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## “The Mirror of Your Words:” Desire and Identity in Saariaho’s and Maalouf’s *L’amour de loin*

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### ABSTRACT

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In 1999, the Finnish-French composer Kaija Saariaho and the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf teamed up to create *L’amour de loin* (“Love from Afar”), premiered in 2000. The work quickly became a sensation, and is still being performed frequently, most notably in December 2016 as the first opera written by a woman to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera since 1903. The plot is based on the life of the medieval troubadour-prince, Jaufré Rudel, famous for his poetry detailing his desire for his “love from afar.” His *vida*, or legendary biography, tells that as he sailed to Tripoli to meet the woman he thought was his “love from afar,” he fell ill, and, upon reaching Tripoli, died in her arms. While the work has generated a decent amount of academic discussion, that discussion has so far failed to comment on the connection between the processes of identification and desire within *L’amour de loin*. Perhaps no theorist has explored this connection more deeply than the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In this paper, I trace the connection between desire and identification throughout *L’amour de loin*. Finally, I try to contextualize this work within the overwhelming body of culture exploring the connection between desire and identity, as well as comment on the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s exploration of this connection as it relates to the presence of courtly love structures in contemporary popular culture.

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### KEYWORDS

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Kaija Saariaho, Amin Maalouf, Opera, Desire, Identification, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, Courtly Love

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## Introduction

On December 1, 2016, the Metropolitan Opera performed its first opera composed by a woman since 1902. This was a momentous occasion in the still heavily male-dominated world of classical music, especially since the Met also hired Susanna Mälkki to conduct, who is only the fourth woman to conduct at the house in its history. Many people view this occasion as a sign of change for classical music and opera, both of which are heavily entrenched in their standard repertoires of works predominantly by dead white men. With a libretto by the French-Lebanese writer and music composed by the French-Finnish composer, Kaija Saariaho, *L'amour de loin*, or "Love from Afar" has become something of a sensation since its premiere at the Salzburg Festival in 2000. It has been performed at many of the world's most prestigious opera houses in Paris, Santa Fe, Helsinki, Darmstadt, Quebec, New York, Brussels, London, Berlin, Tokyo, Linz, Brno and a handful of other cities (Calico 340). This is remarkable, as most newly-composed operas are lucky to get as many as one performance beyond the premiere; the sheer number of performances serves as a testament to the work's value, immediacy, and importance.

In addition to the performance sphere, the work has generated a fair amount of discourse in the academic world, most of it musical-theoretical and musicological. Unfortunately, what is perhaps the most prominent theme of the opera, the connection between the processes of identification and desire, has not yet been adequately discussed, as the bulk of this research has not been concerned with narratology. Furthermore, the literary analysis of opera is somewhat limited when compared to the study of poetry, prose and film. The connection between identity and desire has probably been most profoundly developed in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Although extremely influential to literary studies, especially cinema studies, Lacan's theory has not taken the same hold in studying music or opera. There is, however, a small yet growing body of work, spearheaded by the Lacanian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. In this paper, I will first give brief introductions to the opera's plot and the work of Jacques Lacan, and then a more detailed analysis of three crucial moments in the opera. Finally, I will bring a bit of the work of Žižek present, namely, his expansion of Lacan's analysis of courtly love to more broadly contextualize the work and conclude upon the concepts discussed here. Here I attempt to trace the processes of desire and identification within the opera and ultimately demonstrate that desire and identification are not two discrete processes, but tightly interwoven.

Now has come the time to explain the story of the piece. The three main characters are Jaufré Rudel, the troubadour-prince of Blaye, sung by a baritone; the Pilgrim, sung by a mezzo-soprano; and Clémence, the Countess of Tripoli, sung by a soprano. The piece uses male and female choirs, which represent the inhabitants of Tripoli and Blaye, respectively. The opera opens with Jaufré, having grown weary of his life of luxury and womanizing. He imagines his ideal woman as “beautiful without the arrogance of beauty, noble without the arrogance of nobility, and pious, without the arrogance of piety” and begins to sing only of her, yearning for his perfect love (Saariaho and Maalouf 347). His companions deride him, telling him that she does not exist. The Pilgrim arrives and tells Jaufré that such a woman does exist, and that she lives in Tripoli. The Pilgrim sails to Tripoli, where he tells the Countess about Jaufré, his love for her, and that she is the woman in his songs. At first offended and outraged, the Countess softens, flattered when the Pilgrim sings one of Jaufré’s songs to her. Highly nostalgic for her homeland, the Countess soon begins to doubt if she is worthy of the poet’s praise.

Back at Blaye, the Pilgrim tells Jaufré that the Countess adores his songs. Jaufré is at first angry, then resolves to meet her, so that she will hear his songs from his own lips. In Tripoli, the women question Clémence and warn her not to get too emotionally involved with the troubadour. Clémence responds that she is perfectly content with the distance, as she doubts she would love the poet as she loves the man. Jaufré and the Pilgrim set sail for Tripoli, and as they approach the city, Jaufré becomes ill, and his health declines as they reach the harbor. He and Clémence profess their love for one another, and he dies in her arms. Clémence laments the loss of her love, and rails against heaven for having taken him from her. She has a sudden change of heart, decides to join a convent, and lifts up a final prayer to her love from afar, though it is ambiguous whether she is praying to Jaufré or to God (Saariaho and Maalouf 375).

Before we begin analysis, it will be necessary to have some groundwork in Lacanian theory. Perhaps the most important facet of Lacan’s theory is his conception of the self. According to Lacan, the fully conscious, intelligent, coherent, intentioned view of the self put forth by Descartes and expanded upon by later philosophy is an illusion. He credits Freud for undermining this construction with his id-ego-superego model, and suggests that even the ego is itself a fiction (Écrits 801). (It should be noted here that Lacan considered himself a re-interpreter of Freud and considered his work merely a “return to Freud” (431).) For Lacan, starting in infancy, when a child sees an its reflection in a mirror, it misrecognizes that image as

itself, and assumes an ego, an “I.” We continue to keep this “specular image” of ourselves throughout life, when in reality, we are what he calls, “the subject of the unconscious” (94, 524). (This identification with an image will be extremely important with Clémence later.) The word “subject” both refers to the grammatical subject of a sentence and to the sense that people who are ruled are “subjects.” That he denotes the “subject” with the letter “s” is also significant, as “s” is pronounced “es,” which sounds as the German word for “it.” Freud used this word to denote the id), aligning the self with the id, or with desire and the unconscious (765). The next concept is that of the “Other.” The other (miniscule “o”) denotes someone who can be grouped with the subject (and often becomes an object of desire), and the Other (majuscule) represents another subject who cannot be assimilated by identification. Though the Other often takes the form of the Father (or sometimes even society, as it is related to the superego), it really is in the realm of language and the Law. Thus, the subject is thrust into a world built upon language, which does not belong to the subject, but to the Other (814). In addition, the subject is always reduced to representation by signifiers, which is to say that the subject is always erased by elements of language, which belong to the Other (801). The subject is always bound between its attempt to identify itself and to escape the power of the Other.

Desire, according to Lacan, is constant. From the loss of the real (the world of infancy) due to entrance into the symbolic (language), there is always residue left over which cannot be accommodated by language (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis 280). This loss and the leftovers lead to a never-ending, never-fulfilled process of desire. The objet a (minuscule “a” referring to the other) is this leftover substance (282). For Lacan, this becomes what a person loves in someone else (268). That is, we attach the cause of our desire, an unattainable object, in other people in love (this will prove quite salient in the opera). Desire is a process of misrecognizing thing after thing (or person) as a missing substance, left over from the process of symbolization. Thus, desire is metonymic—it is a constant process of trying to connect different things (or people) with this loss, and by taking these objects, force them to take on the leftovers from symbolization, thereby taking a part for the whole (Écrits 516). And yet, desire is also caught up in the Other. We seek validation from the Other and crave confirmation of our existence as subjects from the Other, and we want to be recognized by the Other. Yet, we also want to determine our own being. For Lacan, love exists “somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen” (Four Fundamental Concepts 268). That

is, in love, a person asks for not only recognition from the Other, but also loves an idealized version of their own sense of self.

Finally, desire is also connected to the subject's position as a subject, as it is often a method by which the subject receives affirmation of their own existence (from the Other) as a subject in the symbolic. Lacan sums this up with the formulation, "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Écrits 690). As the word "de" in French here indicates both "of" and "for," this sentence intentionally has several possibilities for its meaning. It means first that we desire what the Other desires, which sets us up to look for confirmation of our desire by the Other. Second, this sentence also suggests that our desire is to be desired by the Other. (In both cases, the Other can be replaced with an other). Desire is tied to the recognition of our position as subjects. These formulations will be especially important in the relationship between Clémence and Jaufré.

## **L'amour de loin**

Here I analyze three crucial moments in the opera: the moment Jaufré constructs his "distant love" and learns that she exists; the moment Clémence hears of Jaufré's existence and his songs, and her subsequent response; and finally, the moment Jaufré dies in Clémence's arms, and Clémence's reaction.

First known as a womanizer and drunk, Jaufré becomes dissatisfied with his life. His friends, voiced by the male chorus, and often unseen in productions, deride him for his change of heart. That the chorus is offstage, and not visible, gives the chorus a superegoic function; the voice of the chorus becomes the voice of the superego inserting itself into Jaufré's consciousness. (This construction will become even more evident in the analysis of Clémence.) He decides to devote his life to the desire of a perfect woman.

Jaufré's desire helps define and express his new identity. When the chorus or superego accuses him of "no longer wanting a woman in [his] arms", Jaufré replies that he does, but that she is far away, and his "arms will never close themselves around her" (357). It is interesting that the chorus/superego is asking (the force hounding him is essentially his internalized societal expectations). That is, what he believes society expects of him is causing him to question and further flesh out his desire, so he feels that he must create his object of desire for the satisfaction of society. To state it more plainly, he is looking for confirmation of his existence as a subject

by societal affirmation of his desire.

As the chorus asks him to describe such a woman, Jaufré lists several unattainable and contradictory qualities which she must have: “courageous yet timid, tough yet fragile / a princess with the heart of a peasant, peasant with the heart of a princess” (Saariaho and Maalouf 357). These unattainable qualities perhaps exist for a reason: Jaufré really wants the continuation of his desire, not actual companionship, so he constructs an ideal vision of femininity which he can never hope to find in a living human being. Jaufré’s desire is like the drive—its aim is not satisfaction, but recapitulation (Four Fundamental Concepts 179). At this point, he says that the woman “will sing [his] songs in a passionate voice” (Saariaho and Maalouf 357). Jaufré wants the voice of the ideal woman to sing his songs; he wants the voice of the Other to speak through an other, and repeat the words that Jaufré himself had spoken/sung. Those words, extolling femininity and articulating his desire, as part of song/poetry, must be repeated exactly. In directly repeating Jaufré’s words, the Other confirms Jaufré’s desire and his sense of self. Thus, by wishing his object of desire, his ideal image of Woman, to repeat his own words, he is really calling to the Other for approval and love.

In the midst of this discussion, the Pilgrim appears. Jaufré is describing his ideal woman as “beautiful without the arrogance of beauty, noble without the arrogance of nobility, pious without the arrogance of piety” (Saariaho and Maalouf 357). (This phrase will be repeated several times throughout the opera, and will become the yardstick by which Clémence attempts to measure herself.) The chorus of Jaufré’s friends tells him that such a woman cannot and does not exist, yet the Pilgrim tells Jaufré that she does, and he (the Pilgrim) has met her. He describes her using the same phrase as Jaufré, and relates that as she walked to mass, “suddenly there was no one else but her, conversations fell to silence, every gaze was drawn to her like butterflies with powdery wings (Saariaho and Maalouf 358). Before she appears onstage, Clémence is an object of beauty for the male gaze, which the Pilgrim articulates to Jaufré. (The effect Clémence has on people as described by the Pilgrim should remind one of Mulvey’s work on the representation of women in cinema). Jaufré’s desire had no specific object, yet now the Pilgrim gives him one, and one who is an object of desire for many men. Jaufré begs the Pilgrim for more information, yet as the Pilgrim is about to utter Clémence’s name, Jaufré stops him. Clémence’s name is a signifier which represents and yet also erases her, just as any other name-signifier. If he were to know her name, he would lose power over the construction of his love-

object; he would instead misrecognize the signifier as her, and lose parts of her in the process, as a subject cannot be fully symbolized. Instead, Jaufré takes over from the Pilgrim the task of describing Clémence to fit his own desires.

Jaufré decides that Clémence has “hair so black and silky that at night one can no longer see it, one can only hear it like the rustling of leaves” (Saariaho and Maalouf 358). (It should be noted here that Dawn Upshaw, the soprano who created the role of Clémence, has light brown hair, and in the Deutsche Grammophon DVD recording of the opera, her hair is cut short, and does not look “silky.” Thus, the image Jaufré has of Clémence is completely a construction, and does not represent the real Clémence.) Jaufré continues to create an ideal woman who can never exist in the world. He says of her hands, “her smooth hands flow like fresh water which I gather in my open palms; I bow down my head above them, just like above a fountain to drink, with my eyes closed” (Saariaho and Maalouf 359). In both of these examples, sight is removed, and the part-objects of the Woman are described through the other senses. As sight is removed, there can be no gaze from the other (or the Other), no point at which there is a gaze being returned to Jaufré. Lacan says what is “profoundly unsatisfying” about the gaze focused on the subject is that “you never look at me from the place from which I see you” (Four Fundamental Concepts 103, emphasis in original). That is, there is another presence sending out a gaze which the subject cannot account for in its own sight. This causes anxiety because this gaze has the power to turn the subject into an object or confirm the subject’s position as a subject. The subject has no control over the outcome. This removal of sight gives Jaufré the feeling of being the sole subject and reduces the object of his desire from being another subject into being an object. In addition, it removes the gaze of the Other from the table. Though the gaze need not be exclusively visual, the removal of sight still breaks down the ideal Woman into individual parts to be desired and turns her into an object.

Jaufré continues, describing her lips as “another fresh spring which smiles and whispers comforting words, and which offers itself to a lover dying of thirst” (Saariaho and Maalouf 359). This connection with thirst and its satisfaction makes Jaufré’s desire self-centered, as its satisfaction can only be fulfilled by an inhuman source to which Jaufré owes nothing. It should also be noted that the past two examples utilize imagery concerning bodies of water and stress the “flowing” nature of that water. The hair is said to essentially disappear as well. These three descriptions highlight the necessarily slippery nature of the object—when one tries to focus

one's gaze on the hair, it disappears from their grasp, just as water in a stream flows away. Though Jaufré describes the water as pooling in his hands, it is not possible to contain all the water; there is always so much that slips away from his grasp. That leftover part drives his desire but also stops it from being fulfilled, which prolongs his desire. Jaufré's desire is not centered on a person, or even aimed at being fulfilled, but is aimed at its own continuation.

Yet, Jaufré does not realize this; he needs someone to blame for the impossibility of the fulfillment of his desire. He externalizes this process and blames the Pilgrim, accusing the Pilgrim of “[giving him] a taste of the far-off spring, from which never, never, will I ever be able to drink” (Saariaho and Maalouf 359). Only a few minutes earlier, he was content to never know the object of his desire. He laments the separation, yet pledges himself to her, “Never will this far-off woman be mine, but I am hers for always, and I will never know any other woman” (359). Jaufré puts himself in a position of servitude to this woman he has constructed and will never know, and resigns himself to live alone in his desire. Jaufré identifies himself as a man in love, a man desiring, and decides that he belongs to the woman he loves, despite not knowing her. His identity is connected to that object of desire, as he is “hers.” And yet, as he will never know her, his desire does not run the risk of being satisfied, so neither does his identity run the risk of being cut short. His identity is that of a subject subjected by desire into being in suppliant desire for an inaccessible object. His identity is his desire.

The other character exhibiting these processes of identification and desire is Clémence. Woefully homesick, Clémence is really looking to the Other for the confirmation of her existence as a subject. Forced to move at five years old from Toulouse to Tripoli so her family could rule, Clémence is lacking the confirmation of her identity from the Other; she says, “I still remember my childhood, but nothing of the world of my childhood remembers me...the land of my birth still breathes in me, but to it I am dead” (Maalouf and Saariaho 360). Her sense of identity is tied to Toulouse such that she needs a validation from the place to confirm her existence, or else she is “dead.” Now, living away from her birthplace, she takes the position of an exile (though one in a position of privilege) yet still ties her identity to her birthplace, and not the region which is stated in her title, Countess of Tripoli. The melancholy is an attempt to take control of her identity. Clémence wants confirmation from Toulouse that she is where she belongs, and not Tripoli, from where she receives constant pressure to conform, and has this question of geographical identity forced upon her. Her attempt to be in control of and reclaim



her identity is an act of rebellion against the Other, both the Other in actuality, and as the residents of Tripoli.

The Pilgrim reveals that Jaufré knows of her existence and that he writes his songs about her. At first, Clémence is offended, yet flattered when she hears the Pilgrim sing one of Jaufré's songs. She of course knows that the image of her which Jaufré praises in his songs is merely an image, yet it concerns her, as this image is of a better person than she is:

If this troubadour had known me well, would he have sung this song with such desire?... 'Beautiful without the arrogance of beauty'... Beautiful? Yet I look around constantly to see if any woman is more beautiful! 'Noble without the arrogance of nobility?' Yet I covet both the Occident and Orient, as if Providence was indebted to me! 'Pious without the arrogance of piety?' Yet I dress up in my finest clothing on the way to mass, and then kneel in church with an empty soul!

Troubadour, I am only beautiful in the mirror of your words. (362)

Clémence realizes that the image she has put forth for society is empty and is merely a façade to hide her insecurities. She realizes that this image is of an impossibly good woman and does not reflect who she is. She presents a self to her society and is very concerned about keeping it up; she worries she is not beautiful or wealthy enough, and dresses herself (and her self) as opulently as possible to demonstrate her power and keep up her image. This image fits how she presents herself in society—beautiful, noble, and pious—but she cannot let society know that she is worried about her status. The defining feature of those three phrases is “without arrogance,” which is how she must present herself as a Christian woman, because “without arrogance” suggests timidity and passivity. The disconnect between image and inner self is deeply unsettling to Clémence, however, and she tries to take on that “without arrogance” qualification in her private self. That Maalouf chooses the word “mirror” here is also interesting—essentially Jaufré is giving her another specular image around which to assume an ego. And yet, to simply try to be that image would merely turn her into an object, or at least a being of lesser subjectivity than Jaufré. So she cannot simply be that vain creature she believes herself to be, yet also cannot be the specular image Jaufré puts forth for her. This game of identity dialectics will occupy her throughout the opera as she continues to juggle her own identity and the image of her which was created by Jaufré.

And yet she still is no longer yearning for confirmation of her existence from Toulouse.

Perhaps the biggest reason for this change is that she has also fallen in love with that idealized image of herself—the ego-ideal, or the best possible version of the self. That is that point “somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen” (Four Fundamental Concepts 268). And this is what Clémence gets through Jaufré’s love for her—an idealized image of what she could be, and with which she can identify, though she cannot be it. When she states “Troubadour, I am only beautiful in the mirror of your words” (Saariaho and Maalouf 362), she is recognizing the ego-ideal for her put forth by Jaufré, and can hold onto that ego-ideal as a sort of self-recognition. When she returns in the third act, Clémence is reciting verses by Jaufré she has learned by heart. She even receives her wish expressed earlier; she states, “to know that over there, in my country, a man thinks of me, I suddenly feel close to the land of my childhood” (366). She has received confirmation of her existence, and through an other, not the Other, so she is not recognized as a subject of the system but rather as an individual worthy of love. Her desire is the desire of an other; she is able to love the image of herself made perfect by the love of Jaufré. She has received an image of herself to latch on to, and is then able to build her identity on that image. For Lacan, and for the opera, desire is linked to identity because what we love in love is the ego-ideal; as we desire/love we get an image of ourselves to love. That is the process with which Clémence is involved.

The final scene I analyze here is the interchange between Jaufré and Clémence before Jaufré dies, and Clémence’s reaction. When Jaufré finally meets Clémence, he turns his thoughts toward praising God and the act of love, which is different for his character, as before, his object of praise was always Clémence. Now that he has been united with her, his praise and love must be reattached to someone (or something) unattainable. Jaufré is still the desirer of something unattainable. When the other characters lament the lack of time, and curse Love for their misfortune, Jaufré gently reproaches them. This prompts Clémence to say, “I would so much have wished to be a poetess and respond with words as beautiful as yours” (Maalouf and Saariaho 372). Jaufré responds, saying, “You are Beauty and I am nothing but the pond surface from where Beauty reflects itself” (372). Clémence’s wish is for an equal poetic footing with Jaufré, and to create beauty in the way he does. Jaufré essentially says that Clémence even created the beauty of his words through her own beauty. Jaufré is not willing to give up the figure of the suppliant in love with the object when Clémence wishes for the opposite. Their identities are too closely tied to their desires for love to work, even if there was/had been time.

Jaufré asks Clémence if she would have loved him “as much as [he] loves her” and if she would say “I love you Jaufré” (Maalouf and Saariaho 372). She replies that she would, and Jaufré exclaims, “O Lord, forgive me, I have a new desire to live!” (372). Jaufré thinks he is able to transform his identity from that of a far-off lover to a “real” lover, and this gives him new life. And yet, the impossibility of their relationship is still present. Before, it was distance which separated them, and now it is time which prohibits their relationship. The Pilgrim merely observes, “if death were not so near, Jaufré...she would not have said ‘I love you, Jaufré’” (373). That is, the fantasy would be dashed to the ground, and Jaufré would realize that Clémence does not fit the image of beauty which he has constructed, and Clémence would lose the ego-ideal she was able to find in Jaufré’s songs. Jaufré finally gives up his desire (and his identity), asking, “I have all I desire. What else to ask from life?” (373). As his desire ends so does his life.

Clémence, at this point, still has desire, beseeching God to revive him, and exclaiming, “I hope still, O Lord, I hope still” (Saariaho and Maalouf 373). Clémence still desires Jaufré, but now she is less explicitly interested in the vision of herself he provided and desires the man back. When it is certain that Jaufré is dead, she then berates God for having taken Jaufré from her. This God is essentially the Other—the incomprehensible, unknowable, shadowy figure against whom the subject is constantly trying to define itself. The Other has taken her other, and Clémence rebels against everything. The superegoic voice of the chorus calls out to her, “silence, woman, your passion is leading you astray” (374). That the voice should call her “woman” is significant—it highlights her predicament, as she just lost the man who declared her the pinnacle of femininity—but more importantly, it stresses her lack of power to change her circumstance and de-subjectivizes her, erasing her subjectivity by classifying her. She continues her rant against the Other, and then turns it inward. In the place of the ego-ideal is now an object of self-loathing: “He believed he saw in me Clarity, yet I was nothing but the guardian of darkness” (374). Clémence takes responsibility for Jaufré’s death, and then berates herself, deciding she is “no longer worthy of love” (374). She then decides to join a convent and finally becomes that image of perfection: she loses the arrogance connected with her beauty, nobility, and piety, and tries to be genuine.

And yet, desire does not leave her. The last five minutes of the opera become an extended monologue for Clémence, in the form of a prayer. Yet the addressee is deliberately left ambiguous—Clémence is addressing both God and Jaufré, as she extends the prayer to her “love

from afar” (Saariaho and Maalouf 375). Now the roles have been reversed. With Jaufré dead, Clémence becomes the one to project her love for a distant figure out into the world, and is no longer the object of desire. Clémence no longer identifies with an idealized image of herself, or with her homeland, but instead as the subject of desire, the position which Jaufré took.

Clémence’s desire for Jaufré turns into her identification with Jaufré; because she can no longer want Jaufré, she becomes him. This reversal of roles is even present in the music itself—the chord structure of Clémence’s final monologue is almost identical to the one accompanying Jaufré when he first constructs the image of Clémence. Their roles and identities are reversed after Jaufré dies, just as their desires are. The identity-desires to which each adhered before are still present, but are interchanged. Thus, desire is still connected with identity.

### **Conclusions: Distance, Identity, and Courtly Love**

It is appropriate to bring in a bit of the work of a later Lacanian theorist, Slavoj Žižek, at this point. (Though much of his work is problematic, here I simply bring his expansion of Lacan’s arguments on courtly love for its lucidity.) In his article “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing”, Žižek lays out the ways in which courtly love works in a Lacanian framework. There is always the Knight, hopelessly in love with the cold and inaccessible Lady, who is an “inhuman partner” (Žižek 151). While the Lacanian analysis discusses the figure of the Woman in courtly love this way, Clémence’s character does not fit the bill; the inaccessibility is more due to geographical distance than emotional distance. And yet, for Žižek (and Lacan by proxy), the Knight defines himself and his identity as in terms of an impossible desire for this figure of femininity whom he serves (151). Is this not the exact position in which Jaufré puts himself? Clémence, at the end, praying to her inaccessible god/love object also fits this description. And here is the crux of Žižek’s argument: the “real” love we talk about happens when courtly love fails, and the object of desire returns our love (164). That is, the lover must become the loved one, and vice versa. Jaufré is the lover, sending out an image of his desire, and Clémence the loved one, receiving the ego-ideal and falling in love with it. They cannot exchange these roles as they are both still alive, so this identity-switch does not take place until after Jaufré dies.

And yet, this is tied to their inability to give up these identities. Jaufré spends the whole opera as the lover, and yet, when he decides to embark for Tripoli to meet Clémence, he immediately becomes ill, and grows worse as he gets closer to Clémence. If for Lacan, anxiety

is proximity to the love object (Four Fundamental Concepts, 41), it then makes sense that Jaufré grows ill on his voyage. As he gets closer to Clémence, the impossibility of fulfilling his desire weakens, or, to put it plainly, the fulfillment his desire becomes possible. And this fulfillment of desire would then end his desire. Here again resurfaces the question of identity: if Jaufré's entire identity is defined by an unfulfillable, impossible desire, how can the desire sustain itself once its fulfillment becomes possible, and is reached? Instead of being able to switch roles with Clémence, Jaufré simply continues to find ways to keep the love impossible: the moment he arrives in Tripoli, he praises God instead of Clémence. He finds a new object to desire "from afar." It doesn't last however, as Clémence extends the love back to him, turning him into the loved object. This brings him back to his identity as the lover yet also threatens this position; it pushes him into being the loved object, which he cannot be at the same time as being the lover. As the distance and the impossibility is erased, so is Jaufré's identity as desirous-of-the-love-from-afar and he must die.

The other main point of Žižek's essay is that the paradigm of courtly love is ever-present in current media, of which L'amour de loin is merely one example. L'amour de loin is hardly the only opera to appear in recent years which could be looked at from the lens of courtly love or desire and identification: George Benjamin's wildly successful *Written on Skin* and Thomas Adès' *Powder Her Face* both feature women engaged in the identity dialectic which Clémence finds herself in, and both more directly attack the sexual double standard than L'amour de loin. Not that only modern opera can benefit from this sort of reading, however; take the complex web of desire and identification in *Der Rosenkavalier*, or Violetta's attempt at subjectivization while being reduced to an object of desire in *La Traviata*. And yet, with so many examples of desire being tied to identity in media all around, one begins to wonder why we like to view this sort of tale. Perhaps these stories reveal something about the inner workings of ourselves. Whatever the case may be, desire and identity are heavily connected within L'amour de loin, and, perhaps, life itself.

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