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Power is a dominant theme in Verdi’s operas: throne and altar, never-ending sources of conflict, a fatal illusion for the characters that aspire to them, a devastating burden on those who sit upon them, and other dramaturgical variations around their ever-noxious relationship with those who obtain them. In view of this, it was natural that the dramas of Shakespeare (“my preferred poet,” the composer claimed), read and interpreted from a Romantic perspective, were a favored source for Verdi. But of the long dreamed of King Lear, which could have been a major milestone in the rich world of Verdi’s dramatic oftSpring, nothing remains but a mass of letters, the libretto, and an intertextual trace in the dramaturgy of Rigoletto (if we can consider the misunderstandings and failed communication between the court jester and his beloved daughter Gilda as akin to that of Lear and Cordelia). As for the composer’s two late Shakespearean masterpieces, Falstaff (1893), the Maestro’s spiritual testament, is a comedy; while in Otello, the earlier of the two, precedence is given to laying bare the violent inner nature of the protagonist, a man devoured by jealousy, and the remorseless machinations of his neurotic antagonist Iago, whose whole being is dedicated to revenge—a revenge not sufficiently motivated by his hatred for the Moor who has humiliated him.

In Macbeth, a masterpiece already in the original 1847 version for Florence, and even more so in the Paris version of 1865, Verdi deals with the theme of power, keeping closely to Shakespeare’s vision of its corrupting nature, in one of his darkest and most pessimistic operas. At the same time the score traces a fine web of dramaturgical and musical relationships that reveal the centrality of Verdi’s “political” vision, which I shall try briefly to illustrate in the following pages after some preliminary considerations as to how the subject is treated in the opera. Though Verdi claimed that the nature of his subject was first and foremost “fantastic,” his Macbeth is one of the most important examples of how the “hope of a royal throne” can unleash an act of homicidal madness. In Meyerbeer’s Robert le diable, which in certain aspects served Verdi as a model, the composer admired “the happy marriage between the fantastic and the true, and with that he meant the truth as he understood it in Shakespeare,” as Attilo Pizzi recalls in his Ricordi verdiiani inediti. The fantastic thus enters the sphere of “dramatic truth” and contributes to determining the message of the opera: lives cast aside on the path to power—“sound and fury signifying nothing.”

The tragic development of the opera is set in motion by the boundless ambition of its two main protagonists: “prien di misfatti è il calce della potenza” (“the road to power •
The virus of power corrodes the soul of the ferocious usurper from the moment of his entry. It is the witches, guiding the sinister events, who instil the poison in Macbeth, knowing well the fertile ground that their evil will find is full of evil deeds)" sings Lady Macbeth, implanting a dynamic that will lead her husband rapidly to the throne, fuelled by their bloodthirsty love that induces them to sweep aside every obstacle in their way. Verdi wanted Macbeth to be more susceptible to the diabolical allure of his wife than he is in the pages of Shakespeare, who makes him directly responsible for his own actions.

In Verdi, Lady Macbeth mixes power and love in a unique erotic inspiration: "Vieni, t'arresta, accorci [ti vo' quel freddo cuore [l'audace impresa a compiere [io ti darò valore] ("Come! Hurry! I wish to light a fire in your cold heart! I shall give you the courage to carry out this bold undertaking") she sings in her first aria; and when in 1865 the composer was preparing Recitativo for the banquet scene in the second act, he wrote that she "dominates everything, supervises everything, scolds Macbeth for not being even a man" ("domina tutto, sorveglia a tutti, rimprovera Macbeth di non essere nemmeno un uomo").

The virus of power corrodes the soul of the ferocious usurper from the moment of his entry with Banquo, both of them generals of King Duncan's Scottish army. It is the witches, guiding the sinister events, who instil the poison in Macbeth, knowing well the fertile ground that their evil will find. Their role as protagonists is strengthened by Verdi with respect to the hypotenent, again, in his recommendations for the Paris version, he writes "the roles in this opera are three: Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, and the Witches' Chorus", and is revealed in the first theme of the prelude, a theme heard again in the orchestral accompaniment to the chorus a few bars after the dark opening of the third act as the sorceresses throw their revolting ingredients into the cauldron to prepare their potions. The arch thus created is emphasized by the instrumental timbre, which is dominated by the tone of the reed instruments that accompanies these moments; the same timbre also plays a central role in the great scene of the apparitions, a powerful creation dominated by the fantastic element represented by the witches.

The witches, as a choral character, play a determining role in the tragic scheme of the drama, similar to that of the Furies. And Macbeth's destiny comes immediately to embrace him, as the predictions of the crones are instantly realised: after the shire of Glamis, which he has just received (though this is something we know only from the hypotenent) he also obtains the field of Cawdor (Act I, scene 3). Only the throne of Scotland is missing, though the uncertainty about Banquo's descendants, destined to reign, remains.

Throughout the opera Macbeth is incited by his wife to lend a hand to fate, until the moment in which he takes the initiative himself, visiting the witches in their dark cave for confirmation of their prophecies with regard to his own future. Thus begins the mechanism that will lead to catastrophe, following on from the extreme tension at the end of the second act with its convulsive scenes of Macbeth's madness during the banquet when he sees the figure of Banquo, whom in the meantime he has had brutally murdered. Madness and visions, just as would befall the usurper Tsar in Boris Godunov (1872) by Mussorgsky, a composer who knew well both the great creations of Verdi and Shakespearean dramas.

But what kind of power does Macbeth aspire? His wife assumes the vocal strains of a witch, invoking the infernal spirits to favour her ambitious plans ("I would like the voice of Lady [Macbeth] to have something of the diabolical" - "La voce di Lady vorrei che avesse del diabolico" - Verdi urged Cammarano in 1848), and fate plays right into her hands with the King's visit to the castle. In Shakespeare Duncan has a substantial part in the first act; but in the opera, in the interests of economy (for synthesis is required), Plais, the librarian - in agreement with the composer -
The brass provides a cheerful welcome to Duncan as he enters the castle of his assassin. This realistic gesture (a band would normally celebrate something of this kind) has a connotative function.

This connection with Rigoletto, in terms of Verdi's exceptional use of form in conjunction with reflections of a similar depth, is not only the example of the organic vision of power which permeates Verdi's dramaturgy at fundamental moments, such as in Les Vêpres siciliennes (1865) and, most notably, Don Carlos (1867). Traces of this network of associations are to be found right up until Otello — another foray into the world of Shakespeare — when, in his monologue “Dio mi potevi scalzarmi” (“God! Thou couldst have raised”), the eponymous hero, his soul now poisoned, has succumbed to Iago’s lies and recitals, with heartbreaking nostalgia, the serenity he has lost for ever. When he singe “grov’ gioiello, / l’amor specchio” (“in which I, joyfully, keep a tranquil soul”) Otello borrows a cadential phrase from the Scottish king — “Solo sangugno la mia mano irriga” (“a bloody streak now stains your blade”) — so that his defeat by means of a lie almost recalls the hauntings of Macbeth: a specter without substance, the equivalent of the bloody blade, flashes before him, spurring him on to commit his crime.

Other tyrant’s monologues in Verdi include those of Guy de Montfort and Philip II. Both of these depict men struggling with excruciating loneliness, the result of their despotic exercise of power; and the sons of both men are their political enemies. While the former knows the strength of paternal love and will redeem himself as a ruler, the latter is able only to lament his fate, knowing that no power on earth can secure for him the love of his spouse, who spurns him. Nevertheless, his suffering is real.

Macbeth, on the other hand, does not seek redemption, even on the point of death. She takes her leave in a monologue-aria (Act IV, scene 3) which begins with a moving introduction, a melody full of pathos, the orchestral flow disrupted only by the interjections of the doctor and the gentlewoman. The music of the introduction — originally heard just before the witches’ theme in the prelude to the first act — returns at the end of the scene as Lady Macbeth is swallowed up in eternal darkness. Its role in the formal and dramatic context of the work is powerfully expressive, developing a musical syntax which will prove valuable in the solo for the Spanish king in Don Carlos (Act IV, scene 1, line 1): “Philip II awakes alone ‘in the vaults of El Escorial’ (‘in nell’alveo dell’Escorial’) and, after an introduction consisting of a touching melody on the cellos, extended and enriched by secondary motifs, begins with a motto phrase ‘She never loved me’ (‘Ella giismani m’amò’) while the melodic flow continues in the orchestra (as in the introduction to Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking aria in Macbeth, to which this is a close relation). The king then embarks on the cantabile ‘Dormirò sol’ (‘I shall sleep’) — the counterpart of the Andante assai sostenuto of Lady Macbeth’s ‘Una macchia è qui tuttora’ (‘There is still a spot here’) — at the end of which the initial motto reappears. In neither case is the melody sung by the character on stage: it is the orchestra, the voice of the composer, that comments on the action — violins for the soprano who, sleepwalking, sings in her sleep, and cellos for the bass who has just awoken. These are two examples of Verdi’s sympathetic understanding of his “evil” characters: Philip, ruthless and tyrannical, is condemned to the pain of his lonely marriage; and even Lady Macbeth — monster though she undoubtedly is — is nevertheless capable of love. For Verdi, even the love of monsters is worthy of compassion and respect.
Stage Effects and Machinery

Twenty years later Verdi had not changed his mind about the scene of the eight kings, despite having at his disposition in Paris, that most modern of cities, the most advanced scenography his technology then available. Indeed, he had already seen an excellent solution to one particular aspect of his visual conception of the scene in Italy, and this he did not hesitate to recommend to the French stage designers, together with an explanatory drawing in his own hand (Figure 12). In March 1865, for a production in Genoa, they had in fact used a large wheel, not visible, on which the Kings are placed; and this circular wheel in motion, which elevates and advances these royal figures and then lowers them and makes them vanish, produces an excellent effect. The Kings are on a little base, leaning on a strong iron bar to keep them on their feet and in equilibrium; the base is hinged in such a way that the person is always upright. The whole wheel is underground, with only its extremity reaching the level of the stage. The stage is dark enough for an electric light illuminating the figures of the Kings... I find this mechanism admirable, since it avoids the monotony of the Kings processing in a straight line, and because it sets those Kings in motion without their having to walk. This is more fantastical. Verdi, then, found it monstrous if the eight kings appeared in procession; moreover, it was important to him that their posture should be heroic (difficult to achieve if they were to walk), and, if possible, he wanted them to appear and disappear one at a time. It is not uncommon nowadays to see one or other of the composer’s wishes fulfilled effectively. But at the same time it is still quite usual to see a more run-of-the-mill solution to the appearance of the eight figures, whether in procession (Milan, 1997, Figure 12) or all together (Zurich, 2011, Figure 12).

Whenever the fantastic, supernatural element in Macbeth is mentioned, the reference is usually to the actions of the witches. And when considering the sonorities that give these characters their specific sound color, the emphasis is primarily focused on the music that emanates through a trapdoor from a small group of single and double reed instruments located under the stage. According to the stage directions, this music should imitate “a sound of bagpipes underground” (“un suono sotterraneo di cornamusa”), and it is given substance in the mysterious cantilena that accompanies the procession of the eight kings of Scotland. But this ghostly parade of power (an effect created by illuminating the kings’ faces as they pass on a rotating platform), is preceded by three apparitions which foretell Macbeth’s fate. A stroke of the tamtam, also located under the stage, marks the end of each prediction. Here both truth and the fantastic contribute to the dramaturgy: each apparition foretells the events that will lead to Macbeth’s death — prophecies which he mistakenly interprets in his favour, subsequently resolving upon the final crime that he will succeed in carrying out (“Morte e sterminio! sull’iniqua piazza!... macbeth: Si morte! di Macduff avrò la rocca, ne perda moglie, prole...” — lady: Death and destruction to that wicked brood!... [macbeth: Yes, death! Macduff’s castle shall burn! | His wife and children shall perish...]; Act III, scene 5, 1865 version).

Supernatural events call for a particular timbre, which in French dictionaries of the nineteenth century was humorously described in the following terms: “tamtam. This has been replaced by the gallow, often less dramatic than the excruciating sound of the instrument, whose solemn vibrations cause the nerves to contract.” At that time the tamtam was an instrument that was used only rarely; its principal function — that of suggesting an arcane occurrence — meant that it was associated with lugubrious and/or inexplicable situations, and sometimes with the sacred. Verdi might well have known of at least five important earlier examples.
"Tantam. This has been replaced by the gallow, often less dramatic than the excruciating sound of the instrument, whose solemn vibrations cause the nerves to contract."

Like his wife, Macbeth disappears into the void, killed by Macduff, a not "born of woman". An end far more fitting for the man who only shortly before had defined life as "a tale told by an idiot".

of its use: the curse of excommunication uttered by the High Priest in Spontini's La vestale (1807) and by Brogl in Halévy's Le Juive (1835); the call to the sacred rise in the first act finale of Norma (1831), marking the "knell of death" for the three protagonists; the gong strike that heralds the apparition of the ghost in the finale of Act I in Semiramide (1823); and the arrow that strikes Guisnel before the concluding chorus in Guillaume Tell (1829). A further example — and one of which he certainly cannot have failed to be aware — is that of the strokes, marked pri¢e d'apres rancine, in the scene of the resurrection of the nun in Meyerbeer's Robert le diable (1831; Act I, scene 3), an opera which had preceded Macbeth in the experimental seasons at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence in 1840; and neither could another key work in the fantastic genre, Weber's Der freischütz (given in Florence in 1843) have been unknown to him.

After Macbeth Verdi would not deal again with the supernatural, which was far from his conception of drama, except in the French version of Il trovatore, where Manzetti goes to his death (Le Trouvère, 1887), and in the final scene of Don Carlos for Paris (1867). There, too, the composer employs a tarantula at the appearance of the mysterious monk who, having already appeared in the second act, suddenly emerges from the tomb of Charles V and, like a Deus ex machina, resolve the drama in what many commentators regard as most unsatisfactory manner. In fact, however, the denouement is more than plausible: the truth and the fantastic are once again combined in what must be considered a "political" masterpiece par excellence. Verdi, it is clear, saw the tautam as the ideal instrument for representing an extraordinary event, and he endows the monk, who speaks with the Emperor's voice, to the apparitions in Macbeth. This parallel is confirmed by another circumstance: in Paris, and subsequently elsewhere, in order to intensify the overall effect of the kilophone, electric light — still in its experimental phase at the time — was used. In a letter to Escudier, Verdi describes a very roomy production of the original Florentine version of Macbeth at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa in 1865:

"The stage is dark; there is only the electric light that shines on the Kings' faces" ("La scena 8 corami; solunto la luce elettrica che batte sulla figura del Re").

IV

Two of the alterations for the Paris version of Macbeth enable us to draw some further conclusions. In the 1865 version, the fourth act opens with one of the most effective choruses in all Verdi's operas, "Patria oppressa". Here, setting the same poetry, the composer re-composes the original chorus of 1847, which still spoke the language of the Risorgimento period, looking back to the great examples of Nabucco, Il trovatore and I Lombardi; in so doing, he raised it to a far higher degree of expressiveness. The new version is conversational in style, full of dissonance and acerbic sonorities that express well the mourning and the precarious situation of a population devastated by battles — in some respects not unlike the version who supplant Elisabetta di Valois for help at the beginning of Don Carlos. As Julian Budden has said, it is a change that lifts the work into the ethical and aesthetic sphere of Shakespeare, and which creates a more coherent background both for the sleepwalking scene and for Macbeth's monologue ("Furioso, rispetto, amore"), both of which belong to 1847 original version.

In the Paris finale, Verdi further strengthens the link with Shakespeare, who has Macbeth the offstage and Macduff return with the tyrant's bloody hands in his hands (Act V, scene 7). In the original version for Florence the composer had opted for a powerful solo in reductive style ("Mal per me, che manifai al prezzo dell'infelice" — "You have deceived me, hellish prophecy", Act IV, scene 10), placing Macbeth on the stage as he curses his ambition: "muovo ... al Cielo ... al mondo in ira, vil corrora ... col pervertito creato, ... e solo per uoi" ("I die... raging at heaven... light the earth, | worthless crown ... and only for you"), thus assuming an almost "heroic" attitude. In the revision for Paris, however, Verdi writes to Escudier: "Everything is now right up to the end. For the battle I've written a fugue! [...]

The subjects and counter-subjects changing after each other; the clash of dissonances, the noise, etc., etc. all express a battle very well.

I do not believe that Verdi wanted here only to exploit the descriptive qualities of the strict learned style — though it must be said that he did it very effectively; rather, he intended to re-affirm his vision of a tenacious, inexpressible power, making a connection with the apparition of a puppet king in the first act. Like his wife, Macbeth disappears into the void, killed by Macduff — not "born of woman" — who, in the composer's words, "only becomes a hero at the end of the opera." Such an end, indeed, is far more fitting for the man who only shortly before had defined life as "a tale told by an idiot."
ATTILA

FIGURE 2: Mme. de Hulst, 2001, Teatro alla Scala di Milano, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 3: Attila, 1993, Teatro alla Scala di Milano, photo Lelli and Mattioli © Teatro alla Scala

FIGURE 4: Attila, 2015, Teatro Comunale di Bologna, photo Noco Cassaroli © Teatro alla Scala


FIGURE 6: Attila, 1997, Teatro alla Scala di Milano, photo Lelli and Mattioli © Teatro alla Scala

FIGURE 7: Attila, 2010, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 8: Attila, 2012, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 9: Attila, 2006, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 10: Letter from Giuseppe Verdi to(sizeof(17,17) Verdi, 1856, Roger Shakespeare Library

UN GIORNO DI REGNO

FIGURE 1: Illustrazione da periodico corrispettivo, 1846, Servizio Casa della Musica, Comune di Parma

FIGURE 2: Attila, 2013, Sarzana Opera Festival, photo Rod Millington

FIGURE 3: Attila, 2010, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 4: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 5: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 6: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

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FIGURE 9: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 10: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 11: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 12: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 13: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci

FIGURE 14: Attila, 2009, Teatro Regio di Parma, photo Roberto Ricci