I note with sadness that one of the beauties of the lyric theatre is neglected and is falling steadily into a highly regrettable decline. This is, quite frankly, a shameful thing for an enlightened century like ours. Dear me! When monsters are used in a tragédie [lyrique], they are so puny, so clumsy that they simply make you feel sorry for them (...). I was at a performance of Persée at the court theatre. It has to be admitted (...), that the Persées have improved themselves beyond recognition, and yet, by an incredible contrast, the monsters no longer arouse any interest. They have nothing to characterize them, nothing which in former times used to cause that delicious tingly feeling we call goose flesh. People will reply, perhaps, that this decline to which I take exception is quite immaterial, that monsters no longer attract the attention of the public, who regard them as mere sleight out of hand. Yet I maintain – and several ladies of this province agree with me – that one never sees monsters without experiencing emotion. What potential to stir up violent feelings in the spectator’s heart if the monsters were as they should be! But what kind of a monster is it which, with two paws about the size of my fan, tries to terrify Andromeda who is prepared to laugh in its face. (...). To be honest, it seems high time that several rules, several fixed principles on the deployment of monsters, were added to the system of poetics. Every sea monster, for example, should be at least 18 feet long by 6 feet wide with an aperture in its head that could gobble up a twenty year-old; how ridiculous a monster seems if it is reduced to snapping like a common guard dog. That is truly ignoble!

This is a letter from 1747 to the Mercure de France of an alleged Burgundian lady of qualities. Her complaint against the deplorable state of the monsters in the tragédie lyrique or tragédie en musique – an opera genre introduced by Lully and Quinault in 1673 – is most probably ironical. In the Enlightened century, this pretended lady from a provincial salon worries about the deteriorating theatrical representation of monsters. She

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puts that it is necessary that one never sees monsters without experiencing emotion. The monsters on stage should launch heroic actions, such as Perseus’ rescue of Andromeda. However, the monsters used in the performances which the alleged lady saw were so trivial that their threat is restricted to the minimum. The actual effect of the monsters is deemed as utterly ridiculous.

Although the lady claims that in past times the theatrical monsters had been far better represented, in reviews and reflections on the French stage of the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth century the ridiculing of monsters and other machinery and the complaint for their failure were commonplace. La Fontaine, for example, wrote in 1677 that it was not infrequent in performances of operas that the flying chariot of a god broke down and that the singer was clinging on a rope crying for help.² During the heights of the tragédie lyrique, theatre machinery was increasingly used and their failures all the more discussed. A letter of 1727 on the Paris reprise of Bellérophon by Lully-Quinault (1679), reports that a huge dragon suddenly fell apart while from its stomach a half-naked boy appeared who was operating the machine.³ Even in Rousseau’s Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse from 1761, we read ironical comments on the use of flying gods and threatening monsters in the opera.⁴

Despite those frequent comments on the use of machinery in French lyrical theatre, the letter to the Mercure de France points at the fact that the ideal employment of monsters and other impressive machinery on French music theatre nonetheless could cause this special feeling called ‘goose flesh’ and which could ‘stir up violent feelings in the spectator’s heart’. The only way this could be achieved is when, ‘several rules, several fixed principles on the deployment of monsters were added to the system of poetics.’ Therefore, the idea comes to the fore that the use of machinery can be evaluated following specific rules and principles. If these are complied with, the delightful horror on stage can be fully appreciated.

This essay will deal with the aspired effect of excessive machinery in theories on French performing arts from 1650 until 1750. As we will try to make clear, many theatre critics put forward that machinery and scenography could arouse an intensive response. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the ideal onlooker had to be able to get totally

² Fontaine, Jean de la, “Epistre à Mr. de Niert”, in Œuvres Diverses (Paris: 1958) 617.
³ Voltaire, Lettres de Mlle Aïssé à Madame C. [Calandrini] (Paris: 1787 (1727)) 80.