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# Rameau, Revelation, and Europe's Ancient Oriental "Others:" Enlightenment Occultism and Orientalism in Rameau's Theoretical Writings and Operas

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in Music

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## Abstract

Despite the popularity of Jean-Philippe Rameau's operas in mid-eighteenth-century France and the prominent role that Enlightenment philosophy played in his career as a theorist and composer, there has not yet been a study dedicated to examining the occult aspects of his theoretical writings and operas that appeared in his works at the height of the French Enlightenment. This dissertation fills this lacuna by demonstrating that, at the heart of two of Rameau's theoretical works the *Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, lie the Hermetic doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, two concepts that were tied to the literary trend of orientalism. Additionally, this dissertation shows that these two doctrines and their connection to orientalism were not limited to Rameau's later theoretical writings but also appeared in the libretti of four of his earlier operas. Because the occult elements of Rameau's theoretical treatises and operas – particularly in relation to orientalism – have been severely neglected in musicological scholarship, this dissertation introduces a new avenue to investigate how occult themes inform the relationship between theory and practice in his work.

### Keywords

Rameau, Occultism, Enlightenment, Orientalism, Philosophy, Hermeticism, Exoticism, Esotericism, Prisca Sapientia, Prisca Theologia

## Abstract for Lay Audience

Despite the popularity of Jean-Philippe Rameau's operas in mid-eighteenth-century France and the prominent role that Enlightenment philosophy played in his career as a theorist and composer, there has not yet been a study dedicated to examining the occult aspects of his theoretical writings and operas that appeared in his works at the height of the French Enlightenment. This dissertation fills this lacuna by demonstrating that, at the heart of two of Rameau's theoretical works the *Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, lie the Hermetic doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, two concepts that were tied to the literary trend of orientalism. Additionally, this dissertation shows that these two doctrines and their connection to orientalism were not limited to Rameau's later theoretical writings but also appeared in the libretti of four of his earlier operas. Because the occult elements of Rameau's theoretical treatises and operas – particularly in relation to orientalism – have been severely neglected in musicological scholarship, this dissertation introduces a new avenue to investigate how occult themes inform the relationship between practice and theory in his work.

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Sincerely,

Sonja Zoë Maurer-Dass

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, partner, friends, and to the memories of my grandmother Mildred Maurer (1923-1999) and friend Nicholas Alba (1986-2022), who all provided me with support, understanding, love, laughs, and encouragement at different stages throughout my musical education. You all believed in me and helped me to navigate the times when I felt weary. I love you all.

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## Disclaimer

Because of the time period that is central to this dissertation, antiquated terminology that is offensive and outdated today – such as the words “Orient” or “Oriental” – is included in this dissertation’s text in order to preserve the original language used by scholars at the time. These offensive words and perspectives are in no way representative of my own belief systems and only reflect the vocabulary and thought processes of intellectuals who lived in Early Modern Europe.

## Chapter 1:

### Overview of the Dissertation

#### **Introduction**

“The most flattering reward that has been offered to me is the approval and the esteem of scholars.”<sup>1</sup> Arguably, no other words written by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) encapsulate his relationship with the French Enlightenment more than this sentence he wrote to the *philosophe* Jean le Rond d’Alembert in the *Mercur de France*’s May 1752 issue. Indeed, the search for “the approval and the esteem of scholars” and the desire to be recognized as a *philosophe* occupied a central role in the life of the celebrated French composer for most of his adult years, a pursuit that continually led him to seek out and engage with the most cutting edge and influential works of philosophy and science while formulating his own theories on music.

While his earlier theoretical works such as the *Traité de l’harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (1722) and *Génération harmonique ou traité de musique théorique et pratique* (1737) are indicative of his adoption of Cartesian and Newtonian principles, in the latter part of his life Rameau’s writings turned away from the rational and empirical methods he once employed and began to resemble the musings of “occult philosophers” of the eighteenth century as well as those who preceded it.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Rameau’s theoretical voice began to strongly echo the ideologies of what I describe as the Occult Enlightenment<sup>3</sup> – a movement of philosophers and

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, “Lettre de M. Rameau à l’Auteur du Mercure,” *Mercur de France: dédié au Roy*, May 1, 1752, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kléber Monod uses the term “occult philosophers” to describe philosophers who engaged with or held beliefs that were considered to be occult practices in his book *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 9. This is a term that I will also make use of in this dissertation going forward.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kléber Monod uses the term “Occult Enlightenment” in Chapter 8 of his book *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

scientists who, while upholding various sociopolitical ideals and scientific theories of the Enlightenment, continued to propagate Renaissance occult ideas that had become less prominent or had been rejected by the majority of academics during the eighteenth century. Indeed, scholars such as Thomas Christensen have observed that after the 1760s, Rameau's writings on his most treasured theoretical principle the *corps sonore* are strikingly metaphysical in nature and contain phrases that mirror the occult ideologies of Rosicrucianism, Occasionalism, and Pantheism such as proclamations that the *corps sonore* is the source of all knowledge and, as Christensen notes, "the 'key' that opens up the doors of all the sciences;"<sup>4</sup> however, scholars have not yet observed that Rameau's writings – particularly the *Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore* from his treatise *Code de musique pratique* (1760)<sup>5</sup> and his essay *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet* (1761)<sup>6</sup> – indicate influence from another Renaissance occultist concept that involved orientalism, and which continued to circulate among some scholars during the eighteenth century: a primordial body of sacred, natural, and theological knowledge and wisdom called the *prisca sapientia* and the *prisca theologia*<sup>7</sup> that belonged to the Hermetic tradition.<sup>8</sup> This knowledge was believed to have been divinely granted to, cultivated, and protected by the people of the Ancient Orient; however, it had eventually been

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 291.

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, the *Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore* was a highly speculative work that was appended to the much more practical *Code de musique pratique*. Additionally, it should be noted that, since there are similarities between their titles, the *Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore* should not be confused with Rameau's earlier work *Nouvelles réflexions de M. Rameau sur sa démonstration du principe de l'harmonie* (1752).

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth in this dissertation, I will refer to these two theoretical works as the following abbreviated forms: *Origine des sciences* and *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*.

<sup>7</sup> The *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* will be discussed further in the next chapter; however, to summarize, the *prisca sapientia* was believed to have been a divinely inspired body of higher knowledge concerning the arts and sciences that had been in the possession of people in the Ancient Orient. The *prisca theologia* was believed to have been a primordial and universal monotheistic faith that had been known to the people of the Ancient Orient.

<sup>8</sup> Hermeticism is a philosophical tradition (based on the teachings of the legendary Hermes Trismegistus) that teaches everything in the universe derives from one, single divine source or being. Followers of Hermeticism believe that they may reunite or understand this divine source through higher, spiritual knowledge and learning to detach from the physical world.

lost or drastically altered from its original form and was consequently unknown to subsequent generations.

The Age of Enlightenment and the occult may seem like unlikely bedfellows. Indeed, this was the era in which objective science and logic prevailed and superstition as well as blind faith in religious institutions were condemned and pushed aside; however, in Early Modern Europe, the term “occult” among philosophers and scientists did not have the same connotations that it currently has. While today we may associate the occult with witchcraft or the conjuring of spirits, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the word “occult” was more nuanced and referred to knowledge and things that were concealed or hidden without necessarily referring to supernatural events.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, in addition to the supernatural, the word “occult” was used to describe entirely natural occurrences that were not easily comprehended. For example, gravity and magnetic attraction were described by some scientists and philosophers as occult because they were concealed from view and enigmatic.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Paul Kléber Monod explains that during the Age of Enlightenment, “the distinction between natural and supernatural could be slippery,”<sup>11</sup> and some of the era’s foremost “enlightened” intellectuals participated in activities and held views which, for all intents and purposes, would be considered occultist in the mystical or supernatural sense. For example, some of the scientific and philosophical interests of Isaac Newton – who, along with Descartes, was hailed as one of the Enlightenment’s founders – intersected with activities that would be deemed as magical or mystical, notably his research and writings on alchemy and prophecy. Additionally, as this dissertation will demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, the *prisca theologia* and *prisca*

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 3, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

*sapientia* – which belonged to the mystical or supernatural side of occultism since the concept of revelation (that is, the divine or supernatural disclosure of knowledge to humanity) was central to these doctrines – were embraced by many of the occult philosophers during the eighteenth century. Consequently, the *prisci*'s existence was largely disputed by the majority of Enlightenment philosophers who rejected the supernatural aspects of the occult (such as the *philosophes*) since the concept of revelation was considered to be antithetical to the rational ideologies of the Enlightenment.

As for orientalism (which is a subspecies of exoticism) during the Enlightenment, it commonly served as a literary device that was used to admonish European societies for political injustices.<sup>12</sup> This was accomplished by placing Western cultures alongside contemporary non-Western ones in order to assess the weaknesses of the West and involved a – usually – entirely fictitious and Eurocentric vision of who people of the East were and what they were like. Essentially, people of the Orient were viewed as “the other” and were assigned characteristics that were, in some way, beneficial to whichever European narrative or values were being promulgated. In eighteenth-century France, this trend was prominent among the *philosophes*, some of whom produced the most influential and celebrated orientalist works, such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721).

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<sup>12</sup> Orientalism specifically refers to European portrayals of people who lived in the Orient; that is, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Exoticism is a much broader term and encompasses European portrayals of all non-European people such as Indigenous Americans as well as those who lived in the Orient. Today, scholars generally draw upon the ideas of Edward Said when discussing orientalism, particularly the ideas presented in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. This book describes the harmful impact of the subjugating stereotypes of Oriental people that were promulgated during the rise of nineteenth-century French and British imperialism. Contemporary musicologists often analyze musical orientalism and exoticism through the lens of Said's *Orientalism* even though some of these works were created prior to the nineteenth century, and therefore prior to the extreme imbalance of power between East and West. Since my dissertation focuses on eighteenth-century occultism and orientalism which lie beyond the scope of Said's *Orientalism*, I will not be drawing upon his work throughout the remainder of this dissertation. Rather, I have consulted sources that focus on eighteenth-century (and earlier) orientalism, a time when certain nations of the East, particularly the Ancient East, were not necessarily viewed as inferior (although there were certainly some scholars who subscribed to this notion), but were often idealized as a means to further European knowledge and wisdom, particularly as it concerned theological matters.

In addition to the writings of the *philosophes*, who largely used orientalism to criticize the contemporary mores of European society, occult philosophers and scientists who subscribed to the doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* turned to the Ancient Orient as sources of wisdom and esoteric knowledge. Some ventured back into the annals of history to situate their ideas or theories within these cultures as a way to indicate that a particular idea had first been propagated or developed among the “Ancients,” thus giving their claims substantial roots.<sup>13</sup> These narratives were also largely fictitious and were created in order to promote the philosophical, scientific, or religious “truths” of various scholars. Fundamentally, since the *prisca* involve fictitious, Eurocentric visions of Ancient Oriental people, their cultures, and their possession of a privileged, primordial divine knowledge, I see the occult and orientalism intertwined within the notions of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*.

While European scholars associated different Ancient Oriental civilizations with the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, three of the most frequently cited civilizations were Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China, which were considered to be among the oldest human civilizations and therefore the most learned.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as will be delineated in this dissertation’s following chapters, the people of these three civilizations were viewed as repositories of revelatory knowledge and wisdom to Europeans as it concerned both the spiritual and natural

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Kléber Monod explains how Newtonian scholars often “borrowed what they needed” from other areas of the occult apart from orientalism in order to substantiate their own theories: “The Newtonians who sought to reclaim the occult as support for their own theories were not concerned with its coherence. They borrowed what they needed from alchemy, astrology, or Neoplatonism, ignoring the rest.” Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 189.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the Benedictine scholar and monk Paul-Yves Pezron listed the Ancient Egyptians, Chaldeans (Mesopotamians), and Chinese together when discussing the antiquity of “Oriental nations.” This information is cited in David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 51; Daniel Špelda, “The Search for Antediluvian Astronomy: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Astronomers’ Conceptions of the Origin of the Science” *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 44.3 (2013): 338.

worlds;<sup>15</sup> however, the scholarly outlook on these cultures was not entirely positive and was also fraught with contradiction. Although they were believed to have been the original recipients and disseminators of the *prisca sapientia* and the *prisca theologia*, the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese were also held responsible for the disappearance of this primeval knowledge from human history. Indeed, this knowledge was believed to have been lost and, or, corrupted from its original form at their hands. As such, some philosophers and scientists held and promulgated negative stereotypes or characteristics about these ancient, foreign people. Thus, in scholarly writings that concern the *prisca*, we often see two contradictory views: the people of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China are viewed as sources of both revelation and corruption; that is, they were the original recipients and disseminators of a primordial body of ancient wisdom and knowledge, and Early Modern Europeans felt that they had much to learn from them, but they were also the reason why this knowledge was inaccurately handed down to their descendants or disappeared altogether.

As it concerns Rameau, we will see the composer and theorist, whose intellectual aspirations frequently led him to appropriate the theories and methods of his scholarly contemporaries, incorporate these occultist and orientalist ideas concerning a privileged and ancient body of sacred knowledge into his two theoretical works *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, in both of these works, Rameau imitates contemporary scholarly narratives of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* by portraying the people of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China as having been the original possessors of the sacred, all-encompassing knowledge of his *corps*

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of revelation was rejected by most philosophers and scientists who were strongly aligned with the Enlightenment since the idea of revelation was in conflict with these thinkers' rational and empirical outlooks on the acquisition of knowledge; however, as will be detailed throughout this dissertation, the belief in revelation was still viable for certain occult philosophers and scientists.

*sonore*, which was then disseminated to Europe; however, while Rameau describes these ancient civilizations as the original bearers and disseminators of the *corps sonore*'s revelation, he also imitates and propagates contemporary ideas about these same Ancient Eastern people as having been responsible for knowledge of the *corps sonore* becoming corrupted and eventually disappearing from human consciousness.

Interestingly, these occultist ideas about the Ancient Orient's possession of higher, privileged knowledge were not limited to Rameau's later theoretical writings; they are also present in four of his operatic works, most of which were composed prior to his two aforementioned treatises: *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*; *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie*; *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie*; and *Les Paladins*. Like his theoretical writings, in these operas, we are introduced to Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese. These different civilizations do not interact with each other in Rameau's operas (they appear in works that are independent from one another); however, despite the vastly different situations portrayed in these works, they are connected by the overarching theme of revelation. As in his theoretical writings, these operas depict people from Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China as sources of revelatory knowledge to characters from the Occidental world, namely, Ancient Greece for the first three operas and early medieval Italy in *Les Paladins*.<sup>16</sup> While the knowledge that these Eastern characters possess or impart is not the *corps sonore* (and not related to music in general) as it is in Rameau's writings, the knowledge is still revelatory to the Western characters in a

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<sup>16</sup> While Thomas Christensen has stated that people from Rameau's time would not have considered Ancient Greece to be part of the European West because it was part of the Ottoman Empire (Thomas Christensen, "Music Theory, Cultural Transfer and Colonial Hybridity," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 15.2 (2018): 16), I have to disagree on this point. This may have been applicable to the contemporaneous Greeks of Rameau's time, but Early Modern European scholars largely considered themselves to be the descendants of the Ancient Greek intellectual legacy and culture and did not view the Ancient Greeks as "others." This is explained by Margaret Geoga and John Steele in *The Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca. 1600-1800*, eds. Margaret Geoga and John Steele (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 5.

significant way. Furthermore, as will be detailed in this dissertation's third chapter, like the specific skills or higher knowledge that contemporary philosophers and scientists attributed to the people of each of these ancient civilizations, Rameau also endows each of these civilizations' people with these same types of skills and knowledge. Additionally, like his theoretical works and the works of his intellectual contemporaries, Rameau's Ancient Oriental operas depict Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese as possessing negative or corrupt characteristics. Ultimately, these operas depict these ancient foreign people as agents of revelation but also of corruption.

To summarize, this dissertation's objective is to show that Rameau's depictions of the Ancient Orient – specifically his depictions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China – in both his theoretical writings and operas are connected by the overarching theme of revelation, and that all of these portrayals exhibit influence from contemporary occultist notions of revelation and corruption as they relate to the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*. To be clear, Rameau's theoretical works *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* will be analyzed alongside the occultist writings of scholars from the Enlightenment, and this dissertation will demonstrate that the composer's descriptions of the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese closely mirror the positive and negative characteristics that were promulgated by contemporary intellectuals as it concerns these peoples' identities as bearers and corruptors of revelation.

While Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* closely imitate the orientalism found in the occultist works of many of his contemporaries, Rameau often does not provide his readers with the exact sources from which he drew upon. It is, therefore, important to note that the purpose of this dissertation is not to prove that specific

individuals may or may not have directly influenced the composer's writings (apart from the few which he credited) or that Rameau studied any specific occult philosophies such as Hermeticism, but to demonstrate that the orientalism in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* was fostered within the intellectual sphere of occult philosophy and science during the Age of Enlightenment, specifically as it relates to the combined themes of revelation and the Ancient Orient.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to his theoretical works, the libretti of Rameau's four aforementioned Ancient Oriental operas will be individually analyzed in a similar manner; that is, each of these operas will be shown to promulgate the same narrative of revelation and corruption than can be seen in Rameau's writings. This is particularly interesting since musicologists generally write about the orientalism and the associated occult elements in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* in a dismissive way, suggesting that his departure from the rational and empirical methods in his former treatises was sudden, unanticipated, or simply the result of an elderly composer who was gradually losing his ability to reason; however, the appearance of the same themes and portrayals in his operas that preceded the composition of these treatises indicates that Rameau had been engaging with these occultist ideas and the associated orientalism with his librettists long before he penned the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*. Since scholars, notably Cynthia Verba, have observed the theory-practice and practice-theory relationship between Rameau's theoretical writings and his compositions – that is, the observation that his compositions are often informed by his theoretical findings and vice versa – this study draws a further connection, specifically a

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<sup>17</sup> My approach is similar to Abigail Shupe's, whose dissertation "Aspects of Newtonianism in Rameau's *Génération harmonique*" does not seek to show Rameau's exact sources of Newtonianism in his *Génération harmonique*, but to situate this treatise "in an intellectual milieu that included Newtonianism." Abigail Shupe, "Aspects of Newtonianism in Rameau's *Génération harmonique*," (PhD diss., Western University, 2014), 3.

philosophical, thematic connection instead of a musical connection, between his operas and his theoretical work.

### **Significance and Relationship to Existing Literature**

The significance of this dissertation is twofold: first, it will contribute to the growing literature on musical exoticism (specifically orientalism) in which Baroque opera – especially French Baroque opera of the Enlightenment – has been neglected. In fact, while there have been a number of published studies dedicated to analyzing musical exoticism of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries such as Matthew Head’s *Orientalism, Masquerade, and Mozart’s Turkish Music* (2000), Richard E. Mueller’s *Beauty and Innovation in la machine chinoise: Falla, Debussy, Ravel, Roussel* (2018), and W. Anthony Sheppard’s *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (2019), a study solely dedicated to French Baroque musical exoticism remains to be undertaken. While musicologists Miriam Whaples and Ralph Locke have both published large scale works on exotic operas that were composed prior to the nineteenth century,<sup>18</sup> neither scholar allots significant attention to French Baroque music of the Enlightenment, and both limit their discussions of the topic to exoticism within Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes* (as do most studies on musical exoticism) despite the prevalence of non-European themes in his subsequent operas such as those that will be studied in this dissertation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Whaples’s dissertation “Exoticism in Dramatic Music, 1600-1800” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958) addresses musical exoticism prior to the nineteenth century, and Locke’s *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) also provides insight on musical exoticism prior to the nineteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> This refers to Whaples’s and Locke’s following publications: Miriam Whaples, “Exoticism in Dramatic Music, 1600-1800” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1958); Ralph P. Locke, *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

As it concerns Rameau's use of exoticism and its connection to Enlightenment thought, while several musicologists have acknowledged the inclusion of Enlightenment themes within the libretti of his exotic works, there has not yet been an effort to situate these compositions within the larger context of French Enlightenment culture, especially as it concerns occult philosophy and science. This absence may suggest that Rameau's exotic themes were arbitrary choices despite the similarities between his operas' archetypes and those employed by the philosophical communities with whom he sought to align himself. Additionally, the decision to analyze Rameau's exoticism apart from his extensive engagement with eighteenth-century philosophy and science potentially precludes a new way to further understand the impact of Enlightenment thought on his operas' structures, notably, his operas' themes. An example of musicological literature that analyzes Rameau's exotic themes apart from his philosophical and scientific interests can be observed in Ralph Locke's analysis of *Les Indes galantes* in his 2009 book *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*.

Locke begins his analysis of *Les Indes galantes* by stating that its libretto "was no doubt inspired by several famous recent *opéra-ballets* that were set in Venice and other favoured travel destinations."<sup>20</sup> This opening sentence suggests that the work's display of cultural diversity derives principally from the works of other composers. Essentially, Locke does not mention the possibility that *Les Indes galantes*' exotic themes could have held deeper significance as a result of Rameau's well-established connection to the philosophical sphere. Next, Locke notes the presence of Enlightenment archetypes such as the Noble Savage. This is followed by his observation that the *opéra-ballet*'s exploration of different cultures appears to draw upon the "encyclopedic world tour" of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*; however,

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<sup>20</sup> Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 98.

he does not elaborate on the similarities between the two works.<sup>21</sup> Instead, Locke proceeds to analyze the libretto of *Les Indes galantes*, and notes the foreign characters who promulgate Enlightenment ideals such as the condemnation of political corruption and religious fanaticism. Yet, despite observing the similarities between the libretto's exoticism and contemporaneous philosophical archetypes, Locke's analysis implies that the presence of Enlightenment themes is arbitrary. Essentially, he does not identify a connection to Rameau's treatises and *tragédies en musique* that embrace Enlightenment thought, the Enlightenment themes that appear in conjunction with his subsequent operas' foreign characters, or that Rameau associated with Diderot, d'Alembert, and others within the philosophical community.

In addition to *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*, Locke penned another book on musical exoticism titled *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* (2015) which focuses on music composed prior to the nineteenth century; however, analysis of Rameau's operatic exoticism is still limited to *Les Indes galantes* and there is also no further analysis of the opera's Enlightenment themes as they connect to Rameau's engagement with Enlightenment philosophy and science.

Although *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* and *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* are excellent examinations of the sociopolitical influences that contributed to the creation of exotic musical works throughout each epoch of Western art music, Locke's analyses of *Les Indes galantes* begs for further and deeper discussion of the work's foreign themes as they relate to Rameau's involvement in contemporary French Enlightenment culture. It is curious that there has not yet been a thorough study dedicated to musical exoticism of the French Enlightenment or Rameau's compositions given that he was the leading composer

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

of French opera in the mid-eighteenth century, a time when France was at the forefront of creating exotic works, and exoticism features heavily in his other operas apart from *Les Indes galantes*.

In addition to *Les Indes galantes*, the exoticism in two of Rameau's other operatic works *Zaïs* and *Zoroastre* has occasionally been mentioned in a few scholarly articles and in books dedicated to the composer, but like *Les Indes galantes*, apart from scholars having noted the presence of foreign characters and Enlightenment themes in these works, attention to the use of exoticism has not been at the centre of these studies and therefore these operas have not been examined in a sustained fashion or within the larger context of French Enlightenment culture.

While the exoticism in *Les Indes galantes*, *Zaïs*, and *Zoroastre* has received some attention in musicological discourse, scholars who specialize in musical exoticism have almost entirely neglected analyses of the exoticism in the four operas at the heart of this dissertation: *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*; *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Famille*; *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie*; and *Les Paladins*. My dissertation seeks to fill this lacuna in musicological scholarship by establishing that the exoticism in these four neglected operas was consistently rooted in Occult Enlightenment thought concerning Europe's Ancient Oriental "others" and served, moreover, as vehicles of such thought.

Second, this dissertation will contribute to the field of what Cynthia Verba describes as "studies in music and the Enlightenment,"<sup>22</sup> specifically as it relates to the connection between Rameau's theories and his practical work as a composer and as a figure of the Enlightenment. To date, a number of scholars have added to this field by examining the presence of Enlightenment thought in Rameau's theoretical treatises; but few have explored the relationship between this

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<sup>22</sup> Cynthia Verba describes this field as "studies in music and the Enlightenment" in *Music and the French Enlightenment: Rameau and the Philosophes in Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xi.

and Rameau's most celebrated compositions, his operas.<sup>23</sup> Verba's *Dramatic Expression in Rameau's Tragédie en Musique* is one of the only works which examines the theory-practice relationship in Rameau's operas, specifically, his *tragédies en musique*. Verba conducts her study within the context of Enlightenment culture and shows how contemporary ideas on topics such as gender contributed to shaping the structures of his operas and theories; however, there has not yet been a study dedicated to the occult aspects of Rameau's theories, how they manifest in his operas, and how this relates to the broader context of Enlightenment thought.

As it concerns Rameau's theoretical treatises apart from his operas, although a few scholars have discussed his theoretical works during the last years of his life and the occultist air that permeates their content, unfortunately, these fascinating works have largely been eclipsed by their earlier rational and empirical counterparts. This is particularly evident in Thomas Christensen's *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (1993).

In *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, the scholarly pursuits of Jean-Philippe Rameau are recounted and contextualized within contemporary Enlightenment culture. Central to Christensen's study is Rameau's relationship with intellectuals such as the *philosophes*, and how the composer drew upon and appropriated knowledge acquired from these various acquaintances and written sources in order to bolster the credibility of his own theoretical works in the eyes of the foremost academic institutions and scholars in Europe. As previously mentioned, however, Christensen's study is focused on the height of Rameau's career and his interactions with the *philosophes* and other philosophers and scientists prior to the 1760s. Indeed, the final chapter of his book explains how Rameau's theoretical writings adopted an occultist or metaphysical air, and Christensen does briefly bring attention to the fact that Rameau uses

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<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Verba, *Dramatic Expression in Rameau's Tragédie en Musique: Between Tradition and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

exoticism in a way that reflects the writings of the *philosophes* (although he does not elaborate on how this is accomplished); however, this is not where the focus of his study lies and, as such, this section is significantly underdeveloped compared to the rest of the book's content on Rameau's earlier years. While there is mention of the *Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, the discussion of their relationship to contemporary Occult Enlightenment thought is very brief and lacking in comparison to Christensen's analyses of Rameau's earlier works. Essentially, as it concerns Rameau's theoretical writings, this dissertation continues with the period in Rameau's life that concluded Christensen's *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*.

Like his aforementioned book, Christensen also wrote an essay titled *Music Theory, Cultural Transfer, and Colonial Hybridity* (2018), which mentions the orientalism in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*, but it does not provide an accurate or thorough explanation of how these ideas reflect contemporary Enlightenment literature. For example, when referring to Rameau's portrayals of Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese, Christensen states: "Of course we may be duly skeptical of Rameau's fable regarding the ancient global peregrinations of the triple progression. It seems all too redolent of other happy fictions we may read in many Enlightenment narratives that seek to make history conform to certain rationalist conceits, particularly regarding the supposed wisdom and morality of non-Western people."<sup>24</sup> Accompanying this passage, in a footnote, Christensen writes: "One thinks of writings such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) or Denis Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1771),"<sup>25</sup> which are problematic comparisons because they suggest that Rameau's

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Christensen, "Music Theory, Cultural Transfer and Colonial Hybridity," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 15.2 (2018): 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

use of orientalism lacks a specific approach and is rather arbitrary. Indeed, nowhere in this essay does Christensen observe that Rameau's portrayals of the Ancient East specifically mirror the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* narratives. Instead, he states that "one thinks of" Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* or Diderot's *Bougainville*, which are in no way reflective of the occultist themes used in Rameau's writings, the narrative, nor the cultures. Neither Montesquieu's nor Diderot's writings that Christensen mentions involve Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, or Chinese and their connections to primordial and sacred bodies of knowledge, and Rameau's writings do not involve the ethnicities – or time periods – in these *philosophes'* aforementioned works. Fundamentally, the way that Christensen has written these passages suggests that he views Rameau's exoticism as arbitrary and that he was not drawing on any specific ideas, which as this dissertation's second and third chapters will argue, is not the case.

Additionally, Mark Howard has published a translation and commentary on Rameau's *Code de musique pratique* titled *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science. A translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (2016). The English translation of this work is a very useful addition to the world of Rameau studies, since, as previously mentioned, this is one of Rameau's theoretical works which has been neglected in comparison to his earlier theoretical writings. Howard's commentary, as well as the historical information on the work's publication and reception history, is also very insightful and is an excellent complement to Rameau's text.

Necessarily, since orientalism is so prevalent in the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*, Howard provides his opinions on Rameau's various assertions as they pertain to the Orient, and notes the similarities to some philosophers' writings of the time; however, Howard does not make the connection that Rameau's portrayals of the Ancient Orient are indicative of

the doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* as it concerns the three specific Ancient Eastern cultures that are presented in his work. For example, when explaining that scholars commonly used the biblical figure Adam (who appears in Rameau's writings and who I have categorized as Mesopotamian in Chapter 3) to explain their studies' origins, Howard states in a footnote that "historical scenarios involving Adam were common, and Adam appears in several treatises in which authors discuss the origins of their topic. For example, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac begins with Adam and Eve in his chapter titled 'The Origin and Progress of Language' in *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746). Condillac, as Rameau does later, introduces some assumptions about biblical events in order to argue his overall point."<sup>26</sup> While the information that Howard provides here is correct, I find it to be too unspecific since, when reading the precise passage in Condillac's work to which Howard refers, there is a clear indication that Condillac is referring to Adam as having been the original recipient of the *prisci*. To be clear, Condillac, when discussing the origin of language, states that Adam did not need to gradually acquire the skill of language during infancy as did his descendants. Rather, he received a complete knowledge and understanding of language from the divine upon his creation. As will be explained in the following chapters, this is indicative of the doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, the occult principles with which Adam was strongly associated in Early Modern Europe.

More recently, Qingfan Jiang has written an article titled "In Search of the 'Oriental Origin:' Rameau, Rousseau, and Chinese Music in Eighteenth-Century France" (2022). This article provides some interesting information on how Rameau engaged with Chinese music and history

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 577.

in order to construct his history of the *corps sonore* and, as Jiang notes, “foreground[s] the importance of Chinese music in the formation of their [Rameau’s and Rousseau’s] influential concepts of the *corps sonore* and the unity of music and language respectively;”<sup>27</sup> however, the author’s perspective on Rameau’s engagement with Chinese music focuses on the favourable aspects that the composer wrote about this Ancient Eastern civilization and neglects to mention the inferior qualities that Rameau assigns to Chinese people and their music. Essentially, Rameau’s viewpoint is more nuanced than Jiang presents and as this dissertation will show, Rameau presents the Chinese in both a positive and negative light reflecting this dissertation’s theme of revelation and corruption as it relates to the *prisci*.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation draws upon a wide selection of primary and secondary sources, the former of which are used to demonstrate the various intellectual discourses on the Ancient Orient that were circulating in Early Modern Europe and the latter of which are primarily used to provide historical context or contemporary scholarly perspectives where applicable. As it concerns primary sources, many of these works were originally written in eighteenth-century French, and I used existing English translations whenever at my disposal for quotations included in the dissertation’s text; however, some of these sources were not available in English. In those cases, I translated the documents from French to English and provided the translations in the body of my dissertation. Most notably, I used my own translation of Rameau’s *Origine des sciences* throughout this dissertation and Mark Howard’s translation of the *Code de musique pratique* and

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<sup>27</sup> Qingfan Jiang, “In Search of the ‘Oriental Origin:’ Rameau, Rousseau and Chinese Music in Eighteenth-Century France” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 19.2 (2022): 125.

its *Nouvelles réflexions*. I also provided all the English translations for Rameau's libretti included in this dissertation, which were published in French by Philidor, the digital resource portal of the Centre de Musique Baroque Versailles. As it concerns analyses of Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, I often consider and analyze these two sources in conjunction with one another since Rameau specified in his *Origine des sciences* that he intended it to be a continuation of the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*.<sup>28</sup>

As for secondary sources, literature concerning Enlightenment philosophy, science, and culture, specifically those that concern music, exoticism, and the occult form the main body of contemporary scholarship that I engaged with while conducting research for this dissertation. As it concerns music and the Enlightenment, Thomas Christensen's work, primarily *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, was important in providing a broad history of Rameau's engagement with the world of eighteenth-century philosophy and science, and how he used the methods of many contemporaneous intellectuals to conduct his own theoretical investigations.

Additionally, Cynthia Verba's *Dramatic Expression in Rameau's Tragédie en musique: Between Tradition and Enlightenment* (2013) was important for demonstrating how Rameau incorporated Enlightenment thought into the structures of his operas and how his theoretical works and operatic works informed each other in what Verba calls the "theory-practice" or "practice-theory" relationship. This helped to lay the foundation for my dissertation which analyzes the link between orientalism and revelation present in both Rameau's theoretical work

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau: "From now on, the *Origine des sciences* and the following *Observations* will be joined to my *Code de musique pratique*." From Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761): Observations de M. Rameau, sur son ouvrage intitulé Origine des sciences* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 29. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

and operas, affirming a thematic connection that may constitute another type of theory-practice or practice-theory relationship.

While Christensen's and Verba's works helped to inform me on the ways in which Rameau engaged with Enlightenment culture in a broad context and how this shaped his earlier theoretical works and his *tragédies en musique*, literature which addressed the occult aspects of Enlightenment thought helped to provide a foundation for understanding the occultist ideas present within Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*, *Origine des sciences*, as well as the themes of the four operas analyzed in this dissertation. For example, Paul Kléber Monod's book *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of the Enlightenment* (2013) was particularly helpful in understanding various Enlightenment scholars' perceptions of the occult in light of what is currently deemed to be the occult. Additionally, Monod's book provided me with a term to describe the undercurrent of occultism that persisted during the Age of Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and empiricism – the "Occult Enlightenment."

Indeed, Monod's work helped to provide a general overview of the occult during the Age of Enlightenment; however, scholarship dedicated to Hermeticism during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, notably Florian Ebeling's book *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (2007), provided me with the information that was necessary to more thoroughly understand this philosophical tradition's ideologies and how they were perceived, practiced, and propagated during the Renaissance and throughout the Enlightenment.

As it concerns exoticism, or orientalism, during the Enlightenment, David Allan Harvey's *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (2012) provided this dissertation with general information on discourse

concerning non-European people from around the globe, particularly the prevalence of Sinophilia in eighteenth-century France. For different eighteenth-century perspectives on cultures of the Ancient Orient, some of the most insightful and informative works I consulted were the various essays on Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia/Babylon in the book *Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca.1600-1800* (edited by Margaret Geoga and John Steele, 2022), which explained how different scholarly perceptions of the Ancient East impacted various European literary and artistic works as well as philosophy and science.

### **Chapter Summaries**

This introduction serves as the dissertation's first chapter. A summary of the remaining three chapters follows.

#### Chapter 2: The Hermetic Tradition and Rameau's *Corps sonore* as *Prisca Theologia* and *Prisca Sapientia*

This chapter will provide historical context on the occult philosophical tradition of Hermeticism as well as the proliferation of two doctrines that emerged from its teachings – the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*. Additionally, this chapter will introduce and explain Rameau's theory of the *corps sonore* and his two theoretical works *Code de musique pratique* and the *Nouvelles réflexions* contained within, as well as the *Origine des sciences*. In discussion of these two works, the *corps sonore* will be shown to possess very similar qualities to the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*.

Chapter 3: The Ancient East as a Source of Revelation and Corruption in Early Modern Europe: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China in the Writings and Ideologies of Philosophers, Scientists, and Rameau

Because this dissertation focuses on Rameau's portrayals of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China and how he drew upon existing philosophical and scientific ideas concerning revelation and corruption, this chapter centres upon the philosophers, scientists, and secret societies – both within and outside of France (since French Enlightenment culture was influenced by scholars abroad, such as Newton) – preceding and during the eighteenth century who propagated contradictory notions that the people of the Ancient Orient were sources of primordial, revelatory knowledge (the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*) but also contributed to its corruption. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, specific stereotypes developed that were associated with each ancient civilization. These stereotypes were then propagated and recycled from scholar to scholar including Rameau. While the orientalism in Rameau's operas will be addressed in chapter four, the orientalism in his theoretical writings *Origine des sciences* and *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* is analyzed in this section in conjunction with select philosophical and scientific works of his contemporaries as well as those of earlier eras, but whose ideas persisted into the Enlightenment. Analysis of Rameau's two theoretical works will reveal how he utilized various philosophical and scientific ideas concerning Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China's connections to revelation and corruption to bolster the credibility of his own theories concerning the origins of music and the *corps sonore*.

Chapter 4: Revelation and Corruption in Rameau's Ancient Oriental Operas: *Les Fêtes de L'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte; La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie; Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie; and Les Paladins*

Like the previous chapter which demonstrated that the portrayals of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China in Rameau's theoretical writings were modeled on the occultist ideas promulgated by different scholars in Early Modern Europe, this chapter will show that these same ideas informed the portrayals of these specific Eastern cultures in his operatic works as well, most of which were composed prior to the publication of his *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*. As will be shown, these four operas portray Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and the Chinese as sources of revelation and corruption in alignment with the stereotypes that also appear in Rameau's theoretical works. Each opera will be analyzed in its own section and instances of revelation and corruption will be highlighted in the libretti's texts.

## Chapter 2:

### The Hermetic Tradition and Rameau's *Corps sonore* as *Prisca Theologia* and *Prisca Sapientia*

While this dissertation's overarching goal is to show how Rameau's two aforementioned theoretical works and operas portray the Ancient Orient as both sources of revelation and corruption in alignment with occultist notions of his time, it is first necessary to explain that these ideas concerning revelation and corruption were directly related to the belief that people from the Ancient East were the original recipients, bearers, and eventual corruptors of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*. This chapter will first recount the history of the *prisci* body of knowledge within the Hermetic tradition and will be followed by an analysis of how Rameau's descriptions of the *corps sonore* in the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* resemble the *prisci* doctrines.

The terms *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* first appeared in fifteenth-century Europe. When the word "prisca," which is the Latin word for "old" or "ancient," was combined with the words "sapientia" ("wisdom") and "theologia" ("theology"), it referred to a primordial body of wisdom and knowledge that was believed to have had existed since the beginning of humanity. The two *prisci* are related concepts; however, a few differences exist in respect to the knowledge associated with each. To be specific, the *prisca theologia* concerned the universal monotheistic tenets that God had given directly to the first man, Adam – that is, a divine revelation.<sup>29</sup> Scholars

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<sup>29</sup> These monotheistic tenets were given to the first human (the biblical figure Adam in the Bible's book of Genesis) and cultivated by his descendants in subsequent centuries of Antiquity, who Early Modern Europeans called the "Ancients." According to the scholarship I have read from the eighteenth century and earlier, there does not appear to have been a consistent sense of what constituted as "the Ancients" in terms of timeline. "The Ancients" are referred to very broadly and encompass people ranging from the Judeo-Christian creation story to Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and various, often unspecified, eras in Ancient China, Egypt, and Chaldea. This is also true for Rameau's theoretical writings, which do not specify exact timelines for the people of the Ancient Orient apart from very broad

who upheld the existence of the *prisci* believed that after the creation of the first man, God imparted to him knowledge of the proper way to worship and a comprehensive understanding of the divine. These theological principles were then shared among all early human nations (“the Ancients”) and were carefully studied and preserved by each culture’s most learned individuals;<sup>30</sup> however, as indicated in the works of Renaissance, seventeenth, and eighteenth-century thinkers who wrote about the *prisci*, the first recipients of these ancient theological principles were the inhabitants of the Ancient Orient (the specifics of these nations will be detailed in the following chapter) who then transmitted their knowledge to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, although early humans had all, at one point, possessed knowledge of the one “true” universal monotheistic faith (which was in alignment with the Christian idea of monotheism), this knowledge was gradually degraded by the rise of idolatry, as the majority of nations, including all those in Europe, eventually adopted entirely pagan belief systems.

Like the *prisca theologia*, the *prisca sapientia* was believed to be the higher knowledge and wisdom that was originally possessed by people of the Ancient Orient, which was then disseminated to the Occident; however, whereas the *prisca theologia* referred to knowledge of God, the original religion, and its associated practices, the *prisca sapientia* referred to the advanced body of knowledge concerning the arts, sciences (particularly cosmology), and the occult sciences (such as alchemy and astrology). The *prisca sapientia* was also considered to be a divine revelation, since this knowledge was believed to have been given to humanity by God

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or vague references such as Egypt during the time of Pythagoras and biblical figures in the book of Genesis (they are frequently divided as pre-diluvian and ante-diluvian, which refers to the global flood story in Genesis).

<sup>30</sup> Tom Dixon, *Music, Nature and Divine Knowledge in England 1650-1750: Between the Rational and the Mystical* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2023), 169.

along with the *prisca theologia*. As a result of the corruption of the true, original religion, the *prisca sapientia* also became corrupted and was eventually lost.<sup>31</sup>

While the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* were widely known among scholars in Early Modern Europe, the acceptance of their veracity was not, what Tom Dixon has described as, “mainstream.”<sup>32</sup> That is, although there were certainly scholars – particularly those who were drawn to the occult – who embraced the belief that there had existed an ancient sacred, uncorrupted body of knowledge that God had imparted to humanity, there remained understandable resistance to this speculation. Specifically, sceptics were opposed to the combination of ideas concerning the Christian God and mythological figures from decidedly non-Christian traditions.<sup>33</sup> Yet, despite objections from Church authorities, there were still Catholic intellectuals who propagated this controversial idea. One important figure was the Italian humanist scholar and Catholic priest, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who was the first person to use the term *prisca theologia* as it relates to a primordial, universal monotheism,<sup>34</sup> and who saw evidence for this concept in the writings of an Ancient Eastern, non-Christian sage.

Ficino believed that one of the most significant recipients and disseminators of the *prisca theologia* was a mythical figure from Ancient Egypt named Hermes Trismegistus, after whom Hermeticism takes its name. Hermes Trismegistus’s origin story begins with the combination of

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<sup>31</sup> Mark A. Waddell, *Magic, Science, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24; Tessa Morrison, *Isaac Newton’s Temple of Solomon and his Reconstruction of Sacred Architecture* (Basel: Springer Basel, 2011), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Tom Dixon, *Music, Nature and Divine Knowledge in England 1650-1750: Between the Rational and the Mystical* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2023), 171.

<sup>33</sup> As will soon be demonstrated, there were philosophers and scientists during the Renaissance (and the Middle Ages) who believed that mythological figures such as Orpheus were real people, although they were reframed within a Christian context. For example, Ficino (among others) believed that Orpheus had been a prophet. Because of Orpheus’s association with music, Ficino believed that music had the ability to control various elements of the natural world and could even exert power over death. Jacomien Prins, “Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Cardano under Orpheus’s Spell” in *Music, Myth and Story in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. Katherine Butler and Samantha Bassler (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2019), 107.

<sup>34</sup> Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), viii.

mythology from two distinct and powerful ancient civilizations: Greece and Egypt. He was a syncretic blend of the Ancient Greek deity Hermes, who was the god of heraldry and diplomacy, and the Egyptian deity Thoth, who was the god of the moon, learning, and wisdom. While the two deities were sometimes viewed interchangeably, particularly among the Greeks, the two ancient cultures also assigned different characteristics to Hermes and Thoth. The combination of these traits eventually led to the development of the figure Hermes Trismegistus, who was believed to have been an Ancient Egyptian sage who had been acquainted with the biblical prophet Moses (approximately 3000 years prior to the time of Ficino).<sup>35</sup>

Although Hermes Trismegistus was an imaginary figure, Ficino and other contemporary occult philosophers believed that he was a real person.<sup>36</sup> For example, in the following passage, Ficino describes the Egyptian sage as if he were recounting the deeds of a historical figure. Here, Ficino explains that Mercury (which was another name for Hermes) was the first theologian who preserved the sacred knowledge of the *prisca* in writing. His name is followed by a list of several well-known mythical and historical Greek figures (which culminates in Plato) who are listed as subsequent recipients and preservers of the *prisca*: “He [Hermes] was called the first author of theology. He was followed by Orpheus, who gained second rank among the ancient theologians. Aglaophemus was initiated into the Orphic mysteries, Pythagoras followed him in theology, and the latter was followed by Philolaus, who was the teacher of our divine Plato. There thus arose a single, internally consistent primal theology (*prisca theologia*), from six theologians in wonderful order, which had its beginning in Mercury [Hermes] and its fulfillment in Plato.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mark A. Waddell, *Magic, Science, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13, 25; Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), viii.

<sup>36</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Western Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 390.

<sup>37</sup> Marsilio Ficino’s forward to the *Corpus Hermeticum* quoted in Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 62.

Despite Hermes Trismegistus being a pagan, he was thought to have endorsed and propagated an early monotheistic faith that closely resembled the “one true faith” (Christianity). Indeed, Ficino tells us that he was not just a philosopher, but also a prophet, and that Hermes had foretold the coming of Christ and his resurrection: “He [Hermes] often spoke not just as a philosopher, but as a prophet.”<sup>38</sup> He foresaw the fall of the ancient religions, the coming of Christ, the Judgement to come, the Resurrection, the glory of the blessed, and the punishment of the sinners. Augustine thus wonders whether he brought forth much from his knowledge of the stars or through the revelation of demons. But Lactantius does not hesitate to count him among the Sibyls and prophets.”<sup>39</sup> As seen in the last sentence of this quote, Hermes Trismegistus had been a well-known, and controversial, theological figure in Christianity since Late Antiquity (which continued through the Middle Ages), with the likes of Augustine of Hippo and the writer Lactantius referring to him in their writings.

In addition to appearing in various written works of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Hermes Trismegistus was credited with having authored his own collection of seventeen esoteric texts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which instructed on topics including philosophy, astrology, and religion; however, during the Middle Ages, the *Corpus Hermeticum* disappeared. In fact, its whereabouts remained unknown until it was rediscovered and subsequently acquired

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Although the orientalism aspect of the *prisci* narrative is not the focus of this chapter (this will be discussed in detail in the next chapter), I would like to point out that since Ficino identifies Hermes as the source of the Greeks’ knowledge of the *prisca theologia*, we see an example of the Ancient Orient (specifically Ancient Egypt in this case) identified as the source of revelation to Greece, one of the cradles of Western civilization.

<sup>38</sup> Hermes Trismegistus refers to himself as a prophet in the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “Speaking as a prophet, I will tell you that after us will remain (...).” This quote was taken from Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74.

<sup>39</sup> Marsilio Ficino’s forward to the *Corpus Hermeticum* quoted in Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 62.

by Marsilio Ficino's patron in the fifteenth century.<sup>40</sup> In approximately 1462, Ficino had been in the process of translating the works of Plato from Greek to Latin; however, in the midst of this endeavour his work was interrupted by his patron Cosimo de' Medici, who had another project in mind. The influential Florentine had come into the possession of a collection of ancient writings that had been unearthed by a monk in Macedonia, and he wanted Ficino to redirect his focus to translating these manuscripts.<sup>41</sup> Although these works were also written in Greek, they were not written by Plato; they were the works that constituted the lost *Corpus Hermeticum*, which had been attributed to the hand of Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>42</sup>

The *Corpus Hermeticum* is composed of a series of dialogues in which Hermes speaks with various people such as his son Tat and Asclepius. In these dialogues, Hermes is either the disseminator or recipient of divine revelation or wisdom. For example, in the first and most important treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* called *Poimandres*, which focuses on Hermes as the recipient of the *prisca theologia*, the Egyptian sage explains that, upon contemplating the mysteries of God, the universe, and its nature, he was approached by "an enormous being completely unbounded in size [who] seemed to appear to me and call my name and say to me: 'What do you want to hear and see; what do you want to learn and know from your understanding?'"<sup>43</sup> This mysterious being informs Hermes that he is Poimandres, a divine entity who is capable of revealing to him all knowledge of theology and the universe. Poimandres then grants Hermes visions of the creation of the world and all its creatures, a narrative that strongly

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<sup>40</sup> Antoine Faivre, "Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esotericism," in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Mark A. Waddell, *Magic, Science, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

resembles the biblical creation story in the book of Genesis. Indeed, the similarities between the teachings in the Christian Bible and the *Corpus Hermeticum* were what permitted Renaissance intellectuals to embrace the teachings of a non-Christian figure. Although he was a Pagan, Hermes Trismegistus's teachings were viewed as fundamentally compatible with the tenets of Christianity due to the way in which God was portrayed in his works; that is, as a single loving deity – identified as “father” in the same way that he is portrayed in the Christian New Testament – who is master of all creation and who created humans in his image.<sup>44</sup>

While the *Corpus Hermeticum* reflected biblical teachings concerning humanity's relationship to the divine, it additionally provided a detailed description of the primordial sacred knowledge of which the first man had been made cognizant. In the following excerpt from *Poimandres*, the divine entity reveals to Hermes the secrets of the first man's experience of “breaking through the vault” to observe the “the fair form of God.” During his experience, God allows the man to see through or beyond the universe, which is described in the text as the “cosmic framework:” “Having all authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals, the man broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework, thus displaying to lower nature the fair form of God.”<sup>45</sup> These words describe a mystical experience through which the first man acquired knowledge or consciousness of the universe, the heavens, and of God himself, which he was then able to share with “lower nature” (the Earth); however, this information was not available to those who only read the Bible.<sup>46</sup> Since the Bible did not

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<sup>44</sup> “Mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a man like himself whom he loved as his own child. The man was most fair: he had the father's image; and God, who was really in love with his own form, bestowed on him all his craftworks,” quoted in Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> In fact, the book of Genesis does not mention anything about the first man having had access to sacred knowledge of the universe or the nature of God. On the contrary, in Genesis, God forbids Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. It is only through disobeying God and eating from the Tree of Knowledge that Adam gains insight into

detail the revelation that the first man supposedly received, to readers of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the realization that humanity had once had unrestricted access to the secrets of the universe and the divine was only brought to light through the revelation of *Hermes Trismegistus*. This is substantiated by the following excerpt from the *Corpus Hermeticum* in which Poimandres tells Hermes: “This [the revelation of the first man’s divine knowledge] is the mystery that has been kept hidden until this very day [the day on which *Poimandres* appeared to Hermes].” Ultimately, this knowledge was believed to be privileged, secret, and only attainable to those who sought it in Hermetic writings.

In addition to revealing the esoteric, divine knowledge that the first man possessed, the *Corpus Hermeticum* enticed its readers with the prospect of being able to uncover such great knowledge for themselves. For example, in the following passage from his conversation with Poimandres, Hermes asks the divine being how the soul can be reunited with God and transcend the material world<sup>47</sup> to which Poimandres explains that “those who have received knowledge” “enter into God” and thus are “to be made God:”

First, in releasing the material body you give the body over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body’s senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature. Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third the illusion of longing, now inactive; at the fourth the ruler’s arrogance, now freed of excess; at the fifth unholy presumption and daring recklessness; at the sixth the evil impulses that come from wealth, now inactive; and at the seventh zone the deceit that lies in ambush. And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the

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the existence of good and evil; however, apart from the knowledge of good and evil, we are not told that he received any higher, divine knowledge of the universe or God.

<sup>47</sup> Hermes asks Poimandres: “But tell me again [about] the way up; tell me how it happens.”

Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

ogdoadic region and hymn God with sweet voice. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into God. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made God.<sup>48</sup>

The quote above mentions that the metaphysical reward for those who have received knowledge will be to “be made God” by entering into God. This knowledge was not purely intellectual; rather, it was a spiritual awareness. That being said, what exactly would allow humanity to attain this mystical knowledge or spiritual awareness? Throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermes and those with whom he communicates discuss the ways in which one can transcend the physical world and know the divine. One of the ways to achieve this was through music, as it was believed to be part of the very fabric of the universe. This is confirmed in the following passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which Hermes tells Asclepius that knowing music is equivalent to understanding the divine structure of the cosmos: “Knowing music is nothing more than being versed in the correct sequence of all things together as allotted by divine reason. By divine song, this sequencing or marshalling of each particular thing into a single whole through reason’s craftwork produces a certain concord – very sweet and very true.”<sup>49</sup> Fundamentally, the order or sequence of each of the universe’s components amalgamate in a divine harmony.

In addition to music being described as an essential component of the universe in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, we are presented with a story of how God introduced music to the world and humanity. Hermes Trismegistus recounts that God, “the supreme divinity,” sent the Muses to meet with humans lest they – and the earth – be “less civilized:” “Rightly the supreme divinity sent the chorus of Muses down to meet mankind lest the earthly world lack sweet melody and seem thereby less civilized; instead, with songs set to music, humans praised and glorified him

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 74.

who alone is all and is father of all, and thus, owing to their praise of heaven, Earth has not been devoid of the charms of harmony.”<sup>50</sup> Since music is described as descending from God to humanity, and it was intended to bring more civility (or order) to the world, I believe that this is an instance of music being presented as an important element of the *prisci* in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

The *Corpus Hermeticum*'s claims that music was integral to the composition of the universe was not a unique concept. Indeed, during Classical Antiquity, music had been inextricably connected to the cosmos through its arithmetic properties and was believed to possess mystical or divine qualities. For example, Pythagoras was credited with the *musica universalis* (universal music or harmony of the spheres), a theory which held that planetary relations exemplified simple ratios. The vibrations that resulted from their movements created imperceptible harmonies, whereas the music and sounds that were produced on Earth were imitative of these celestial harmonies. Plato also wrote on the importance and primordial nature of music in several of his writings, especially in the *Timaeus* where music is presented in metaphysical terms.<sup>51</sup>

Considering music's prominence in the writings of the aforementioned Ancient Greek philosophers with whom Marsilio Ficino was well acquainted (due to his translation work), it is unsurprising that he believed music to be an important constituent of the *prisci* during his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Indeed, Ficino had been deeply involved in studying the mystical and magical qualities of Orpheus's music (which included trying to reconstruct Orphic singing),<sup>52</sup> and believed that music had the ability to control or impact all aspects of the natural

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxviii.

<sup>52</sup> Jacomien Prins, “Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Cardano under Orpheus's Spell,” in *Music, Myth and Story in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. Katherine Butler and Samantha Bassler (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2019), 110. As previously mentioned, like Hermes Trismegistus, Ficino believed that Orpheus was a real person who was a recipient and preserver of the *prisci*.

world, including death (as exemplified in the myth of Orpheus's descent into the underworld to rescue Eurydice).<sup>53</sup>

Following his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ficino was one of the most active proponents in promulgating the idea that this ancient work was a wellspring of primordial sacred, hidden, and uncorrupted knowledge concerning both the natural and spiritual worlds. This idea was embraced by many of Ficino's contemporaries who saw the Hermetic writings as a way to reintroduce humanity to the deep comprehension of the universe and God that had once been possessed by their ancient ancestors but was subsequently lost, misunderstood, or forgotten. Thus, it was necessary to turn to the Ancients in order to restore humanity to its once uncorrupted state of existence and understanding,<sup>54</sup> however, in the seventeenth century, the assumed antiquity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was contested and disproven, which led the vast majority of scholars to refute the validity of the texts' contents including the existence of the *prisci*.

While there had been sceptics who doubted the antiquity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* since the Renaissance, it was not until the seventeenth century that suspicions about its authenticity were confirmed. In 1614, the philologist Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614) took issue with the many similarities between the teachings in the Bible and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. He argued that it was preposterous to believe that God would have chosen a pagan sage (Hermes) to receive divine, sacred knowledge and to predict the coming of Christ rather than a Jew. Additionally, Casaubon noted that the *Corpus Hermeticum* included Greek words that had only been used after Christ was born;<sup>55</sup> these words would not have appeared in a text that was written during the time of

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<sup>53</sup> Jacomien Prins, "Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Cardano under Orpheus's Spell," in *Music, Myth and Story in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. Katherine Butler and Samantha Bassler (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2019), 107.

<sup>54</sup> Mark A. Waddell, *Magic, Science, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13.

<sup>55</sup> Florian Ebling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 92.

Moses (approximately 1300-1400 years before Christ). Indeed, as Casaubon proved, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not a collection of primordial knowledge divinely revealed to an Ancient Egyptian sage; rather, the texts had most likely been written between the second and third centuries CE, long after Christ had been crucified. It was, therefore, not because of prophetic visions that the *Corpus Hermeticum* so closely resembled the teachings of Christ, but because they had been written after he lived and could thus imitate the content of the New Testament's texts.<sup>56</sup> As a result of Casaubon's new – and generally accepted – timeline for the *Corpus Hermeticum*'s creation, scholarly interest in Hermes Trismegistus dwindled as did the number of adherents to the doctrines of the *prisci*.

Despite Casaubon's convincing evidence that contested the *Corpus Hermeticum*'s antiquity, there were still scholars who refused to accept that Hermes Trismegistus and the *prisci* were only legend. One such important scholar was the Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), who continued to propagate Ficino's belief that the *prisci* had been received and cultivated in Ancient Egypt by Hermes. While working in Rome, Kircher's fascination with Egypt grew when he saw remnants of the civilization's artifacts such as obelisks and sculptures that the Romans had brought back to Europe.<sup>57</sup> Although his research on Egypt led him to draw some correct conclusions (such as the observation that the Coptic language was related to that of Ancient Egypt), Kircher also believed that the Ancient Egyptians were privy to mysterious, hidden, sacred knowledge and powers; that is, knowledge that had been concealed within the civilization's enigmatic hieroglyphics. Mistakenly, Kircher was convinced that he was able to decode the meaning of the Ancient Egyptian script and attributed the creation and transmission

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<sup>56</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, "European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute" *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004):139.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

of hieroglyphics to Hermes Trismegistus, who, like Ficino, he considered to be a prophet.<sup>58</sup> As seen in the following quote from Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-1654) – which was dedicated to the history of Ancient Egypt – Kircher, like Ficino, describes Hermes as the man responsible for having taught the Greek philosophers about the one, true God; that is, revealing to them the *prisca theologia*. Additionally, he states that the Egyptian sage had recorded his teachings “on lasting stones” and “huge rocks,” which refers to the use of hieroglyphics to preserve divine knowledge:

Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian, who first instituted the hieroglyphics, thus becoming the prince and parents of all Egyptian theology and philosophy, was the first and most ancient among the Egyptians and first rightly thought of divine things; and engraved his opinion for all eternity on lasting stones and huge rocks. Thence Orpheus, Musaeus, Linus, Pythagoras, Plato, Eudoxus, Paramenides, Melissus, Homerus, Euripides and others learned rightly of God and of divine things...And this Trismegistus was the first who in his Pimander and Asclepius asserted that God is One and Good, whom the rest of the philosophers followed.<sup>59</sup>

Kircher firmly believed that the Ancients had knowledge of a true, monotheistic faith, which Jan Assmann has described as “a kind of monotheistically or rather pantheistically conceived religion,” of “all one-ness,”<sup>60</sup> and which had been cultivated and safeguarded in Egypt.<sup>61</sup> This faith was not at all like the polytheism with which Egyptian religion would eventually become synonymous; it was believed to have been closely related to Christianity (like the faith that Ficino had believed Hermes Trismegistus practiced).<sup>62</sup> After the Great Deluge (which will be discussed further in the next chapter's section on Mesopotamia), Kircher believed that Hermes

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>59</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1964), 453.

<sup>60</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Jay MacPherson, “The Travels of Sethos” *Lumen* 23 (2004): 237; Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>62</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, “European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute” *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004):143.

Trismegistus recorded this true faith in Egyptian hieroglyphics in order to preserve it from the corruption of burgeoning paganism.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the corruption of the *prisci* was predicted in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, when Hermes tells Asclepius that people of later generations will be led astray from “the true, pure, and holy philosophy” by clever sophists: “Accordingly, the people who will come after us, deceived by the ingenuity of sophists, will be estranged from the true, pure and holy philosophy.”<sup>64</sup> According to Kircher, this preserved, true faith continued to be practiced in secret by Egypt’s priests; however, they, too, eventually succumbed to the paganism that had overtaken Egypt, and mixed these heretical beliefs with the beliefs that had once been true and pure.<sup>65</sup>

Like Ficino and the Ancient Greek philosophers who saw music as the key to understanding the cosmos and all creation on Earth, Kircher also expressed his opinion on music’s highly important role in unlocking these secrets of the universe. In fact, in the following quote, we can see Kircher describe music as the divine creative force of all:

So this is how the admirable symphony of the world is born: the symphony in which Earth concords with the Moon, the heavenly earth, Water with Mercury and Venus, Air with Jupiter and Venus, Fire with the Sun and Mars, stones with Saturn, metals with Jupiter, zoophytes with Mars, insects with the Sun, birds with Venus, amphibians with Mercury, and quadrupeds with the Moon. All concord with all in a wonderful sympathy, now among themselves, now with the rational soul, whose ennead is compounded of the five exterior senses and the four interior ones – the common imaginative appetitive, and rational senses. These are completed by the Intellect as by a tenth, in the same way as the other, purer Ennead compromising the nine orders of Angels becomes the complete image of the Angels and of GOD by the addition of the tenth source, namely the supreme Father of all. His is the three-fold operation, of such consonance and harmony: the working of the inferior world with Nature; of the heavens with the senses; and of the Angels with the intellect. It appears in the tetrad through the simple power of the soul; in the ennead through the nine senses, five corporeal and four incorporeal; and in the icosiheptad it

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 37-38.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74-75.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 38; Jay MacPherson, “The Travels of *Sethos*” *Lumen* 23 (2004): 237.

attains the idea of the whole consummation of things, until by intellection it becomes the All.<sup>66</sup>

In speaking of the above quote within the context of Hermeticism, Charles E. Brewer, observes that “Kircher seeks to understand the harmony of the spheres in a more symbolic and mathematical manner that eventually leads to resonances between the planets and the angelic orders, and finally between everything in creation.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, we can see similarities between Kircher’s quote and a previously mentioned passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum* which stated that “knowing music is nothing more than being versed in the correct sequence of all things together as allotted by divine reason. By divine song, this sequencing or marshalling of each particular thing into a single whole through reason’s craftwork produced a certain concord – very sweet and very true.”<sup>68</sup> As observed by Brewer, these Hermetic words on music must have truly resonated with Kircher, as he included the phrase “music is nothing other than to know the order of all things” on the frontispiece for the second volume of his *Musurgia universalis* (1650).<sup>69</sup>

While the seventeenth century saw occult philosophers such as Kircher strongly and openly reject Casaubon’s new evidence that refuted the authorship of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and its Ancient Egyptian origins, by the eighteenth century, intellectuals of the Enlightenment generally relegated Hermeticism and all other mystical aspects of occultism to the sidelines of academia due to their perceived incompatibility with more rational or empirical pursuits;<sup>70</sup> but the occult,

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<sup>66</sup> Athanasius Kircher quoted in Charles E. Brewer, *The Instrumental Music of Schmelzter, Biber, Muffat, and Their Contemporaries* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 18.

<sup>67</sup> Charles E. Brewer, *The Instrumental Music of Schmelzter, Biber, Muffat, and Their Contemporaries* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 17.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74-75.

<sup>69</sup> Charles E. Brewer, *The Instrumental Music of Schmelzter, Biber, Muffat, and Their Contemporaries* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 20.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Kléber Monod explains that the occult went into “decline” over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which “translated into fewer works on alchemy, less respect for astrology, and the virtual disappearance of

including the doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, still persisted among a minority of Enlightenment intellectuals, most of whom conducted their research on mysticism and the supernatural in private, away from the critical eyes of their more “enlightened” colleagues. Yet, despite the general backlash against the occult during the eighteenth century, as we will see in the following chapter, even some of the occult’s staunchest critics, such as Voltaire, retained ideas of a very ancient, true body of scientific and philosophical Eastern knowledge. As for Enlightenment thinkers who continued to uphold – what they felt was – the truth of the *prisca*, Isaac Newton was one of the doctrines’ most influential advocates. Like the occult philosophers who preceded him, Newton expressed similar views on the Egyptians as sources of the *prisca*, which he believed had been lost and which he endeavoured to unearth.<sup>71</sup> Like Kircher and Ficino, Newton held that the Ancient Egyptians were originally in possession of – and practiced – a true and pure monotheistic religion and philosophy.

What led Newton to his conclusions about Ancient Egyptian religion and philosophy was his immersion into the history of mathematics and its developments by the Ancients.<sup>72</sup> During his investigation into the mathematical knowledge of ancient civilizations, Newton became engrossed in their views on natural philosophy. Like Kircher, he, too, believed that the Ancients were cognizant of “the true frame of nature” which led to their beliefs in the authentic or original religion which had been heliocentric.<sup>73</sup> While he continued his exploration of some of the earliest known cultures and faiths, Newton became preoccupied with identifying the ways in which the true religion had become distorted (like Kircher, Newton posited that one such way was idol

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ritual magic among the educated.” Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 119; 157.

<sup>71</sup> Tessa Morrison, *Isaac Newton’s Temple of Solomon and his Reconstruction of Sacred Architecture* (Basel: Springer Basel, 2011), 22- 23.

<sup>72</sup> Mordechai Feingold, “Isaac Newton, Historian,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton, Second Edition*, eds. Rob Iliffe and George E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 525.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

worship) and disseminated throughout the world in the centuries that followed.<sup>74</sup> He deduced that this unadulterated belief system had first been known to – and safeguarded by – the Ancient Egyptians, from whose wisdom the Israelites drew upon and from whom the Ancient Greek philosophers including Plato had also endeavoured to learn.<sup>75</sup> In a manuscript titled *The Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology*, Newton explained that the Ancient Egyptians observed a sacred philosophy that emerged from their understanding of astronomy. Additionally, in this work, he detailed a sacred Egyptian ritual procession centred upon the stars:

Sacred philosophy flourished especially in Egypt and was based on a knowledge of the stars (...). In this procession the harmony of the celestial spheres is signified by prefatory Hymns. Then proceeds the Astronomer with the sacred books concerning the knowledge of the stars. He is followed by the scribe of sacred things who understands the patterns of the Sky...the Earth, the Stars and the sacred things. Finally, the Priest and the Prefect of the Sacred Things, expert in everything involved in the sacred rites and theology, close the whole Procession. By combining the science of the stars and the world with theology and putting that science in the first place, the Egyptians were asserting that their Theology concerns the stars. And indeed, the Gods of the Egyptians were the stars and the elements.<sup>76</sup>

Newton's theories on the Ancient Egyptians and the original faith were recorded in draft chapters of a work titled *Treatise on the Origin of Religions and Its Corruption* which expanded upon the religion's genesis and gradual corruption. Like Kircher, he explains that the original religion that had been in the possession of the Egyptians was then transmitted to the rest of the world after the Great Deluge;<sup>77</sup> however, Newton lamented that while the true, original faith had

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Rob Iliffe, "The Religion of Isaac Newton," in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton, Second Edition*, eds. Rob Iliffe and George E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 503.

<sup>76</sup> Isaac Newton, "The Philosophical Origins of Pagan Theology," (Yahuda Ms. 16.2, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel), translated by Michael Silverthorne, The Newton Project, December 2013, <https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/TRAN00010>.

<sup>77</sup> Along with Kircher's theories on the Great Deluge transmission, Newton's theories on this will be addressed further in the following chapter's section on Mesopotamia.

been maintained and practiced by a select few, its transmission to the Occidental world resulted in devastating consequences – notably widespread idolatry.<sup>78</sup>

As for music's role in the *prisci*, Newton, believed that harmony had been an important element in the construction and motion of celestial bodies, and believed that the Ancients had been in possession of this knowledge. The following quote highlights Newton's belief that Plato had had an understanding that "the soul of the world" was composed of musical ratios that were inherently connected to the divine:

Hence, after Plato has, by succession from Pythagorean doctrine and by the divine profundity of his own genius, shown that apart from these ratios (i.e. musical ratios) there can be no possibility of conjunction: in his *Timaeus*, he constitutes the soul of the world by means of the composition of those ratios by the ineffable providence of God the craftsman. Consequently, the soul of the world, which propels into movement this body of the universe visible to us, being constructed of ratios which created from themselves a musical concord, must of necessity produce musical sounds from the movement which it provides by its proper impulse having found the origin of them in the craftsmanship of its own composition.<sup>79</sup>

In another quote, Newton describes how Pythagoras's experimentation with gut strings led to his comprehension of the ratio of celestial harmony and the gravitational relationship between the planets and the Sun:

For Pythagoras, as Macrobius avows, stretched the intestines of sheep or the sinews of oxen by attaching various weights, and from this learned the ratio of the celestial harmony. Therefore, by means of such experiments he ascertained that the weights by which all tones on equal strings...were reciprocally as the squares of the lengths of the string by which the musical instrument emits the same tones. But the proportion discovered by these experiments, on the evidence of Macrobius, he applied to the heavens and consequently by comparing those weights with the weights of the Planets and the length of the strings with the distances of the Planets, he understood by means of the harmony of the heavens that the

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<sup>78</sup> Tessa Morrison, *Isaac Newton's Temple of Solomon and his Reconstruction of Sacred Architecture* (Basel: Springer Basel, 2011), 44; Isaac Newton, "The Philosophical Origins of Pagan Theology," (Yahuda Ms. 16.2, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel), translated by Michael Silverthorne, The Newton Project, December 2013, <https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/TRAN00010>; Newton's speculations about Noah's transmission of sacred knowledge will be addressed further in the next chapter's section on Mesopotamia.

<sup>79</sup> Isaac Newton quoted in James E. McGuire and Piyo M. Rattansi, "Newton and the 'Pipes of Pan,'" *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 21.2 (1966): 120.

weights of the Planets towards the Sun were reciprocally as the squares of their distances from the Sun.<sup>80</sup>

Considering that some of the most influential and well-known thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were writing discourse that still involved the *prisci*,<sup>81</sup> and were extolling the divine, creative forces of music, it is unsurprising that Rameau's origin story of the *corps sonore* involves a similar narrative. This is especially true when considering that Rameau appropriated various scholarly ideas in the creation of his earlier theoretical writings (for example, the empirical approach that Rameau took in the *Génération harmonique*, particularly the "experiments" he included to substantiate his findings, was reminiscent of Newtonianism). Although Rameau never used the terms *prisca sapientia* or *prisca theologia* in his theoretical writings, as will be demonstrated, the language that he used to describe the nature of the *corps sonore*, and music in general, suggests that he had come into contact with occult notions of the *prisci*.

In the theoretical works that will be examined in this chapter, it should be noted that Rameau cited a few scholars such as Athanasius Kircher, who were known proponents of the *prisca sapientia*; however, some of these citations are very vague and do not provide an exact source or highlight a particular borrowed concept or theory related to the *prisci*. For example, in his *Origine des sciences*, Rameau's reference to Kircher's work simply says: "see Kircher."<sup>82</sup> Yet, as will be delineated in the next chapter, the fact that Rameau's *Origine des sciences* and *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* present his musical theories as having originated among the

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<sup>80</sup> Isaac Newton quoted in James E. McGuire and Piyo M. Rattansi, "Newton and the 'Pipes of Pan,'" *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 21.2 (1966): 116-117.

<sup>81</sup> The next chapter introduces a number of these scholars and their works.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

Ancients of the Orient, and the fact that he made references to intellectuals who promulgated such ideas, suggests that he had, to some extent, been exposed to their ideas on the subject.

By the early 1760s, when Rameau wrote his *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, the musical principle that was central to his work as a musician and theorist was the *corps sonore*. He had first formulated this musical concept in his second theoretical treatise *Nouveau système de musique theorique* (1726). Meaning “sonorous body,” the name *corps sonore* describes a vibrating string that produces overtones above its fundamental frequency, specifically, an octave, perfect twelfth, and major seventeenth. Essentially, with this discovery, Rameau believed he had unearthed the source of the major triad.

Considering how salient the *corps sonore* would become to Rameau’s theoretical work, it is surprising that he did not dedicate more space to exploring this new and revolutionary concept in his *Nouveau système*. Rather, he dedicated the majority of this treatise to building upon concepts that he had presented in his earlier *Traité de l’harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (1722).<sup>83</sup> In fact, it was not until his next treatise, *Génération harmonique* (1737) that Rameau shared the extent of his exciting findings on the *corps sonore*.<sup>84</sup> In the years that followed, these theoretical findings received both negative and positive feedback from Rameau’s scholarly contemporaries, some of whom lauded Rameau for his insight into the foundation of harmony, and others who lambasted him for making, what they saw as, preposterous claims. For example, when the Swiss physicist Bernouilli tried to replicate Rameau’s experiments to generate the *corps sonore*, he stated that he was not able to generate the same harmonic partials that Rameau had claimed were constant.<sup>85</sup> Yet, d’Alembert, one of the Enlightenment’s most respected mathematicians,

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<sup>83</sup> Thomas Christensen, “Eighteenth-Century Science and the *Corps Sonore*: The Scientific Background to Rameau’s Principle of Harmony,” *Journal of Music Theory* 31.1 (1987): 26.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

unwaveringly supported Rameau's proclamations on the nature of the *corps sonore*.<sup>86</sup> He trusted that an experienced theorist and composer such as Rameau would make accurate observations on this musical concept;<sup>87</sup> that is, until Rameau began assigning to the *corps sonore* omnipotent, mystical qualities. While d'Alembert never ceased in his support for Rameau's initial empirical claims, the composer's later metaphysical musings about the *corps sonore*'s ancient, divine origins and powers in his works *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* were too outlandish for the *philosophe* to digest.<sup>88</sup>

Before demonstrating how Rameau's descriptions of the *corps sonore* resemble the Hermetic notions of the *prisci*, I first want to draw attention to a visual representation of these concepts in the *Code de musique pratique*'s frontispiece (Figure 1). The frontispiece displays an engraving which depicts three women who are dressed in garments that resemble those worn in Classical Antiquity. A review written in 1761 names the figure situated in the middle as "Harmony," who is depicted playing a lyre which is producing the sound of the *corps sonore*.<sup>89</sup> The figure situated to the left is named "Music" and is shown with her head lowered while looking at the parchment on which she notates music. On the right of Harmony is "Geometry" who is holding a monochord and using a mathematical tool to determine a measurement on its string.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 27.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1: Frontispiece from *Code de musique pratique* by Jean-Philippe Rameau, Bibliothèque nationale de France (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86232474>).

Thomas Christensen and Mark Howard have both commented on the symbolism of the imagery in this engraving. Christensen notes that the figure of Harmony (who he identifies as the muse Euterpe) strums a lyre while attentively listening to the overtones it produces (the *corps sonore*). He observes that the figure of Music applies these overtones to her own musical composition, while Geometry measures the *corps sonore*'s proportions on her monochord.<sup>91</sup> Howard provides a slightly more detailed interpretation in which he brings attention to the position of each of the figures. He observes that Harmony is in a higher position than Music and Geometry; she is placed closest to the image's "source of light," which he interprets as the *corps sonore* and which demonstrates the dominance and importance of the *corps sonore* above its "descendants" Music and Geometry.<sup>92</sup> He notes further that Music is in a higher position than "Geometry," which is representative of Rameau's assertions in the *Nouvelles réflexions* that Geometry descends from music.<sup>93</sup> Music in this image is, therefore, presented as the more senior discipline. In addition, Howard conjectures that the dark atmosphere surrounding the three women could signify the "darkness" that engulfed musicians, philosophers, and scientists prior to Rameau's success in reviving knowledge of the *corps sonore*.<sup>94</sup>

While both Christensen and Howard provide compelling interpretations of the *Code de musique pratique*'s frontispiece, I would like to propose an additional interpretation that shows how this image depicts the *corps sonore* as divinely inspired, specifically, as a visual representation of the *prisca theologia*. On the surface, the engraving resembles an apotheosis, a common theme in the visual arts during the Baroque period. Indeed, with its central figure

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 293.

<sup>92</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 27.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

gazing toward the heavens and the mass of clouds surrounding her, the image projects a theological air. The central figure resembles a Madonna and is reminiscent of many paintings depicting the Madonna and Christ child. In such paintings, the Virgin Mary is often depicted as the *virgo lactans* (nursing virgin) with a single breast exposed while in the midst of nurturing the infant Christ. Similarly, the figure Harmony is depicted with a single breast exposed; but who is the “Christ” child in this image? The lyre on Harmony’s lap is positioned directly next to her exposed breast and corresponds to imagery of the infant Christ. Here, it appears that the lyre is being nurtured by Harmony who has her eyes turned towards Heaven; she is receiving or absorbing the knowledge of the *corps sonore* and then imparting it to the lyre. The divine knowledge of the *corps sonore* is then disseminated to the disciples Music and Geometry, who, as observed by Howard, are positioned lower than Harmony.

The content of the *Code de musique pratique* is composed of sixteen chapters which concern such practical topics as accompaniment, singing, composition, and improvisation. Additionally, it includes the appended *Nouvelles réflexions*. While, like many of Rameau’s other writings, the *Nouvelles réflexions* is written in a way that sometimes prompts confusion or bewilderment, especially when he contradicts or questions himself, what remains steadfast throughout this work is the centrality of and primacy of the *corps sonore* as it relates to the origins of harmony, music in general, and the rest of the arts and sciences. Because of the *Nouvelles réflexions*’ descriptions of the *corps sonore* which are particularly reminiscent of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, as well as its orientalism which will be addressed in the next chapter, this dissertation will focus on the appended *Nouvelles réflexions* instead of the surrounding sections of the *Code de musique pratique*.

As it concerns the *prisca theologia*, we see an example of the *corps sonore*'s similar qualities in the first sentence of the *Nouvelles réflexions* where Rameau states: "there is only one principle for everything."<sup>95</sup> This short, but powerful sentence – which refers to the *corps sonore* as the "one principle for everything" – carries the weight of religious conviction and strongly resembles the Hermetic notion that there had always existed one, true, universal religious principle that governs all in existence. Additionally, in the same opening paragraph, Rameau provides a brief history of the *corps sonore*'s transmission among the Ancients which is almost identical to the *prisca* transmission narratives that were presented earlier. To recall, these narratives stated that the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus had been a recipient and preserver of the *prisca*, who then passed on this revelation to the Greek philosophers. Similarly, Rameau explains that the *corps sonore* had first been known among the Egyptians, from whom Pythagoras learned of its mysteries and then "applied the laws of harmony to the movement of the planets:" "Convinced of the necessity of this universal principle, the first philosophers sought it out in Music. Pythagoras, according to<sup>96</sup> the Egyptians, applied the laws of Harmony to the movement of the planets. Plato made it preside over the composition of the soul. Aristotle, his disciple, after having stated that Music is a heavenly and divine thing, adds that the reason behind the system of the world is found in it."<sup>97</sup>

As seen above, the *corps sonore*'s lineage of transmission from the Egyptians to Pythagoras, through Plato and Aristotle, imitates the *prisca*'s lineage of transmission from Hermes

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<sup>95</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 189.

<sup>96</sup> I have changed Howard's translation here as I do not agree with his word choice. Howard's version states "Pythagoras, after the Egyptians," however, Rameau's original French passage is "Pythagore, d'après les Égyptiens" which, in my view, more correctly translates to "Pythagoras, according to the Egyptians."

<sup>97</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 189.

Trismegistus through Plato. Although the people in this lineage are not identical to the aforementioned accounts (for example, Rameau does not mention Orpheus), nor does Rameau specifically mention Hermes's name, his story still resembles the general idea that the *prisci* had emerged from Egypt before being transmitted to the world of Greek philosophy. Moreover, like the aforementioned occult philosophers, we see Rameau recounting that the Ancients believed in music's inherent divinity.<sup>98</sup>

As for similarities between the *corps sonore* and the *prisca sapientia*, there are numerous examples throughout the *Nouvelles réflexions* which point to Rameau's belief in a pure, true body of knowledge that originated from a divine source, only to be later corrupted. In various passages throughout his treatise, Rameau tells us that the *corps sonore* was the original source of all the arts and sciences; that is, the various types of human knowledge descended from the *corps sonore*. The Ancients, through "sentiment" or feeling, had been aware of its existence, but as knowledge about the *corps sonore* and its musical correlates the tetrachord and the triple progression<sup>99</sup> were inherited by different generations and nations, these musical concepts became corrupted and understanding of the *corps sonore* was gradually lost. This is evident in the following passage in which Rameau, having credited the Greek philosophers for realizing the ubiquity and divinity of music, laments that – at some point – their own musical systems created

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> The following definition of a tetrachord is taken from Grove Music Online (<https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027750?rsk=GDvUBR&result=1>): "In Ancient Greek theory, a [tetrachord is a] system of four notes, contained within the limits of a perfect fourth." The following definition of the triple progression is taken from Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 178: "a geometric progression is any numerical series expanded by a common multiple, or, as Rameau defined it, 'a series of terms that all have the same quotient.' There are three particular geometric progressions that will interest Rameau. They come from the three fundamental partials that are generated by the *corps sonore*: the octave (8), the perfect twelfth (3), and the major seventeenth (5). The geometric expansion of each of these terms produces, respectively, the 'double geometric progression' (1-2-4-8-16, etc.); the 'triple geometric progression' (1-3-9-27-81, etc.); and the 'quintuple geometric progression' (1-5-25-125-625, etc.)."

distance between them and their pursuit of the universal principle that he claimed they felt and sought. This eventually led to a state of complete “unknowing:”

In effect, struck by the wondrous agreement that results from the assemblage of parts that make up the Universe, these contemplative men<sup>100</sup> necessarily prevail in order to seek out reason in Music, as in that one thing in which proportions reside, because in objects in every other sense but hearing, these proportions are just, properly speaking, an image. Movement, action, the life of ratios and analogies only belong to acoustical types. Unfortunately, however, the system that these great men adopt, far from bringing them closer to the object of their research,<sup>101</sup> only further distances them from it. I even say to assert that the phenomenon of the *corps sonore* was absolutely unknown to them. This principle is so simple, so luminous. Analysis is so natural to it, so easy. Its products are so substantial, so rich that with whatever obscurity time had been able to conceal this part from the ideas of Ancient authors and whatever consideration may be lost from their works on Music, it would undoubtedly be on us to find whatever vestiges of this discovery are in the small number of their Writings that have come down to us.<sup>102</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Nouvelles réflexions*, we see a passage that describes the transmission of the *corps sonore* to other Greek scholars by way of Pythagoras’s musical system that was based on the triple progression; however, in this account, Rameau speculates that Pythagoras may have unwittingly contributed to the *corps sonore*’s corruption while trying to conform his new knowledge of it within the confines of an existing corrupt Greek musical system:

This philosopher [Pythagoras], having found a series of fifths in the triple progression, in which the major key, which process the difference between the fifth and fourth, is presented in fifths two-by-two, allowed himself to be so dazzled by this discovery and, in spite of the ear’s uprising, believed he must stick to a system in which the ratios of all proper intervals in music are in tune up to the comma, whose nature nor origin has been penetrated and which we are always content to call Pythagorean Comma. But with no explanation?<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Howard uses the word “thinkers” here, but Rameau’s French says “hommes contemplateurs” which I feel more accurately translates to “contemplative men.” For this reason, I had changed Howard’s word “thinkers” to “contemplative men.”

<sup>101</sup> Again, I do not agree with Howard’s word choice here. He uses “reproaching” to translate “rapprocher.” The original French is “loin de les rapprocher de l’objet de leurs recherches” which I have alternatively translated to “far from bringing them closer to the object of their research.”

<sup>102</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 189.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 554.

As a result of this corruption, Rameau tells us that Pythagoras's disciples (or students) had never been capable of identifying the source from where he derived his knowledge of the triple progression (the *corps sonore*). Because they were "so far removed" from the true meaning of the *corps sonore*, Rameau conjectures that these followers concocted a "fable" which they then attributed to Pythagoras. This ultimately led to an entire body of Occidental knowledge corrupted by errors:

(...) the triple is the unique basis on which the system of Pythagoras was established; an observation that his Secretaries had never made and were so far removed to think about that, in order to develop their master's system, they attributed a fable to him, from which the most egregious error followed (...) it is lastly a system in which the ear had consequently never been consulted, a system adopted by Pythagoras, the Greeks, the Latins, and lasting until Guido d'Arezzo, who embraced it himself.<sup>104</sup>

As indicated in the final sentence of this quotation, since Greek musical systems informed the modal system of medieval Europe, this corrupt knowledge infiltrated the musical traditions of the continent. Unfortunately, according to Rameau, knowledge of the *corps sonore* had been lost forever until his rediscovery of it.

All of the examples that have been analyzed up to this point were taken from Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions*; however, we also see evidence of the *prisca sapientia*'s and, especially, *theologia*'s influence in the *Origine des sciences*, which expands on the origins of the *corps sonore*, its mystical qualities, and the mysteries surrounding its existence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Rameau included a two-page addendum to his *Origine des sciences* in which he indicated that it should be considered a part of his *Code de musique pratique*, and thus, the *Nouvelles réflexions*.<sup>105</sup> Certainly, when reading the *Origine*, the similarities in composition are

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 553-554.

<sup>105</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau: "From now on, the *Origine des sciences* and the following *Observations* will be joined to my *Code de musique pratique*." From Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): *Observations de M. Rameau, sur son ouvrage intitulé Origine des sciences* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 29. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

evident. For example, as it concerns the *prisca theologia*, we see a similar presentation to what Rameau included in the *Nouvelles réflexions*; that is, the *corps sonore* is praised for its divine qualities, although this is even more pronounced in the *Origine*. In fact, there are passages in which Rameau even uses the word “theology” alongside discussion of the *corps sonore*. For example, in the *Origine*’s preface, Rameau states that the healthiest theology would adopt the principles of the *corps sonore*, the source from which geometers made their first mathematical discoveries. This suggests that he attributes to the *corps sonore* paramount moral or ethical and divine properties. Additionally, the fact that he mentions the *corps sonore* as the source of geometers’ first mathematical principles highlights that it is primordial, considering the antiquity of geometry. The combination of the *corps sonore*’s primacy and the notion of it as a single, true theological source are strikingly similar to the idea of the *prisca theologia*: “This is only a prelude to lead to the marvelous effects of this *corps sonore*, from which the geometer has drawn his first principles without suspecting it, and which the healthiest<sup>106</sup> theology adopts.”<sup>107</sup>

In another theological example from the *Origine*, Rameau praises the *corps sonore* as a “creator.” He does so while discussing the *corps sonore*’s power and impact on the vibration of surrounding strings, and questions whether it is even possible to talk of theology without including the elements of the *corps sonore*:

Let us suppose that the resonating *corps sonore*, a string, for example, placed in the center of other strings, tuned in all possible accuracy in unison with its aliquots, we will see them all quiver in proportion to the power of this *corps sonore*: it is clear that the parts set in motion will find limits only in those we see, as well as in the lack of grandeur and proportionate thickness between these strings: which incontestably presents an idea of infinity: there is more, we see the aliquots divide themselves in the unisons of the *corps*

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<sup>106</sup> The French word that Rameau uses here is “saine” (la plus saine théologie) which literally translates to “healthy.” Within the context of the sentence, Rameau is stating that only a religion which embraces the truth of the *corps sonore* as the creative and intellectual force behind everything would be the purest, or “healthiest” theological doctrine to follow.

<sup>107</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d’une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761): Préface* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

which makes them resonate: they are consequently incorporated, they become one in their multitude; since this principle proves, by that, that it contains everything, without being able to be contained: then finally it yields to these three unique consonances, the octave, the twelfth, and the seventeenth designated by these first three numbers 2, 3, and 5, not to say,  $1/2$   $1/3$  and  $1/5$  the right to order all its generation, while always serving as an antecedent to establish this same right in all their operations. What an image! Truly animated image, which presents to the mind the greatest ideas that one can form of a creator! Can one speak of theology without putting forward these principles? Do we not even find some of these principles in the writings of certain Greek philosophers who are said to have passed through Egypt?<sup>108</sup>

As to how the *corps sonore* would lend its principles to theology and how that would actually materialize in a religious doctrine, Rameau does not elaborate; however, as observable in the last sentence of the paragraph, he mentions that certain Greek philosophers who “passed through Egypt” (where they no doubt learned of the *corps sonore*. Rameau is likely referring to Pythagoras here) had incorporated these principles into their writings. Indeed, elsewhere in the *Origine* Rameau does briefly speculate that the Ancient Egyptians practiced a theology that incorporated geometry, arithmetic, and music: “Egypt is the place where it is agreed that priests were the first to devote themselves to the research of the sciences; that they possessed, among others, those of music, arithmetic and geometry to a certain point, that they even had a sort of theology; we add to this that several great philosophers of Greece had profited from their lessons.”<sup>109</sup>

Rameau later added to the *Origine*’s related *Controverse* (a response that he penned addressing the “inaccuracies” in d’Alembert’s new addition of the *Elémens de musique*) an enigmatic statement which suggests that either he was unable to conclude the exact way in which the Egyptians incorporated the *corps sonore* into their religious beliefs or that he *did* know their secret mystery but simply did not want to share his conclusions with d’Alembert and others

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<sup>108</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d’une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761)* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 13-14. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

(which would not be out of the realm of possibility considering Rameau's obstinate nature and tendency to be resentful, especially when his theoretical speculations were being questioned). Regardless, this statement further points to Rameau's belief that the Egyptians practiced a theology in which the *corps sonore* was indispensable: "I pass over in silence the inferences which the Egyptians were able to draw from the phenomenon in question [the *corps sonore*] for their theology, as well as the physical and metaphysical which can be deduced from it: perhaps one day we will be able to draw happy conclusions from it."<sup>110</sup>

Thus far, we have seen examples of how Rameau's descriptions of the *corps sonore* correspond to occultist, specifically Hermetic, notions of the *prisca theologia* and *prisca sapientia* as they relate to ideas of revelation and corruption; however, what remains to be discussed is the aspect most pertinent to this dissertation's premise: how Rameau portrayed the people of the Ancient Orient (Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China) as the original recipients and bearers of the *corps sonore*, and how this was imitative of contemporary (and earlier) occult ideas on the Eastern origins of the *prisca theologia* and the *prisca sapientia*. While this chapter already addressed Rameau's belief that the Egyptians were the source of the Ancient Greeks' initial contact with the *corps sonore*, the next chapter will elucidate exactly how this idea was perpetuated within the context of the *prisci* among European intellectuals, and how this further corresponds to Rameau's depictions of the Ancient Orient as both sources of revelation and corruption as it concerns the origin and dissemination of the one, true musical principle.

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<sup>110</sup> Rameau wrote this passage in response to d'Alembert's following statement: "Mr. Rameau does not mention it at all in his code and only sets it out in his new reflections to give an exact account of the products of the resonance of the *corps sonore*, which have been used in all sciences: does he only say that we must recognize a triple progression in the sequence of dominants?" From Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des science, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): *Préface* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 26. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

## Chapter 3:

### The Ancient East as a Source of Revelation and Corruption in Early Modern Europe: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China in the Writings and Ideologies of Philosophers, Scientists, and Rameau

Thus far, this dissertation has delved into the histories of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* and examined how Rameau's two theoretical writings *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* indicate influence from these Hermetic concepts. As mentioned previously, occult philosophers attributed the initial acquisition, cultivation, and subsequent corruption of these ancient bodies of knowledge to the people of the Ancient Orient, and as we will see in this present chapter, Rameau closely mirrored this notion in the lore that he developed surrounding the origin and dissemination of his own version of the *prisci*: the *corps sonore*.

To elucidate the specific connections between Rameau's ideas of the Ancient Orient as a source of both revelation and corruption and similar ideas that appear in the occult writings of various philosophers and scientists, this chapter will focus on identifying and detailing the specific stereotypes or characteristics that Rameau assigned to the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese in his writings and show how these characterizations imitated those that were disseminated by occult thinkers. Each Ancient Oriental civilization, and the scholarship written about it, will be addressed in its own subsection. At the end of each subsection, passages from Rameau's *Origine des sciences* and *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* will be analyzed and shown to correspond to the ideas and stereotypes found in the works of scholars who subscribed to the notions of the *prisci*. Not all of the themes and stereotypes discussed in this chapter are identifiable in Rameau's writings; however, those that are not will be identified in his operas' libretti in the next chapter.

### 3.1 Ancient Egyptian Priests as a Source of Enigmatic, Sacred Knowledge

As seen in the previous chapter, the Egyptians were the Ancient Oriental people responsible for revealing the *prisci*'s mysteries to Ancient Greece's most respected philosophers. While these origin stories about the *prisci* were fictitious, they were, however, rooted in the historical fact that the Ancient Greeks were the first in the Occidental World to look to the land of the pharaohs with veneration and a sense of wonder. Certainly, the Ancient Greeks were in awe of the Egyptians' erudition, wisdom, and mystique,<sup>111</sup> and their perceptions of these Eastern people – along with biblical accounts of Egyptian magic and wisdom – contributed to the Egyptians' eventual enigmatic and esoteric reputation among Europeans.

Since their first exposure to Egyptian culture, the Ancient Greeks had been mesmerized by the advanced scientific and architectural knowledge that the Egyptians possessed and that had been developed independently of Hellenic influence. Indeed, Homer's *Odyssey* contains examples of the Greeks' reverence for Egyptian knowledge and wisdom, wherein Egyptians are lauded for their expertise in medicine and are upheld as the world's most proficient physicians.<sup>112</sup> As observed by Erik Iversen, this was particularly fascinating to the Greeks since Egypt's advanced civilization was in conflict with the Greek perception of *barbaroi* (people who were foreign to Greek culture) and thus challenged the superiority of their own cultural achievements.<sup>113</sup> During the Saïte period (662-525 BCE), the Greeks' presence in Egypt expanded due to increased trade; however, although the physical presence of the Greeks in Egypt was increased due to mercenaries, merchants, and trading posts, outside of trade, cultural

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<sup>111</sup> Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 36.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphics in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 38.

differences between the two groups of people resulted in few personal relationships and interactions. The fact that Greek and Egyptian interactions were limited to strictly business appears to have, in Jason Thompson's words, "enhanced Egypt's mystique in the Greek imagination."<sup>114</sup>

Regardless of the exact reason for the increased mystique surrounding Egyptians, there is no doubt that the Greeks increasingly viewed Egypt as what Thompson describes as "the source of ancient wisdom," and that they gradually incorporated elements from Egyptian culture and religion into their own arts and sciences.<sup>115</sup> Despite the advancements made in Greek arts and sciences, we still see Plato, in his work *Phaedrus*, crediting the Egyptian deity Thoth (to recall, the figure Hermes Trismegistus was a blend of Thoth and Hermes) with having been the creator of numbers, geometry, astronomy, letters (in order to make writing possible), as well as games of draughts and dice. In *Phaedrus*, Plato writes: "Well, what I heard was that one of the ancient gods of Egypt was Naucratis in the country, the god to whom the sacred bird they call the ibis belongs; the divinity's own name was Theuth [Thoth]. The story was that he was the first to discover number and calculation, and geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of draughts and dice and, to cap it all, letters."<sup>116</sup>

Additionally, we see Plato exhibiting a very early example of the later tendency among Early Modern European occult philosophers to view Ancient Egyptians as bearers of divine revelation. For example, in the following excerpt from *Phaedrus*, Plato, through the voice of Socrates, recounts a dialogue between the mythical king of Egypt, Thamus and Thoth. In this conversation,

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<sup>114</sup> Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 37.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.; Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphics in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>116</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 2005), 61.

Thoth approaches Thamus and presents his inventions and discoveries that he wishes to impart to the people of Egypt. Thoth explains that the gift of writing will be the most valuable to the Egyptians and will make them wiser: “But this study [writing], King Thamus, will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory; what I have discovered is an elixir of memory and wisdom.”<sup>117</sup> While, in this dialogue, Thamus expresses concern that the ability to write will cause his people to rely upon the new skill too much and weaken their memories, this situation is, nonetheless, demonstrative of the theme of revelation and the *prisca theologia* and *prisca sapientia*; that is, Egyptians are portrayed as the intended recipients of divine or supernatural knowledge that will advance their civilization and, consequently, the civilizations of foreigners who interact with them and adopt their skills. Indeed, the Egyptian writing system of hieroglyphics was viewed by many Greek intellectuals such as Plutarch as indicative of knowledge imparted by the divine.<sup>118</sup>

The Ancient Greeks were not the only ancestors of Early Modern Europe who were captivated by Egypt; it also had a firm grasp on the Romans’ imaginings both during and before it was absorbed as a province into the Roman Empire.<sup>119</sup> Not only did Egyptian architecture and art influence the art and designs of Roman structures, but Egyptian spirituality also permeated the Greco-Roman sphere.<sup>120</sup> For example, Egyptian deities, notably Isis, Osiris, and Thoth were embraced and incorporated by both the Romans and Greeks into their own religions and mythologies, although sometimes with modified names (for example, Thoth was known to the

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>118</sup> Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphics in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 45.

<sup>119</sup> Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 43.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Greeks as Hermes and to the Romans as Mercurius).<sup>121</sup> In addition to influencing Roman architecture and religion, we also see written examples of the Romans viewing Egypt as a source of higher knowledge. Like the Greeks, the Roman historian Tacitus credits the creation of writing to the Egyptians, a skill that was then transmitted to the Greeks via the Phoenicians:

The Egyptians, in their animal-pictures, were the first people to represent thought by symbols: these, the earliest documents of human history, are visible today, impressed on stone. They describe themselves also as the inventors of the alphabet: from Egypt, they consider, the Phoenicians, who were predominant at sea, imparted the knowledge into Greece and gained the credit of discovering what they had borrowed.<sup>122</sup>

Despite the strong allure of Egypt to the Greco-Roman world, its once venerated culture was met with disdain from its own people when Christianity began to take root in Egyptian soil during the first century CE.<sup>123</sup> Condemned as paganism in the eyes of Christians, the traditional religion and culture of Egypt – including its accompanying temples, rituals, and even the use of hieroglyphics – were gradually exterminated.<sup>124</sup> When Islam was brought to Egypt in 641 CE, this contributed to the further erasure of Egypt’s ancient roots and culture. Thus, while the ancient ancestors of Europe (Greece and Rome) had once looked toward Egypt for inspiration both spiritually and intellectually, the Christianization and Islamization of the Western and Eastern Worlds respectively created a newfound interest in Jerusalem and Mecca.<sup>125</sup>

While a large-scale fascination with Ancient Egypt had, to a great extent, dissipated in Europe during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Egyptians’ reputation of possessing profound wisdom and knowledge was ongoing due to the Bible’s recurring narrative that they were particularly sagacious. For example, in the Old Testament, King Solomon is described as

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<sup>121</sup> Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphics in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 42-43.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>123</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, “European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute” *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004):138.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

having been granted wisdom from God so great that it even exceeded that of Egypt's learned: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt."<sup>126</sup> Additionally, in the New Testament book of Acts, Moses, the most revered Hebrew prophet, is described as having been "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians."<sup>127</sup>

In addition to their superior intellect, during the Middle Ages, the Ancient Egyptians themselves were believed to possess medicinal qualities acquired through the process of mummification. Bitumen, a substance that had been used by Arabs for medicinal purposes, was substituted by consuming pieces of mummified Egyptian flesh. This practice was thought to provide the same medicinal treatments as bitumen (which had eventually become less accessible to physicians), and, by the thirteenth century, was embraced by European crusaders who brought the belief and the practice back to the Occidental World.<sup>128</sup>

Apart from Ancient Egypt's relevance to biblical studies and medical knowledge in the Middle Ages, it was not until the Renaissance that Egypt's religion, philosophy, and culture once again began to significantly intrigue intellectuals whose interests in Ancient Greece led them to study the writings of the philosophers and travelers who had recorded their observations, knowledge, and opinions of Egypt.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, it was during this time that a deep interest in the Hermetic writings, and the concepts of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, came to the forefront of intellectual circles because of scholars

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<sup>126</sup> 1 Kings 4:29-30; Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 83.

<sup>127</sup> Acts 7:22; Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 83.

<sup>128</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, "European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute" *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004):142.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

such as Ficino. As such, this fueled Egypt’s reputation as having been a repository of ancient theological wisdom, knowledge, and revelation.

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, interest in Ancient Egypt became even more pronounced within the context of an intellectual culture that was greatly fascinated by non-European people, and travel to Egypt for research purposes became more frequent.<sup>130</sup> Yet, despite increased scholarship and firsthand accounts of Egypt and its artifacts, there still remained much speculation about Ancient Egypt’s history and its mysterious written language.<sup>131</sup> As a result, some Enlightenment writings on Ancient Egypt tended to feature a melange of both occultist speculation and fact, what Kerry Muhlestein describes as “secret powers and motions” and the understanding of “lost concepts.”<sup>132</sup> We already saw a prime example of this in the work of Athanasius Kircher in the previous chapter, whose work Muhlestein states “serves as a good example of the way Enlightenment Egyptological scholarship intermingled with the unscholarly impression that Ancient Egypt was a land of magic and mystery.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, as demonstrated in the last chapter, Kircher saw the Egyptians not just as a “land of magic and mystery” but also as a land of primordial divine revelation – the land that received, preserved, and protected the *prisci*.

In addition to Kircher, the previous chapter also introduced Isaac Newton and his thoughts on the Ancient Egyptians’ role in the *prisci* narrative – as bearers and disseminators of the *prisci*; however, while Newton’s initial writings on the Ancient Egyptians demonstrated an admiration for their wisdom, their cultivation of astronomy, and the practice of a primordial, true

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<sup>130</sup> Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, 1: From Antiquity to 1881* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 106. Because of increased colonialism and traveler accounts, exoticism was prevalent among philosophers, scientists, and artists in the eighteenth century.

<sup>131</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, “European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute” *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004): 139.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

monotheistic faith, the scientist's respect and adulation for the people of this ancient civilization were not to last. In fact, he came to see them as one of the sources of the *prisca theologia* and *prisca sapientia*'s corruption and therefore responsible for the heresies that resulted from its corruption. The Egyptians, far removed from their sacred knowledge, embraced idolatry and began condemnable practices such as venerating dead monarchs.<sup>134</sup> Because of these depraved practices, the true faith and its sacred body of knowledge had been lost for thousands of years, until Newton – and his fellow occultist scholars – made efforts to rediscover and reinstitute these ancient beliefs and practices.

As perplexing as Newton's severe change of heart towards the Ancient Egyptians might seem, he was certainly not alone in these negative sentiments. At a time when many scholars in Europe were being swept away by Egyptomania, there were simultaneously those who were unimpressed by the sagacity of the Ancient Egyptian priesthood and chastised them for their perceived arrogance and secrecy. Specifically, for some scholars, Egyptian priests were so blinded by their own arrogance and pride that they chose to keep knowledge of the one true religion for themselves and Egypt's kings while encouraging the proliferation of a false, polytheistic faith among commoners. One such scholar who subscribed to these views was Hermann Conring (1606-1681), who believed that Egyptian priests intentionally led their people astray by disseminating corrupt, pagan practices to the population in order to manipulate and exert authority over them.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, Thomas Sprat (1635-1715) expressed similar views and conjectured that Egyptian priests had recorded the existence of the *prisca theologia* and *prisca sapientia* within their hieroglyphics and kept these revelations hidden from their people in

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<sup>134</sup> Rob Iliffe, "The Religion of Isaac Newton," in *The Cambridge Companion to Newton, Second Edition*, eds. Rob Iliffe and George E. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 514.

<sup>135</sup> Samuel Jackson, "'The Wicked Priest' in Egyptology and Amarna Studies: A Reconsideration" *Antiquo Oriente* 6 (2008): 190.

order to inspire admiration for their erudition. This was, in Sprat's own words, "a sure way to beget a reverence in the peoples' hearts towards themselves [the priests]." <sup>136</sup>

Turning to France during the Enlightenment, its intellectuals had also speculated about the captivating history of the Egyptians and the knowledge that they were believed to possess. Additionally, as in surrounding countries, there were circulating scholarly ideas that had occultist undertones, especially ideas related to the Ancient Egyptian priesthood and their possession of secret, sacred knowledge. Among the most significant of these writings was the novel *Séthos, histoire ou vie tirée des monumens anecdotes de l'ancienne Égypte* (1731) by the Abbé Jean Terrasson. The novel was very influential in the eighteenth century as evinced by the six editions that were printed between the years 1731 and 1825, the four languages into which it was translated, and the fact that it inspired many works of art, music, and literature. <sup>137</sup> It is a novel that highlights Terrasson's own views that Ancient Egypt was a civilization that had cultural advancements far superior to the Greeks and Romans (Terrasson's position was that modern Enlightenment intellectuals were also capable of achievements that were superior to the Greeks and Romans). <sup>138</sup>

Written as a work of both fact and fiction, *Séthos* chronicles the pivotal events in the life of an Ancient Egyptian prince named Séthos from his education during his youth to his travels across Africa. Most pertinent to the theme of Ancient Egyptian esoteric knowledge, however, are the initiation rites that Séthos must endure when he attempts to be initiated into the priesthood of the mysteries of Isis. The son of incompetent monarchs, the prince receives his education in

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Margaret Geoga, "Ancient and Modern: Citational Practices and the Status of Ancient Egypt in Jean Terrasson's *Séthos*," in *The Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca. 1600-1800*, eds. Margaret Geoga and John Steele (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 185.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

Memphis under the guidance of Amédès (the queen's counsellor) until his sixteenth birthday, after which Amédès encourages Séthos to undergo initiation into the priesthood of Isis at the Great Pyramid, so as to learn the ways of an "enlightened" king.<sup>139</sup> The priesthood is a secretive society, and Terrason details an arduous series of tests to which Séthos is subjected in order to gain acceptance. In the first test, Séthos is made to walk among flames which is followed by a swim across a perilous canal. His last test consists of the challenging feat of being thrust into the air from a drawbridge, taking hold of two rings, and remaining suspended in the air until, suddenly, a door opens, and the priests welcome the successful initiate into the Temple of Memphis.

As demonstrated by the challenges that Séthos faces to join the priesthood and, ultimately, to gain the wisdom and knowledge that would lead to him being an enlightened leader, Terrason vividly illustrates the secrecy and exclusivity that European scholars associated with Ancient Egyptian priests and the sagacity they were believed to have possessed. Yet, these ideas about Egyptian esotericism were not limited to individual scientists, philosophers, and authors. In the words of Hugh B. Nisbet, "the eighteenth century was the century of Enlightenment. But it was also the Golden Age of secret societies,"<sup>140</sup> and it was within secret societies that Ancient Egypt's erudite and enigmatic reputation was further upheld and perpetuated.

One of the most notable secret societies that revered Ancient Egypt as a vessel of hidden higher knowledge and wisdom was the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, originally established in regions that now constitute Germany.<sup>141</sup> The Rosicrucians' rise to prominence began in the year

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<sup>139</sup> Jay MacPherson, "The Travels of *Sethos*" *Lumen* 23 (2004), 239.

<sup>140</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 131.

<sup>141</sup> Kerry Muhlestein, "European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: A Cultural Context for the Magic Flute" *Brigham Young University Studies* 43.3 (2004):144.

1614 as a result of the circulation of an anonymous pamphlet titled *Fama Fraternitatis*.<sup>142</sup> Within its pages was contained an account of the discovery and opening of the tomb belonging to Christian Rosenkreutz (from whom the name Rosicrucianism derives), the legendary creator of a medieval monastic brotherhood who sought to ameliorate both science and theology.<sup>143</sup>

While the *Fama Fraternitatis* had appeared in the early seventeenth century, Rosicrucianism became more widespread in the eighteenth century, and it was also during this time that greater importance was given to legends concerning Ancient Egypt. Among these legends was the belief that the biblical prophet Moses had been initiated into the most secret and ancient of Egyptian religious practices which had then contributed to the formation of the religion of the Ancient Hebrews.<sup>144</sup> Like scientists and philosophers who believed that the one, true monotheistic religion of Ancient Egypt had eventually become corrupted by paganism, so too did Rosicrucians believe that Ancient Egyptian religion had eventually become distorted; however, in their account, these distortions and pagan practices were ostensibly purified and corrected by Saint Mark.

For the Rosicrucians, the secret, hidden knowledge of Egypt, most notably alchemy, was an important part of the brotherhood's different stages of their initiation process, in which initiates would become acquainted with the exclusive Egyptian practices that were presumed to be accessible within Ancient Egyptian places of worship.<sup>145</sup> Among the Enlightenment's thinkers, Isaac Newton – whose occult interests involved the study of alchemy – was notably acquainted

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<sup>142</sup> Hereward Tilton, "Rosicrucianism from the Renaissance to Early Modernity," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 172.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

with the Rosicrucian brotherhood, as evinced by his ownership of an English copy of Thomas Vaughn's Rosicrucian manifesto, *The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity R.C.*<sup>146</sup>

More predominant than the Rosicrucians, however, was the society of Freemasons, who drew upon the Rosicrucians' incorporation of Egyptian lore and rituals.<sup>147</sup> Among the Ancient Egyptian initiation practices, Freemasons adopted the Rosicrucian notion that Moses had been welcomed into a secret group of Ancient Egyptian priests, from whom he had learned all of their privileged knowledge and wisdom.<sup>148</sup> According to Kerry Muhlestein, these ideas concerning Ancient Egyptian initiation had been further reinforced by the complex initiation rituals detailed in Terrason's novel *Séthos*.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, in France, by the eighteenth century, Freemasonry had attracted the attention and subsequent membership of some the country's foremost Enlightenment thinkers including Voltaire, Montesquieu, and – as will be discussed more thoroughly within the context of Rameau's operas – the librettist, playwright, and dance theorist Louis de Cahusac.<sup>150</sup>

Although it was deemed to be a heretical institution by the Catholic church, Freemasonry was not a religion or an institution which held a particular dogma;<sup>151</sup> in fact, it was a society of men whose traditions were largely based upon Christian mysticism as well as mysticism from other monotheistic faiths. According to Geoffrey Burgess and Margaret Jacob, each lodge would generally recommend that its members “follow whatever religion to which all men agreed;”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Francis A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1972), 255.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1991), 206.

<sup>151</sup> Jan A. M. Snoek, “The Renaissance and Early Modernity: Freemasonry” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 200.

<sup>152</sup> Geoffrey Burgess, “Enlightening Harmonies: Rameau's *corps sonore* and the Representation of the Divine in the *tragédie en musique*” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65.2

however, as explained by Jan Assmann, what appealed most to secret societies such as the Freemasons in the eighteenth century, were the Egyptian mysteries.<sup>153</sup> Priests in Ancient Egypt were thought to have continued to practice and preserve the aforementioned true, monotheistic religion even though the rest of the civilization had descended into corruption via the worship of many pagan gods. According to Assmann, the idea of preserving and practicing a true religion amidst sociopolitical turmoil and corruption was particularly resonant with the Freemasons' (as well as Rosicrucians') "intellectual mission" to preserve and practice their own ideologies amidst their own countries' political and religious turmoil.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, its members saw themselves as the Ancient Egyptian priests' "true heirs."<sup>155</sup>

Thus far, this chapter has presented some of the most prominent scholars and groups who were involved in propagating the occult notions of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* as they related to the Ancient Egyptians before and during the Enlightenment. Next, this chapter will turn to contextualising Rameau's portrayals of the Ancient Egyptians as agents of the *corps sonore*'s revelation and its corruption within the aforementioned scholarly discourses.

### Ancient Egypt in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*: Two Different Stories of Revelation and Corruption

Upon reading Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*, it becomes evident that one of the most recurring features is the importance of Ancient

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(2012): 431; Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts & Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 18, 35.

<sup>153</sup> Jan Assmann, *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

Egyptians in the *corps sonore*'s origin story; that is, Rameau attributes to Egyptians the honour of having been among the first to have been aware of the *corps sonore*'s powers and its theological significance. What has yet to be discussed, however, are the two separate narratives about the Egyptians in these works (each work presents a different narrative): one which presents the entire Egyptian population as erudite, a people who collectively understood and preserved the sacred knowledge of the *corps sonore* (in this narrative they are not complicit in the corruption of musical knowledge) and the other which specifically attributes the cultivation of this privileged knowledge to Egypt's priests. This second narrative still portrays the priests as having been wise and erudite, but also as an exclusive secret society who ultimately contributed to the corruption of musical knowledge apart from the corruption eventually caused by the Greeks. The first narrative is present in the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and the second narrative in the *Origine des sciences*.

In the previous chapter, we looked at passages from the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* which claimed that the Egyptians had recognized the theological significance of the *corps sonore* and used its principles to develop both their religious beliefs as well as their sciences. We also saw how Rameau portrayed the Egyptians as the source of Greek knowledge; that Pythagoras was said to have known of the *corps sonore* through his interactions with the Egyptians, but that the purity of this principle had either become corrupted through his and his students' misunderstandings or deliberate alteration. This is the extent of the context in which Rameau describes the Egyptians' knowledge of the *corps sonore* and the triple progression in the *Nouvelles réflexions*; he does not expand upon who among the Egyptians was aware of this knowledge – they are referred to as an entire people, as if the whole population was privy to this knowledge.

Additionally, while Rameau described Pythagoras and the Greeks as having contributed to the corruption of Egypt's knowledge, we do not see any indication that the Egyptians contributed to the corruption of the *corps sonore*; they are depicted as enigmatic, as a people with a sagacious culture who mysteriously cultivated and preserved the *corps sonore* before it was transmitted to the Greeks. Conversely, in the *Origine des sciences*, Rameau presents us with a more detailed history of the Ancient Egyptian's knowledge of the *corps sonore* and specifies who the precise keepers of this knowledge were in Egyptian society: the priests. As evinced by the works of the aforementioned scholars in this chapter, the Egyptians, specifically the priests, were frequently viewed as sources of hidden, sacred knowledge, particularly knowledge concerning the *prisci*, and we see many of these views replicated in Rameau's writings. Additionally, we see Rameau assigning the negative characteristics of arrogance and pride to Egypt's priests, which, as this section will demonstrate, is indicative of the *prisci* corruption narratives that were espoused by some intellectuals in Early Modern Europe. In summary, while in the previous chapter we touched on the Egyptians as a source of revelation (the *corps sonore*) to the Greeks in the *Nouvelles réflexions*, this section will focus on how Rameau portrays Ancient Egyptian priests as both sources of the *corps sonore*'s revelation and corruption in the *Origine des sciences*, and how this corresponds to the aforementioned scholarly discourses.

### ***Rameau's Influences in the Origine des sciences***

The Egyptians are the first Ancient Oriental civilization mentioned in Rameau's *Origine des sciences* but trying to discern exactly from which sources he derived his occultist ideas is challenging. Although Rameau provides footnotes in the *Origine*, citations corresponding to his knowledge of the Ancient Egyptians are severely lacking. He begins by telling us that Egypt was

the first place in Antiquity where people were dedicated to the study and advancements of the sciences, specifically music, arithmetic, and geometry. He further explains that these skills were cultivated by Egypt's priests who imparted some of their "lessons" to Greek philosophers.<sup>156</sup> As seen in the previous section, this was a narrative that was based in historical fact, as the Ancient Greeks had interacted with the Egyptians and were greatly impacted by their architectural and scientific advancements. As for Rameau's claims that Egypt's priests were the first to have developed the sciences, that they were the most erudite in the land, and that they were in possession of a theology that was based on the most sacred and true principle, we also saw this idea perpetuated in the works of some of the aforementioned scholars.

As mentioned previously, we know from a footnote provided in the preface of *Origine des sciences* that Rameau had read a work by Kircher, but that he did not specify which work this was. To recall, the footnote only says "see Kircher" and is in reference to the "fruitless" musical research that was being conducted in Europe and China without knowledge of the *corps sonore*.<sup>157</sup> Essentially, there is no mention of Egypt in Rameau's footnote about Kircher or in the corresponding text in the body of the preface, nor does Kircher's name appear elsewhere in the text; however, this does not negate the possibility that Rameau may have read Kircher's writings on Egypt considering that he had been engaging with his orientalist writings to some extent in order to reference him in a footnote involving China. The same can be said for Newton's writings that involve Ancient Egypt. Since many scholars have noted that Rameau's earlier theoretical writings were reflective of Newton's work, it is possible that Rameau had also been aware of

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<sup>156</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761): Préface* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid: "See them all, throughout Europe, even in China, persisting in limitless and fruitless research into Music, for an infinity of centuries, until it became the arbiter of the different effects experienced in this vast Universe."

Newton's occult writings that concerned Egyptian wisdom and their initial guardianship of the "one true faith." In the eighteenth century, Newton's works had been circulating and growing in popularity among France's intellectual elite (most notably by Voltaire who was one of the physicist's greatest advocates and promoter), so the probability that Rameau had been exposed to Newton's theological ideas along with his scientific works through his associations with France's Enlightenment culture is likely. The theological air that permeates Rameau's writings on the *corps sonore* in this later period of his life is certainly reminiscent of the religious fervor with which Newton talks of the *prisci* in his own theological writings; but how would Rameau have come to know of Kircher's work? Although he does not mention how he was introduced to the Jesuit's discourse, it is possible that Rameau had been introduced to Kircher's writings by another Jesuit named Louis Bertrand Castel, with whom the composer had been amicable for a period of time and who had admired the writings of Kircher.

Although Rameau does not reference Kircher or Newton in relation to any information concerning Ancient Egypt, he does provide one footnote in the *Origine* which mentions the Egyptians alongside the work of a contemporary scholar: the eighteenth-century French mathematician Jean-Étienne Montucla (1725-1799). Rameau's footnote reads: "History teaches us that we hold from the Egyptians the first elements of the Sciences, and that mystery generally reigns in what they were willing to communicate to others. See what concerns Thales and Pythagoras on this subject, in *Histoire des mathématique* by M. Montucla, p.52, as well as all the works where the Egyptians are concerned."<sup>158</sup>

Rameau does not specify from which volume of Montucla's *Histoire des mathématiques* he derived his information. This required me to make an educated guess based upon the subjects

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

dealt with in each of Montucla's volumes and investigate the first volume which is dedicated to the history of Antiquity. This decision was made since the footnote Rameau provides refers to the works of the Ancient Greeks. I examined a copy of this document in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*'s digital library, and found that this corresponds to Montucla's discussion of Ancient Egypt, the cultivation of geometry, and of how the Ancient Greek philosophers acquired their knowledge of geometry from them:

We cannot refuse so many authorities which, although varying in circumstances, form a kind of unanimous cry in favor of the Egyptians. We must also consider that it was among them that the first Greek philosophers went to draw their geometric knowledge. It is therefore in Egypt that we must seek, it seems, the first sparks of Geometry, I mean, of this Geometry a little developed, by which the Geometer differs from the artist or the artisan guided only by a certain instinct. We even find in Aristotle, a reason more philosophical and more judicious than all those that we have just exposed. Without resorting to the floods of the Nile, he says, were "born in Egypt, because in that country the priests enjoyed the privilege of being detached from the affairs of life, and had the leisure to devote themselves to study." This is what Herodotus, Diodorus, and several others also teach us. It seems that among men who could freely and without anxiety follow the inclination of their mind, there must have been some who turned to curious objects, such as Physics, Astronomy, and who attached themselves to perfecting this natural geometry of which we have spoken. The manner in which this feeling gives birth to Geometry is more analogous to the development that we have given it, and perhaps is the most in conformity with the truth.

It now remains for us to form some conjectures on the progress that the Egyptians made in this science. In this respect, whatever great idea certain authors may have conceived of their geometrical knowledge, I am inclined to believe that it was not considerable, and that they hardly went beyond the limits of the most common elementary truths. The works and the first steps of the Greek philosophers seem to me to furnish proof of this. Indeed, if the transports of joy that Thales and Pythagoras burst forth at the sight of some geometrical theorems that they had just discovered, were not affected, we must not conceive a very high idea of the knowledge of the Egyptian priests, or else it must be said that they revealed to them only the most elementary of the knowledge of which they were in possession; which seems difficult to believe to me.<sup>159</sup>

In the above passages from page 52, it is apparent that Montucla refers to the Egyptians as a source from which the Greeks obtained their knowledge of geometry; however, what we do not

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<sup>159</sup> Jean-Étienne Montucla, *Histoire des mathématiques, Tome 1* (Paris: A. Jombert), 52.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5401071b/f95.item#>.

see are references to the Egyptians' possession of a particularly erudite body of knowledge independent from the Greeks, nor do we see any reference to Hermetic occultist concepts such as a universal sacred principle from which all knowledge derives. Additionally, Montucla does not describe hidden, privileged Egyptian knowledge that we see in the passage to which Rameau has attached this citation. To be clear, Rameau attached the citation of Montucla's work to the following text: "There is every reason to suspect that the mystery that we generally attribute to the Egyptians, could well have led them to disguise the principle from which they have drawn all their knowledge, by communicating it only by a few consequences, by emblems (...)." <sup>160</sup>

On the contrary, while Montucla certainly credits the Egyptians with having developed mathematical concepts, he begins the second paragraph of this page by stating "whatever great idea certain authors may have conceived of their [the Egyptians] geometrical knowledge, I am inclined to believe that it was not considerable, and that they hardly went beyond the limits of the most common elementary truths." In essence, Montucla does not consider the Egyptians to have held any great mysteries, secrets, or a "principle from which they had drawn all their knowledge" as Rameau states.

Since there is no evidence of occultist ideas as they pertain to a sacred or privileged body of knowledge on the page from Montucla's work that Rameau cited, it stands to reason that Rameau must have derived these ideas from other sources, namely the ones to which he refers in his footnote as "all the works where Egyptians are concerned." This, however, is extremely vague and ambiguous, and we are only left wondering what all these other works could be. From what we have seen of Kircher's and Newton's ideas on Egypt and the *prisci*, it is easy to see the

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<sup>160</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

similarities between their ideas and those found in Rameau's *Origine* (as well as the preceding *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*). For example, returning to the previously quoted passage from the *Origine*, Rameau speculates that Egyptian priests may have been secretive about their knowledge of the one, true principle (the *corps sonore*) and that in order to preserve or hide this knowledge, recorded it in "emblems." Rameau does not specify exactly what he means by emblems, but his use of this word suggests that he was referring to symbols or more specifically, hieroglyphics. This reference to emblems or hieroglyphics is very much reminiscent of Kircher's belief that Hermes Trismegistus had recorded the secrets of the one true faith in hieroglyphics. Indeed, Rameau's speculations here share nothing in common with the factual information provided on the page cited from Montucla's work.

Throughout the remainder of the *Origine*, Rameau continues to portray Ancient Egyptian priests as bearers of the *corps sonore*'s esoteric knowledge. He talks about their elite intelligence and describes them as having "penetrated the secrets of nature" as well as the joy that they must have felt upon being exposed to the magnificence of the *corps sonore*.<sup>161</sup> Certainly, the secrecy and exclusivity of the Egyptian priesthood that Rameau describes is reminiscent of how Egyptian priests were portrayed in *Séthos* and perhaps suggests masonic influence. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, Rameau's librettist Louis de Cahusac had strong connections to Freemasonry.

### ***Scholarly Influences on Egyptian Corruption in the Origine des sciences***

Like the *Nouvelles réflexions*, the *Origine des sciences* depicts the Egyptians (although specifically priests in the *Origine*) as having been the source of revelatory knowledge for the

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<sup>161</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761)* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 5. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

Greeks. Although the *Nouvelles réflexions* states that the Greeks inherited a corrupt body of knowledge because of the distortions that occurred to the *corps sonore* during its transmission, this corruption had not been attributed to the Egyptians; it was due to the Greeks' errors. Yet, the *Origine* presents us with a more sinister corruption narrative on the part of the priests. Rameau provides several passages which describe how Egyptian priests contributed to the *corps sonore*'s corruption. The first is found in the *Origine*'s preface and is woven within the same quotation that was analyzed at the beginning of this section. I will now include the complete quotation and want to draw attention to the text that I italicized: "There is every reason to suspect that the mystery that we generally attribute to the Egyptians, could well have led them to disguise the principle from which they have drawn all their knowledge, by communicating it only by a few consequences, by emblems, *by figures that will have seduced, and which will have deceived (...)*. (...)." <sup>162</sup> Rameau's claim that the Egyptians may have tried to disguise their sacred knowledge from others makes a direct reference to the corruption of the *corps sonore*. While trying to protect their knowledge from the influence of others, the Egyptians recorded and communicated in a way that would both "seduce" and "deceive" outsiders into believing a false truth. This false knowledge is what contributed to the dissemination of a tainted principle and the corrupt products that emerged from that principle in other lands. This sentiment is very similar to the ideas that we saw propagated by scholars such as Conring, who believed that Egyptian priests had intentionally led their people astray by teaching pagan doctrines to the masses and reserving the true faith for themselves.

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<sup>162</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

Rameau provides another example which further reflects ideas like Conring's and illustrates how the Egyptians spread corrupt knowledge of the *corps sonore* to the Occidental World through the Greeks. In the following passage, we return to Pythagoras and the discussion of the Greeks' use of the tetrachord; however, we are told that it was not due to his own (or his followers') misunderstanding of the tetrachord and triple progression (and thus, its progenitor the *corps sonore*) that it was corrupted, but because Egyptian priests failed to explain the truth about the principle to Pythagoras; they had intentionally given him false or incomplete information when imparting their knowledge:

It was, without doubt, when feelings began to be divided, that Pythagoras, returning from Egypt, where he could have been told about this tetrachord and the triple progression (each thing separately, and without further explanation) nevertheless put off by the first semitone which is repugnant to everyone, took it into his head to look in this progression for relationships which could give it degrees or intervals, in the order in which we naturally intone them; and his success was so great that he formed a diatonic system, which has been maintained until recent days, especially thanks to the first tone going up, but not at all as regards the relationships of the greater number of intervals. If, however, one has claimed to form, with this Tetrachord, a perfect system of Music, as it actually is, to the shame of all the Authors who have so far given only false ones, from Pythagoras to Mr. Rameau inclusive, one must have been guided by a prior principle, to which one cannot appeal, and this is what must be examined.<sup>163</sup>

Rameau states that Pythagoras had visited Egypt and speculated that the musical knowledge he received had been given to him without any explanations of its significance. Additionally, the different components of this knowledge had been treated as individual, independent concepts and, thus, the fact that they were united by the same principle – the *corps sonore* – was withheld from Pythagoras. In short, The Egyptians had led Pythagoras astray by withholding the extent of their knowledge of the one, true principle.

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<sup>163</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761) (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 4. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

Rameau's preface to the *Origine* gives another example of corruption as it relates to the priests' arrogance and pride. This passage, which directly follows the previous quotation that mentioned seduction and deceit, states that the priests of Egypt had tried to "seduce" and "deceive" others by their "emblems" out of fear that others would take hold of their secrets and acquire the same erudite reputation as them: "They feared, without doubt, that by letting a few glimmers of this principle be seen, others would seize it and make them lose at least a part of the great reputation that they had acquired. To what excesses do not ambition, glory, interest lead!"<sup>164</sup> The fear that Rameau describes here is a fear caused by arrogance and pride. The Egyptian priests are so determined to maintain their learned and mysterious reputation among others that, in their efforts to do so, they concealed the truth of the divine principle and allowed lies and misunderstanding to flourish. As with Rameau's other depictions of corruption, we see this narrative appearing in the works of a few of the scholars that were previously discussed, notably Sprat, who, to recall, believed that Egyptian priests had disguised their secret knowledge within hieroglyphics so that they would remain the most revered and exclusive community of their civilization.

According to Rameau, as a result of the *corps sonore's* (and its products the tetrachord and triple progression's) corruption, it was lost for thousands of years while false knowledge proliferated, that is, until Rameau claimed that he discovered it. Indeed, he credits himself as having unearthed and reestablished the long lost one, true, sacred principle, and having opened humanity's eyes to the falsehoods that were present in musical systems that had been built upon the faulty system of the Greeks. This is evident in the following passage from the *Origine*:

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<sup>164</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

Of all the systems of music, only the tetrachord deserves to be considered perfect, as will be shown: The Greek systems are full of errors, and we have been misled by a blind bias in their favour by the supposedly marvelous effects attributed to them. Even if Zarlino corrected some of these errors, many still remain, and even Mr. Rameau himself did not notice them since he sought to base everything on the fundamental bass. However, after much research, having realized that it was this same fundamental bass that any music system should be built upon, he finally recalled that original tetrachord for which the Greeks' systems derived and which he had initially dismissed because of the first ascending semitone. He saw well, like them, that to arrive at the octave it was necessary to join two of them to each other; but he saw, moreover, the precipice into which they threw us, by abandoning such a system, to substitute for it one, of which we still admit great defects, namely, three tones in a row, which are not natural, and the change of mode forced by the third tone: for-then he no longer hesitated on the choice, and bringing the first semitone to the end, he finally found himself rewarded for his care, while nevertheless seeking the reason why there had at first been question of only a single tetrachord. Indeed, it did not take more for the inventors of this tetrachord to give the first rules of the art; having apparently reserved for themselves all that could have given rise to some suspicions on the true principle, from which the announced consequences, joined to those which can be deduced in the continuation, have probably procured them the knowledge which is attributed to them. I believe, however, that I must prove before anything else (for the satisfaction of those who want to know everything) that nothing can be added to this tetrachord without some imperfections resulting.<sup>165</sup>

By highlighting that the Greeks had promulgated a musical system replete with errors and contending that even influential theorists such as Zarlino were blind to their misinformation, Rameau draws attention to himself as the scholar and saviour who identified these corrupt qualities and who ultimately restored musical knowledge back to its unadulterated state. In this respect, Rameau is mirroring the ambitions of Newton and other contemporary scholars who sought to unearth the *prisca sapientia and prisca theologia*, and who saw themselves as restoring religion and knowledge to its original, pure state.

According to the *Origine* and *Nouvelles réflexions*, the Greeks were recipients of revelatory knowledge from the Egyptians; but how exactly did the Egyptians come to possess this knowledge? Where did it come from? As we will see in the next section, according to Rameau,

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<sup>165</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761) (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 10. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

the principle of the *corps sonore* and all knowledge that descended from it were passed on to the Ancient Egyptians from another Ancient Oriental civilization: Mesopotamia.

### 3.2 Mesopotamians as a Source of Astral Knowledge and Wisdom: The Chaldeans and Early Biblical Patriarchs

Unlike the Ancient Egyptians, the Mesopotamians do not appear in both Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions* and *Origine des sciences*; they only appear in the former of the two works and are presented as two distinct groups: the early Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs (notably, the antediluvian patriarchs) and the Chaldeans. Although the Chaldeans are descendants of the patriarchs, in Rameau's writings, these two groups are not treated equally; that is, we see the early biblical patriarchs aligned with a narrative concerning the *corps sonore*'s revelation and dissemination and we see the Chaldeans associated with a narrative of its corruption.

The antediluvian biblical patriarchs are mentioned in several passages in the *Nouvelles réflexions*, but they appear less frequently in Rameau's texts than the Egyptians. Yet, despite their limited presence, Rameau emphasizes the substantial role that these early humans played in the reception, preservation, and dissemination of the *corps sonore*. As for the Chaldeans, their appearance in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions* is confined to only one short passage, in which they serve to highlight the intellectual accomplishments of the biblical patriarchs and diminish their own. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, they are ultimately portrayed through the lens of the *corps sonore*'s corruption. Despite the emphasis on their negative qualities in the *Nouvelles réflexions*, I decided to include a significant amount of information concerning both positive and negative scholarly opinions on the Chaldeans, since we will revisit them in much more significant and sustained roles in Rameau's opera *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La*

*Sympathie*, where they will be portrayed as disseminators of revelation as well as a people affected by corruption.

The title of an enigmatic collection of manuscript fragments called the *Chaldean Oracles* is a testament to the longstanding reputation of Mesopotamia's connection to wisdom, higher knowledge, and mysticism.<sup>166</sup> Presumed to have been written in either the second or third century CE (the exact date is unknown), the *Chaldean Oracles* contain writings on metaphysics, mysticism, as well as magic.<sup>167</sup> The fragments were written in Greek by an author (or authors) whose identity is currently undetermined, but who scholars suggest may have been a collaborative effort between Julian the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist.<sup>168</sup>

Despite the inclusion of the word "Chaldean" in its title, and one of its ostensible authors being identified as "the Chaldean," the *Oracles* is likely to have been created in one of the Roman Empire's eastern provinces and its authors were possibly not Chaldean at all.<sup>169</sup> To be clear, historians have not been able to agree upon whether the word "Chaldean" refers to Julius's ethnicity because at the time of the work's composition, "Chaldean" also held connotations that were related to wisdom, supernatural knowledge, or magic. Because of this correlation, "Chaldean" may have simply pointed to the author's admirable intellect or understanding of supernatural matters.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, Platonist philosophers revered the Chaldeans as a people who were vessels of what Graham John Wheeler describes as "religious enlightenment;"<sup>171</sup> however, among the Ancient Greeks and Romans, they were primarily reputed for their expertise in

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<sup>166</sup> Chaldean was an alternative name for Babylonian. Chaldeans or Babylonians were Mesopotamians.

<sup>167</sup> Graham John Wheeler, "Towards a Reception History of the Chaldaean Oracles" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 28.3 (2001): 263.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1.

<sup>171</sup> Graham John Wheeler, "Towards a Reception History of the Chaldaean Oracles" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 28.3 (2001): 263.

astrology and astronomy.<sup>172</sup> In fact, the word “Chaldean” eventually became synonymous with the word “astrologer.”<sup>173</sup> Astrology and astronomy, although presently considered to be entirely separate from one another (the former focusing on predictions and divination based upon the movement of celestial bodies and the latter focusing on objective scientific observations of celestial bodies and the universe), were closely related in the ancient world, which persisted until the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>174</sup>

Along with the study of astronomy and astrology came an assumed expertise in mathematics, considering that charting the movements of the stars and planets required an understanding of advanced calculations. Among the Greeks, we can see examples of the Chaldeans’ reputation for excellence in the astral sciences recorded in a comprehensive forty-book account of world history called *Bibliotheca Historia*, which was written by the first-century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus. In the following excerpt, he describes the Chaldeans as a people comparable to the priests of Egypt; as a people who were noteworthy in the astral sciences, philosophy, as well as divination:

(...) the Chaldeans, being among the most Ancient Babylonians, have a rank in the subdivision of the state comparable to the priests of Egypt; for having been assigned to the cultivation of the gods, they practice philosophy for all the time of their life, having a very great repute in astral science. They also adhere to the great extent to divination, making forecasts about the things that are going to happen, and they undertake to supply turnings-away of evil things and fulfilments of good things, some by purifications, some by sacrifices.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.; Alexander Jones and John Steele “Diodorus on the Chaldeans” in *“The Scaffolding of Our Thoughts:” Essays on Assyriology and the History of Science in Honor of Francesca Rochberg*, eds. C. Jay Crisostomo, Eduardo A. Escobar, Terri Tanaka, and Nieck Veldhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 333.

<sup>173</sup> Francesca Rochberg, “Babylonian Astral Science in the Hellenistic World: Reception and Transmission” *CAS Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München eseries* (2010): 1.

<sup>174</sup> John V. Fleming, *The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: Wizards, Alchemists, and Spiritual Seekers in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 170.

<sup>175</sup> Alexander Jones and John Steele “Diodorus on the Chaldeans” in *“The Scaffolding of Our Thoughts:” Essays on Assyriology and the History of Science in Honor of Francesca Rochberg*, eds. C. Jay Crisostomo, Eduardo A. Escobar, Terri Tanaka, and Nieck Veldhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 335.

Like the Egyptians, the Chaldeans' associations with erudition and the occult would continue in the Occidental World into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; however, there also existed mixed opinions on the validity or value of the Chaldeans' knowledge. In particular, Chaldean astrology, astronomy, divination, and mathematics were often conflated and treated with both admiration and suspect especially since astrology and divination were denounced by Christianity.<sup>176</sup> For example, the Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) chastised the Chaldeans for their cultivation of astrology which he felt contributed to the corruption of the one true faith.<sup>177</sup> On the contrary, there existed philosophers and scientists who recognized the merits of the Chaldeans' ancient astral knowledge. One such notable – and controversial – champion for the Chaldeans was Annius of Viterbo (1437-1502).

Annius, a fifteenth-century Italian scholar and Dominican friar who was notorious for fabricating historical accounts and creating archaeological forgeries, condemned the Ancient Greeks for having appropriated their arts and sciences from Eastern cultures (including the Chaldeans), claiming them as their own inventions, and ultimately bastardizing them.<sup>178</sup> He based this radical opinion on a series of ancient manuscripts that he claimed to have found and published under the name *Vetustissimi Auctores* (1498), but these writings were soon exposed as inauthentic.<sup>179</sup> Apart from the unethical act of fabricating archaeological evidence, and although his source documents were fraudulent, Annius's opinions on the Chaldeans and their higher knowledge of astronomy and astrology were reflective of other positive scholarly opinions of the time. Additionally, despite his fraudulent sources, Annius's claims were not any more

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<sup>176</sup> Nicholas Popper, "Abraham, Planter of Mathematics: Histories of Mathematics and Astrology in Early Modern Europe" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67.1 (2006): 89.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

preposterous than many other “historical” speculations that were circulating among philosophers and scientists, as we will soon see in other writings on the history of the antediluvian biblical patriarchs.

Of all Annius’s fabricated documents, Nicholas Popper notes that his “prize piece” was a work that contained the annals of a real historical figure named Berosus, a fourth-century BCE priest from Chaldea.<sup>180</sup> Within this work, Annius provides an account of Eastern civilizations that were in existence prior to the rise of the Ancient Greeks, and emphasizes that the Chaldeans were in possession of advanced astral knowledge long before the appearance of the biblical flood. In fact, Annius asserts that the Chaldeans’ specialized knowledge was so ancient, that it could be sourced as far back in human history as possible – to the time when the first man in the Bible, Adam, lived.<sup>181</sup>

In placing the Chaldeans alongside the earliest biblical figure, Adam, we see Annius attempt to prove that the Chaldeans were one of the most ancient civilizations who existed, quite literally, since the dawn of time in conjunction with (what many people at the time believed) an accurate historical narrative (the creation of humanity). Specifically, he contends that the Chaldeans’ knowledge could be traced back to approximately 4000 BCE, which, according to the Hebrew Bible, places the acquisition of their knowledge within the lifetime of Adam and Eve.<sup>182</sup> In his opinion, the earliest biblical patriarch Adam, was the founder of the earliest scientific and linguistic disciplines, and his son Seth, as well as another biblical figure Enoch, were also very learned in these early disciplines which included the astral sciences. He states that it is alongside Adam and his descendants that the Chaldeans also became privy to the most ancient knowledge:

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

But that letters and disciplines began and were disseminated by their first founder Adam, is proven not only by faith alone, but also from the history of the peoples and the tradition of the Chaldeans, which asserts that they themselves knew astronomy and letters 3634 years before the monarchy of Alexander [the Great] ... therefore the conjecture and argument are firm, that Enoch received letters from Seth the first son of Adam, in whose time, theologians assert, letters and disciplines were infused into Adam, and in which same time the Chaldeans affirm themselves to have grasped letters and astronomy.<sup>183</sup>

What evidence did this dubious scholar provide to support the radical claim that the Chaldeans absorbed the same knowledge as Adam and lived at the same time? Nicholas Popper states that Annius's intertwined narratives of the Chaldeans and the early biblical patriarchs clearly indicate that he believed that the earliest biblical figures including Seth and Enoch were Chaldeans themselves. That is, the Chaldeans were, in fact, the original "chosen" nation of God, and it is from them that their descendants, the Hebrews, later learned their astrological knowledge – knowledge that Popper calls "a pure, original, and divine Chaldean practice."<sup>184</sup>

While it may seem aberrant that Annius conflates the ethnicities of the early biblical patriarchs with the Chaldeans, this is certainly not his most preposterous "historical" claim, since Adam and his descendants up until the patriarch Abraham were decidedly not Hebrews or Jews (the ethnicity and religion with which many Christians may associate them);<sup>185</sup> less specifically, these early biblical patriarchs can be identified as Mesopotamians (as were the Chaldeans). The Hebrew Bible, which contains the religious texts of Judaism (and the Christian Old Testament) and recounts the history of the Jewish people, their patriarchs, and prophets, identifies Abraham as the first Hebrew and his descendants as the Jews. The book of Genesis tells us that, prior to moving to and settling in the land of Canaan, Abraham lived in his homeland of "Ur of the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>185</sup> In the Bible, Abraham was the first patriarch to be known as a Hebrew. Many of the earliest biblical patriarchs are not assigned specific ethnicities, but based upon locations provided in the text, we can deduce that some of them were situated in the region that constituted Mesopotamia.

Chaldeans,”<sup>186</sup> which was situated in Mesopotamia (and as indicated by the name of Abraham’s homeland, it was the land of the Chaldeans).

Tracing back the genealogy of biblical patriarchs from Abraham, scripture indicates that Abraham’s ancestors, who traditionally included Adam and Seth, were also indigenous to Mesopotamia. According to Genesis, prior to partaking in the first sin and triggering “the fall of man,” Adam and his partner Eve lived in an earthly paradise called the Garden of Eden, for which readers are provided with an approximate geographical location:

A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. (The gold of that land is good; bedellium is there, and lapis lazuli.) The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.<sup>187</sup>

Given the location of these rivers, particularly the Tigris and the Euphrates, Mesopotamia can be plausibly identified as the approximate region from where the biblical figure Adam was said to have originated. He can, therefore, be considered as an Ancient Mesopotamian figure, although, this does not necessarily designate him as a Chaldean (his existence would have predated the establishment of a specific nation).

The mingling of biblical stories with Chaldean history, their possession of ancient astral knowledge, and its associations to the divine was not limited to the musings of Annius. Indeed, the Chaldeans (or the Babylonians) were heavily featured in the Bible, although much later after Adam’s creation. One of their earliest appearances occurs in the book of Genesis in the story of

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<sup>186</sup> *The Jewish Bible, Tanakh the Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 17.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

the Tower of Babel.<sup>188</sup> In this account, the inhabitants of Shinar (a southern area of Mesopotamia) attempt to erect an immense tower that reaches to the heavens, which is perhaps a reference to their associations with astrology and the desire to attain knowledge of the cosmos. Apart from scripture, the association between the Chaldeans, astral knowledge, and wisdom persisted in Early Modern Europe as did the mixed opinions about their character and abilities. During the seventeenth century, we see literary works that speak on the occult knowledge of the Chaldeans, sometimes in conjunction with Ancient Mesopotamian biblical figures as we saw in the example with Annius. Two primary examples of this can again be found in the works of Kircher and Newton. Like their ideas on Egyptian occult knowledge as it related to the “true religion,” both Kircher and Newton wrote on the revelatory knowledge and wisdom of the early biblical patriarchs and the Chaldeans.

To discuss Kircher’s narrative on early biblical Mesopotamians and the possession of revelatory knowledge, we must first return to his ideas on the Ancient Egyptians and their knowledge of the one true religion. As previously mentioned, Kircher believed that prior to their idolatrous beliefs, the Ancient Egyptians had been in possession of knowledge concerning the true, monotheistic religion, which had closely resembled Christianity; but how did the Egyptians come into possession of such sacred and important knowledge? According to Kircher, the answer is an early biblical patriarch who was introduced in Annius’s work: the first man, Adam.

According to Kircher’s *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650) and *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-55), after creating Adam, God endowed him with wisdom and perfect, profound knowledge of theology (the *prisca theologia*), as well as all knowledge concerning the cosmos, the earth, the

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<sup>188</sup> According to Jewish scripture, “Babel” refers to “Babylon,” suggesting that it was the Chaldeans, or the Babylonians who constructed the tower. *The Jewish Bible, Tanakh the Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 16.

arts, philosophy, and language (the *prisca sapientia*).<sup>189</sup> Adam then bequeathed this knowledge to his surviving children Cain and Seth, who passed on the knowledge to their descendants; however, while Seth preserved the purity and truth of Adam's teachings, Cain – who was cursed because of killing his brother Abel – disseminated a contaminated paganistic version of Adam's knowledge when he was sentenced to wander the earth for committing murder.<sup>190</sup>

Next, Kircher turns to another biblical figure to explain how Adam's knowledge managed to survive after the flood. Many generations after the death of Adam and his sons, humanity descended into an irreparable state of sin and idolatry; the true faith had been severely perverted from its original form. Because of the wickedness of humanity, God decided that the world and all nations must be destroyed. This would be accomplished by a deluge that would cleanse the earth. The only righteous man in existence was Noah, a descendant of Adam through Seth, who had been a recipient of the sacred and profound knowledge that had been in the possession of his forefather. Because of his virtue, God chose to save Noah and his family, which consisted of his wife and his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth (along with their wives). To survive, Noah received divine instructions that ordered him to construct a colossal arc that would house him, his family, and a male and female pair of every animal while the waters collected on the surface of the earth.

After the waters receded, Noah and his sons set out to repopulate the world, and they proceeded to disseminate their sacred knowledge along with all the knowledge of the arts and sciences to their descendants, so that the true, monotheistic religion would once again be practiced worldwide; however, Adamic wisdom and knowledge was once again corrupted by

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<sup>189</sup> Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 30.

<sup>190</sup> Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England c.1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 64.

Noah's son Ham, who settled in Egypt and taught its inhabitants about superstition, magic, and idolatry (a continuation of the corruption of Adamic knowledge that had begun with Cain).<sup>191</sup> This corruption ultimately led to the pantheon of deities and the practice of magic for which Egyptian religion was eventually known.<sup>192</sup> It is at this point in the story where Kircher's previously mentioned narrative of Thoth comes into play. To reiterate, amidst the corruption of the true faith in Egypt, Thoth (Hermes Trismegistus) sought to preserve and protect it (along with Adam's sacred knowledge of the arts, sciences, and cosmos) from complete annihilation and thus recorded these secrets in hieroglyphics which were preserved by Egypt's priests (until they too misinterpreted the hieroglyphics and became corrupt).

Newton propagated a very similar narrative to Kircher's concerning Noah and the transmission of the one, true religion from Egypt to the rest of the world. To recall, Newton believed that the Egyptians had originally practiced this faith prior to their polytheistic beliefs, and that Noah had also practiced this same monotheistic religion; however, after the flood, Newton lamented that while Noah preserved the original religion, eventually he, as well as his sons, were wrongly believed to be (and worshiped as) planets and gods by other nations such as the Greeks and others in the Occident (for example, Noah was identified as Saturn, and his son Ham was believed to be Jupiter). These incorrect beliefs were also embraced by the Egyptians, whose belief in the true faith was descending into corruption via idolatry (for example, the sons of Ham were believed to be various pagan gods such as Osiris).<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>193</sup> Tessa Morrison, *Isaac Newton's Temple of Solomon and his Reconstruction of Sacred Architecture* (Basel: Springer Basel, 2011), 44; Isaac Newton, "The Philosophical Origins of Pagan Theology," (Yahuda Ms. 16.2, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel), trans. Michael Silverthorne, The Newton Project, December 2013, <https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/TRAN00010>.

While it may seem like a strange coincidence that biblical figures such as Adam and Noah appear in different histories recounted by Annius, Kircher, and Newton, the appearance of the earliest biblical Mesopotamian patriarchs within the context of philosophy and science is unsurprising for the times in which they lived. In fact, as it relates to Adam, it was a relatively common practice for scientists and philosophers in Early Modern Europe to cite the first biblical man as the initial human to possess a deep understanding of the sciences and the arts.<sup>194</sup> Specifically, scholars often presented Adam as the originator of astral studies and the first to understand the motion of the stars and planets. A common narrative that was perpetuated among sixteenth and seventeenth-century intellectuals was an extrabiblical account recorded by the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus (b.37 CE) in his work *Judean Antiquities*, which recounts the origin and dissemination of astronomical knowledge from Adam to the Ancient Greeks.

In the first book of *Judean Antiquities*, Josephus explains that there once existed two pillars, one constructed of brick and one of stone, upon which the progeny of Adam's third son Seth recorded the entirety of Adam's astronomical knowledge. This was done in an effort to preserve Adam's knowledge from the Great Deluge as well as another unspecified event involving fire, for which Adam had received a vision:

Other and more numerous children were born to him [Adam], including Sethos [Seth]. But it would take too long to speak about the others; I shall try to relate only the ones derived from Sethos. He, after being nurtured and coming to the prime of life that is able to judge beautiful things, strove after virtue and, being himself excellent, left descendants who imitated the same virtues. All of these, being virtuous, lived in happiness in the same land without civil strife, with nothing unpleasant coming upon them until their death. And they discovered the science with regard to the heavenly bodies and their orderly arrangement. And in order that humanity might not lose their discoveries or perish before they came to be known, Adamos [Adam] having predicted that there would be an extermination of the

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<sup>194</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 577.

universe, at one time by a violent fire and at another time by a force with an abundance of water, they made two pillars, one of brick and the other of stone and inscribed their findings on both, in order that is the one of brick should be lost owing to the flood the one of stone should remain and offer an opportunity to teach men what had been written on it and reveal that also one of brick had been set up by them. And it remains until today in the land of Seiris.<sup>195</sup>

According to Josephus, the pillars survived the flood, and it is from them that astronomical knowledge was disseminated to the world through the descendants of Noah's sons. His son Shem became the forefather of the Chaldeans, which included the biblical patriarch Abraham, who became particularly learned in the astral sciences because of the knowledge passed on to them from Seth's pillars.<sup>196</sup> Josephus continues to explain that when Abraham travelled to Egypt, he imparted his knowledge of the cosmos and mathematics to Egyptian priests. It is from these priests that Josephus contests that the Greeks obtained their mathematical and astronomical knowledge.<sup>197</sup>

The narrative that claims that biblical figures and the Chaldeans were the originators of astronomical knowledge was clearly intended to highlight the venerability and intellect of the ethnicities in question, since, as explained by Daniel Špelda, the longevity of a nation's astronomical knowledge and accomplishments was evidence of an advanced and well-established culture.<sup>198</sup> We see a similar trend taking place among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European scholars who sought to emphasize the antiquity of their astronomical knowledge and astral sciences in general by crediting the first biblical man as the originator of

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<sup>195</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Flavius Josephus Judean Antiquities 1-4*, ed. and trans. Louis H. Feldman (Boston: Brill, 2004), 24-26.

<sup>196</sup> John Steele, "The Long History of an Imaginary Inscription: Josephus' Two Pillars in Early Modern European Histories of Astronomy" in *Afterlives of Ancient Rock-cut Monuments in the Near East*, eds. Jonathan Ben-Dov and Felipe Rojas (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 405; John Steele, "Egypt and Babylon in Eighteenth-Century European Histories of Astronomy" in *The Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca. 1600-1800*, eds. Margaret Geoga and John Steele (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 313.

<sup>197</sup> Daniel Špelda, "The Search for Antediluvian Astronomy: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Astronomers' Conceptions of the Origins of the Science" *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 44.3 (2013): 338.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

their discipline. This was deemed particularly significant because of the many religious authorities who judged astronomical studies as unnecessary and irrelevant to those who were focused on the most important part of human existence: the pursuit of redemption and eternal salvation.<sup>199</sup> Because Josephus did not report the exact knowledge that was inscribed upon Adam and Seth's pillars, John Steele explains that this was a "blank canvas" for sixteenth and seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists to assign to the pillars whatever knowledge or biases they were trying to make more appealing and persuasive to their contemporary audiences.<sup>200</sup>

Thus far we have discussed scholarly trends that conflated the histories of the early Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs with the Chaldeans, and who saw the Chaldeans as the progeny of the patriarchs who carried on their legacy of advanced knowledge as it concerns the astral sciences; however, there were also scholars who juxtaposed the biblical patriarchs against all their Chaldean descendants, who were deemed to have inherited the corrupt version of the perfect knowledge that had once been known to Adam and his kin. While this viewpoint was evident in the work of some scholars from the Renaissance such as Pico, who saw the Chaldeans' legacy as one of divination, astrology, and superstition, this perception can also be observed in the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars. Take, for example, the *Origines sacrae* (1662) by Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699),<sup>201</sup> a work whose objective was to uphold the validity of Christian scripture when confronted with ancient civilizations whose histories proved to exist long prior to the creation narrative in the book of Genesis. Stillingfleet compares the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>200</sup> John Steele, "The Long History of an Imaginary Inscription: Josephus' Two Pillars in Early Modern European Histories of Astronomy" in *Afterlives of Ancient Rock-cut Monuments in the Near East*, eds. Jonathan Ben-Dov and Felipe Rojas (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 403; 422.

<sup>201</sup> Edward Stillingfleet was an English scholar and theologian.

histories of several ancient civilizations – which he calls “heathens” – and attempts to discredit the validity of their abilities and their ancient histories in comparison to the antediluvian patriarchs. Included among these great Eastern civilizations was the Chaldeans, to whom the entirety of his third chapter was dedicated.

In the *Origines sacrae*'s chapter on the Chaldeans, Stillingfleet chastises them for several sins which includes the practice of judicial astronomy<sup>202</sup> and being charlatans, all of which are contrasted to their ancestors, the biblical patriarchs. He begins his inquiry into the history of the Chaldeans' accomplishments – and lack thereof – by first acknowledging them as “a nation of great and undoubted antiquity” whose system of government was likely established within the lifetime of the biblical patriarchs, soon after the Great Deluge;<sup>203</sup> however, Stillingfleet's positive remarks about the Chaldeans are short-lived as he begins to reprimand them on the second half of the chapter's first page for having had leaders who “corrupted” the “tradition of the eldest times:” “For want of which, the Tradition of the eldest times varying in the several families after their dispersion and being gradually corrupted by the policy of their Leaders (...).”<sup>204</sup> The tradition to which Stillingfleet refers is mentioned in his work's first chapter, where he mentions an “original tradition” which is reminiscent of previously mentioned ideas concerning a true, original religion, or a true, uncorrupted Adamic body of knowledge. He explains that part of his mission is to identify in which heathen culture the original tradition was preserved best, how it became corrupted, and to separate the corrupt elements from the remaining truth:

Which is the design and subject of our future discourse, viz. To demonstrate that there was a certain original and general tradition preserved in the world concerning the eldest Ages of the World; that this tradition was gradually corrupted among the Heathens; that

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<sup>202</sup> Judicial astronomy was a practice that involved observing the movements of celestial bodies in order to predict future events.

<sup>203</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae, or A rational Account of the Grounds of Natural and Reveal'd Religion, the Seventh Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1702), 27.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

notwithstanding this corruption there were sufficient remainders of it to evidence its true original; that the full account of this tradition is alone preserved in those books we call Scriptures: That where any other History seems to cross the report contained them, we have sufficient ground to question their credibility and that there is sufficient evidence to clear the undoubted certainty of that history which is contained the Sacred Record of Scripture.<sup>205</sup>

It is with this original tradition in mind that Stillingfleet assesses the validity and defectiveness of the Chaldeans' knowledge, particularly as it relates to astronomy, the scientific discipline for which they had long been lauded. He states that, prior to the corruption of their original tradition, the Chaldeans had had an advantage over other "heathen nations" in making advanced astronomical observations because of their geographical location, since they lived in a land that was "settled" and less mountainous. Therefore, it was easier to observe the motions of the stars and the planets.<sup>206</sup> Within the description of their geographical location, Stillingfleet also makes sure to note that this was the same location where the "grand ancestors of the world had their chief abode and residence," establishing that it was in the same land as the Chaldeans that the early biblical patriarchs dwelled and possessed knowledge of the original tradition.<sup>207</sup>

Stillingfleet continues by saying that the Chaldeans forgot their original tradition and that there was "a confusion of histories, where there had been before of Tongues." The mention of tongues here likely points to the previously mentioned biblical story concerning the Tower of Babel, whereby the word "tongues" refers to the diversifying of humanity's languages. This is especially likely since in the following sentence Stillingfleet states that the Chaldeans "retained something still of their old aspiring mind to reach up to Heaven, the only thing they were eminent for" which seems to further point to the tower which was intended to reach up to the heavens.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

Next, although Stillingfleet explains that the Chaldeans were “careful in preserving some astronomical observations,” which seems to refer to the original tradition, he continues by stating that it is pointless to admire any skills in astronomy that the Chaldeans may have retained, since they swiftly descended into the practice of judicial astrology (the corruption of the original tradition).<sup>208</sup> Evidently, in Stillingfleet’s opinion, the Chaldeans’ accomplishments and knowledge were unworthy of acknowledgement in comparison to their biblical ancestors. In fact, any accomplishments should be dismissed since, in his view, their primary area of speciality was not in astronomy (that was inspired by the Christian God), but was instead in astrology, a superstitious tool of divination.

In summary, Stillingfleet saw the Chaldeans as mere recipients of an older, more valid astronomical tradition from their Mesopotamian biblical ancestors, which was then corrupted by their practice of astrology. In his opinion, they were not instrumental in the advancements of astronomical studies as is historically claimed. This leads into Stillingfleet’s next criticism of the Chaldeans which concerns their claims of having cultivated a long, established astronomical heritage. He asserts that although they were clearly a nation of “great and undoubted antiquity,” the Chaldeans had no “undoubted or credible records preserved.”<sup>209</sup> Since their claims to astronomical knowledge and an established civilization predated the creation story in the Bible, in Stillingfleet’s eyes, they must have propagated a false narrative as nothing more than an attempt to compete with other civilizations for recognition as the most knowledgeable and ancient nation, an action which Stillingfleet believes was rooted in “vanity.”<sup>210</sup> Essentially, the Chaldeans are portrayed as not only less knowledgeable and respectable than their early

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<sup>208</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacrae, or A rational Account of the Grounds of Natural and Reveal’d Religion, the Seventh Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1702), 28.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

Mesopotamian biblical ancestors, but Stillingfleet also sees them as charlatans; as people who seek to deceive others into believing a false narrative about their nation's antiquity and achievements.

Stillingfleet was not alone in his opinions on the Chaldeans being charlatans. This was a narrative we can see in other scholars' works of the time including George Costard (1710-1782), who was convinced that the Chaldeans (along with other Ancient Eastern cultures) misled and deluded the Greeks into accepting that their astronomical observations were novel and advanced.<sup>211</sup> Clearly, Costard's opinion was not supported by historical fact, but his strong, negative opinion on the Chaldeans' deception of the Greeks is reflective of a bias that was circulating in Early Modern Europe.

In the mid-eighteenth century, we continue to see a dichotomy concerning the Chaldeans and their reputation as sources of revelation and as sources of primitivism, superstition, and deception as it concerns astronomy and astrology. While in previous centuries, Adam and the antediluvian biblical patriarchs were looked to as the first scientists, notably astronomers, during the eighteenth century, this narrative had diminished greatly because of the many scholars who were doubtful about a venerable, sacred astronomical knowledge that had existed prior to the Great Deluge.<sup>212</sup> Yet, although comparisons to their biblical ancestors dwindled in the eighteenth century, we still see the astronomical knowledge of the Chaldeans judged against the knowledge of the Ancient Egyptians in the writings of eighteenth-century astronomer and mathematician Pierre Estève (1720 – c.1790). The Chaldeans appear in Estève's three-volume work *Histoire générale et particulière de l'Astronomie* (1755), which includes both a "general history of

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<sup>211</sup> John Steele, "Egypt and Babylon in Eighteenth-Century European Histories of Astronomy" in *The Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca. 1600-1800*, eds. Margaret Geoga and John Steele (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 325; 338.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

astronomy” as well as a section which delves into the details of specialized subjects within the history of astronomy.

The Chaldeans as well as the Egyptians and their astronomical bodies of knowledge are included in the “general history.”<sup>213</sup> As noted by John Steele, the chapter titles of the general history are incredibly revealing as to the bias in favour of Egyptian astronomy versus the Chaldeans’. Translated to English, the chapter titles are as follows: Chapter V. Of the alleged antiquity of the Babylonians, and from when they already applied themselves to astronomy; Chapter VI. Of the Chaldean magi; Chapter VII. Of the antiquity of the astronomy amongst the Egyptians; Chapter VIII. Of the discoveries which were made by the Ancient Egyptians in the science of the stars. Steele observes that while the Egyptians’ astronomical knowledge is presented as verified fact in the chapter titles, the Chaldeans’ history and astronomy, however, are associated with words such as “alleged” – which indicates that their history and astronomical observations are unverified or that there is doubt surrounding the historicity of their claims – and “magi” which points to magic and superstition as opposed to an intellectual discipline.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, the content appearing in these chapters further draws this intellectual distinction between the two ancient civilizations. Like Stillingfleet, Estève concludes that any astronomical observations made by the Chaldeans were primarily a result of the fortune of having lived on a flat terrain, which allowed them to clearly observe the motion of the stars. He also draws the same conclusion for the Egyptians, stating that the absence of precipitation and a clear night sky was conducive to observing the stars; however, because of the periodic flooding of the Nile river, the

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 332.

Egyptians developed geometry – a science necessary for astronomy – in order to better predict the location of peoples’ fields after they had been engulfed by water during the floods.<sup>215</sup>

Fundamentally, there was no doubt in Estève’s mind that the Egyptians were the source of any astronomical knowledge that the Chaldeans possessed; there was no skepticism around their abilities or whether they had had a hand in scientific advancements. As for the Chaldeans, however, any astronomical knowledge that they possessed was merely inherited from others. Estève cites Belus, a Chaldean, who he states went to Egypt and learned all that he could from the Egyptians, which he then brought back to his nation. While Estève does concede that the Chaldeans made some astronomical observations that influenced others, such as establishing the zodiac, they were certainly not capable of formulating the geometrical calculations that were necessary for producing any respectable scientific observations, and any observations that they had happened to make were tainted by their affinity for astrology.<sup>216</sup> In his mind, astrology only required that one be able to “persuade” another of one’s abilities. This “persuasion” is tantamount to manipulation or deception, since Estève believed that the Chaldeans had convinced others that they possessed knowledge of unforeseen events, and not of anything that required verifiable facts to substantiate their claims. This is evident in his following words:

The Chaldeans were more skilful in astrological predication than in astronomy. To persuade the vulgar that one is a great astrologer, it is sufficient to have wit and imagination; but to prove to him knowledge of the positive science of the stars, it is necessary to predict eclipses and other visible phenomena. One cannot succeed in constructing the theory of these certain (ie. astronomical) predictions, except by borrowing some light from geometry, and observing the celestial motions with precision and accuracy. I believe that the Chaldeans did not go deeply into either of these two elements of astronomy.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 336.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

To substantiate his claims, Estève selectively cites Western authors from Antiquity such as Vitruvius and Seneca, who refer to the Chaldeans with the word “astrologer” as opposed to “astronomer;” however, as recalled from earlier in this section, there was a fine line dividing the disciplines of astronomy and astrology in Antiquity, and the terms were sometimes used interchangeably. Conveniently, Estève chooses to ignore other authors from Antiquity who substantiate astronomical activity among the Chaldeans, such as Ptolemy’s *Almagest* which indicates that the Chaldeans had indeed been making observations of lunar eclipses from at least the eighth century, BCE.<sup>218</sup> He chooses, however, to make use of Ptolemy in another capacity – to discredit the antiquity of Chaldean knowledge as claimed by other authors in Antiquity.

Like Stillingfleet, Estève was skeptical on the purported antiquity of the Chaldeans knowledge, a narrative which he also found to be deceptive. Indeed, there existed some unsubstantiated ancient sources such as those by Cicero and Calisthenes who cited varying narratives and timelines concerning the Chaldeans’ possession of astronomical knowledge. Some of these writings state that this knowledge was cultivated during periods of time which far exceeded what, in Estève’s opinion, was logical or possible. To discredit any notion that there may have been a very ancient scientific tradition among the Chaldeans, Estève turns to Ptolemy’s *Almagest* to show that the Chaldeans had only been making astronomical observations since the eighth century BCE.<sup>219</sup> Evidently, the irony of using, what he felt was, a verifiable ancient account of Chaldean astronomical observation in order to disprove the antiquity of Chaldean science, while also ignoring the exact same source (and many other sources) when trying to prove that the Chaldeans only had an aptitude for astrological predictions was oblivious to Estève.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 333.

Apart from the negative opinions expressed by Estève, we also find philosophers and scientists in eighteenth-century France who expressed mixed opinions on the Chaldeans' cultivation of astronomy and astrology. Among these intellectuals was one of France's most preeminent *philosophes*, Voltaire. In his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756) and *Zadig* (1747), Voltaire accepts the views of earlier philosophers and scientists who believed that the early Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs had had access to an accurate and true body of scientific knowledge which was then later corrupted by their Chaldean (or Babylonian) descendants when they began practicing judicial astrology.

In *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, the Chaldeans appear in the work's first part which Voltaire titled "philosophy of history." Like the intellectuals who preceded him in this study, we see Voltaire assigning to Ancient Oriental civilizations a knowledge of a primordial and true faith; however, this faith had nothing to do with Christianity as did the narratives of the aforementioned scholars. Instead, Voltaire respected and lauded the pagan beliefs of these ancient civilizations which he fundamentally believed were based upon the belief in an all-powerful deity:<sup>220</sup> "There existed among nations called pagan, gentile, and idolatrous a very pure religion which reduced itself to a belief in a supreme deity, his providence and justice."<sup>221</sup>

In Voltaire's opinion, this ancient, pure religion had been known to all ancient people who had been civilized, apart from the Jews. Voltaire was fervently opposed to the institutionalized religion of the Catholic Church, who he deemed to be the embodiment of fanaticism, superstition, and intolerance. Because Judaism laid the foundation for Christianity, Voltaire saw the Jews as possessing a religious tradition that was not in alignment with the "truth" known and

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<sup>220</sup> Jerome Rosenthal, "Voltaire's Philosophy of History" *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1955): 159.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

espoused by the aforementioned pagan nations.<sup>222</sup> In turning to the histories and faiths of ancient pagan civilizations, Voltaire was able to discreetly undermine the history and authority of the church without having to explicitly identify the institution in his writings.<sup>223</sup> This was done in order to demonstrate that morality and truth predated and existed outside the parameters of Christianity and that one need not adhere to the teachings and confines of the Catholic Church in order to be in possession of good scruples.<sup>224</sup> Among the nations that Voltaire cites are the Chaldeans, whom he lauds as having practiced a heliocentric faith with an almighty deity (this is reminiscent of writers such as Newton who praised the ancients for having observed a heliocentric faith). Although there is no direct reference to astronomy here, Voltaire's admiration for the Chaldeans' worship of a heliocentric faith brings their reputation for their knowledge of the cosmos into the foreground. Another of Voltaire's works which more clearly reveals his thoughts on astronomy and astrology as it relates to the Chaldeans is his philosophical novella *Zadig*.

Published in 1747, Voltaire's *Zadig* addresses issues concerning the state of contemporary French society and politics, which are disguised in the many misfortunes of the story's fictional protagonist, Zadig.<sup>225</sup> Voltaire tells us that Zadig is a wise and virtuous Babylonian who, although his actions are always well intentioned, is frequently victimized by those he interacts with and finds himself surrounded by people who lack common sense. He is subjected to consecutive incidents of extreme misfortune; however, despite his many adversities, Zadig

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> *Zadig* is an entirely fictional tale and was not based on historical characters or precise facts concerning the Chaldeans/Babylonians; however, it reflects Voltaire's ideas concerning Chaldean intellect and demonstrates that he was not averse to the narrative that the Babylonians had had access to scientific knowledge, specifically, astronomical knowledge.

consistently manages to move forward and eventually overcome his troubles owing to his wisdom and intellect.

As a protagonist, Zadig embodies patience, bravery, and persistence when faced with hardship; however, how do astrology and astronomy fit into his story? Since the Babylonians were central to so many intellectual conversations concerning astronomy and astrology, it is unsurprising to see that Voltaire included two different perspectives concerning the Babylonians and these astral practices: the first perspective concerns the earliest Chaldeans and the belief that they had held a true scientific understanding of the natural world. The second concerns the descendants of these Chaldeans, the Babylonians who are contemporary with Zadig, and who instead practiced judicial astronomy.

Throughout the novella, Zadig is shown to always be the voice of reason and seeks scientific explanations for various occurrences. In the first chapter, Voltaire tells us that, in addition to his exceptional character, Zadig was very well educated and had been “instructed in the learning of the ancient Chaldees [Chaldeans], and understood as much as was known about natural causes at that time: he also knew as much metaphysics as has ever been known.”<sup>226</sup> As seen in this passage, Voltaire establishes at one of the earliest points in the novella that Zadig, the most rational character in the story, studied the teaching of his ancient ancestors, and as a result of his studies, comprehended as much as possible about “natural causes.” Like earlier narratives concerning the ancient biblical Mesopotamians and their knowledge of a true, natural body of scientific knowledge, Voltaire also suggests that the Ancient Chaldeans were in possession of scientific knowledge concerning the natural world.

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<sup>226</sup> Voltaire, *Zadig/L'Ingénu*, ed. and trans. John Butt (London: Penguin Classics, 1964), location 277 of 2346, Kindle.

Zadig's scientific knowledge, specifically concerning astronomy, is further expanded upon when Voltaire notes that he was convinced that the days of a year consisted of three hundred and sixty-five days and a quarter and that the sun was the central celestial body in the solar system (although Voltaire refers to this as "the universe"). This knowledge is emphasized as having been uncommon among the Babylonians during Zadig's time, since the Babylonian religious authorities (called chief mages) strongly contested Zadig's knowledge stating that it was dangerous and "contrary to the national interest" of the Babylonian people:

He [Zadig] was firmly persuaded, in spite of the latest philosophy, that the year consists of three hundred and sixty-five days and a quarter, and that the sun is the centre of the universe; and when the chief mages arrogantly told him that he harboured dangerous opinions, that it was contrary to the national interest to believe that the sun revolved on its own axis, and that there were twelve months in the year, he held his peace and refused to be moved.<sup>227</sup>

Evidently, Zadig appears to have been an anomaly among his countrymen, for he alone is shown to be enlightened by true, scientific knowledge, whereas the religious authorities – and by extension, the Babylonian people – are willingly corrupted by superstition, notably, judicial astrology (we see later on in the story that this forms a component of their belief system).<sup>228</sup>

Another occasion in which we are made aware of Zadig's astronomical knowledge is after he is forced to flee Babylon for Egypt following one of his many unfortunate incidences. We are told that in order to find his way to Egypt, Zadig used the stars as navigational tools. To further emphasize the depth of his astronomical knowledge, we are told that while he gazed at the stars, Zadig pondered humanity's nature and existence while also "meditating" on the unalterable laws of the universe:

Zadig took his course by the stars. The constellation of Orion and the brilliance of Sirius directed his steps towards Canopus. He was lost in admiration for these vast spheres of light, which look to our eyes like feeble sparks only because the Earth, which is in reality a

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., location 279 of 2346, Kindle.

<sup>228</sup> This appears to be Voltaire criticizing the religious authorities of his day.

mere imperceptible point in the Universe, appears to our greedy outlook something noble and grand. Then he pictured to himself men as they really are, insects devouring one another on a tiny fragment of mud. The truth of this conception seemed to annihilate his misfortunes as he recalled to mind the utter nothingness of his own being and of Babylon too. His spirit soared into space; and with the grossness of the senses left behind, he meditated upon the unchangeable laws of the heavenly universe (...).<sup>229</sup>

While Zadig is portrayed as a bearer of Ancient Chaldean scientific knowledge, his contemporaries, as previously mentioned, are described as willfully ignorant, especially the religious leaders who deem scientific observations to be harmful to the nation. Indeed, in place of scientific observations of the stars, they are shown to consider knowledge of astrology as an essential skill. For example, in one of Zadig's fortunate moments, he is appointed as the king of Babylon's Chief Minister and then presides over several court cases. In the last case he judges, Zadig is introduced to a wealthy young woman who had committed herself to marrying two different mages. The woman had been intimate with both men, became pregnant, and was uncertain of which man was her baby's father. She tells the two mages that she will marry whichever man impregnated her; however, they both claim to have done so. The woman then responds that when the baby is born, she will recognize its father as whichever man can provide it with the best education.

After the woman gives birth, both mages express their desire to educate the child, and to resolve the conflict, Zadig is consulted. He asks the two mages "what will you teach your pupil?"<sup>230</sup> to which the first mage replies with several areas of knowledge including astrology, suggesting that these were the most revered areas of study among the learned in Babylon; there were no scientific disciplines to be found among the list of subjects that the first mage proposed. As for the second mage, he simply replied: "I shall try to give him a sense of justice and make

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<sup>229</sup> Voltaire, *Zadig/L'Ingénu*, Zadig, ed. and trans. John Butt (London: Penguin Classics, 1964), location 638 of 2346, Kindle.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, location 524 of 2346, Kindle.

him worthy of having friends.”<sup>231</sup> Zadig, clearly unimpressed by the entirety of the first mage’s curriculum, chose the second mage to be the child’s father.

Indeed, astrology was among the subjects that Zadig rejected for the child’s education; however, if this instance was not sufficiently indicative of the enlightened Zadig’s distaste for astrology – and of Babylonian mages’ affinity for it – another instance in chapter sixteen is illuminating. In this instance, Zadig blatantly states that astrology, along with the philosophers’ stone and the mages’ theology is preposterous. He states this within the context of advising that good health and lack of moderation or restraint are incompatible with one another: “Understand that there is no such thing as a cockatrice, and that a man can always keep well with moderation and exercise. Good health and intemperance cannot subsist together. The idea is as fantastic as the philosophers’ stone, or astrology, or the theology of the mages.”<sup>232</sup>

Despite Voltaire stating that his story’s protagonist was among the most noble and virtuous of men, he also demonstrates – whether inadvertently or advertently – that Zadig possesses an unsavoury quality that we have seen other scholars accuse the Chaldeans/Babylonians of possessing: deception. This episode occurs in the novella’s second chapter and concerns Zadig, his wife Azora, and his friend Cador. We are told that, one day, Zadig notices that his wife is upset after visiting a friend whose husband had recently died. When Zadig asks her why she is troubled, she responds that her friend had made a tomb for her husband beside a stream, and that, in her grief, she had vowed to remain beside the tomb as long as the stream continued to flow by. Zadig sees no issue with this situation and believes this to be an act of an “admirable woman;” however, Azora clarifies the part of the story that upset her: she had witnessed her friend

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., location 1068 of 2346, Kindle.

diverting the stream so that she would not have to remain by her husband's tomb as she had originally vowed.

Because of her anger, Azora begins to berate her friend Zadig, which he views as evidence that Azora possesses less virtue than he had originally believed. Because of her outburst and the story she recounted, Zadig decides to test her virtue and loyalty in an act of deception. He approaches his friend Cador, who his wife admires, and entrusts him with his plan to trick her: he intends to fake his death and see if Azora will remain loyal to him or turn to Cador for comfort. While Azora is away visiting friends, Zadig executes his plan. Upon her return, Azora is told by her servants that Zadig has died and been buried during her absence. Overwhelmed with grief, Cador offers to comfort Azora and discloses that Zadig has left most of his estate to him instead of her. Infuriated by this news, Azora begins to tell Cador about some of the faults which she believes Zadig possessed. As they continue to spend time together, Cador suddenly feigns illness, and Azora attempts to alleviate his pain with all of the medicinal remedies she has. When none prove effective, Cador explains that the only remedy that will work is to apply a dead man's nose to the area of his pain. Although Azora finds the remedy to be bizarre, she decides to enter Zadig's tomb and cut off his nose. As she approaches her husband's reclined body with a razor in hand, he suddenly sits up, seizes the razor from Azora, and states that she must no longer judge the actions of her widowed friend because intending to cut off a nose is just as guilty as diverting a stream.

Although Zadig intended to reveal Azora's lack of virtue and hypocrisy for committing an act that he deemed to be as deplorable as that for which she accused her friend, his actions in this situation were entirely deceptive and void of virtue. Indeed, for all the positive qualities that we

are told Zadig possesses, he still retains an imperfection that was, for some scholars, quintessentially Chaldean.

Now that this section has presented a variety of scholarly opinions on the early biblical patriarchs, Chaldeans, and their preservation and corruption of the *prisci* respectively, we will look at how Rameau incorporates these ideas into his writings on the *corps sonore* and its products the triple progression and the tetrachord.

### Mesopotamians in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions*

#### ***The Early Biblical Patriarchs and Revelation in Rameau's Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique***

Like much of the philosophical and scientific discourse introduced in the previous section, Rameau credits the early Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs Adam and Noah with having been among the original recipients, protectors, and disseminators of his own version of the *prisci*: the *corps sonore* and its products the tetrachord and the triple progression. Rameau first introduces us to the Mesopotamians when he poses a series of questions about why philosophers have always sought the secrets of music, how all the sciences originate from music, and how all philosophers and scientists were misled toward a corrupt body of knowledge at some point.<sup>233</sup> He begins to address these questions by stating that all answers are revealed by crediting the first knowledge of the sciences to Adam: “By attributing the infuse science to Adam – as some have done – all is revealed.”<sup>234</sup> What is also revealed is that Rameau was aware that “some” scholars had been naming Adam as not only the first man, but also as the first man to have cultivated the

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<sup>233</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 571.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 572.

arts and sciences; however, like his writings on the Egyptians, Rameau leaves us wondering exactly to which scholars he refers. He does not provide us with a footnote for this sentence, so it is difficult to know from which sources he was drawing upon for this information; however, the themes present within his descriptions of the Mesopotamians, as well as a few footnotes he later provides, do give us some suggestions as to where he may have derived these ideas.

The first footnote that Rameau does provide corresponds to a sentence that appears much farther down the page after his initial introduction of Adam and does not refer to the first man, but one of his descendants. Prior to this point in the text, Rameau had been speculating about how the earliest humans had learned to sing and speak. He conjectured that if musical traditions had been passed down “from father to son,” then it would be logical to conclude that early humanity’s profound knowledge of music had been passed down from the “first father,” Adam, to his descendants.<sup>235</sup> Immediately following this, we see Rameau trying to establish that Adam must have been in possession of “a perfect ratio” between musical intervals and subsequently passed this knowledge down to his descendants. His reasoning for this is due to biblical genealogy, which lists one of Adam’s later relatives, Jubal, as having been the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and the pipe (some versions of the Bible state that he was the forefather of those who play the harp and the organ). It is for Jubal that Rameau provides his first footnote, and we see him citing the “Genealogy of Adam” from Père Calmet’s *L’Histoire de l’ancien testament* (1718).<sup>236</sup> As with his citation for Montucla in the previous section on Egypt, Rameau does not specify from which volume of Calmet’s *Histoire* he derived his information, so again, I had to make an educated guess based upon the subject matter dealt with in each of Calmet’s volumes. I found that Calmet’s first volume focuses on biblical history beginning from the

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Augustin Calmet (1672-1757) was an influential priest and scholar.

creation of the world up to the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem, and that this should encompass the antediluvian biblical patriarchs that Rameau had included in his writing. Indeed, the page that Rameau cited in reference to Jubal, page 203, did in fact correspond to this particular volume. Because of this exact correspondence in information, it is from this particular volume that I continued to examine Rameau's other references to Calmet's work as they concerned the antediluvian biblical patriarchs.

Returning to Rameau's inclusion of Jubal, the composer's decision to bring attention to this seemingly obscure biblical figure out of all of Adam's progeny deviates from the *prisci* accounts we saw in the previous section, as he does not focus solely on Adam, his sons, or Noah as having contributed to the initial dispersal of primordial knowledge. So why did Rameau select Jubal to be a key figure in the *corps sonore*'s origin story? The Bible states that Jubal had been the ancestor of all those who specifically play the aforementioned instruments; however, it became common practice for scholars to view Jubal as the ancestor of all musicians. Clearly, Rameau did not stray far from this narrative and used Jubal's identity as the first musician to substantiate that Adam, or one of his close descendants, must have had knowledge of the *corps sonore*. According to Rameau, Jubal would have required precise knowledge of the "perfect ratio between intervals" in order to have invented musical instruments: "Jubal, to whom the invention of instruments I attributed, could not have done so without having a correct idea of a perfect ratio between the intervals that these instruments form. Adam was deceased just fifty-six years before the birth of Lamech, Jubal's father. Therefore, Lamech could have seen Adam. Therefore, Adam, or at least one of his descendants before Jubal, could have been the first to sing."<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 572.

According to Rameau, Adam probably learned of the *corps sonore* while becoming acquainted with his God-given ability for language and the vocal sounds he was able to produce. While experimenting with his own voice, Adam would have become aware of his ability to sing, and it is from this first musical activity that his awareness and understanding of the *corps sonore* emerged;<sup>238</sup> but how would Adam's discovery of the *corps sonore* through his own voice have been possible without the scientific tools of measurement or musical instruments that Rameau himself would have possessed for his own discovery of the *corps sonore*? In Rameau's opinion, humans are "passively harmonics" and the voice itself is a *corps sonore*; it acts as a first intoned sound from which harmonics derive. Like Kircher (and some of the other scholars previously mentioned) Rameau asserts that humans were in possession of an inherent, sacred knowledge that had been instilled within them since creation, and Adam was the first human who was aware of this inherent wisdom and knowledge:

Moreover, we are passively harmonics. Our voice is a *corps sonore* that always presents the first sound intoned, with no presentiment of music, without thinking about it, and therefore it is from its harmony, or from the harmony of one of its harmonics, that is born in us the sentiment of the just ratio that this original sound must have with the one made to follow it, as our own experience, artificial instruments, and even nature prove.<sup>239</sup>

Owing to his knowledge of the most fundamental principle of all, Rameau then tells us that Adam was able to create the "tetrachord BCDE" in its purest state, prior to its later corruption by the Greeks.<sup>240</sup>

Apart from showing us the source from where he acquired his biblical information on Jubal, Rameau does not divulge his sources on Adam as the first scientist; however, when comparing Rameau's portrayal of Adam as the first recipient of the *corps sonore*'s wisdom and knowledge

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 572-573.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 577.

with the scholarly narratives of Adamic knowledge in the previous section, there is ample evidence to show that the *corps sonore* was being portrayed in the same light as the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*. Like the authors of these narratives, Rameau used the story of Adam and his direct descendants to breathe authenticity and antiquity into his theory. While his writings on the *corps sonore* and the biblical patriarchs are certainly reminiscent of Kircher's ideas on the first man, I suspect that Rameau may have also been influenced by Calmet's discussions on Adam based upon the information that he referenced for Jubal.

As previously mentioned, Rameau cited page 203 as the source for his information on Jubal. Considering that Calmet did not include a table of contents or an index in which Rameau could have deliberately searched for Jubal's name, it is possible that he would have had to read all of the pages of the text leading up to that point in order to discover this information (and as we will see shortly, Rameau actually does cite additional pages in close proximity prior to Jubal's appearance on page 203). If Rameau did read this significant amount of Calmet's work, it is probable that he continued to read the volume past the point that mentioned Jubal. Indeed, this becomes even more likely when considering the volume's contents in the following three pages that discuss Adam in a way that is very similar to the common *prisca* narratives. To be clear, on page 205, just two pages after the page Rameau cited for information on Jubal, Calmet recounts Josephus's story of the two columns of Seth that were engraved with Adam's knowledge of the sciences, specifically astronomy:

Nor do I say anything about those two scorching columns, which Josephus says were erected before the flood by the sons of Seth. He [Seth] being instructed in all the science of astronomy and informed by Adam that the world was to perish twice, once by the waters of the flood which was soon to come and the other by the flames of a general fire which was to come a long time after, erected two columns, one of stone to resist the water and the other of brick to resist the flames, on which they wrote their discoveries, to pass them on to

posterity. As these things are not of a certainty, which could make them rank among historical facts, we only touch upon them to warn the reader in passing.<sup>241</sup>

As seen in the above quote, Calmet refers to the *prisca sapientia* as it relates to Adam and his progeny prior to the deluge. Although Calmet ends the passage by expressing skepticism about the story, this would not have necessarily deterred Rameau from appropriating this information for his own narrative of the *corps sonore*. As we will see in our discussion of the Chaldeans, he did not always choose to use information that was deemed historically accurate (which is also evident from the speculative nature of his writings in general from the 1760s).

One page later, on page 206, Calmet provides a more thorough description of the knowledge that Adam was believed to have possessed:

Adam, after having lived nine hundred and thirty years, died leaving a large number of sons and daughters; some who imitated his piety and his penitence, and others who followed the deregulations of Cain. We credit Adam with having invented letters and writing. The Hebrews name the angel Raziel as his master and tutor. We want him to have been the most enlightened man there ever was; that he invented and perfected all the arts, both liberal and mechanical, that he was filled with the spirit of prophecy.<sup>242</sup>

Considering that this account which describes Adam as having “perfected all the arts” and as having been “the most enlightened man” that ever lived is in very close proximity to Rameau’s citation of Jubal, it is not beyond the scope of reason to suggest that Rameau may have read and been inspired by these ideas that attribute to Adam the most primordial and perfect knowledge of “all the arts,” which would, of course, have included music. This claim is further reinforced by another of Calmet’s quotes which appears on page 208, and which resembles the notion that the *prisca sapientia* had first been given to people of the Ancient Orient (“the Easterners”). In the

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<sup>241</sup> Antoine Augustin Calmet, *Histoire de l’ancien et du nouveau testament et des Juifs: premier tome* (Paris: Rue S. Jacques, 1718), 205.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

following passage, we see Calmet refer to Adam's astronomical knowledge in addition to his knowledge of the arts. We also see the common occultist idea that the *prisci* had been lost. This is evident when Calmet states "but these discoveries have not reached us:"

"The Easterners believe with great probability that Adam communicated to them, as to his beloved son, all the knowledge he had received and the discoveries he had made in astronomy and the arts. But these discoveries have not reached us."<sup>243</sup>

In addition to Adam, Rameau also turns to another antediluvian biblical patriarch who played a key role in many histories of the *prisci* body of knowledge: Noah. Like the scholarly narratives that claimed Noah played a primary role in preserving the *prisci* aboard his ark, Rameau, too, claimed that the *corps sonore*'s products the triple progression and the tetrachord were preserved on Noah's ark during the biblical flood.

According to Rameau, Noah realized the importance of musical instruments and theoretical knowledge, theorizing that it was possible that the powers of the *corps sonore*'s triple progression had already produced significant scientific knowledge in capacities outside of music; however, while this sacred musical knowledge was preserved in its entirety aboard the ark, after the deluge, Noah's sons distributed a corrupt version of the *corps sonore* to others:

Noah, set on his destiny, must not have failed in all probability to equip himself with everything he believed specific for some use. That way the triple progression, even the tetrachord, as well as musical instruments, could have very well been a part of that, all the more so since several benefits of the progression with which the sciences were concerned could already have been drawn, according to the above. This patriarch, however, too occupied with his establishment on the new earth that he was going to inhabit, could have well neglected what was then of least consequence to him, allowing the freedom or rather the duty of tracing the memories he had stored his children, in order to render account of them to him. Now, could it not be possible that the progression had fallen into one of their

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 208.

hands and the tetrachord in another one's, and that they, not seeing the time favorable to make use of them, had them taken to different places? (...).<sup>244</sup>

In this passage, Rameau once again cites Calmet's *L'histoire de l'ancien et du nouveau Testament* directly after the first four words "Noah, set on his destiny;" however, the three pages that he cites, while providing information on Noah's time on the ark as well as information about his descendants (these three pages are a chronology of Noah's kin and briefly describe his time on the ark and after), do not mention anything concerning Noah's possession of sacred, primordial knowledge. Again, the lack of corresponding information between Calmet's account here and Rameau's version of the story points to influence from other pages in Calmet's text or alternative scholarly sources such as those mentioned in the previous section. As for Calmet, we do see a *prisci* narrative told in this volume, but it is located much later in the text than the pages that Rameau cited:

Until then the worship of the true God had been preserved in its purity among the men of Noah's race. But after the dispersion of peoples, superstition and disorder gradually introduced themselves into the world, when we were no longer held back by the respect and preference of the first patriarchs. There are others who relate the origin of false religion, of curses, of the magic of worship of the stars, of fire and of demons to Ham son of Noah, who having learned these dangerous arts before the flood, and having given himself over to all the corruption of morals which reigned then, conversed the memory of it, and carried the practice into the times which followed the flood.<sup>245</sup>

In this passage, Calmet tells us that Noah had preserved the worship of the true God in its purest form. Although he does not use the words *prisca theologia*, Calmet's account of how the proper way to worship the true God was preserved aboard the ark and how this knowledge was subsequently corrupted by superstition is reminiscent of *prisci* corruption narratives wherein the

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<sup>244</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 579.

<sup>245</sup> Antoine Augustin Calmet, *Histoire de l'ancien et du nouveau testament et des Juifs: premier tome* (Paris: Rue S. Jacques, 1718), 243.

true religion, preserved by Noah on his ark, was subsequently corrupted at the hands of his sons, specifically Ham. While Rameau, in his account of Noah, does not name Ham specifically, we still see the same occultist idea present in his aforementioned passage – the idea that a true and pure principle had been preserved by Noah aboard his ark, but was later degraded because of his children and their descendants.

### ***Chaldean Corruption and Intellectual Deficiencies***

In the previous section that focused on the writings of Early Modern European scholars, we saw that it was not uncommon for intellectuals who embraced the notions of the *prisca* to praise the antediluvian biblical patriarchs for their possession and preservation of primordial, divine knowledge. This praise was often in conjunction with the condemnation of the patriarchs' descendants, the Chaldeans, for having embraced corrupt practices such as judicial astrology. It was believed that the practice of such “corrupt” disciplines had led the Chaldeans astray from the *prisca*, which then led to their inability to draw upon the higher, sacred knowledge that had once been possessed by their ancestors. Similarly, Rameau also presents us with this negative Chaldean narrative. While he presents Adam, Jubal, and Noah – his antediluvian biblical forefathers of choice – as bearers of revelatory and divine knowledge, we also see Rameau juxtapose this knowledge with that of the Chaldeans, who are portrayed in a much less flattering light.

As it concerns the relationship between the first biblical patriarchs and the Chaldeans, Rameau would have certainly been aware that the Chaldeans were direct descendants of Adam and Noah, as this information is included on one of the pages he cited in reference to his knowledge on Noah. Specifically, page 4 of Calmet's aforementioned volume states the following (this is from the biblical chronology that Rameau referenced): “Abraham's calling

from Ur of Chaldea. He goes to the city of Chares, or Haran in Mesopotamia.”<sup>246</sup> This entry on Abraham the Chaldean is preceded by a genealogy which traces his lineage back to Shem, one of Noah’s sons. The genealogy continues by tracing Noah’s lineage back to Adam. Since Rameau would have read this account on the aforementioned page, it is not unexpected to see that he contrasts the Chaldeans with Adam:

Why would he [Adam] not be the first astronomer at least, he who should possess an understanding of ratios and to whom each of his descendants could furnish the means of going forward of producing the very instruments specific for this purpose? Does history not tell us that such instruments, which could already be as old as reason, as old as his lifetime, were invented for one thing, the other, something else? Would that not be better based on our account than that of the Chaldeans, who we believe were not *versed in geometry* and who lacked *the instruments necessary to make accurate observations of astronomy*?<sup>247</sup>

Here, Rameau refers to Adam’s position as the first astronomer, a position that we have seen ascribed to him by many other philosophers and scientists, as well as by Calmet who had referred to Adam’s astronomical “discoveries” in the volume from which Rameau sourced his biblical information; however, at the end of the text, we see Rameau introduce the Chaldeans, who we are told were “not versed in geometry” and therefore “lacked the instruments necessary to make accurate observations of astronomy.” As recounted in the previous section, although the Chaldeans were condemned by some scientists and philosophers for their cultivation of judicial astrology, there were still many who acknowledged the historical fact that the Chaldeans were among the first ancient civilizations to have cultivated the discipline. Yet, it appears that Rameau chooses to discredit the Chaldeans’ scientific abilities in order to bolster his own claims that

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 4. This quotation is in reference to the biblical forefather of the Jews, Abraham who was mentioned in the previous section. Calmet’s first sentence of the quotation refers to the story of when God had called Abraham out of his homeland in Chaldea and told him to move to Canaan.

<sup>247</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 577.

Adam had been in possession of the first astronomical knowledge and therefore, by Rameau's reasoning, the *corps sonore* (since Adam would have had to understand ratios in order to make his astronomical observations).

Through this hypothesis, Rameau elevates the status of the *corps sonore* by placing it in the hands of the earliest biblical man who was in closest proximity to the divine. Essentially, the decision to align the *corps sonore* with Adam comes with far more credibility and theological authority than aligning it with a nation who had a dubious reputation among scholars; but from where did Rameau acquire his information on the Chaldeans? In Calmet's work, the Chaldeans are acknowledged as sources of both astronomy and astrology, but it is not within Calmet's work that Rameau found his historical knowledge. Instead, Rameau provides a footnote which references the work of a man with whom he had one of his most tumultuous relationships of the 1760s: d'Alembert.

Rameau's citation of d'Alembert's work corresponds to his aforementioned passage about the Chaldeans: "would that not be better based on our account than that of the Chaldeans, who we believe were not *versed in geometry* and who lacked *the instruments necessary to make accurate observations of astronomy?*" The text given in italics – which also appears in italics in Rameau's original text – is a quotation slightly altered from d'Alembert's entry on astronomy from the *Encyclopédie*. The quoted excerpt from d'Alembert's entry is as follows: "The Chaldeans were not versed in Geometry, and they lacked the necessary instruments to make just observations: their great study was judicial Astrology; science whose ridiculousness is well recognized today. Their observatory was the famous temple of Jupiter Belus, in Babylon."<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Astronomia, Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.," eds. Robert Morissey and Glenn Roe, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Autumn 2022 Edition, <https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/encyclopedia0922/navigate/1/4559?byte=9630338> Encyclopédie.

While Rameau uses this passage from d'Alembert's entry on astronomy to highlight the improbability that the Chaldeans were well versed in geometry (and therefore not capable of making astronomical observations derived from the *corps sonore*), he chooses to ignore all of the historical details that d'Alembert provided on the Chaldeans' astronomical knowledge leading up to the quotation that he ultimately selected. For example, in the following passage, d'Alembert makes a definitive statement on the Chaldean roots of astronomy: "Whatever the case, it does not appear that one can doubt that astronomy began in Chaldea; at least this is the judgment that one must make according to all the historical proofs that remain to us (...)." <sup>249</sup>

In another, he how recounts how the Greeks and Romans credited the Chaldeans with having made advanced astronomical observations, and affirms that both astronomy and astrology were "born" in Chaldea:

(...) but it is certain that the greater number of Greek and Latin authors are of a contrary opinion: almost all attributing them [astronomical observations] to the Chaldeans or Babylonians.

Astronomy and Astrology were therefore born in Chaldea, in the judgment of the great number of authors: also the name of Chaldean is often synonymous with that of Astronomer, in ancient writers. There are some who, on the authority of Josephus, prefer to attribute the invention of these sciences to the ancient Hebrews, and even to the first men. <sup>250</sup>

While d'Alembert briefly mentions that there are "some" who give credit to the "first men," which would include Adam, for the birth of astronomy, he does not entirely dismiss the idea as unreasonable until two paragraphs later when he calls the practice "gratuitous:"

"Some have given a perfect knowledge of astronomy to Adam; and, as we have just said, the same honor has been given to the descendants of Seth, but all this gratuitously. However, we

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

must not doubt that there was some knowledge of astronomy before the flood: we learn from the journal of this terrible event that the year was 360 days long, and that it was made up of 12 months; an arrangement which supposes some notion of the course of the stars.”<sup>251</sup>

D’Alembert’s acknowledgement that astronomical knowledge existed prior to the flood does not discredit the idea that the Chaldeans may have had access to astronomical knowledge, but he does note the improbability that Adam and the children of his son Seth would have had access to such “perfect” knowledge. Considering the placement of the quote Rameau selected within d’Alembert’s article, it is probable that the composer read d’Alembert’s other paragraphs on the astral sciences originating in Chaldea prior to selecting the text that mentioned the Chaldeans’ lack of geometric knowledge; however, why would d’Alembert have written this seemingly contradictory information about the Chaldeans when he had previously stated that they had been responsible for developing the astral sciences, and why would Rameau have chosen to ignore the aforementioned material in favour of information that discredited the Chaldeans? To answer the first part of the question, d’Alembert’s quotation about the Chaldeans’ lack of aptitude for geometry appears within the context of presenting the opinions of various writers spanning from Antiquity up to his time, and this was simply one of the many opinions expressed in his article. It is an anomaly among all other mentions of the Chaldeans in this article, since every other opinion claims that the Chaldeans were indeed cultivators of astronomy, as well as astrology, and that they were among the first to have made the first astral observations. As for the question of why Rameau would ignore all the historical facts that d’Alembert provided in his article which stated that astronomy was a Chaldean science, I return to the motivation I previously mentioned: by selecting Adam as the first astronomer and the first human (despite d’Alembert’s skepticism

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

about this story's historicity) to have had knowledge of the *corps sonore*, Rameau is able to claim the *corps sonore* as the most ancient of all principles, since it was known to the first man. Additionally, through Adam, he is able to situate it within a mystical, theological, or divine context; it thus has powers and capabilities gifted to humans directly from God. Since the *corps sonore* was the most perfect and pure source of knowledge by Rameau's account, it would have had to originate from a completely uncorrupted and pure source itself – the divine.

Rameau's decision to ignore the historical and scientific content in d'Alembert's article and instead choose the material that suits his own narrative, or purpose, is very much in alignment with his actions at this period in his life. For example, in the *Controverse* included in the *Origine des sciences*, we see Rameau directly responding to d'Alembert's criticisms on his speculative and metaphysical theories of the *corps sonore* and showing no hesitation to chastise and correct the scientist's "errors:"

During the printing of this work, the new edition of the *Elémens de musique* by Mr. d'Alembert fell into my hands. I quickly looked through it, and it seemed to me that this famous geometer was adding new errors to those he had put forward in the *Encyclopédie*, doubtless to give them more weight; we will see him, moreover, dwell at length on practice, where not only does he contradict himself, but he is also mistaken, without thinking that people who are not familiar with it can easily be mistaken with him; for I do not believe that he did it on purpose; which does not give a great idea of this simplicity, of this clarity, to which he intends to have reduced the principles of Mr. Rameau in this part; but before going down there, let us first examine his preliminary discourse, the pages of which I will mark with the same Roman numerals for each article that I will cite.<sup>252</sup>

Perhaps the most ironic aspect of the above passage is Rameau's accusation that d'Alembert had been "adding new errors" to his work in order to "give them more weight," when we see Rameau doing the exact same thing in his description of the Chaldeans; that is, he appropriates content about the Chaldeans from d'Alembert's work, but misinterprets said content in a way that

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<sup>252</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): *Controverse* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 17. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

bolsters his own claim that Adam had been the originator of astronomy and the first recipient of the *corps sonore* (despite d'Alembert's objections to the veracity of Adamic knowledge).

Fundamentally, Rameau chooses to adhere to the occultist notion that the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* had been fostered and protected in the hands of the earliest Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs, but that their descendants the Chaldeans had not inherited this privileged knowledge or wisdom.

### 3.3 China: Source of Wisdom, Philosophy, and Ethics

While Europeans had been aware of China's existence since Classical Antiquity, there had not been a collection of extant written works from the Ancient Greeks or Romans documenting the European reception of the Far East in the way that the Ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians had been recorded. There had been some European explorers during the Middle Ages, notably Marco Polo, who had ventured to the Far East and written about their experiences, having been dazzled by the splendour of China's imperial court, wealth, and political organization; however, some readers viewed such accounts as suspect and fictitious since there had also existed contemporaneous contradictory writings by others such as Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (d.1252), who described the inhabitants of the Far East with less enthusiasm and in a much less flattering light.<sup>253</sup>

During the Renaissance, China's culture and civilization were still little understood by Europeans. In fact, apart from the writings of Marco Polo, it was not until the seventeenth century that Europeans received an influx of information concerning Ancient Chinese

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<sup>253</sup> Na Chang, review of *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts, and Revenues*, by Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Reviews in History* (Review No. 1667): <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1667/#f2>.

philosophy, religion, and science which gradually led to a wave of Sinophilia. Additionally, it was during this century – and especially during the eighteenth century – that Ancient China was believed to have been a source of primeval wisdom, ethics, and philosophy, and that the Chinese who were contemporaneous to the European Age of Enlightenment were inheritors of this ancient wisdom and knowledge. In fact, like the Ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, some European intellectuals believed that the Chinese had access to the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*. As a result, during the eighteenth century, some of Europe’s foremost philosophers – notably in France – turned to the writings of Ancient China for inspiration on how to improve their countries’ sociopolitical woes;<sup>254</sup> but why did European interest in China exponentially increase during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how did Ancient Chinese writings become so widespread among intelligentsia? The answer lies in the missionary efforts of the late seventeenth century Jesuits, who propagated the notion that China was an enlightened nation that had access to ancient wisdom, knowledge, and philosophy.<sup>255</sup>

The Jesuits’ missions in the Far East began in the sixteenth century owing to the work of Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552), a Spanish religious authority who contributed to the founding of the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuit Order.<sup>256</sup> Although he died before he was able to proselytize China, Xavier’s quest to convert the inhabitants of Asia to Christianity was continued by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian priest who oversaw the creation of the Chinese Jesuit mission.<sup>257</sup> Although the Jesuits experienced an initial period of instability in China which included persecution for attempting to convert its inhabitants, the aftermath in the mid-

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<sup>254</sup> David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 41.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

seventeenth century was much favourable for the Catholic priests. They were appreciated and protected by the Kangxi emperor because of their intellectualism and the scientific knowledge that they exchanged with the learned of the imperial court.<sup>258</sup> Similarly, the Jesuits were developing a strong admiration and respect for Chinese philosophy and government which was expressed in their written works.

Among the earliest Jesuit works that extol the virtues of the Chinese were those written by Álvaro Semedo (1585-1658), a Portuguese priest who promulgated the European vision of China as an extremely civilized people who were governed by spiritually enlightened, scholarly leaders.<sup>259</sup> For example, in his description of Hun Vu, Semedo expressed admiration for the fourteenth-century Ming Dynasty ruler's sagacity and shrewdness by explaining that he entrusted the entirety of his governing body to the hands of intellectuals as opposed to practicing nepotism which was common among the European ruling elite. In his own words, Semedo explains that Hun Vu:

(...) placed the whole government in the Literati, who are created such by way of concurrence...without any dependence at all on the Magistrates, or the King himself, but only by the merit of their learning, good parts, and virtues. He did not annul those ancient laws which concerned good government (...) who seeth not how much reason we have to envy these heathens, who, although they are exceeded by us in the knowledge of things belonging to faith, do yet oftentimes surpass us in the practice of moral virtues.<sup>260</sup>

In addition to lauding the Chinese for their virtues in comparison to Europeans, a point to draw attention to in Semedo's quote above is that he mentions Hun Vu's decision to continue enforcing "ancient laws" concerning "good government." Effectively, Semedo praises the medieval Chinese ruler for his decision to abide by an ancient body of knowledge in order to

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 43.

lead his people. As previously mentioned, like Egypt and Mesopotamia, China had been viewed by the missionaries as having been in possession of an ancient corpus of divinely inspired knowledge. In China's case, this ancient knowledge was believed to have been preserved within the teachings of Confucianism.

During the Jesuit mission in China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the two most favoured religions among the nation's inhabitants were Buddhism and Taoism, and the philosophy of Confucianism was also widespread. While the Jesuits rebuked the practices of both Buddhism and Taoism, which were considered to be pagan religions, surprisingly, Confucianism was deemed acceptable because its core teachings were not believed to be in conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>261</sup> Confucianism was an Ancient Chinese school of thought established by Confucius, a Chinese sage who lived from c. 551 BCE to c. 479 BCE. His fundamental teachings were centred upon an individual's morality, virtue, and a collective consideration and respect for the well-being and amelioration of society. These teachings were recorded for posterity by Confucius's followers in a collection of books, the most notable of which was the *Lunyu* (551-479 BCE). Considering that the veneration of one's ancestors was deemed necessary for those practicing the teachings of Confucius, it is surprising that the Jesuits did not condemn this belief system as heretical. On the contrary, the Jesuits made accommodations and exceptions for the adherents of Confucianism to continue ancestor veneration by arguing that these were not rituals directed toward a deity; that is, the practice was not sacred, it was profane and was deemed to be within the realm of the secular. The reason for such tolerance – considering that missionaries had not been so accepting of rituals and practices

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. This situation is comparable to when Ficino and his contemporaries viewed the teachings of the pagan Hermes Trismegistus as compatible with the teachings of Christianity.

of “pagans” elsewhere (such as in the Americas) – was due to power; that is, China’s position as a wealthy and formidable empire.<sup>262</sup>

For the Jesuits, Confucius’s ancient teachings, notably the emphasis he placed on living a moral life, were informed by the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, which they concluded to be synonymous with Confucius’s “heavenly principle.”<sup>263</sup> In their eyes, it was not possible for one to attain such a high level of morality and goodness without the presence of the Christian God,<sup>264</sup> so they set to work hypothesizing on how Confucius’s writings may have been connected to biblical history. In this process, they analyzed the *Lunyu* through a Christian lens, identifying concepts that were comparable to and compatible with Church doctrine such as *tian* (heaven) and took this as evidence that Confucius had had a connection to “the divine.”<sup>265</sup> Additionally, while examining the *Five Classics*, the Jesuits came upon the word *Shangdi* meaning “the sovereign on high,” which they took as comparable to their own concept of God.<sup>266</sup> This led them to conclude that Confucius had believed in the one true God, was a saint, and was disseminating his knowledge of the divine, despite – as noted by Thierry Meynard – the fact that there had been no indication in the *Lunyu* that this was the case.<sup>267</sup>

The consensus among the missionaries was that Confucius had come to accept the true God and religion by means of his own discernment and sense of ethics, not because God had spoken to him personally.<sup>268</sup> Instead, this knowledge had come down to him from a source that appeared in the previous section – through the sacred knowledge preserved and disseminated by Noah and

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>263</sup> Thierry Meynard, *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius: The First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West, Jesuit Studies Volume 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 61.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid 8; 62.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

his sons.<sup>269</sup> Once Confucius had received this knowledge, the Jesuits speculated that he then spread it among the Ancient Chinese.<sup>270</sup> Other Jesuits such as Philippe Couplet (1623-1693) asserted that the Chinese were direct descendants of the biblical patriarchs in Mesopotamia, where they learned of Adamic knowledge first-hand and worshiped the one true God,<sup>271</sup> however, like the Mesopotamians and Egyptians who eventually adopted corrupted beliefs, the Jesuits believed that the Chinese, too, gradually embraced corruption. The practice of religions such as Buddhism and Taoism were simply the result of the degradation of Confucius's essential, divine truths.<sup>272</sup> Thus, in the Jesuits' opinions, by introducing the Chinese to Christianity, they were simply helping those who had been led astray by Taoism and Buddhism to, in the words of David Allen Harvey, "recover their true selves"<sup>273</sup> and to rediscover the truths that Confucius had known and propagated.

While for some Jesuits the narrative concerning the biblical flood timeline and the Chinese served to substantiate Confucius and the Chinese as sources of the *prisci*, for others, the story of Noah's Ark and the antiquity of the Chinese proved to be much more troubling and confusing. Missionaries had discovered and relayed to their colleagues back in Europe that the Chinese had recorded approximately five thousand years of their history and this included a fact that was particularly threatening to Catholic sentiments: the first emperor Fo-Hi was recorded as having lived in c. 2950 BCE, which predated the biblical flood narrative by six hundred years.<sup>274</sup> In Early Modern Europe, a nation's greatness and magnificence were defined by its antiquity, and a civilization that could be traced back to the biblical flood was considered to be the most ancient

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 44.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 50.

of all.<sup>275</sup> A nation that could prove such antiquity was believed to have been the progenitor of all subsequent nations, and since China was in possession of documents that substantiated their existence prior to the dates assigned to the early biblical forefathers, this was particularly problematic for some church authorities.<sup>276</sup>

Thus, the Jesuits set to work trying to amalgamate these two vastly different histories, which resulted in some wildly unsubstantiated tales, some of which ignored or entirely dismissed the accomplishments and value of Chinese culture and civilization. For example, Kircher concocted a fanciful origin story for the Chinese in his *China illustrata* (1667). Ignoring their long, detailed chronologies, Kircher posited that the Chinese – although he lauded them in different respects and claimed that they were, in his words, “the richest and most powerful” of civilizations – had definitely not preceded the Great Deluge, and that China had been settled long after the flood by none other than his preferred Ancients of the Orient: the Egyptians.<sup>277</sup> For Kircher’s student, the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini (1614-1661), the Chinese’s antediluvian annals were improbable, and he believed they were nothing more than fabrications in order to buttress their own antiquity: “and clearly, the Chinese annals contain many absurdities, so far as both the ages of men and the regnal years of kings are concerned. Should we trust these writers, historical time would have to be extended far backwards, thousands of years before the flood;”<sup>278</sup> however, like some of his contemporaries, Martini’s writings on the Chinese contained contradictory opinions, and while he made disparaging remarks on Chinese record-keeping as it pertained to biblical history, he simultaneously acknowledged that the Chinese had excelled at astronomy and had kept

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 50.

<sup>278</sup> Anthony Grafton “Kircher’s Chronology” in *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paul Findlen (New York: Routledge, 2004), 176.

meticulous historical records in that respect.<sup>279</sup> Eventually, Martini, in a manner in alignment with some of his contemporaries, decided that the Chinese's antediluvian records were compatible with biblical history as long as the date of the flood was amended to align with the Septuagint's account.<sup>280</sup> The Septuagint pushed back the earliest events in Genesis to 5500 BCE instead of the generally accepted 4000 BCE in the Latin Vulgate used by the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore provided an explanation for how China was able to be in possession of such extensive historical records.

Owing to the literature produced and disseminated by the Jesuits, Sinophilia was not limited to the realm of those immersed in the sacred, but also to Europe's secular world. In particular, France was notably affected by the allure of China. Its enigmatic reputation and antiquity captivated the attention of some of the country's foremost intellectuals who, like some of the Jesuits (but without the religious fervour), saw China as a civilization that had access to primeval wisdom, ethics, and philosophy. Primary among the Enlightenment French scholars who extolled China for its wisdom and philosophy was Voltaire, who was well-versed in the Jesuits' corpus on Chinese religion, philosophy, and governance. Praising China as "the wisest and best governed people in the world,"<sup>281</sup> Voltaire saw Confucius as the paradigm of philosophers and held that studying the Ancient Chinese intellectual's teachings was incumbent for his contemporaries to truly understand the way to reshape European society and politics to be more enlightened and, thus, civilized. For Voltaire, Confucianism was an ideal model for a belief system that involved the reverence of a supreme being, but which was centred on ethics, being rational, and the laws

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> The Septuagint was the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>281</sup> Voltaire refers to China as "the wisest and best governed people in the world" in his *Lettres philosophiques*, during his discussion on inoculation. He states that the Chinese had long practiced inoculation and that because of their wisdom and good governance, the practice is deemed to be favourable. Voltaire, *Letters on England* (London: Cassell & Co., 1894), 35.

of nature as opposed to superstition, the importance of denomination and institution, and the importance granted to the priesthood.<sup>282</sup> We see several instances of his high opinions of Confucius, Chinese virtue, philosophy, and wisdom in several of his works, but notably in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*.

Published in 1764, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* was a collection of articles that were arranged alphabetically and which addressed various philosophical concerns such as religion and politics. These articles provide a great deal of insight into Voltaire's thoughts on the contained topics, as they were not objective definitions of the topics in question, but a compilation of his opinions and their justifications. As it concerns his thoughts on Confucius and China, we are presented with multiple instances where Voltaire reveals his admiration. A primary example is found in his article *Chine (de la)*, where he upholds China's antiquity by referring to the Chinese as "that ancient species of men"<sup>283</sup> and condemns identifying them as idolators: "but we should not question their [the Chinese's] antiquity and tell them that they are idolators."<sup>284</sup> We also find Voltaire lauding the Chinese's appreciation for ethics and virtue by noting that China was the only place where one could find laws that were established to reward virtue or good behaviour, whereas "everywhere else" the laws were designed to be punitive: "the only one [the Chinese empire] that has established prizes for virtue, when everywhere else the laws are limited to the punishment of the crime; the only one that has made its conquerors adopt its laws (...)."<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, as it relates to Oriental primordial knowledge, in this same article there is a brief indication that Voltaire was drawing upon the tradition of Ancient Eastern knowledge and its ties

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<sup>282</sup> David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 103.

<sup>283</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 146.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

to the *prisci* as had been done by previous scholars. Although Voltaire was not involved in occult philosophy or sciences, some of his writings suggest influence from the doctrines of the *prisci*. This is evident in *Chine (de la)*'s concluding paragraph, wherein Voltaire commends Chinese scholars for their “simple,” natural, and rational religion (although he does not specify the religion to which he is referring),<sup>286</sup> and compares them to the early biblical patriarchs:

Once again, the religion of the scholars is admirable. No superstition, no absurd legends, none of those dogmas that insult reason and nature and to which bonzes give a thousand different meanings because they have none. For more than forty centuries, the simplest worship has appeared to them best. They are what we think Seth, Enoch, and Noah were. They are content to worship a god with all the wise men of the world, when in Europe men are divided between Thomas and Bonaventura, between Calvin and Luther, between Jansen and Molina.<sup>287</sup>

Although Voltaire emphasizes his disdain for superstition and “absurd legends” (which likely refers to traditions like the *prisci*), the *philosophe*'s words still indicate indirect influence from the idea that there had – for more than 40 centuries – been a longstanding, original, ancient religious tradition that had existed since the biblical patriarchs Seth, Enoch, and Noah. His reference to “superstition” and “absurd legends,” which refer to the practices of institutionalized religion, suggests that there had once existed a pure and simple religion that had been known to people of the Ancient East (Mesopotamia and China), but which eventually became corrupted by superstitious practices.

In addition to his article on China, Voltaire included an entry titled *Catéchisme chinois* in which we find a dialogue taking place between two fictional Ancient Chinese man, one of whom – who is named Ku-Su – is identified as one of Confucius's disciples and the other – named

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<sup>286</sup> Although Voltaire does not specify a religion here, we can assume that he is not referring to Taoism or Buddhism, as he explicitly expressed his views that they were corruptions of the original beliefs of sages such as Confucius. David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 60.

<sup>287</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), 148-149.

prince Koo – is the son of a king named Loo. The dialogue, we are told, takes place four hundred and seventeen years before Voltaire’s time and is divided into six sections which are labeled as “conversations.” The overarching goal of these conversations is to convince the reader that ethics are more important than organized religion. This involves much discussion between the two characters concerning the nature of God and his involvement in the natural world as well as human civilizations, with the two outlining Voltaire’s vision of an ideal faith as well as what exactly constitutes virtue. In this process, we see Confucius being referenced as a source of wisdom several times throughout the *Catéchisme*: “Ku-Su: The rules of my master Confucius: ‘Live as you would wish to have lived when you come to die. Treat your neighbour as you want him to treat you.’”<sup>288</sup>

Additionally, we see an instance when Confucius’s teachings are used to highlight the innate wisdom and virtue of the Chinese people. This appears in the *Catéchisme*’s fifth conversation when Ku-Su and Koo are discussing the treatment of one’s friends versus enemies. While Ku-Su notes that Confucius teaches that one must love their enemies, he also questions the feasibility of this principle and questions Koo on whether he believes this to be difficult; however, Koo responds with disbelief at the question and exclaims that Confucius’s advice is already common among their people. In this exchange, it appears that Voltaire is not only highlighting the wisdom of Confucius, but also emphasizing that the sage’s teachings were widely practiced and essentially “common sense” among the ancient people of China; that is, they were naturally in possession of these ethics and wisdom in their society, which were absent in other lands:

Ku-Su: But how will you behave to your enemies? Confucius recommends us in twenty texts to love them. Doesn’t that seem to you a little difficult?

Koo: Love one’s enemies! Great heavens! Nothing is more common.

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 105.

Ku-Su: How do you mean?

Koo: I think I mean it as one should. I served my apprenticeship of war under the prince Décon against the prince of the Vis-Brunck. Whenever one of the enemies was wounded and fell into our hands we took care of him as if he were our brother. We often gave our own beds to our wounded and captured enemies, and we slept next to them on tiger-skins spread on the ground. We waited on them ourselves. What more do you want? That we should love them as one loves one's mistress?

Ku-Su: I'm very edified by everything you tell me, and I wish that all the nations could hear you; for I'm assured that there are peoples so impertinent they dare to say that we don't know true virtue, that our good actions are only splendid sins, that we need the lessons of their talapoins to implant good principles in us. Alas! Wretches! It is only since yesterday that they can read and write, and they want to teach their masters!<sup>289</sup>

Apart from virtue, Voltaire makes sure to highlight the ancient history of Chinese wisdom and knowledge in comparison to the West by indicating that the Chinese had long been capable of literary accomplishments whereas, comparably, Europeans had only been engaging in such an act of intellectualism since, as noted by the character Ku-Su, "yesterday." This opinion is further expressed in Voltaire's article *Chine (de la)*, in which he notes the audacity of Europeans for criticizing and condemning the traditions of such an ancient civilization by drawing attention to the infancy of European innovation and knowledge: "Let us then, we who were born yesterday, who are descended from the Celts, who have only just cleared the forests of our savage regions, let us leave the Chinese and the Indians peacefully to enjoy their lovely climate and their antiquity."<sup>290</sup>

For all the praise that Voltaire bestowed upon the Ancient Chinese's cultivation of philosophy, wisdom, and knowledge, his opinions concerning the intellectualism of the contemporary Chinese were not always as favourable. Although Voltaire commends the Ancient Chinese for their cultivation of religion, wisdom, and ethics, in his article he also disparages the

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 148.

contemporary “common” folk for living in a state of corruption far from their ancestors, for being controlled by their religious leaders (in the same manner as European commoners), and for practicing questionable ethics such as “selling everything at high prices to foreigners”<sup>291</sup> (which Voltaire also admits European common folk do). As it concerns intellectual matters, Voltaire claims that, although the Ancient Chinese had been among the most advanced in the sciences and philosophy, during the eighteenth century they had not significantly expanded upon the knowledge and innovations of their forefathers. In other words, their contemporary knowledge was stagnant, and Europeans had far surpassed them since their distinguished days in Antiquity.

Voltaire further emphasizes the inertia of contemporary Chinese knowledge and science by explaining that the Chinese continue to believe in talismans and judicial astrology as the Europeans once did, and that their medical knowledge is not superior to that of contemporary Europeans. That being said, Voltaire reverts back to highlighting that, although contemporary Chinese knowledge may not be capable of rivaling the science of Enlightenment thinkers, those who lived thousands of years before were privy to the knowledge that Europeans required millennia to unearth. Unfortunately, the Chinese of Voltaire’s time were, in some capacity, corrupt versions of their glorious intellectual and spiritual pasts; their ancient history merely served as inspiration for the Europeans of the current age:

In the sciences the Chinese are still where we were two hundred years ago; that, like us, they have a thousand ridiculous prejudices; that they believe in talismans, in judicial astrology, as we did for a long time. Let us also admit that they were amazed by our thermometer, at the way we freeze liquids with saltpetre, and at all the experiments of Torricelli and Otto Guericke, just as we were when we saw these scientific amusements for the first time. I must add that their doctors cure mortal illnesses no better than ours, and that nature by herself cures minor illnesses in China as she does here. But all this does not

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

alter the fact that 4,000 years ago, when we could not read, the Chinese knew all the indispensably useful things of which we boast today.<sup>292</sup>

Voltaire was not the only *philosophe* who held a lower opinion of the contemporary Chinese. In fact, we see much more disparaging comments coming from another influential French scholar, Montesquieu. Montesquieu's opinions on the Chinese were far from those of whom were under the spell of Sinophilia, and he could, in fact, be dubbed as – what Simon Kow has described as – “the most prominent Enlightenment Sinophobe.”<sup>293</sup> In speaking on the missionaries' affinity for the Chinese system of government, Montesquieu repeated a familiar stereotype that we saw applied to the Chaldeans: deception. He suspected that there was a possibility that the missionaries had been “betrayed” by the Chinese into believing that they were a more advanced and civilized nation than they truly were and further compounds this opinion by asserting that the Chinese were thieves. Any claims that the Chinese were honourable were misleading since, in Montesquieu's opinion, they were incapable of doing anything without receiving beatings:

Our missionaries speak to us of the vast Chinese empire as an admirable government, which mixes together in its principles, fear, honour, and virtue. Therefore I have laid down a vain distinction, when I have established the principles of the three governments. I do not know what that is, the honour about which they speak, among peoples with whom one causes nothing to be done save by baton blows. Further, it is well necessary that our merchants [also] would give us the idea of that virtue about which our missionaries speak. One may consult them about the banditry of the Mandarins (...). Could it not have occurred that the missionaries would have been betrayed by an appearance of order?<sup>294</sup>

In addition to negative opinions on the contemporary Chinese's stagnation and their lack of good character (as expressed by Montesquieu), the Chinese were said to be lacking in

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Simon Kow, “Enlightenment Universalism? Bayle and Montesquieu on China” *The European Legacy* 19.3 (2014): 352.

<sup>294</sup> Montesquieu, *Montesquieu's 'The Spirit of the Laws: A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. William Barclay Allen, (London: Anthem Press, 2024), 137.

innovation and creativity. We can see an example of this in the writings contained in the *Histoire de l'académie des sciences*, in which the French philosopher Mairan's opinions on Chinese intellect are presented. According to Mairan (1678-1771), the Chinese, while being acknowledged as possessing "admirable genius," are stated to be intellectually inferior to their European counterparts: "All these considerations and many others, which we are obliged to suppress, lead Mr. de Mairan to say with reason, that the genius of the Chinese, though very estimable, is very inferior to that of the Europeans, and that they know little how to invent or perfect; and this judgment of the Chinese is again confirmed by Father Parrenin."<sup>295</sup>

Diderot, one of the most influential *philosophes* who collaborated on the creation and editing of the *Encyclopédie*, also shared the position that the Chinese were incapable of any creative feats, stating: "it is worth noting that the sciences and the fine arts have made no progress in China, and that this nation has had neither grand building, nor beautiful statues, nor poetry, nor music, nor painting."<sup>296</sup>

### Rameau's Portrayals of Ancient China in the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*

Like his intellectual contemporaries, Rameau was intrigued by China's ancient past and turned to Jesuit accounts for answers on how Chinese music and history fit into his investigation on the *corps sonore's* origin story. His references to Chinese music and knowledge can be found in both the *Nouvelles réflexions* and *Origine des sciences* and reflect the contemporary mixed

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<sup>295</sup> Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, Jean Paul Grandjean de Fouchy, Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat marquis de Condorcet, *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences...avec les mémoires de mathématique et de physique...tirez des registres de cette Académie* (Paris : Imprimerie royal, 1759), 45. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3557b>; Father Parrenin was a French Jesuit who was a missionary in China.

<sup>296</sup> David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 64.

opinions on the Ancient Chinese as sources of wisdom, knowledge, and creativity. As will be demonstrated in this section, while Rameau's writings certainly acknowledge the antiquity of Chinese civilization and assert that the Chinese, like the Egyptians and Chaldeans, had initial access to the most primordial, uncorrupted knowledge, he also contradicts himself by questioning how a civilization like China could have had the ability to recognize and attain such profound knowledge in the first place. Indeed, there are instances when Rameau describes the Chinese as among the first Ancient Oriental civilizations to have been in possession of the oldest and most revelatory musical knowledge, but also as a people who misinterpreted its meaning, thus corrupting it from its purest form. Additionally, we see Rameau propagating contemporary negative stereotypes about the Chinese, specifically that they were a people who lacked creativity and ingenuity and that they were deceptive about their antiquity.

Like the previous two sections on the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, this section will analyze passages from Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences* that correspond to contemporary intellectual notions of Chinese revelation and corruption as it concerns the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*.

### ***Scholarship on Chinese Revelation and Rameau's Writings***

On the first page of the *Nouvelles réflexions*, Rameau informs his readers that he derived his information on China from the writings of the Jesuit, Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718-1793). He provides this information in the page's first footnote:

A translation of everything that has been collected on Chinese Music by R.P. Amiot has recently come into my possession, from the country of Jesus, Missionary in Peking, for around sixteen years. The author from whom he draws the majority of his ideas, lived, he states, 2277 years before Jesus Christ. This author, who only provides what he had been able to collect from the debris of the collections of his father and who escaped from a fire, first cites, along with others, the triple progression, up to its thirteenth term, as the source

of systems of Chinese Music and afterwards I will discuss these systems soon. Then, after having recounted the marvelous effects of this music, he gives an enumeration of the comparisons that have been produced with everything that we can imagine in nature. This translation was addressed, in 1754, to M. de Bougainville, of the *Académie des Belles-Lettres*.<sup>297</sup>

Although Rameau's footnote does not provide the specifics of Amiot's work besides stating that he received "a translation of everything" on Chinese music that had been compiled, his opinions on the Ancient Chinese as sources of revelation, that is, the *corps sonore*, bear witness to influence from several of Amiot's ideologies which will be delineated shortly. Like the majority of authors who penned works on Chinese culture and customs, Amiot was a Jesuit missionary who worked at the Chinese Imperial court. He first arrived on Chinese soil in 1751, more than a hundred years after the Jesuit mission had established itself in China.<sup>298</sup> While his contemporary colleagues and predecessors reported and wrote on a variety of topics including Chinese medicine, science, and religion, Amiot's writings are most notable for their documentation of Chinese music. Upon first experiencing this foreign musical tradition, Amiot was unimpressed by what he heard and recorded his displeasure in his work *De la musique moderne des Chinois*, which was written three years after he arrived in China.<sup>299</sup> In fact, he had tried to persuade some members of China's upper social echelon that European art music was more pleasing to the ear than their own. Interestingly, considering that Rameau would turn to Amiot's writing for his own musical research, Amiot's presentation of European music to the Chinese involved the performance of Rameau's harpsichord pieces; however, much to his

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<sup>297</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 553.

<sup>298</sup> Qingfan Jiang, "In Search of the 'Oriental Origin:' Rameau, Rousseau, and Chinese Music in Eighteenth-Century France" *Eighteenth-Century Music* 19.2 (2022): 128.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

surprise, Amiot's Chinese audience was not seduced by what he believed was the superiority of European music.<sup>300</sup>

While he initially held a negative opinion of Chinese music, this sentiment was eventually superseded by a passion and advocacy for Chinese arts and culture. This change of heart was partially fueled by Amiot's gradual acquisition of the language and his study of Chinese history. This eventually led to Amiot promoting the virtues of Chinese arts and culture to the West.<sup>301</sup> Among the themes we see presented in Amiot's writings is the notion that the Chinese had been among the original recipients of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, and that their civilization had been one of the world's oldest, predating the Chaldeans/Babylonians and the Egyptians. As it concerns Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions*, we see the Chinese presented in a similar light, as recipients of the *prisci* bodies of knowledge.

Like Philippe Couplet who had asserted that the Chinese had directly descended from the biblical patriarchs, Amiot subscribed to the idea that the Chinese had not only been one of the early recipients of the *prisci*, but that they had been the descendants of Noah's own grandchildren which had given them direct access to the true, sacred body of knowledge.<sup>302</sup> While Rameau does not provide details such as the Chinese having been descendants of Noah, he does appropriate the idea that the Chinese had received primordial knowledge from Noah's sons, specifically knowledge of the triple progression. We see this presented in the following passage from the *Nouvelles réflexions*:

It is true that the era of the Chinese was not too distant from the Deluge, since that time precedes the raising of the tower of Babel by thirteen years. However, could those very ones who worked on the construction of this tower not have already made their reflections on that very progression, whether a son of Noah or others to whom this son would have

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 130.

transmitted it [the triple progression] and who afterwards went to China, even Egypt, while the tetrachord could have been taken elsewhere? All of that is possible.<sup>303</sup>

While Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions* only includes a single, aforementioned footnote bearing Amiot's name, and provides no reference from where he garnered his ideas on the Chinese having been in contact with Noah's descendants, the fact that Amiot also propagated the notion that the Chinese had been the direct recipients of Noah's knowledge suggests that Rameau had come across this idea in Amiot's writings.

Another indication that Amiot influenced Rameau's perception of the Chinese as a source of revelation is the fact that Rameau ascribes to the Chinese knowledge of the triple progression instead of the tetrachord (who he had previously mentioned fell into the Greeks' hands) in the above quotation. Although Rameau does not directly credit this idea to Amiot, this is an idea that the missionary had included in his writings on Chinese music. Specifically, Amiot credited the Chinese with having known and made use of the triple progression since the time of Fo-Hi.<sup>304</sup> Essentially, Amiot was promulgating the notion that the Chinese had been in possession of the triple of progression since time immemorial, a belief to which we also see Rameau subscribing when he dates the Chinese's reception of the triple progression to one of the earliest recorded events in the book of Genesis.

Rameau provides more thoughts on the Chinese and their knowledge of the triple progression in the *Origine des sciences* and an appended letter addressed as "*Lettre de M\*\*\*. A M\*\*\*.*" The only citation regarding the Chinese that Rameau included in this work is the aforementioned,

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<sup>303</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 579.

<sup>304</sup> Qingfan Jiang, "In Search of the 'Oriental Origin:' Rameau, Rousseau, and Chinese Music in Eighteenth-Century France" *Eighteenth-Century Music* 19.2 (2022): 133.

vague citation from Kircher which simply says “see Kircher.”<sup>305</sup> To recall, this citation was mentioned in the section of this dissertation that addressed Rameau’s writings on the Egyptians, and which described the “fruitless” musical research of contemporary Europeans and Chinese; however, this does not provide any specifics regarding the rest of the information on Chinese music and the triple progression that Rameau includes in this work. Despite his lack of citations, most of Rameau’s ideas in the *Origine* are closely aligned with Amiot’s opinions of Chinese music, which suggests that he was still drawing from Amiot’s work after he had written the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*. For example, in the *Origine*, Rameau once again notes the antiquity of the Chinese and that they had been in possession of the triple progression even before the Egyptians had had knowledge of it: “I must add to the preceding facts that the Chinese propose the progression of fifths, called triple, up to its thirteenth term, the order of which they follow in their system of music much more regularly than Pythagoras did; they date it even before the establishment of the Egyptians.”<sup>306</sup>

Apart from the Ancient Chinese connection to the triple progression, Rameau’s statement that the Chinese had been in possession of the triple progression before the Egyptians at this point (and I include the disclaimer “at this point” since we will see Rameau discredit the Chinese later) is once again reflective of Amiot’s belief that the Chinese’s antiquity and their knowledge had predated that of the Egyptians. Where Amiot’s and Rameau’s accounts of the triple progression differ, however, are in regard to the Greek acquisition of this primordial concept. While Rameau asserted that the Greeks had inherited their musical system from the Egyptians, a system which

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<sup>305</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d’une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

<sup>306</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d’une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): Préface (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 4. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

had been tainted by corruption, Amiot believed that Pythagoras had attained knowledge of the triple progression from the Chinese (a belief that was not rooted in historical fact). Despite the differences in how they believed Ancient Oriental revelatory knowledge was passed from East to West, Rameau and Amiot both believed that the Ancient Chinese had originally been in possession of an uncorrupted primeval musical concept. We can see an example of Rameau hypothesizing about how the Chinese may have uncovered the mysteries of the *corps sonore* through their knowledge of the triple progression. In the following passage, Rameau notes that the Chinese and Pythagoras, having initially both derived their musical systems from the same progression, interpreted the information in very different ways. While Rameau maintains his narrative that the Ancient Greeks were practicing a corrupt system due to Pythagoras (who he notes, that despite his incorrect system, was correct in believing that both music and geometry were governed by the same overarching mysterious musical progression), he contrasts this with the Ancient Chinese who, in practicing their own musical system, he states may have been “enchanted” by the triple progression which would have led them to “its true meaning.”<sup>307</sup>

Such is the product of a single fifth, of a single tetrachord, of the single number three put in progression, to which Pythagoras attributed all-power over music and even more over geometry. On what could he have based such a just decision in favour of music, when from this same progression he drew the most evil of all systems? The Chinese, in proposing the same progression, draw from it a completely different system. Can one doubt, after that, that they did not allow themselves to be enchanted on the account of such a progression by emblems which would have made them pronounce it in advance, without having guessed its true meaning?<sup>308</sup>

Although in the above passage Rameau indicates that the Chinese were among the earliest recipients of the triple progression, and thus the *corps sonore*, it is in the *Origine*'s appended letter “*Lettre de M\*\*\*. A M\*\*\**” that we truly see him hailing the Ancient Chinese as particularly

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<sup>307</sup> Rameau does not indicate what this true meaning is, but it is possible that he is referring to the *corps sonore* here.

<sup>308</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 11. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

erudite in the same manner as contemporary Sinophile scholars. At first glance, the letter appears to have been written by someone other than Rameau; that is, a third party who has been asked to objectively examine Rameau's speculative and metaphysical claims as well as d'Alembert's objections. The letter begins as follows:

When you lent me, Sir, the three Letters of Mr. Rameau and that of Mr. d'Alembert, you asked me to tell you naively what I thought of them. I obey you, Sir, at the risk of boring you with reflections that you have doubtless already made; but finally, I promised, I must keep my word. Here are some of the ideas that this reading gave me.<sup>309</sup>

Although the author of this letter discusses Rameau in the third person, the writer is none other than Rameau himself, speaking through the voice of a fictitious character who, unsurprisingly, upholds his own discoveries as facts.<sup>310</sup> Even though he is writing under the mask of another identity, we still, nonetheless, are presented with Rameau's feelings on several matters including his fervent belief that music is the foundation of all sciences and his frustrations with d'Alembert for refusing to accept this universal "truth." On the third page of his letter, Rameau tries to demonstrate that music had existed prior to all other arts in addition to the sciences by stating that ancient nations had first been aware of harmony before cultivating the visual arts. In doing so, he emphasizes that the Chinese, who he states were among the most philosophical and most enlightened of all nations, had developed music and advanced music theory beyond all other peoples: "Eh! How many Nations capable of feeling the charms of harmony have been almost insensible for thousands of centuries to the lovely power of the other Arts! How long have the beautiful proportions of Architecture been known in France? And is not the Art of Painting and Design still in its infancy among the Chinese, this people so philosophical, so enlightened, who

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<sup>309</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): *Lettre de M \*\*\*. A M\*\*\** (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 5. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

<sup>310</sup> Sylvie Bouissou, *Jean-Philippe Rameau : musicien des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 982.

have nevertheless pushed the science or at least the theory of Music further than any other people?”<sup>311</sup>

As can be observed in the above quotation, Rameau certainly exhibits the Sinophile sentiments of scholars such as Voltaire and Amiot; however, this excerpt also exhibits influence from some of the prevailing negative stereotypes that were assigned to the contemporary Chinese. Specifically, stagnation. This will be elaborated on further in the following section on corruption and negative stereotypes.

### ***Scholarly Influences on Rameau’s Portrayals of Chinese Corruption and Negative Stereotypes***

After reading the entirety of the *Nouvelles réflexions* and the *Origine des sciences*, Rameau’s opinions of the Chinese are revealed to be contradictory. While we have seen that he wrote passages that speak of the Chinese as recipients and cultivators of the most primordial of musical knowledge, he also includes opinions that disparage the people of this ancient civilization. For example, in the aforementioned quotation which praises the Chinese as “philosophical” and “enlightened,” Rameau does so while simultaneously incorporating the notion that the contemporary Chinese were stagnant in certain areas of their culture, specifically, painting and design; that is, while he acknowledges that the Ancient Chinese had advanced music theory, he suggests that the Chinese of the eighteenth century were underdeveloped in other aspects of their society. This is observable in the sentence “and is not the Art of Painting and Design still in its infancy among the Chinese.” Here, Rameau indicates that he is speaking of the Chinese in a contemporary context by using the words “still” and emphasizing their lack of

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<sup>311</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d’une controverse sur le même sujet*, (Éd. 1761): *Lettre de M \*\*\*. A M\*\*\** (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 7. Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

progress in these arts by stating that they remain in their “infancy.” Essentially, he suggests that this ancient civilization had not made significant advancements in the other arts despite their early contributions to the development and understanding of music. We saw an example of the Enlightenment *philosophe* Voltaire propagating a similar narrative about Ancient Chinese wisdom and learning versus those of the contemporary Chinese. To recall, Voltaire had stated that, as it concerns the sciences, “the Chinese are still where we were two hundred years ago;” that although the Chinese were once at the forefront of scientific and philosophical ingenuity, their descendants were no longer able to build upon or further their initial discoveries.

Rameau’s belief that the modern Chinese “were still in their infancy” in the arts and design is also reminiscent of Diderot’s and Mairan’s convictions that the Chinese were lacking in innovation and creativity. Rameau further demonstrates these sentiments in the following passage from the *Nouvelles réflexions* in which he asserts that the triple progression must have “fallen into the hands” of the Chinese by way of Noah’s sons, because there is no possible way that they would have been capable of knowing its secrets without the intervention of others. According to Rameau, the Chinese had not produced any original ideas, and it was therefore inconceivable that they could have made such a revelatory discovery on their own:

“(…) the triple progression alone had fallen in their hands [the Chinese], and that the tetrachord had gone into other hands – all of them at different times, by way of some of Noah’s descendants. In effect, how the progression and tetrachord could have reached in another way the hands of peoples who proffered no ideas through which their authorship could be suspected should not be seen.”<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 581.

Additionally, while in the *Nouvelles réflexions* Rameau indicates that the Chinese had initially been in possession of the *corps sonore*'s products in an uncorrupted state, or, as he states, in “a particular [state of] perfection,”<sup>313</sup> through eventual misunderstanding of its principles, musical knowledge became corrupted which led to the development of “flawed” or “false” musical systems:

We will never believe that we have given to music all the great prerogatives with which the Greeks and Chinese enrich it without having tasted its delights beforehand. But, once more, how have they tasted these delights with so many false ratios for consonances and for the natural degrees that serve for going from one of these terms of these consonances to another? We well know that the compass does not direct the ear as it does the eye. It is the ear on the contrary that order the placement of the needles of a compass at various sections of a string, up to the point that the ear hears the perfect intonation of the consonance, by the resonance of the *corps sonore* alone. It is inevitable therefore, that music had been heard in a particular [state of] perfection, at least before seeking out the ratios of the sounds that make it up was a concern and that apparently we were never informed of experiencing it in an order of false ratios, of which all early systems were composed.<sup>314</sup>

Rameau further reflects on the initial perfection and subsequent corruption of Chinese musical knowledge in the following passage from the *Origine des sciences*, in which he once again questions the source of Chinese music (as well as Pythagoras's knowledge) and accuses the Chinese of having “gone astray by false conjectures.”<sup>315</sup> This idea is similar to that of the intellectuals who believed that Confucius had introduced his people to a pure and wholly natural philosophy and faith only for the Chinese to eventually be led astray by “false” faiths such as Taoism and Buddhism.

Why propose a diatonic system without declaring its foundation? Why propose only the product and keep silent about its principle? Why make this system begin with a rising semitone that revolts, without saying the reason, when the necessity is discovered, as one must remember, in several very important cases? Why not have said, at least, that this system, although it was composed of only four sounds or notes, contained all that is most

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 556.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 555-556.

<sup>315</sup> In this passage, Rameau appears to suggest that the Greeks had also been influenced by Chinese practices to some extent, which is an idea he may have been exposed to through Amiot. As mentioned previously, Amiot claimed that Pythagoras had travelled to China from where he obtained advanced scientific knowledge.

natural, and consequently most perfect in singing? Why speak of a triple progression, in a case where it is still only a single fifth? Could the Chinese and Pythagoras have imagined this progression themselves? And what profit did they get from it? Bad systems. Could it be on this principle that the Chinese have founded everything that they make dependant on music, even morality, even domestic ceremonies, in which even the Greeks followed them quite closely? They have gone astray by false conjectures.<sup>316</sup>

According to Rameau, although the Chinese had once been aware of the one, true principle, they were misled by its eventual corruption which infiltrated multiple aspects of their society including morality and domestic ceremonies (which Rameau states were dependent upon music).

Other negative qualities that we see Rameau assigning to the Chinese are those that we saw propagated by scholars such as Montesquieu: deception or betrayal. Montesquieu believed that the Chinese had tricked European missionaries into embracing the idea that they were a far more advanced civilization than they truly were, and we see Rameau presenting a similar notion as it concerns the antiquity of Chinese knowledge. In the following passage from the *Origine des sciences*, Rameau accuses the Chinese of “wrongly bragging” to have had knowledge of the triple progression millennia before Christ lived, suggesting that they had been propagating a false historical narrative: “we should put forth that the Chinese wrongly brag to have known of the triple progression 2277 years before Jesus Christ without, however, thinking about its inventors. We should put forth that Pythagoras had got it from the Egyptians. From whom did these people [the Chinese] get it themselves?”<sup>317</sup> Once again, Rameau questions from where the Chinese would have acquired knowledge of the triple progression and doubts their claims of antiquity despite having previously suggested that they likely would have been among the first recipients

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<sup>316</sup> Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Origine des sciences, suivie d'une controverse sur le même sujet, (Éd. 1761)* (Paris: Impr. de S. Jorry, 1761), 14-15. Bibliothèque nationale de France : <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k875294x/f3.item>.

<sup>317</sup> Mark Howard, *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science: A Translation with Commentary of Code de musique pratique and Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore (1760)* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 580.

of the principle as a result of the postdiluvian dissemination of the *corps sonore*. Ultimately, like some of his scholarly contemporaries, Rameau's opinions on the Chinese are fraught with contradiction.

### Chapter Final Thoughts

Thus far, I have shown how European scholars during the Enlightenment (and in the eras prior) viewed the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese as both sources of revelation and corruption as it concerns the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, and the positive and negative stereotypes that were associated with the people of each of these ancient civilizations as a result of contradictory perspectives. Additionally, I have demonstrated how Rameau's writings on the *corps sonore*'s origin, as well as the transmission of its products the triple progression and the tetrachord, reflect these contemporary scholarly stereotypes of the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese as it concerns revelation and corruption of the *corps sonore*.

Now that a connection has been established between the orientalism in Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*, *Origine des sciences*, and the orientalism and occultism propagated by many of Early Modern Europe's foremost thinkers, this study will shift to analyzing the libretti of Rameau's operatic works that are situated in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China within this intellectual environment.

## Chapter 4:

### Revelation and Corruption in Rameau's Ancient Oriental Operas: *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*; *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie*; *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie*; and *Les Paladins*

While the previous chapters focused on contextualizing the orientalism in Rameau's theoretical writings within the works of European scholars who perceived the Ancient Orient as both sources of revelation and corruption, this chapter will focus on how these ideas manifested in the libretti of four of the composer's operatic works that mostly predated the composition of his *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences: Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* (1747), *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie* (1754), *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie* (1751), and *Les Paladins* (1760).<sup>318</sup> As in his *Nouvelles réflexions* and *Origine des sciences*, these four operas feature Ancient Egyptians (for the first two operas listed), Mesopotamians, and Chinese respectively.

Each opera will be addressed in its own subsection, which will begin with a brief history of the work's creation followed by information pertinent to its analysis. In the analyses, each opera's plot will be summarized, and each summary will be accompanied by an examination of the scenes that portray Ancient Oriental characters as sources of revelation to their European counterparts. Just as European intellectuals – including Rameau – saw the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese as sources of revelation, as this chapter will show, so do the European characters in Rameau's operatic works. Additionally, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, many scholars who engaged with and wrote discourse on the *prisca sapientia* and

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<sup>318</sup> *Les Paladins* was written in the same year that the *Code de musique pratique* was published.

*prisca theologia* and their connections to Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China assigned to these very different civilizations specific stereotypes regarding both their possession of higher knowledge and wisdom as well as negative characteristics related to or resulting from corruption (their distance from a once pristine state of intellectualism and wisdom). To recall and summarize: Ancient Egyptian knowledge and wisdom were associated with exclusive knowledge of the divine; however, the Egyptians were also associated with arrogance and pride, for which Rameau accused them of failing to widely disseminate their knowledge of the earliest musical principle, the *corps sonore*. As for the Mesopotamians, they were divided into those who were the antediluvian biblical patriarchs and their descendants the Chaldeans.

While the early biblical patriarchs were viewed as having direct access to the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* and specialized in the astral sciences, the Chaldeans were viewed by some scientists and philosophers as having corrupted this original sacred knowledge, and as a result, were no longer capable of advanced astronomical observations. Instead, certain intellectuals viewed them as adept in astrology, divination, and magic. Yet, although the Chaldeans' skills in astrology were seen as inferior and corrupt to some, there were others who viewed this skill as admirable or in a more nuanced light such as the Renaissance scholar Annianus. Additionally, like the Egyptians, the Chaldeans were stereotyped with possessing the negative stereotype of deception.

As for China, Sinophilia had taken hold of Europe (especially France) during the Enlightenment, and because of its civilization's extremely ancient history and culture, the teachings of one of its most significant ancient philosophers, Confucius, were revered as a moral paradigm. For those who upheld the notions of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, Confucius's teachings were thought to contain elements from the "original" religion and body of

knowledge; however, the Chinese who embraced “pagan” faiths such as Taoism or Buddhism were assumed to be practicing a perversion of Confucius’s truths. In addition, some scholars saw the Chinese as lacking innovation or creativity and accused them of being deceptive.

Before delving into this chapter’s libretti analyses, one question must first be addressed: how can we be assured that the themes in these four works are reflective of contemporary occultist ideas and to what extent was Rameau involved in the selection of these themes? There is no doubt that Rameau’s theories and his *tragédies en musique* were heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and science. Additionally, as mentioned in the introduction, Rameau’s *opéra-ballet Les Indes galantes* appealed to contemporary philosophical ideas about the “noble savage;” but how can we be sure that the four operas at the centre of this chapter reflect occultist ideas about the Ancient Orient? Thankfully, the answer to this question is not too difficult to ascertain. While the librettist of *Les Paladins* is uncertain,<sup>319</sup> the librettists of *Les Fêtes de l’Hymen et de l’Amour*, *La Naissance d’Osiris*, and *Acanthe et Céphise* were actively involved in the philosophical sphere of the Enlightenment and were known to be associated with Freemasonry. In this dissertation’s third chapter, we touched on the importance of the *prisca theologia* and the *prisca sapientia* to Freemasons; specifically, we saw that the Freemasons viewed themselves as the inheritors and protectors of the ancient true body of theological and philosophical knowledge and wisdom originating from the Ancient East.

Louis de Cahusac, who authored the libretti of *Les Fêtes de l’Hymen et de l’Amour* and *La Naissance d’Osiris*, was a French playwright and dance theorist who was one of Rameau’s most frequent collaborators. He was also a contributor to one of the Enlightenment’s most ambitious projects, the *Encyclopédie*, edited by Diderot and d’Alembert. Although we cannot be certain

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<sup>319</sup> Graham Sadler, *The Rameau Compendium* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2014), 151.

that Cahusac was a member of the Freemasons (Graham Sadler has explained that masonic records from Cahusac's lifetime are incomplete),<sup>320</sup> he was certainly exposed to the enigmatic society and some of its most influential members. For example, he had been made secretary to the Comte de Clermont in 1743, the Grand Master of the French Grand Masonic Lodge.<sup>321</sup>

Musicologists have observed the recurring presence of Masonic symbolism and thematic material in Cahusac's libretti, and because of these Masonic elements, many believe that this points to the plausibility that he was a Freemason himself. Geoffrey Burgess even suggests that Cahusac introduced Rameau to Freemasonry, and that Rameau may have become a Freemason as a result.<sup>322</sup> Regardless of whether Cahusac was an actual member of the brotherhood, the presence of Masonic themes at least confirms that he was well-versed in the group's symbolism and its significance. Considering how closely he worked with Rameau, he likely imparted knowledge of this symbolism to his collaborator who was always interested in absorbing fashionable intellectual ideas.

Like Cahusac, the French librettist of *Acanthe et Céphise* – Jean-François Marmontel – was also heavily involved in the scholarly activities of the Enlightenment and contributed to the *Encyclopédie*. Additionally, he was an author, historian, and Freemason, which means that he, too, would have been well-versed in the concepts of the *prisca sapientia* and the *prisca theologia*. His dedication to the brotherhood is evident from an act of loyalty for which he was imprisoned for not revealing the identity of a fellow Freemason.<sup>323</sup> Additionally, like Cahusac's libretti, musicologists have observed the presence Freemasonry symbolism in the libretto of

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Geoffrey Burgess, "Enlightening Harmonies: Rameau's *corps sonore* and the Representation of the Divine in the *tragédie en musique*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65.2 (2012): 431.

<sup>323</sup> Graham Sadler, *The Rameau Compendium* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2014), 17.

*Acanthe et Céphise*. For example, Graham Sadler has observed that the character Zirphile’s “initiatory voyage” is reminiscent of the initiations associated with Freemasonry, and the fact that this character is a female may be a commentary on the exclusion of females from the society.<sup>324</sup>

As for whether Rameau had a hand in the creation of his operas’ stories and whether these works were promulgating his own ideals, that is something of which we cannot be certain; however, what we *are* sure of is that Rameau had been actively involved in his librettists’ creative processes during other collaborations and did not hesitate to voice his disapproval of content that did not meet his expectations. For example, one of Rameau’s earliest operatic collaborators was Voltaire, and despite being one of the preeminent intellectuals of his time, Rameau did not shy away from demanding that the celebrated *philosophe* alter his writing to suit his own preferences. So intense were some of Rameau’s demands that Voltaire experienced much distress at his hands. We can see an example of Voltaire’s frustration in the following letter that he wrote to Charles Augustin Feriol, comte d’Argental. Here, Voltaire bemoans Rameau’s “mad” criticisms and suggests that the composer is incapable of the agreement that is so necessary between author and musician:

There is one more thing that I want you to judge; it is the dose of entertainment that must enter my play. It must not be suffocated by sixteenth notes, the parties must be short so that the play does not seem long. I don’t know if Rameau will be able to accommodate himself to such a small portion, besides, what a man! He has gone mad; judge of it by the criticisms he has made, and what is worse is that he will be encouraged in his folly by people who take pleasure in sowing sorrows in the road of pleasure. You should first of all [...] withdraw from him the entertainment that I am going to correct, but you should also urge someone to ask M. de Richelieu that Rameau is not at all made for this kind of musical entertainment, which is at all times mixed up with the narrative of the declamation; that this genre requires as great an agreement between the author and the musician, a union, a harmony as that which exists between Francoeur and Rebelle (...).<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Voltaire to Charles Augustin Feriol, comte d’Argental, 4 August 1744, *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*.

Additionally, those who knew both Voltaire and Rameau commented on Rameau's audacity in "correcting" Voltaire. An example of this can be seen in a letter written by President Hénault: "But what do you think of Rameau who has become a wit and a critic and who has set out to correct Voltaire? That insane person has for advisers all the riff-raff in poetry. He shows around texts which will be pulled apart, torn to pieces, criticized (...)." <sup>326</sup>

Voltaire was not the only unfortunate librettist to suffer Rameau's obstinate personality and his exhausting demands. It is because of these issues that Rameau did not often collaborate with the same librettist on more than a few occasions. Yet, Louis de Cahusac was able to weather Rameau's storms and would end up being one of the librettists with whom he produced the most operas in a period that spanned more than a decade; however, this did not mean that all was smooth-sailing with the creative duo's libretto-writing process. Graham Sadler notes that Cahusac's "servile" nature made him inclined to do "everything that Rameau willed," <sup>327</sup> and indeed we see an example of this recounted in a letter written by the French playwright and novelist, Françoise de Graffigny (1695-1758). Cahusac had shown her a portion of his libretto for *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* which included a shocking number of corrections that had been dictated by a displeased Rameau. In her letter to her friend Devaux, Madame de Graffigny expresses her surprise at Rameau's indications by stating that Cahusac had "erased everything that Rameau did not want, which, truth be told, was almost everything." <sup>328</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Letter written by Hénault, quoted in Madeline Fields, "Voltaire and Rameau," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21.4 (1963): 462.

<sup>327</sup> Graham Sadler, *The Rameau Compendium* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2014), 47.

<sup>328</sup> Mme de Graffigny to Devaux, [15 May 1746], in *Correspondance de Madame de Graffigny, t.7*, ed. J.A. Dainard (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 411.

While it was indeed normal and expected for composers to request that their librettists make changes to a libretto's text to suit their music, the extent to which Rameau was involved in altering his librettists' works appears to have been far beyond customary as indicated by the bewildered reactions of those who witnessed his interactions with his librettists. Rameau's creative disputes with Voltaire and Cahusac illustrate that he was far from an agreeable or cooperative collaborator; he was deeply involved with the libretti and insisted upon changes until he was satisfied with the final product. In this respect, it is possible that Rameau personally approved of the occultist themes in these operatic works.

Now that Rameau's involvement in the creation of his libretti has been discussed, we will turn to analyses of revelation and corruption in the four operas *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*; *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie*; *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie*; and *Les Paladins*.

#### 4.1 Introduction to the Ancient Egyptian Operas *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* and *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie*: Two Different Depictions of Egyptian Sacred Knowledge

Like the *Nouvelles réflexions* and *Origine des sciences*, Rameau's two Ancient Egyptian operas *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* and *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie* present two different narratives concerning the theme of revelation.

Interestingly, these narratives are similar to the ones presented in his treatises. To be clear, while both operas portray the Ancient Egyptians as recipients and bearers of sacred revelatory knowledge, the first opera *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* also presents a portrayal of the Ancient Egyptians similar to that seen in the *Origine des sciences*; a portrayal wherein the Egyptian elite – the high priests – are bearers of profound, sacred

knowledge and which also implicates the Egyptian priests in corrupting sacred knowledge. While the opera shows the Egyptians as disseminators of divine revelatory knowledge to the Ancient Greeks, as they are presented in both of Rameau's treatises, the Egyptian laity is shown to be ignorant to the truth. Similar to the account that Rameau gives in the *Origine des sciences*, this ignorance among the masses is caused by the priests, who lead the general population away from divine truth (the will of the gods).

As for *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Famille*, we see a revelation narrative similar to that found in the *Nouvelles réflexions*. In this opera, it is not only the priests or sages who are shown to be aware of divine revelation. Rather, Egyptians from contrasting social classes – both priests and laity – are shown to be recipients and possessors of divine, revelatory knowledge. This is similar to the way in which the Egyptians are presented in the *Nouvelles réflexions*, wherein Rameau speaks of the Egyptian population in its entirety as having been enlightened by the wisdom of the *corps sonore* and its products. Additionally, while *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour* depicts the Egyptians as sources of both revelation and corruption as well as disseminators of revelation to the Greeks, *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Famille* is a story which revolves around the Egyptians receiving sacred knowledge. Essentially, the opera focuses on the Egyptians' role as bearers of divine revelation.

#### 4.2 *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte*: The Wisdom and Corruption of the Egyptian Elite

Rameau and Cahusac's *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte* is an *opéra-ballet* that was first performed on March 15, 1747 at the Palace of Versailles's Grande Écurie in honour of the Dauphin's marriage to Maria Joseph of Saxony. Composed of three *entrées* and a prologue, it is the first of Rameau's Oriental operas that he collaborated on with

Cahusac, and also the first of their two operas set in Ancient Egypt. Since the opera's prologue focuses exclusively on characters from Greek mythology (there are no Egyptian characters present or mentioned), it will not be discussed here, neither will the third *entrée* whose story is less relevant to the themes of this dissertation. However, the first and second *entrées* contain narratives concerning Ancient Egyptian revelation and corruption: the Egyptian elite (here consisting of gods and god-kings) are in possession of sacred, revelatory knowledge; they are sources and disseminators of this knowledge to the Greeks; and the priests spread misinformation or a corrupt version of sacred knowledge to the masses in Egypt. More specifically, the protagonists of each *entrée* are Egyptian deities or god-kings who impart sacred, revelatory knowledge to mortals (the knowledge is necessarily sacred since it comes from the gods). The first *entrée* focuses exclusively on the Egyptians as disseminators of revelation to mortal characters from Greek mythology. In this *entrée*, the revelation is related to the arts (dance and music) which is in alignment with Rameau's later writings that portray the Egyptians as keepers and disseminators of revelatory and divine musical knowledge. The opera's second *entrée* focuses on corruption among the Egyptian people at the hands of their priests.

### **First Entrée: Osiris**

The *opéra-ballet's* first *entrée* focuses on the meeting and interaction between the Ancient Egyptian god Osiris and Orthésie, the queen of the Amazons (a clan of warrior women in Greek mythology). According to legend, only women were permitted to live among the Amazons, and they only interacted with men in order to reproduce. Daughters were kept and reared by the tribe, but any sons who were born were given to their fathers to raise. The Amazons were perceived by the Greeks and later European readers of Greek mythology as wild and fierce, and the stage

design of the opera's first *entrée* bears witness to this untamed reputation. The libretto begins by describing the setting: one side of the theatre's stage is covered with rocks, and the other side is covered with a mixture of wild, dilapidated trees, some that are missing branches and others whose branches are spread upon the ground. Among the rocks, several cave entrances are also visible. Following this description, the libretto introduces two of the opera's primary characters: the queen of the Amazons Orthésie and one of her fellow tribeswomen Mirrine.

The first scene opens with Mirrine and Orthésie engaged in a distressing dialogue. The Egyptians are approaching their land under the leadership of the god-king Osiris, and Mirrine fears the consequences if they overpower and conquer the Amazons. She describes her fears to Orthésie, stating that all the women of their tribe will be enslaved by the foreign men if they do not succeed in defending themselves. Orthésie agrees and vows to protect her people and defeat Osiris and his men. In response, a chorus of Amazon women sing of taking up arms, while Mirrine and Orthésie join in their battle cry; however, in the midst of their preparations to fight, Osiris arrives with his retinue.

It is in the opera's second scene that we begin to see the contrast between the Egyptians' elevated characteristics and the warlike character of the Amazon women. Osiris and his followers are face to face with Orthésie and the Amazons. Realizing that the women believe that his arrival is marked by hatred and a desire to oppress them, Osiris affirms that he has come to their lands in peace. Yet, despite his pacifying words, Orthésie remains steadfast in her convictions and refuses to lay down her arms. Once again, Osiris tries to demonstrate that he means no harm to the Amazons and begins to praise the queen for her beauty while proclaiming the glories of love; however, Orthésie interprets his declaration of love as an insult and a threat to her freedom. She expresses the sense of power she feels from her tribe's courage and their "wild" land:

OSIRIS:

How little you know the power of your charms!  
 Eh! Why resort to arms  
 to give us chains?  
 Beauty is your share,  
 for our hearts you are the image of the gods  
 that the universe adores.  
 Fly, fly to victory, love and glory offer your charms  
 a sweeter triumph.  
 Fly, fly to victory, let love reign, the universe is yours.

ORTHÉSIE

To the sweetness of a frivolous homage,  
 we know how to prefer a noble pride.  
 We find in this wild place, glory in our courage,  
 and happiness in our freedom.  
 I see your care as an outrage: My people share it with me,  
 what do you hope for from your temerity?<sup>329</sup>

In his response to Orthésie, Osiris brings attention to the noble characteristics of the Egyptian people, whom he notes are generous, courageous, and adverse to war. He further states that the Egyptians are a people who strive to ensure the happiness of others, and that they possess a sacred art that enriches the earth. Indeed, as we will soon see, this art will prove to be revelatory and transformative for the Amazons:

OSIRIS:

I guide a generous people who, without fearing it,  
 Flee the horror of war.  
 They put all their happiness into making people happy.  
 Their art, dear to humans, adorns, enriches the earth.<sup>330</sup>

This description of the Egyptians stands in contrast to the way in which the Amazons have thus far been portrayed in their savage abode, with their distrust of kind words and their propensity

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<sup>329</sup> Louis de Cahusac and Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte, Livret (1748) – français modernisé* (Philidor CMBV, 2013), 5.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

for war. Their savagery is further intensified by Orthésie's inability to see the value in the Egyptians' supposed divine qualities (divine because they are praised by a deity). Ultimately, she still believes that Osiris is trying to deceive her and her people and is unable to trust his intentions:

ORTHÉSIE:

What do these false goods matter to the heart that ignores them!  
Do you believe that by their charms you can disarm our rigors?<sup>331</sup>

After expressing her distrust towards Osiris, the deity calls upon the power of love to help soften the Amazons' hearts. It is in this moment that we see the opera's moment of revelation through the power of the arts.

***Revelation: The Divine Power of the Arts***

As part of his attempt to prove his true intentions to the Amazons, Osiris turns to the power of the arts to reveal his sincerity and love to Orthésie. He asks his followers to present fruits and flowers to the Amazons and to dance a ballet representing the seasons. Many of the Amazonian women are enchanted by the perfumes and bright colours of the performance and begin to see Osiris's virtues; however, Mirrine remains unconvinced and tries to reason with her kinswomen and Orthésie to resist the charms of the Egyptians. Indeed, while Osiris claims to have come in peace, Mirrine cannot be faulted for interpreting his arrival as a direct threat to the Amazonian way of life. As we will soon see, Osiris's version of love and peace involves the adoption of his and the Egyptians' values and the renouncement of her own. Yet, the majority of the Amazons

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

remain unmoved by Mirrine's pleas to remain steadfast in their desire for war, which results in Mirrine departing from the scene with a few other tribeswomen.

To reinforce his message of love and peace and further convince the Amazon queen and her followers of his sincerity, Osiris asks the Muses to join him in dancing a second ballet to demonstrate the extent of their artistic talents along with the Egyptians. Upon witnessing the perfection of the Egyptians' and Muses' music and dancing, the remaining Amazons who were still hesitant to believe Osiris, are suddenly made aware of his divine nature and the truth he speaks. Music and dance were the conduits through which their eyes were opened to the revelation of the god's identity. This is evident in the words collectively expressed by the Amazonian women:

CHORUS OF WILD AMAZONS:

What enchanting objects! What unknown charms!  
Only a god could have produced them.<sup>332</sup>

As for Queen Orthésie, she expresses both awe and fear in what she has witnessed:

ORTHÉSIE:

They [the performers and the performance] astonish me, without seducing me  
and I fear only its virtues.<sup>333</sup>

Although she has not been entirely seduced by Osiris and the Egyptians, the revelation of Osiris's divine identity through his mastery over the arts has made her more receptive to him. While Orthésie questions whether abandoning her oath to fight against the Egyptians and

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

maintain independence from men would be a betrayal of her Amazonian principles, Osiris reassures her that these oaths are “barbaric” and “an insult to the gods.”<sup>334</sup>

Despite her initial hesitations, Orthésie is gradually overcome by feelings of love at Osiris’s words; however, the same cannot be said for Mirrine, who has remained resistant to Osiris and ignorant of the truth and power of love since she departed before the start of the more persuasive and powerful second ballet. While Orthésie reflects on and accepts Osiris’s words, Mirrine and the remaining Amazon women charge back to the scene, declaring their faithfulness to their oath and their desire for Osiris to perish; however, Orthésie demonstrates her new enlightened disposition by thrusting herself between Osiris and Mirrine and commanding the violence to halt:

ORTHÉSIE:

Oh Heaven! ...Barbarians stop...  
Obey your queen.<sup>335</sup>

As a result of receiving Osiris’s revelation, Orthésie’s “savagery” has been tamed, and she has become aware of her tribe’s unenlightened propensity for war. Once again, Orthésie addresses her people as “barbarians” and commands that they obey their queen.<sup>336</sup> She tells her fellow Amazons to defend Osiris from the “inhuman rage” of Mirrine. Given Orthésie’s rejection of the ideals of her own people, the revelation that she received from Osiris can be viewed not only as a source that instilled civility and divine knowledge within her, but also a sense of humanity. She has, in a sense, been transformed into the “noble savage” archetype, a stark departure from the wild, bloodthirsty savagery that the libretto casts upon the culture of the Amazons.

When Mirrine refuses to surrender, Orthésie orders that she and her followers be arrested; the followers of Osiris, swiftly disarm and chain her. Despite her unfortunate circumstance, Mirrine

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

takes the opportunity to tell the queen that, although she is the one now imprisoned and chained, she is still more free than the Amazons who have ceded to Osiris and his new perspective:

MIRRINE:

You overwhelm me in vain, I am free and you serve.  
Go, your injustice and my chains are less to be feared than your chain.<sup>337</sup>

From Mirrine's perspective, abandoning one's principles is the antithesis to freedom; however, we are led to believe that because she has rejected Osiris's revelation and made the conscious choice not to embrace peace and the deity's perception of love, she has been condemned to a life of darkness in the prison of her own ignorance as well as the physical prison she will henceforth dwell within.

As for the Amazons who were receptive to Osiris's revelation, the libretto tells us that they lived a life of peace and love thereafter. Orthésie admits that her love for Osiris has enlightened her by stating "love, by enlightening me, begins my happiness," and calls for her people to be united with the Egyptians. Suddenly, the Amazons' rugged territory is transformed into a lush countryside filled with fruits and flowers, possibly representing the Amazons' new awakened sense of being. This brings the first *entrée* to its conclusion, with Orthésie, Osiris, the Egyptians, and Amazons happily singing and dancing in celebration of their new lives together.

### **Second Entrée: Canope**

While the first *entrée* was situated in a Greek territory belonging to the Amazons, the *opéra-ballet's* second *entrée*, *Canope*, turns to the banks of the Nile. The story's principal characters are the Egyptian river god Canope (or Canopus) and his love interest, a nymph named Memphis. Canope has been courting Memphis while disguised as a mortal named Nilée. The *entrée* opens

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

with Canope and his friend Agéris in conversation. Canope is dressed as Nilée and is anticipating his next meeting with Memphis; he plans to reveal his true identity to her. Meanwhile, Agéris informs Canope that on this day, the Egyptian people, led by Canope's priest, plan to propitiate the deity by offering a human sacrifice. He explains that the victim has already been chosen, and that the cruelty of the festival should incite outrage in Canope:

AGÉRIS:

Egypt on this day believes to make you propitious  
by offering on these banks a new sacrifice.  
The victim is chosen and blood will flow.  
This cruel festival is an outrage for you.  
Will you see it without disturbing it?<sup>338</sup>

Indeed, Canope agrees that the sacrifice is barbaric and refers to the Egyptians as a “vile blinded people;”<sup>339</sup> however, he admits that his preoccupation with Memphis holds him back from feeling any rage:

CANOPE:

My soul is entirely devoted to the object that engages me.  
Love holds back my avenging arm of a vile blinded people,  
I disdain the homage, and I feel only my happiness.<sup>340</sup>

***Corruption: Distorted Sacred Information Disseminated Among the Egyptian Population by its Priests***

Canope's description of the Egyptians as a “vile blinded people” is the first reference to corruption in the *entrée*. From the conversation between Canope and Agéris we can discern that human sacrifice is not a practice that the deity endorses and was therefore not a practice that had always been performed in his name. Certainly, Canope's words “vile blinded people” suggest

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

that the Egyptians are ignorant of his true desires and have been led astray; but who is responsible for this ignorance? As in Rameau's *Origine des sciences*, we will see that the corruption of sacred knowledge – in this instance, the sacred knowledge concerning the proper worship of Canope – occurs at the hands of Egypt's priests.

After Agéris departs, Memphis finds and approaches Canope, who is disguised as Nilée. In a state of panic, she discloses to her lover that she has had a distressing dream and omen about a fierce deity who threatens the well-being of the Egyptians. She explains that the god in her dream resembled Nilée and that it is she who will be sacrificed to placate him. While Canope tries to reassure and comfort her, Memphis suddenly realizes that her nightmare is about to come true as a chorus of Egyptians announce that she has been chosen as their sacrifice. Infuriated that Memphis has been chosen to be sacrificed in his name, Canope declares that the Egyptians are barbarians and vows to defend Memphis from her fate. He runs from the scene without explanation, prompting Memphis to call after him in confusion and distress.

While Memphis is alone, the high priests of Canopus and the people of Egypt approach her and prepare her for her sacrificial role. While they lament her fate, the high priest affirms that this is her destiny, and Memphis bravely accepts that she is ready to die for her people. In preparation, the priests erect an altar along the river while Egyptian women adorn Memphis with flowers. The ceremony then begins with the high priest's prayer which is accompanied by a chorus of Egyptians. While the priest appeals to Canope, Memphis is seated upon the altar; but the sacrificial rites are interrupted by a sudden change in environment: the sky darkens, the river bubbles, overflows, and waves begin to rise. The cause of this alarming environmental shift is none other than Canope himself, who rises from the river on a chariot drawn by fire-breathing

crocodiles. Upon his arrival, the deity chastises the Egyptians for their corrupt practices and expresses his anger about the crime that is being committed in his name:

CANOPE:

Blind people, can I be honored by a crime!  
 Will you never learn to know the gods?  
 Flee, and respect the victim.  
 Drag your odious priests far from me.<sup>341</sup>

With these words, Canope underscores the negative reputation of Egyptian priests that had been expressed by scholars such as Conring and Sprat as well as Rameau. Since priests, as religious authorities, are responsible for interpreting and disseminating sacred teachings, they are, therefore, at fault for not having delivered the accurate will of the divine to their people. As in Rameau's writings on the *corps sonore*, the priests in this *entrée* are responsible for the transmission of a corrupt tradition among the masses. Canope highlights the culpability of the priests by referring to the Egyptian people as merely "blind" – that is, ignorant or unaware – whereas the priests are described as "odious."

Upon experiencing Canope's wrath, the priests and the Egyptian public flee the scene, leaving Canope and Memphis alone together. Memphis, who is still unconscious on the altar, is awoken by Canope's voice and is stunned to discover that he and Nilée are the same person. Because she had been led to believe that Canope was a fearful and wrathful god, she remains in a state of panic despite learning that he is truly the man she loves; however, Canope assures her that an "error" has led to her prolonged belief that he is a tyrant. This error likely refers to the priests' erroneous belief that human sacrifice would propitiate Canope, but instead enraged him:

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 12.

CANOPE:

You penetrate my heart with pleasure and love.  
 An error too long has caused your alarms.  
 I saw you on these shores, I burned for your charms;  
 Under the name of a mortal, I hoped that in my turn...<sup>342</sup>

After Canope professes these words, Memphis realizes that he never intended any harm and that he is, in fact, the same person that she knew to be Nilée. After the couple expresses their love for each other, Canope addresses the Egyptian people and asks them to join in celebration. He further confirms that their beliefs about his temperament were inaccurate by telling them to stop living in fear of his anger:

CANOPE:

Love! Ah! What a heart you have made me master of!  
 Memphis, you will know me.  
 Everything will be felt by the happiness of my fires.  
 It is only by making people happy that one can deserve to be so.  
 You who obey me, run to my voice.  
 Come, sing my fires, and celebrate my choice.  
 And you peoples, stop fearing my anger.  
 Come, run to my voice.<sup>343</sup>

Canope's words successfully convince the Egyptian people of his kindness, and the *entrée* concludes with deities and mortals celebrating together and singing of love.

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

### 4.3 *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie*: Sacred Knowledge and an Enlightened People

Written in 1754, Rameau and Cahusac's *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie* was composed in honour of Louis XVI's birth, with the titular character Osiris representing the newborn Dauphin. An opera comprised of one act, the work's plot revolves around the mortal birth of the god-king Osiris in Thebes, Egypt, and the divine announcement of his birth to the Egyptian people. Cahusac's libretto was inspired by the Ancient Egyptian festival of Pamyliia, for which – as noted by Graham Sadler – he likely derived his knowledge from Claustré's *Dictionnaire portatif de mythologie*.<sup>344</sup>

While Cuthbert Girdlestone asserted that “there is practically no story”<sup>345</sup> in the libretto of *La Naissance d'Osiris*, this statement is an unfair dismissal of the opera's plot which, while certainly less eventful than some of Rameau's other operatic works, should not be described as having “no story.” In fact, the opera's plot, while brief, is philosophically significant and illustrates the occultist idea that the Ancient Egyptians were recipients and possessors of divine or sacred knowledge. This idea likely stemmed from Cahusac's affinity for Freemasonry and, as seen in the previous chapters, was clearly embraced by Rameau in his *Nouvelles réflexions* and *Origine des sciences*.

*La Naissance d'Osiris*'s story begins at the temple of Jupiter in Thebes. While Jupiter was a principal deity for the Ancient Greeks and Romans, in this production, the god also has a temple dedicated to him in Egypt. Overall, the opera's setting is pastoral, and features shepherds

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<sup>344</sup> Thomas Soury, “Re-assessing Attributions to Louis de Cahusac of the Librettos of Rameau's *Io*, *Zéphire*, and *Nélee et Mirthis*,” in *The Operas of Rameau: Genesis, Staging, Reception*, eds. Graham Sadler, Shirley Thompson, and Jonathan Williams (New York: Routledge, 2022), 89.

<sup>345</sup> Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 728.

gathered around the temple. After describing the setting, the libretto introduces the first scene's characters: the titular character Pamilie who is a shepherdess (after whom the title *La Fête Pamilie* is named), additional shepherds, and characters with unspecified identities (they are simply noted as "people"). The opera begins with a chorus proclaiming the happiness of the Egyptian shepherds and people, who are said to be guided by love; however, despite this blissful existence there is a "single good" missing from their lives. This is the divine revelation which will soon be granted to the nation. Meanwhile, Pamilie and the other shepherds continue to dance and sing, expressing their contentment while carrying their gifts of offering and sacrifices into the temple of Jupiter. Amidst the cheerful festivities, lightning fills the sky and terrifies the shepherds who fear that the deity is displeased with their offerings; however, their fears are swiftly dispelled by the Egyptian high priest who provides assurance that their gifts have pleased him:

THE HIGH PRIEST:

Faithful people, is it up to you  
to fear the thunder that roars?  
Heaven reserves its blows,  
to punish the crimes of the world.  
May the sweetest hope succeed your terrors.  
The flame of lightning, the peals of thunder,  
In these happy moments announce to the earth  
only the most brilliant favours.  
Your incense in Heaven has known how to please.  
How many times already its tutelary help, has it  
not wiped away your tears?<sup>346</sup>

### ***Revelation***

The high priest's words are the first instance where the Egyptians are highlighted as

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<sup>346</sup> Louis de Cahusac and Jean-Philippe Rameau, *La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie, Livret (1754) – français modernisé* (Philidor CMBV, 2013), 2.

a divinely favoured people who are worthy of revelation. As seen in the libretto, the high priest extols his countrymen as being “faithful” and exempt from divine punishment which is reserved for the rest of the world’s wickedness. He explains that the thunder and lightning, while frightening, only signify divine approval of their actions. As evinced by the words “your incense in Heaven has known how to please. How many times already its tutelary help, has it not wiped away your tears,” the Egyptians are presented as having consistently won divine favour in the past.

After establishing that the Egyptians had been favoured by the gods, Cahusac proceeds to illustrate the ancient civilization’s moment of receiving divine revelation. The high priest announces to the laity that since Jupiter has been so pleased with the Egyptian people, he has chosen to descend among them in order to personally deliver his message:

THE HIGH PRIEST:

What do I see? ... What extreme happiness!...  
Mortals, of the sovereign of the gods,  
contemplate, trembling, the supreme majesty.  
Fortunate people, it is he himself  
who deigns to offer himself to our eyes.<sup>347</sup>

At this moment, Jupiter appears in front of the Egyptians and is accompanied by Eros and the Graces. He then makes his announcement to the shepherds and the high priest:

JUPITER:

How sweet it is to reign in profound peace!  
May fate prepare beautiful days for mortals!  
Nothing can trouble the sky, the earth, and the water anymore:  
Love, who seconds me, has ensured the course of their happiness.  
He is born, this hero, whom your wishes ask of me,  
how I love to travel the course of his years!  
I already see all these brilliant features shining,  
which your tender hearts while waiting,

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

in the secret splendour of destinies and time.<sup>348</sup>

It is through these words that Jupiter reveals a divine revelation to the people of Egypt: the birth of the hero, Osiris. The importance of this divine revelation to the Egyptian people resembles another theologically significant event well known among Christians; that is, the story of Osiris's birth announcement strongly resembles the Christian nativity story in which an angel heralds the birth of Christ to shepherds. This parallel to a notably recognizable biblical event further amplifies the significance and gravity of the sacred information imparted to the Egyptians in the opera. Like the Jewish nation in the nativity story who had long been praying for the birth of the Messiah, Jupiter implies that the Egyptians had also been praying for the arrival of a hero as evinced by his words: "he is born, this hero, whom your wishes ask of me." Like the Christian Messiah, Osiris was a figure who was believed to be both divine and mortal. Since this opera celebrates the birth of the Dauphin, the young French prince is allegorically revealed to be a messiah figure, or saviour, to his people. This context is especially fitting considering that French kings were considered to be appointed by God.

Additionally, like the messianic nativity story, the news of Osiris's birth is not reserved for the priests and most elite in Egyptian society; the divine message was delivered to both the high priest as well as the shepherds and other laity who were present. This is a similar narrative to that which Rameau propagated in his *Nouvelles réflexions*, wherein all classes of the Egyptian people were privy to the sacred knowledge or revelation of the *corps sonore*. This narrative is contrary to that found in the *Origine des sciences*, in which the *corps sonore*'s knowledge is only held by the priests who then cultivate it in secrecy apart from the rest of Egyptian society.

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

Another point that emphasizes the opera's portrayal of the Ancient Egyptians as being divinely favoured among all nations, and their roles as recipients, bearers, and disseminators of sacred knowledge, is the depiction of them as a favoured people to a foreign deity. As previously mentioned, Jupiter (or Zeus as he was known to the Greeks) was the king of the gods for both the Greeks and Romans. The presence of a temple dedicated to Jupiter on Egyptian soil suggests that the opera's story occurs during a time when Egypt was under the control of the Greeks or Romans, and temples were erected in honour of their gods. Yet, although Jupiter was the god of the Greeks and Romans, in the opera he chooses to appear to the Egyptians and to inform them of Osiris's birth. Fundamentally, he chooses to reveal sacred knowledge to foreign people instead of those for whom he was the foremost deity.

Additionally, the opera reinforces the idea that the Egyptians were among the original Ancient Oriental recipients of the *prisca theologia* who then disseminated this information to the Greeks. This is evident when examining the opera's central subject: Osiris. To be clear, Osiris was embraced by both the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks, but Cahusac's narrative shows the Egyptians as the first to receive the news of his incarnation. Like the scholars of Early Modern Europe who saw the Egyptians as one of the original sources of sacred knowledge, which was then transmitted to the Greeks, Cahusac's libretto upholds the Egyptians' reputation as the original recipients of divine revelation. Although *La Naissance d'Osiris* makes no mention of the Greeks or Romans apart from their deities, the fact that the Greco-Roman world eventually incorporated Osiris into their own theology suggests that the revelation received by the opera's Egyptian shepherds and priests would eventually be transmitted to the Greeks and Romans. In the opera, the eventual dissemination of knowledge concerning Osiris's birth is supported in the aforementioned text sung by Jupiter. The beginning of this passage refers to mortals in general

and how, because of this news, nothing may “trouble the sky, the earth, and the water anymore” which suggests this revelation will be beneficial to a larger geographical region. This is further substantiated by Jupiter’s words “Love, who seconds me, ensures the course of their happiness,” with the word “their” referring to mortals and the earth that he had directly mentioned prior to this phrase. It is only after talking about the earth and people in a broader context that Jupiter addresses the Egyptians and their prayers for a hero directly.

After Jupiter’s announcement, the high priest and shepherds continue to praise the deity while the shepherdess Pamilie sings of the god’s love for the Egyptian people. The Egyptians continue to celebrate and worship while Jupiter addresses them one last time:

JUPITER:

Mortals, the care of my greatness,  
to the abode of the gods calls me back;  
But the earth is the object dearest to my heart.  
I leave Love to it. He makes it happy,  
May he reign over it unceasingly.<sup>349</sup>

This brief passage, while signaling the deity’s departure back to the heavens, further suggests that the revelation of Osiris’s birth, although first granted to the Egyptians, will also be for the benefit of the whole world. This is exemplified by Jupiter’s declaration that “the earth is the object dearest to his heart,” which demonstrates the god’s love for the entirety of the earth. This is further exemplified by his order that Love dwell among the inhabitants of the earth to “make it [the earth] happy” and to “reign over it [the earth] unceasingly.” Indeed, reigning over the earth would include the people of other nations.

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 3.

Considering the short length of the work, the revelation and celebration of Osiris's birth occupies the majority of *La Naissance d'Osiris*'s libretto. After Jupiter's departure, the opera reaches its conclusion with the Egyptians, Love, and the Graces continuing to celebrate their happiness and the news of their hero's arrival.

As seen in both of Rameau and Cahusac's Ancient Egyptian operas, the narratives of revelation and corruption are consistent with the themes present in Rameau's later theoretical works; however, in the next section which addresses the Chaldeans (or Babylonians) in *Acanthe et Céphise*, we will see Rameau and his librettist Marmontel emphasize different contemporary ideas concerning revelation and corruption to what we find in the *Nouvelles réflexions*.

#### 4.4 *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie: Mesopotamian Talismans, Astrology, Divination, and Deception*

While Rameau's theoretical writings focused on the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia* in relation to the Mesopotamian biblical patriarchs and dismissed the Chaldeans as having been incapable of cultivating the same astronomical and mathematical knowledge as their biblical ancestors, *Acanthe et Céphise* focuses instead on the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, and their association with astrology and divination. Indeed, in Early Modern Europe, there were many who disparaged the Chaldeans and their knowledge of astronomy and divination; however, there were others who appreciated the Chaldeans' merits and saw astronomy and astrology as part of the same area of study and as part of the *prisca sapientia*. In this opera, we see the Chaldeans as bearers of revelation through their possession of astrological knowledge and their ability to bestow this knowledge and wisdom on the Ancient Greeks through the skill of divination and talismans. As it concerns the theme of corruption, the Chaldeans are also viewed as agents of

deception, a quality which, as we saw in the previous chapter, had also been associated with them.

The three-act opera *Acanthe et Céphise* was first performed on November 18, 1751, at the *Académie royale de musique*, to honour the birth of the Monseigneur le duc de Bourgogne.<sup>350</sup> According to the score's *avertissement*, this operatic work is a combination of “*mitologie*” (myth) and “*la féerie*” (enchantment). No mythological tradition is identified but since one of the protagonist's names – Céphise – is clearly of Greek origin,<sup>351</sup> we can deduce that the word *mitologie* refers to Greek mythology. Additionally, since *Acanthe et Céphise* includes Greek mythology, we can conclude that, temporally, the opera takes place in Classical Antiquity. As for *féerie*, this word was used to describe theatrical productions that centred upon supernatural or enchanted elements as well as characters such as fairies and other magical characters found in fairytales. These productions heavily relied upon *le merveilleux*, specifically, elaborate special effects and staging.

While we have established that Greece is one of the cultures featured in *Acanthe et Céphise*, there is evidence that a Middle Eastern culture is also central to the opera's story. Although this locale is not indicated in the opera's *avertissement*, it is evident from the inclusion of characters that derive from Middle Eastern mythology: genies. Additionally, another important clue that the opera features characters from the Middle East is the name of one of the opera's primary characters, the fairy Zirphile. Apart from *Acanthe et Céphise*, I found two French sources that use this name within a Middle Eastern context. The first use of this name can be seen in the *conte Acajou et Zirphile* (1744) by Charles Duclos. Although this tale does not

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<sup>350</sup> Jean-François Marmontel and Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie, Livret (1751) – français modernisé* (Philidor CMBV, 2013), 3.

<sup>351</sup> “*Céphise*” is the French word for “Cephissus,” the name of several rivers in Greece.

include the name of an actual Middle Eastern location (the *conte* only names two fictional kingdoms), scholars have observed that it contains Oriental elements such as the inclusion of genies and the use of talismans (the same elements that are also present in the plot of *Acanthe et Céphise*).<sup>352</sup>

The second source that I found which uses the name Zirphile was written in a period that is beyond the scope of this study, but which still provides evidence that the name had Middle Eastern connotations in France: the *opéra-féerie*, *Zirphile et Fleur-de-myrtle, ou Cent ans en un jour* which was composed by Charles-Simon Catel in 1818. Like *Acajou et Zirphile*, the opera's setting is ambiguously Oriental; that is, it does not specify a precise location in the East. Yet, like *Acajou et Zirphile*, we can be fairly certain that the opera is centred around characters from the Middle East as evinced by the inclusion of the aforementioned stereotypical signs of this region: genies and talismans.

Although genies and talismans were associated with the Middle East, they still do not indicate that the opera took place in Mesopotamia. Another character's name, however, makes this association clearer: the name of the story's antagonist, the evil genie Oroès. Apart from *Acanthe et Céphise*, this name appears in Voltaire's tragedy *Sémiramis* (1746), which centres on the legendary queen of Babylon who is the play's eponymous role. Among the characters appearing in this fictional Babylonian landscape is the high priest, Oroès. Considering that Voltaire was very close to *Acanthe et Céphise*'s librettist Marmontel, it is unsurprising to read in Marmontel's *Mémoires* that he was very familiar with Voltaire's *Sémiramis* and expressed his praise and admiration for the play which he called "Voltaire's masterpiece of genius."<sup>353</sup> Since

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<sup>352</sup> Tili Boon Cuillé, "Of Mind and Matter in Charles Duclos's *Acajou et Zirphile*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 31.1 (2018): 183.

<sup>353</sup> Jean-François Marmontel, *Memoirs of Marmontel, First Book*, trans. Brigit Patmore (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1930), 154.

Marmontel was a close friend of Voltaire and expressed admiration for *Sémiramis*, it is possible that he was cognizant of the play's characters and that, therefore, the name Oroès was associated with Mesopotamia.

In addition to Voltaire's use of the name Oroès in his Babylonian-themed play, there is one more clue which points to a setting in Mesopotamia: the libretto's description of the countryside in the opening scene of Act 1. The description reads as follows: "The theatre represents a rural place. In the background is a valley intersected by streams. At the top of the hill that forms this valley, is a palace of delicate architecture which belongs to a fairy, beneath which are the palace's gardens, which are on the slope of a hill." This description is quite vivid and specific and seems to resemble contemporary descriptions of one of Mesopotamia's most noteworthy landmarks: The Hanging Gardens.

From the seventeenth through eighteenth centuries, there was an increased fascination in the architecture of Antiquity, especially as it related to the Seven Wonders of the World.<sup>354</sup> One of the structures included in the Wonders, and which garnered much attention in Early Modern Europe, were the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Unlike the other Wonders, the Hanging Gardens were not a verified historical fact; that is, no one was certain that they had actually existed.<sup>355</sup> Yet, this uncertainty did not dissuade artists and writers from producing works that featured them and from them being inextricably tied to European imaginings of Mesopotamia.

The gardens were said to have been a marvel to behold as they were constructed in ascending tiers that resembled a massive hill of greenery. Additionally, some accounts of the gardens located them in proximity to the Babylonian royal palace. When compared to Marmontel's

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<sup>354</sup> Michael Seymour, "Images of Babylon in Early Modern Europe," in *The Allure of the Ancient: Receptions of the Ancient Middle East, ca. 1600-1800*, eds. Margaret Geoga and John Steele (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 28.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

description of the countryside in the opera's opening scene, we can see the similarities: there is a palace, beneath which are situated gardens "on the slope of the hill." The description of the slope and the hill are certainly unique when considering the typical landscape of a European garden and seem to point toward the famous ascending tiers of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Perhaps, however, the most convincing evidence that this scenery is synonymous with Babylon's famed gardens is the fact that Voltaire begins his first scene in *Sémiramis* within the vicinity of the Hanging Gardens. Like the name Oroès, it is likely that Marmontel was drawing inspiration from Voltaire's vision of Babylon.<sup>356</sup>

Now that we have explored the justification for situating *Acanthe et Céphise* in the Ancient Orient, specifically Mesopotamia, I will turn to instances of revelation and corruption in the opera's plot. Like so many theatrical works, *Acanthe et Céphise*'s story is essentially a love story – a story of lovers who face an abundance of challenges in trying to be together. As stated in the libretto, the opera's first act opens in a rural setting, which we are told is situated close to Zirphile's palace. Here, we are introduced to the main female protagonist Céphise who is in a state of despair. She is deeply in love with the opera's male protagonist Acanthe, who reciprocates her feelings; however, she has also attracted the attention of the evil genie Oroès, who has fallen in love with her and who is jealous that she has chosen Acanthe. As a result, Oroès is determined to destroy their relationship and win Céphise's hand.

Meanwhile, we are introduced to the fairy Zirphile, who is a type of "fairy godmother" or protectress to the distressed lovers. The situation becomes more dire for Acanthe and Céphise when we learn that despite her supernatural abilities, Zirphile is not currently able to protect them from Oroès's wrath, because destiny has predicted a specific day when she will finally be

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<sup>356</sup> *Sémiramis* begins in front of a royal palace which is located in front of the Babylonian Hanging Gardens.

able to overpower the genie, and that day has, unfortunately, not yet arrived. Determined to find a solution to the situation, Zirphile tells the lovers that it is necessary for her to leave them and embark on a voyage to meet the gods, so that she may seek their council on when and how she will obtain the powers needed to defeat Oroès. Although she cannot protect them from Oroès's powers, Zirphile is able to provide another type of protection to Acanthe and Céphise: a talisman in the form of a bracelet.

***Revelation: Talisman***

Zirphile's gift of the protective talisman to Acanthe and Céphise is the first example of revelation in the opera; that is, it is the first instance in the plot where we witness a character from the Ancient Orient sharing revelatory knowledge with Greek characters. How exactly is the talisman revelatory or enlightening? Zirphile tells the lovers that the talisman possesses a "secret power" which creates a "magic bond" between them.<sup>357</sup> This magic bond grants Acanthe and Céphise telepathic powers to be able to know how the other one is feeling, to be able to share in one another's experiences even if they are not physically together. Essentially, they receive the revelation of "sympathy" for each other, which is the sentiment to which the opera's subtitle *La Sympathie* refers. Although this newly acquired telepathic awareness of each other's physical and emotional states might not seem like an effective protective measure against Oroès's malice, Zirphile explains otherwise. Because the lovers can now experience both each other's pleasure as well as pain, if Oroès attempts to harm Acanthe, he will inadvertently harm Céphise, the woman with whom he desires to be.

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<sup>357</sup> Jean-François Marmontel and Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie, Livret (1751) – français modernisé* (Philidor CMBV, 2013), 3.

Soon after presenting her gift to Acanthe and Céphise, Zirphile departs and begins her voyage to the gods.<sup>358</sup> Meanwhile, Acanthe and Céphise are confronted by Oroès, who commands that his minions seize and imprison Acanthe while he tries to seduce Céphise with promises of wealth and power; however, owing to her new enchanted state and the revelation of the pain Acanthe is experiencing in prison, Céphise gathers the strength to resist Oroès's advances and remains focused on the feelings of her true love. The genie soon realizes that if he does not reunite Acanthe with Céphise, the latter will be harmed. As a result, he decides to allow the lovers to be together for the time being, but this does not mean that he has had a change of heart. In fact, we see him embody the stereotypical Chaldean characteristic of deception in the opera's second act.

***Corrupt Characteristic: Deception***

In Act II, after having been reunited, Céphise and Acanthe decide to visit the Temple of Love to consult the high priestess for answers on how long they will have to wait until they can safely remain together. The priestess prophesies that they will be united indefinitely only on “the day when all hearts will give thanks to Love.”<sup>359</sup> Realizing the improbability of a time when love will reign supreme in the world, Acanthe and Céphise feel hopeless and discouraged; however, much to their surprise, Oroès reappears and states that he has surrendered his pursuit of Céphise; he cares only for her happiness, even if it means conceding her love to another man. This is, however, where his deceptive intentions come into play.

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 11.

When he had imprisoned Acanthe, Oroès suspected that there had been some type of magic bond connecting his rival and Céphise, since she had been experiencing the same torments to which Acanthe was subjected. As a result, he devises a plan to trick the couple in order to learn the source of their bond; if he can discover the source, he can break their connection and kill Acanthe without inflicting the same fate on Céphise. Setting his plan into action, Oroès approaches Acanthe, with whom he pretends to be make amends, and tries to earn his trust so that he may feel comfortable speaking about his telepathic ability, admitting the source of his knowledge and power. Oroès tells Acanthe that he already knows about the secret charm that binds him to Céphise, even though he truly has no confirmation that this is the case; however, he hopes that his lie will coax Acanthe into divulging the details. We see this in the following text from Act II, Scene VII:

THE GENIE:

At last my heart is disarmed.  
 Acanthe, you are loved;  
 You will be happy; I see it without envy.  
 But I demand the price for the effort I make.

ACANTHE:

To pay for so many benefits.  
 I want to devote my life.

THE GENIE:

I no longer fear being indiscreet.  
 If this testimony is sincere.  
 Your two hearts are united by a secret charm;  
 Can I not penetrate the mystery of this knot?  
 If this confession must cost you,  
 You can remain silent.  
 I want to owe nothing but gratitude.  
 It is up to you to consult yourself.

ACANTHE:

How ungrateful I would be, if some distrust

Made me hesitate!<sup>360</sup>

Thankfully, Céphise detects the genie's deception, and she is able to interrupt the potentially disastrous conversation before the secret of Zirphile's talisman has been revealed. Angered that his deceitful plan has been uncovered, Oroès finally decides that he would rather see both of the lovers put to death instead of allowing them to live happily together.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Chaldeans were accused of having been deceptive to the Greeks concerning their possession of advanced knowledge. We saw this in the work of scholars such as George Costard who was convinced that the Chaldeans were charlatans and had deceived the Greeks into believing that their astronomical sciences were sophisticated and novel. Here, we can see a similar narrative propagated in the interaction between the Chaldean, or Babylonian, character Oroès and the two Greek characters Acanthe and Céphise. In Act II, Scene VII, Oroès tries to deceive Acanthe by lying and telling him that he already knows the source of his power. He is portrayed as a charlatan who tries to convince the opera's Greek characters that he possesses advanced knowledge that he actually does not have.

### ***Revelation: Astrology and Divination***

In Act I we saw the theme of revelation in the form of Zirphile's telepathic knowledge and the transmission of that knowledge from an Ancient Oriental character to Greek characters. In the opera's third act, there is another instance of revelation and its transmission, but rather than through the use of talismans, it now transpires by means of astrology and divination.

At the end of Act II, we were left with an infuriated Oroès who, after witnessing the disintegration of his scheme, decides to put both Acanthe and Céphise to death rather than admit

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

defeat. To first torture them, Oroès has his followers carry the two lovers away to a desert and place them each on different, steep cliffs so that they may witness each other's pain. The third act begins with Acanthe and Céphise chained to these cliffs, with a perilous gorge between them that is filled with monsters and wild beasts.<sup>361</sup> The opera's chorus sings of the torments and "barbaric death" they are about to experience.<sup>362</sup>

The lovers call out to the heavens and proclaim their innocence, begging to be freed. Feeling as though they have been abandoned by Zirphile, Acanthe and Céphise resign themselves to their fate. At this point, they are once again confronted by Oroès, who is mounted on a dragon and encircled by his henchmen. Just as the evil genie is about to exact his anger and revenge on the lovers, thunder crashes and the scene suddenly changes – the genie and his minions are hurled into the abyss of the surrounding, collapsing cliffs. What has caused this sudden change of circumstances? It is the unexpected return of the fairy Zirphile. All hope is not lost for Acanthe and Céphise, as the foretold day when Zirphile will overpower and defeat Oroès has finally arrived! We are suddenly transported to the next scene in Zirphile's palace, where she is seated on her throne and surrounded by dancing spirits, fairies, and Acanthe and Céphise, who all sing of her triumph; the lovers are now able to be together forever and live in peace.

While everyone celebrates the fulfillment of the prophecy and Acanthe and Céphise's love, Zirphile excitedly interrupts the festivities – she has had a vision which we see expressed in the recitative and chorus *Où suis-je ? Et qu'est-ce que je vois ?* (Zirphile and choir):

ZIRPHILE:

Where am I? And what do I see?

My eyes, from the future pierce the dark veil  
O worthy blood of the greatest kings!

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

What brilliant destinies your star announces to me!  
 What a fabric of benefits, virtues, and exploits!  
 The symphony paints a sound of war.  
 On the wings of victory  
 I see you flying to glory.<sup>363</sup>

In Zirphile's recitative, we see two markers of astrology and divination. The first marker of divination is Zirphile's sudden disorientation and disconnection from the reality of her surroundings when she excitedly asks "where am I? And what do I see?" She is no longer aware of her environment and is overtaken by the divine message that she is about to receive. The second indication, which points directly to the use of astrology for divination, is Zirphile's statement that she has seen the destinies of the "greatest kings" and that the way she has come to see their destinies is by interpreting an "announcement" from their star; that is, she has used astrology in order to see the future. In response to her vision, the chorus of fairies and spirits respond with concern and wonder if this might be a prophecy of more pain and war:

CHORUS:

What do you announce to us? O gods!  
 Must we still tremble for this precious blood?  
 A sweet and pleasant symphony follows this noise of war.<sup>364</sup>

However, their worries are assuaged by Zirphile's assurance that the prophecy is positive and foretells of a hero who will bring peace to the earth:

ZIRPHILE:

Rest assured. Heaven, favorable to the earth,  
 Takes care of the gifts it has given you.  
 This hero escaped from the furies of war,  
 Will come to deposit his thunder at the foot of the altars of peace.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

Upon hearing the good news, a group of shepherds enter the scene along with the fairies, spirits, Acanthe, and Céphise, and everyone rejoices and dances to the sound of musettes. While we know that Zirphile's news is positive and that she foretells of a hero, who exactly is the hero in question and who were the "great kings" that were mentioned in her vision? The answer is none other than the newborn Bourbon prince for whom the opera was first performed, and the "great kings" are likely his Bourbon ancestors (considering that the opera's final chorus is dedicated to praising "the race of our kings").<sup>366</sup> Indeed, the birth of the prince is woven directly into the opera's ending and is the ultimate revelation that Zirphile imparts to Acanthe, Céphise, and her retinue. In the following text, we see the newborn prince foretold in an almost messianic manner – he is the "star" who will bring joy and peace to the world: "May the earth respond to our concerts, may everything form songs of joy and love. A Bourbon who is received this day is a star that is born for the happiness of the world."<sup>367</sup> The opera ends with everyone dancing and singing of the Bourbon kings as "omens of peace."<sup>368</sup>

#### 4.5 *Les Paladins*: Chinese Wisdom, Morality, and Deception

The appearance of Chinese characters in *Les Paladins* differs greatly from the appearance of the Eastern characters in the operas discussed previously. For one, *Les Paladins* does not revolve around its Chinese characters, but rather their European counterparts. In fact, the Chinese characters only appear briefly in a single scene toward the opera's end. Secondly, as will be detailed later in this section, the Chinese characters are not actual people, but rather inanimate and animate objects who represent eighteenth-century European fantasies of Chinese culture and

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

civilization. Yet, despite their brief and seemingly arbitrary inclusion in the opera's plot, the Chinese elements act as both sources of revelation and corruption for the work's European characters. Essentially, the Chinese characters act as repositories of wisdom and morality for the European characters as they did for the scholars of Rameau's time. Additionally, they demonstrate the negative characteristics assigned to them by some of the aforementioned intellectuals and Rameau — most notably, deception. In order to understand the context of the Chinese characters' significance to their European counterparts, it is first necessary to provide a summary of the opera's plot and the events leading up to the appearance of its Chinese characters.

A three-act *comédie lyrique* composed in 1760, *Les Paladins*' early development by Rameau and his librettist is difficult to trace. Indeed, the librettist cannot be definitively identified, though musicologists have generally attributed the work to Duplat de Monticourt; however, as to which of the two Monticourt brothers — Pierre-Jacques or Jean-François — penned the work is still undetermined.<sup>369</sup> The libretto was inspired by La Fontaine's "Le Petit chien qui secoue de l'argent et des pierreries" and is set in early medieval Italy. Its title refers to Charlemagne's Paladins, who were his twelve foremost knights that were featured in the *Song of Roland*.

In Act I, the libretto explains that the first scene begins in front of an old castle which is situated near a forest. Here, we are introduced to the opera's heroine Argie (who we learn is in love with a Paladin named Atis) and her friend Nérine who have both been imprisoned within the castle by Argie's guardian Anselme. The reason why Anselme has jailed the two women is because of his love for Argie; he is jealous that she desires to be with another man. Fearing that Atis may be in danger of death or that he may have already been killed, Argie and Nérine plot

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<sup>369</sup>Sylvie Bouissou, *Jean-Philippe Rameau : musicien des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 815.

their escape. This involves Nérine trying to persuade the prison guard Orcan to free them; however, Orcan states that the only way to make him “sensitive” to their suffering is to heed to his desires.<sup>370</sup> In response to his demands, Nérine reasons that it is not possible for her to love from behind bars, and after several exchanges, Orcan remains unswayed by Nérine’s pleas and departs; however, all hope is not lost for the two women as Atis and the other Paladins, disguised as pilgrims, arrive to rescue them. In the midst of Atis and Argie’s joy at being reunited, and before they can all escape, Orcan returns; however, he is swiftly overpowered by Atis. Despite this seeming success, Anselme then arrives, which further prevents the escape from happening and the Paladins are forced to flee into the woods.

Act II begins in a hamlet situated near Anselme’s castle where Orcan tells him about the pilgrims who had tried to liberate Argie and Nérine. Anselme then confronts and questions Argie about the pilgrims’ identities and she informs him that it was her true love, Atis, who had orchestrated the escape. She continues by professing her love for the Paladin while praising his admirable qualities. In response, Anselme asks whether she will ever be able to love him in return, and Argie responds that she will only ever love him as a father figure and implores him to accept her feelings. Infuriated by her response, Anselme plans to kill her but intends for this to be executed by Orcan so as to not “soil” his hand.<sup>371</sup>

Once alone, Orcan reflects on how he may be able to exact revenge on the Paladins for their attack upon him during their attempt to free Argie and Nérine; however, he also expresses fear at this prospect. Meanwhile, Nérine overhears Orcan speaking to himself about this dilemma and tells him that he will be subject to vengeance if he chooses to kill her and Argie. She tries to

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<sup>370</sup> Unknown and Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Les Paladins, Livret (1760) – français modernisé* (Philidor CMBV, 2013), 2.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

distract him from enacting Anselme's plan when the Paladins reappear disguised as demons and once again overwhelm and chase Orcan away.

It is in the opera's third act that the Chinese elements appear. Act III begins with the Paladins' victory celebration having been interrupted by Anselme. As they hide in the castle, Anselme prepares to attack along with a troop of peasants and servants. Just as he declares his vengeance and wrath upon the lovers, and his henchmen place ladders along the castle's side to infiltrate it, the castle and its surroundings are suddenly transformed into a magnificent Chinese palace.

***Revelation: Wisdom and Morality***

At the moment of the Chinese palace's appearance in the opera, the libretto provides the following description: "A palace in the Chinese style, open on all sides, and situated in the middle of a garden, succeeds the previous decoration; the inside of the palace is decorated with several groups of figures from China."<sup>372</sup> It is this palace and the several groups of Chinese figures that will soon serve as a source of revelation to the opera's European protagonists; but from where did the foreign palace appear? The libretto tells us that it was the result of a magic spell cast by a fairy named Manto, who Atis had once helped. The fairy has now appeared in Atis's time of need and has chosen to transform Anselme's castle into a Chinese palace to distract him from harming the Paladins, Argie, and Nérine. We can see Anselme's response to the palace is the following text:

ANSELME:

But oh heaven! This castle disappears from my eyes!  
 What delightful gardens  
 have suddenly sprung up!  
 What superb palace rises up to the heavens.

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 16.

Gods! What strange object presents itself to my eyes?<sup>373</sup>

At this moment in the libretto, it is evident that Manto's plan to distract Anselme is successful, and the antagonist casts aside his weapons as a result of being dazzled and overwhelmed by the palace's exotic beauty. Like the Chinese arts and architecture that were so alluring to the Europeans of Rameau's time, the foreign architecture and gardens of the Chinese palace are similarly alluring to Anselme – so much so that he has been diverted from his original mission. Ultimately, this scene reflects the powerful hold that Sinophilia and *chinoiserie* had on eighteenth-century French society; that is, of all the wonders that could be used to disarm Anselme, a European character, the librettist chose Chinese aesthetics as the most powerful decoy. This seduction, however, is not the “revelation” on which this section focuses. Instead, these Chinese elements become a source of revelation for one of the opera's European protagonists, Argie.

While Anselme admires the new palace, Manto, disguised as an enslaved Moor, crosses his path. Upon seeing the fairy, Anselme poses questions about the palace's origin, to which Manto responds that all the visible treasures belong to her. As a result, Anselme praises Manto as a deity and begs for forgiveness:

ANSELME:

Of what god do I see here the dazzling abode?  
Whose treasures are these?

MANTO:

These treasures are mine.

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

ANSELME:

Goddess! Forgive me if I could not have known...

MANTO:

I forgive you; and of the goods you see  
at once, if you wish, I can make you master.

ANSELME:

Great divinity!<sup>374</sup>

As seen in the above exchange between Manto and Anselme, the Chinese “treasures” have convinced Anselme that he is experiencing a divine encounter, and he becomes eager to please Manto in any way she requests. In response, Manto asks that he commit to loving only her. After Anselme agrees and confesses his love to her, Manto turns to the Chinese figures adorning the palace – which are referred to as “pagodas” in the libretto<sup>375</sup> – and instructs them to come to life and honour Anselme. Upon this command, the pagodas’ heads and then bodies become animated, and they begin to dance around Anselme.

While Anselme is overwhelmed by the beauty of the Chinese palace, gardens, and pagodas, Manto calls for Argie to appear so that she may witness Anselme’s newfound obsession with another woman and the foreign treasures. Once Argie witnesses that Anselme’s proclamations of love for her have been contradicted by the ease with which he has been seduced by another, she immediately shames him; however, Anselme responds that he only surrendered to Manto’s demands solely to obtain the Chinese treasures so that he could give them to Argie. Unconvinced by his lies, Argie remains steadfast in her loyalty to Atis, affirming that she already possesses all

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>375</sup> We know that the pagodas are Chinese because the libretto had referred to them earlier as “figures from China.”

that she needs through his love. Because of Anselme's inability to remain faithful to Argie, she is freed from his captivity. Manto then reveals her true identity to Atis and Argie and blesses their union before departing. As a result, Anselme has no choice but to accept their relationship and leaves in sadness. The opera concludes with the Paladins, Atis, Argie, Nérine, Manto, and the Chinese figures dancing and celebrating their triumph; but how do the Chinese palace and figures function as sources of revelation in the story? Thus far, we have seen how they were alluring to Anselme, but how were they revelatory to Argie? A closer look at their function in Manto's rescue plan reveals that they acted as sources of both wisdom – or insight – and morality, two of the characteristics that many European Enlightenment intellectuals had admired in the Chinese.

Manto's plan to rescue Argie and the Paladins involved seducing Anselme and exposing his avaricious and flawed character. Not only were the Chinese palace and figures capable of seducing Anselme, but their presence also made it possible for Argie to gain wisdom and insight into Anselme's disloyal nature and subsequently shame him into her freedom. More specifically, the Chinese palace and figures can be viewed as sources of morality in that they exposed Anselme's weakness and inability to be faithful; that is, he was easily swayed by their beauty and riches and proved to be incapable of being a suitable, moral, or chivalrous partner in the way that Atis, the Paladin, was capable. While beauty and wealth easily distracted Anselme from his love for Argie, Atis's true love for her is highlighted since he was willing to brave the most challenging circumstances to liberate her and Nérine. In conclusion, although they had no spoken parts, the mere presence of the opera's Chinese elements was significantly illuminating to Argie and emboldened her to confront and oppose her oppressor.

### ***Corruption: Deception***

While the Chinese palace and figures were sources of revelation to Argie, they could also arguably be viewed as possessing the negative characteristic of deception for which a few scholars accused the Chinese. To recall, the Chinese were criticized by intellectuals such as Montesquieu for portraying themselves as different from who they actually were. In this respect, they can be interpreted as sources of deception for Anselme. Indeed, Manto uses the palace and pagodas to deceive or trick him into professing his love for another woman; they were never his to possess despite Manto's assurances.

Although their presence is less significant within the larger context of *Les Paladins'* libretto, the opera's Chinese elements are an embodiment of prominent contemporary scholarly views concerning both revelation and corruption.

## Chapter Final Thoughts

As demonstrated in the four operas discussed in this chapter, Rameau's operatic portrayals of the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese exhibit characteristics that align with the doctrines of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*; that is, each of these Ancient Eastern characters represent contemporary scholarly ideas concerning revelation, higher knowledge, and, or, corruption that correspond to the stereotypical characteristics associated with each civilization. Additionally, like the Ancient Greeks and the Europeans – including Rameau – who turned to the writings of the Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Chinese as sources of revelatory knowledge for their own intellectual and spiritual enrichment, we clearly see these same Ancient Oriental cultures as sources of revelation to their Occidental counterparts in Rameau's operas.

## Final Thoughts

Overall, this dissertation showed that Rameau's *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique*, *Origine des sciences*, and his four operas that feature Ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Chinese characters all demonstrate influence from scholarship that viewed the Ancient Orient through a specific Enlightenment occultist lens – as sources of both revelation and corruption to the West that resembled the Hermetic doctrines of the *prisca*. Since the occult elements in Rameau's theoretical works and operas, especially as it concerns orientalism, have been severely neglected in musicological discourse, this dissertation introduces a new avenue for further research concerning Rameau's use of occultist themes as they relate to the theory-practice or practice-theory relationship between his operas and his theoretical writings.

For the few existing studies that have briefly discussed the orientalism in Rameau's theoretical works, scholars have relegated these Oriental depictions to the nonsensical musings of an aging composer, grasping for ways to convince his targeted scholarly audience of the *corps sonore*'s extreme significance; however, this dissertation provides a fresh perspective and understanding of why Rameau may have chosen to portray these Ancient Oriental cultures in the way that he did. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, it appears that the Ancient Oriental cultures that Rameau incorporated into his theories were not arbitrarily chosen and were deliberately selected to reflect the new, occultist approach to his writing that is evident in the *Nouvelles réflexions/Code de musique pratique* and *Origine des sciences*. By selecting these Ancient Eastern civilizations that were recognized by occult scholars as bearers and corruptors of the *prisca sapientia* and *prisca theologia*, Rameau was likely emphasizing that his own theory of the *corps sonore* was synonymous with this exclusive body of sacred knowledge. Essentially, he

was adopting the methods of occult philosophers and scientists who believed that the Ancient Orient was a wellspring of divinely inspired knowledge and wisdom.

### **Avenues for Further Research**

Apart from orientalism, this dissertation encourages further investigation into other possible aspects of Hermeticism that may be concealed within Rameau's writings, libretti, and even within the fabric of his music. Indeed, other than my dissertation, I have not encountered another work of scholarship that has considered Hermeticism to be a philosophical tradition that contributed to the formation of Rameau's theories or his compositions. Thus, approaching Rameau's works through a Hermetic lens potentially introduces many new hypotheses for musicologists and theorists to explore.

Additionally, as mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, Thomas Christensen has briefly noted that Rameau's writings of the 1760s resemble those of other occult traditions, such as Rosicrucianism. Yet, there has not yet been a study dedicated to exploring exactly how these other occult traditions manifest in his writings nor his music. It is my hope that my dissertation's findings will encourage scholars to delve deeper into examining how various ideologies from the Occult Enlightenment influenced the structure and themes in Rameau's treatises, and whether aspects from these ideologies can also be detected within the structures of his compositions.

Although research regarding musical performance was not relevant to my dissertation, this study may also inspire new interpretations and productions of the four Ancient Oriental operas at the heart of my work. With a new perspective centred on the operas' Eastern characters as sources of revelation and corruption, they are given philosophical depth in libretti that have often been dismissed by musicologists as frivolous. Like *Les Indes galantes* which has often been

performed with an emphasis on its Enlightenment themes, perhaps, too *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour, ou Les Dieux d'Égypte; La Naissance d'Osiris, ou La Fête Pamilie; Acanthe et Céphise, ou La Sympathie; and Les Paladins* can be resurrected on the modern operatic stage as windows into Rameau's engagement with Occult Enlightenment philosophy and his alternative identity as an occult philosopher rather than an aspiring *philosophe*.

While we cannot know with certainty all of the sources that Rameau consulted while formulating his hypotheses of the Ancient Orient and its relationship to the *corps sonore*, what this dissertation has shown is that he was exposed to these ideas long before their presence in his theoretical writings since we can see these exact same cultures associated with the theme of revelation in his four operatic works. Because these four operas exhibit influence from the doctrine of the *prisci* and their relationship to the Ancient Orient, it is possible that these ideas had already been presented in Rameau's operas via his librettists and influenced his perspective on Ancient Eastern people prior to the composition of his later treatises. Essentially, what first transpired on the stage may have inspired what later appeared on the page.

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