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The Censorship of *I masnadieri* in London

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In accordance with the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 (6 & 7 Vict. C. A. P. 68), in Victorian London every new "tragedy, comedy, farce, opera, burletta, interlude, melodrama, pantomime or other entertainment for the stage" with a plot or continuous action had to be sent to the Examiner of Plays in the Lord Chamberlain's Office at least seven days prior to its intended performance to be officially licensed.1 The general procedures for licensing theatrical texts were outlined by the Examiner William Bodham Donne:

All the manuscripts performed at the theatres in Great Britain must be sent in for my examination, in order to their being afterwards recommended for a license by the Lord Chamberlain. I read all those manuscripts, and if I find anything objectionable, I endorse on the license the objectionable passages, with a direction to omit them in the representation, and then I recommend them to the Lord Chamberlain, or if I am doubtful about the whole bearing of the piece, it is then referred to the Lord Chamberlain to confirm or reject my opinion against it; if his opinion coincides with mine, the play is refused a license.2

Of course, the approval process, as Donne implied, focused on censoring the text. In general, the Examiner's object was "principally to exclude any scriptural subject, or plays in which highwaymen or immorality are exalted, and any personal, or personally political questions."3 General Victorian principles, as stereotypically perceived, were obviously among the considerations guiding the censorial process, although there were no precise rules governing it.4 And, although each Examiner followed a similar procedure in reviewing stage texts, individual concerns differed somewhat according to personal predilections. The best evidence of codified precepts are the proposals set forth in the Report of the 1909 Joint Select Parliamentary Committee on Stage Plays (Censorship) which surely reflect earlier practice:

The Lord Chamberlain ... should license any play submitted to him unless he considers that it may reasonably be held—

a) To be indecent;

b) To contain offensive personalities;

c) To represent on the stage in an invidious manner a living person, or a person recently dead;

d) To do violence to the sentiment of religious reverence;

e) To be calculated to condude to crime or vice;

f) To be calculated to impair friendly relations with any Foreign Power; or

g) To be calculated to cause a breach of the peace.5

Although in the nineteenth century all of these issues were of some concern in considering whether or not a play or an opera should be licensed and in determining the extent and nature of required modifications (if any), with the exception of (ir)religious references, few of these principles were applied with any discernable degree of consistency. Moreover, despite Examiners' statements to the contrary,6 operas were judged less stringently than spoken dramas. Perhaps one reason for this was, as Donne once declared, that "the words and the story of an opera, being a vehicle only for music, fall less directly on the ear than in the spoken drama,"7 and "if there is a musical version of a piece, it makes a difference, for the story is then subsidiary to the music and the singing."8 In addition to the musical emphasis of an operatic work, the lack of understanding of the text (be it French, Italian, or, rarely, German) by both the audience members and the Examiners of Plays played a role in the level of censorial intervention in opera. Thus, having the text of an opera in a "foreign" language meant that the subtleties of the words and the plot would not have been readily perceived aurally by the patrons, at least in the censors' view. The printed text, which audience members would have read in English, was, however, a different matter, and it is, therefore, not surprising to find most of the censoring imposed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office was done in the English translations of opera librettos.

In conformity with the regulations of the era, in 1847 the libretto of *I masnadieri* had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office for approval before it could be performed at Her Majesty's Theatre. The Examiner of Plays responsible for its license was John Mitchell Kemble (1807-1857).9 The text that Kemble presumably would have read, a copy of the printed libretto that was prepared and issued for the premiere of *I masnadieri* at Her Majesty's Theatre, is preserved in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection at the British Library.10 Unfortunately, Kemble's shoddy record-keeping habits resulted in the absence of an entry for the opera in the Lord Chamberlain's Daybooks.11 Thus the actual dates of submission and of license are not known.12

The printed booklet for *I masnadieri* contains both Italian verses and an English translation. The Italian text was left intact, but for a few verses either the literal meaning was softened or substantially changed in translation to remove objectionable allusions, or else the text was simply not translated into English at all. There is little reason to doubt that the translation was made prior to the submission of the libretto for licensing, and it is altogether possible that, in this instance, as was the case in others, the staff of the Lord Chamberlain's Office advised the impresario before he printed the text or applied for the license, to avoid potential problems in obtaining approval for presentation. Such a consultation could easily have resulted in the incorporation of textual modifications in the English version designed to eliminate an Examiner's objections.

In reality, few textual alterations were necessary in *I masnadieri*. All of them, however, were directly related to religious concerns. One of the most common religious ideological problems encountered in opera librettos was the use of "oaths" — "Lo giuro" - "I swear it!" , "Oh Dio!" - "Oh God!", and the like — which all Examiners eliminated. Evidence of a firmly rooted objection to oaths in Victorian ethics is found in an influential and widely disseminated publication titled *Essays on the Principles of Morality* by Jonathan Dymond.13 Dymond devoted several pages to the subject of oaths, going so far...
as to question the validity of judicial oaths, and discussing how
oaths “diminish the power of those principles upon which the moral
character is founded” and indicate a lack of integrity in those who
utter them.\textsuperscript{14} Oaths were viewed by some Victorians as “immoral
and improper” as well as vulgar and thus never to be uttered “in
assemblies where high characters and females congregate[ld].”\textsuperscript{15}
Several examples can be found in the libretto for \textit{I masnadieri} in
which the English words were emended, e.g., “Gran Dio” translated
as “Great heaven.”

Throughout the nineteenth century of greatest importance in regard
to censorial intervention on religious grounds, however, were
Examiners’ objections to explicitly scriptural themes or theological
references. In the view of Colman, “all scripture is much too sacred
for the stage, except in very solemn scenes indeed,”\textsuperscript{16} and, as Donne
noted several years later: “both as a matter of morality, and as a
matter of taste, I never allow any association with Scripture or theology
to be introduced into a play.”\textsuperscript{17} \textit{I masnadieri} deals with some quite
specific theological issues in its final act, and it is precisely these
connections that account for the censored translations.

The scenes that open Act IV — Francesco's narration of his dream and
the encounter between him and the priest Moser — deal explic­
ily with theological issues, and documentary evidence attests that
these scenes would have presented a concern to the Examiner of
Plays. In an English language adaptation of Schiller's \textit{Die Räuber}, the
play on which the opera is based, licensed on 26 December 1845 for
performance at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the entire pseudo-
repentance scene was omitted and the role of the Priest was elimi-
nated altogether.\textsuperscript{18} The libretto printed expressly for the (world)
premiere of \textit{I masnadieri} at Her Majesty's Theatre contains the scenes
but the English translations exhibit some curious alterations
designed to get past the censors without necessitating deletion of the
scenes. A few of the most blatant changes in Act IV, scene ii,
Francesco's narration of his terrifying dream about the Day of
Judgment and his eternal punishment for his earthly crimes, reveal
how the meaning was toned down: “L’immagine è questa dell’ultimo
di!” (literally “The image is that of the Day of Judgment”) is translat-
ed as “What fearful omens crossed thy soul!”; “Infiele chi manca di
fede” (“Unhappy is he who lacks faith”) is modified to read
“Wretched is he who breaks his faith”; “… il Sangue ... del nostro
Riscatto” (“the blood ... of our redemption”) becomes “heavenly
mercy”; and, finally, “Per te, maledetto, l’Uom-Dio non peno” (“For
you, accursed one, the Son of God did not suffer”) reads “Mercy, wretch,
is not for thee.”

The most dramatically damaging translations, however, occur in Act
IV, scenes iii and iv. In the opera’s Italian text, following his dream
Francesco summons the priest Moser who tells him that there can
be no forgiveness for his crimes of patricide and fratricide. As
the castle is suddenly attacked, Francesco, fearing for his life, asks for
absolution from the priest. Being refused his request, he begins to
pray but has a sudden change of heart, deciding to return to his evil
ways. The impresario at Her Majesty's Theatre, Benjamin Lumley,
and the staff librettist could not have failed to realize that this blas-
phemous scene needed some refining if the opera was to pass the
Examiner’s watchful eye. Thus, in Act IV, scene iii, the lines about
provoking the Christian god are not translated into English at all:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{Francesco:} & \textbf{Literal translation}\tabularnewline Che far mi può? [Se l’alma & What can he do to me? [If my soul\tabularnewline Non è mortale, provocar vo’ tanto & is immortal, I want to provoke\tabularnewline Quel tuo Dio che la strugga.] Or, qual & your God so much that he will\tabularnewline peccato & destroy it.\tabularnewline Più lo mette in furor? & Now, which sin most evokes his\tabularnewline & wrath?\tabularnewline & \textbf{London libretto translation}\tabularnewline What sin angers him the & \textbf{[two verses omitted]}\tabularnewline most?\tabularnewline \end{tabular}

And in Act IV, scene iv, Francesco remains truly repentant, while Moser, rather than telling Francesco that he is damned to Hell without
God’s forgiveness, explains that he will receive divine forgiveness:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{Francesco:} [s’inginocchia] & \textbf{Literal translation}\tabularnewline E la prima!... Odimi, Eterno! & Francesco: (he kneels)\tabularnewline E sarà la volta estrema, & It is the first time!... Hear me,\tabularnewline Ch’io ti prego... [s’alza in furure] & Eternal One!\tabularnewline Ah, no, l’inferno & And it will be the last time,\tabularnewline Non si dee beffar di me! & that I pray to you... (rising in fury)\tabularnewline & Ah no, Hell will not scoff at me!\tabularnewline & \textbf{London libretto translation}\tabularnewline Francesco: (kneeling) & Francesco: (he kneels)\tabularnewline Hearken, eternal one, & It is the first time!... Hear me,\tabularnewline to the heart that repentant & Eternal One!\tabularnewline turns to thee, & And it will be the last time,\tabularnewline now that I at length discern & that I pray to you... (rising in fury)\tabularnewline the truth, & Ah no, Hell will not scoff at me!\tabularnewline have pity now again on me.\tabularnewline \end{tabular}

\textbf{Moser:} \tabularnewline Trema, iniquo! il lampo, il tuono & Tremble, wicked man! Lightning\tabularnewline Ti sta sopra... iniquo, trema! & and thunder\tabularnewline Dio ti nega il suo perdono, & rage above you... wicked man, tremble!\tabularnewline Sta l’abisso innanzi a te. & God denies you his forgiveness;\tabularnewline & the abyss lies before you.

\textbf{Moser:} \tabularnewline Yes, yes, kneel and pray. & The thunder of wrath\tabularnewline you may yet escape. & you may yet escape.\tabularnewline The Eternal denies not his pardoning love, & The Eternal denies not his pardoning love,\tabularnewline to him who in his mercy confides. & to him who in his mercy confides.
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This strategy seems to have worked, for the Italian text is preserved intact in the printed libretto, and the Examiner of Plays did not require omissions or alterations in these scenes. It is somewhat difficult to explain fully the strictness of religious censorship of stage works in Victorian Britain that necessitated the modifications in I masnadieri, but several factors can be posited in partial explanation. The developing undercurrents and emerging religious philosophies in Britain in the nineteenth century — as exemplified by the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the Oxford Movement, the writings of John Henry Newman and the rise of the Tractarians, the deepening rift between science and religion, and the aura of doubt of one’s faith expressed in literary works (by Tennison and Carlyle, for example) — made religious belief a source of concern to the Victorians. In this evolving religious climate all hints of blasphemy or sacrilege intended to be exhibited in public could not have failed to raise eyebrows in the Lord Chamberlain’s Office. Another reason may have been related to the concept that religious fervor provided an outlet for oppressed female passions, especially for the Victorian lady who was obliged to appear passive, innocent, asexual, and submissive to male authority figures. Such fervor could not be encouraged by public spectacles. At the least, the special attention lavished by the censor on religious allusions in stage texts at this time was a remnant of a long-standing tradition of religious censorship. As early as 1559 a decree had been made that “no plays with religious or political themes were to be performed.” Moreover, early in the nineteenth century the Examiner George Colman had enforced an inflexible and unreasonable policy in regard to religious references. The extremes to which Colman took the excision of Biblical allusions from stage works can be demonstrated by his testimony concerning prohibition of the word “angel” on the stage if applied to a woman. Such policies surely left residual effects in the years following his appointment.

The objections to religious allusions were not, however, unique to I masnadieri in London in the nineteenth century. The very same scenes had proved to be a source of consternation for Italian censors as well, especially in the Papal States (librettos for performances in Rome 1847-48 and Spoleto 1849-50) and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (librettos for performances in Naples 1849 and Palermo 1851-52). (For a full discussion, see my “The Censorship of I masnadieri in Italy,” Verdi Newsletter 21 [1993]: 5-15.)

I masnadieri furnishes but a single case of the practices of the Examiners of Plays in regard to Verdi’s operas in particular and to Italian opera in general. It is, however, a representative case that demonstrates the extent to which upholding Victorian pretenses conditioned the official sanctioning or prohibition of public spectacles and led the Lord Chamberlain’s Office to attempt to protect the “delicate sensibilities” of Victorian audiences and, thus at least superficially, preserve social decorum.

Notes

1 Such control over public entertainment in Britain can be traced back to the fifteenth century when Henry the VII’s Master of the Revels was empowered to supervise court entertainments to ensure that they were not offensive to the King. With time the practice increased in scope and purpose. Eventually approval of stage works was assigned to the Office of the Lord Chamberlain, and with the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, a separate Examiner of Plays was appointed. In that year a bill labeled 10 George II, c. 28, was brought to Parliament by Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister, in an effort to curtail satirical allusions, both personal and political, in stage works of the time. It served as the basis for all subsequent legislation in regard to licensing of stage works in Britain. For additional information about the Act, see John Russell Stephens, The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901 (Cambridge, 1980), esp. 5-10, and John Johnston, The Lord Chamberlain’s Blue Pencil (London, 1990), 26-27.

2 William Bodham Donne, testimony of 20 April 1866 before the Select Parliamentary Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations [Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index 1866, Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Stage and Theatre 2 (Shannon, n.d.), q.2068].

3 Spenser Ponsonby, Comptroller to the Lord Chamberlain, testimony of 19 March 1866 (Ibid., q.170). Later during the hearings, on 23 April 1866 (Ibid., q.2438), Donne confirmed Ponsonby’s statement.

4 See the discussion of the issue in Stephens, 17.

5 “Proposals with Respect to the Licensing of Plays,” Report from the Joint Select Committee on Stage Plays (Censorship), together with Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices 1899 (London, 1909), xi and xxviii.

6 See Report...1866, qq.2306, 2489-2491, 2495. James E. Stottlar (“A Victorian Stage Censor: The Theory and Practice of William Bodham Donne,” Victorian Studies 13 (March 1970): 253-82) pointed out that Donne’s words in regard to his approval of stage texts did not always seem to be compatible with his actions.

7 Donne stated this opinion in a letter dated 2 July 1851 (GB-Lbl Add. MS. 71565) concerning Sigismund Thalberg’s opera Florinda, or Moors in Spain (Italian libretto by Giannoni), which was performed at Her Majesty’s Theatre, London, in 1851.

8 Testimony of 20 April 1866 (Report...1866, q.2284).

9 Kemble officially served the office between February 1840 and March 1857 but actually worked only from February 1840 to August 1849 and from February 1856 to March 1857 and even then somewhat intermittently. During the intervening years, William Bodham Donne (1807-1882) served as the Acting Examiner of Plays (assuming full responsibility from March 1857 through August 1874). Donne was responsible for the licensing of several of Verdi’s operas. (The information concerning the dates of office was obtained from Stephens, pp.157-58.)

10 GB-Lbl Add. MS. 42,999 #15.

11 The Daybooks [GB-Lbl Add. MSS. 53,702-53,708] are a series of ledgers in which the Examiner entered basic information on the licensing of theatrical texts, including the title of each work submitted for approval, its genre, the theater in which it was to be performed, the date of submission, the date of license, and sometimes comments referring to objectionable passages.

12 The libretto in the Lord Chamberlain’s collection has no date of license written on it, but the manuscript that follows it in the bound volume at the British Library (GB-Lbl Add. MS 42,999 #16) was licensed on 23 January 1847. Since the date of the opera’s premiere was not set until July 1847, due to numerous delays in the completion of composition, it is unlikely that the libretto was sent to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office in January. There are errors in the binding of this volume; see British Museum Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts: Plays Submitted to the Lord Chamberlain 1824-1851: Add. MSS 42865-43038 (London, 1964). For further discussion of the libretto, see the introduction in my critical edition of I masnadieri in The Works of Giuseppe Verdi (Milan and Chicago Continued...
2000. The title page of the libretto reads: "Masnadieri: A Tragic Opera, / in Four Parts. / The Libretto Founded on the Drama of "The Robbers," by Schiller. / Composed expressly for / Her Majesty's Theatre, / by / Maestro Giuseppe [sic] Verdi. / The Scenery (entirely new) by / Mr. Charles Marshall. / The new Costumes (from authorities) under the / Superintendence of / Madame Copere, / by Mr. Whales and Miss Bradley. / The Decorations by / Mr. Edmund Bradwell. / Produced on Thursday, / July 22, 1847. / The Only Correct Edition. / London: / Published and sold at Her Majesty's Theatre. / [list of vendors] / 1847. / Price Two Shillings.

The massive treatise was first printed in 1828 and reprinted without revision several times through 1880. The edition consulted for this study was published in London in 1851.

Dymond, p. 63.

George Colman (who had a particular aversion to oaths), testimony of 20 June 1832 to the Parliamentary Committee [Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature 1831-32, Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, Stage and Theatre 1 (Shannon, 1968), q.858].

George Colman, testimony of 18 June 1832 (Ibid., q.857).

Donne, testimony of 23 April 1866 (Report...1866, q.2410). But, even with stories derived directly from the Bible, it was not always so terribly difficult to obtain the approval of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. A change of title, names of characters, and temporal or geographical settings might suffice, as in the case of Verdi's Nabucco. As is well known, this opera was not performed under its original title or with its original characters in London in the nineteenth century but rather appeared under two different names: as Nino on 3 March 1846 at Her Majesty's Theatre and as Anato on 30 May 1850 at Covent Garden. In both instances, the outline of the story remained essentially the same as in Nabucco, but details were modified: the names of the characters were changed; Hebrews became Babylonians; the action was moved to ancient Assyria and Nineveh rather than taking place in Old Testament Jerusalem and Babylon; the god became the Egyptian Isis.

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19 The technique is not so different from what is done today in American opera houses when supertitles are modified to reflect current-day concerns with political correctness in matters of race, gender, class, etc.

20 For an informative and detailed discussion of these issues and of the general state of religion in Victorian Britain, see Bernard M. G. Reardon, Religious Thought in the Victorian Age, 2d ed. (London, 1995).

21 This idea is discussed by Peter T. Cominos in "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict," in Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, ed. M. Vicinus (Bloomington, 1972), 155-72. It is also expressed succinctly and explicitly by Barbara Rees in The Victorian Lady (London, 1977), 108.

22 Johnston, 23.

23 See Report...1832, q.852: Duncombe: "The Committee have heard of your cutting out of a play the epithet 'angel,' as applied to a woman?" Colman: "Yes, because it is a woman, I grant, but it is a celestial woman. It is an allusion to the scriptural angels, which are celestial bodies. Every man who has read the Bible understands what they are, or if he has not, I will refer him to Milton."