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978-0-521-65086-1 - Opera, Liberalism, and Antisemitism in Nineteenth-Century France:
The Politics of Halévy's *La Juive*

Diana R. Hallman

Excerpt

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Introduction

Within a few years of the Revolution of 1830 and the advent of the July Monarchy, the renowned dramatist Eugène Scribe (1791–1861) began to sketch ideas and verse for a five-act *grand opéra* destined for the stage of the Académie royale de musique, or Paris Opéra. At the head of his draft synopsis, Scribe placed the words “Rachel ou L’auto-da-fe,” but later opted for a simpler title, *La Juive* (*The Jewess*). After showing his plan to Opéra director Louis Véron (1798–1867), Scribe signed a contract for future completion of his libretto and began searching for a composer. He first sought out Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), his collaborator on the highly successful *Robert le diable* of 1831, but the German composer declined. Scribe then turned – somewhat reluctantly – to Fromental Halévy (1799–1862), a young Frenchman whom he knew primarily as *chef de chant* at the Opéra.¹ As Prix de Rome winner, Conservatoire professor, and composer of several *opéras comiques*, Halévy clearly had a solid reputation, but he had never written a *grand opéra* for the prestigious lyrical stage that he knew so well behind the scenes. It was a golden moment for the aspiring composer, one that Halévy would recall years later:

¹ Nicole Wild, *Dictionnaire des théâtres parisiens au XIX^e siècle: Les Théâtres et la musique* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1989), 312–13, places Halévy as the third-ranked (“3^e”) *chef* or *maître de chant* at the Opéra, 1829–33, a position that entailed rehearsing and overseeing the chorus. Although Wild notes that the positions of *chef de choeur* and *chef de chant* were not clearly designated before 1840, Halévy’s advancement to *premier chef de chant* in 1833 at the death of Hérold, and until 1840, involved a change in status as well as responsibility. In this position, Halévy rehearsed soloists, aided composers in rehearsals, and worked with other *chefs* when combined forces were rehearsed, as suggested in a letter of 1835 from Meyerbeer asking Halévy to call the chorus of *femmes* to rehearse the second and third acts of *Les Huguenots* with soloists. See Fromental Halévy: *Lettres*, ed. Marthe Galland (Heilbronn: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1999), 12.

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It was a beautiful summer evening in Montalais Park when M. Scribe first told me the subject of *La Juive*, which moved me deeply. I shall always remember this conversation, which was associated with one of the most interesting epochs in my life as an artist.²

With the powerful success of the opera that would grow from this collaboration, beginning with its première on 23 February 1835, Halévy's life as an artist blossomed more than he probably could have imagined on that evening at Montalais, Scribe's summer home near Meudon. His election to the Académie des beaux-arts the following year would prove to be only one demonstration of the new stature that *La Juive* would bring. During the meeting, Halévy undoubtedly reflected on the potential career benefits of working with this established dramatist and librettist and the artistic challenge of trying his hand at such a large-scale work. But perhaps dominating his thoughts was the scenario that Scribe related, the subject that moved him so profoundly. Certainly the title alone would have intrigued this young Jewish composer, son of a Talmudic scholar. The centering of an opera around not one but two Jewish characters, in a story of religious conflict, persecution, and doomed love, seems to have stimulated strong emotions in Halévy: his brother recalled that he wrote the score "with enthusiasm and passion . . . in a state of feverish anxiety."³

The setting that the theatrically astute Scribe had ultimately chosen and that Halévy endorsed, the early fifteenth-century Council of Constance (Konstanz), promised to satisfy popular taste in its evocation of the distant past. Historical settings, with vivid portrayals of a vast array of characters, detailed presentations of scene and costume, and an ambience of authenticity, continued to enthrall the French public

² (Jacques-François-) Fromental (-Elie) Halévy, *Derniers Souvenirs et portraits* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1863), 166: "C'est par une belle soirée d'été, dans le parc de Montalais, que M. Scribe me conta pour la première fois le sujet de *la Juive*, qui m'émut profondément, et je conserverai toujours le souvenir de cet entretien qui se rattache à une des époques les plus intéressantes pour moi de ma vie d'artiste." Henceforth, the original French of substantial quotations will be supplied for sources not readily available. All unattributed translations are mine, with editing by M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet and Raymond La Charité.

³ Léon Halévy, *F. Halévy: Sa Vie et ses oeuvres*, 2d ed. (Paris: Heugel et C^{ie}, 1863), 26: "d'entraînement et de passion . . . dans un état de fébrile anxiété."

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in the theatre as in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas. Scribe's setting evoked scenes of visual splendor and ceremonial pomp significant to the new genre of *grand opéra*. But in his choice of a religious convocation, the inclusion of the historical figure Cardinal Jean-François Brogni, and a concluding *auto-da-fé* called for by the Church Council, Scribe was venturing into a provocative dramatic arena. The incorporation of religion, especially Catholicism, into French theatre, although not unprecedented, remained controversial.

Scribe again touched on popular trends in his partial modeling of the central Jewish characters of *La Juive*, Eléazar and Rachel, on the literary stereotypes of the mercenary, persecuted Shylock and his beautiful daughter. These stock types were known in France, particularly by contemporary writers, through editions and performances of Shakespeare, as well as through recastings in such popular works as Scott's *Ivanhoe* – one of the most widely read novels in France in the later 1820s. Like Scott's characterization of Rebecca, Rachel carries elements of exoticism that fascinated early nineteenth-century readers and audiences. Yet the librettist's choice to feature Jewish characters in a large theatrical work during one of the most significant periods in modern Jewish history in France – beginning with the granting of civil rights to French Jews shortly after the Revolution of 1789 and continuing with the establishment of a new legal equality after the Revolution of 1830 – suggests a historical immediacy of social and political import.

The Jewish-Christian amalgam of *La Juive* raises a number of interesting questions, particularly in light of the fact that Scribe was renowned for his adeptness at capturing public opinion and taste in his works. Moreover, as many scholars have determined, French *grands opéras* in essence melded art and politics, serving as vehicles for social and political critique and captivating audiences with the topical resonance of their subjects.⁴ The strength of *grand opéra* hinged on

⁴ See William L. Crosten, *French Grand Opera: An Art and a Business* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948); Jane F. Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Fulcher emphasizes the political bases of *grand opéra* subjects in relation to the

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the manner in which it addressed controversial issues or “powerful historical interests,” as Véron described in his memoirs.⁵ With these ideas in mind, *La Juive* promises strong connections to the social, political, and religious contexts of one of the most fascinating historical periods in France – the July Monarchy.⁶

government that subsidized the Académie royale de musique. See also her articles “French Grand Opera and the Quest for a National Image: An Approach to the Study of Government-Sponsored Art,” *Current Musicology* 35 (1983): 34–45, and “Meyerbeer and the Music of Society,” *Musical Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (April 1981): 213–29. Carl Dahlhaus, in *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 114–15, states that the *Zeitgeist* of the era of *grand opéra* called for a “fusion of art and politics” and refers to Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète* as “musicopolitical concoction[s].” M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet generally refers to the genre’s use of provocative subjects in “Grand opéra,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1992), vol. II, 512–14. See also the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton; Sieghart Döhring and Sabine Henze-Döhring, *Oper und Musikdrama im 19. Jahrhundert* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1997); Anselm Gerhard, *Die Verstärkung der Oper: Paris und das Musiktheater des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1992), and its translation, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Rey M. Longyear, “Political and Social Criticism in French Opera, 1827–1920,” in *Essays on Bach and Other Matters: A Tribute to Gerhard Herz*, ed. Robert L. Weaver (Louisville, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1981), 245–54; Sonia Slatin, “Opera and Revolution: ‘La Muette de Portici’ and the Belgian Revolution of 1830 Revisited,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 3 (1979): 45–62; and other publications listed in Anselm Gerhard, “Die französische ‘Grand Opéra’ in der Forschung seit 1945,” *Acta musicologica* 59, no. 3 (1987): 220–70.

⁵ Louis Véron, *Mémoires d’un bourgeois de Paris comprenant la fin de l’empire, la restauration, la monarchie de juillet, la république, jusqu’au rétablissement de l’empire*, 6 vols. (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1856–7), vol. III, 181.

⁶ Brief discussions of *La Juive*’s social relevance are offered by Crosten, *French Grand Opera*, and Fulcher, *The Nation’s Image*. Also see Karl Leich-Galland, “*La Juive*: Commentaire musical et littéraire,” *L’Avant-scène opéra* 100 (July 1987): 32–87; Hélène Pierrakos, “Chrétienté, judaïté et la musique,” *L’Avant-scène opéra* 100 (July 1987): 20–23; Leich-Galland’s introduction to Eugène Scribe, *La Juive: Opéra en cinq actes d’Eugène Scribe, musique de Fromental Halévy*, ed. Marthe Galland (Saarbrücken: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1990), viii, and his essay, “‘Scheut Ihr die Erinnerung?’ Zur Wirkung von Halévy’s *La Juive*,” in *Halévy: La Juive*, program booklet for the 1999/2000 production of *La Juive* at the Vienna Staatsoper, 19–26; Alexander Gruber, “Gang der Handlung,” in *Halévy, Die Jüdin*, program booklet for the 1989/90 production of *La Juive* by Bühnen der Stadt Bielefeld, ed. Heiner Bruns (Bielefeld: Kramer Druck, 1989), 16–29.

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The political and philosophical liberalism that defines this era, particularly in its idealized revolutionary beginnings, emerges strongly in the subject of *La Juive*. At its core lies the polemic, central to French thought since the eighteenth century, between the principles of individual liberty and human rights and the principle of traditional authority – namely, authority emblematic of the absolutist *ancien régime*, Restoration monarchies, and the Catholic Church inextricably linked to them. Although metaphors of authority are treated ambiguously, the opera serves primarily as a critique of the intolerance and despotism of political and religious institutions – Voltairean themes that were espoused anew by a young, reform-minded generation generally opposed to the Bourbon monarchies of Louis XVIII and Charles X and supportive of the July Revolution and, at least initially, the Orléanist regime of Louis-Philippe.

This liberal, Voltairean critique inspires the opera's religious conflict, its setting at the Council of Constance, its concluding *auto-da-fé*, and – integral to the commentary – its use of Jewish characters as symbols of oppression. Echoing anticlerical sentiments that intensified during the Restoration after 1825, incited by a series of actions by ultraroyalists (extremely right-wing royalists), the opera most strongly illustrates and condemns the intolerance and abuse of power of the Catholic Church and political factions supportive of the Church. Without undermining its anticlerical slant, the opera moves somewhat beyond a tale of Christian oppressors and victimized Jews to a more universal, ambiguously told story. In the Voltairean tradition, the opera aims its criticism at any political or religious group that is unwilling to accept others with different beliefs and philosophies, including the Jews: in the language of the day, it points out the errors of the *fanatique* and of institutionalized fanaticism.

The opera's early reception in Paris points to its ideological stance. A review of the première in the legitimist paper *La Gazette de France* labeled it a “truly little masterpiece in the Voltairean genre” and an anachronistic example “of the most well-honed Voltairean philosophy.”⁷ This basis appears more concrete if the opera's setting is viewed

⁷ Fromental Halévy, “*La Juive*”: *Dossier de presse parisienne* (1835), ed. Karl Leich-Galland (Saarbrücken: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1987), 50. *La Gazette*

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in light of the philosopher's own historical account of the Council of Constance in his widely published *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*.⁸ In his narrative, Voltaire rebukes the Council's execution of the religious reformers Jan Hus (or Huss) and Jerome of Prague – whom he portrays as independent, rational thinkers – as well as the endorsement of this action by political authority. The Council of *La Juive*, rather than burning at the stake these real-life “heretic” reformers, condemns to death the “heretic” *juif* and *juive*.

The opera's anticlericalism resonates with other dramatic treatments of Catholic symbols and clergy in the early 1830s that carried political overtones, often serving as criticism of the power of the Church and pro-Church regimes. Many depictions were overtly unflattering and, in the minds of some, profane. Shortly after the banning of theatrical censorship by the Charte (Constitutional Charter) of 1830, villainous, murderous, and licentious Church figures began to appear in anticlerical satires such as *Le Mariage du capucin*, *Le Jésuite*, and *Le Te Deum et le tocsin*. In a similar vein, Scribe and Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* smacks of sacrilege in the dancing of “debauched nuns.” By comparison, *La Juive* presented a milder form of anticlericalism.

Voltairean interpretations and ideals fundamental to the work are further underscored by Scribe's parallel use of another Enlightenment symbol of religious and political tyranny in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, the Paris Opéra's new production of the following year (1836). Featured in its background and foreground is Saint-Barthélemy, or Saint Bartholomew's Eve, a sensational event of French history in which thousands of Huguenots were massacred by Catholic forces in 1572. This event had long served as a storm center of religious polemics and political theories, but Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers enhanced its mythological status in the eighteenth century.

backed the cause of legitimists (*légitimistes*), supporters of legitimism, a political movement devoted to returning the older branch of the Bourbon dynasty to the throne after its 1830 overthrow.

⁸ François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 11 vols. (Paris: Chez Th. Desoer Libraire, 1817), vol. IV, 411–22.

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Liberal voices of the 1820s and 1830s followed suit, adopting Voltaire's use of Saint-Barthélemy (in *Essai sur les guerres civiles de France*) to denounce the intolerance of the Catholic Church or the French Catholic monarchy. In the appropriation of Saint-Barthélemy and the Council of Constance, Voltairean mythology was realized by Scribe, Halévy, and Meyerbeer on the stage of the Paris Opéra.

The portrayal of Jewish intolerance in *La Juive*, as embodied in the character Eléazar, might ironically be linked to a cultural bias inherited from Enlightenment thinkers. In contrast to the symbolism of Semitic persecution and in contradiction to their calls for religious openmindedness, the French *philosophes* exhibited a harsh skepticism about Jews and Judaism. According to Jay Berkovitz, such attitudes were influenced by English Deists, whose academic analyses reflected the belief that Jews were superstitious, barbaric, fanatical, and, therefore, deserving of denigration.⁹ The *philosophes*, particularly Voltaire, took the Deist invectives and pronouncements on early Judaism to another level, linking the ancient Hebrews more explicitly with contemporary Jews through character traits deemed permanent and unchanging. They harshly criticized the Talmud as a source of Jewish superstition and immorality and the rabbinic tradition as a hindrance to a much-needed intellectual, religious, or social reform of Jews. Montesquieu, despite his endorsement of biblical Judaism and his active denunciation of the Spanish Inquisition and other examples of religious persecution, criticized rabbinic Judaism as detrimental to Jewish character.¹⁰ The belief that Jews and the Jewish religion were "morally deficient" lay at the foundation of Abbé Grégoire's influential late eighteenth-century *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des juifs*, which argued for Jewish civil rights and equality as the first steps toward *régénération*. Influenced by Montesquieu, Grégoire believed that Jews were not to be blamed for their perceived deficiencies, since these had developed in response to environments over

⁹ Jay R. Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35–6, 255, n. 36; Pierre Auberry, "Montesquieu et les Juifs," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 87 (1972): 87–99.

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which they had no control.¹¹ Although interlaced with paradox, the arguments of the *philosophes* helped to bring about the “emancipation” of French Jews in 1791.

In a wide historical framework, the opera's presentation of Jewish elements – the characterizations of Eléazar and Rachel, the depiction of a Passover service, the religious confrontations, and the death sentences of the Jews – touches on the age-old conflict between the Christian and Jewish faiths. (Ernest Newman identified the central theme as “the eternal antagonism of Christian and Jew.”¹²) This conflict, although set in a distant age, also bears on contemporary religious tensions and debates, and offers insight into attitudes toward and within French Jewish communities, exposing antisemitic strands of thought woven through the liberalism of this era. Following the granting of basic civil rights to French Jews, and a series of subsequent measures both positive and restrictive during the Empire and Restoration, the era of the “Citizen-King” Louis-Philippe brought about a significant change in the status of the Jewish community that was tied to ideals of political and religious freedom promoted by the early Monarchy, as well as to its official position toward the Catholic Church. Some historians have recognized the July Monarchy as the first period of absolute legal equality for French Jews, evidenced by a modification in the government's stance toward Judaism. Although the promise of religious freedom found in Article 5 of the 1830 Charte had already appeared in the 1814 Charte (also Article 5), the succinct declaration of Catholicism as the religion of state in the earlier document (Article 6) was removed. As one governmental spokesman proclaimed, with this omission “the state ceased to be identified with the Catholic religion.”¹³ Instead, the 1830 Charte specifies a commitment understood in Article 6 of the

¹¹ Berkovitz, *Jewish Identity*, 30–31.

¹² Ernest Newman, *More Stories of Famous Operas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 323.

¹³ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, seconde série*, ed. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent (Paris: Société d'Imprimerie et librairie administrative/Paul Dupont, 1887), vol. LXV, 313.

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1814 Charte – that of governmental subsidy for priests of the Catholic religion “professed by the majority of French people.” A law of 8 February 1831, however, extended governmental support to rabbis, or “les ministres du culte israélite,” who would receive stipends (though not full salaries) from the “trésor public” (public revenues). Along with this legal signifying of religious acceptance came a stronger presence of Jews in French institutions and in positions of social and political prominence. Notables included Max Cerf-Berr, Adolphe Crémieux, and Achille Fould, deputies of France, Gustave Halphen, *consul-général* of Turkey in Paris, and Jacques Javal, member of the Conseil général des manufactures. Halévy’s election to the Académie des beaux-arts figured in this new distinction.

The debates surrounding the passage of the 1831 law in the governmental houses, the Chambre des députés and Chambre des pairs, touch on questions that seem encapsulated in *La Juive*: questions about the meaning and extent of religious freedom, associations between the Catholic Church and the state, governmental tolerance and protection of religions other than Catholicism, and the social integration of Jews and Christians in France. In proposing the law, Joseph Mérilhou, the Ministre de l’Instruction publique et des cultes who had worked to suppress the law of sacrilege and the extremely clerical Société des missions de France, reminded his colleagues of the indignity of retaining the “rust of the Middle Ages” in an “enlightened century” and appealed to them: “Let us erase these distinctions that exist between our neighbors, let us erase these last vestiges of an oppression that must never be reborn, and let us ensure that in France there are only French citizens, rather than *religionnaires* divided by their religion.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 317: “Effaçons ces distinctions qui existent encore chez les peuples nos voisins, effaçons ces derniers vestiges d’une oppression qui ne doit plus renaître, et faisons qu’il n’y ait en France que des Français citoyens, et nullement des religionnaires divisés par leur culte.” During the Restoration, Mérilhou belonged to the Carbonari, a radically oppositional society, acted as defense counsel for *Le Courrier français* and individual authors accused of sacrilege by the government, and played an instrumental role in organizing the resistance to Charles X’s *ordonnances* (see pp. 18 and 50 below).

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Another supporter cited the law as a consecration of “the great principle of tolerance” that would mark not only “the progress of public reason,” but also the advancement of the principle established by the 1789 Revolution and *Assemblée constituante*; through this law, the Revolution and government of 1830 would *protect all religions* from intolerance.¹⁵ Although the majority agreed with him through their votes of passage, those who opposed argued that citizens should not be asked to pay for such governmental subsidy, that it would be insulting to rabbis, and that it would result in hatred of the government within both “enlightened” and “unenlightened” regions; some argued that, despite past governmental efforts, no alliance between *les juifs* and *les chrétiens* existed in France, and to reward Jews for being true French citizens when most were not was inappropriate. These polemical voices, including those in the forum of the press, speak in *La Juive*: the theocratic, the reactionary, the liberal and *philosophe*-inspired. But it is the overruling voices that dominate the opera’s critique, endorsing the government’s stance that society should be swayed not by the power of tradition but by the principles of religious, and political, tolerance and freedom.

Social fears and prejudices revealed or referred to in these debates and period writings illustrate that, despite legal and social advances, antisemitism existed in overt and latent forms in the early July Monarchy. Although most French Jews lived in modest or even impoverished conditions, old, suppressed anxieties about Jewish usury resurfaced as the financial clout of Baron James de Rothschild (1792–1868) and other banking notables grew more powerful. With the partial decline of aristocratic and clerical power and the rise of bourgeois elites after the Revolution of 1830, concerns about the consequences of unchecked capitalism and industrialization often took the form of accusations against Jewish (as well as Protestant) bankers, manufacturers, and merchants. By the 1840s, an “anti-capitalist antisemitism,” as defined by historian Roger Berg, had clearly emerged.¹⁶

¹⁵ M. Vaucelles, *ibid.*, 318.

¹⁶ Roger Berg, *Histoire des juifs à Paris de Chilpéric à Jacques Chirac* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 155.