

# Verdi and Shakespeare

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Verdi and world literature  
His love of Shakespeare  
His first experience of live Shakespeare

“He is a favorite poet of mine, whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth, and whom I read and reread constantly.”



## Introduction

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Verdi had an acute interest in world literature and looked to French, German, English and Spanish sources for opera subjects. Why not Italian? For a variety of reasons, one of which was the dialect issue, there was a dearth of suitable Italian literature and writing for the theater. Ironically, some of the northern European literature on which Verdi's libretti were based had Italian medieval sources. One of the great achievements of Italian Romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century was the translation of those works of the great men of letters flourishing north of the Alps, such as Victor Hugo, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and Schiller. Although Shakespeare is not of this period, prior to this time there was very little of his work available in Italian. Verdi admired Shakespeare above any other dramatist, calling him the “master of the human heart.” His admiration and knowledge are evident in his letters and also in the fact that there were two translations of Shakespeare's plays always in the bookcase by his bed. In a famous letter of 1865 he said, “He is a favorite poet of mine, whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth, and whom I read and reread constantly.”

It is worth noting that Shakespeare's plays were not generally performed in Italy. It is most probable that Verdi had never seen any of the plays before tackling Macbeth. We know that he saw Macbeth performed in London only in June, 1847, after the opera's premiere, when he was there to supervise the production of Masnadieri.

NOTE: This is the talk as originally written, which proved to be too long for the actual presentation.

## The works based on Shakespeare

### Macbeth – 1847

“Now here is my Macbeth, which I love more than all my other operas and which I think most worthy to present to you. It comes from my heart: let yours receive it, and let it always be a witness to the gratitude and affection borne for you by

Your most affectionate G. Verdi”  
Letter to Barezzi, 25 March 1847

### Re Lear

### Otello – 1887

### Falstaff – 1893



## Introduction, con'd

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The three operas based on works by Shakespeare are Macbeth and Otello, based on the the plays of the same name,, and Falstaff, based on the play The Merry Wives of Windsor, with some little material relating to the character of Falstaff taken from Henry IV, Parts I and II. Verdi also worked on an opera based on the play King Lear, but it was never finished.

Macbeth may be distinguished from the latter two operas because it was composed in 1846-47, during Verdi's "years in the galley" as he described them, when he was composing more than an opera per year. It was a favorite of Verdi among his own works and when it was successful, he dedicated it to his father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi, in a letter of March 25, 1847.

He worked on Re Lear on and off between 1850 and 1857, when he apparently gave up on it, the most probable reason being his dissatisfaction with the work on the libretto.

Otello premiered in 1887 when Verdi was 73 years old, and like Falstaff to follow, was not written to commission. This meant that he there was no need to compose in haste, nor to please anyone but himself. For these two last operas he had the collaboration of Arrigo Boito, both a man of letters and a composer in his own right, a lover of Shakespeare, whose tact and talent were a boon to the work, and who became like a surrogate son to "the Maestro," as he always addressed Verdi in their correspondence.

Falstaff, which premiered in 1893, when Verdi was 79, has the further distinction of being a comedy. This was his first comedy since the fiasco in 1840 of Un Giorno in Regno, his second opera, and therefore the fulfillment of his long-term desire to write a successful one. Many consider these last two operas to be Verdi's masterworks, in which he achieved the culmination of all he had been aspiring to in his long career.

The transformation from play to opera  
Synopsis and Libretto  
Condensation of the work  
The business of opera

“A Libretto! A libretto, and the opera is made!”  
Verdi, Letter to Escudier



## Introduction, con'd

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Let's consider for a moment what is involved in the conversion of a work of literature to an opera. First, a synopsis was prepared, an outline of the scenes and musical numbers envisioned for the opera, to be fleshed out by the libretto. Verdi frequently himself prepared a detailed synopsis of the proposed libretto.

Libretti were written in various meters of rhyming verse., and it was the job of the librettist to turn the synopsis into poetry suitable to being set to music.

On average, it takes about three times as long to sing something as to speak it, and this was one reason that stories were often compressed with subplots and characters omitted.

Other reasons were the economics and conventions of the opera business.. Why pay two singers when their functions in the drama could be combined in one character? Also, traditionally, there were certain primary roles and secondary roles in opera, somewhat apportioned among the different types of voices, which did not necessarily dovetail with the cast of characters of the original drama.

## The transformation from play to opera, con'd

The purpose of opera

I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion



## Introduction, con'd

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Perhaps most significantly, opera, in comparison to a story or a play, achieves its purpose not in the logical elaboration of a theme or the contemplation of the human condition, but in the intensification of the human emotion and the drama through music. In the pruning of the original work, elements which lend themselves more to the musical drama may be chosen over those not so well suited, resulting in a different emphasis.

Another factor, of course, is the extent to which a librettist or composer wishes to improve upon the original or depart from it for his own reasons. Verdi was most meticulous about being faithful to Shakespeare in some ways. I suppose when he deviated he wanted it to be on purpose.

Now let's turn to the individual operas.. If something is unclear because I have not provided a full synopsis of each opera, please don't hesitate to ask a question. One real boon: When you have Shakespeare for your English translation, the subtitles really improve!

Witchcraft and stage craft  
Historical accuracy

“Do me the favor of informing Perrone [the costumer] that the period of Macbeth is well after that of Ossian and the Roman Empire...”

Letter to Tito Ricordi, February 1847



## Macbeth

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It might be pointless to criticize departures of the opera from the play of Macbeth, since there was a long stage tradition, stemming from the time of Shakespeare himself, of taking any opportunity for sensation, emphasizing the spectacular and supernatural elements of the play, elevating the witches to the status of main characters, adding songs and dances, elaborate costumes, and, of course, stage machinery to enable them to fly. The character of Hecate, who appears in Act III, scene v and Act IV, scene i of the play seems to have been written by Thomas Middleton, or at any rate not by Shakespeare.. So from almost the very beginning there was no standard, authentic version to which any other could be compared. In fact, in spite of the freedom with which Verdi handled the text of the play, it is often conceded that he captured the spirit of the drama and conveyed its essence as Shakespeare would largely have approved.

Unlike Othello and Falstaff, the roots of the play are English, the source being the Chronicles of Holinshed, taken from the accounts of the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth. Not strictly speaking histories, these accounts included the role of the witches. Shakespeare, of course, tailored the story to his purpose, and Lady Macbeth is his own creation. That Verdi was punctilious about certain matters is illustrated by the following letter concerning the costumes for the play:

“Do me the favor of informing Perrone [the costumer] that the period of Macbeth is well after that of Ossian and the Roman Empire. Macbeth assassinated Duncan in 1040, and he was then killed in 1057..... Don't fail to give this information to Perrone immediately, as I believe him to be mistaken about the period.”

Letter to Tito Ricordi, February, 1847.

Povero Piave!  
“Poche parole! Stilo conciso!”  
“That’s how the Maestro wants it.”  
The composer as librettist



## Macbeth, con'd

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His librettist for *Macbeth* was Francesco Piave, with whom he had worked on *Ernani* and *I Due Foscari* and with whom he would work on more operas than any other librettist. Piave was a long-suffering, but not especially competent, soul, who learned to write as Verdi directed, but had a difficult apprenticeship.. Verdi wrote the synopsis for the opera himself, as he was wont to do. He wrote to Piave regarding the work on *Macbeth* on September 22, 1846: “I’ve got the cavatina, which is better than the introduction, but oh, how prolix you are!” He went on to complain that Lady Macbeth’s *recitativo* was too long and not sufficiently “lofty” in style, there were too many lines in Macbeth and Banquo’s duet, perhaps the lines should be shorter in the witches’ chorus. And over and over in insulting capitals appeared “POCHE PAROLE...STILO CONCISO.” (Few words...concise style.) He was not known as “The Bear of Busseto” for nothing.

Piave bore it all patiently, often remarking, “that’s how the Maestro wants it.” Verdi sometimes had to hire another librettist to effect what Piave had been unable to provide, and this was also the case with *Macbeth*. He brought in Andrea Maffei, a friend, poet and translator, who wrote, or rewrote, entirely the witches’ chorus in Act III and the sleepwalking scene. Piave was nevertheless brought in on the revision of *Macbeth* 18 years later, although it appears that Verdi wrote the new aria for Lady Macbeth, “*La luce langue*,” virtually himself.



## Verdi's modifications

How many witches in a coven?  
Shakespeare forgot the patriotic chorus scene  
Now auditioning for bards and women



## Macbeth, con'd

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One of the first changes Verdi made was to multiply the number of witches from 3 to 3 groups of six, perhaps because dancing is called for in Act IV, or because he had choruses in mind for them.

Lennox, Ross and other Scottish nobleman are eliminated, their dramatic functions given to other characters.

The role of Duncan, the murdered king, is mute. When he arrives at the castle, we see him only pass across the stage in the background, miming greetings.

Verdi eliminates the drunken porter who admits MacDuff and Lennox to the castle after the murder of Duncan, a bit of comic relief that was not congenial to the Italian notion of tragedy.

Enhancements which are strictly operatic are the chorus of murderers before the assassination of Banquo, and the brindisi, or drinking song, sung by Lady Macbeth at the banquet.

Act IV, scene ii, the murder of MacDuff's family, is omitted, as is Act IV, scene iii, the conversation between MacDuff, Malcom, the king's son, and Ross in England.

In that conversation, they refer to the plight of Scotland under Macbeth's bloody reign and Verdi chooses to show this by adding an entirely new scene, Act IV, scene i, of the opera, providing Scottish refugees the opportunity to sing a patriotic chorus in the tradition of *Va pensiero*. The last 7 scenes of the play, which are mostly short ones depicting the movement of the armies and the state of battle, are reduced to one scene, a series of vignettes, with no real damage to the drama.

In the 1847 version, Macbeth dies on stage, unlike in the play.

In both versions, the opera ends with a chorus of rejoicing, the only of Verdi's tragic operas to do so. Except for the multitudinous witches, Verdi had so pruned the cast that there were difficulties with the number of singers available for group numbers and for the chorus at the end he calls for the appearance of "Bards and Women" to round out the voices.

## “Is this a dagger?” Instructing Varese

“I shall never stop telling you to study the words and the dramatic situation; then the music will come right of its own accord.”

Macbeth, BBC-Time Life Films, Ambrose Video,  
New York, NY  
Act II, scene i, Nicol Williamson as Macbeth



Macbeth, RM Art DVD, Opernhaus Zurich,  
Franz Welser-Most, Conductor, 2001  
Act I, scene ii, Thomas Hampson as Macbeth



## Macbeth, con'd

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Much, however, remained faithful to Shakespeare. Let's compare the opera and the play in regard to the famous scene in which Macbeth hallucinates a dagger just before he exits to kill Duncan. Here is the play.

Before we listen to the opera, let's hear some of Verdi's directions to Felice Varese, the first MacBeth: "...But when you're left alone you get more and more carried away and you seem to see a dagger in your hands which gives you the idea of how to kill Duncan. This is the most beautiful passage, poetically and dramatically, and you must put a lot into it! Remember that it's night; everyone's asleep; so that this duet should be sung *sotto voce* but in a hollow voice such as will inspire terror. ..."

Letter to Varese, January 1847

## The Villainess

“I would like Lady Macbeth to look ugly  
 and malignant.”

### Instructing Marianna Barbieri-Nini

Macbeth, Act V, scene I,  
 Jane Lapotaire as Lady Macbeth



Macbeth, Act IV, scene iv,  
 Paoletta Marrocu, Lady Macbeth



## Macbeth, con'd

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Perhaps the most significant departure from the play is one of emphasis – Verdi’s enhancement of the role of Lady Macbeth.

In Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth, although she and her husband discuss the necessity of Banquo’s murder, does not participate in the planning of it. In the opera, not only does she do so, but has an entire aria about it, “*La luce langue*.” Some of the words are even borrowed from Macbeth’s omitted speeches.

Of course in Shakespeare she does not sing a drinking song at the banquet at which Banquo’s ghost appears as she does in the opera.

She appears at the end of the Apparition of the Kings scene to sing a duet with her husband about the murder of the Macduffs, in which she takes no part in the play.

Most prominent of all is the amount of Act IV devoted to the sleepwalking scene, taking up fully a third of the time which in Shakespeare takes only one eighth of the time for the equivalent number of scenes remaining.

Let’s watch the sleepwalking scene in the play.

Before we hear the opera, let’s consider Verdi’s instructions to the singer.

Amazingly, Verdi’s directions to Lady Macbeth are that she should not sing the sleepwalking aria at all, or at least sing it unbeautifully, in a “raw, choked, hollow voice.” One commentator has asserted that the natural character of the music is such that it must almost of necessity be sung beautifully. He thinks Verdi was trying to make the soprano do with a “deformed appearance and a distorted voice” what he had been reluctant to do with the music. Another said, “... to combat the narcissistic disposition of the Italian *prima donna*, a touch of exaggeration was needed.”

## The Witches

“The witches dominate the drama; everything derives from them-coarse and gossipy in the first act, sublime and prophetic in the third.”

Macbeth, Act IV, scene i, Brenda Bruce, Eileen Way,  
Anne Dyson as the witches



## Macbeth, con'd

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Verdi saw the chief roles in the opera as three: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and the witches. In a letter to Tito Ricordi, 4 February, 1865, he said, “The witches dominate the drama; everything derives from them-coarse and gossipy in the first act, sublime and prophetic in the third.”

He directed Piave that for Macbeth, he must “adopt a sublime diction, except in the witches’ choruses, which must be trivial, yet bizarre and original.”

Let’s watch the witches from the play, Act IV, scene I, as they prepare their noxious brew in the cave while waiting for Macbeth to come and hear the second set of prophesies.

## The witches, con'd

1. Tre volte miagola la gatta in fregola
2. Tre volte l'upupa lamenta e ulula
3. Tre volte l'istrice guaisce al vento  
Questo e il momento.

All: Su via sollecite giriam la pentola  
Mesciamvi in circolo gli arcani intingoli  
Sirocchie all'opra! L'acqua gia fuma  
Crepita e spuma.



Macbeth, Act III, scene i, Witches' Chorus



## Macbeth, con'd

13

Before we hear the witches' chorus in the opera, I thought the witches' incantation provides a good opportunity to contrast Shakespeare's iambic pentameter with the poetry of the libretto. It's no wonder Piave had trouble - with all that menagerie, including hedge-pigs and howlets, and "Double, double, toil and trouble!"

The Italian version of the chorus is shorter and I've reproduced only a short section here. It uses much of the imagery of the English, but sometimes the sense is altered to provide the rhyme. It does not follow Shakespeare as closely as the subtitles suggest:

Here is a translation with no attempt to rhyme the English:

Three times mewed the cat in heat  
Three times the hoopoo lamented and howled  
Three times the porcupine whined to the wind  
This is the moment.  
Speedily we go 'round the pot  
Pouring out in a circle the mysterious sauces  
Sisters, to work! The water already fumes  
Crackles and bubbles.

## A finger in every pie

“He must be wearing an ashen veil, but quite thin and fine, and just barely visible; and Banquo must have ruffled hair and various wounds visible on his neck.”

## Exasperating the singers



## Macbeth, con'd

14

There is little doubt that Verdi was a perfectionist and when his fame and popularity as Italy's foremost opera composer were established, he became more and more of an autocrat, with opinions and directions on every aspect of opera production. He wrote concerning the staging of the banquet scene:

“Note that Banquo's ghost must make his entrance from underground; it must be the same actor who played Banquo in Act I. He must be wearing an ashen veil, but quite thin and fine, and just barely visible; and Banquo must have ruffled hair and various wounds visible on his neck.”

One can't blame him for being concerned with the singing – it was after all the composer's job to rehearse the premiere of the opera. However, Marianna Barbieri-Nini, the first Lady Macbeth, described in her memoirs an extra rehearsal of the first-act duet on the evening of the dress rehearsal, with a theater full of guests:

When we were dressed and ready, Verdi signaled to me and Varesi to follow him into the wings. There he explained that he wanted us to accompany him to the foyer for another piano rehearsal of the accursed duet.

“Maestro,” I protested. “We are already in these Scottish costumes; how can we?”

“Put a cloak over them.”

And Varesi, annoyed at the strange request, dared to raise his voice:

“But we've already rehearsed it a hundred and fifty times, for God's sake!” To which Verdi replied,

“I wouldn't say that again for within half an hour it will be a hundred and fifty-one!”

The opening of *Macbeth* was a great success and Verdi dedicated it to his father-in-law as noted, who had been a tremendous help to him in his early career. Now we have to fast forward 32 years to talk about Otello.

## Retirement?

*"Are you serious about my moral obligation to compose? ...[T]he account is settled."*

Letter to the Countess Maffei, 1878

## Ricordi, the midwife



## Otello

15

In 1879, Verdi's friends were afraid he had retired. He had composed virtually nothing since the Requiem premiered in 1874; it was eight years since Aida. Verdi was not happy with the growing popularity of foreign music in Italy, and he was incensed by the opinion of some critics that he imitated Wagner. He responded to a letter of the Countess Maffei in 1878, in which she urged him to compose again:

"For what reason should I write? ... The results would be quite wretched. I would have it said of me all over again that I didn't know how to write and that I've become a follower of Wagner. Some glory! After a career of nearly 40 years to end up as an imitator!" And after another such urging letter, he replied as above.

Sometime in 1879, however, the idea for Otello was planted, the result of a coordinated effort led by Giulio Ricordi and involving Arrigo Boito, who was to be the librettist, Verdi's wife, Giuseppina, and others. Giulio was the grandson of Giovanni Ricordi, the head of the music publishing firm, House of Ricordi, with whom Verdi worked. He later told the story to a friend of how the subject was broached to Verdi: "The idea of the opera arose during a dinner among friends, when I chanced to turn the conversation on Shakespeare and Boito. At the mention of Othello I saw Verdi look sharply at me, with suspicion but with interest. He had certainly understood; he had certainly reacted. I believed that the time was ripe."

A Handy Libretto  
The Chocolate Project  
A Cloud on Title

"I would rather it were said 'he tried to pit his strength against that of a giant and was crushed' than 'he tried to hide behind the title of Jago.'"



Otello, con'd

16

Verdi's interest was piqued, but he was not yet ready to agree. Shown the scheme of the libretto soon after, he pronounced it excellent, but would not commit himself. He advised that it be finished, for it would "come in handy for yourself [meaning Boito]... for me... for someone else."

There were many more delays and interruptions in the composing of the opera, including time-outs for the revisions of Simone Boccanegra and Don Carlo. Verdi insisted on secrecy, and the project was referred to at times as "chocolate" or "the chocolate project." Finally he began to concentrate on the new work, finishing most of it between 1884 and 1886.

The original source for Shakespeare was a medieval Italian *novella*, or short story, which Shakespeare adapted.

In preparation, the opera was indiscriminately called either Otello or Jago. But the time came when the title had to be decided. The title Otello was problematic because Rossini had written an opera seria with the same title which was still being performed. Although it did not follow Shakespeare very well – it had a happy ending – it had some very fine music and an excellent last act which included a beautiful "Song of the Gondolier." There was an unwritten law of the theater which provided that a new version of a subject already treated should have a new title. Another unwritten law, however, allowed that a subsequent opera judged superior should be allowed to usurp its predecessor's title. Verdi decided on Otello for the title, saying:

"I would rather it were said 'he tried to pit his strength against that of a giant and was crushed' than 'he tried to hide behind the title of Jago.'"



## Boito's Act One

"There are too many verses in the solo of Otello,  
and the storm is interrupted for too long."

Letter to Boito, 14 May 1886

## Establishing Otello's character

Othello, BBC and Time-Life Films, Ambrose Video, N.Y.

Act I, scene iii; Anthony Hopkins as Othello

Otello, Metropolitan Opera, James Levine, Conductor,  
Deutsche Grammophon, UMG Recordings, NY, NY, 2004

Act I, Ch. 10; Placido Domingo and Renee Fleming



## Otello, con'd

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Let's consider some of the ways Boito made the transition from play to music drama. I'm referring to Boito alone here because he wrote a complete libretto before Verdi saw it, and had also done the synopsis himself. So, while Verdi certainly made suggestions and requested and collaborated on changes, he did not play as full a role in the construction of the libretto as he had in many previous operas.

In addition to the condensing of the text and the elimination of some characters, Boito made two major modifications of the play. First, he eliminated Act I, which takes place in Venice, while the rest of the play occurs in Cyprus. One of the main functions of Act I of the play is to establish Othello's character. His fall will not be tragic if he is not a man of integrity, command, eloquence and self-mastery. In the opera, Othello is given a triumphant public entrance, establishing him immediately as a successful commander. In the play, much of the action so dramatically portrayed in the opera's opening storm scene takes place off-stage in Act II and is merely reported. One way Shakespeare does establish Othello in Act I of the play is by causing him to have to defend his elopement and marriage to Desdemona before the Duke of Venice and the Senators, when her father accuses him of persuading her to marry by witchcraft or other devious means. Boito uses much of Othello's speech before the Senate in the duet between Othello and Desdemona at the end of Act I. He also includes part of Othello's lines from Act II, scene i, with which he greets Desdemona on arriving in Cyprus. So we're getting the same information in the opera as in the play, but rearranged to provide the occasion for a love duet which also does double duty in portraying both *Otello's* character and the relationship between him and Desdemona.

Let's hear Othello's speech from the play.

Othello greets Desdemona, who has been awaiting his arrival.

Oth. O my fair warrior!

Des. My dear Othello!

Oth. It gives me wonder great as my content  
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy  
If after every tempest came such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!  
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas  
Olympus-high, and duck again as low  
As hell's from heaven! If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy; for, I fear,  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

Des. The heaven forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase,  
Even as our days do grow!

Oth. Amen to that, sweet powers!

I cannot speak enough of this content;  
It stops me here; it is too much of joy.  
And this, and this, the greatest discords be [kissing her]  
That e'er our hearts shall make!



## Otello, con'd

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Here is the short additional excerpt from Act II which is also used in the duet. Now we'll listen to the duet. (Caption for the duet on previous slide).

In addition to Othello and Desdemona, Act I of the play introduces Iago and Roderigo, who begin their conspiracy to bring about Cassio's downfall against the backdrop of the people's celebration of victory over the Turks. Roderigo incites Cassio to drink and fight, causing Othello to dismiss him as lieutenant, an incident which does not happen until Act II in the play. Desdemona's pleading later on Cassio's behalf for Othello to reinstate him is part of the apparent evidence of her infidelity which so inflames Othello. So our drama has been well set in motion with all essential plot elements efficiently in place.

## A problem in Act III The return of the Turks?

“That attack of the Turks is like a fist breaking the window of a room where two people are dying of asphyxiation.”

Letter from Boito, 18 Nov. 1880



## Otello, con'd

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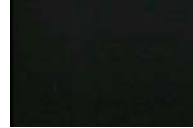
The second major modification Boito made was in response to Verdi's expressed need to find room for a concertato act-finale – that is, one of those pieces at the end of an act when the action stops and the major characters stand and sing their various feelings not to each other but to the audience. Othello did not provide an obvious occasion for such a piece. After Othello strikes Desdemona at the end of Act III, as Verdi put it, “there is nothing more to say- at the most a sentence, a reproach, a curse on the barbarian who has insulted a woman!” And here we would either bring down the curtain or else *invent* something that is not in Shakespeare!”

And here, Verdi made the suggestion that they do just that: He proposes adding a fanfare and the announcement that the Turks are reinvading, allowing Otello to brandish his sword and gather the soldiers, while Desdemona prays for her husband.

In Boito's opinion, bringing back the Turks interrupted the tension building in the drama. He replied, in part, to Verdi's suggestion as above.

## Boito's solution

Othello, Act IV, scene I, Anthony Hopkins as Othello,  
Bob Hoskins as Iago.



Otello, Act III, Chs. 38, 39, Placido Domingo as  
Othello, Renee Fleming as Desdemona, and  
James Morris as Iago



## Otello, con'd

20

But, Boito duly rewrote the Act III finale, rousing Othello and putting in the fanfare, although not bringing back the Turks. Verdi praised his work, but expressed doubt whether Othello's energetic call for renewed celebration of the victory, while providing the necessary dramatic curtain, was consistent with the logic of the drama. Boito actually completely agreed that the call for celebration was not appropriate, and in a letter that is the epitome of tact, he managed to say that he agreed with Verdi's doubts while still allowing that the ending that Verdi proposed would be splendid.

But he did have a solution to the problem. He suggested that *Otello's* fainting fit be moved from its original place in Act IV, scene I, to the end of Act III. Verdi was immensely pleased with this idea, saying he liked the fainting fit there better than in its original place in the drama. Let's watch the original fainting scene and then the concertato finale.

In Act IV, the last Act of the opera, Othello strangles Desdemona and then kills himself when the truth of her fidelity is revealed. A surprising difference is that in the play, Iago is captured and held for trial, while in the opera, he escapes from the scene in the bedroom and it remains unknown if he ever suffers for his misdeeds.

The story is told that when the nineteen-year-old Arturo Toscanini returned to Parma from Milan where he had gone to hear the premiere, he woke his mother, saying "Otello is a masterpiece. Get down on your knees mother and say Viva Verdi."

## Command performance

### Boito, the Maestro of persuasion

"...[W]hat joy to be able to say to the public: 'Here we are again! Roll up!'"

Letter to Boito, 7 July 1889



## Falstaff

21

It is a generally accepted tradition dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Shakespeare wrote The Merry Wives of Windsor at the command of Queen Elizabeth. The reason for her request was that she liked Falstaff so much in the two parts of Henry IV that she commanded that he continue in another play, and moreover, he was to be shown in love. In addition to the character of Falstaff, many features of the play appear to be original, but, according to some sources, it has some roots in an Italian Renaissance *novella*, The Tale of the Two Lovers of Pisa in 1590. Boito attributed it to an Italian tale from Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's 1558 collection, *Il Pecorone*. The *commedia dell'arte* connection is exploited in one version of the opera from which will view scenes.

Boito again had to persuade Verdi that he was not too old to embark on another project. There was only one way to finish his career better than with *Otello*, he said, and that was with a triumphant Falstaff. See quote above.

The conversion from opera to play was deftly accomplished by Boito, who condensed 23 scenes down to 6. Characters and subplots were omitted and additional material for the character of Falstaff is garnered from Henry IV.

## The Honor Catechism

The Merry Wives of Windsor, BBC-Time-Life Films, Ambrose Video, NY  
Act II, scene ii, Richard Griffiths as Falstaff, Nigel Terry as Pistol

Falstaff, The Royal Opera House, Bernard Haitink, Conductor, BBC Opus Arte  
Act I, scene I, Ch. 4, Bryn Terfel as Falstaff, Peter Hoare as Bardolph,  
Gwynne Howell as Pistol



## Falstaff, con'd

22

Let's see how this worked in a famous piece, the "Honor Catechism." At the end of Act I, scene I, Falstaff has told his henchmen Bardolph and Pistol, about his plan to woo two ladies of the town, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, with an eye toward benefitting from their control of the household purse strings. When Pistol and Bardolph refuse to deliver the letters as beneath their honor and dignity, Falstaff berates them and discourses on the subject of "honor." By integrating the original "Honor Catechism" from Act V, scene v, of Henry IV, Part I, with a short speech about honor given by Falstaff in The Merry Wives, Act II, scene ii, Boito restored to his character the full sense of his thoughts on this subject. Of course, in Henry IV, he's talking about the role of honor on the battlefield. First, the short scene from The Merry Wives.

Falstaff's Catechism of Honour from Henry the Fourth, Part I.

Act V, scene ii.

It is the eve of battle. Falstaff expresses the wish that it were bedtime and all were well. Prince Hal. Why, thou owest God a death. [Exit]

Falstaff. "Tis not due yet: I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward of him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter: honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air; a trim reckoning!~ Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, 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.



## Falstaff, con'd

23

Unfortunately, I do not have Henry IV available, so we'll have to read the speech from that play (see slide).

Now here's the opera version. In this production, the director wanted to hark back to the medieval commedia dell'arte. (Caption for opera excerpt on previous slide.)

“When I was a page”  
“Quand’ero paggio”

Falstaff, *Teatro alla Scala*, Ricordo Muti, Conductor,  
EuroArts DVD Video, Canada, 2001  
Act II, scene ii, Ch. 19, Ambrogio Maestri as Falstaff,  
Barbara Frittoli as Mistress Ford



## Falstaff, con'd

24

Our next selection is a famous one, and it has to do for an aria since the pickings here are very slim. About as slim as Falstaff says he was when a page to the Duke of Norfolk and “could have crept into any alderman’s thumb-ring.” It’s not found in The Merry Wives of Windsor; the idea comes from King Henry IV Part I, Act II, scene iv, when Falstaff’s replies to Prince Hal’s question as to how long it was since he was able to see his own knee.

He’s singing to Mistress Ford, with whom he has an assignation one afternoon when her husband isn’t home. This production of Falstaff , from which we will hear “Quand’ero paggio” and, later, Fenton’s Sonnet, is by the the Teatro alla Scala, but it is recorded, not in Milan, but live at the Teatro Verdi, in Busseto, the town near which Verdi was born. The scenery and costumes are recreated from an historical performance conducted by Arturo Toscanini to mark Verdi’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Now we’re going to see the heart of the comedy – the scene wherein Falstaff ends up getting tossed out the window into the Thames with the dirty laundry. The problem is that Falstaff has also tried to woo Mistress Page, by sending her a letter identical to the one he sent to Mistress Ford. Since the ladies have compared notes, they’ve arranged for the husband to arrive in the middle of the romantic assignation and make it necessary for Falstaff to hide in the laundry basket.



“Affogo!” A very big bundle of laundry  
“Trionfo!” The success of the plan  
The real love story

The Merry Wives of Windsor, BBC & Time-Life Films, Ambrose Video,  
Act III, scene iii, Richard Griffiths as Falstaff, Judy Davis as Mistress  
Ford, Prunella Scales as Mistress Page, Ben Kingsley as Ford.



Falstaff, Royal Opera House, Bernard Haitink, Conductor,  
Act II, scene ii, Ch. 19, Bryn Terfel as Falstaff, Barbara Frittoli as Alice  
Ford, Diana Montague as Meg Page, Roberto Frontali as Ford.



## Falstaff, con'd

25

In the opera, we also see the young lovers, Nannetta, or Anne, and Fenton in this scene. Here is Boito's conception of how to use the love story in the opera:

“This little love story between Nannetta and Fentone must appear in very frequent bursts; in all the scenes where they appear they will kiss secretly in corners, cleverly, boldly, taking care not to be noticed, with fresh little phrases and brief, very rapid and sly little dialogues from the beginning to the end of the comedy. It will be a very lighthearted love, constantly disturbed and interrupted and always ready to begin again. We must not forget this color, which seems good to me.

Letter to Verdi, 7 July 1889

In this scene, the lovers hide behind the screen, are heard billing and cooing, and are mistaken for Mistress Ford and Falstaff by Ford and his fellow searchers.

For this scene, we're back to the the Royal Opera House Production to see the *commedia* touches added.

Falstaff's last trial  
 Who will marry Nannetta?

Fenton's sonnet - "*Dal labbro il canto estasiato vola*"

"To be sure, Fenton's song is pasted in there to give the tenor a solo, and this is too bad. Shall we cut it?" Letter from Boito

Falstaff, Teatro alla Scala, Ricordo Muti, Conductor,  
 EuroArts DVD Video, Canada, 2001  
 Act III, scene ii, Ch. 25, Juan Diego Florez as Fenton



Falstaff, con'd

26

The final punishment devised by the ladies for Falstaff's presumptuous designs is to lure him to Windsor Park at midnight by the promise of meeting Mistress Ford, there to be accosted and berated, both verbally and physically, by virtually the entire cast disguised as fairies, woodmen, etc. I wish we had time to see the entire last Act of both the opera and the play. In the play as well as the opera there is a Fairy Song, and in the version of the play that we've been watching, there is a country dance around the prostrate Falstaff. The ambiance is similar to that of A Midsummer-Night's Dream. The subplot of both play and opera, who will marry Nannetta, is resolved by a marriage in masque in which the other suitors are foiled and young love prevails. The lovers and Falstaff are both forgiven, and everyone happily goes off to supper at the Fords' after singing, in the opera, the fugue, "*Tutto nel mondo e burla*" ("All the world is a joke"), which ends with, "*Ride ben chi ride la risata final.*" ("He laughs well who has the last laugh.")

Since we unfortunately don't have time for all that, we are going to end on a beautiful, but un-Shakespearean note. At the beginning of Act III, scene ii. of the opera. Fenton sings a lovely song "From the lips the song flies in ecstasy" which ends in a refrain the lovers have sung before: "A kissed mouth doesn't lose luck, Rather it is renewed as the moon is...As the moon is." Like many of the lines illustrating Fenton and Nannetta's love, these have their source in non-Shakespearean literature. They are a quotation from a story in Boccaccio's Decameron. In any case, while the song may indeed be pasted in there to give the tenor a solo, we can all be glad that there was no decision to cut it.

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