

Jacques Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*: Parodic Mythology

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Paper Abstract

In December 1864, Offenbach searched for ideas for works to be premiered at his theatre. Destined to be as successful as his 1858 *Orphée aux enfers*, *La belle Hélène* contained more parodic references than *Orphée*. Parodic connections between Greek mythology and the text of *La belle Hélène* have been discussed by Dana Munteanu, continuing work begun by Albert Gier and Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer. Following Lars Elleström, Munteanu argues that parody in performed theatrical works can contain multiple layers as staging, costumes, and vocal inflections are added. With this layering of parody in mind, descriptions of staging and the extant photographs and sketches of the costumed actors in *La belle* are helpful in determining how other elements add to the parody that can be read in the libretto and score. Elements of the mythology that have been inverted or otherwise altered for comic effect are discussed in this paper, with layered examples of the “Game of the Goose” and pastoral costuming references discussed in more detail. Offenbach also included intertextual parodic musical references in *La belle*. Rossini, Verdi, and Wagner were three composers he either borrowed music from or referenced parts of their operas in *La Belle*. As I will discuss, the varied types of parody employed by Offenbach and his librettists in the text and the music of *La belle Hélène*, layered with costuming, settings, and staging created compositions that are as effective today as they were in the late nineteenth century.