The Destructive and Redemptive Power of Illusion: Verdi's Shakespearean Tragedy *Otello*[1]

Maria Frendo

Iago: It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.
In following him, I follow but myself;
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end;
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.

(1. i, 56-65)

Duke: If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

(I. iii, 289-90)

The two quotations above, significantly both occurring in Act One of Shakespeare's play, indicate that all it not what it seems. Neither Othello nor Iago are to be taken at face value and the intimation is that the audience treats black as white and white as black. Again, we are in that perplexing world of *Macbeth*'s initial scene of the first Act, where the Weird Sisters claim: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair".[2]

Shakespeare's Influence on Verdi

Verdi states most unequivocally that Shakespeare was not only an enduring presence in his life but was also had a formative influence. He states that Shakespeare is "a favourite poet of mine, whom I had had in my hands from earliest youth and whom I read and reread constantly".[3] The great Italian composer was not only a superb musician but he was also widely read in a variety of literary works that came out of Western Europe. He found in Maffei and Carcano excellent mentors and, with his judicious eye (or is it ear?) he recognised operatic potential when he saw it. The follower of Donizetti and Bellini, he is captivated by the bizarre and the confrontational. So, we find Attila the Hun conspiring with Aetius, the Roman general in a reworking of Werner's *Attila*. There is also Lina, who has cheated on her husband, a Lutheran pastor (of all professions), who prostrates herself at his feet halfway through a church service in *Stiffelio*, an adaptation of Souvestre and Bourgeois' *Le Pasteur*. Verdi is also uniquely fascinated by powerful characters. A Triboulet, a Lady Macbeth, an Amneris, will take over his creative fantasy for a long time, sometimes, years, finding their life histories irresistible.

However, Verdi is not content to just appropriate characters from literature and fit them into opera. He takes it a step or two further. For him, the original text (be it a novel or a play) contributes much more than a memorable character; it goes beyond a plot or a sequence of intense circumstances. Here we come to the concept of faithfulness. Is it an exercise of close translation of a text, a scene by scene re-enactment, a dutiful representation of the unfolding of the events or does 'faithfulness' mean something more subtle? In this respect, we are dealing more with trans-formation or even trans-figuration, than with translation. It is a trans-formation, a trans-figuration from one medium to another – a trans-formation from words to notes, from poetry to music. This trans-formation, in turn, leads to a restoring of the aesthetic function of poetry which is fulfilled through the music.

For Verdi, this trans-figuration is an inspiring force. He forges an alliance with it which leads to the process of enriching and breathing new life into the very musical fabric of Italian opera. The ramifications

of this approach towards his work are especially important in those Verdi operas that are inspired by Shakespeare. Characterisation is one of the many aspects of Shakespearean drama that Verdi admires tremendously. Yet, there is a marked development in what may be termed the Verdian allegiance to the Shakespearean plot. As a young composer, the ideal of fidelity to the literary source finds characteristic expression in a letter he writes to Marianna Barbieri-Nini, his first Lady Macbeth, when she is about to start learning the role:

The plot is taken from one of the greatest tragedies the theatre boasts, and I have tried to have all the dramatic situations drawn from it faithfully, to have it well versified, and to give it a new texture, and to compose music tied as far as possible to the text and to the situations: and I wish this idea of mine to be well understood by the performers; indeed I wish the performers to serve the poet better than they serve the composer.[4]

However, here is the authenticity of characterisation that is the particular source of reverence for the literary source. In his maturity, Verdi perceives a sort of *verismo* (realism) that emerges from Shakespeare's characters. This realism will overwhelm all other paradigms of dramatic art. In a letter addressed to his librettist, Boito's, son, he writes:

To imitate truth may be a good thing, but to invent truth is better, far better. Perhaps there seems a contradiction in these three words – to invent truth – but ask Papà. It is possible that he may have met a Falstaff, but he is hardly likely to have met so villainous a villain as Iago, and never such angels as Cordelia, Imogen, Desdemona, etc etc, yet how true they are.[5]

Additions and Omissions in *Otello*

"My mother had a maid called Barbary"

Is meaning lost or found in translation? To say that Arrigo Boito does an excellent job re-working Shakespeare's text to fit an opera libretto would be an understatement. That said, I wish to dwell in some detail on what appears to be a glaring misunderstanding of what at first glance seems to be a simple, insignificant line. In Shakespeare's play, Act IV Scene iii, when Desdemona is slowly but surely disengaging herself from the world around her and tentatively but equally steadily entering the one of memory, of the past and of recollection, says:

> My mother had a maid call'd Barbary,
> She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad,
> And did forsake her; she had a song of 'willow',
> An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,
> And she died singing it; that song to-night
> Will not go from my mind....
>
> (IV. iii, 26-31)

Boito translates these lines as follows:

> Mia madre aveva una povera ancella
> innamorata e bella; era il suo nome Barbara:
> amava un uom che poi l'abbandonò,
> cantava una canzone: la canzon del Salice.
> *ad Emilia:(Mi disciogli le chiome.)*
> Io questa sera ho la memoria piena di quella cantilena.

The two key words that strike me most in the translation are "Barbara" and "memoria". While "memoria" is what matters here, at this acute psychological moment "Barbara" is, to my mind, a misnomer; Shakespeare's "Barbary" is not "Barbara". I imagine that if Shakespeare had wanted to call the maid Barbara he would have done so.[6] The connection with the Barbary coast in North-western Africa is more than pronounced in Shakespeare's play. Iago makes it his business to refer to it in all its underlying, sexual innuendo in Act One, Scene i, when he deliberately stirs up tremendous anger in Brabantio's heart with the words: "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephew neigh to you ...".

Critics have reiterated that throughout the opera, Desdemona is the one character that fails to develop roundly. This is largely attributable, they say, to Verdi's opting to leave out Act One out of the libretto. Indeed, there is no Venice; no Brabantio (Desdemona's father); no summoning of Desdemona and Othello in front of the Venetian Senate to explain their elopement; no rejection of Roderigo as a husband for her; no indication of the honourable character of Cassio as demonstrated in his contacts with Desdemona; none of the good humour of Emilia.

However, in Verdi's final Act, Desdemona takes possession of the destiny that awaits her. Quite irrationally, memory conjures up connections that have long been buried in the reservoir of her past. What seems to cause this is her total preoccupation with her husband, the Moor, and a desperate attempt to redeem the terrible, present story with the beautiful, untainted tales of her past. Both narratives are connected by the word "Barbary" – the present moment is spoiled, smeared and stained by the man from Barbary (Otello); the past moment is redemptive in the figure of her mother's maid, "Barbary".

This is a state of acute heightened consciousness for Desdemona. Language has failed in its promise to mean or even connect. Now, in the moment where she is obsessively rehearsing the scene of her final encounter with the Moor, memory steps in carrying with it the strains of a melody rebounding down the corridors of her history, redeeming her fallen language through song. This is the moment of self-recognition for Desdemona; one that comes with memory, when memory is all that is left of an event. Here, the fine line between fact and fiction, truth and invention, reality and illusion, becomes increasingly blurred because of a reachable past and an unreachable present. In recollecting, remembering the past, Desdemona re-collects, re-members (in the sense of putting together) the fragments that are not well shored up against ruin. This is the experience of essential freedom, one that is almost impossible to attain in an increasingly saturated, confined, repressive and threatening space, a space that is not only physical (her bed-chamber) but also psychological, emotional and spiritual.

Here, Shakespeare captures the power of symbolism to act on a psychologically fragmented consciousness. Correspondences are created, almost in the Baudelairean sense. The power of recollecting as both remembering and gathering fragments is enabled through the intensity of the symbol, in this case, "Barbary" – who is both individual and type. There is in this process both poetic meaning and poetic beauty. Here, meaning and beauty make tentative steps towards coinciding, acknowledging each other's presence with a perceptible nod. For Desdemona, this is, albeit unknowingly for her, an experience that marks both the failure and success of symbolic synthesis. On the one hand it is failure because the symbolic correspondence of sound and sense is deferred; on the other hand, it is success because of this failure, namely, aesthetic dissimilarity is experienced as a suspension in time of symbolic achievement.

The audience senses a thematics of temporality. The temporal challenge to the symbol's best intentions, one that permits the memory to function, is not quite conscious: it takes place in Desdemona's need to locate the aesthetic experience in memory. The *Canzon del Salice* both negates and affirms historical distance. The muttering from the past can only be heard and experienced as allegory – one that enables Desdemona to objectify her own subjectivity at a moment when this same subjectivity is eroding with alarming speed. Translating "Barbary" into "Barbara", most of this is lost and nothing much happens psychologically except that Desdemona tells us she is remembering a song her mother's maid used to sing in similar circumstances of betrayal and madness. It could well be that she remembers this, of course, because of her similar present situation, but Shakespeare's text provides a deeper, psychological link whereby things are unleashed in their differences, and incongruity, by virtue of their co-existence in both the past and the present.

The Aubade

In Shakespeare's play, the brawl between Cassio and Montano, which has been carefully contrived by Iago, occurs in Act Two, Scene iii. In the next Scene, at the start of Act Three, Cassio instructs a group of musicians to play beneath the balcony of Othello and Desdemona's palace. This happens at the break of dawn. Here, the audience hears an *aubade*, which is an old French air (not necessarily sung) that heralds the parting of lovers at dawn. One other instance where we find this in Shakespeare is in *Romeo and Juliet*, immediately after Romeo and Juliet's first night together. Juliet thinks it is the nightingale singing, Romeo is sure it is the lark. What's in a bird, one may ask? There is a lot in this particular instance, for the nightingale is the bird of the night, whereas the lark is the bird of dawn. For Juliet, the song of the nightingale means that a night of love is still in anticipation; for Romeo, the song of the lark means he has to leap out of bed and escape through the proverbial balcony. Added to this quibble about birds, an

aubade sounds. Taken in the wider scheme of things, the *aubade* here is ominous for the omniscient audience knows that Romeo and Juliet will never meet again.

In *Othello*, Cassio's employing of the musicians carries deeper psychological weight. The *aubade* seems to make no sense here because conventionally it heralds the parting of lovers at dawn – there is no difficulty for Othello and Desdemona for they are married to the knowledge of all around them (unlike the case with Romeo and Juliet, whose marriage is kept a total secret.) So, one may rightly ask: why an *aubade* at this point? On a surface level, this is the Venetian Cassio's refined way of showing his felt regret at disturbing Othello through his drunkenness and subsequent fight with Montano the previous night. It is a language of gesture which is all but completely lost on Othello. However, it is not lost on Desdemona, who understands that Cassio is truly repentant and contrite. On a deeper level, the discerning audience realises that the *aubade* truly signals the parting of lovers at dawn for, from this point on, Othello and Desdemona will grow increasingly apart on both an emotional and psychological level. Little does Cassio realise how loaded with what amounts to Sophoclean irony his elegant gesture becomes when seen in the wider context of the tragedy.

Boito understands this with impeccable exactness. Rather than have a short interlude or what is known as an intermezzo in opera, he creates a delectable, wonderful scene which sees Desdemona mixing with the Cypriots, including children to further enhance the beauty and innocence of the scene. This scene comes hot on the heels of Jago's diabolical *Credo* and the contrast between the goodness and evil that constitute the main tension of the play could not be more stark.

The *Credo*

Over all, in this opera Verdi not only emulates Shakespeare but also enhances his verse. The result is that, not only does Verdi's musical sensibility, mediated through Shakespeare's imagination, begin to reconfigure the archaic forms of Italian opera but, more importantly, Shakespeare's poetic imagination, mediated through Verdi's musical sensibility, opens up new interpretative possibilities on his [Shakespeare's] own work.

The omissions in *Otello* are as glaring and intriguing as the additions. Shakespeare's first Act is completely omitted. Moreover, where Verdi, through Boito, does not omit, he changes the order of events: Desdemona's first plea for Cassio's reinstatement comes after Jago first puts doubt in Otello's mind not before, as in the play. Verdi also places Otello's derangement after the audience with the Venetian ambassadors not before, as Shakespeare does. Apart from the omissions and the time shifting of significant events in the play, Verdi also urges Boito to add new material. In Shakespeare, the Cypriots do not celebrate Othello's victory with a bonfire; they do not serenade Desdemona and, although Desdemona tells Othello that she has said her prayers, the audience does not hear her do it. In the opera there is a bonfire, Desdemona is serenaded, and in Act IV she sings a most beautiful *Ave Maria*.

Careful understanding of these liberties, as it were, prove to be not a dissolving but a resolving influence. In Verdi's opera, the audience immediately finds itself in *medias res*. It is a raging storm off the coast of Cyprus – angry seas, gales uprooting trees and ripping off roof-tops, blinding rain – an elemental scene of apocalyptic proportions.[7] Othello's ship is adrift on the mounting waves, tossing aimlessly, risking drowning. It is a symbolical anticipation of the much bigger storm that will destroy Othello, who will find himself adrift on the waves of doubt. On shore, the Cypriots and the Venetians (with the exception of Jago, Montano and Roderigo) are praying fervently for the safe arrival of Othello and his crew. It is a tug of war between the raging storm and the fervent prayer, between good and evil, between Jago's *Credo* and Desdemona's *Ave Maria*. It is this storm and this prayer that matter for Verdi.

Evil in Shakespeare's play is synonymous with Iago.[8] In fact, with the inclusion of Verdi's demonic *Credo*, Jago becomes evil incarnate. "Il tuo demone son io", he proclaims in the recitative preceding the famous *Credo*. At the end of the fragmented, diabolical 'Credo', ending in a cackle of fiendish laughter, the audience is reminded of Milton's Satan, muttering to himself "I am evil", "Evil be thou my good".[9] The inclusion of the *Credo*, with the declamations of *"credo in un dio crudel che m'ha creato simile a sè...vile son nato!...* redefines and reinterprets Shakespeare's own text. In the light of the completely new material, the famous lines

O, beware jealousy;
It is the green-ey'd monster...

take on a new perspective. *Othello* is a play about jealousy, more specifically, sexual jealousy. The more we read it the more we are convinced that Othello is a man consumed by jealousy; and there is almost nothing in the text to alienate us from this premise. However, a closer look at the man will make us rephrase that assertion. Othello is a Moor living and leading the army of arguably the most refined and elegant cities in Renaissance Europe – Venice. He is married to one of the most beautiful girls in the city, young, fair and innocent, the daughter of Brabantio a senator of Venice. Would any reader be truly shocked to find a coloured man in his thirties or more being over-protective of a beautiful, young wife?

Looking at it differently, it is equally possible to conclude that if there is one jealous man in the play it is Iago, and it is the manipulation and machination of his words and deeds that further (mis?)lead the reader to believe that Othello is jealousy personified. In Shakespeare's first Act of the play, Iago is left fuming for not being promoted to the status of lieutenant, which status goes to Cassio. He cannot believe his ears (or eyes, for that matter) when the fair Desdemona elopes with the dark Othello; he even maliciously suspects Othello of sleeping with his [Iago's] wife Emilia. He is consumed with jealousy for Othello. Desdemona is just a pawn which he uses to brilliant effect to checkmate Othello. It is endgame.

Throughout the opera, Jago comes across as a suave, charming and glib character, one who juggles words and orchestrates events to suit his purpose – that of destroying Otello. Contrary to expectation, with the exception of his great aria, the *Credo*, Jago's dynamic range never rises above a mezzo forte. His is not the evil one sees in other major baritone roles such as Nabucco, Macbeth, Conte di Luna, and many others. Evil in the shape of Jago is clothed in elegance, refinement and charm, the incarnation of Milton's Satan. It is only in his one major 'soliloquy', the *Credo*, that he emerges in all his diabolical fury, anguish and jealousy. It is almost impossible for Otello to see through Jago's manipulation and deceit. It has also been impossible for the Venetians to see through his evil, with the exception of Emilia, his wife, and that comes too late right at the end of the opera. She is the one who really knows him and he is aware of that knowledge; hence his supreme efforts at keeping her out of sight and hearing when he is poisoning Otello's ear with false truths. He is the "serpens antiquo".

Boito's inclusion of Jago's *Credo* has raised more than the proverbial eyebrow. It has also raised considerable critical controversy. A few attack it for apparently bearing no relation to any of Iago's speeches in Shakespeare, and for elevating Jago from a mere scheming malcontent into an embodiment of evil itself.[10] Others go so far as to say it could be omitted with no loss to the opera.[11] Others agree with Verdi's opinion: "Most beautiful, this Credo, most powerful and wholly Shakespearean".[12] In this critical debate, it is less a question of who is right and who is wrong and more which argument gives greater psychological weight to the character of Jago in Verdi's opera. Although there is no indication of a Credo of any sort in Shakespeare's tragedy, it is paradoxically Shakespeare's own text that provides the source for it. Much has been made of Boito reversing the traditional Nicene Creed but that critical position is, at best, so obvious that it becomes almost trivial. On a much deeper level, the *Credo* builds upon a number of the ideas present in Shakespeare's play.

What hint does Shakespeare give of Iago's cosmic identity? Throughout the play Iago sees himself as an agent of hell but when his credibility is under scrutiny he also invokes heaven without batting an eyelid. For instance, when Othello demands proof of his wife's infidelity and threatens Iago with dire punishment if he has slandered her, Iago replies, "O grace! O heaven defend me!" (III. iii, 370). When Roderigo asks why he serves a man he hates, Iago replies, "Heaven is my judge, not I for love or duty, but seeming so for my peculiar end" (I. i. 60-1). In fact, the enduring nature of *Othello*'s conflict is clear from the incidence of such words as "heaven", "hell", "sin", "baptism", and "devil", which Shakespeare uses more in this play than in any other.[13] Boito picks up on this readily and writes the *Credo* to focus the opera's action more sharply on this aspect of the drama.

Iago's hypocrisy, his camouflaged evil and love of subversion are central to his character. One could say that his character is the plot in action. In both the play and the opera he sets things in motion and nowhere more devilishly clever than in his drinking-song. In the play this comes across as a totally harmless merry-making ditty while in the opera it develops into a more fully-fledged episode as is demanded by the dramatic nature of opera. Drinking songs in Shakespeare are always an incitement to dramatic and sometimes tragic action.[14] Having a good time after escaping certain drowning, during which the audience

hears Jago saying in an aside *"L'alvo frenetico del mar sia la sua tomba" ("I fain would the fierce torrent of the sea would be your grave")*, is to be expected. However, Jago uses this happy episode to trigger the chain of events that spiral beyond any hope of control. He depends on the Mallarméan 'hasard', 'chance': being an acute reader of human nature he sees potential for evil in a harmless and benign moment – celebrating the survival from certain drowning of Otello, the man he hates most in the world.

As the many instances in the play show, Iago invokes heaven in hatred and protests his honesty when he is most lying. Likewise, the entire action of the play consists of Iago's making persons and situations appear other than they really are. The virtuous Desdemona is made to look like a whore; the honourable Cassio like a drunken lecher; the noble Othello like a wife-abusing lunatic. In his dirty hands, virtue is disfigured into vice. By extension, for Verdi's Jago to degrade a holy affirmation into a diabolical one is entirely in character. Hence, the insertion of the *Credo*.

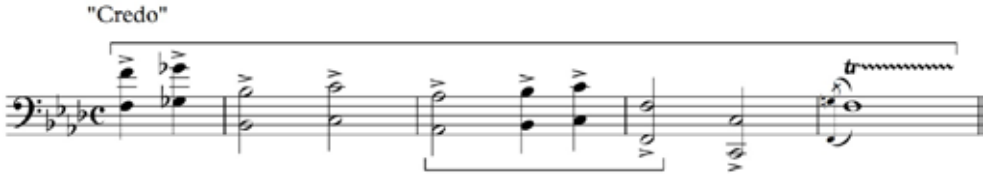
Probably, the strongest motivating factor in Iago's actions is a corrosive self-hatred. This same repugnance motivates Jago, gushing from the *Credo* like a noxious discharge. The God in whose image Jago is made is cruel; Jago himself is born vile; he is evil because he is a man, made of the originary slime; the honest man's virtues are finally worthless; life is nothing but mockery and death brings only oblivion; heaven is an old wife's tale. Boito takes all the significant clues that Shakespeare disperses throughout his play and concentrates them into this brief text, which fascinates listeners even as it strikes them with horror. After hearing the *Credo* it is superfluous to ask whom Jago hates most.

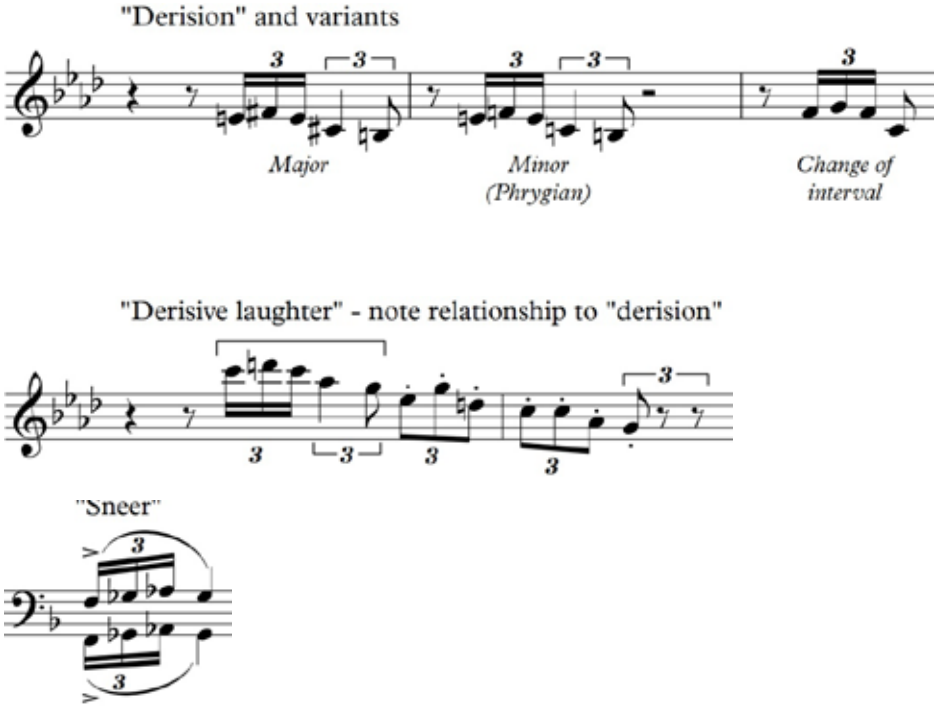
Finally, Boito draws on plays other than *Othello* for several of the ideas in the *Credo*. Jago says *"E credo l'uom gioco d'iniqua sorte" ("And I believe man to be the sport of an unjust fate")*. The idea that humans are not in control of their destiny is ubiquitous in *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, the entire course of events in that play is determined by a series of accidents.[15] A similar idea is expressed in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods", says Gloucester; "They kill us for their sport" (IV. i. 44-5). Elsewhere in the *Credo* Jago expresses the opinion that evil is his destiny: *"Credo ... che il mal ch'io penso e che da me procede per il mio destino adempio" (I believe ... that whatever evil I think or do was decreed for me by fate")*. The protagonist of *Richard III*, not having been blessed with an attractive appearance, concludes that he was also made for wickedness:

> I ... am curtailed of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
> Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world scarce half made up....
> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain....
>
> (I. i. 18-21, 28-30)

Jago believes that people are all hypocrites, some better at playing a part than others. Unable to cope with his own evil he consoles himself by saying that all are evil: *"Credo che il giusto è un istrion beffardo" (I believe that the honest man is but a poor actor")*.[16] When Verdi, therefore, calls the *Credo* "wholly Shakespearean", he is saying perhaps more than he realizes. As a condensation of Iago's character it is effective, and entirely justified.

The text alone is earth-shaking. There is no doubt that the music is more than overwhelming – quite in keeping with the text – but examination shows that, like tragedy (and unlike comedy), it moves on simple lines. Verdi builds the *Credo* on several structural motives as indicated below:





These enable him to keep a tight rein on his material while also allowing him to keep the aria in character. Throughout the opera, Jago's voice lines are repetitive, to the point of being obsessive in much the same way that his hatred is, and so it is in the *Credo*. Also, Verdi does not give Jago a 'tune' to sing, either in the *Credo* or elsewhere, despite the fact that he is virtually present at all times in the opera except for the duets between Otello and Desdemona and in the final act (not least because the latter takes place in Desdemona's bed-chamber). Arguably, Jago is one of Verdi's more powerful creations yet he is the one not to be given an aria to sing. In fact, at the end of the opera, no-one leaves the theatre whistling or humming a melody taken from a Jago aria.[17] So, Verdi creates an 'aria' (for lack of a more suitable word) that is primarily motivic rather than melodic; one that avoids the lyricism that Verdi considers inappropriate to Jago. A brief recitative precedes the monologue/aria proper, as Jago gloats over the downfall he foresees for Cassio, characterizing himself as Cassio's "evil genius" (*"il tuo dimon son io")*. This being a monologue/aria in much the same vein that so many other great arias in Verdi are,[18] the character will expose his true feelings and motives and no matter how evil these are, one cannot but admire his honesty about admitting and acknowledging them.[19] The 'sneer' motive[20] underlines Jago's contempt, conclusively establishing the attitude of the aria to come.

After the orchestral Prelude, the voice begins on a series of repeated notes, namely, the note-by-note style of Gregorian chant that is the hallmark of Jago's recitatives. (One could well muse whether this is another teasing ploy by Verdi to highlight Jago's perversity.) Whatever the case, no doubt, the combination of the repeated tones and the text *"Credo in un Dio crudel"* strengthens the liturgical associations in the minds of Verdi's audience. Besides, the reciting tones of Jago's line are largely generated from the motive 'credo', particularly when a phrase begins with that word. Finally, he often borrows the triplet rhythm (although not the pitches or the staccato articulation) of the derisive laughter motive. The remaining motive, that of 'derision', and the trill, previously associated with Jago remain the prerogative of the orchestra.

The 'Credo' motive (from which the shorter 'credo' is taken) contributes to more than just Jago's line. It serves to define both the aria's principal tonality (F Phrygian) and its form (ABA'). This motive always appears in F, although the key is at times disguised by the harmony. It is always played in its entirety, although in the A' section it is interrupted by the voice, further emphasizing its structural integrity. It is associated with the more cosmic portions of the text, which correspond to the two A sections: in the first A, Jago speaks of his origin from a cruel God and the vileness of his birth; and in the A' he speaks of death. The B section deals with the human condition generally, and 'Credo' is absent (the aria's tripartite organization further strengthens its liturgical associations). The *Credo* has an aesthetic function as well. Both melodically and rhythmically strong, it always occurs at points of cosmic interest. Thus, it calls the audience's attention to fundamental issues: God, eternity, death. Also, it always accompanies a profoundly shocking statement: God is cruel; human nature is evil; death is oblivion; heaven is an old wife's tale. It not only acknowledges these concerns as vital, but symbolizes Jago's bravado in knowing that what he says is shocking; and he relishes it.

Verdi's orchestra in *Otello* is never merely accompaniment, never functioning solely as the harmonic basis of earlier *bel canto* opera. An examination of the orchestral texture in the *Credo* can lead to a conclusion about the orchestra's role in this overwhelming aria. The trill, traditionally (and significantly in this context) known as the 'diabolus in musica', is one which Jago sings elsewhere. It resides in the orchestra here, and appears both at the beginning and at the end, as Jago speaks of God and heaven. Jago's sung trills express contempt, and so do these: contempt and derision of simple, traditional belief. Here, as they occur on the orchestra, they are much longer than his sung trills, to indicate the depth of his disrespect.

However, the orchestra, apart from providing a sub-text to Jago's true feelings, also functions on another level, namely, as Jago's Evil Genius. The final A section supplies the clue at this point. After the A and B sections which are mostly delivered at a 'forte' or 'fortissimo' level, the dynamic bottom drops out of the final A, as Jago turns his attention to death. The sudden change in dynamic intensity and the unsettled harmony beneath the 'Credo' motif (always played in unison earlier in the aria) set up a tension which only builds as the orchestration becomes leaner and leaner and the music softer and softer. When Jago finally says *"La Morte è il Nulla" ("Death is Nothingness")*, the orchestra bursts into derisive laughter at 'fortissimo' level. There is something triumphant about this outburst, as if in truly Faustian fashion, Jago has delivered his soul into the hands of Mephistopheles. Jago is not a departure from, nor a perversion of, Shakespeare's character. He is, rather, a more concentrated version of Iago and the *Credo* is the personification of this evil character.[21] Jago is Iago stripped to his allegorical essence, and the *Credo* and the subsequent words about the "green-ey'd monster" to Otello is his self-identification, his perverted "I am that I am".

Immediately after the *Credo,* Jago encounters Otello and the seeds of suspicion start to be planted. When Jago warns Otello speaks of the "green-ey'd monster", he advises Othello to beware of its fangs. Could it be that Jago is talking about himself, that *he* is the "green-ey'd monster, which doth mock that meat it feeds on", that he could be warning Othello of his (Jago's) own diabolical nature? "Othello can be colonized by Venice", writes Virginia Mason Vaughan, "but he can never become wholly Venetian".[22] In fact, Othello, we know, is a man culturally out of tune with both the refinement of Venetian society and the subtlety of its language and manners. Metaphor is lost on him. For Othello, a "green-ey'd monster" is a "green-ey'd monster". This interpretation becomes a possible redefinition of the play's best known verses and, coming as they do in Verdi's opera straight before the *Credo*, the possibility comes close to a probability. What Jago seems to be telling Otello is "Beware me."

Within this critical context, the *Credo* enables Shakespeare's text to become more Shakespearean. Moreover, it further tightens the thematic and structural links through it being used as a Leitmotif.

The redemption of the *Credo* by the *Ave Maria*

There is no other opera in Verdi's canon that contains so much religious connotations, directly or otherwise. The insertion of a *Credo* and an *Ave Maria* in the same opera raises a few interesting questions. We have a 'Miserere' in *Il Trovatore* and a host of other prayers in operas such as *La Forza del Destino*, amongst others. For the rest, Verdi operas, and particularly tragedies at which he excelled beyond measure, are generally punctuated with utterances of *"Maledizione", "Orrore", "Anatema"* and the whole

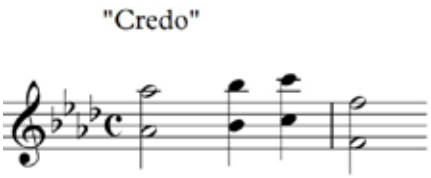
range of curses heaped upon perpetrators and victims alike. Like the *Credo*, the *Ave Maria* has no direct precedent in Shakespeare yet, again like Jago's aria, is a distillation of many hints into a confined space. Prayer scenes are conventional in opera, and Shakespeare gives Boito an opening for this one:

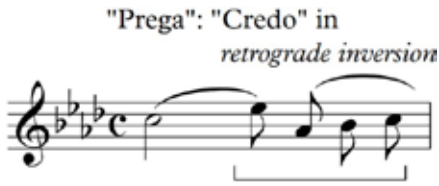
> *Othello:* Have you pray'd tonight, Desdemona?
> *Desdemona:* Ay, my lord.
>
> (V. ii, 25)

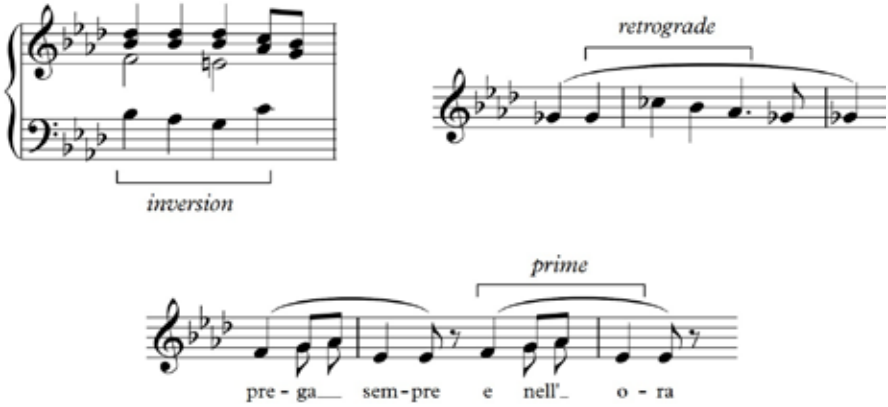
Apart from operatic convention, the opera needs a scene such as this one. Although the audience has seen Desdemona's generally steadfast character and her generosity, Boito has not as yet shown, in the unvarnished clarity with which he reveals Jago in the *Credo*, the *caritas* that identifies Desdemona as Jago's holy counterpart in this cosmic allegory. Shakespeare shows this goodness in Act IV Scene ii, but Boito cuts that scene out and must now perforce replace it. The *Ave Maria* is everything he needs – a real prayer to counterbalance the perverted one of Jago. This entire aria may be seen as an answer to Jago's repellent *Credo*. Desdemona's text turns Jago's upside down – a cruel God is replaced by a Virgin full of grace, for instance. Verdi's music likewise reflects Desdemona's rejection of Jago's point of view. The most obvious difference is dynamic: Jago hurls the *Credo* at us, darting in our direction like a poisoned arrow, holding forth at 'forte' and 'fortissimo' almost entirely. Desdemona sings 'piano' and 'pianissimo'.

Beyond this rather superficial point, the structures of the two vocal lines are similar enough to be startling, particularly when one knows how entirely different they are in mood. Both begin with a recitative type of phrase: a single repeated pitch, whose accompaniment leaves room for considerable freedom of declamation. Both use a particular melodic motive: Jago uses the motive "credo" every time he begins a phrase with that word, Desdemona uses a motive on the word "prega". This word appears when she names another person, or type of person, that the Virgin Mother might intercede for. Both arias speak of death, and both set this section off from the rest of the music by repetition and orchestral interlude. Finally, both arias end on a climactic high note, for Jago it is F^1, sung fortissimo, for Desdemona it is an Ab^2 sung pianissimo. The mood of the endings, however, is diametrically opposed. While Jago denies contemptuously that heaven exists, Desdemona floats serenely towards that very heaven whose existence Jago rejects as "an old wife's tale". In essence, therefore, Desdemona denies Jago's denial, a double denial that becomes an assertion of good.

Verdi makes the connections between these two arias most apparent during Desdemona's silent repetition of her prayer. The orchestra repeats what it had played when Desdemona sang *"Prega sempre e nell'ora della morte nostra" ("Pray always and at the hour of our death").* The melody consists of a single motif, repeated three times, the same motif with which Jago begins almost every phrase of his aria, *"credo".* The figures below attest to these similarities.







His motif ends with a falling perfect fifth, hers with a descending perfect fourth; but the ear perceives them as identical, the only significant difference being that hers is a plagal cadence, one that audiences associate with an *"Amen"* ending in a chorale. Jago's *"credo"* is all over the *"Ave Maria"*, not merely in this passage, but is also a part of the *"prega"* motive, in retrograde inversion, turning Jago's perverted statement inside out and redeeming it in the process.

Through this analysis, one notes that Verdi makes up for what Desdemona as tragic character loses through the omission of Act One. She emerges as a fully-rounded heroine, making her point through pregnant silent pauses in her *Willow Song* and especially in the *Ave Maria*, something she has not been able to do with her insistent pleading for Cassio throughout the opera.

All this could not have been achieved if it were not for Verdi's superb yet subtle use of the Leitmotif which, in this case, is almost Wagnerian. The leitmotif in the late, mature Verdi, in the Verdi of *Otello* (and later of *Falstaff*) is capable of attaining what in nature is most universal and, consequently, most elusive, namely, its internal force. As used in *Otello*, it operates on various levels. In the particular case of the *Credo*, by the incremental repetition of a sneering, tortuously chromatic triplet pattern, Verdi seems to be imparting more than an actual melodic strain. What comes across is an acoustic idea, understood as an acoustic trace of the transposition between different levels of musical discourse. The twisting evil in the contorting triplet pattern of Jago's leitmotif is valuable as a representational metaphor. It becomes precious in its capacity for interpretation. The interpreter has the chance to probe the discursive space in which the sanctioning metaphor lives. He can also analogise what appear to be relevant aspects of this space to the musical activity inherent in the leitmotif. This analogising moves in two directions. It compresses, as it were, the discursive space into the music; simultaneously it enables a reinterpretation of the discourse through the music. Discourse and music do not engage in a text/context alliance; rather, the association is a dialogical one.

As I see it, this is what happens in the Shakespeare-Verdi alliance with regard to *Otello*. With characteristic brilliance Verdi, on the one hand, whenever possible allows leitmotif to emerge as parts of the organic thematic design and, on the other hand, endows ordinary thematic phrases with leitmotivic effects. In this way, Verdi develops a convincing entity from two phenomena that are discrete in principle, namely, thematic structure and thematic symbolism. As George Bernard Shaw writes, "apart from *Otello* being an opera by Verdi written in the style of Shakespeare, *Othello* is also a play written by Shakespeare in the style of a Verdi opera".[23] It is a brilliant stroke of the most refined of intertextual practices.

It is such verbal music that allows Shakespeare's text to communicate before it is understood. In this

regard, Shakespeare's verses become a privileged moment, an epiphany, as it were, where words are revealed in a new context, clothed in a new perspective, truly trans-figured. It is an experience that trembles with the force of an interiorised coherent that is its soul. The euphony of this experience is not likely to be forgotten by anyone who has once responded to it.

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1 For the sake of clarity, I shall be referring to Jago in Verdi's opera and Iago to Shakespeare's tragedy. Likewise with the name of the protagonist: it is Otello in Verdi but Othello in Shakespeare.
2 W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), p. 2.
3 Letter of October 24, 1848; G. Cesari & A. Luzio (eds.), *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, p. 388; translated by Phillip-Matz, *Verdi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 190
4 G. Verdi *Letters* vol. 2 (11 April 1857), p. 31.
5 Ibid., vol. 6 (21 November 1878), p. 153
6 The name Barbara came into use in the Middle Ages of the Christian world.
7 A similar storm is enacted in *King Lear*, Act III, Scenes ii, iv
8 For more detail on this subject, see R. Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello* (University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, KY, 1998) p. 116.
9 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 79, 80.
10 P. J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1907, repr. 1937, 1750, 1986, 2001), p. 283.
11 F. Bonavia, *Verdi* (Boston: Hyperion Press, 1968), p. 97.
12 Letter from Verdi to Boito, quoted by Gary Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 164.
13 G. Schmidgall discusses this argument at length. See *Shakespeare and Opera*, pp. 247-9.
14 Another equally important drinking-song occurs in *The Tempest*, where Stephano and Trinculo get Caliban drunk, leading to the foiled attempt of the rape of Miranda.
15 If Romeo had not crashed the Capulet's party, or if Friar John had not been detained on his way to Mantua, or if Friar Lawrence had given the letter to Romeo's man in the first place, the whole tragic affair would not have happened. However, one remembers, that time is of the essence in tragedy. Many tragic events could have been averted if something had happened a second sooner or later.
16 The idea that people are merely actors is echoed by Jacques in *As You Like It:*

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts....
>
> (II. vii. 139-42)

17 The drinking-song at half-way through the first Act has a very catchy tune but that is a communal song rather than an aria as the term is properly understood in opera.
18 'Celeste Aida' and 'Ritorna vincitor' from *Aida*, 'Il balen del tuo sorriso' from *Il Trovatore*, 'Sempre libera' from *La Traviata,* and 'Ella giammai m'amò' from *Don Carlos* are just a few of the many instances in Verdi's operas.
19 It is the same feeling one gets when reading Satan's superb monologue in Book IV of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
20 This is Verdi's own phrase.
21 This argument is discussed in some depth in B. Kettemann (ed.), *Expanding Circles, Transcending Disciplines, and Multimodal Texts* (London: Harper Row, 2003), pp. 194-7.
22 V. Vaughan, *Othello: a Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 48.
23 G.B. Shaw, *Shaw and Laurence*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 881.