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"Crowned, and Discrowned and Decapitated": Delacroix's *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* and its Critics

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Abstract:

Delacroix's *Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* (1826) was the subject of reviews by the painter's political allies Auguste Jal and Ludovic Vitet, which bordered on the openly hostile; Delacroix had conjured up a vision of Charles X's recent pompous, theatrical *Sacre* in this depiction of an equally theatrical Medieval execution ritual, known from Byron's tragedy *Marino Faliero*. Delacroix's irreverent, menacing blend, realized with the help of excessive theatre and color effect, was seen by both critics to undermine the elevating character of history painting, which they defended even while sharing Delacroix's anti-royalist feelings.

"Crowned, and Discrowned and Decapitated": Delacroix's *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* and its Critics

by Marijke Jonker

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Introduction

One of the most enigmatic of Eugène Delacroix's early works is *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* (fig. 1). It was the subject of an ambiguous review by Ludovic Vitet in *Le Globe* on the occasion of its first presentation to the public at the *Exposition en bénéfice des Grecs* of 1826. Because Vitet had written that Delacroix excelled as a historian but flouted the most basic laws of history painting, the review did much to damage Delacroix's reputation as a serious, innovative artist. When the painting was exhibited for the second time, at the politically charged Salon of 1827, it was reviewed by Auguste (or Augustin) Jal, whose review was even more ambiguous than Vitet's.^[1]

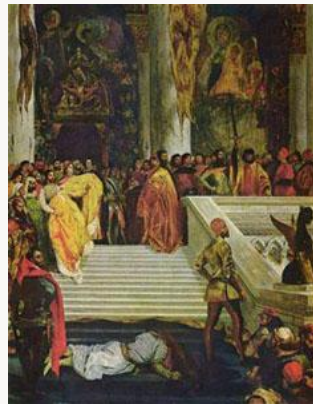


Fig. 1, Eugène Delacroix, *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, 1826. Oil on canvas. Wallace Collection, London. [\[larger image\]](#)

Virtually every discussion of the downturn of Delacroix's career after the Salon of 1827 has focused on the scandal caused by his *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 2). This disturbingly violent and erotic history painting, based on a tragedy by the notorious Romantic rebel Lord Byron, is usually understood as a damning comment on absolute rule. Apart from the painting's subject, which critics believed to have been chosen precisely for its potential to shock its viewers, Delacroix's sketchy, colorist manner and the painting's chaotic composition, which seemed to defy every artistic rule, were vehemently attacked.^[2] *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* can also be related to a violent, shocking scene from a tragedy by Byron (*Marino Faliero*, of 1821). What part, if any, did this painting play in Delacroix's falling out of favor? To answer that question it is necessary to carefully analyze the painting and its contemporary reception for the clues they provide to the significance that the painting may have held for Delacroix's contemporaries. Just like *The Death of Sardanapalus*, *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* may have been a politically subversive painting that also flouted history painting's traditional

requirements of decorum and edification, held dear even by politically liberal critics like Vitet and Jal.^[3]



Fig. 2, Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
[\[larger image\]](#)

The most noteworthy aspect of the reviews by Vitet and Jal is that neither author engaged with *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* as an interpretation of Byron's play. Instead, they related their descriptions and reviews of the painting to Delacroix's succinct and matter-of-fact description of the painting and its historical subject in the *livret* of the *Exposition en bénéfice des Grecs*.^[4] Relating the painting not to Byron's tragedy but to history enabled Jal and, to a lesser extent, Vitet, to present other frames of reference for *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* than Byron's tragedy. Indeed, Jal provocatively compared Delacroix's grim execution scene with two paintings by Baron Gérard of events in the history of the restored Bourbon dynasty. These paintings, the most important of which was the as yet unfinished official painting of the recent coronation (sacre) of Charles X, depicted scenes that emphasized the legitimacy of the Bourbon dynasty.

Jal's comparison of Delacroix's work with Bourbon propaganda painting instead of with Byron's tragedy gives rise to numerous questions. Did the artist intend to make a visual connection between the ritual execution of Faliero and the recent coronation ritual of Charles X, as Jal suggests, or was the painting, like *The Death of Sardanapalus*, inspired by one of Byron's tragedies? Even if we assume the latter, we have to come to grips with Delacroix's choice of the final bloody suppression of Faliero's rebellion as a subject, instead of a scene that clarifies the motives of this head of state for rebelling against his own government. If, on the other hand, the painting is to be understood, as Jal and Vitet assumed, only in relation to Delacroix's own description, will this allow us to conclude that Delacroix's painting of the execution of a Venetian ruler has to be understood as a cynical and lugubrious comment on the inauguration of a French monarch who was unloved and unwanted by the liberal opposition?

In order to answer the questions raised by *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* and its reviews, I will begin by discussing the history of Marino Faliero as it is told in the works of the Venetian chronicler Marin Sanuto. I shall then analyze the opinions of Faliero's rebellion (and of Venetian culture in general) held by French liberal historians during the Restoration, and

contrast them with Byron's interpretation of the doge's acts. Moving to Delacroix's *Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, I'll relate it first to Byron's interpretation of the subject and then to the account of Marin Sanuto, which Byron attached to the end of his play. After discussing the recent literature on *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, emphasizing features of the painting noted by other scholars that may help to interpret the painting and its reviews, I will analyze the reviews by Vitet and Jal. In conclusion I will argue that Delacroix's painting, though perhaps inspired by the *mise-en-scène* of the final act of Byron's tragedy, during which Faliero is sentenced to death and executed, was intended as a rendition of a medieval chronicler's account of Faliero's ritualized death, informed (as Jal suggested in his review) by the recent *sacre* of Charles X.

The History of Marino Faliero and its Interpretation by Historians

The Venetian Doge Marino Faliero was executed for treason in 1355. For this reason, he is the only doge not portrayed in the gallery of ducal portraits, which commemorates all doges, in the Ducal Palace. His place in the succession of portraits is covered with a painted black veil, bearing the text *Hic est locus Marini Falieri decapitati pro criminibus* (*This is the place of Marino Faliero, who was decapitated for his crimes*). His story is known to us through the writings of Venetian historians such as Andrea Navagero,^[5] Lorenzo de Monacis,^[6] and Vettor Sandi,^[7] and through Petrarch's contemporary account.^[8] The most detailed account is that given by the chronicler Marin Sanuto, in *Le vite dei dogi*, (1474–94),^[9] who described him as a criminal. The outline of Faliero's history was retold by other writers—in France, for instance, by Abbé Laugier,^[10] Count Pierre Daru,^[11] and Léonard Simonde de Sismondi.^[12] Faliero, at nearly eighty, had been elected to the office of doge, or chief magistrate of Venice—a position without any real power usually held by venerable men.^[13] When in 1355 a Venetian nobleman scrawled on the ducal throne that Faliero's young wife was maintained by her elderly husband but enjoyed by others, he was, in Faliero's view, punished too lightly by a tribunal of fellow nobles. Faliero's protest went unheeded, and he swore to avenge himself. Sismondi in particular ascribes Faliero's wish for revenge to an old man's excessive, senile jealousy of his wife,^[14] and not to his wish to enlarge his power, the motive that according to Sanuto was foremost in his mind.^[15] Faliero conspired with Venetian commoners and with the city of Genoa, then at war with Venice, to overthrow the noble oligarchy that ruled the Republic and slaughter the Venetian nobility. The plot was leaked, and Faliero was arrested, tried, and finally beheaded on the grand staircase of the Ducal Palace, where he had also been inaugurated. After the custom of the Venetian nobility, Faliero's trial and execution took place behind the closed doors of the Ducal Palace, with the common people being allowed into the palace only to see the corpse after the execution.^[16]

Liberals and Bonapartists preferred to judge the Venetian nobility as corrupt, tyrannical, and secretive, because this provided justification for Napoleon's occupation of Venice in 1797, which had put an end to the Venetian Republic. *Histoire de la République de Venise* (1819–22), by Stendhal's cousin, Count Pierre Daru, was the most important source for liberal opinion of the Venetian nobility. Precisely because personal feelings and beginning senility drove Faliero to undermine the Venetian Republic when it was already threatened from outside, Daru could use his conspiracy as a perfect example of the corruption and inequality of Venetian society, a society in which notions of citizenship and public spirit did not exist.^[17] His view was that Faliero's reasons for conspiring against the nobility were totally egocentric. According to Daru even conspirators were usually inspired by a common interest, or a shared sense of injustice, while Faliero simply went to people who were previously totally unknown to him to

exterminate the whole of the Venetian nobility, on the first pretext that chance offered.[18] Stendhal himself also gave a succinct, but lurid and damning portrait of medieval Venetian society in his influential book *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817),[19] which Delacroix had certainly read.[20] Stendhal described Venice as a state ruled by a corrupt tyranny that stood in the way of the flourishing of public and religious art seen in more democratic states, such as Florence.[21] He dismissed even the mosaics made by Byzantine artists in Saint Mark's Basilica as execrable works, made by artists who "served as models to the Italian artisans who made Madonnas for the pious, who made them all according to the same model, and who represented nature only to disfigure it." [22] Ordinary Venetians, although feared by the ruling nobility, remained passive: "from time to time the people fearfully watched some nobleman's head fall, but never did they take it into their heads to conspire for their liberty." [23]

Byron's Interpretation

Byron's play *Marino Faliero*, originally written as a reading drama, was performed on stage both in London and Paris shortly after its publication in 1821. Although the plot follows the outline of events given above, Byron explained, in the preface, that he had chosen to depict Faliero as a noble man, unfortunately of an ungovernable temper, who was not "actuated by jealousy of his wife; but rather by respect for her, and for his own honor, warranted by his past services and present dignity." [24] In Byron's work, Faliero feels that the injustices suffered by him at the hands of the nobles equal those suffered by the common people, whose fate causes him growing concern. Byron's choice of Faliero as his subject may thus be interpreted as his reaction to the post-Waterloo political climate in Europe, characterized by political oppression, corruption, state control of private lives, and restrictions on freedom of action. This political climate drove Byron, the rebellious aristocrat who understood that he had nothing to gain by revolution, almost to despair. [25] Byron's frustrations are reflected in Faliero's mixed feelings of defiance and guilt over his treason to the state and his own class, together with his awareness of having sunk so low that he now keeps the company of people whom he pities and despises at the same time. After having given the signal for the rebellion in Act 4, Scene 2 he exclaims:

Oh man! What are ye, and our best designs,

That we must work by crime to punish crime? [26]

Byron's interpretation of the doge as a noble man is undercut by Marin Sanuto's account of the history of Marino Faliero, which defends the stance of the Venetian government in the matter. Sanuto's text, printed both in Italian and in an English translation in the appendix of Byron's *Marino Faliero*, describes the doge as an evil, physically violent man, who was not above committing the sacrilegious act of striking a bishop for being late with the Host. In Sanuto's view, Heaven lured Faliero into the conspiracy so that, by committing this crime against the Venetian state, he would surely lose his life on the scaffold. In Sanuto's words: "Heaven allowed Marino Faliero to go out of his senses in order that he might bring himself to an evil death." [27] Byron may have added this "official statement" about Faliero's rebellion as an example of a repressive government's hypocritical invocation of the will of Heaven, but he may also have had another reason for including Sanuto's chronicle. Sanuto's description proves that the sequence of events that led from Faliero's rage over the insult to his wife and himself to his decapitation for treason, took place in the course of only a few days, during which he hardly left the Ducal Palace. This enabled Byron to choose the form of a French

classical tragedy—demanding unity of time, place, and action, as well as decorum and a limited number of parts in order to please and edify the public—for a subject of rebellion and bloody suppression that was better suited for Romantic drama. Confining the history of Faliero's rebellion within the restraints of classical tragedy, although defended by Byron in his preface to the tragedy as an attempt to overcome the lack of classical unity that was "the reproach of the English theatrical compositions,"^[28] may perhaps be better understood as a wry comment on the way in which conservative governments encroached on individual, intellectual, and artistic freedom.^[29]

Byron's imagination was fired not only by the doge's moral dilemma, but also by the ritual character of the doge's condemnation to death and eternal dishonor, "the black veil which is painted over the place of Marino Faliero amongst the Doges, and the Giant's Staircase where he was crowned, and discrowned, and decapitated."^[30] His tragedy ends with two grand scenes centering on the doge's execution, in which Byron radically abandoned the law of classical tragedy that forbids horrific and shocking scenes to be shown on stage and only allows their representation in the form of a *récit* (narrative).^[31] In these last two scenes, in which rebellion is punished, Byron's allegiance to classical tragedy ends as he finally expresses artistic freedom and enters the domain of Romantic drama, which defies the classical unities by allowing sudden changes of focus, and also by showing frightening events as well as mass scenes.

The sheer visual attraction of Romantic drama caused it to be criticized as a form of theater devoid of seriousness and formal balance. In contrast to the elitism of classical tragedy, Romantic drama was seen as a response to an uneducated theater public's wish to see spectacle and melodramatic action.^[32] In Romantic dramas, actors, dressed in lavish, colorful historical costume, moved in impressive, "historically correct" stage sets, whose part in the performance was just as essential as those played by the actors. Stage props with huge dramatic possibilities, such as impressive staircases, were a stock element of Romantic drama. Staircases enabled authors to make the action take place on different levels, which sometimes symbolized changes in a person's fate, or different psychological states, just as did the choice of bright or dark colors in sets and costumes.^[33] In *Marino Faliero*, Byron made ample use of the dramatic possibilities of level differences and a magnificent staircase.

In the first of the two execution scenes Byron shows the preparations for the execution inside the Ducal Palace, at the top of the Giant's Staircase. After having ended his final speech the doge turns away from the Council of Ten,^[34] to whom he has just prophesied the downfall of Venice, and addresses the executioner with the words:

Slave, do thine office.
Strike as I struck the foe! Strike as I would
Have struck those tyrants! Strike deep as my curse!
Strike –and but once!

The doge then throws himself on his knees, and as the executioner raises his sword the scene closes. In the last scene we see the Venetian people in front of the closed and barred doors of the Ducal Palace. However, those nearest to the doors can catch a glimpse of the execution inside, although they can't hear the doge's speech. One commoner reports on the execution itself:

Now-now-he kneels-and now they form a circle
Round him, and all his hidden—but I see
The lifted sword in air—Ah! hark! It falls!

The commoners mourn the loss of the doge, whom they held to be their liberator and a friend of the common man. They regret that they did not know what would happen before they were summoned to the palace, or else they would have brought weapons and forced the doors. At the very end of the tragedy, one of the Council of Ten appears on the balcony of the Palace and holds up the execution sword to the people far below him, exclaiming:

Justice hath dealt upon the mighty traitor!

After this the doors are opened, and the people rush in toward the Giant's Staircase to see the corpse. The foremost exclaims:

The gory head rolls down the Giant's steps! (Curtain).

Delacroix's Painting, its Composition, and its Use of the Venetian State's Symbolism

In addition to the impressive execution scenes, Byron's *Marino Faliero* contains other scenes that could have inspired a painter to illustrate the doge's personal tragedy. These included, for instance, the heroic, prophetic final speech in which the doge foretells the decline of corrupt Venice and its final downfall at the hands of Napoleon, the *Dogaressa's* moving plea for her beloved husband's life, and the moment when the doge lays off his ducal robe and cap to be executed in the same spot in which he was inaugurated. However, Delacroix settled on the very end of Faliero's history, the moment *after* the execution, when the Venetian commoners were allowed into the palace to see the corpse of the executed doge.

Delacroix's painting shows the interior of the Ducal Palace as the painter imagined it, with its marble columns, balustrades, and, at the center of the composition, the white staircase on which the doge was executed. On the landing at the bottom of the staircase lies the corpse of Faliero, clad in a white undergarment. The head is covered by a dark cloth, a reference, no doubt, to the dark veil that was to cover Faliero's place in the row of doge portraits later on. The executioner stands to the right of the corpse, gazing into the distance; an unidentified man stands to the left. Below the landing we see the foremost of the group of Venetian commoners who have been allowed into the palace, looking up at the corpse with expressions of horror on their faces, while the man standing to the left of the corpse scrutinizes them. In the loggia at the top of the impressive staircase stand the magnificently clad Council of Ten and other members of the Venetian oligarchy, two of them holding the ducal mantle and cap, while the member of the Council of Ten who holds up the execution sword to the people stands to their right, looking down at the people who are still flooding into the palace but who are not depicted. He points the sword to the figure of Christ in a wall-painting above him, as if to point to the will of Christ as justification for the execution. The Venetian nobles form a group in which they are just as anonymous as the people depicted at the bottom of the stairs. They seem to hide behind each other and their membership in the Council of Ten or one of Venice's other governing bodies, seeming unconcerned while trying to detect the effect of the execution on the ordinary Venetians.

The background against which the nobles are depicted is just as magnificent as their costumes. The walls of the loggia are covered with flags, wall-paintings of religious subjects, and coats-of-arms, doubtlessly of noble Venetian families. The subjects of the religious decorations, though products of Delacroix's imagination, suggest that he had some general knowledge of Venetian history and culture as they relate to the Virgin and Saint Mark, both significant figures in the city's legendary history.^[35] During their inauguration, doges swore with their hand on the Gospel to protect the relics of Saint Mark, which were crucial to the city's sense of importance.^[36]

Delacroix and Byron

Just as Byron defied the laws of classical tragedy in the two execution scenes at the end of *Marino Faliero*, Delacroix defied the laws of history painting in *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*. Its composition is not centered on a limited number of figures in a coherent action, as was required by classical art theory.^[37] Faliero's life has already ended; the emotional scenes in the tragedy that could have furnished the material for a far more traditional history painting are in the past. Instead of a confrontation between identifiable persons, Delacroix chose to depict the psychological confrontation between the Venetian nobility and the Venetian people, separated by the grand white staircase that takes center stage, and there is no discernible human protagonist. Both the Venetian nobles and the Venetian commoners form tightly knit groups, while the member of the Council of Ten who holds up the executioner's sword in the background hardly stands out from the group to which he belongs. The only two figures who stand alone are the executioner and the unidentified man who flank the corpse, but other than having been, in Faliero's words, the "slave" of the Council of Ten, the executioner has played no part in the tragedy.

The Execution of Marino Faliero can be seen as an attempt to conjure up the last scene of Byron's *Marino Faliero*, example *par excellence* of the grand dramatic scenes that formed one of the main attractions of new Romantic drama. Byron's Romantic *mise-en-scène* is reflected not only in the centering of the painting's composition around the staircase but also in the painting's bright, contrasting, and sometimes garish colors. Indeed, Delacroix's unusual depiction of the moment after the execution, in which nobles and commoners both gaze at the corpse of the traitor who has been punished by the law, can be understood as an emulation of Byron's own display of artistic, intellectual and political freedom in a scene depicting repression and punishment.

But we must also consider whether appreciation of the reason for Byron's interpretation of the history of Faliero, and not just fascination with the Romantic drama of the closing scenes, may have inspired Delacroix's painting. Although Delacroix never expressed any opinion on the personality and dilemma of Faliero, as early as 1819 he admired Byron and was aware that one of the poet's main themes was that of genius (embodied by alter egos such as Tasso) crushed by power.^[38] In writings of a much later date, Delacroix betrayed sympathy for Byron's reaction to the humiliations that he suffered through the law and the judgment of public opinion, which drove this "irritable and nervous personality"^[39] to "defy the universe, and to pose as disgraced, rejected, the Cain of modern times."^[40] Perhaps even during the Restoration, Delacroix's recognition of the doge as one of Byron's alter egos may have partly inspired Delacroix's choice of Faliero's execution for a painting in which he demonstrated his craving for artistic freedom, just as Byron had done in his two magnificent Romantic scenes. Again,

just like Byron, Delacroix may have regarded the doge as a man driven to great deeds and unforgivable crimes by his awareness of his own impotence and by social, political, and intellectual repression.

Delacroix's Painting, its Description, and Sanuto's Chronicle

Although we may sense a craving for artistic and political freedom and sympathy for kindred souls behind the choice of Faliero as a subject, this sympathy is largely denied by Delacroix's short and matter-of-fact *livret* description of the depicted moment:

The Doge of Venice, Marino Faliero, having at more than 80 years of age conspired against the republic, had been condemned to death by the Senate. Conducted to the stone staircase where the doges took their oath upon entering office he was beheaded, after being stripped of his doge's bonnet and ducal mantle. A member of the Council of Ten took the sword that had served for the execution and said, holding it on high: *Justice has punished the traitor*. Immediately following the death of the Doge, the doors had been opened and the people had rushed in to contemplate the corpse of the unfortunate Marino Faliero (see the tragedy by Lord Byron).^[41]

Although Delacroix refers the reader to Byron's tragedy for additional information, the description itself appears to be based not on Byron's dramatization, but on Sanuto's official rendition of the execution,^[42] to be found in the tragedy's appendix, which, as we have seen, had to be understood as a criminal's punishment, ordained by Heaven.

On Thursday, the sixteenth of April, judgment was also given in the aforesaid Council of Ten, that My Lord Marino Faliero, the Duke should have his head cut off, and that the execution should be done on the landing place of the stone staircase where the Dukes take their oath when they first enter the palace. On the following day, the seventeenth of April, the doors of the palace being shut, the Duke had his head cut off, about the hour of noon. And the cap of estate was taken from the Duke's head before he came down stairs. When the execution was over, it is said that one of the Council of Ten went to the columns of the palace over against the place of St Mark, and that he showed the bloody sword unto the people, crying with a loud voice — '*The terrible doom hath fallen upon the traitor!*' [*E stata fatta la gran giustizia del Traditore*]—and the doors were opened, and the people all rushed in to see the corpse of the Duke, who had been beheaded.^[43]

Delacroix not only based his description on that of Sanuto, but, as was noted by Lee Johnson, he also decided to base the composition of the painting itself partly on Sanuto, instead of on Byron. This is proved by the existence of preliminary sketches which follow Byron's rendition of the story, in which Faliero's corpse is placed at the top of the stairs, among his peers.^[44] In the finished painting, however, the corpse lies at the bottom of the grand white staircase, at eye level with the people, separated by the grand staircase from the nobility which has cast Faliero out. Johnson argued that Delacroix may have made his choice because it underlines the connection between the doge and the people with whom he had conspired. But even in Byron's view the doge never really bonded with the people. On the contrary, he felt shame over his leadership of a rebellion which he knew to be a crime.

Delacroix may have decided to base both his description and a telling detail of the composition on Sanuto's chronicle for quite another reason. Sanuto's text underlines both the

ritual character of the execution that so fascinated Byron and the anonymity of the event. This ritual and anonymity are reflected both in Delacroix's description and in the painting itself, which shows rows of inscrutable figures. Except for the doge, none of the people involved in the conspiracy and its suppression are mentioned by name in the fragment of Sanuto's account on which Delacroix based his description. Both Sanuto and Delacroix stress the fact that the execution took place in the same place as the doge's inauguration, that the cap and robe of estate were removed before the execution, and that the execution sword was shown to the people, with words that defended the justice of the execution. Perhaps Delacroix referred his public to Byron's tragedy to enable it to understand the events that led up to the execution scene and Faliero's motives for his crime. Delacroix's description did not mention these motives, nor did Delacroix side with the doge and the Venetian people. Only the word "unfortunate," which he used to describe Faliero, may betray some sympathy, but it may also point to Faliero's being struck by the hand of fate.

It appears that Delacroix, whatever his underlying feelings about Byron and Faliero may have been, chose to describe and depict an official, spectacular, theatrical ritual, devised by the Venetian oligarchy to instill the people with respect for its authority, based on the will of Heaven. For this reason, the painting and its description also bring to mind Stendhal's description of medieval Venetian society in *Histoire de la Peinture en Italie*. The nobles have concluded their business behind closed doors, while the people are called in as witnesses after the fact. The interior of the Ducal Palace as imagined by Delacroix shows not only the Venetians' pompous taste, but also the primitive character of their religious art so despised by Stendhal.

Modern Interpretations

Before discussing the implications of Delacroix's choice to depict the confrontation of anonymous members of opposing social classes at the end of an impressive and bloody state ritual, instead of a dramatic scene that illustrates Faliero's moral dilemma, it is necessary to summarize the most important recent interpretations of *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*.

The absence of protagonists and drama has posed interpretational difficulties for the few art historians who have seriously engaged with this work. Among them, only Elisabeth Fraser considers *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* to be an illustration of the fate of those who conspire against democratic rule, embodied in the Republic and Senate that are mentioned in Delacroix's description.^[45] However, this interpretation is discredited by the fact that influential liberal and Bonapartist historians, such as Sismondi, Daru, and Stendhal despised Venice's oligarchic system of rule. Duncan Macmillan believes Faliero to be a Christ-like hero, executed as a traitor by those whose innate right to rule he has challenged.^[46] Frank Trapp interprets the painting as a cryptic reference to the unpopularity of Bourbon rule and to the power of state and class that triumphs over individual ambition.^[47] So, Trapp seems to consider Delacroix's intent to have been like Byron's, which was to give vent to his sense of intellectual and political oppression after the Battle of Waterloo. As we have seen, Johnson points to Delacroix's decision to move the body of the executed doge from the top of the staircase to a lower level so as to be able to underline the connection between the doge and the plebeians with whom he conspired.^[48] In Johnson's view, Delacroix agreed completely with Byron's rendition of the story and used some details of Sanuto's chronicle not because he was

interested in Sanuto's rendition of the events in itself, but only to make the bond between doge and people tangible. Albert Boime describes Faliero's execution, as it was painted by Delacroix, as a gory scene that draws a thrill-seeking Venetian populace, and that invites nothing but a morbid gaze upon the ignominious fate of the Venetian ruler. According to him, Byron's tragedy does not answer the question of whether Faliero or the government tried to gain unlimited power. Boime seems to regard both painting and play as works that do not invite sympathy with Faliero, or nobility, or commoners.[\[49\]](#)

In my view, the two most interesting recent interpretations of the painting are those by Beth Wright and Robert Floetemeyer. Central to their interpretations, as it was to those previously mentioned, is the originality and psychological effect of the white staircase which forms the focus of the composition, and which separates nobles from ordinary Venetians. Wright, basing her analysis on the contemporary reviews by Vitet and Jal, believes Delacroix's painting to have been inspired by Byron's depiction of Faliero's tragic history. She notes that Delacroix, contrary to the classical rules for history painting, concentrated neither on protagonists nor on drama. Instead, he depicted the class arrogance of those in power in medieval Venice by giving prominence to the impressive white staircase separating the nobles from the resentful plebeians far below them, and by allowing the setting in which the execution took place, with its colorful religious decorations, flags, and coats of arms, to compete for the viewer's attention with the human beings in that setting. Wright points to the view of liberal historians, such as Augustin Thierry, who believed that it was the historians' task to present their readers with "the immediate representation of that past which has produced us, we ourselves." In Wright's interpretation of the painting, Delacroix dismissed protagonists and psychological drama in order to paint an eye-witness account, enabling him to emulate historians' ability to let their readers share in the sufferings of people from near and distant history, so that they may become aware of belonging to that same historical continuum of suffering and oppression. As Wright sees it, both the painting's attractions and its flaws were judged by contemporary critics to be the inevitable results of the painter's attempt to carry out this historian's task. Had Delacroix followed classical rules, Wright felt, the painting's psychological drama would have interested us, but it would also have become the analysis and assessment of a closed event, without any relationship to the political situation of Delacroix's own time.[\[50\]](#)

Besides elaborating on the immediate psychological effect of the white staircase that separates nobility and people, Robert Floetemeyer, who does not discuss the relationship between painting and tragedy, also points to the sumptuous religious decoration in the background of the scene and to the painting's color scheme, in which gold is the most important. According to him, the painting is an illustration of Delacroix's ultimately conservative ideas on society and authority. The use of gold in the ducal mantle, the sumptuous robes of the dignitaries, the executioner's costume and, most tellingly, the religious decorations, suggests that the power of the unflinching servants of law and state at the top of the stairs is of divine origin. As a punishment for overthrowing the divinely ordered social hierarchy the doge is stripped of his gold mantle, and has literally fallen to a lower level, where gold is no longer the most important color, and where, now dressed in simple white, he is separated by the white staircase from his own class of loyal servants of state and religion.[\[51\]](#) So, Floetemeyer believes *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* to be an image that can be understood independently from Byron's tragedy, an image whose meaning is largely conveyed through Delacroix's well-thought-out use of color. It is interesting to note that Floetemeyer's interpretation of the painting centers on its colors and the staircase in a way that allows us to compare their use by

Delacroix to the symbolic meaning that they sometimes conveyed in Romantic theater, as clear signs of a person's status—or change of status.

Thus, Wright believes that both Byron and Delacroix depicted Faliero as a champion of the oppressed. She concludes that the painting is meant as an eye-witness account that invites its viewers to identify with people of the past who suffered social injustice, in order to become aware of the social injustices of their own time. In contrast, Floetemeyer, following Sanuto's account, sees an unconventional, hierarchically ordered composition, which symbolizes the unchangeable social order based on the will of God. Wright's interpretation seems more convincing because it is based on contemporary *Salon* reviews. Floetemeyer's assessment of Delacroix as a believer in the unchangeable social order in 1826 is based on more or less conservative opinions Delacroix had voiced in his writings during several periods, none of which bear any direct relation to France's political situation during the Restoration, or to the choice of Faliero as a subject.^[52] My own interpretation owes much to Wright's and Floetemeyer's ideas, but it is to an even greater degree based on some passages in Vitet's and Jal's reviews which offer the possibility of a more specific reading of Delacroix's painting.

Vitet's Review

The two contemporary reviewers who paid most attention to *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* were Ludovic Vitet and Augustin Jal. Born in 1802, Vitet came from a wealthy middle-class family and could afford to devote his life to writing about historical and art-historical subjects.^[53] As a critic for *Le Globe*, and in line with that journal's mission to bring some order to the anarchy caused by Romantic writers' and artists' dismissal of classical artistic principles, Vitet tried to restrain the individualism of young writers with principles that resembled those of French Classicism, as defended by the *Académie Française* and the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, but which he believed to be based on reason and not on sterile, outdated rules. ^[54]

Vitet's best-known work consists of a series of three reading plays, for which he devised the name *Scènes Historiques*: *Les Barricades* (1826), *Les Etats de Blois* (1827), and *La Mort de Henri III* (1829), which were based on one of the bloodiest periods in French history—the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion, a combination of dynastic and religious strife between Catholics and Protestants. Vitet's subject was one of these wars' great crises, which culminated in the murder of the Catholic King Henri III in 1589 and his succession by the Protestant leader Henri IV. Vitet's liberal views of history are clear from his analysis of the Parisian populace's support of the *Ligue*, (the association of Roman Catholics opposed to Henri III, whom they believed to be too friendly toward the Protestants). Vitet believed the *Ligue* to have been the first phase in the French people's struggle for independence, which was still going on during the Restoration. According to the preface of *Les Barricades*, Vitet's intention was not to write a historical drama, in other words a work of artistic value to be performed on stage, but to find a new way of writing history, focused on bringing it to life, instead of presenting it as a cold *récit*. This he achieved by showing historical events through the eye-witness account of a stroller through Paris in 1588. He apologized in advance for the fact "that the result of this could be no more than a series of portraits, or, to speak like painters do, *studies*, or *thumbnail sketches*, that don't have the right to aspire to another merit than that of resemblance," and he expressed his apprehension that these sketches might be unable to excite the same emotional response as a historical drama or a tragedy.^[55] True to the principles defended by *Le Globe* Vitet belittled his own achievement because a real poet or artist should never be satisfied with creating an eye-

witness account, but should always remain true to art's mission to "recreate it [history] in such a way that it delights and moves more vividly."[\[56\]](#)

Vitet's review of Delacroix's *Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* in *Le Globe*,[\[57\]](#) must be seen in the context of his introduction to his work *Les Barricades*. Vitet saw the painting shortly after he had completed the first volume of his *Scènes Historiques*, at a time when the problems it addressed were still freshly on his mind. Vitet alluded to his own recent literary work by calling the painting's subject a grand *scène historique* and describing the painting in words based directly, and only, on Delacroix's own *livret* description, and not on Byron's tragedy. Significantly, in his review he did not even attempt to interpret the painting's subject, or to judge the reasons for the conspiracy or the personal choices made by Faliero. I must assume that he either did not know Byron's tragedy, to which Delacroix referred his readers, or he deliberately refused to "read" a meaning in the painting that was not given in Delacroix's description. He may have emphasized in this way that a factual rendition of an event was not able to convey its meaning to the same extent as a recreation of the event with the means available to artists. In the review, the painting comes out indeed as no more than a realistic depiction of a historical scene, chosen in the first place not for the emotional interest it may provide to viewers during the Restoration, but for its lugubrious, theatrical effect. By repeatedly using terms such as *scène historique* and *effet théâtral*, serving to compare the painting with Romantic theater, and by once actually referring to the debacle on April 8, 1826, of Victor d'Arlincourt's *Le Siège de Paris*, a Romantic drama set in the ninth century about an attack on Paris by the Vikings,[\[58\]](#) Vitet managed to convey his opinion that the painting resembled the shallow spectacle of Romantic theater.

Vitet believed that Delacroix had chosen this medieval, Venetian execution scene not only for its theatrical effect, but also because it enabled him to show off his audacity, and his contempt for the classical rules of composition, technical correctness and the need to please the eye. According to Vitet, this resulted in sketchiness, ugly, badly drawn human figures, lack of idealization, dissonant colors, and the grand staircase in the center of the composition. Although Vitet deplored most of these, the daring prominence of the staircase and the lack of contrasting, edifying scenes (*épisodes*) in the painting also gave Vitet a chance to lash out at the classical principles of composition rigidly defended by the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. He dismissed threadbare solutions "that would be judged by history as highly ridiculous," such as contrasting *épisodes* showing wives and mothers, or fathers, pointing out to their sons the moral lesson to be learned from the execution of a traitor to his country. Nonetheless, a greater expression of passions, in Vitet's opinion, would have helped the viewer to understand what the figures in the painting were thinking. Instead of clarifying *épisodes*, he only saw the nobles play-acting before the ordinary people at the bottom of the staircase, now that the curtain had gone up after the execution, displaying their power and majesty but hiding their emotions.

By using the term *scène historique* to describe the painting, the critic also defined its problematic nature. According to Vitet, Delacroix had indeed, as Wright assumed, taken up the historian's mantle, having "written a page of history with his brush,"[\[59\]](#) and for this reason the painting was lacking protagonists, emotional interest, unity, and action. Or in other words: Delacroix had succeeded as a historian, but not as a history painter. Although Vitet admired Delacroix's audacity and original choice of this "imposing and lugubrious" ("*imposante et*

lugubre") subject, it was also his opinion that the scene created huge problems for any painter wishing to depict it. Judged as a realistic historical portrait, ("portrait historique"), *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* was, according to Vitet, one of the most remarkable paintings to be seen in the exhibition, but one that attracted more critics than admirers. The critic believed that "one should either renounce such a subject, or conform rigorously to all that history demanded,"[60] but he wondered at the same time if Delacroix had not, to some extent, overdone his duties as a chronicler.

According to Vitet, the nobles' ugly Venetian faces—all looking nearly identical—their seemingly unconcerned air, their colorful, inelegant costumes, and the background cluttered with coats-of-arms, flags and enormous wall paintings, formed an ensemble that was incapable of drawing any emotional response from viewers, especially because the human figures were so badly and sketchily drawn: "How could he draw our interest with these rows of tailor's dummies, as immobile as the rows of saints that we see in old stained-glass church windows." [61] Indeed, wrote Vitet, this work could well earn Delacroix the reputation of a dauber ("faiseur de croûtes").

To sum up, in Vitet's opinion, this eye-witness account could never express more than the bare facts; even when judged by his and *Le Globe's* standards for a good history painting, and not by the Academy's sterile rules, it would never possess the same value as a serious work of art in which psychological drama and idealization of the human form could be used to bring out an historical events' moral essence, and please and move the viewer. Only a history painting created with these standards in mind could draw interest and sympathy from its viewers and enable them to grasp the significance of the depicted event for their own time. This contradicts Wright's conviction that psychological drama in a history painting, although it moved the viewer, only invited him to analyze the painting as a depiction of a closed event of the historical past. Instead of understanding Delacroix's break with even the most reasonable standards for history painting as an attempt to draw the viewer into the painting and make him feel part of a historical continuum, it was Vitet's opinion that the lugubrious subject itself, the composition, the theatrical display of Venetian pomp, the excessive coloristic effects, and the sketchiness, ugliness, and lack of individuality of the human figures all stood in the way of true involvement and understanding on the viewer's part.

Jal's Review

At the *Salon* of 1827, Delacroix exhibited *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* again, together with *The Death of Sardanapalus* and other new works such as *Christ in the Garden of Olives*. Auguste Jal, another liberal critic, reviewed the painting in his book-form *Salon* review: *Esquisses, croquis, pochades et tout ce qu'on voudra sur le Salon de 1827*. Jal had begun his career in the navy during the Napoleonic era. He was placed on inactive service shortly after Napoleon's downfall as punishment for "subversive activities" —he had turned against the Bourbons during the Hundred Days. Jal was now forced to look for income elsewhere. He worked as a teacher, trained for some time in the workshop of the painter Pierre Mongin, whose niece he married in 1822, and drifted into journalism. Leading journalists belonging to the liberal opposition (such as Jay, Jouy, and Etienne) saw a natural ally in this gifted young man, whose career had been broken by the Bourbon government, and welcomed him to periodicals such as *Le Miroir des spectacles*, *Le Mercure du XIXe siècle*, *Le Diable boiteux* and *Le Globe*. Jal's experience as an artist and his deep interest in cultural subjects inspired him to specialize in

art criticism. He published reviews of the Salons of the 1820s in magazines and in book-form. Only after the downfall of the Bourbons was Jal rehabilitated as a naval officer. During this later period of his career he was the official historian of the French navy.^[62]

Jal's review fits in with the politicized character of the Salon of 1827, caused by growing resentment over Bourbon rule.^[63] Referring to Vitet's review and his belief that Delacroix had tried to do the historian's work, Jal wrote that the painting was not even "a page of history" ("page d'histoire"), but a "painted chronicle" ("chronique peinte"), or "official minutes in oils" ("procès-verbal à l'huile"). So, far from regarding Delacroix's painting as an eye-witness account of the execution that enabled contemporary viewers to empathize with the social injustices of the past, as Wright assumed, Jal believed it to be simply a painted official chronicle. Here, as in Vitet's review, Byron's name is not mentioned and there is no speculation about Faliero's or his opponents' motives, but only the assessment of the painting as "the chilly *dénouement* of a drama whose movements are hidden from us."^[64] He also left no doubt about sharing Vitet's opinion on the ugliness of the figures in Delacroix's painting of a Venetian ceremony: "it is a population of the damned or villains of the lowest sort."^[65]

Jal praised Delacroix for his truthful rendition of the execution scene, a truthfulness that forced the artist to ignore the established rules for composing a picture. It was precisely the truthfulness of Delacroix's painting of a bloody Venetian ceremony that enabled Jal to relate the painting to Bourbon ceremonial and etiquette: "when M. Gérard composed his *Philippe V*, when he arranged the *Sacre de Charles X*, he had to comply with special conditions. *Tableaux d'étiquette* have to be made according to etiquette. There was also a master of ceremonies in Venice for the beheadings of doges."^[66] *Tableaux d'étiquette* was a term coined by Jal himself for official paintings of state occasions, occasions presided over by a master of ceremonies who ensured that everything was done according to established rules and ceremonial. The two works by Baron Gérard mentioned by Jal commemorated such important state occasions from the history of the hated Bourbon dynasty. Faliero's execution could also be seen as an important state occasion, because of its exceptional, solemn, and ritualized character. The masters of ceremonies in Faliero's case were the members of the Venetian government who ordered the execution and the way in which it was to be performed. Jal compares that to what would have resulted had Delacroix painted the execution scene from the Jaffier conspiracy (from Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, 1682): the executioner would not have been alone on the staircase, having been placed there in the chilly conclusion of a drama of which the action remains hidden to us; instead, the scene would have been a violent one.^[67] In Otway's bloody, emotional play about a Venetian conspiracy, Pierre, one of the conspirators, is sentenced to death while his fellow-conspirator, Jaffier, has managed to escape. In a last act of friendship and remorse, Jaffier goes to the scaffold and stabs Pierre to death to save him from being broken on the wheel. He then stabs himself.

The first of Gérard's two paintings that Jal mentions, *Philippe de France, duc d'Anjou, proclaimed King of Spain under the Name Philippe V on 16 November 1700* (Salon of 1824; fig. 3), was a rendition of Louis XIV presenting his grandson to the Spanish ambassador as the new king of Spain, thus establishing the Bourbon dynasty in Spain. Like *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, *Philippe V* shows long lines of impressively dressed, inscrutable dignitaries, and does not invite any emotional involvement from its viewers. The other was Gérard's painting of the 1825 sacre of Charles X (intended for the *Salon* of 1827 but not finished in time), a composition in which

the painter had been guided by official accounts of the event and possibly by sketches made by him during the ceremony.[68] The completed painting shows the moment directly after the coronation by the Archbishop of Reims, assisted by the Duc de Bourbon, the Duc d'Orléans, and the dauphin, when the king embraced these three near relatives (fig. 4). Gérard had also contemplated a moment nearer the beginning of the sacre service, when the king prostrated himself before the altar to subject himself to God. He discussed his sketches of both moments with the king at the end of 1825. The king originally preferred the now lost sketch that showed him in total subjection to God, but allowed Gérard to start work on both paintings.[69] Gérard settled on the moment after the coronation, and did not even begin to work on the other subject,[70] because "he could not bring himself to depict the king of France prostrated at the feet of priests." [71] As we will see in a moment, this was a wise choice because the moment when the king prostrated himself before the altar and the officiating priests was indeed one of the most controversial in the whole sacre ceremony. Since Delacroix knew Gérard well and was a frequent visitor to his salon[72], it is quite possible that he knew about the existence of the two sketches and had perhaps even seen them.



Fig. 3, François, Baron Gérard, *Philippe de France, duc d'Anjou, proclaimed King of Spain under the Name Philippe V on 16 November 1700*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Musée national du château, Versailles. On loan to Château de Chambord. Photograph courtesy of M. Jean-Louis Gautreau. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, François, Baron Gérard, *Sacre de Charles X*, 1829. Oil on canvas. Musée National du Château, Versailles. [\[larger image\]](#)

The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero and the Sacre Ceremony

Jal's condemnation of *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* as empty spectacle and his comparison of the painting with Gérard's *Sacre* hints at the skepticism with which liberals

viewed the rituals reinvented by the restored Bourbons to underscore their power. Those rituals, with their lavish, medieval-looking settings and costumes, were compared by liberals to the worst kind of Romantic theater, which only strove for empty effect.[73] The association among Bourbon ritual, popular Romantic theater, and Delacroix's painting is implicit in Vitet's use of theatrical terminology to describe Delacroix's depiction of a lugubrious Venetian ceremony, and is particularly apparent in his comparison of the painting with the much-criticized dramatic work of the Romantic writer d'Arlincourt. The writings of this self-styled *vicomte* and *prince des romantiques* were known to be beloved by the Royal family.[74] Their right to rule must have seemed to liberal eyes as unjustified as were d'Arlincourt's claims to his titles. Significantly, Vitet also describes the nobles' behavior after the execution as play-acting before the simple people at the bottom of the stairs.

The resemblance which Jal supposed to exist between *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* and Gérard's unfinished painting of the sacre may have been confined to the observation that both paintings depicted ritual events with multiple figures from the ruling classes. But is it possible that Delacroix, in fact, was inspired by the sacre, which had taken place in Reims Cathedral on May 29, 1825? He certainly was not present at the ceremony, but it would have been very easy for him to obtain information about the liturgy and the overloaded, loudly colored, gaudy temporary decorations, imitating mosaics on a gold background,[75] which were meant to express the symbolic meaning of the sacre, from the many contemporary books, brochures, and newspaper articles giving the official description and interpretation of the event.

It is noteworthy that in one of the descriptions of the event, an explicit connection is made with both medieval Venice and Faliero. The royalist art critic Edmé Miel, describing the cathedral's decorations, wrote that the cathedral's nave contained a row of portraits of predecessors of Charles X which not only showed his line of succession, but also emphasized the legitimacy and permanence of kingship. In his description, Miel points to the line of papal portraits in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome and to the portrait gallery in the Venetian Ducal Palace as comparable examples of galleries expressing the notion of permanent rule, and he even mentions the veil-covered place of Faliero as punishment for betraying his country.[76]

While Miel's comment is intriguing for the added possibility it offers to connect the sacre and Faliero's execution as related events, the actual ritual of the sacre also included elements that may directly have inspired Delacroix's painting. Fairly quickly after his accession in 1824, at the ripe age of 67, Charles X, the youngest brother of the decapitated Louis XVI, decided to have the traditional sacre ceremony performed, a decision that met with skepticism from the side of the liberal opposition.[77] Resurrection of this ceremony, which went back to the early Middle Ages, lent new vitality to the proposition that the legitimacy of the monarchy could not have ended with the Revolution, as it was based on divine intervention. The *saint-chrême* (chrism) used to anoint the king, which was believed to have been sent down from Heaven, and the relics of the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns, possessions of the French kings that underlined their God-given power (just as did the relics of Saint Mark for the Venetian government), all played their part in the sacre. The ceremony itself began with the king's oath, taken while touching the Gospel and the relic of the True Cross, to uphold the Charter (the Restoration's Constitution that was given to France by the king instead of being voted by

Parliament) and the laws of the kingdom.[78] To liberal commentators, the sacre ceremony of 1825 offered examples of empty theatricality and "play-acting" by the personalities taking part in it. For example, the Duc d'Orléans, who openly sided with the liberal opposition and who was, for this reason, one of the king's most notable adversaries, was one of the king's three near relatives chosen to assist at the coronation. Liberal commentators regarded the sacre as a desperate but vain attempt to bridge the gap between the opposite poles of French society.[79] In an attempt to reconcile ancien régime nobility and people who had come to the fore during the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, both had been invited. Former enemies of the Bourbons, who had chosen to side with them when they were restored to power, witnessed the sacre, without believing in its religious and symbolic meaning, and without betraying their skepticism. Some of them even played a significant part in the ritual itself. Talleyrand, for instance, though he stemmed from an old noble family, had supported both the Revolution and Napoleon, and had, behind the scenes, been one of the chief agents behind Napoleon's downfall and the return of the Bourbons.[80] It now belonged to Talleyrand's task as *grand chambellan* (grand chamberlain, an office also held by him at the time of Napoleon's sacre) to clothe the king in the several layers of coronation robes that would replace the simple white garment in which he entered the church at the beginning of the ceremony. The coronation sword, symbolizing the king's duty to protect widows and orphans, but also intended to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies, was held pointing upwards during almost the entire ceremony by the Maréchal Moncey, another loyal servant of Napoleon who now supported the Bourbons, in his position as *connétable* (supreme commander).[81]

Other aspects of the ceremony seemed to offer proof that the king's arrogant, authoritarian stance hid that pious old man's dependence on the Church. Liberal critics regarded the king as a puppet in the hands of the Jesuit order, which was suspected of wielding great influence over France's government.[82] For this reason, the white catechumen's camisole that the king wore at the beginning of the ceremony was judged even by royalist commentators to be too simple when compared to the splendid, gold-embroidered robes of the clergy.[83] I have already mentioned, as a subject dismissed by Gérard for his *Sacre* painting, the part of the ceremony preceding the king's anointing, in which the king lay prostrate before the altar to subject himself completely to God. This was one of the most controversial moments in the sacre, because it was interpreted, not just by Gérard, but even by many who were present, as a subjection not to God, but to the clergy. No longer familiar with the symbolism of the sacre, they didn't see anything but the king prostrating himself before a group of clergymen.[84]

The sacre was also an event in which the highest in the land assisted at the inauguration of a ruler, and served as witnesses, behind closed doors, to all that this inauguration stood for. Tradition demanded that the common people wait outside the cathedral, only to be allowed inside, ostentatiously, to show their approval of the new king once the ceremony was over. They could only see the enthroned king, clad in his coronation robes and surrounded by the relatives and other dignitaries who had played a part in the ceremony, literally elevated to a level far above other Frenchmen and nearer to heaven, on a platform that had been erected above the choir screen (or *jube*) at the top of an impressive grand staircase of 30 steps (fig. 5). The theatrical aspect of the sacre was emphasized by the fact that new groups of spectators were herded in one after the other to see the magnificent outcome of the sacre, while the same piece of music was played repeatedly, so that the scene resembled a series of operatic encores. [85]

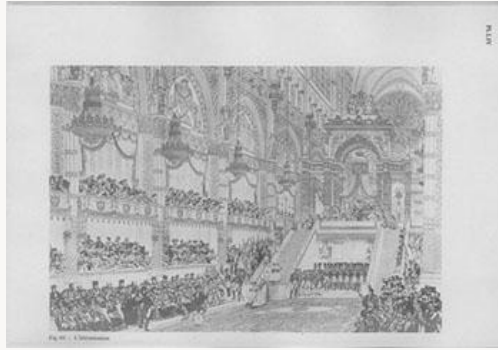


Fig. 5, V. Adam, J. I. Hittorff, L. Lafitte and J. F. Lecointre, *Album du Sacre de Charles X: The Enthronization*, 1825. Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. [\[larger image\]](#)

When we go back to *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, we can understand Jal's reasons for comparing Delacroix's painting with the sacre. We see rows of impassive looking Venetian noblemen, ugly, as *Ancien Régime* nobility was also supposed to be, two holding the robe and Ducal bonnet that they have taken from the doge, one with raised sword in hand, reminiscent of the raised sword in the sacre. We see the body of Faliero, clad in white, prostrated at the foot of the marble steps, much as the white-clad king had lain prostrated at the base of the altar in Reims. We see the people who have rushed in, at the foot of the stairs after the conclusion of the ceremony, not to see an old man enthroned, but to see the corpse of another old man who has betrayed Venice, beheaded, clad in white, his head covered with a dark shroud.

In conclusion, *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* is a complex painting that engages at once with the political events of the day and with contemporary debates regarding artistic freedom. Delacroix deliberately flouted the classical rules of history painting that dictated that such works teach a clear moral lesson through the example of one or two "heroic" protagonists. Instead, his execution scene may be seen at once as a form of historical reportage, and, with its combination of pomp and gore, as a scene in a contemporary Romantic drama—immediately bringing to mind Byron's play of the same theme. At least one contemporary critic related the painting to one of the important political events of the day, the coronation of Charles X, who provoked the opponents to his rule by staging a lavish, garishly decorated, ritual spectacle intended to bridge the conflicts in French society and to reassert the divine right of kings. *The Execution of Marino Faliero* may indeed be seen as a veiled subversion of that event, implying the consequences that may befall an arrogant ruler. Faliero himself is, in Delacroix's painting, an ambiguous person, victim as well as figurehead of a corrupt regime that defends its actions as being the will of Heaven. The painting's stunningly original composition and excessive use of coloristic and theatrical effect, in a scene in which rebellion is quenched "with the help of Heaven," underline tyrannical regimes' reliance on sheer effect. At the same time, composition and effect form a strong and brave demonstration of the wish for freedom from artistic and political conservatism and tyranny. Because Delacroix refused to please and edify in this work, he estranged even critics who were his political allies, but whose esthetic principles forbade them to approve of Delacroix's strategy or to accept the *Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* as a serious history painting.

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Notes

All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

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[1] Both [Vitet's](#) and [Jal's](#) reviews can be found below.

[2] See for instance Elisabeth A. Fraser, *Delacroix: Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 132–34.

[3] During the Bourbon Restoration (1815–30), the liberal opposition consisted of Bonapartists, such as Delacroix, liberals and republicans. See Robert Alexander, *Re-Writing the French Revolutionary Tradition: Liberal Opposition and the Fall of the Bourbon Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[4] *Explication des ouvrages de peinture exposés au profit des Grecs: Galerie Lebrun, rue du Gros-Chenet, no. 4, le 17 mai 1826*, no. 45.

[5] Andrea Navagero, *Storia veneziana*, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ed. Luigi Antonio Muratori (Milan: Typographia Societatis Palatinae, 1733), 23: 921–1246.

[6] Lorenzo de Monacis, *Chronica de rebus Venetis* (Venice: Remondini, 1759).

[7] Vettor Sandi, *Principi di storia civile della Repubblica di Venezia dalla sua fondazione, sino all'anno di n.s. 1700* (Venezia: Coleti, 1755), 1.

[8] Letter to his friend Guido Settimo, Milan, April 24, 1355 in Giuseppe Fracassetti, ed. *Lettere di Francesco Petrarca* (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1863), 4:184–91.

[9] Marin Sanuto, *Le vite dei dogi* in Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 22:599–1253.

[10] Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Histoire de la république de Venise depuis sa fondation jusqu'à présent* (Paris: Duchesne, 1760), 4.

[11] Pierre-Antoine-Noël-Bruno Daru, *Histoire de la République de Venise* (Paris: Didot, 1821), 1.

[12] Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes du Moyen Age* (Paris: Nicolle, 1807–18; new ed., Paris: Treuttel & Würtz, 1826). Citations are to the 1826 edition.

[13] David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.

[14] Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des Républiques italiennes*, 6:143.

[15] Byron [George Gordon Byron], appendix (extract from Marin Sanuto's *Vite dei Dogi*) to *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice: An Historical Tragedy in Five Acts, with Notes* (London: Murray, 1821), 188.

[16] *Ibid.*, 175–94.

[17] Pierre Daru, *Histoire de la République de Venise* (Paris: Didot, 1821), 1:634–35.

[18] *Ibid.*, 6:195–96.

[19] Stendhal [Marie-Henri Beyle], *Histoire de la peinture en Italie*, ed. Henri Martineau (1817; Paris: Le Divan, 1929), 1:46–47.

- [20] See for instance James H. Rubin, "Delacroix's *Dante and Virgil* as a Romantic Manifesto: Politics and Theory in the Early 1820's," *Art Journal* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 48–58, esp. 51.
- [21] Stendhal, *Histoire de la peinture*, 1:46–47.
- [22] "servirent de modèles aux ouvriers italiens qui faisaient des madones pour les fidèles, qui les faisaient toutes sur le même patron, et ne représentaient la nature que pour la défigurer." Ibid., 72–73.
- [23] "De temps à l'autre le peuple voyait avec effroi tomber la tête de quelque noble; mais jamais il ne s'avisait de conspirer pour sa liberté." Ibid., 46.
- [24] Byron, preface to *Marino Faliero*, xii.
- [25] Alan Richardson, "Byron and the Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 133–51, esp. 139–40.
- [26] Byron, *Marino Faliero*, 120.
- [27] Byron, appendix to *Marino Faliero*, 185.
- [28] Byron, preface to *Marino Faliero*, xx.
- [29] Richardson, "Byron," 139.
- [30] Byron, preface to *Marino Faliero*, xv.
- [31] For the history and function of classical French stage conventions see Jacques Scherer, *La dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1968), esp. 229–44 for the concept of *récit*.
- [32] John McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 76–88.
- [33] See for instance Samia Chahine, *La dramaturgie de Victor Hugo: 1816–1843* (Paris: Nizet, 1971), 102–3.
- [34] The Council of Ten was Venice's highest tribunal. It had almost unlimited powers to put down conspiracies against the state. The Ten had its own police force and spies and carried out interrogations behind closed doors. See for instance Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 100.
- [35] We see a wall-painting of Christ appearing to Saint Mark in prison in the upper left corner and an *Adoration of the Kings* on the right, behind the member of the Council of Ten who holds up the execution sword. On the balustrade at the bottom of the staircase, at the level of the place of execution, right above the Venetian commoners, a small, sinister, winged lion holds an escutcheon bearing the Venetian motto "Pax tibi Marce, Evangelista meus," ("Peace be to thee Mark, mine Evangelist"), written on the pages of an open book. Venetians believed this text to mean that their ownership of the relics of Saint Mark had been the will of Christ. Rosand, *Myths of Venice*, 66.
- [36] Iain Fenlon, "Rites of Passage: Music, Ceremony and Dynasty in Renaissance Florence and Venice," in *The Royal Chapel in the Time of the Habsburgs: Music and Court Ceremony in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Juan José Carreras and Bernardo García García; English version ed. Tess Knighton, trans. Yolanda Acker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 29–39, esp. 33.
- [37] Josefina E. P. Leistra, *Contouren van de kunstgeschiedenis: Het Musée de peinture et de sculpture 1828–1834* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2004), 203–4.
- [38] See for instance the letter from Delacroix to his friend Pierret, dated September 22, 1819, in which the painter writes about his wish to read Byron's *The Lament of Tasso* (1818) and expresses his indignation about Tasso's "oppression at the mercy of the 'protectors' who imprison him." Anne Larue, "Delacroix and his Critics: Stakes and Strategies," in *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 83.
- [39] Eugène Delacroix, *Oeuvres littéraires*, ed. Elie Faure, vol. 1, *Etudes esthétiques* (Paris: Crès, 1923), 94.
- [40] Ibid., 95.
- [41] "Marino Faliero, ayant à l'âge de plus de 80 ans conspiré contre la république, avait été condamné à mort par le Sénat. Conduit sur l'escalier de pierre où les doges prêtaient serment avant d'entrer en charge, on lui tranche la tête, après l'avoir dépouillé du bonnet de doge et du manteau ducal. Un membre du Conseil de Dix prit l'épée qui avait servi à l'exécution et dit en l'élevant en l'air: La justice a puni le traître. Aussitôt après la mort du doge, les portes avaient été ouvertes, et le peuple s'était précipité pour contempler le corps de l'infortuné Marino Faliero (voir la tragédie de Lord Byron)." The description and translation are taken from Peter Brooks, *History Painting and Narration: Delacroix's "Moments"* (Oxford: Legenda / European Humanities Research Centre, 1998), 24–25.

- [42] Sismondi or Laugier's existing succinct accounts in French of Faliero's execution, which are also based on Sanuto's chronicle, may have served as intermediary between Sanuto and Delacroix's description. However, Delacroix chose his own wording and did not copy Laugier's or Sismondi's. See Laugier, *Histoire de la république de Venise*, 79–80, and Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des Républiques italiennes*, 147–48.
- [43] Byron, appendix to *Marino Faliero*, 192.
- [44] Lee Johnson, *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1:100.
- [45] Fraser, *Delacroix*, 124–26.
- [46] Duncan Macmillan, "Sources of French Narrative Painting: Between Three Cultures," *Apollo* 137, no. 375 (May 1993): 297–303.
- [47] Frank Trapp, *The Attainment of Delacroix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 63.
- [48] Lee Johnson, *Paintings*, 100.
- [49] Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution: 1815–1848* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 228.
- [50] Beth S. Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154–60.
- [51] Robert Floetemeyer, *Delacroix' Bild des Menschen: Erkundungen vor dem Hintergrund der Kunst des Rubens* (Mainz/Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 82–85.
- [52] *Ibid.*, 84
- [53] See Christopher M. Greene, "Romanticism, Cultural Nationalism and Politics in the July Monarchy: The Contribution of Ludovic Vitet," *French History* 4, no. 4 (1990): 487–509, for Vitet's biography and the ideological background to Vitet's writings.
- [54] *Ibid.*, 489.
- [55] "qu'il n'a pu resulté de là qu'une suite de portraits, ou, pour parler comme les peintres, d'études de croquis, qui n'ont pas le droit d'aspirer à un autre mérite que celui de la ressemblance." Ludovic Vitet, *La Ligue, précédée de Les Etats d'Orléans; scènes historiques: nouvelle édition, entièrement revue et corrigée* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1878), 254–55.
- [56] "la recréer de telle sorte qu'elle plaise et qu'elle émeuve plus vivement." *Ibid.*, 258.
- [57] L. V. [Ludovic Vitet], "Exposition des tableaux en bénéfice des Grecs; II. M. Delacroix," *Le Globe*, June 3, 1826, 372–74, reprinted in Ludovic Vitet, *Etudes sur les beaux arts: Essais d'archéologie et fragments littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1847), 189–96.
- [58] See Christian A. E. Jensen, *L'évolution du romantisme: l'année 1826* (Geneva: Droz, 1959), 276–77, for the play's synopsis, its reception and its most important reviews.
- [59] "a écrit avec son pinceau une page d'histoire." L. V., "Exposition des tableaux," 373.
- [60] "il fallait abandonner un tel sujet, ou se conformer rigoureusement à tout ce qu'exigeait l'histoire," *Ibid.*
- [61] "comment exciter notre intérêt avec des mannequins aussi immobiles que les saints qui nous voyons rangés en file sur les vieux vitraux d'église," *Ibid.*
- [62] For a short biography see Charles Bouvet, "Un historiographe de la marine: Augustin Jal (1795–1873)," *Revue maritime*, no. 79 (July 1926): 20–40.
- [63] Boime, *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution*, 223. For the political background to Jal's writings see Hubertus Kohle, "Kunstkritik als Revolutionsverarbeitung: Das Beispiel Augustin Jal" in *Frankreich 1815–1830*, ed. Gudrun Gersmann and Hubertus Kohle (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), 171–86. For the organization of the Salon, the exhibited works, reviews, and critics' points of view in esthetic matters see Eva Bouillo, *Le Salon de 1827: Classique ou romantique?* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009).
- [64] "le dénouement froid d'un drame dont les mouvemens nous sont cachés." Auguste Jal, *Esquisses, croquis, pochades et tout ce qu'on voudra sur le Salon de 1827* (Paris: Ambroise Dupont, 1828), 112.
- [65] "c'est une population de damnées, ou de scélérats du plus bas étage." *Ibid.*
- [66] "Quand M. Gérard a composé son *Philippe V*, quand il a disposé le *Sacre de Charles X*, il a du se soumettre à des conditions particulières. Les tableaux d'étiquette doivent être faits selon l'étiquette. Il y avait aussi un maître des cérémonies à Venise pour les décapitations des doges." *Ibid.*, 111–12.

[67] "Si M. Delacroix avait représenté la conspiration de Jaffier, une silhouette de bourreau ne se serait pas dessinée toute seule sur cet escalier qu'on reproche tant au peintre de Marino-Faliero; il en aurait fait le théâtre d'une action violente." Ibid., 112.

[68] For the detailed history of the creation of the Gérard's *Sacre* see Elodie Lerner, "Entre effervescence politique et artistique: le *Sacre de Charles X* de François Gérard," *Revue du Louvre* 58, no. 1(2008): 73–86. See also Auguste Jal, *Le peuple au Sacre: Critiques, observations, causeries faits devant le tableau de M. le Baron Gérard, premier peintre du Roi* (Paris: Dénain, 1829), 5–14.

[69] Lerner, "Entre effervescence politique," 76–77.

[70] Jal, *Le peuple au Sacre*, 8.

[71] In a conversation with Lady Morgan in 1829: "je ne pus me résoudre à montrer le roi de France prosterné aux pieds des prêtres," quoted by Lerner, "Entre effervescence politique," 76.

[72] See Mme Ancelot [Marguerite-Louise-Virginie Ancelot], *Les salons de Paris: Foyers éteints* (Paris: Tardieu, 1858), 62.

[73] Benjamin Walton "Quelque peu théâtral": The Operatic Coronation of Charles X," *19th-Century Music* 26, no. 1 (2002): 1, 3–22. For the theatricality of the restored Bourbon regime as a whole see Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 21–154.

[74] Alfred Marquiset, *Le Vicomte d'Arlincourt: Prince des romantiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1909) gives a detailed account of Arlincourt's life and career.

[75] Landric Raillat, *Charles X: Le Sacre de la dernière chance* (Paris: Orban, 1991), 80–81.

[76] Edmé-Antoine-François-Marie Miel, *Histoire du Sacre de Charles X dans ses rapports avec les beaux-arts et les libertés publiques de la France* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1825), 167.

[77] Raillat, *Charles X*, 75. Another example of Charles X's arrogance was his resurrection of the medieval Sacrilege Law, which imposed the death penalty for sacrilege. According to this law the condemned had to be decapitated, after having been led to the scaffold with his head covered by a black hood. Kroen, *Politics and Theater*, 113–14.

[78] Raillat, *Charles X*, 162–66.

[79] Walton, "Quelque peu théâtral," 12.

[80] Alfred Duff Cooper, *Talleyrand* (1932; New York: Grove Press, 2001), 217–37.

[81] Raillat, *Charles X*, 168–69, 172.

[82] See for instance Carol Duncan, "Ingres's *Vow of Louis XIII* and the Politics of the Restoration," in: *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 57–78, esp. 75, originally published in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, ed. Linda Nochlin and Henry Millon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

[83] Raillat, *Charles X*, 162.

[84] Ibid., 174–76.

[85] Walton "Quelque peu théâtral," 18.

L.V. [Ludovic Vitet], "Exposition des tableaux en bénéfice des Grecs; II. M. Delacroix," *Le Globe*, June 3, 1826, 372–74.

M. Delacroix semble destiné à devenir la pierre de scandale de toutes les expositions. Soit courage et dévouement de sa part, soit imprudence ou mauvaise fortune, c'est sur sa tête que s'amassent tous les anathèmes des antagonistes de la nouvelle école, tandis qu'à l'ombre, pour ainsi dire, de l'indignation qu'il excite, on voit ses jeunes confrères obtenir grâce et jouir tranquillement des éloges de leurs admirateurs. A peine les esprits ont-ils eu le temps de se calmer, et d'oublier leur rancune contre son *Massacre de Scio*, que déjà le voici qui s'aventure à braver de nouveau la révolte par un second coup d'audace qui en vérité ne le cède guère au premier. Aussi arrêtez-vous quelques minutes devant ce tableau de *Marino Faliero*, et prêtez l'oreille aux discours de vos voisins, vous vous croirez, pour le moins, transporté à la représentation d'une tragédie de M. d'Arlincourt. Que c'est mauvais! entendrez-vous dire; quelle croûte! Quelle ignorance! Quelques-uns prononceront en soupirant les mots de *vandalisme* et de *perte du goût*! D'autres iront jusqu'à la fureur, et tous se hâteront de détourner les yeux. De loin en loin seulement viendront quelques-uns de ces amateurs consciencieux, au regard attentif et sans prévention: ceux-là s'arrêteront; vous les verrez s'éloigner de quelques pas, regarder le tableau entre leurs doigts, afin de l'isoler de ceux qui l'entourent et de concentrer sur lui la lumière, puis exprimer par le mouvement de leurs lèvres je ne sais quel blâme mêlé d'admiration; mais leur bouche ne s'ouvrira pas, ils n'oseront protester contre les exclamations de l'auditoire.

Il faut pourtant avoir plus de courage qu'eux; il faut rompre le silence, et voir si en effet M. Delacroix mérite tant de dédain, s'il est tout-à-fait indigne de rémission. Arrêtons-nous donc aussi devant son tableau.

Marino Faliero, doge de Venise, a été condamné à mort pour avoir conspiré contre la république. Au jour fixé pour son exécution, les dix et les grands de l'état se réunissent au haut de l'escalier du Géant: le condamné est introduit; on le dépouille du vaste manteau de drap d'or doublé d'hermine et du bonnet ducal, insignes de sa souveraineté; puis, dans le bas de l'escalier, sur la marche même où Faliero, à son avènement, prêta son serment de fidélité, le bourreau lui abat la tête. Aussitôt, sans déranger le cadavre, sans emporter le bonnet et le manteau, et chaque sénateur gardant sa place, les portes du palais sont ouvertes et le peuple est admis à contempler le doge baigné dans son sang, tandis que l'un des dix, saisissant de la main du bourreau le glaive tout sanglant, le lève au-dessus de sa tête, en adressant ces mots à la foule: "La justice a puni le traître."

Telle est la scène imposante et lugubre que M. Delacroix a voulu rendre sur la toile. Le sujet nous semble magnifique: il réunit presque toutes les conditions nécessaires dans un tableau d'histoire; mais il présente une foule de difficultés qu'on ne peut ni éluder ni vaincre, et qui auraient dégoûté tout autre peintre moins audacieux, moins indifférent sur les lois de la composition, que M. Delacroix.

La première de ces difficultés, c'est la nécessité de donner à l'escalier une place immense dans le tableau. Si les sénateurs ne sont pas au haut de l'escalier, comme pour se montrer au peuple dans toute leur majesté, si le cadavre, le bourreau et le peuple ne sont pas sur les degrés inférieurs, l'effet historique, l'effet théâtral est manqué. Or c'est pourtant une chose désagréable à l'oeil qu'un grand escalier de marbre blanc occupant le milieu d'un tableau: les mauvais plaisants ne manqueront pas de dire que le principal personnage c'est l'escalier. D'un autre côté, cet escalier fera une lacune dans la composition, les différentes parties seront désunies; il y aura deux ordres de figures, celles d'en haut et d'en bas; le tableau, quelque beau qu'il soit d'ailleurs, n'aura point d'unité, il ne sera pas *composé*. Mais cet inconvénient n'est pas le seul qui doive détourner d'un tel sujet le peintre qui sait ses principes et qui respecte l'Académie. Ne faut-il pas, pour qu'un tableau d'histoire soit beau et intéressant, qu'il puisse réaliser la grande loi de la *variété dans l'unité*? Or, le moyen dans une telle scène de placer ce qu'on appelle des *épisodes*, c'est-à-dire des groupes de personnages occupés de sentiments en apparence étrangers à l'action principale, tout en s'y rapportant néanmoins par quelque côté. Mais où est l'obstacle, dira-t-on? Ne peut-on pas nous montrer dans un coin du tableau un vieux sénateur serrant entre ses bras ses deux jeunes fils, l'un blond et l'autre brun, selon l'usage, et leur montrant le cadavre du doge coupable, comme pour leur enseigner à bien aimer la république? Plus loin, un groupe de complices de Faliero, dissimulant entre eux, et détournant la tête pour faire part au public de leur fureur concentrée? enfin, n'y aurait-il pas moyen d'introduire quelque part des mères et des épouses? car un tableau sans femmes est monotone ou du moins trop sévère. Tout cela est fort bien: il n'y a qu'un malheur, c'est que l'histoire trouverait tout cela fort ridicule. Elle exige impitoyablement que, sur ces trente ou quarante figures placées au haut de l'escalier, il n'y en ait pas une qui laisse paraître la plus petite trace d'émotion. Avant que les portes fussent ouvertes, au moment où le glaive frappait le coup fatal, peut-être on eût pu observer quelques passions diverses sur ces physionomies; mais dans cet instant la toile est levée et les acteurs sont tout à leurs rôles. Ils doivent être graves, sérieux, impassibles comme les juges sur leurs bancs. Quelques uns jetteront un regard détourné sur le peuple, mais avec une expression si vague et si indifférente, qu'on ne saurait deviner ce qu'ils pensent. S'il est dans le nombre quelques complices de Faliero, à peine pourra-t-on les distinguer à leur regard encore plus incertain, plus insouciant que celui des autres. Quant aux leçons de patriotisme données par les pères à leurs fils, il n'y a pas lieu; pas plus qu'à la présence des mères et des épouses. Que va donc devenir le peintre au milieu d'un tel sujet? où trouver des contrastes, des oppositions? Comment exciter notre intérêt avec des mannequins aussi immobiles que les saints que nous voyons rangés en file sur les vieux vitraux d'église? Mais ce n'est rien encore; l'histoire lui réserve bien d'autres tribulations. D'abord elle exige que tous ses personnages aient à peu près la même physionomie, cette physionomie vénitienne qui nous ont retracée Paul Veronèse et le Titien. Voilà donc toutes les figures du tableau avec une paire d'énormes sourcils noirs, le nez grand, les traits carrés et durs, l'oeil fixe, le teint basané; en d'autres termes, les voilà toutes laides. Ce n'est pas tout: il faudra des pages et des hérauts d'armes bariolés de rouge, de bleu et de blanc comme les valets de carreau; des costumes extravagants par leur excessive ampleur et leur forme disgracieuse; enfin la muraille sera couverte depuis le haut jusqu'en bas d'écussons et d'armoiries de toutes couleurs, ce qui donnera pour fond au tableau la bigarrure de l'habit d'Arlequin; une Madonne colossale occupera tout un vaste panneau, et, pour couronner l'oeuvre, des étendards suspendus au plancher flotteront de tous côtés, comme sur les cordages d'un vaisseau pavoisé. Voilà le tableau tel que l'histoire le commande. Eh! bien, qui osera charger sa palette, et se mettre à l'ouvrage? M. Delacroix. Il accepte toutes ces difficultés; il suit à la lettre tout ce qui lui dicte l'histoire. S'il a cru qu'il allait produire un tableau agréable, s'il a cru pouvoir faire de la peinture,

il s'est étrangement mépris: mais il n'a cherché, nous en sommes sûrs, qu'à écrire avec son pinceau une page d'histoire. Or, nous devons le dire, il a merveilleusement réussi. S'il veut qu'on ait le courage de lui donner des éloges, il faut qu'il confesse que son intention a été de mettre son art au service de l'histoire; qu'il a oublié qu'il était peintre. Nous consentirons alors à ne pas souvenir à notre tour qu'un tel oubli est la plus grande faute que puisse commettre un artiste; que c'est, par une route opposée, tomber dans le même excès que l'école de David, c'est-à-dire sacrifier l'art à la réalité, au lieu de le sacrifier à l'idéal. Mais, pour être juste, il faut de temps en temps tenir compte des qualités en voilant les défauts. Il y a tel tableau dont nous dirions, C'est admirablement dessiné, admirablement composé, tout en prenant nos réserves pour ajouter: C'est de la pitoyable peinture. Suivons donc M. Delacroix sur le terrain qu'il a choisi; jugeons-le comme historien. Or, nous le répétons, comme portrait historique, son tableau nous a fait la plus vive impression: il évoque, il ressuscite le passé; il atteste une grande force d'esprit, une grande flexibilité d'imagination, une connaissance profonde de ce que nous appellerons l'art historique, et, sous ce point de vue, en dépit de tous ses défauts et de toutes les censures, il doit être regardé comme l'un des plus remarquables que nous présente la nouvelle exposition.

Mais maintenant revenons à la peinture, et voyons si M. Delacroix n'aurait pas pu, tout en restant aussi fidèle historien, montrer un peu plus de respect pour l'art. Sans doute il fallait ou abandonner un tel sujet, ou se conformer rigoureusement à tout ce qu'exigeait l'histoire; mais M. Delacroix n'a-t-il pas fait plus qu'elle ne demandait? Ne s'est-il pas exagéré ses devoirs de chroniqueur? pour atteindre le naturel, était-il nécessaire d'aller jusqu'au trivial, et même jusqu'à l'ignoble? Certes, nous ne demandions pas des sénateurs beaux comme l'Antinoüs, mais fallait-il se complaire à les rendre si laids? Pour éviter le *grand style*, qui est une *manière*, est-il besoin de tomber dans le grotesque, qui est une *manière* aussi? Pourquoi M. Delacroix ne consulte-t-il pas sur ce point le Paul Véronèse, auquel, soit dit en passant, il a fait de si larges emprunts? Il verrait que, pour représenter des figures vénitiennes, il est des degrés intermédiaires entre le type de l'Adonis et celui de l'Orang-Outan. Dans son tableau, il y a peut-être dix ou douze têtes que nous voudrions conserver malgré leur laideur, parce que cette laideur est naturelle et sans affectation; telles sont en général celles qu'il a placées à la gauche du spectateur; mais de l'autre côté, il y en a dix ou douze autres qui abusent réellement de la permission d'être laides. Ce n'est pas seulement leur visage, mais leur taille et leur tournure qui prêtent à rire. Citons entre autres le personnage qui est à la gauche de ce sénateur qui montre au peuple le glaive ensanglanté; ni dirait-on pas, au bonnet rouge près, le plus burlesque des marmitons? En vérité, nous ne pouvons pas croire que l'histoire se fût offensée si, ça et là seulement, nous eussions vu quelques visages ovales et tant soit peu réguliers. Quant au bourreau, nous aimons beaucoup sa tournure gauche, son buste mal assis sur les hanches, et surtout son air brute et son oeil éteint. Mais était-il nécessaire qu'il fut plat comme un homme de pain-d'épice? Quelques lumières et quelques ombres jetées sur sa figure, en lui donnant plus de relief, auraient-elles altéré son expression? Ajoutons enfin qu'on trouve dans ce tableau une foule de négligences de dessin qui étaient tout au moins inutiles. Il y a telles autres parties qui prouvent que M. Delacroix manie admirablement le crayon; mais ce ne sont, pour ainsi dire, que des échantillons de son savoir-faire. Pourquoi donc trouver du plaisir à déguiser son talent?

Quant au coloris, il est, à notre avis, d'une force et d'une richesse admirable. M. Delacroix est surtout coloriste: il a le sentiment du ton vrai, il le trouve toujours sur sa palette. Mais, quand il s'agit de l'appliquer sur la toile, il dédaigne de demander à son pinceau ces petites précautions minutieuses pour fondre et dégrader les teints, sans lesquelles le plus grand coloriste ne paraît aux yeux peu exercés qu'un hardi barbouilleur. Ces têtes qui vous semblent peintes si négligemment, regardez-les bien, vous allez y trouver vingt ou trente tons différents: il y a tous les éléments d'une admirable couleur; mais vous comptez tous les coups de pinceaux, rien n'est fondu, rien n'est dégradé. Serait-ce par crainte de tomber dans la froideur qui accompagne ordinairement un fini précieux? Mais c'est trop de timidité; le précipice est encore loin, et vous avez bien des pas à faire avant d'être en danger de ce côté-là. C'est comme un musicien qui de peur d'être monotone, ne ferait que des successions de dissonances; eût-il le plus grand génie musical, il écorcherait les oreilles du prochain. Il en est peu près de même du coloris de M. Delacroix; il faut l'admirer, mais il est si heurté, si *dissonant*, qu'il fatigue au lieu de plaire.

En abandonnant ainsi avec une sorte de bravade tous les procédés ordinaires de l'art, en négligeant tous les petits moyens de séduire les yeux, qu'arrive-t-il? on ne peut briller que si l'on trouve occasion de faire deviner son talent en donnant des preuves de beaucoup d'esprit, d'un vif sentiment dramatique, d'une habile observation de l'histoire; mais quand on se trouve renfermé dans un cadre trop étroit pour que ces qualités puissent se développer, quand on ne fait qu'un simple étude, c'est-à-dire un morceau de peinture, on risque de passer pour un faiseur de croûtes. Si, pour le malheur de M. Delacroix, nos lecteurs découvrent son *Turc mort* et son *Don Juan*, dans les coins obscurs où ils sont cachés, ils verront se justifier la vérité de cette observation.

En somme, le tableau de *Marino Faliero* n'en est pas moins extrêmement remarquable, d'abord parce qu'il est la représentation la plus vraie, la plus fidèle, d'une grande scène historique; en suite parce qu'il nous offre pour la seconde fois le spectacle assez curieux d'un jeune homme plein de talent qui, comme pour jouer un tour au public et à lui-même, se complait à exagérer volontairement ses défauts et à déguiser ses qualités. Sans doute le négligé sied souvent à merveille, mais c'est à condition que de temps en temps, on en appelle à la parure: les extravagances d'un homme d'esprit peuvent avoir beaucoup de charmes, mais pour les faire valoir il faut des moments lucides. Si Goethe eût toujours déraisonné comme quand il nous mène au sabbat et chez les sorcières, il est douteux qu'il eût obtenu la place qui était due à son génie. Que M. Delacroix y prenne donc garde: il est temps qu'il nous montre sérieusement ce qu'il peut faire. Passe encore pour *Marino Faliero*, ce n'est que la seconde fois: mais s'il recommençait une troisième, il faudrait lui dire avec Rivarol: *Un bon mot répété devient une sottise*.
L.V.

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Auguste Jal, Review of Delacroix's *Execution of the doge Marino Faliero* in *Esquisses, croquis, pochades et tout ce qu'on voudra sur le Salon de 1827* (Paris: Ambroise Dupont, 1828), 111–13.

On a fort critiqué la composition du *Marino Faliero*; je ne saurais pas me ranger à l'opinion générale sur ce sujet. Ce n'est pas une page historique que M. Delacroix a eu la volonté de tracer, il a fait de la chronique peinte. Je pourrais appeler ce tableau un procès-verbal à l'huile, car ce n'est pas autre chose. Le cadavre du doge décapité est sur le premier degré de l'escalier du palais ducal; le bourreau, debout auprès de sa victime, jette les yeux sur la foule pour étudier l'impression que produit le supplice; en haut de l'escalier un serviteur des Dix montre la robe d'or dont on a dépouillé Faliero avant l'exécution; au milieu de la galerie, un des membres du conseil présente aux Vénitiens l'épée qui a frappé le doge; les Dix et tous les dignitaires de la république remplissent la galerie ou sont rangés contre le mur de l'escalier; le peuple est au pied des marches du palais, il attache ses regards sur le glaive, le bourreau et le traître que la loi vient de tuer. La marche de toute cette représentation est bonne, car elle est vraie; et si elle ne satisfait pas aux règles de la composition pittoresque, je ne le reprocherai pas à M. Delacroix. Quand M. Gérard a composé son *Philippe V*, quand il a disposé le *Sacre de Charles X*, il a dû se soumettre à des conditions particulières. Les tableaux d'étiquette doivent être faits selon l'étiquette. Il y avait aussi un maître des cérémonies à Venise pour les décapitations des doges. Si M. Delacroix avait représenté la conspiration de Jaffier, une silhouette de bourreau ne se serait pas dessinée toute seule sur cet escalier qu'on reproche tant au peintre de Marino-Faliero; il en aurait fait le théâtre d'une action violente; il y a placé le dénouement froid d'un drame dont les mouvemens nous sont cachés.

Cet ouvrage est original justement par le défaut que les classiques y ont repris; son aspect étonne, et il serait du plus grand intérêt si les figures ne semblaient pas n'être que le prétexte trouvé par l'auteur pour faire briller son coloris. Les têtes sont d'une laideur repoussante; c'est une population de damnés ou de scélérats du plus bas étage, que celle dont M. Delacroix nous a donné l'échantillon. Quant au dessin il est plus maniéré dans cette production que dans aucune autre du même artiste. Il semble que ce soit sous l'inspiration de ces vieilles gravures en bois qui nous viennent des âges gothiques, que l'auteur a dessiné tous les personnages. Le bourreau est vraiment comique; j'en suis fâché, mais je ne puis le voir sans songer à Potier jouant la parodie d'un valet de l'inquisition. Les costumes des 12^e, 13^e, 14^e et 15^e siècles ne peuvent-ils donc revêtir que des squelettes? Est-il convenu que la grâce sera dans les formes négatives, et la vérité dans l'absence de toute proportion?

M. Delacroix ne restera pas dans un système où il a entraîné beaucoup d'imitateurs; ceux-ci n'en sortiront plus, parce qu'ils ne sont pas riches de leur propre fonds. Ils marcheront encore à la suite du maître, mais les défauts primitifs ne s'effaceront point. M. Delacroix renoncera au trivial et à l'exagération; il est poète par la pensée, il sera peintre par la forme. Jamais, sans doute, il n'aura le style pur et châtié de Girodet, mais il ne se contentera plus de revêtir d'une couleur prestigieuse *des à-peu-près humains*; il se gardera du mannequin et de la statue, mais il attachera des membres à des corps, et non des lambeaux livides à d'autres lambeaux.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1, Eugène Delacroix, *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero*, 1826. Oil on canvas. Wallace Collection, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, François, Baron Gérard, *Philippe de France, duc d'Anjou, proclaimed King of Spain under the Name Philippe V on 16 November 1700*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Musée national du château, Versailles. On loan to Château de Chambord. Photograph courtesy of M. Jean-Louis Gautreau. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, François, Baron Gérard, *Sacre de Charles X*, 1829. Oil on canvas. Musée National du Château, Versailles. [\[return to text\]](#)

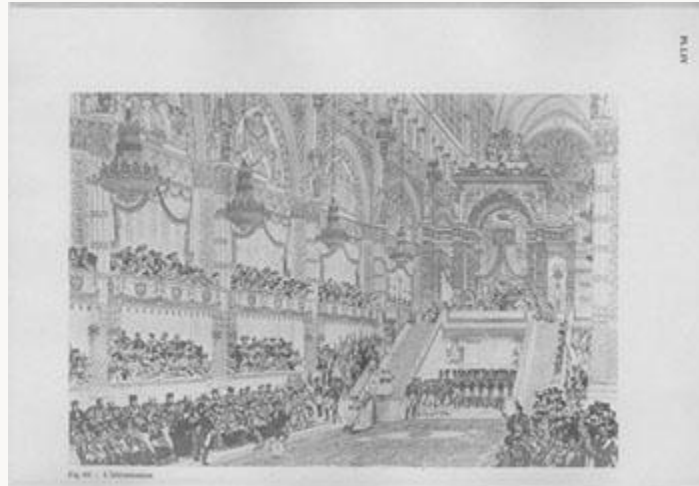


Fig. 5, V. Adam, J. I. Hittorff, L. Lafitte and J. F. Lecointre, *Album du Sacre de Charles X: The Enthronization*, 1825. Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)