An Analysis of *Amadeus*

Even a malicious lie does not sting like an untimely truth. There is a certain untimely truth that, for years, has evoked predictably hostile reactions. The malicious lie that personal opinions are of equal value so the majority is always right, is illustrated by the efforts of the film *Amadeus.*

In it, Peter Shaffer has given us a beautiful and moving picture in which two musicians are thrown into conflict with one another. The acting (F. Murry Abraham, Tom Hulce and Elizabeth Berredge) is great, particularly the part of Salieri. The scenery is beautiful and the musical vignettes are well chosen.

The film makes no attempt at consistent historical accuracy, taking such liberties as are needed to make its point. In art this is not only permissible, it is often both desirable and necessary. But when historical accuracy is displaced by other factors, the viewer must be aware that some point is being superimposed upon the characters from outside and consider what that point might be. It is this point, rather than historical judgment, that will provide the pith of the message and must be judged.

What then, is the point of Amadeus? What ideas does it seek to impart? The film is powered by the obvious contrast between brilliance and mediocrity, but to what end? It is not merely to contrast brilliance and mediocrity, but their value and acceptability. Indeed, it may be that the highly debatable assumption that "value" is synonymous with "acceptability" that is at issue here.

The story is told by Salieri, who is seated before a piano in an asylum. The auditor is a priest seeking Salieri's confession. Salieri's "confession" recounts God's miraculous provision for his heart's desire, i.e. to become a musician and composer. It relates his rise to deserved fame and God's mocking derision at the decline of Salieri's star with the ascent of Mozart's.

The "confession" begins when the priest unwittingly uncovers the reason for Salieri's bitterness. Seeking Salieri's confession, the priest urges "all men are equal in God's eyes." Salieri's carefully measured rhetorical" *are* they?" begins a narrative of the story's conflict.

The conflict of the story is the psychological warfare between Salieri and God, (incarnate in Mozart). Indeed, Mozart's very name, *Amadeus,* spells Salieri's defeat. To the confessing Salieri it must have seemed that God had called him forth for no other purpose than to humiliate him publicly. From the elitist perspective, Mozart was decidedly not a suitable vehicle for the divine music which Salieri sought to compose; indeed, Mozart's character, as presented throughout the film, is at odds with orthodox Christian ethics and civilized decorum. So Salieri finds, in Mozart's undeniable genius, justification for his own enmity toward God. Salieri defiantly tells God that "from now on, we are enemies, you and I. Because you choose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy and give me for reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation. Because you are unjust, unfair, unkind."

Although the story is told by Salieri, both characters define themselves. Mozart, egotistical and self-assured, decries heroes and legends "so lofty they sound as if they shit marble." And he freely admits to Emperor Joseph "1 am a vulgar man." Disappointed in his relative lack of talent and yearning to speak great things, Salieri asks, "why would God give the yearning, like a lust in my body, and leave me mute, with only enough talent to recognize the incarnation?"

Both characters are further defined by their roles in the story. Thus, Amadeus – the beloved of God – is not only "a vulgar man," in taste and manner, he is the picture of musical brilliance and perfection and is universally acclaimed. By way of contrast, the impeccable Salieri, who claimed once to have "liked himself," represents musical mediocrity and is locked in a war with God.

Everything about these adversaries is contrived to enhance these contrasts. We are left in no doubt that the music of the aristocrat is mediocre at best, while that of the vulgarian is divine. Is it stretching the point to see in Mozart the musical hero of Everyman? Is he not, in fact, shown to be the darling of the masses? And what of Salieri? Is he not portrayed as an aristocratic lap-dog, pandering to the (ill formed?) elitist tastes of the nobility? Indeed, everything about Salieri, from his manner to his morals, is hopelessly foreign to the masses.

But by whom *are* these symbolic features accepted? Salieri, the musically mediocre, is the darling of the nobility, the toast of the upper echelons of society. Mozart, on the other hand, meets resistance from the nobility both because of his manner and because of his music ("it has . . . too many notes. There are, after all, only so many notes the ear can hear in the course of an evening").

But if Mozart met with resistance from the nobility, he was warmly accepted by the masses with whom he loved to party and for whom he composed some light pieces. More important, his common friends not only loved his music, they paid him well and in cash, for his compositions.

As Salieri proceeds to tell the story of his enmity toward God and his rivalry with Mozart, he also shows that God's eyes are no less jaundiced than are those of the masses. Just as surely as one lie begets another, this proposition betrays a sub-theme, for the picture of God presented here has no western theological counterpart. It is easily recognized as part of Salieri's psychological makeup. But is this very psychological construct not built dramatically upon a more subtle lie, i.e., the rightful debasement of great music and the elevation of the common? Throughout the film, the people are seen in a positive light, while the nobility is portrayed as shallow and its lap-dog finally as insane. God's judgment is seen in the pronouncements and values of the common man.

Nowhere in the film are these trends more clearly developed than in the discussions about opera and its proper form and function. One of the nobles notes that "opera is here to ennoble us" but Mozart insists that one's hairdresser has more to say than the operatic heroes and legends of the past. Not only was the subject matter of opera a matter of canon, even the language of opera was set unalterably -- until one of Mozart's supporters cast his vote for an opera in German – "an opera for the people in the people's language."

Even Salieri seems to view the public's reaction to music with some regard. In response to Mozart's complaint that his opera had not been given a fair hearing, Salieri responded that perhaps it wasn't fair, but "if the public doesn't like one's work . . ." This puts the burden of judgment on the public's shoulders.

Insult is added to injury when Emperor Joseph, speaking, one assumes, for the nobility, calls Salieri "the brightest star in the musical firmament." Coming from the very man whom Salieri had earlier said had "no ear at all," and in the face of Mozart's success, such praise not only damns Salieri, but the nobility as well. For the nobility's undemocratic tastes could not be

trusted to evaluate properly the genius of The Beloved of God or its own mediocrity.

So the common is extolled and the elite belittled. Mozart is the "beloved of God" because he is the beloved of the masses; one's value in God's eyes is nothing other than his acceptability to the public's tastes. The final scenes confirm this notion. At his death Mozart is mourned only by the common man. A bright light has gone out. But one looks in vain for a noble face among the mourners. As the dust settles in upon Mozart's corpse, lying now atop the other bodies in the common grave, God Himself seems to add the "Amen."

And what of Salieri? As he finishes his "confession" to a now broken priest, he notes that he has lived thirty-two years watching his light die slowly. And as he absolves his fellow mediocrities, to whom he is patron saint and by whom he is surrounded in this, the common grave of his living death, he hears again the familiar sound of God laughing at him.

In addition to asserting an arbitrary god, the film also demonstrates an intelligent and purposeful community. The film assumes that the elite are poor tastemakers, that their vision is too narrow. It assumes that the public has a mind, that common opinion is on a par with, nay, is superior to, educated opinion. It is the assumption that "all men are created equal," and that all opinion is created equal, too. Perhaps this was not intended, or even directly expressed, but it is implicit in the way the story is told.

This "principle of equality" produces lazy critics and invariably makes popular approval synonymous with value (weather ethical or aesthetic). But more to the point, it is the false principle to which both Salieri and Mozart defer. For although they both operate upon the idea that what is acceptable to the masses dictates what has artistic value, Mozart goes further, believing that popular acclaim for his music excuses his poor manners and give him license to do as he pleases. This point is made early and pointedly in the film when Mozart, after being chastised by the Archduke for his tardiness, but being acclaimed by his admirers for his music, opens the door to the Archduke's chamber to allow the applause of the masses to be heard within. The Beloved of God takes this opportunity to show the Archduke his hind side in a most discourteous bow to the commoners.

Whether explicit or implicit, the principle of toleration, as it is based upon the idea that the masses are suitable tastemakers, is a malicious lie. And the untimely truth? It is Plato's dictum that "the masses move at random." The masses cannot understand or produce good taste, for they are motivated by pragmatism alone. This is why democracy cannot succeed over the historical long haul; turning its back upon the educated elite and regarding all opinion as of equal value, democracies must finally vote themselves into cultural oblivion.

"Well! There it is."