14). Indeed, for Pamina, "the sound of her mother's name is sweet" (1.19).

Nor is it only Pamina who speaks highly of the Queen. In fact, in the entire opera, not one character criticizes the Queen except Sarastro. Admittedly, many characters, including Tamino, make general misogynistic comments² that may be directed toward the Queen, but only Sarastro openly slanders her. To counter his comments, the Three Ladies question Sarastro and the priests as "priests of false character" (2.5). Considering this lack of criticism, there is not overwhelming textual evidence that the Queen's character is evil; rather, it is a case of their word against his.³ And Pamina—arguably the one who should know her mother best—does not question her mother's motives.

Motherhood is central to the Queen's identity; she not only mothers Pamina, but she also extends maternal concern to others in her realm. Her world is filled with the wonder, fear, and enchantment associated with childhood, and she rules there through her Three Ladies, who act as governesses for her. They save a young, frightened Tamino from a terrifying snake and bring him to the Queen, who refers to Tamino as her son. The Three Ladies provide daily sustenance for Papageno, and, under the Queen's motherly direction, he is mildly reprimanded for dishonesty. Furthermore, the Three Ladies tell Tamino that the Queen's "maternal heart has decided to make [him] completely happy" (1.5). Both Tamino and Papageno are conspicuously referred to as youngsters [Jünglinge]. The Queen's realm is a world in which a mother's gifts of a magic flute and silver bells can chase away any danger and bring happiness to all of humanity (1.8).

The Queen's Fears and Pamina's Choices

When her mother is in charge of her realm, Pamina's relationship with her mother remains stable and secure; however, their relationship changes when they confront each other and Pamina learns of her mother's weaknesses. Ever aware that her daughter is increasingly influenced by her developing relationship with Tamino, the Queen fears the worst when she hears that Tamino has joined the initiates: "The initiates? My unfortunate daughter, now you are snatched away from me forever" (2.8). The princess, who still believes that her mother is able to remedy anything, naively suggests that they run away and hide together. "Let us flee, dearest Mother! Protected by you I will defy every danger" (2.8). Hoping to show her daughter why Tamino's association with the initiates is so offensive to her and why he is lost to them, this single mother now chooses to share her adult burden with her daughter. The Queen tells Pamina that she does not possess the source of power, the sevenfold disk of the sun, and that she was betrayed by her own husband, who gave the disk to Sarastro and the initiates.

In spite of her dramatic and hopeless tone, the Queen puts forward a plan to return things to the way they were before Tamino joined the initiates. Hoping to secure both Pamina's and Tamino's loyalty, she inverts Tamino's earlier charge to save Pamina from Sarastro: Pamina must now reclaim Tamino from the initiates. The Queen tells her daughter that she must do more than save Tamino physically; she must convince him to return to the Queen's realm: "[The prince will be] lost unless you persuade him to flee" (2.8).

Perhaps subconsciously, the Queen also uses the emotions that Pamina and Tamino have for each other to ensure that they return to her. Just as Pamina was to be the prince's reward for fulfilling the Queen's bidding, the Queen assures Pamina that Tamino will not be hers unless she succeeds. "The first glimmer of daylight will determine whether he belongs entirely to you or to the initiates" (2.8). Essentially, Pamina's mother compels her daughter by presenting her with two options, one of which is utterly discouraging for the princess: either Tamino will belong to Pamina or he will be given to the initiates and lost to her forever.

But Pamina's interpretation of these options illustrates the Queen's greatest fear, that Pamina may desire something different than she does. The Queen's intention notwithstanding, her word choice reveals that there might be other options for the princess. The Queen uses the German word *ganz* ("entirely") when describing how Tamino may be given to Pamina—"ganz dir," "entirely to you." The sentence is structured so that it is unclear whether the word "entirely" also modifies the initiates, meaning that Tamino could belong either entirely to Pamina or entirely to the initiates. Pamina, who does not have her mother's jaded outlook regarding the initiates, does not interpret the sentence this way and thus sees further possibilities for the second option: Tamino's association with the initiates need not preclude a relationship with her: "Dear Mother, could I not love the young man just as tenderly as I do now, even if he does become one of the initiates?" (2.8). Indeed, Pamina believes that she and Tamino can still be together because her own parents had such a relationship: "My father himself was bound to these wise men" (2.8).

Perhaps because of the Queen's struggles with her own initiate husband and with Sarastro, she will not entertain the possibility of such a partner for her daughter. The Queen, who has just shared her darkest secrets about her conflicts with those very men, feels abandoned by the person she expected most to understand. "You, my daughter? How could you love a man like that, who associates with my mortal enemy?" She is hurt that her daughter might even suggest such a union because it is utterly contrary to the hopes she holds for herself and for her daughter. She perceives the suggestion as substantiation that she is losing Pamina and is driven to the ultimatum described in her second aria: "You will kill him [Sarastro] and deliver up the mighty disk of the sun to me . . . If you do not cause Sarastro to suffer the pains of death, then you will be my daughter no more" (2.8). Murdering Sarastro thus becomes the determining test of her daughter's allegiance.

Although Pamina does not know where to turn in light of her mother's ultimatum, she is certain she cannot comply. Furthermore, she knows that

her disobedience will hurt the Queen deeply. Nevertheless, Pamina, a fledgling adult, makes her own decision: "Am I to commit murder?—Ye gods! That I cannot do" (2.9). Fulfilling the Queen's oath in an ironic way, Pamina refuses to kill Sarastro and, as a result, is no longer the Queen's daughter—she is the Queen's equal as an adult. She is no longer innocent to adult responsibilities and decisions, and she alone must bear the consequences for her own actions. Thus, Pamina (like Tamino) develops morally through making choices, in a manner that would be consistent with Latter-day Saint views of moral agency and accountability.

It is difficult to know what the Queen thinks about her daughter's choice because there is so little dialogue or aria time dedicated to the Queen's troubles in the second half of the opera. In act 2, the Queen refers to Pamina as her child, but the reference is unpleasant because it is a part of a bargain that the Queen has struck with the self-serving Monostatos. Monostatos has offered the Queen entrance into the temple in exchange for Pamina, and the Queen agrees: "I'll keep my word; it is my will: my child shall be your wife" (2.30). For those disposed to thinking of the Queen as evil, her bargain with Monostatos seems to confirm all suspicions.

But the view that the Queen is evil is difficult to rationalize without ignoring the effort and torment she went through when Pamina was first abducted. Had the Queen then wished Sarastro dead, she could have reasonably sent Tamino to kill him during his rescue mission, for from the power-stripped Queen's perspective Pamina's abduction was the initiates' second unprovoked offense against her. Yet this mother did not ask for justice or even vengeance; she simply longed for her daughter's return. It is not until the initiates begin to turn her daughter and Tamino against her that the Queen begins to speak of wrath, revenge, and power.

Power to Save Her Daughter

The only time the Queen ever addresses the issue of power is when she feels she cannot protect her child. In her first aria, she mourns that as her daughter cried for help, she was powerless: "Ah, help was all she cried . . . But my assistance was too weak" (1.6). Later she is forced to admit to Pamina that her power ceased with her husband's death and that she cannot protect Pamina (2.8). Is it not then reasonable that at the end of the opera she wishes to seize power to serve justice on those who have turned her daughter against her?

The possibility that the Queen wants power only to protect Pamina could help to explain the Queen's alliance with Monostatos. Monostatos is privy to much more information than the Queen is, and she needs his

knowledge to locate her daughter. The Queen does not know what the audience does, that Monastatos is a liar and a potential rapist.⁴ The audience is aware of Monastatos's shifting loyalties and manipulations of the truth to serve his own ends, but the Queen knows only what he has told her. It is he who seeks out the Queen when he fails to blackmail Pamina into marriage: "Since I am not to have the daughter, I'll seek out the mother" (2.11). What the Queen does know is that she and Monastatos share an objective: to "exterminate the hypocrites⁵ from the earth with glowing fire and mighty sword" (2.30). To the Queen, Sarastro is a great hypocrite and a real threat to Pamina.

We have all known parents who are concerned because their children are involved in things with which their parents do not agree. My grandmother, a devout Presbyterian, was one such parent. When my father became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she feared for her son and tried hard to convince him that his ways were wrong. Although she did not succeed in her attempts, we never viewed her efforts as evil or motivated by anything other than love.

Similarly, Pamina understands that her mother cares for her child. Perhaps appealing to the audience as much as to Sarastro, Pamina makes a plea for her somewhat controlling, flawed but caring mother as it dawns on her how very difficult it must be to let go of a daughter: "Lord, do not punish my mother! [Consider] her sorrow at my absence" (2.12). Pamina's constant consideration for her mother is evidence that the Queen should not be interpreted as a purely evil character. Our own perceptions might have constructed the cunning witch that we associate with the Queen of the Night.⁶ By focusing on the relationship between mother and daughter, as given in the text, it is possible to redeem not only Pamina, whose moral development is often overlooked, but also the Queen of the Night, who is too easily castigated for blind malevolence.

Victoria A. Webb (webb victoria@hotmail.com) earned a BA in humanities from Brigham Young University and an MA in comparative literature from the University of Utah. She also holds an MA in the classical tradition from the University of Reading, England. She is currently employed as an adjunct, teaching a variety of composition and humanities courses at Hamline University and Rasmussen College near Minneapolis, Minnesota.

1. Although the reference to future happiness is made directly to Tamino regarding his forthcoming association with Pamina, one can reasonably assume that the Queen also implies future happiness to her own daughter through the union as well.

2. The Priest discredits Tamino's reasons for hating Sarastro because "a woman has so told [him]" but gives no reason other than gender for not believing the implied woman—the Queen of the Night (1.15).

3. Of course, it must be stressed again that we are examining the opera in a slightly distorted way by discounting the performance elements and musical logic that can create tensions with this reading. Nevertheless, the text must be taken into account.

4. In act 2, scene 8, the Queen interrupts Monostatos's advances on her daughter, but the Queen barely notices him and certainly is unaware of what the audience knows from the previous scene. Upon her arrival, she simply dismisses the Moor.

5. Though the word *Frömmel* is often translated as "pious ones," since the eighteenth century the verb *frömmeln* has come to mean *fromm tun*, to act or appear pious, which corresponds to the English word *hypocrite*. The German words *Frömmerei* and *Frömmel* have negative connotations implying an inward insincerity masked by outward pious behavior. See *Fromm* in *Der Große Duden Band 7: Etymologie*. Bibliographisches Institute AG: Mannheim, 1963.

6. Similarly, our own wish to see Sarastro as a perfectly wise and benevolent ruler might make us less sensitive about slight ambiguities in his character. Compare Michael Evenden, "Sarastro's Repentance: One Dramaturg's Advice on *The Magic Flute*," in this issue, 162–69.