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Giuseppe Verdi, Attila, censorship
Attila is Verdi's ninth opera, composed to a libretto that was begun by Temistocle Solera and completed by Francesco Maria Piave. It received its premiere at Venice's Teatro La Fenice on 17 March 1846, and despite a poor first performance, went on to achieve great success both in Italy and abroad. Indeed, the popularity of Attila was eclipsed only by Verdi's triumphs of the 1850s and beyond. Based on Zacharias Werner's Attila, König der Hunnen, Verdi's Attila revolves around the Huns' conquest of Rome in the fifth century. It culminates in the murder of Attila by Odabella, an Acquilean who, like the Biblical Judith, has craftily charmed her way into her oppressor's confidence. Such a story, brought to the stage at such a time, was a natural candidate for censorship. The central act of regicide, references to religious practice, and the presence of inflammatory lines like "Avrai tu l'universo, resti l'Italia a me" ("You may have the universe, but leave Italy to me"), virtually guaranteed that the libretto would be modified in certain cities.

The typical censored libretto was not a one-size-fits-all adaptation. Local censors considered the inclinations and sensitivities of a particular audience, as well as their own personal tastes, with the result that the same opera could be performed in different cities with significantly altered texts, and sometimes even new titles. For example, the Attila libretto prepared in 1847 for Rome, the seat of the Catholic Church, leaves the opera's political message largely intact, but censors numerous religious details, while an 1855 libretto for Palermo, a city with a particularly painful history of foreign domination, retains certain religious improprieties, but suppresses both the opera's patriotic sentiments and its original title.

A brief examination of these two altered librettos suggests how local censors might have played their part in moderating the political, religious, and social influences affecting these two communities.1

The timing of Attila's first performance in Rome was critical in determining the particular direction of the censors' actions. At the start of the 1847-48 Carnevale season, when this performance took place at the Teatro Apollo, the Papal States were under the control of Pius IX, whose political beliefs were at that time still relatively liberal. While other European cities were already seething with revolution, Rome was comparatively peaceful, its citizens trusting in the good will of their government. Had this performance taken place just one year later, after Pius's conservative turn rendered him so unpopular that he had to flee the city, it is doubtful that the opera's most politically charged lines—including Ezio's offer to give up the entire universe for control of Italy—would have been allowed to remain. In late 1847, however, the Roman censors seem not to have been troubled by the revolutionary message simmering just beneath Attila's surface. Of greater concern to them were the opera's references to religious rituals and personages.

The Rome Attila libretto contains numerous minor textual changes that address the theatrical employment of religious terms: for example, "terra beata" ("blessed land") becomes "terra diletta" ("dear land") and "sacre figlie degli Unni" ("sacred daughters of the Huns") becomes "figlie elette degli Unni" ("chosen daughters of the Huns"). Three scenes in particular have a strong religious content that was neutralized by the Roman censors. The first of these, representing the founding of Venice by the exiled Acquileans and their leader, Foresto, includes a chorus of hermits praising God at their homemade altar. In addition to replacing references to prayer, the altar, and the cross, the Roman censors modified Foresto's declaration that he would rather see his beloved Odabella "fra gl'angeli" ("among the angels") than in the clutches of Attila: in the Roman text, Foresta simply prefers to see her "cinta di raggio etereo" ("girded with an ethereal ray").

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Two other passages concerning Attila's dream about the conquest of Rome and its subsequent realization also underwent substantial religious censorship. In the second tableau of Act I, Attila relates a dream in which an old man forbids him to enter the Eternal City. This dream, which Attila pridefully refuses to heed, comes true in the following tableau, when his way into Rome is barred. The real Attila's Roman conquest was halted by Pope Leo I, whom Werner changed to a bishop in his drama.

Verdi, who was clearly familiar with the historical incident but worried about the reaction of the censors, demoted Leo even further: in Attila Leone is a “vecchio romano,” and in his one appearance in the opera he enters accompanied not by priests but by six elders (“sei Anziani”).

Verdi's caution notwithstanding, the Roman censors still found work for themselves in these two scenes. The old man in Attila's dream became the spirit of Rome itself. Attila's irreverent threat, “Roma iniqua, io volo a te” (“Wicked Rome, I fly to you”), was replaced by the less offensive “O superba, io movo a te” (“O prideful one, I advance upon you”). Leone, whose name might have reminded audiences of the historical Pope Leo even though he is characterized simply as “one of the six elders of Rome,” is rechristened Ugone — a safe name lacking any political or religious associations. As one might expect, all references to God and biblical events disappear from this scene.

The Rome version of Attila also contains minor modifications which could best be attributed to social or moral censorship. For example, the word “vergine” (“virgin”) was usually replaced by the similar-sounding, yet sexually neutral, “giovane” (“young person”).

Our second censored Attila libretto goes by an alternate title, Gli unni e i romani (The Huns and the Romans). Prepared for Palermo's Teatro Carolino in 1855, this version of the story reflects above all the censors' anxiety over the stirring patriotism displayed in the original text. Sicily in the mid-19th century was in a sense under a double occupation. As half of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, it was ruled by the Bourbon King Ferdinand I. In 1816, Ferdinand abolished the separate Sicilian parliament and placed the island under the control of Naples. Resentment of foreign, and above all, mainland domination permeated all levels of Sicilian society. Add to that a failed local economy and a cholera epidemic, and the stage was set for an uprising.

Revolution hit Sicily in the fateful year of 1848. Comparatively few of the insurgents were concerned with Italian statehood—most simply wanted to better their way of life. In fact, Sicily's grudge against Naples may have actually hindered the cause of Italian unification. The Sicilian uprising proceeded by fits and starts—at one point both a parliament and a king were chosen—but Naples ultimately crushed the rebellion in May of 1849. For the next ten years, Ferdinand governed both Naples and Sicily with such cruelty that even the Jesuits were appalled.3

In 1855, Verdi's Attila, or rather Gli unni e i romani, had its first performance in Palermo at the Teatro Carolino. In addition to modifying the opera's conclusion, the local censors altered the name and title of the main character. Rather than Attila, King of the Huns, in Palermo the protagonist is Bleda, the Huns' general—an interesting choice, since the historical Bleda was Attila's brother, and the two ruled jointly until Bleda's mysterious death, thirteen years into their reign.

Odabella, too, underwent a transformation in the Palermo libretto, a denaturing based on both political and social concerns. At the first entrance of Odabella and her companions, Uldino remarks that these “miraculous female warriors defended their brothers” (“mirabili guerriere difesero i fratelli”); in Palermo, by contrast, the women were merely “secretly burying their beloved dead” (“di furto seppellivano i loro amati estinti”). Odabella's stirring claim that her actions express “boundless and sacred love of my homeland” (“santo di patria indefinito amor”) is in Palermo reduced to “boundless love for our dear ones” (“dei nostri cari indefinito amor”). Her ensuing aria is similarly neutralized, shedding its many references to oppression and resistance. Thus Odabella's twin motivations of patriotism and vengeance are, in the Palermo libretto, reduced to politically neutral—and more appropri-
ately feminine—concerns of the heart. It is no wonder that in this version of the opera Bleda does not give Odabella his sword as a reward for her courage.

In keeping with the censors' political concerns, the Palermo libretto omits Attila's most famous line of text: while in the original libretto Ezio, the Roman general, attempts to bargain with the Huns, offering the entire universe in exchange for Italy, in the Palermo version he simply threatens Bleda with the strength of the Roman army. And just as the Rome libretto replaced certain religious terms with neutral alternatives, so the Palermo libretto avoids politically charged words like "patria" and "Italia," words that the Roman censors had let stand.

The Palermo libretto exhibits a certain sensitivity to religious imagery, although this concern pales next to the censors' apprehension regarding political matters. References to the cross and to the hermits' altar were eliminated in this libretto. In many scenes the censors were careful to distinguish ancient Rome from its modern counterpart—the seat of the Catholic Church—by referring to Ezio as the representative of Caesar. Bleda's dream and confrontation with Leone, however, emerge largely unscathed: a "specter," rather than an old man, appears in Bleda's dream, but the actual showdown outside Rome is left as written.

In the matter of the opera's final scene, each of our censored librettos is true to form. In the original version, Attila finds Odabella, his bride-to-be, in the company of Ezio and Foresto. Suspecting treachery, he curses them, and each offers a ready defense. At the scene's climax, sounds of battle are heard; Odabella springs into action, stabbing Attila in the heart as payment for her father's death. After Attila's last words "E tu pure Odabella?..." (evoking the shade of Julius Caesar), the ensemble declares that God, people, and king have been avenged.

As expected, the Roman censors neutralized the religious element in Attila's final scene. The ensemble's final words eliminate the mention of God: here, only the people and their king are vindicated. More importantly, Attila's murder still takes place—the onstage killing of a king was apparently not viewed as subversive in the Papal States at this time. By contrast, the Palermo libretto once again demonstrates that the censors in that city were more concerned with political intrigue than with religious impropriety. In this version of the final scene, Bleda is not murdered at all; rather, he commits suicide to avoid being captured by the victorious Roman army. The political situation in Palermo was apparently so tense that an onstage suicide—normally prohibited for religious reasons—was more acceptable than the murder of an occupying general.

Differences between these two modified librettos for Verdi's Attila demonstrate the significance of a particular performance's location, time, and context for the practice of theatrical censorship. Given the variety of priorities exhibited by censors, leading to multiple expurgated versions of a single opera, it is hardly surprising that Verdi and his librettists should feel that their work was under attack.

NOTES

1. It would seem that censors were slow to recognize the subversive potential of the "Avrai tu l'universo" lines, since printed librettos omitted it with any consistency only after the revolts of 1848. Before then the lines had been criticized, not for any political import, but for their opacity. Verdi himself had asked Solera to explain their meaning (Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, 4 vols. [Milan: Ricordi, 1959], 1: 593-95), and critics would liken them to Dulcamara's absurd phrase in *L'elisir d'amore*, "Per tutto l'universo e in altri siti" ("for the whole universe and in other places" (Giuseppe Stefani, *Verdi e Trieste* [Trieste: il comune di Trieste, 1951], 24-25). I am grateful to David Rosen for this observation.

2. Both librettos used in this study are in the microfilm collection of the American Institute for Verdi Studies: (1) Temistocle Solera. *Attila*. Rome: Teatro Apollo, Carnevale 1847-1848 (call number Film/ML49.V48 v. 3); (2) Temistocle Solera. *Gli unni e i romani* Palermo: Teatro Carolino, 1855 (call number Film/ML49.V48 v. 19).