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# THE EVOLUTIONARY TRAJECTORY OF LIBRETTO ON DONIZETTI'S SERIOUS OPERAS, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN HIS OPERAS WITH THEMES FROM THE MOORISH KINGDOM AND ENGLISH HISTORY

## ABSTRACT

Donizetti's certain serious operas employed the ostensibly secure themes of the Moorish kingdom and the history of England. This study examines them on chronological order revealing an evolutionary course. Donizetti started by using stereotypes and applying happy endings but he gradually developed a mature romantic style expressing passion and suffering and employing mad scenes and tragic endings representing true romantic catharsis. Thus, although Donizetti was not a great renovator, he ultimately influenced the development of romantic opera.

## KEYWORDS

Donizetti's serious operas, Italian opera, Libretto, Romanticism

## SUMMARY

Donizetti was a prolific opera composer with evolutionary trajectory concerning the way he handled his libretto themes. He started conservatively to proceed towards a bolder elaboration which led to his mature romantic style and consequently fulfilled his desire for orders from the more liberal Paris.

On his serious operas, among other subjects he repeatedly used the ostensibly “safe” themes from the Moorish Kingdom and from the history of England. A study of these works on chronological order makes obtainable the course of the change from the subservience to the restrictions of his era to the composer’s mature romantic style.

Thus, regarding the “Castilian Ring-let”, the first three operas are diffused by stereotypes and have happy endings whereas *Sancia di Castiglia* (1832) focuses on passion and sufferings and has a tragic ending, *La favorite* (1840) is a grand opera commissioned for the Paris Opéra presenting well-expressed characterization and hints on the state-church relations, *Maria Padilla* (1841) offers a mad scene and *Dom Sébastien* (1843), is the composer’s chief achievement.

As to the operas with librettos from the history of England, again the two first are conservatively written with happy endings, while the "Tudor Queen Trilogy" that follows as well as *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Roberto Devereux*, (1837) offer true romantic catharsis.

The conclusion of the comparative study of the operas with common subjects is that Donizetti eventually managed to surpass the obstacles and to develop his inclination for dynamic plots. He ultimately influenced the development of romantic opera.

## 1. PREFACE

Donizetti was a prolific opera-composer with 35 works of the serious genre. He began his operatic career in 1818, at a time that the wave of Romanticism was sweeping many parts of Europe, despite that the Italian composers were possessed by conservatism which is also visible in Donizetti. However, an evolutionary trajectory is detected in the libretto theme of his serious operas, with an increasing attraction to the dynamic plots with tragic or dark and horrible elements, indicative of a turn of the composer away from conservatism towards innovation. It is indisputable that the circumstances of the period, especially the censorship of the time forced him to make changes in his librettos, so as to receive an order for an opera from the more liberal Paris which was his constant thought and desire.

In this study will be examined Donizetti's serious operas with themes taken from the Moorish Kingdom<sup>1</sup> and from the history of England. The specific themes have been repeatedly used in the course of his career thus enabling the researcher to see the progressive approach to Donizetti and the concessions that the composer had to make to overcome stereotypes and create his mature romantic style.

## 2 DONIZETTI'S SERIOUS OPERAS WITH THEMATOLOGY TAKEN FROM THE MOORISH KINGDOM

In the first half of the 19th century, Italian censorship was particularly sensitive to the issues of Christian monarchs. Thus, it was easier for a subject to be accepted if it referred to a non-Christian ruler, such as the dynasties of the Moorish Kingdom. In addition, Naples at that time was Spanish-dominated and Spanish-Moorish themes in Neapolitan operas were very popular (Ashbrook 2000: 499-500, Jellinek 2005: 743).

Donizetti wrote 7 serious operas with the above mentioned subject, that William Ashbrook calls Donizetti's "Castilian Ring-let": *Zoraida di Granata* (1822), *Alahor in Granata* (1825), *Elvinda* (1826), *Sancia di Castiglia* (1832), *La favorite* (1840) *Maria Padilla* (1841) and *Dom Sebastien, roi de Portugal* (1843) (Ashbrook 1982: 457).

### 2.1 THE OPERAS

#### *Zoraida di Granata* (1822)

Donizetti's first serious opera, in two acts was firstly performed at the Argentina Theatre in Rome, where it became a great success. The libretto was written by Merelli, inspired by the French novel *Gonsalve de Cordove* or *Grenade reconquise* by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian

(1793) and Romanelli's libretto for Giuseppe Nicolini's *Abenamet e Zoraide* (1805). Merelli followed Florian's narration quite faithfully.

The story is about Princess Zoraïda who loves Abenamet but the usurper of the throne, Almuzir, intends to marry her. The events appear in an expected way and the opera has a happy ending with Abenamet marrying Zoraïda (Ashbrook 1982: 535, 2000: 500, Osborne 1996: 147).

Two years after the opera's premiere, impresario Paterni invited Donizetti to adapt the opera for the same theatre by extending the role of Abenamet to the leading musico of the time, Rosmunda Pisaroni. The libretto was adapted by Ferretti. The opera, however, did not have the same success, which shows that in 1822, when the opera was premiered, the Romans were fascinated by the appearance of the new composer, while by 1824 they had become accustomed to him (Ashbrook: 1982: 287-288).

Nevertheless, Zoraïda brought Donizetti an invitation from the greatest impresario of the time, Domenico Barbaja, to the San Carlo theatre in Naples, where he settled for the next 16 years, although he accepted invitations from other theaters (Ashbrook 1982: 287, Smart 2001).

#### *Alahor in Granata* (1825)

As Neapolitan theatres remained closed in the winter of 1825-26, Donizetti accepted the position of musical director at the famous Carolino Theatre in the remote Sicilian city of Palermo, with the obligation to compose a new opera. After a series of disappointing delays, *Alahor in Granata*<sup>2</sup> in two acts premiered on January 7, 1826 (Freeman 1972: 243)

The plot takes place in medieval Granada during one of the Moorish wars at the end of the Moorish Kingdom. The relation of *Alahor* with *Zoraïda* is well-known as both derive from Florian's *Gonzalve de Cordove*, although the latter is more freely written (Ashbrook 2000: 500). The libretto is attributed to someone with the initials M.A. As Freeman writes, according to Ashbrook, the initials M.A. mean Maestro Anonimo or a similar term. But Freeman himself supports Pirrotta's view that it could mean "Molti autori". The same originals are also found in the opera *Don Pasquale*, Paris, 1842. Probably it was a local amateur from Palermo who wrote it, in collaboration with Donizetti (Freeman 1972: 245).

*Alahor's* libretto is based on Etienne de Jouy's libretto for Cherubini's *Les Abencerages* (1813) and Romani's libretto for Meyerbeer's *L'Esule di Granata* (1821), which in turn are based on Florian's *Gonzalve de Cordove*. The librettist kept the plot but changed the names and the kinship of the main characters (Freeman 1972: 246, Ashbrook 1982: 539-540, Osborne 1996: 161).

Romani's libretto for Meyerbeer had a minimal dramatic feeling<sup>3</sup>. The changes made for Donizetti's libretto did not improve it, neither poetically nor dramatically (Freeman 1972: 245-246).

After its premiere, the opera was performed three times at the San Carlo theatre, Naples, in 1826, and another time in Carolino theatre in Palermo, in 1830 (Freeman 1972: 240, Ashbrook 2000: 501).

The opera was a moderate success and according to the correspondent of the German Journal *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Vol. XXVIII (1826), col. 637, this was due to the conservatively written libretto. It was considered that the characters were rigid and the situations rather static, although they had a dramatic perspective. The whole opera was diffused by the stereotypes of the time. The only innovative element was the exotic setting. Otherwise, there was nothing Moorish in the story except the names of the characters. No attempt was made to combine the exotic elements into larger, more complex and powerful dramatic sections. The opera could have taken place in classical Greece or anywhere else, instead of Granada. The passions evoked in *Alahor* were subdued and the happy ending was characteristic of an outdated tradition (Freeman 1972: 246, Ashbrook 2000: 502).

The plot refers to the siblings Alahor and Zoraida, descendants of the late Moorish leader Abencerrage. Zoraida loves Hashem, the new leader of the Zegri, and brother of her father's murderer. In the end, Hashem meets Alahor and convinces him of his virtue and his love for Zoraida (Freeman 1972: 246, Osborne 1996: 161).

#### *Elvida* (1826)

Shortly after the production of *Alahor* in San Carlo in the summer of 1826, Donizetti wrote for the same theatre his only opera in one act, *Elvida*, for the birthday of Queen Maria Isabella of Spain, wife of Francis I of Naples. Librettist is the experienced Giovanni Schmidt who provided Donizetti precisely the text he had asked for: a solid non-historical plot with minimal complications, with safe references to the Spanish-Moorish conflict, highlighting the Spanish elements and with a happy ending. The source of the libretto is unknown. Donizetti received a small financial reward for the work and, as a result, he made the least effort in its composition (Ashbrook 1982: 296-297, 540, Jellinek 2005: 743).

#### *Sancia di Castiglia* (1832)

The opera is written in two acts and the libretto is written by Pietro Salatino based on an unknown source. It premiered in San Carlo. For the first time in an opera with a Moorish theme,

Donizetti highlighted passion and suffering. The composer unreservedly dedicated the opera to his teacher Mayr, which evinces his devotion to him. It is one of Donizetti's most inconspicuous operas. The reason is that the libretto, although leaden and providing some promising situations, is conservatively given and ultimately it does not take advantage of them. It offers little on the characterization of the roles. The only interesting character is that of Sancia, who is possessed by internal conflicts. The opera takes place in the 10th century Castile, where the Moorish prince Irkano tries to usurp the throne through his marriage to the widow Queen Sancia, while at the same time he is trying to persuade her to poison her son, Garzia. When the cup with the poison is presented to Garzia, his mother grabs it, drinks it and dies (Ashbrook 1982: 554, Osborne 1996: 214).

It is Donizetti's first opera with a Spanish theme that has a tragic ending, but there is a complete lack of mutual love between the characters. Irkano is characterized by selfishness and revenge, first impelling Sancia to poison Garzia, and later, when his future wife has died it is revealed that he had ulterior motives. Also from the way he handles the libretto, Donizetti showed that he was more attracted to Sancia's internal suffering rather than to her being a deceived lover (Ashbrook 1982: 333-334, Osborne 1996: 215).

#### *La favorite* (1840)

By 1840 Donizetti was a permanent resident of Paris. *La favorite* is a grand opera in four acts for the Opéra. The story unfolds having the background of the Moorish wars and the conflicts between church and state. The libretto has a mixed origin, which was not a disadvantage. In particular, *La favorite*, originated, from the one hand, from *L'ange de Nisida* (1839) in libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaez, based on various sources, including the play *Le Comte de Comminges* by Francois-Thomas Baculard d'Arnaud (1790). *L'ange* however, was never performed because the production of the theatre went bankrupt. From the other hand, the libretto largely originated from the libretto of an older unfinished opera, the *Adelaide* (1834). In *Adelaide* however, the Italian language had already been replaced by the French libretto of *L'ange*, which is now being replaced by the French text of *La Favorite*. This last text, to a large extent, has a different plot and characters from *L'ange*. Donizetti revised the libretto with the help of Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaez and possibly Scribe. He managed to fulfill the plot with strict and coherent logic (Glasow 1998: 33-35)

While *L'ange* was designed to be performed in the Renaissance Theatre which had limited resources, *La Favorite* was destined for the more exuberant demands of Opéra where spectacle was a key element of the production. The accession of the historical character of Leonora de

Guzman to the plot, not only provided a more consistent environment with the Opéra repertoire, but also allowed the possibility of presenting the work in Italy whereas *L'ange*, which dealt with the extramarital affairs of the king of Naples, could never had been presented (Ashbrook 1982: 441-442).

The plot was about the love story of Fernando, son of Balthazar, abbot of the Monastery of Santiago de Compostela and member of the Cistercian Order<sup>4</sup> of Calatrava in Castile, with Leonora, mistress of King Alfonso. Fernando does not know the true identity of his beloved and asks the king permission to marry her. Alfonso ironically gives his consent but when Fernando learns her identity he returns to the convent. The opera ends with the remorseful Leonora dying in the arms of her beloved (Osborne 1996: 277).

Fernando personifies the ideals of courtly love, idealism, courage and a strict sense of honor. This last feature shines in one of the famous episodes of the opera where he breaks his sword and throws the pieces at the feet of the king (Ashbrook 1982: 253, 443).

At the same time, Alfonso is one of Donizetti's most wonderful characters. He is the king, but his other side, the sardonic, lustful and corrupted, is always present as well.

Important point in the opera is the contrast between the restraint of the monastic scenes and the hedonistic court of Alfonso.

Another remarkable point is the conflict between church and state, that culminates when Balthazar threatens to abdicate the king if he divorces his daughter (Ibid: 444, 447).

### *Maria Padilla* (1841)

This opera is written in three acts and was premiered at La Scala in Milan, where Donizetti returned after an absence of several years in Paris. The opera's performance was overshadowed by Verdi's *Nabucco* (Willier 1998: 182).

Donizetti himself chose the subject and wrote the libretto with Rossi. The theme is based on Ancelot's play of the same title, which was staged in Paris in 1838. The story takes place in the 14th century Castile and is loosely based on the historical figure of the proud and ambitious Maria Padilla, Don Pedro's beloved mistress, among many. A faction of the court wants Pedro to marry Bianca, a Bourbon princess, in order to avoid a civil war. In the end, Pedro proclaims Maria as queen and rejects Bianca (Osborne 1996: 284).

The orchestration of the plot contributes to the dramatization in a way far ahead for its time (Ashbrook 1982: 458).

Despite all the advantages, *Maria* unfortunately has a major flaw in the most sensitive part of the drama - its resolution. In Ancelot's play, when Maria discovers that Pedro is going to marry



Bianca for political reasons, she grabs the crown from her opponent's head and commits suicide. But the Milan censors of 1841 did not tolerate death on stage and to his displeasure, Donizetti was forced to change the end to a happy one with Maria being the queen and Bianca being insulted and publicly disowned<sup>5</sup> Until the last scene, however, the audience expects a tragic end, which results that the *lieto fine* is in contrast to the preceded action (Ibid: 466).

This particular opera has the popular at that time mad scene<sup>6</sup> concerning Maria due to her father's behavior. In particular, he grabs his daughter's letter from Don Petro that proves the good intentions of him as he names her his lawful wife, and destroys it instead of defending his daughter (Willier 1998: 184).

### *Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* (1843)

This was the last opera Donizetti completed before his mental derangement due to neurosyphilis. It was written for the Paris Opéra and it was the composer's third and best grand opera perhaps the most important achievement of his busy career. It was extensive and intensely gloomy. The libretto was by Eugène Scribe based on the play of the same title by Paul Foucher (1838) which in turn derived from the drama *Don Sebastian* (1691) by John Dryden. It refers to historical facts concerning the King Sebastian of Portugal (1554-1578) and his unsuccessful campaign in Morocco in 1578 (Ashbrook 1982: 510, Porter 1989: 120, Osborne 1996: 298).

The plot is set in Lisbon and the Moroccan desert. The Portuguese King Sebastian depicts a personal drama, unfolding in parallel with the conflict of two contradictory cultures: before embarking on a religious crusade in Africa, he saves the life of the Moorish Princess Zaida. He then invades Morocco but is defeated by her father and is considered dead on the battlefield. The princess discovers him and helps him recover. Meanwhile, in Lisbon, the great cleric Dom Juan de Silva, plots against the absent king and prepares to hand over the country to the Spaniards. Sebastian returns to Lisbon in time to attend his funeral organized by the inquisitor. Sebastian and Zaida go to jail and are eventually shot as they try to escape with the help of Sebastian's friend, the poet Camoens (Baxter 1998: 201).

At the time, Donizetti desired to compose an opera comparable to historical operas such as Auber's, Halévy's and Meyerbeer's. He considered *Dom Sébastien* a great work, rival to Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, which inspired him to present vividly his five protagonists and to highlight dramatic situations. He wrote to a friend in Naples, before the premiere: "Imagine what it would be like: a shocking spectacle — Portuguese, Arabs, an Inquisition auto-da-fe, a royal procession with a catafalque - the underground dungeons of the Inquisition" (Donizetti to Teodoro Ghezzi, 5 October 1843, quoted in Baxter 1998: 200).

The result of his effort, however, is a leaden libretto, full of exaggerations, something that makes the opera not completely plausible. Clement and Larousse, in their *Dictionnaire des opéras*, called Donizetti the new victim of Scribe who received a libretto that contained some rather ridiculous situations (Clement and Larousse 1843: 232).

The opera was not a great success in Paris, a fact that upset the composer. He wrote to a French friend that he was hurt by the way the newspapers criticized his opera and that in time it would be justified (Osborne 1996: 300).

## 2.2 CONCLUSIONS REGARDING DONIZETTI'S SERIOUS OPERAS WITH THEMATOLOGY TAKEN FROM THE MOORISH KINGDOM

The first three operas of the "Castilian Ring-let" are conservatively written with happy endings. But they resonated with the conservative Italian public of the 19th century and brought orders to the composer.

*Sancia di Castiglia*, written a decade after *Zoraida*, differs from the earlier operas as the plot focuses on passion and suffering, and the opera has a tragic ending.

*La Favorite*, written for the Paris Opéra eight years after *Sancia*, outlines the characters successfully and at the same time deals with the relations between church and state.

*Maria Padilla*, a year after *La Favorite*, is deliberately Italian in character as it was written for La Scala in Milan. The plot prepares the listener for a tragic ending, but, since it was intended for the conservative audience of Milan, the ending was eventually happy. Nevertheless, the opera has the innovative mad scene, either as an indicator of the prevalence of the Kantian concept of subjectivity<sup>7</sup> or as a dissolution of the conventional plot.

Finally, *Dom Sébastien*, for the Paris Opéra, is the composer's last complete opera. Here, his attempt to write a monumental work rivaling Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, is evident. It is a historical grand opera with a tragic ending and is proof of the composer's tragic vision.

## 3 DONIZETTI'S SERIOUS OPERAS WITH THEMATOLOGY TAKEN FROM THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND

For the Italians of the time, England was an exotic country with its own characteristics. England's history was often the subject-matter in the operas. The Italian composers were particularly obsessed with the thematology of the Tudor dynasty. Above all, Mary Steward was the most popular heroine, because she was a Catholic queen who was martyred, whereas Queen Elizabeth was regarded as "jealous, willful, and easily overwrought" (Frei 2007: 13).

Donizetti wrote 7 operas with themes dealing with the history of England: *Alfredo il grande* (1823), *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (1829), *Anna Bolena* (1830), *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* (1834), *Maria Stuarda* (1834), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Roberto Devereux* (1837).

### 3.1 THE OPERAS

#### *Alfredo il Grande* (1823)

This is Donizetti's first opera performed in San Carlo, Naples and his first engagement with British history. The libretto is probably by Tottola, which may have come from Merelli's libretto for Mayr's opera of the same title (1818). The opera chronicles the life and work of the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great (9th century). The plot is tedious, with inexplicable encounters and confrontations involving English and Danish soldiers, armed shepherds and various rural elements. The ending is happy (Ashbrook 1982: 292, Osborne 1996: 152).

The action takes place on the picturesque island of Athelney in Somerset, where Queen Amalia<sup>8</sup> arrives in disguise with General Edward, in search of her husband, King Alfred. A shepherd offers them shelter in the same place where the king is hiding but they are watched by their Danish enemies. A skirmish between the English and the Danes ensues and the English win, hailing Alfred as the savior of England (Ashbrook 1982: 536).

#### *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (1829)

The opera is composed in three acts. The libretto is written by Tottola based on Gaetano Barbieri's *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* which was presented in 1824 and which itself was based on Scribe's libretto for the opera *Leicester* or *Le Château de Kenilworth* which was staged in Paris in 1823. Scribe's source was Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* translated into Italian in 1821, a few months after its original publication (Osborne 1996: 185).

The opera was written for the royal gala for the birthday of Isabella Maria, Queen of Naples, and performed in San Carlo. A year later it was adapted and staged at the same theatre under the title *Il castello di Kenilworth*. The plot, which concerns Lester's efforts to keep his marriage to Amelia a secret from the Queen, is a simplified version of Scott's novel, with the important exception that, while in the novel the wife is neglected, insulted and ultimately condemned in death by her husband, in the opera the ending is happy, due to the occasion of the royal gala. Lester saves Amelia and Queen Elizabeth, although in love with him, treats the couple with magnanimity. "How fortunate is England, observes the chorus of courtiers, to have such a

Queen, the splendor of the century." (Ibid: 186). The mercy that the queen shows at the end, and her change from magnificence to leniency is not fully explained.

This opera is Donizetti's first serious opera where two conflicting female roles are presented (Ashbrook 1982: 312-313, Holden 2001: 229).

### *Anna Bolena*, (1830)

*Anna Bolena* is a historically inaccurate but moving drama in two acts depicting the life of King Henry VIII's second wife, Anna Bolena. The story is set in England in 1536. King Henry VIII has lost interest in his wife Anna and is in love with the first lady of the court, Giovanna. Circumstances favor the imprisonment of the innocent Anna, her ex-lover Percy, her brother Rochefort and the servant Smeaton who is in love with Anna. Giovanna then suggests that Anna plead guilty to get out of jail but she refuses. In the Tower of London, Anna hears the firing of cannons announcing Henry's marriage to Giovanna as she walks towards the gallows, in prayer. Before her execution she calls heaven to show mercy for her husband and his new wife (Ashbrook 1982: 549-550).

Romani found the story and suggested it to Donizetti. Regarding the historical events, he did not go back to Shakespeare but collected them from two recent works: *Enrico VIII* or *Anna Bolena* by Marie-Joseph de Chenier into Italian translation by Hippolyto Piedmonte, which was staged in Turin in 1816, and *Anna Bolena* by Alessandro Pepoli, which was staged in Venice in 1788.

It is the most dramatic libretto of Romani's career so far.

It clearly delineates the conflict between the two interacting triangles: Anna-Seymour-Henry and Anna-Percy-Henry. It escalates the tension to a true romantic catharsis as it depicts the lovers' preparation for death, their desire for heaven and their liberation from their sufferings. It focuses on the tragic heroine who moves the audience with the phases of her transformation from an intolerable estate, through desire for salvage, to victory, when her right is re-established, as she finds the psychic force not to imprecate but to forgive those who led her to death. The libretto offers strong feelings of romance, betrayal and suffering. It provides great possibilities for expressions of passion which inspired Donizetti and activated his imagination to bring the characters to life with his music and to keep the drama alive (Ashbrook 1982: 66, 317-318, Fralick 1985: 12).

The premiere featured two outstanding singers who would play a very important role in Donizetti's later career: the soprano Giuditta Pasta, as Anna, and the tenor Giovanni Rubini<sup>9</sup>.

The experienced Pasta, who used to study her roles diligently, offered Donizetti practical advice in writing the work as the composer was hosted at her home on Lake Como for a month and there the composer wrote much of his work (Ashbrook 1982: 317-321, Smart 2001).

The opera premiered triumphantly<sup>10</sup>, opening the Carcano Theater's carnival season in Milan<sup>11</sup>, and quickly gave performances in Paris and in London. It was a great success for almost half a century, decisively changing many aspects of the composer's career as it established him among the top three composers in Italy, along with Rossini and Bellini, prompted him to write more romantic tragedies, and brought him commissions from various theatres (Osborne 1996: 195, Bourne 2008).

It is said that his teacher Mayr, called Donizetti "maestro" only after *Anna Bolena* (Fralick 1985: 10).

*Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux* are often referred to as the "Tudor Queen Trilogy", although Donizetti himself did not intend to link them together (Ibid: 2).

#### *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* (1834)

This opera in two acts was premiered in the Carnival season of the Teatro de la Pergola, in Florence. The libretto is by Romani who originally wrote it for Coccia's opera *Rosmunda* (1829). For Donizetti, Romani made some adaptations of the text. His source is not known but it is probably the same as that used for the ballet *Rosmondo* to music by Schira and choreography by Galzerani. The ballet was staged successfully at La Scala in Milan in 1828 and was certainly known to the librettist. The story takes place near Woodstock Castle in the 12th century England. It refers to the legend of the "blonde" Rosmonda Clifford and her ill-fated love for King Henry II that provoked the jealousy and anger of Eleanor of Aquitaine. At the end of the opera, Eleanor stabs Rosmonda, who dies in the hands of Henry and her father. The dramatic confrontations are skillfully written but the plot is somewhat muddled. Donizetti put music to the libretto rather spasmodically and thus failed to move the audience. He also arranged it under the title *Rosamund Clifford* in 1837 (Ashbrook 1982: 357, Osborne 1996: 228).

#### *Maria Stuarda* (1834)

After spending time in the north, where audiences accepted melodrama and violence in opera, in 1834 Donizetti returned to Naples to begin composing his next opera for the Teatro San Carlo. He chose the subject of Mary Queen of Scots after seeing Schiller's *Mary Stuart*<sup>12</sup>.

The plot refers to Queen Elizabeth's vindictive jealousy of the imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots, whom she orders to be executed. The opera ends with Maria asking for the forgiveness of those who harmed her, before dying (Ashbrook 1982: 558).

Schiller's *Mary Stuart* does not stimulate any tenderness. On the contrary, it expresses feelings of vengeful jealousy and passion on the part of Queen Elizabeth. Donizetti knew the work from Mafei's translation of 1830 which focused more on the political and nationalistic aspects than on Maria's death and differed from Alfieri's more traditional translation of 1778. The composer changed the plot on the objective of intrigue. Although the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, never encountered Mary Stuart and was Elizabeth's asserted lover, in Donizetti's opera he loves the Queen of Scots and urges Elizabeth to meet her. When the ladies meet on a hunt near Fotheringay Castle where Mary is confined, she begs forgiveness, but Elizabeth calls her a liar, declaring that her imprisonment "in dust and shame" suits her. Elizabeth adds that Mary betrayed her marriage to Darnley. The climax occurs when Maria calls Elizabeth "a vile bastard." Elizabeth sentences her to death, and the chorus ends the second act with "The queen has decided for you. Yes, be silent, come, tremble all hope is lost." (Frei 2007: 13-14). In *Maria Stuarda*, Elizabeth's magnificence and caprice are wonderfully portrayed but Maria overshadows her (Ashbrook 1982-401).

Due to the acceptance of bloody themes in the North, Donizetti did not suspect possible opposition from the censors. The Neapolitan censors, however, became increasingly strict against bloody and violent subjects that disturbed public peace and morality. At the same time, Donizetti's passion for dynamic themes was growing stronger. Romani had now retired and Donizetti was forced to find his own librettist. Finally, he found the seventeen-year-old Giuseppe Bardari (1817-1861) who was relatively inexperienced, but dramatically alive. Donizetti helped with the libretto, having already created three of his own, in close collaboration with earlier librettists (Fralick 1985: 28). The original libretto had some weaknesses that focused on the fact that while the opera refers to Maria Steward, the protagonist did not appear in the opera until the second act. Instead, a heavy burden fell on Elizabeth who dominated the entire first act. So the audience would be confused as to who the protagonist is. Also Elizabeth's character was portrayed very predictably. Donizetti realized these weaknesses and made some changes in order to bring balance between the leading roles (Ashbrook 1982: 349, 358, Fralick 1985: 31).

The censors demanded changes on the libretto which were implemented and it eventually was approved, but rumors leaked out concerning the opera's theme. In addition, a quarrel between the leading actresses gave the King, who was married to Maria Christina, a direct descendant

of *Maria Stuarda*, the reason to forbid its premiere. Donizetti found two more librettos but they were cut by the censors. Finally, one entitled *Buodelmonte* set in a different place and time from *Maria Stuarda* was accepted and staged in Naples in October 1834 (Fralick 1985: 29, Osborne 1996: 230).

Nine months later, when the uproar over *Maria Stuarda* settled, the popular mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran insisted on performing *Maria* on the Scala in Milan<sup>13</sup>. As the censors in Milan were more open-minded than in Naples, her request was granted, subject to text modifications (Fralick 1985: 29). The opera was finally staged at La Scala in Milan, but Malibran sang the words that had been banned by the censors, among them the phrase "vil bastarda" (the bastard), which are said to have caused Queen Maria Christina to faint upon hearing them. It is also said that the audience turned pale and trembled at the terrible "bastard" in the confrontation scene. Thus the opera was banned, and Donizetti would not open the Milan's carnival season for the next six years. The opera became popular only at the end of the decade (Ashbrook 1982: 349, 358, Fralick 1985: 30, Osborne 1996: 229-234, Frei 2007: 14).

#### *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835)

The libretto for this opera in three acts is written by Camarano and is derived from: Ballozzi's libretto for Caraffa's opera *Le nozze di Lammermoor* (1829), Bassi's libretto for Rieschi's opera *La fidanzata di Lammermoor* and Beltrame's libretto for Mazzucato's opera *La fidanzata di Lammermoor* (1834), which in turn derived from Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) (Ashbrook 1982: 560).

Scott's novel was inspired by a story that took place in 1668 involving Janet Dalrymple, of noble birth, who on her wedding night stabbed and wounded seriously her husband because her parents forced her to marry someone she didn't love, while she was secretly engaged to someone else.

Scott shifted the plot to the late 17th century, changed the names of the characters, moved the setting to another part of Scotland, and created a complex plot by adding new characters: the benevolent reverend Mr. Bide-the-Bent and Caleb Balderstone, the honest follower who along with the timid Craigenfelt provide comic counterbalance to the tragic story. Donizetti and Camarano in turn set the plot in the same place and time as Scott and focused on the tragic elements with some essential changes: Lucia faints when Edgardo arrives at her wedding and when she wakes up, in her insanity she fantasizes that she is going to marry him, she stabs her husband to death on the first night of the wedding, and Edgardo kills himself when he learns of

his beloved's death. The reverend's place is taken by Lucia's teacher, Raimondo (Osborne 1996: 241-242).

Unlike many operas with complex plots, the story of *Lucia di Lammermoor* is simple: the lives of the young lovers are relentlessly destroyed by the impositions of the family. The main characters are accurately sketched and their fate is apparent from the beginning, while the narrative is strong and clear. All this allows the audience to follow this epic legend without distraction. Madness, hallucinations, murder and the ghost, place the opera in the intense romantic, gothic style. Moreover, it is the first opera that does not bring its protagonist back from the brink of madness. In previous operas, the mad woman returned to sanity through love or through the guidance of a man, yet Lucia is the first to break that tradition (Ashbrook 1982: 375, Sorba, 2006:600, Esse 2009: 85, Armstrong 2016: 10, Menzies 2016: 5). The opera was established and contributed to the vogue for romantic tragedy in Italian opera<sup>14</sup>. In 1839, Donizetti adapted the opera for the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris. In this adaptation, the opera contributed to the formation of the 19th century French culture. Now, at the beginning of the opera, a more detailed description of the background of the plot is given. Otherwise, however, it is not superior to the original Italian work (Ashbrook 1982: 381-382).

### *Roberto Devereux*, 1837

This opera in three acts was commissioned by the impresario Barbagia for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. The librettist was one of the most prominent librettists of his time, Salvatore Camarano with a rich theatrical background. Donizetti considered him only Romani's subordinate but enjoyed working with him more than Romani<sup>15</sup> (Fralick 1985: 45).

Camarano managed to provide a well formed libretto based on two sources: Romani's libretto for Mercantade's *II Conte d'Essex* (1833) and Ancelot's play *Elisabeth d'Angleterre* (1829) (Ibid: 47).

The fact that his sources were already dramatized, perhaps explains Camarano's well-structured libretto. Although Elizabeth is the primary character of the opera, the other main characters are equally important to the plot. Of the operas he wrote about Elizabeth, this one portrays her most fully as it portrays the contrast between her royal power and feminine vulnerability. Donizetti was in a bad psychological condition when he wrote this particular opera as he had just lost his wife and their baby to the cholera epidemic that was plaguing his country (Ibid: 46).

*Roberto Devereux* was one of the last operas that Donizetti wrote for the Italian stage and one of the first he prepared for production in Paris after he settled there in 1838. It represents the



composer's fully mature style near the height of his career. His sensitivity to the performance of the text and dramatization is clearly visible (Ashbrook 1982: 407, Fralick 1985: 45).

### 3.2 CONCLUSIONS REGARDING DONIZETTI'S SERIOUS OPERAS WITH THEMATOLOGY TAKEN FROM THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND

The first two operas with thematology taken from the history of England are conservatively written with a happy ending. But *Anna Bolena*, the first opera in the Tudor's Queen trilogy follows, showing Donizetti's increasing preoccupation with sombre themes. And the rest of the operas in the trilogy are in a strong romantic style, as is *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Of the operas he wrote about Elizabeth, the one that portrays her most completely is *Roberto Devereux*. In this last opera, Elizabeth changes from a reserved but lovable woman to an enraged queen. She is wounded by a sense of betrayal both of her position in leadership and as a woman. She almost disintegrates as she is racked with remorse and consumed by revenge visions.

On the other hand, in *Il Castello di Kenilworth*, Elizabeth's change from grandeur to leniency is not fully explained. It is justified only by the fact that the opera was being performed for the Queen's birthday and that she was present at its premiere. Finally, in *Maria Stuarda*, her majesty and caprice are wonderfully portrayed but the title character, *Stuarda*, prevents her from being knocked off that pedestal (Ashbrook 1982: 401).

## 4 GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Examining Donizetti's trajectory regarding the serious operas with themes from the Moorish Kingdom and the history of England, reveals that the composer often conformed to the conventions of his time and to the restrictions of censorship. He matured relatively slowly in his work and he proved not to be a great renovator. But he tried, and ultimately succeeded, in unfolding his inclination for dynamic plots and in creating a highly personal dramatic style. Thus, he eventually influenced the development of romantic opera both in Italy and in Paris, justifying Mario Pieri's characterization that Donizetti is the first purely romantic composer. (Pieri 2003: 263).

### FOOTNOTES:

1 In the early 8<sup>th</sup> century the Muslims occupied most of the Iberian Peninsula establishing the Moorish Kingdom which lasted until 1492. The Christian states carried out a series of campaigns to recapture their territories and finally abolished the Moorish Kingdom (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reconquista> accessed on 29/8/2022).

2 Some of Donizetti's biographers call the opera *Alahor di Granata*. However, the librettos of all the performances on Donizetti's time clearly give the title *Alahor in Granada* (Freeman 1972: 243, Smart 2001).

- 3 While the librettos written by the same librettist for Donizetti and Bellini had a clearly more dramatic feeling (Freeman 1972: 245-246).
- 4 A mixed religious and secular order of Moor soldiers from Spain who were allowed, by papal release, to marry without resigning from members of the order (Ashbrook 1982: 442)
- 5 In fact, although Pedro eventually married Bianca, he left her almost immediately. This makes the happy ending of the opera somewhat historically correct (Ashbrook 1982: 693).
- 6 Mad scenes in the *Belle Canto* opera of the time can be perceived as a manifestation of an increasing interest in emotional aspects of music. Erfurth and Hoff 2000: 313).
- 7 More about Kantian Subjectivity on Bauer's article *Kant's Subjective Deduction*, 2010, *Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 18:3, 433-4.
- 8 In the opera, Queen Ealswith was renamed Amalia for the sake of euphemism (Osborne 1996: 153).
- 9 Donizetti's collaboration with Rubini inspired him to revise *Gianni di Parigi* for him in the hope that the participation of a well-known tenor would bring an invitation to perform it in Paris. Rubini disappointed him, but the role was soon given to Gilbert-Louis Duprez (Smart 2001).
- 10 Nevertheless, the composer himself was not pleased with the performance of the opera at its premiere, to such an extent that, as he wrote to a friend, he did not want to appear on stage at the end of the opera (Osborne 1996:194).
- 11 This particular theater instituted a carnival opera season in competition with Italy's most famous theater, the San Carlo (Osborne 1996:194).
- 12 Schiller's influence on 19th century Italian opera was great. Donizetti also had the example of the success of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, also based on Schiller, at the Paris Opéra, and hoped to have the same luck himself (Ashbrook 1982: 358).
- 13 Such was Malibran's enthusiasm for Donizetti's opera, that she turned down Bellini's request to perform Evita in *I Puritani* in an adaptation especially for her (Fralick 1988: 29).
- 14 Nevertheless, according to the composer's correspondence, Donizetti became furious with the critical Mantua audience, but, as he wrote in another letter, "not all operas are for all theatres". Letter of January 29, 1838, to Count Ottavio Tasca and Letter of May 20, 1845, to Tommaso Persico. (Zavadini 1948).
- 15 In a note to Camarano while working on the opera, he wrote: "I'll wait for you at the Two Sicilies café until two o'clock. . .The finale doesn't seem bad at all. We'll read it together: four eyes are better than two, or rather eight—counting my glasses and your two eyes equaling four" The original of this note is in the Biblioteca Lucchesi-Pali, Naples (Ashbrook, 1982: 623).

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