

Music, Mimesis, and the Politics of Parabasis (Part 1)

Why Mike Pence Should Have Felt Offended at the Richard Rodgers Theatre

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On November 18, 2016, ten days following the election of Donald Trump as 45th president of the United States, Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended a performance of *Hamilton* at the Richard Rodgers Theatre. His reception was polarized, marked by both applause and loud booing. At the curtain call, actor Brandon V. Dixon, who portrayed Aaron Burr, the third Vice President of the United States, directly addressed Pence. He read a statement jointly composed by producer Jeffrey Seller, show creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, director Thomas Kail, Dixon himself, and other company members:



You know, we had a guest in the audience this evening. And Vice President-elect Pence, I see you walking out, but I hope you will hear us just a few more moments. There's nothing to boo here, ladies and gentlemen. There's nothing to boo here. We're all here sharing a story of love. We have a message for you, sir, and we hope that you will hear us out. [...]

Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you and we truly thank you for joining us here at *Hamilton: An American Musical*. We really do. We, sir, we are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us. All of us. Again, we truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men, women of different colors, creeds, and orientations.

The day after the incident, Donald Trump criticized the cast on Twitter: "Our wonderful future V.P. Mike Pence was harassed last night at the theater by the cast of Hamilton, cameras blazing. This should not happen!" He continued in a second tweet: "The Theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of Hamilton was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!" And he added the next day: "The cast and producers of Hamilton, which I hear is highly overrated, should immediately apologize to Mike Pence for their terrible behavior."¹

Pence himself, in an interview on *Face the Nation* two days after the incident, commented: "I wasn't offended by what was said. I'll leave to others whether it was the appropriate venue to say it."²

These reactions are problematic in several ways. Primarily, they propagate an escapist ideological view of the theater as a social institution serving merely as a means of seeking solace from everyday life. As Hana Worthen pointed out, to perceive the theater as a "safe place" is to envision it as a non-antagonistic space of consumption, thereby ignoring the intricate relationship between theater and politics that has shaped American culture since the 19th century.³

However, the *Hamilton* incident does not merely unveil the aesthetic ideology of the Trump administration. It also shines new light on the old question about the hybrid nature of theater as both aesthetic and political institution. In this and the subsequent blog post, I aim to delve into this question by reintroducing the concept of parabasis as a critical device in the analysis of theater.⁴ I will begin with some general observations about the relation between parabasis and parrhesia in Attic Old Comedy. The main part of this post will then be dedicated to the dual mimetic channels in music theater: the mimesis of action and the mimesis of music. This duality can either converge in what I refer to as "compact difference," leading to the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or clash in an "antagonistic difference," reminiscent of Brechtian epic theater (which will be covered in the follow-up to this blog entry). Despite their distinct theories, both Wagner and Brecht agree that the political impact of music theater largely stems from

the formal relationship between the mimesis of action and the mimesis of music. I will conclude by revisiting the *Hamilton* incident to illustrate how it exposed not only problematic aesthetic assumptions by Trump and Pence, but also by the cast who delivered the statement.

1. Parabasis. The Theater of Free Speech

Discussions about the political role of theater have long been overshadowed by a focus on mimesis and the emotions it elicits. This debate originated from a few seminal passages in the third book of Plato's *Republic*, where Plato argued that representing undesirable emotions on stage, such as lamentation or excessive laughter, would first influence the actor and subsequently spread to the audience, thereby threatening the social order in a just city. This is the main reason why Plato advocates for excluding poets from his ideal state.

Aristotle, however, famously counters this perspective by asserting that aesthetic mimesis confronts us with alternative realities, thus making poetry a profoundly philosophical matter. He posits that observing tragic mimesis on stage purifies spectators from pity and fear, effectively preparing them for their roles as members of the polis.

From the debates about drama in 17th century France onwards, modern reflections about the political power of artworks, especially theater plays, were dominated by the concept of mimesis. This preoccupation was shared by those who feared theater's potential social dangers in the Platonic tradition as well as those who championed theater as a vehicle for moral progress. Throughout most of the 19th century, aesthetic critique centered on criticizing the way reality was represented in an artwork. And it was not until the emergence of postdramatic theater in the late 20th century that the very notion of aesthetic representation itself was challenged.

It is important to note that the concept of mimesis is deeply ingrained in a theory of tragedy, especially with Aristotle (whose book on comedy was infamously lost) and to a lesser extent with Plato. The few comments on comedy attributed to Aristotle that have survived through time make it impossible to reconstruct his theory of comedy.⁵

This is particularly significant since Attic Old Comedy from the fifth century BCE includes a unique dramatic device that directly challenges mimesis. This device, known as *parabasis* (which literally translates as "step-aside"), occurs in the middle of the play when the actors have exited the stage, leaving only the chorus in the *orchestra*. The chorus members, representing the polis, then directly address the spectators on political issues.

The abrupt interruption of the mimetic play through the parabasis has long puzzled modern scholars. This conundrum was further deepened by the belief among some scholars that choreutic dancers removed their masks during the parabasis, an act considered a severe violation of mimetic norms in the Greek context (if it did indeed occur).

Such debates add substance to the rationale for considering mimesis and parabasis as contrasting modes of theatrical play, each introducing a distinct dynamic to the performance. Mimesis, through its continuity of dramatic action and enforcement of a closed stage frame, contributes to an immersive experience for the audience. Parabasis, on the other hand, interrupts the immersive experience, disrupts the flow and breaks the boundaries of the stage, thereby challenging the traditional conventions of tragedy. The theater of classical Athens was fundamentally shaped by this tension, an opposition of mimetic representation and parabolic participation. This juxtaposition placed these contrasting elements at the heart of its dramatic tradition, creating a unique dynamic that defined Athenian theater.

When Athenian democracy died, the parabasis became a dangerous endeavor. In the year 415 BCE a lost play named *Baptai* by the poet Eupolis was performed in Athens. The title means “The Dyers” in the sense of “those who are dipping someone into water,” and it likely was a mock play about Alkibiades. Alkibiades was a controversial Athenian politician – a populist, as we might call him today, who led his people into war when he believed it would enhance his political career, and who was largely responsible for the downfall of Athenian democracy at the end of the fifth century. Unfortunately for Eupolis, shortly after his play was performed, he found himself serving as a marine under Alcibiades. Offended by the mockery, Alkibiades took revenge by having Eupolis drowned, saying, “You may dye me in the theatre, but I will make you die by immersing you in the sea.”⁶

Luckily, Trump is not quite Alkibiades and Lin-Manuel Miranda is not quite Eupolis. However, there are historical resemblances and lessons: The incident with Eupolis marked a turning point in the history of the political public sphere. Since the parabasis was highly offensive and called politicians by their real names – a practice known as *onomastì kōmōideîn* –, it was only allowed during the democratic experiment in Athens. The end of Athenian democracy in the late fifth century BCE signaled the end of the parabasis and the extinction of what Hannah Arendt considered the principle of *vita activa* in the Greek city-states or what Michel Foucault referred to as *parrhesia*, free speech.⁷

2. Compact Differences

To understand the political power of parabasis in modern theater, it is important to explore the interplay between drama and music. Given the constraints of a blog entry, I will only be able to outline this in broad strokes.

Aristotle proposed that music differs from poetry due to its unique mimetic mode. In poetry, he claims, emotions are discerned through a character’s actions, and we empathize with that character to experience their emotions. Music, conversely, communicates emotions directly: “[E]verybody when listening to imitations is thrown into a corresponding state of feeling,” Aristotle writes.⁸ He thus differentiates between the mimesis of theatrical action, mediated by identification with characters, and the mimesis of music as an immediate, direct transfer of emotions.

Music’s ability to provoke emotions depends on specific musical codes. The same piece can induce different emotional responses in audiences of diverse cultures. The mimesis in modern Western music largely stems from the “doctrine of the affections,” which originated in the Baroque era. Baroque arias, for instance, typically merge the mimesis of theatrical action and music, aiming to evoke a similar emotional response in both modes. If a character’s misfortune calls for compassion, the character might sing a melancholic aria to enhance the audience’s emotional engagement.

A textbook example of this can be found in Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (premiered in 1689) with the deeply tragic aria known as “Dido’s Lament.” Aeneas, conflicted between duty and his love for Dido, leaves Carthage and Dido behind. In her desolation, Dido chooses death in an intensely sorrowful scene: She asks for her lifeless body to be incinerated, so Aeneas would see the rising smoke on the horizon as her final farewell.

Purcell’s aria comprises several elements intended to induce a sense of sadness, adhering to the Baroque doctrine of affections. The aria is slow and composed in the key of G minor, a scale considered particularly suited for expressing melancholy and sublimity. Moreover, the aria is replete with descending appoggiaturas that symbolize yearning (“laid” in measure 15), and many falling lines that convey despair (such as the melisma “laid___” in measure 16). Another crucial structure is the chromatic fourth in the bass line, which repeats 11 times in the aria. In Baroque musical theory, this chromatic line was referred to as *passus duriusculus* (“hard passage”), and when it appears in the bass line, as “lament bass” (measures 9–12 and 14–17).

The image displays a musical score excerpt from Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament". It features a vocal line and a basso continuo line. The vocal line begins at measure 14 with the lyrics: "When I am laid, ___ am laid in earth, may my wrongs ___ cre - ate No". The basso continuo line includes figured bass notation: 6/5, 6/4, 7, 6, 6/2#, 7, 6, 6/5, 4, #. Yellow highlights are placed over the chromatic descending lines in the basso continuo part across measures 9-12 and 14-17, as well as over the vocal notes for "laid" in measures 15 and 16.

Figure 1: Excerpt from “Dido’s Lament”⁹

I propose the term 'compact difference' to describe this aesthetic strategy that connects the mimetic modes of action and music. By 'compact difference,' I specifically refer to the intentional effort to maximize the similarity between the emotions evoked by both the action and the music. The goal of this aesthetic strategy is to guide the audience's emotional response, immersing them more deeply into the stage action. However, since this immersion depends on mimesis, which inherently separates the characters on stage from the audience, increased immersion also amplifies the divide between the stage frame and the audience's frame.

This separation between stage and audience's frame has established itself as a standard aesthetic model in opera, musical, and film. The historical trajectory of this development culminates in Denis Diderot's concept of the invisible "fourth wall" at the edge of the proscenium and, perhaps most significantly, in Richard Wagner's idea of "mystische[r] Abgrund" or "mystical abyss",¹⁰ where the orchestra pit is hidden under the stage.



Figure 2: Bayreuth Festspielhaus orchestra pit¹¹

For Wagner, the "mystical abyss" serves several functions: It hides the technical apparatus, i.e. the orchestra which is a possible distraction from the immersion into the music. It increases the illusion of a "ghostly resounding music" that seems to emanate from nowhere. And it transcends the spatial gap between audience and stage frame metaphysically by separating "the reality from the ideality."¹²

This metaphysical idea of the “mystical abyss” is closely related to Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”). The essence of this concept lies in striving to achieve a ‘compact difference’ across multiple mimetic modes, not only in poetry and music but also in dance, stage design, and architecture. By unifying these elements, the aim is to evoke a cohesive emotional response from the audience and to enhance their immersive experience. *Gesamtkunstwerk* (as compact difference of the mimetic modes) and “mystical abyss” (as separation between stage and audience frame) are two sides of the same coin, because the compact differences across various mimetic modes lead to the closure of the stage, to continuity, to a mimetic aesthetics, and to a strict exclusion of parabasis.

It is far from obvious how any of this is political. The link is that Wagner coined the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his essay *Art and Revolution*, written as a direct reaction to the failed revolution of 1848.¹³ In this essay, Wagner claimed that a *Gesamtkunstwerk* would simply revive what he envisioned as early Greek tragedy. Wagner believed that there was a close connection between the state of freedom in classical Athens and its tragedies. And he argued that the artist of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would lead the way to a new social order and ultimately reinstate democracy following the Athenian model.

Drawing from these beliefs, Wagner asserted that political freedom could be attained through the immersive experience of mimetic performance. Consequently, he argued that only highly mimetic art had the potential to bring about democratic political effects.

If Wagner is correct, any form of parabasis inherently jeopardizes its political goals as it disrupts the aesthetic norms of total and compact mimesis. From this perspective, the *Hamilton* incident must be interpreted as a missed opportunity in aesthetic criticism due to its violation of the principles of mimesis. In Wagner’s model, the power of an artistic work is deeply rooted in its immersive capabilities; any interruption of this immersion to communicate a political message will undoubtedly diminish the intended political impact. Furthermore, in the case of the *Hamilton* incident, the political message conveyed was not integrated within the play itself, but rather communicated externally to the aesthetic structure. According to Wagner’s standpoint, such an approach necessarily undermines the theater’s potential to foster political change. It represents a failure to leverage the full potential of music theater’s manifold mimetic forms – the unification of music, drama, dance, and design into a powerful immersive experience. By presenting the message in a less artistically integrated way, the potential political effect of the theatre was curtailed.

However, Wagner’s idealized classical Greece, in line with the tradition of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, struggles to clarify how Greek art could serve as a model for future aesthetic or political direction. Moreover, Wagner failed to recognize the political nature of parabasis, focusing only on tragedy. It was Bertolt Brecht who first significantly advanced beyond the notion of compact differences in mimesis. His perspectives will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the *Hamilton* incident as a moment of political aesthetics.

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