

Verdi and Shakespeare

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Under the sponsorship of our Alumni Association two free performances of scenes from Shakespeare's Othello and Verdi's Otello were given in the College on April 19 by members of the Theatre Workshop and the Opera Workshop.



On an Opera Quiz during a Metropolitan Opera broadcast, one of the panelists claimed that Verdi's *Otello* is greater than Shakespeare's *Othello*. This is utter nonsense. Each of these creative artists is supreme in his own medium.

Verdi in his so-called Shakesperian operas uses the dramatist merely as a springboard, a basis upon which to build his decidedly blood and thunder Italian operas. Master that he was, he recognized that opera demanded a treatment of plot vastly different than did the spoken drama. He knew that the action must of necessity be compressed to allow for various orchestral and vocal effects. This in itself is commendable. But he frequently omits necessary Shakesperian expository material, subtle motivations and nuances both in plot and in character essential for the better understanding of these. More often than not he changes the text — at times beyond the recognition of the familiar Shakesperian lines — and substitutes for the original some absurdly florid nineteenth-century rhetoric. Changes such as these do not always manifest an intimate familiarity or even a concern for the original text. Musically, however, Verdi is for the most part superb.

Verdi's Shakesperian operas must not, therefore, be regarded as unadulterated Shakespeare. Even in his greatest of these, *Falstaff*, in which he comes nearest to his source material, Verdi did not choose the greater Falstaff of Shakespeare's *Henry plays*, but the credulous, almost asinine Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a sequel to the other, and sequels are rarely, if ever, as effective as the original. The Falstaff of the historical plays would never have fallen into the farcically ridiculous situations in which we find him in *The Merry Wives*. On the contrary, not only would his quick wit have devised some means by which to extricate himself, but he would have turned the prank on the tricksters.

Verdi's Falstaff fits into the tradition of the stupidly amorous old dotards of Italian comic opera in pursuit of some pretty young thing principally for her dowry.

Falstaff here is a near kinsman of Don Bartolo and Don Pasquale with this exception, that the holders of the purse strings in both the play and the opera are married women and much older than the heroines of Italian comic opera. That Verdi did not quite understand Shakespeare's supreme Falstaff is manifested by the fact that he takes the fat knight's "honor" soliloquy of the *Henry plays* and gives it to the stupid fool of *The Merry Wives*. Here it is no longer a soliloquy. Falstaff demands that his cronies Bardolph and Pistol carry his amatory epistles to the two rich matrons of Windsor, which they refuse on the ground that honor precludes such a mission. This, of course, is the cue for Falstaff to plunge headlong into his musical diatribe on "honor"— here padded beyond the effectiveness of the original passage. In magnificent music Falstaff castigates the two ruffians. Psychologically, however, even in its mutilated form this passage ill becomes this Falstaff, for he is incapable of the clever syllogistic reasoning of Hal's Falstaff. Nevertheless, what *Falstaff* lacks in the lustiness so dominant in Shakespeare's play, Verdi compensates for in his magnificent score.

As for Verdi's *Otello*, except for the kiss-motive scene which includes some slight references to the Othello-Desdemona courtship days, Verdi omits Shakespeare's entire first act. In this extremely important portion of the drama lie the motivating forces of the entire play. Without this material the opera loses the *raison d'être* of the subsequent scenes and becomes instead a typical nineteenth century melodrama, of course with glorious Verdian music. The deep psychological significance of the interaction of character upon character and character upon situation is lost. For instance, the heart-rending cry of the grief-stricken Brabantio, on discovering Desdemona's elopement with the Moor ("For nature so preposterously to err") becomes the *leit-motif* that echoes over and again throughout Shakespeare's play. It is taken up by Iago in his Temptation scene with Othello, and, convinced by Iago's "proof" of Desdemona's infidelity,

it is finally accepted by Othello himself. Without this extremely important Shakesperian bit, the plot of the opera is almost motiveless.

Again, instead of the subtly delineated Iago of Shakespeare — the seasoned soldier whose petition to Othello for promotion in the Venetian army the Moorish general rejects in favor of the less-deserving Cassio, his love-messenger between himself and Desdemona, moreover, a handsome fellow who knows his military tactics not from hard experience on the battlefield but from theory, an alien from the city-state of Florence and not Venetian like Iago, the opera offers an Iago with a “motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity.” His famous “Credo” reveals a despicable, unearthly creature, an evil genius, whom God “fashioned” from some “vile germ of nature, some paltry atom.” Since God intended him for evil, reasons this Iago, he cares nothing regarding the consequences of his foul deeds, for “after death there is nothing/And heav’n is an ancient lie.” Most baritones, singing the role of Iago, conclude the “Credo” with an outburst of melodramatic laughter. This is hardly subtle. Even less subtle is the diamond-studded doublet in which the Iago of the Metropolitan Opera’s production comes galumphing on to the stage. He could readily be mistaken for one of the Venetian magnificos instead of the petty officer, Othello’s orderly, whom the Moor orders to the bay to “disembark his coffers.”

To return to the “Credo.” This sort of Mephistophilian philosophizing is not in the nature of Shakespeare’s Iago. He claims no such Stygian origin. Shakespeare’s is a human Iago who feels a deep resentment against Othello for disregarding the strict military code concerning promotion “by old-gradation” instead of by favoritism. Throughout all of his soliloquies Iago is concerned with his plan to revenge himself on Othello, and “to diet this revenge” Desdemona becomes the useful instrument. Othello’s hurt to Iago’s pride rankles in the ensign’s heart and embitters him to the point of vengeance through this one thing that Othello holds dearer than life itself — his lovely Desdemona.

Shakespeare’s magnificent battle-victorious Othello is defeated in his attempt to grapple with life off the battlefield. In his soul’s anguish he cries out, “But yet the pity of it, Iago! Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!” This bit alone makes of Shakespeare’s play a human document. Without it, Verdi’s libretto becomes very nearly an Italian melodrama with an almost motiveless diabolical villain but without the Satanic wit that should accompany this sort of character.

But what glorious music Verdi composed for this same *Otello!*

In Verdi’s *Macbeth* we have one of the most atrocious mutilations of Shakespeare’s play since Nahum Tate’s perversion of *King Lear* (1681). Instead of Shakes-

peare’s twelve-line significantly dramatic opening scene of the three Weird Sisters on the blasted heath planning to meet with the victorious Macbeth after his battle with the treacherous Cawdor, Verdi generously provides us with a whole chorus of witches. Verdi’s chillingly descriptive music here is in keeping with the Walpurgis Nacht atmosphere of his scene. But this is not Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s scene is short, pithy, and full of dark forebodings of dire events.

In the scene of the murder of Banquo, instead of the three individualized murderers whom Macbeth sends to do away with the man whose being he most fears, Verdi has the entire male section of the opera chorus swoop down upon poor Banquo. After this frightful onslaught by a gang of men large enough to do battle with a small division of troops, Shakespeare’s “blood-bolten’d” Banquo at the Metropolitan appears in his ghost scene point-device with not a hair on his head out of place — this despite Macbeth’s line in the play, “Never shake/thy gory locks at me.” Macbeth’s consorting with the ghost here is wholly incorrect; Shakespeare’s Macbeth is rooted to the spot with fear.

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.

In this presentation Macbeth rushes madly up to the ghost, throws his mantle over it, and the ghost obligingly vanishes through the seat of Macbeth’s chair in which he appeared, into the trap to the regions below the stage. This is ridiculous. In this same Verdian banquet scene Macduff is surprisingly present. Macbeth in Shakespeare complains to Lady Macbeth that “Macduff denies his person/At our bidding.” By the way, Lady Macbeth sings a drinking song here to divert the attention of the guests from Macbeth’s hysterical outbursts.

Except for the dagger soliloquy Shakespeare’s text is cut to shreds. The important soliloquies that give an insight into Macbeth’s tortured soul and motivate all his actions are omitted in Verdi! Lady Macbeth is painted in the blackest colors, in fact, Verdi makes her the prime mover in all the murderous plots. Of course, this is not so in Shakespeare. The idea of Duncan’s murder originates with Macbeth.

“My thought whose murders yet is but fantastical.” Both, however, plan the manner of the murder. Macbeth’s subsequent crimes to secure his ill-gotten throne are carried through without her help. In Shakespeare, therefore, characters are never all good nor all bad; there are subtle shadings. These Verdi never catches. Shakespeare prepares us, in the scene of the discovery of Duncan’s murder, for Lady Macbeth’s sleep-walking scene. Not so Verdi. In other words, in Shakespeare we have suspense, never surprise. The sleep-walking scene itself in the opera is, nevertheless, one of the sublimest passages in all of Verdi. This quality he achieves through

his almost slavish following of the dramatist's text and thus catches the spirit and the significance of the whole episode. Also the nine measures of the off-beat note played during the scene by the English horn as if to point an accusing finger at the unfortunate lady, is superb in its blood-curdling effect. The director's bringing her back in this aria to the actual scene of Duncan's murder is a stroke of genius.

In dealing, then, with Shakespeare's plays as libretti for the three Verdi-Shakespearian operas, one could very readily say with the fine eighteenth-century classical

scholar, Richard Bentley, commenting on Alexander Pope's translation of Homer, "A pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer." So with Verdi we must not call his Shakespearian operas "Shakespeare." We do not go to the opera house to see Shakespeare performed. For this we resort to the legitimate theater.

These Shakespearian operas are typically Italian in every aspect. Verdi uses the dramatist's material to give him a magnificent foundation for his unsurpassable Italian operas, and we must rejoice that he had the supreme genius to do so.

Nu Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Hunter

Beatrice F. Hyslop

The society of Phi Beta Kappa was founded in 1776, at the College of William and Mary, in Virginia. Not until a century later, in 1875, were women elected to membership—for the first time by the Phi Beta Kappa Chapter at the University of Vermont.

One hundred seventy colleges in the country (out of over two thousand) today have Chapters of the Society, which are established upon the United Chapters' approval of local applications for charters.

Nu Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Hunter was chartered in 1920, the Golden Jubilee year of the College. Petition for the charter was sponsored by twelve members of the faculty, under the leadership of Professor George Meason Whicher, then the chairman of the Classics Department. Other members of the petitioning faculty were Gertrude Bishop Austin, Edward Sandford Burgess, Elizabeth Brownell Collier, Philip Raphael Vincent Curoe, Dora Wilhelmina Davis, George Samler Davis, Luise Haessler, Elizabeth Mathews, Sarah Rush Parks and Frida von Unwerth. These faculty members had been elected to Phi Beta Kappa by the colleges from which they had been graduated. This tradition continues; new members of the staff and faculty elected to Phi Beta Kappa before coming to Hunter become members of Nu Chapter.

Undergraduates are elected annually to the Chapter on the basis of their records. About ten per cent—the top ten per cent—are elected from each graduating class. This year the number elected is 125, a record figure.

In addition to electing undergraduates, a Phi Beta Kappa chapter has the privilege of electing honorary

members, and alumni members who were not elected as undergraduates, but who have subsequently given outstanding service or who have made an outstanding contribution to scholarship. In the last three years President Meng, Dean Hopwood and Dean Gambrell have been elected to honorary membership by Nu Chapter; Professor Ruth Weintraub '25 and Dr. Charlotte Friend '44 to alumnae membership.

Nu Chapter has sponsored special programs and receptions, open to the public. During the current term there was a Phi Beta Kappa reception on Bronx Campus on February 19. Dean Nygreen emphasized, in addressing those present, the aspects of character and scholarship which election to Phi Beta Kappa signifies. Professor Eisele gave a lively discourse on great moments in the history of the College, and the writer spoke on the history of Phi Beta Kappa.

On March 3 the speaker at a reception at Park Avenue was Dr. Roy Nichols, Vice-Provost of the Graduate Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania and Phi Beta Kappa Senator of the Middle Atlantic Region to the United Chapters. His theme was "Scholarship, 1776 and Now." He contrasted the broad liberal scholarship of the past with today's specialization and orientation toward the vocational, which presents a special challenge to the role of Phi Beta Kappa as a guardian of scholarly values in our contemporary society.

At the annual initiation this June of newly elected members of Nu Chapter, Vera Micheles Dean, Professor of International Development at the Graduate School of New York University, was the speaker.