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Verdi's Settings of Shakespeare : from Play to Liberetto to Opera

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/ Verdi's Settings of Shakespeare:
From Play to Libretto to Opera,

by

S. Ann Earon

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ABSTRACT

As a Senior Scholar pursuing the topic Verdi's Settings of Shakespeare: From Play to Libretto to Opera I have endeavored to study a project relevant to my majors, Music and English. During first semester I carefully analyzed Shakespeare's plays, Macbeth, Othello, and The Merry Wives of Windsor and compared them to Verdi's operas Macbeth, Otello, and Falstaff.

The highlight of my project was in January when I traveled to New York City and spent a day working with the Metropolitan Opera Guild. I was also able to see a performance of Verdi's Otello with Jon Vickers in the lead role.

During second semester I studied the musical aspects of the compositions. I spent time analyzing musical passages and relating them to the plays and the operas. I was also able to continue my study of Italian, which I find extremely beneficial while studying Verdi's libretti.

On Monday, May 13, 1974, I gave a lecture presentation of my project. At this time I showed slides of Metropolitan productions of the operas, presented my own rendition of five arias (in costume), and talked about comparisons between the plays and the operas.

I applied for a Rotary Fellowship to take my project to Europe, and am presently waiting to hear the results. If I do receive the fellowship I am planning to spend a year studying the plays and operas in England and Italy. Afterwards I hope to publish a paper explaining my findings.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section is an introduction which explains the period of Romanticism and its relationship to Shakespeare and Verdi. The second section is devoted to discussing the librettist for Macbeth, Francesco Piave. Following this section the opera Macbeth is discussed. Arrigo Boito, the librettist for Otello and Falstaff is discussed in the fourth section. The last two sections deal with Otello and Falstaff. I have also included a number of musical selections to better explain certain passages.

My project has been invaluable to me. My Senior Scholar project has allowed me the freedom of independent study as well as a means of tying my majors together.

INTRODUCTION

In order fully to understand and appreciate Verdi's relationship to Shakespeare it is necessary to know something about the period of Romanticism.

"Romanticism was a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions, and marked especially in English literature by sensibility and the use of autobiographical material, an exaltation of the primitive and the common man, an appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy, and the use in poetry of older verse forms." ¹

Romanticism cherishes experience and tradition, emotion and reason, religion and science, real and ideal, order and freedom, and man and nature.

Romanticism in Italy began after the fall of Napoleon, when Italian restlessness turned to Germany, England, and Spain. The sphere of studies was expanded. Shakespeare, never read or understood before, was now placed beside great writers like Homer and Dante.

For many years Shakespeare was shunned by the general Italian public because of his uncouth traditions and the delight he found in hags, weird sisters, fairies and goblins. Yet, in 1827,

Giocinto Ballaglia gave a careful analysis of Shakespeare's style and tried to incorporate the Shakespearean style into his own drama.²

In 1839, a note appeared in the twenty-third volume of the Foreign Quarterly Review, listing another Italian interested in Shakespeare.

Professor G. Jan in Parma is engaged on a translation of Shakespeare's works into Italian, under the title--"Opere di Shakespeare, nuova versione italiana, &c." The forwarded specimen leaves, from the Merchant of Venice and Romeo and Juliet, are sufficient proofs of the talent and care of the translator. He has commenced with King Lear, which will be printed at Zurich in three months; and a drama in 8vo. will appear every quarter of a year, accompanied with the English version, and the notes will be published separately at the end of every year. The original verses will be retained in metre.

Verdi called Shakespeare "the greatest authority on the heart of man."³ Verdi became attracted to Shakespeare's writings by reading Giulio Carcano's translations of Shakespeare. He was not attracted primarily to Shakespeare the poet, due to the language barrier, but rather to Shakespeare as a dramatist. By this I mean that Verdi was particularly concerned with dramatic presentation and considered Shakespeare the greatest author of dramatic plots. Only once did Verdi show any hesitation about working Shakespeare's plays into operas. This hesitation is evident in a letter written to Antonio Somma, a librettist, on April 22, 1853:

The only thing that has always prevented me from treating Shakespearean subjects oftener has been precisely this necessity to change scenes at every moment.⁴

This one problem did not stop Verdi from attempting to transform some of Shakespeare's plays into operas.

In 1843, three years before Verdi wrote the first version of Macbeth, he mentioned to Count Alvise Mocenigo, president of La Fenice Theatre in Venice, the idea of composing an opera based on King Lear. At Verdi's suggestion, in 1853, Antonio Somma wrote a libretto for King Lear. A preface to this letter states:

At Verdi's suggestion, Somma wrote a libretto, "Re Lear." Though the subject had an irresistible fascination for him, Verdi seems nevertheless to have been overawed by the greatness of certain scenes and never completed the score, of which only sketches remain. ⁵

In 1850, Verdi wrote a letter to Salvatore Cammarano, a librettist, completely outlining his ideas of how King Lear should be turned into an opera.

Dear Cammarano: At first glance King Lear is so tremendous, so deeply involved that it would seem impossible to make an opera out of it. However, after examining it closely, it seems to me that the difficulties, great as they are, are not insuperable. You know, we need not turn Lear into the usual sort of drama that has been customary up to now. We must treat it in a completely new way, on a grand scale, without regard for convention. It seems to me that the principal parts could be reduced to five: Lear, Cordelia, the Fool, Edmund, Edgar. Two secondary parts: Regan and Goneril (perhaps the latter would have to be made a second prima donna). Two secondary bass parts (as in "Luisa Miller"): Kent, Gloucester. All the rest minor parts. ⁶

In the same letter Verdi sketches all the acts and scenes for the opera. In 1853, Verdi said to Somma:

...While poor Cammarano was still alive, I suggested "King Lear" to him. Take a look at it, if you don't mind, and tell me what you think of it. I shall do the same, since I've not read it for a long time. 7

Verdi worked on the libretto for Lear for seven years. Finally, in 1857, Verdi wrote in a letter to Vincenzo Torelli, chief editor of the "Omnibus" and father of the dramatist, Achille,

..."King Lear" is impossible. It would be a certain fiasco, because no one--and that includes Coletti (a singer)--would be in place. With such a certainty in mind, you in your turn will understand that I could not work at it with much will. 8

In 1890, Verdi wrote to Giuseppe DeSantis, his godson, saying:

"Don Quixote", "Romeo and Juliet", and "King Lear", are sleeping the sleep of the just. Let the journals and the journalism print what they like, for from time to time they need to fill up their columns. 9

In 1850, Giulio Carcano asked Verdi to attempt to turn Hamlet into an opera. Verdi replied by saying:

I know that if you suggest composing "Hamlet" that adaptation will be worthy of you. Unfortunately this great subject demands too much time, and for the time being I've had to renounce "Lear" too, which I commissioned Cammarano to adapt for some more convenient moment. But if "King Lear" is difficult, "Hamlet" is even more so. 10

Thus ended all the projects for turning King Lear or Hamlet into Verdian operas.

Shakespeare, in many of his works, demands the aid of music in order to realize his dramatic conceptions. In other words, in several plays--Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Othello, and Macbeth, to name a few--Shakespeare has his characters singing songs to display specific emotions. He felt the addition of music

was natural. Likewise, Verdi, in his works based on Shakespeare, aspires towards conditions of dramatic representation. By this I mean that Verdi was as concerned with historical events, stage setting, characterization, and plot as he was with the music. The combined genius of Shakespeare and Verdi resulted in the creation of the three great masterpieces, Macbeth, Otello, and Falstaff, in which great drama and great music combine in perfect balance.

CHAPTER I PIAVE

Francesco Piave and Arrigo Boito, librettists, collaborated with Verdi in the production of his three completed operas based on Shakespeare.

Count Mocenigo, director of La Fenice at Venice, had suggested, in 1843, that Verdi compose an opera based on Victor Hugo's Hernani. At that time, Piave was resident poet and stage manager at the Fenice. Mocenigo recommended Piave as a suitable individual to turn the play into a libretto. Although Verdi accepted the Count's recommendation, he was not alone in finding much to criticize in Piave's work. When the opera Ernani was produced in Paris, in 1846, Victor Hugo felt that Piave's libretto had not done justice to the play. In many of the libretti Piave worked on, either the original author was dissatisfied with the changes Piave had made, or Verdi became disgusted with Piave's lack of organization and careful study.

Verdi was attracted by the operatic possibilities in Macbeth. Verdi, himself, completed a libretto in prose and handed it to Piave to turn into verse. Several letters written by Verdi describe in detail the episodes that comprise the libretto and the central moments of the opera. In a letter Verdi addressed to Piave in 1845, the central outline of the opera is discussed:

...This tragedy is one of the greatest creations of man...If we can't make something great of it let us at least try and do something out of the

ordinary...The sketch is clear...unconventional... and short. Please see that your verses are short too. Only the first act is rather on the long side but it will be up to us to keep the pieces themselves short...and you will need to write in a lofty, noble style throughout except in the witches' chorus; these must be trivial but in an extravagant original way...When you've done the introduction please send it to me; it's made up of four little scenes and can do with a very few lines....

Special aspects of the acts are discussed in a letter Verdi wrote to Leon Escudier, Verdi's French agent:

A little while ago you received the first two acts of "Macbeth." Day before yesterday I sent the third to Ricordi, through whom you will receive it in two or three days. This third act is entirely new, with the exception of a part of the first chorus and the dance of the Elves when Macbeth faints. I close the act with a duet between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It seems to me quite logical that Lady Macbeth, who watches constantly over her husband, should have found out where he is. The end of the act is better this way. The machinist and the regisseur will enjoy this act! You will see that there is a bit of plot in the ballet, which fits very well with the rest of the drama. The appearance of Hecate, Goddess of the Night, works out well--she interrupts the infernal dances with a sober, severe adagio. I don't need to tell you that Hecate shouldn't dance at all, but only mime. And I also needn't point out that this adagio must be played by the bassett horn or bass clarinet, so that in unison with the 'cello and bassoon, it produces a hollow, forbidding tone which suites the situation. ...Another note on the banquet scene in the second act. I've seen several performances of "Macbeth" in France, England, and Italy. Everywhere they had the ghost of Banquo come out of the wings. It moves nearer, wavers about, menaces Macbeth, and disappears quietly into the wings. This, in my opinion, produces no illusion, inspires no terror, and no one quite knows whether it's supposed to be a ghost or a man. When I produced "Macbeth" in Florence I had Banquo come out of a trap-door, precisely at the place meant for Macbeth;

he made no motion at all, except to shake his head at the right time...Today I sent Ricordi the last act of "Macbeth," which is now completely finished. The whole chorus at the beginning of the fourth act is new. The tenor's aria is touched up and re-orchestrated. And all the scenes from the baritone's romanza up to the end are new, that is, the description of the battle and the final hymn of victory. ¹²

The entire story about Piave's relationship to Macbeth is best explained in a letter written by Verdi to Tito Ricordi on April 4, 1855:

(....Tosselli) asks me too whether, after all, the poem is really as terrible as everybody says. This seems already to have become a "public opinion." How stupid! I think the poem is better than many other libretti by Piave. But it's enough for a libretto to bear that poor devil's name to make people assert that it is wretched, even before anyone has read it. I must tell you a little story. It was ten years ago that I conceived the idea of composing "Macbeth." I did the sketch for the libretto myself. More than that, I wrote out the whole drama in prose, with the division into acts and scenes, indicating the vocal numbers and so on. Then I gave it to Piave to put into verse. Since I had reservations about what Piave wrote, I asked Maffei, with Piave's permission, to go over it, and particularly to rewrite the chorus of the witches in the third act and the sleep-walking scene. And then--would you believe it?--although the libretto did not mention the author's name people thought it was by Piave, and that chorus and the sleep-walking scene were the most bitterly abused and ridiculed of all. Perhaps both pieces could have been better done, but as they stand they are still verses by Maffei, and the chorus bears the stamp of true individuality. There you are: that is public opinion. ¹³

Verdi's last words on the subject were, "I wouldn't have your drama for all the gold in the world." ¹⁴

CHAPTER II MACBETH

Macbeth represented a relatively revolutionary approach to Italian opera, since for the first time the drama itself was given an even greater importance than the vocal material. In a letter to Felice Varesi (the first Macbeth) Verdi wrote:

I shall never stop recommending you to study the dramatic situation and the words. The music comes of itself. In short I would rather you served the poet better than the composer. ¹⁵

Verdi uses less than six hundred lines of Shakespeare's two thousand in Macbeth. In the process of cutting the play to make it suitable for the opera, a great deal of incidental detail had to be sacrificed. In the opera the cutting particularly affects the roles of Macduff and Malcolm, while Duncan is made speechless. Lady Macbeth is portrayed thoroughly in a role that is musically and dramatically a worthy complement to the original. "The important person, the dominating demon of this scene, is Lady Macbeth, and though Macbeth has to distinguish himself as an actor, Lady Macbeth, I repeat, must appear to dominate and control everything..." ¹⁶ Because of many deletions Macbeth is not such a dominantly tragic figure.

The opera opens with a chorus of witches, who greet Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and Banquo as sire of future kings. Macbeth and Banquo are astounded by the witches' prophecy when a messenger arrives and informs Macbeth that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed and Macbeth is now thane.

In the second scene Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from her husband telling her of the witches' prophecy. In a soliloquy she expresses her fears of Macbeth's vacillating nature and wishes that he would arrive so that she might

...chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal. 17

This is one good example of Lady Macbeth's haughty character and her domination of her husband. An attendant announces the imminent arrival of Duncan, and Lady Macbeth calls on spirits to assist her in her deed:

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark.... 18

When Macbeth arrives, Lady Macbeth unveils her purpose and bids her husband "look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't." 19

After Duncan's entrance and retirement, Lady Macbeth waits while her husband murders the sleeping king. The act ends after Macduff and Banquo find the murdered king and the chorus expresses the horror and dismay of all concerned.

The first scene of Act II is a skeletal frame of Shakespeare's III,ii, with a little extra information given for the audience's benefit. Malcolm has fled to England and is therefore suspected of Duncan's murder. Macbeth now fears the fulfillment of the witches' prophecy that Banquo's sons shall be kings. In the opera the recitative closes with "Banquo, thy soul's flight,...if it find

heaven, must find it out tonight"; and Macbeth goes out to arrange Banquo's murder. ²⁰ In the 1847 version, a single cabaletta was written to be sung by Lady Macbeth, "Trionfai, sieuri alfine." In 1865, the cabaletta was replaced by the aria "La luce langue" (Sun, warm and tender). In this aria the sustaining woodwinds overlap each other, the horns no longer beat out the rhythm, and the final section consists of a series of sweeping phrases.

(with full voice)

o. last! O - gni mor - tal, o -
Free of doubt and fear, I -

mf

ff

lunga a piar.

gni mortal de - si - o ta - ce e s'ac - que - ta, s'acque - - ta in
rise, as Fate in - tend - ed, On - ward to my glo - ry no qualm - shall de -

p *ff* *col canto* *pp*

te! ny! Ca - drà To - night, fra po - co this eve - ning, e - a

mf

sa - nime chi fu predet - to Re, ca - -
dy - nas - ty to be will fall and die, At

drà, ca - drà chi fu pre - det - to Re, ca - drà, ca -
last to - night a dy - nas - ty will die! To - night, tonight!

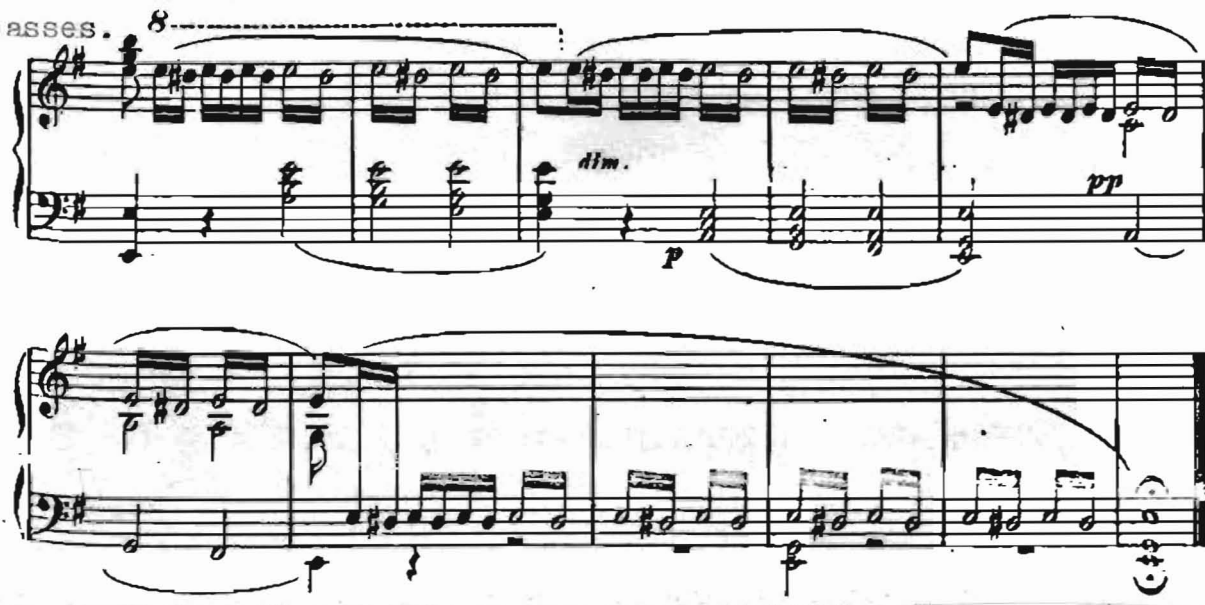
The second scene of Act II is Shakespeare's III,iii, the scene of Banquo's murder. A chorus introduces the scene. There is an unaccompanied timpani figure which launches each phrase. The off-beat accents in the second bar, balanced by normal accents in the fourth, add a certain sharpness to the melody.

the murderers conceal themselves as Banquo enters with Fleance. The scoring for Banquo's *romanza* is remarkable powerful with bassoons, trombones, and cimbasso bunched together on the accompaniment and the full strings doubling the melody, reinforced

by oboe and clarinet.



There is no pause after the final cadence. During the tremolo in the strings Banquo and Fleance leave the stage. At the end of the scene Banquo suddenly cries out: "O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance..." ²¹ Fleance rushes across the stage pursued by one of the murderers. The curtain falls to a whisper on cellos and basses.



In the third scene, Macbeth and his wife are serving as host and hostess at a banquet. Macbeth asks his wife to lead the guests in a brindisi or drinking song. The brindisi is the exact expression of an unsure temperament full of nervous energy.

After Macbeth has been stunned by the appearance of Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth repeats the song.

In the Apparition Scene of Act III, the witches' appearance is particularly important. Verdi realized their importance and said in a letter to Leon Escudier:

Be guided by this: there are three roles in this opera and three roles only: Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, and the Chorus of the Witches. The witches dominate the drama, everything derives from these creatures, uncouth and garrulous in the first act, sublime and prophetic in the third. They are really one of the characters, and a character of the highest importance. ²²

The text of the Apparition Scene is conscientiously condensed from Shakespeare's III, iv. When Macbeth demands to know his fate though 'heaven and earth renew their ancient war,' the witches conjure up three apparitions in a row: the armed head ('Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff!'), the bloody child who tells him that none of 'woman born' can do him harm, and finally the crowned child with a tree in his hand ('Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him'). However, Macbeth still wants to know if Banquo's heirs shall wear the crown. The witches respond by showing him a procession of eight kings each with Banquo's features and followed by Banquo himself. ²³ Verdi scored the apparition of the eight kings for two oboes, six clarinets, two bassoons, and a contrabassoon (suggesting bagpipes) and gave special instructions that it was to be played under the stage, just beneath an open trap door, "so that the sound can penetrate the theater, but in a mysterious manner and as if at a distance." ²⁴ The prophecies sung offstage are

accompanied by bassoons, trumpets, trombones, and cimbasso, sounding like an organ in the distance.

Verdi combines Shakespeare's IV, iii and V, iv into the first scene of Act IV because there is no time for the long colloquy of Macduff and Malcolm about Scotland's future king, nor is there time for the news that Macduff's wife and children have been murdered. Instead a chorus sings a lament about the sorrows of Scotland. The opening brass chorale with timpani rolls, the sustained hollow fifths, and the pizzicato cellos and basses with modal inflections produce chromatic harmony that lends itself well to a lament.

Soli Soprani I.¹ *tristissimo*



D'orfa - nel - li e di piangen - ti chi lo spo - so e chi la
Hun - gry or - phans seek their moth - ers, Sons and daugh - ters mourn their

dolente

Sop. I.¹



pro - le al ve - nir del nuo - vo so - le s'alza un gri - do e fe - re il
fa - thers. In de - spair their cries each morn - ing Rise to Heav - en's might - y

Sop. 2.¹ e 3.¹

del nuo - vo so - le s'alza un gri - do e fe - re il
their cries each morn - ing Rise to Heav - en's might - y

Macduff has an aria in which he bewails the death of his children. Afterwards Malcolm enters and tells Macduff to take comfort from the thought of vengeance. The scene ends with a duet and chorus.

The "Gran Scena del Sonnambulismo" (the grand sleep-walking scene) can be considered a high point of the opera. Lady Macbeth speaks to a well-known accompaniment:



This accompaniment dates from 1847 and has a self-perpetuating pattern in it. All of Lady Macbeth's Shakespearean speech is included. Verdi has constructed a symmetrical design--two stanzas of eighteen bars apiece, the first ending in D flat, the second in E major; a shorter verse of nine bars returning to the original key, and a sixteen-bar coda.

The third scene opens to a clatter of orchestral sound indicative of a battle raging outside. Macbeth is discovered musing on his destiny as in Shakespeare's V, iii: "Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman...shall e'er have power upon thee." Here Macbeth sings his only lyrical adagio in the opera, "Pietà, rispetto, amore" (The devotion, respect, love). The aria uses a simple design. The second limb of the melody is extended with verbal repetition into a dominant cadence. The music unexpectedly modulates into E major returning to D flat with the final three bars. ²⁵

With commotion offstage the Gentlewoman enters to announce that the Queen is dead. Macbeth sings, "Life's...a tale...told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,...signifying nothing," over a dimished seventh.²⁶ The last note is interrupted by military fanfare as Macbeth's soldiers enter to tell him that Birnam Wood is on the move. As Macbeth leaves, the scene changes to a plain where fighting is in progress. Macbeth and Macduff enter fighting and Macbeth taunts his rival with the witches' prophecy, but then learns that Macduff "was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd." ²⁷ They fight and Macbeth falls. After Macbeth's short death scene in declamatory style, each phrase answered by the trombones and cimbasso, the curtain closes as Malcolm is hailed king.

Verdi revised Macbeth in 1865, because he was asked to provide an opera in French for the Theatre Lyrique in Paris. The idea for the revision came from Leon Escudier, who knew Verdi was eager to revise Macbeth. The differences between the 1847 and 1865 versions are worth noting. The 1847 version lacks the witches' chorus ("S'allontanarono") which was added after the duet between Macbeth and Banquo in the first scene of Act I. Aside from this addition, the whole of Act I dates from 1847.

In the second act, after the opening recitative, Lady Macbeth's aria, "La luce langue" was introduced. The next significant revisions (apart from the ballet written to appease the Parisians) occur in the Apparition Scene. Before the revision, Macbeth's part and that of the chorus were set much higher. The change, making the music more somber by lowering the pitch, gave a better

air of mystery. The outbursts from the second and third apparitions also date from 1865. The ending to the opera was completely reset in 1865.

The interesting point about the emendations Verdi made is that when he did revise the opera he actually altered the score very little.

Unfortunately, the revised Macbeth was unsuccessful in Paris and elsewhere. Verdi took his defeat silently. He protested to Escudier in a private letter when one of the French critics accused him of not knowing his Shakespeare.

Perhaps I did not render Macbeth well, but that I don't know, that I don't understand Shakespeare, no, by God, no! He is one of my favorite poets. I have had him in my hands from my earliest childhood, and I read and re-read him continually. ²⁸

In two ~~separate~~ letters the most important scenes of the opera (the duet between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth and the Sleep Walking scene) and the reason for their importance are discussed.

The first letter is from the memoirs of Nini Barbieri, who sang the part of Lady Macbeth.

As I remember it, the opera had two climaxes--the sleepwalking scene and my duet with Macbeth after the murder. No one will believe it, but it is a fact that the sleepwalking scene alone required more than three months of rehearsals. For three months I tried, morning and evening, to play the part of a person talking in his sleep, uttering words, as the Maestro insisted, without moving the lips. Eyes closed, the whole face as rigid as a mask--often it was enough to drive one crazy...

Incredible though it sounds, the duet with the baritone, Fatal, mia donna, un mormore, was rehearsed a hundred and fifty times. Verdi was determined that in our mouths the music should seem rather spoken than sung. Well, even that was

got through with. On the evening of the final rehearsal, Verdi absolutely insisted on everyone's singing in costume, something previously unheard-of. And there we were all dressed, and the orchestra was waiting with instruments ready tuned, when Verdi suddenly beckoned Varese, the baritone, and me to him in the wings, and asked us to do him the favor of running through that accursed duet once more with him in the rehearsal room.

He was a tyrant who had to be implicitly obeyed. I can still remember the black look Varese shot at Verdi as he came into the rehearsal room, his hand clutching the pommel of his sword as if to transfix the Maestro like King Duncan. But he too submitted, and the hundred-and-fiftieth trial took place with the impatient audience already making an uproar in the theater. But anyone who merely said that the duet was enthusiastically received would be saying nothing at all. For it was something unheard-of, something quite new, something unimagined. Wherever I sang Macbeth, every night of the Teatro Pergola season (where it was first performed), we had to repeat the duet two, three, four times, once even five times!

Nor shall I forget how Verdi, silent and uneasy, kept circling about me before the sleepwalking scene on the opening night. It was evident that for him the success of the opera, great as it already seemed to be, could only be decided by that scene. I will let the newspapers of the time be my judge whether I captured the musical and dramatic intent of the great master. All I know is this: the storm of applause had not yet died down, and I was standing in my dressingroom, trembling in every limb, unable to utter a word, when the door flew open--I was already half undressed--and Verdi stood before me. He gesticulated, and his lips moved as if he were trying to make a speech, but not a word came out. But I saw that Verdi's eyes were red too. He squeezed my hand, and rushed out. It was a magnificent reward for those months of work and strain.

Verdi, in a letter to Salvatore Cammarano dated November 23, 1848, also mentions the importance of the two arias.

Tell them that the most important numbers of the opera are the duet between Lady Macbeth and her husband and the Sleep Walking scene. If

these two numbers are lost, then the opera falls flat. And these two numbers absolutely must not be sung:

They must be acted and declaimed
With very hollow voice,
Veiled: otherwise it will
make no effect.
The orchestra *con sordini*. (strings with mutes)³⁰

The sleepwalking scene is set exactly as Shakespeare wrote it, with the doctor and Gentlewoman present, reacting in horror to everything they see and hear. A chromatic ostinato in the bass with a quick staccato figure above it, to depict Lady Macbeth's rubbing of her hands, serves to create the mood. Out of her muttered phrases the melody grows until the end is reached with the hurried repetition of "andiam" followed by a slow cadenza that with "un fil di voce" (a thread of voice) touches D flat above the treble stave and thins out to nothing. ³¹

The accompaniment for the first movement of the famed duet is taken up by the strings and developed into an accompanimental pattern. This figure does not just connote agitation; instead, it grows out of its thematic context with an energy that creates the proper background for the tense exchanges between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.



The central andantino (Allor questa voce m'intesi nel petto) is formed initially from the famous lines:

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep...
Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more.....' (Shakespeare II, ii)

Verdi has availed himself of the implied three-part structure, thereby condensing the speech into three symmetrical phrases in which the scoring is made more sinister by edging each climax with two trombones and a bass drum. Lady Macbeth follows by countering her husband's stanza line for line. The melody is now in the major accompanied by pizzicato strings and a sinuous figure divided between cello and clarinet. The major tonality balances the preceding section and prepares the way for Macbeth's glorious outburst 'Come angeli d'ira' (Like angels of anger) which transcends the horrible situation. At the end of the duet, after Macbeth has presented a brief transitional movement in the original fast tempo, Lady Macbeth returns and begins the stretta as she tries to lead her husband off to bed: 'Vien, vieni altrone ogni sospetto' (Come, come, not all are suspicious).³²

Verdi worked over every aspect of Macbeth. He wrote to London to find out how Banquo's ghost was usually brought onstage. He studied costumes of the period, built models of the stage, drew diagrams of the stage, and instructed the designer, who had started incorrectly, on Scottish history.

Verdi completed the writing and presentation of the opera when he wrote a letter to his father-in-law and faithful supporter,

Barezzi:

Dear Father-in-law,

For a long time I have wished to dedicate an opera to you who have been for me a father, benefactor and friend. It is a duty I should have done sooner, and I would have if circumstances had not prevented me. Now, here is this Macbeth which I love more than all my other operas and which I think the most worthy to present to you. It comes from my heart; let yours receive it, and let it be always a witness of the gratitude and affection borne for you by

Your most affectionate

G. Verdi 33

CHAPTER III BOITO

Arrigo Boito was a man of scholarship and wide culture.

Born in 1842, he entered the Milan Conservatory at the end of 1854 and stayed there for seven years. In 1861, he won a monetary prize that enabled him to go to Paris where he met many composers, including Rossini, Berlioz, and Verdi. From Paris, Boito did a considerable amount of traveling. Returning to Milan with his funds exhausted, he supported himself by writing music and art criticisms as well as translating stories and poetry from Polish. He wrote both the words and music of an opera called Hero and Leander, and a libretto on Hamlet. He produced an abundance of poetry, some of it worth merit.

In 1879, the conversation turned to Shakespeare and Boito when Giulio Ricordi and Franco Faccio, the conductor, had dinner with Verdi and his wife. "At the mention of (Shakespeare's) Othello I saw Verdi fix his eyes on me, with suspicion, but with interest", Ricordi told Giuseppe Adami. "He had certainly understood; he had certainly reacted. I believe the time was ripe!" ³⁴

Verdi agreed to meet with Boito the following day. At first their conversations did not go very well. Verdi read and approved Boito's sketches, but hesitated to commit himself. The idea of Othello had originated not with him, but with Faccio and Ricordi. The idea of producing King Lear still haunted Verdi. He told Boito to send his libretto, but not to come and discuss it. By the end of the year 1879, Verdi had made a decision, for on January 6, 1880, he was in correspondence with his friend Morelli, a painter, as to the physical type of Iago. ³⁵

The "Chocolate Venture" ("il progetto di cioccolata"), as Verdi and his friends called the Otello project, progressed slowly. ³⁶ First there was the production of Aida, then the revision of Simon Boccanegra for La Scala, and finally the new version of Don Carlo for Vienna.

The entire project nearly collapsed in 1884.

After the production of Mefistofele at Naples, a banquet was given to Boito, at which he was reported by newspaper to have said that he was sorry not to be setting "Iago" himself. Verdi, in his touchy mood, thought that Boito implied that his music would not be satisfactory and offered to restore the manuscript as a free gift, "without the slightest resentment." Boito, whose relations with Verdi had been growing steadily more intimate, had no difficulty in proving that he had been misrepresented. He refused point-blank to accept Verdi's offer, and the storm blew over. Verdi, however, refused to guarantee to complete the opera, writing to Boito on the 26th of April, 1884 that there had been too much talk about it, that he had worked and lived too long, that the years not only of his life but of his labor were excessive: "Heaven forbid that the public should have to say to me openly: 'Enough.'" Ten days later he wrote to Franco Faccio in much the same strain: "So, in your opinion, I ought really to finish this Otello? But why? And for whom? It is a matter of indifference to me and still more to the public." ³⁷

Little is known of the collaboration of Verdi and Boito on Otello. No one is sure what changes, if any, Verdi made in Boito's original libretto or what share, if any, Boito had in suggesting a particular musical treatment. "It is said that Boito advised against the great ensemble at the end of the third act, but that Verdi insisted, probably because it provided a characteristic example of Italian operatic construction. It is

said that Verdi had qualms about Iago's 'Credo;' which Boito, drawing on isolated passages in various Shakespearean plays, had inserted in the libretto." ³⁸ The most characteristic idea found in the "Credo" is Shakespeare's shuddering disgust with the physical corruption of the flesh in death. ³⁹

Most of the credit for the adaptation of the Shakespearean play into a suitable operatic libretto must be given to Boito.

In July, 1889, Boito sent Verdi the outline for a libretto, based on Shakespeare's Falstaff. Verdi began to reread all the plays in which Falstaff appears: The Merry Wives of Windsor and Henry IV, Parts I and II. The libretto for Falstaff is the only one in which Verdi did not suggest a change. ⁴⁰

Verdi wrote to Boito protesting that he was too old to write another opera and that he didn't want to interfere with the completion of Boito's opera Nerone. Boito responded by saying that his opera Nerone was his own problem and as for Verdi's age:

Writing a comic opera I don't believe will tire you. A tragedy makes its composer truly suffer, the thought gives rise to grief that morbidly agitates the nerves. But the joke and laughter of a comedy exhilarate the mind and body. "A smile adds a thread to the web of life." I don't know if I've quoted Foscolo correctly, but the idea is true. ⁴¹

Verdi's response was:

Dear Boito:

Amen; and so be it! Let us then do Falstaff! Let's not think at the moment of the obstacles, my age and illnesses! I want only to keep it the most profound secret; a word I underline

three times to tell you that no one must know anything of it... ⁴²

Verdi never worked on Falstaff more than two hours a day, and by March, 1890, he had completed the first act. The only problem, on which he appealed to Boito, was the proper placing of accents on the English words "Falstaff", "Norfolk", and "Windsor".

The unveiling of Falstaff is told as follows:

The story goes that one night in November 1890, after Verdi had finished the first act and outlined the second and third, he gave a dinner in his hotel in Milan for his friends. Among the guests were, of course, Ricordi and Boito and also Ricordi's married daughter, Ginetta, who was plainly pregnant. After dinner Verdi called for some spumante, and Strepponi rose to propose a toast. "I drink," she said, "to the large belly," and hesitated on the word. As Ginetta began to blush, Strepponi smiled and added, "who is 'Falstaff' and whom Verdi finished yesterday evening." 43

CHAPTER IV OTELLO

The obvious change that Boito made in the plot of Othello is the almost complete deletion of Shakespeare's Act I, so that the opera opens in Cyprus rather than in Venice. In the play the conflict between Othello and Iago does not begin until the second act; in the opera it begins almost at once. Unconsciously, both Boito and Verdi agreed with Dr. Johnson:

Had the scene opened in Cyprus, and the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity. ⁴⁴

Boito makes an even more radical change by omitting the relation of the incidents preceding Cyprus. Desdemona as daughter is less important to the drama than Desdemona as lover and wife. Otello does not really begin until Desdemona steps off the ship at Cyprus, and Cassio's line, "O, behold, the riches of the ship is come on shore!" is the bell announcing the opening of the real action of the play.⁴⁵ Thus, in effect, Boito retains the love relationship, which is the dominant theme of Act I, without retaining the characters and actions of Act I.⁴⁶ By bringing the love theme and the jealousy motive close together in time, Boito solves the problem of making Otello's jealousy believable. In the opera it is Desdemona's relationship to her husband which carries the weight of the action.

With the discarded first act went the character of Brabantio and all references to him: Desdemona's denial (Othello IV, ii)

that he could have been plotting against her and her husband to bring them back to Venice, and a reference to him after Desdemona's death (V,ii). Other characters also disappear: the duke, Gratiano, and two senators. Gratiano, who appears only once after Act I in Shakespeare's play, is combined with Lodovico, who in both the play and the opera is an envoy from Venice. The clown is also omitted.

The character of Iago fascinated Verdi more than any other, and for a time he thought of calling the opera Iago.⁴⁷ Shakespeare presents Iago by means of his conversation with Roderigo, Emilia, Cassio, Othello, and Desdemona; Verdi characterizes Iago musically. Iago's "Credo" is formed when Verdi combines Iago's conviction that man is mere animal, that death is the end of everything, and that all ideals are illusions motivated by the selfishness of men into a single aria.⁴⁸ The "Credo" characterizes Iago so clearly that he controls the plot for two acts by being villainous and expressing evil because he enjoys it. Technically, the "Credo" is beyond praise. Verdi shows supreme craftsmanship by using intense musical phrases, set off by striking orchestration, to enhance the words; see the example tremolo or the passage that illustrates the worm that is man's ultimate destiny.⁴⁹



Before Desdemona pleads for Cassio, there is a scene combining several of Iago's "needlings" of Otello. (III,iii). The progress of the drama is broken when sailors and peasants come at Cassio's bidding to serenade the mistress of the isle. (Shakespeare's musicians in III,iii). In the opera, Otello's doubts require more appeasement. The chorus musically represents Desdemona's beauty and purity as she could not have characterized herself.⁵⁰ After this chorus Desdemona pleads for Cassio, only to be rebuked by Otello. The act ends with the oath of vengeance, a carefully rounded, strophic duet sung by Otello and Iago. In this duet there is a strong rhythmic pulse. Triplets are used to give an added rhythm to the melody, which is broken into short phrases. This number is musically striking and dramatically important to the vengeance theme throughout the opera.



For the fourth act Verdi and Boito compressed Shakespeare's scenes in Desdemona's bedroom (IV,iii and V,ii) into one scene. To Shakespeare's 'Willow Song' they added an 'Ave Maria' for Desdemona; but otherwise (except that Emilia is not murdered by Iago) the act follows the original closely. The music between

Desdemona and Emilia is composed of three brief figures which are stated in the prelude to the 'Willow Song'. The figures consist of an arpeggio out of which the melody of the song develops, a rhythmic figure for three flutes, three half-note chords low in the register of the clarinets.

Scene I.

Desdemona.

Emilia.

m.s.

B

poco rall. morendo

Mi pa - ren Mingiunse di co-ri.
So it seemd. He bid me Soon to a -

E - ra più cul-mo?
He look'd more gentle?

(a' alza la tela)
(Curtain rises)

Recitativo.

During the scene, the figure announced by the flutes is developed symphonically, becoming prominent especially when Desdemona calls Emilia back to bid her farewell.

D. Ah! E - - mi - lia, E - mi - lia, ad - dio, E - mi - lia, ad - di - -
 Ah! E - - mi - lia fare thee well, E - mi - lia fare thee

dim. *p morendo*

The three clarinets seem to express a fear and numbness as they are reiterated a dozen times at the opening of Otello's final speech. 'Nun me tema' (Do not fear me). As Emilia leaves Desdemona the empty fifths, played quietly but with ominous accentuation, bring back Desdemona's fears. She cries out, 'Ah! Emilia, farewell!', her voice rising to a high A sharp and then descending to the original F sharp.

The 'Ave Maria' which follows, serves as a point of rest for over-wrought emotions. It is a melodious prayer, based in part on the familiar Latin text, with an accompaniment for muted strings. As it vanishes with a long held A flat, (Amen), the double basses enter, muted on a low E natural. Otello is now in the room.

Poco più mosso. $\text{♩} = 80$.

U Otello (Alla prima nota comparirà Otello sulla soglia di una porta segreta.)
 (At the first note Otello is seen standing on the threshold of a secret door.)

Poco più mosso. $\text{♩} = 80$.

pp

The discourse for the basses is interrupted by a phrase for the violas. The agitated staccato is arrested by the soft beat of the drum. As the scene progresses, the ominous beat for the drum is passed to the brass; and as the eighth-notes overwhelm the pauses, Otello smothers his wife. Then follows the re-entry of Emilia and the revelation of Iago's actions, making amends for the blindness and brutality of Otello's behavior. Otello stabs himself upon a kiss to the music heard at the end of the love duet in Act I.⁵¹

Otello.

Pria d'uc-ci-der-ti... spo-sa... ti ba-
I ——— kissed thee ere ——— I ———

l'om-bra in cui mi gia-cio... un ba-cio...
this, kil-ling my-self, ——— a kiss ———

con espressione

pp

pp

cia-i. Or mo-ren-do... nel-
killed thee, now no way but

un ba-cio an - co - ra...
an - o - ther kiss, —

p

morendo (muore)
(he dies)

ah! — un al - tro ba - cio...
and yet a kiss —

ppp

(cala la tela)
(curtain)

pp

There are other significant changes in both the nature of the characters and the arrangement of the action. Bernard Shaw said:

...instead of Otello being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespear, Othello is a play written by Shakespear in the style of Italian opera....Its characters are monsters; Desdemona is a prima donna, with handkerchief, confidante, and vocal solo all complete; and Iago, though certainly more anthropomorphic than the Count di Luna, is only so when he slips out of his stage villain's part. Othello's transports are conveyed by a magnificent but senseless music which ranges from the Propontick to the Hellespont in an orgy of thundering sound and bounding rhythm; and the plot is a pure farce plot: that is to say, it is supported on an artificially manufactured and desperately precarious trick with a handkerchief which a chance word might upset at any moment. With such a libretto, Verdi was at home.... 52

Although this quotation may seem a bit of an exaggeration, it does require an examination of the characters and their manner in the opera.

Otello makes an impressive initial entrance as a hero saved from the dangers of the sea, who enters to announce, in a difficult tessitura, that he has conquered the Turks. The crucial moment for Otello is when Iago begins his planned campaign to arouse Otello's suspicions about Desdemona and Cassio. In Shakespeare, the conversation between Othello and Iago is interrupted by Desdemona, who has just left Cassio. In Verdi, Desdemona and Cassio are observed in the garden, Cassio having been sent there by Iago. The situation is clearer in the opera, since Otello's suspicions can be aroused immediately because he

can see what Iago is remarking about; and the audience knows immediately Iago's plan and Othello's response.

In the opera the "villainous" intent of Iago is explicitly stated to Roderigo at the beginning, and the storm scene serves to intensify Iago's evil character. In the opera Iago's speeches are refined. Iago's grossness can be better portrayed in words recited than in words sung. Boito ~~avoids~~ Shakespeare's retributions for Iago's sins; he lets Iago escape to an unknown fate.

Verdi's Desdemona is fairly close to her Shakespearean model. In Otello her naivete seems to be stressed. She suffers from an inability to see what is going on around her. She is unaware of the results which come of her persistent suit for Cassio. Both the refusal of Othello and the handkerchief scene are brought together by Verdi to show Desdemona's request to Othello for Cassio's pardon.

Shakespeare, in Act IV, scene iii, of Othello, gives a greater part to Emilia and develops her character more than Boito does in Act IV, scene i, of Otello. In Shakespeare, Emilia questions the statements Desdemona makes. Her reactions to Desdemona's suggestion of dismissal and feelings of death are normal. The idea of death is suggested several times in Shakespeare, whereas it is only mentioned twice in Verdi's Otello. One suspects Desdemona's outcome in Othello when she says: "And she died singing it." 53

In Shakespeare, before Desdemona sings, she speaks about Lodovico. Desdemona mentions him for two reasons: prior to her scene with Emilia, Lodovico and Othello departed; and

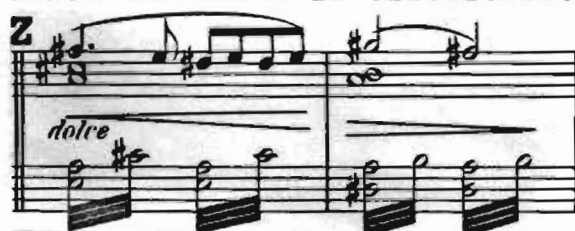
Lodovico is an example of the kind of man Desdemona refers to in the song.

In the song in Shakespeare, Desdemona sings about men and untrue relationships, whereas in Verdi this is completely deleted. Boito deletes this element because he is not attempting to develop Emilia's character. Shakespeare needs these references to prepare the audience for the remarks Emilia makes to many of Desdemona's statements. When Desdemona refers to acts in heavenly light, Emilia responds by saying "Nor I neither by this heavenly light! I might do't as well i' th' dark." When Desdemona challenges Emilia's statement: "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" Emilia's true character is once again suggested in her response, "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice." Emilia continues to explain to Desdemona the kind of women who exist in the world. The scene ends with Desdemona's statement, "Goodnight, good night. God me such usage send, not to pick bad from bad, but by bad amend!" 54

In Verdi, Emilia has two short lines in Act IV, scene i. The rest of the scene is devoted to the "Willow Song" and another song written by Verdi showing Desdemona praying before retiring and before death ("Ave Maria"). Emilia is never developed as an individual with distinct characteristics. Emilia's part in Shakespeare is small enough to warrant Boito's deleting much of it for the sake of the opera.

In the last act of Otello at Otello's entrance ("di una porta segreta") and again at his suicide, the orchestra plays music that was first heard at the high-point of his love-duet with

Desdemona in Act I. "This Erinnerungsmotiv or 'reminiscence theme' is the introduction of a previously heard theme where there is in the action an obvious reminiscence of the earlier situation with which the theme is associated." 55



In Otello nothing is careless or diffuse. Two recurring themes might be mentioned. One is Iago's unctuous phrase warning Otello of the "green-ey'd monster" which forms the substance of the Prelude to Act III.



The modal unisons theme that appears in the bass also recurs several times in the course of the opera. It is the Anabaptists' sermon "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam." 56



What the Prelude records is the relentless working of the "veleno" (poison) of jealousy in Otello's mind between the two acts--something that Shakespeare indicates in quite a different way by opening his Act IV in the midst of a shattering exchange between Iago and Othello.

Verdi's *Otello* is distracted momentarily by a deceptive cadence and a Herald announcing important affairs of the Signory. When *Otello* dismisses the Herald and returns to his obsession, Verdi's direction is exactly appropriate: "Come prima" (As before). Another recurring theme, the orchestral music for the kiss at the height of the love-duet in Act I, returns in Act IV when *Otello* enters to kill Desdemona and then again when he stabs himself. This is called a true "tema-cardine" (principal theme). The recalling theme spans the opera from the first to last and touches the tragic issue "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this--killing myself, to die upon a kiss." 57

On November 1, 1886, Verdi wrote to Boito: "I have finished! All hail to us...(and to him too!!)." Verdi had finished *Otello* and when he was satisfied with his "dramma per la musica" it seemed that Shakespeare had indeed been faithfully interpreted, though undeniably transformed. 58

CHAPTER V FALSTAFF

Sir John Falstaff was originally created by Shakespeare for his plays Henry IV, Part I and Henry IV, Part II. In the epilogue of Henry IV, Part II Shakespeare said:

If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France. Where, for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already 'a be killed with your hard opinions. 59

Falstaff, however, did not appear in Henry V, but in Act II, scene iii, Hostess Quickly touchingly tells of Falstaff's death of a broken heart. He had been rejected by his friend Prince Hal when he became King Henry V.

The basic purpose of the sub-plot in Henry IV, Parts I and II is to provide comic relief to King Henry's serious scenes. Falstaff provides this contrast and even tends to dominate Part I.

In The Merry Wives of Windsor, Falstaff is a thief, a rascal, and a fool. He becomes amorous for the sole purpose of obtaining money. In Act I, he is introduced as a would-be lover and a very obese, bragging knight.

Boito draws lines from Henry IV, Parts I and II and The Merry Wives of Windsor, thereby giving Falstaff a composite characterization from the three Shakespearean plays in which he appears.

There are nine characters in The Merry Wives of Windsor that Boito finds superfluous and dispenses with. Evans, Shallow,

and Slender become one character in Dr. Caius. Page and his son, William, are gone, as are Nym, Rugby, and Simple. The host is retained, but has no lines. Anne Page becomes Ford's daughter.

The opera begins with Shakespeare's Act I, scene i. In the play, Shallow complains of Falstaff's wrongdoings, but Boito gives these lines to Dr. Caius. The idea of Falstaff receiving a bill showing that his expenses are greater than his budget is derived from Henry IV, Part I, Act II, scene iv. In Act I, scene iii, the description of Bardolph's nose comes from Henry IV, Part II, Act III, scene iii.⁶⁰

The honor aria is taken from Henry IV, Part I, Act I, scene i. Boito uses this speech when Falstaff's underlings refuse to deliver his letters to the ladies he wishes to seduce (Act I):

...honor pricks me on. Yes, but how if
honor pricks me off when I come on? How then?
Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or
take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath
no skill in surgery then? No. What is honor?
A word. What is in that word honor? What is that
honor? Air--a trim reckoning. Who hath it? He
that died a Wednesday. Doth he feel it. No. Doth
he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then? Yes, to the
dead. But will it not live with the living? No.
Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll
none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon--and so ends my
catechism.

Verdi's letter scene begins Part II of Act I and is located in the garden. Verdi has his four female principals begin with short phrases in recitative style as they tell each other the surprising news that each has received a letter from Falstaff. The motif which typifies the amorous mood of Falstaff's letters, is also part of the accompaniment to the reading of the letters.



Verdi and Boito make a large scene out of the dramatic implications of the letter scene. First, they use all the principal characters except Falstaff; second, there are two short love scenes for Fenton and Nanetta; third, Bardolph and Pistol have a trio with Ford; and finally, the two ensembles (women's quartet and men's quintet) are combined to make up a nine-voice finale. ⁶¹

The two lovers, Fenton and Nanetta, never have a real duet--they are constantly interrupted. The idea was Boito's: "I should like to sprinkle the whole comedy with that gay love, as one sprinkles sugar on a tart." ⁶²

One particular motif, which appears frequently and symbolizes the entrance of the women after Fenton and Nanetta's first love scene, is connected with Dr. Caius, symbolizes Falstaff's blustering, and is used in connection with Ford. ⁶³



"The Verdi Act II scene of Falstaff and Ford is a highlight of the opera." "From Falstaff's unctuous salutation of the supposed 'Signor Fontana' to his triumphant exit in his courting finery, the scene is a masterpiece of comedy." ⁶⁴

There is an orchestral introduction before Bardolph comes on stage, which is a repetition of the music that represents Falstaff's elation.



Bardolph tells Falstaff that Master Fontana (Ford disguised) has brought a jug of wine and wishes to see Falstaff. Falstaff meets with Fontana, and Fontana asks Falstaff to meet Mistress Ford. The two men shake hands upon the agreement. A motif appears in the orchestra suggesting Falstaff's love making.



Falstaff tells Fontana that he has a prearranged appointment with Mistress Ford. Ford becomes enraged with this news and barely regains his composure before Falstaff re-enters the room. The two men resolve the situation and exit arm in arm, singing, "Passiamo insieme" (We'll go together).



Verdi divides Falstaff's drinking scene into two parts, his self-pity and reproach of the cruel world, and his praise of the good effects of wine.

The drinking song in the second act of the opera is inspired by a soliloquy of Falstaff's in Henry IV, Part II, Act IV, scene iii. In the speech Falstaff extols the virtues of drinking wine. Good sherry, he says, has a two-fold effect:

(1) it ascends me into the brain; dries me there all the foolish and dull and crudy vapors with environ it; makes it apprehensive, quick forgetive, full of nimble fiery, and delectable shapes, which, delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit;

(2) the property of your excellent sherris is the warming of the blood... and makes its course from the inwards to the parts extreme.

...If I had a thousand sons, the first human principle I would teach them should be to foreswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack.

It is this passage which generates Verdi's famous orchestral trill. 65



Act III of Falstaff begins in E major with an instrumental prelude. At the end of the prelude there is a modulation which leads to Falstaff's aria.



After a drink is taken, Falstaff's first word is "buono" (good). The orchestra plays a motif that shows his fascination with the drink.



Following the praises, the trill is heard and is played higher with added trills as Falstaff gets increasingly tipsy.⁶⁶

The Windsor Forest scene is the last scene in the opera. In the final act Falstaff has been convinced to meet Mistress Ford in the forest. Everyone has decided to give Falstaff a bit of his own humor.

Horn calls in the distance usher in the scene in A flat major. The foresters' horn calls are answered by the woodwinds as they recall the first act duet between Fenton and Nanetta.⁶⁷





Verdi uses a most original method of chiming the hour by writing a different harmonization for each strike of the clock as Falstaff counts the hours. ⁶⁸



Nanetta enters dressed as a fairy queen and sings a solo accompanied by the fairies. Her appearance frightens Falstaff into doing good deeds and repenting.

The principals enter, disguised, and find Falstaff lying on the ground, wearing the horns he planned to give to Ford and Page. The principals proceed to torment Falstaff and continue to do so until Falstaff grows suspicious and removes Bardolph's mask.

When Falstaff's reprieve is granted, Ford asks him "Il cornuto chi è?" (Which one of us wears the horns?) to the same music that Falstaff sings later when he asks Ford, "Lo scornato chi è?" (Which of us is the fool?).⁶⁹

All the events and disguises are explained to Falstaff; he says, "Incomincio ad ascorgermi d'esser stato un somaro" (I begin to perceive that likely I shall have been made an ass), whereupon everyone laughs.⁷⁰

The wedding between Fenton and Anne is announced and Ford performs the ceremony, not realizing that his daughter is marrying Fenton elsewhere, while he has "married" Caius to Bardolph. It is announced that Fenton and Anne are married and Ford relents and embraces the newlyweds.

The epilogue is a fugue in C major. The characters sing: "Tutto nel mondo è burla. L'uom'è nato burlone, burlone, burlone" (All the world is a stage and men and women merely comedians).⁷¹

After the fugue there is a brief passage which allows relief from the fast pace. Verdi quotes the "unhappy women" motif to the words, "Tutti gabbati!" (Everyone duped!)⁷²

Verdi wrote on the original score:

"all is ended! Go your way, as long as you can, amusing type of rogue, forever true, though under different masks, at every time and every place....Go...go, away with you, Farewell!"⁷³

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FOOTNOTES

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