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David Rosen
Cornell University

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Macbeth and Ugolino: Another Verdian Encounter with Dante

David Rosen

Luigi Ferdinando Casamorata, in his long, serialized examination of Verdi's *Macbeth*, written shortly after the opera's premiere at Florence's Pergola Theatre on 14 March 1847, cites an example where Piave's “translation” (sic) is not only inappropriate but nonsensical (*a controsenso*): the opening of the *largo concertato* of the Act II finale. Macbeth resolves to learn the future from the witches, while Lady Macbeth tries to calm him and the guests react to his previous outburst with consternation and suspicion. Casamorata cites Shakespeare's lines in English thus:

"...I will to-morrow
...unto the weird sisters:
"More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know,
"By the worst means, the worst etc."

After providing an Italian prose translation (beginning "Voglio domani recarmi dalle fatidiche suore"), he continues: "Now, here is how our librettist has been able to say in two lines precisely the opposite of all this: 'Il velame del futuro / Alle streghe io squarcierò' ['Ora, ecco come di tutto ciò in due versi ha saputo appunto dire il rovescio il nostro librettista (...)']. Aside from his curious notion that one of Piave's tasks as a librettist was to provide an accurate translation of Shakespeare's play, Casamorata apparently misconstrued Piave's couplet as meaning that Macbeth would reveal the future (rend asunder the curtain of the future) to or for the witches, that is, interpreting "alle streghe" as a benefactive dative. But in this context that interpretation makes no sense, and it was surely perverse of Casamorata not to acknowledge that "alle streghe" could also easily be interpreted as a possessive: the witches' curtain of the future. But there is another point about that couplet that escaped him entirely. In the manuscript libretto Piave had begun the *largo concertato* with the following text:

Sangue a me quell'ombra chiede
E l'avrà, l'avrà, lo giuro!
Il sigillo del futuro
Alle streghe io frangerò.

That shade asks me for blood
And it shall have it, it shall have it,
I swear it!
I will shatter
the witches' seal of the future.

Besides two minor alterations in punctuation and one in capitalization in the ensemble, Verdi changed two words, both in the last two lines of Macbeth's quatrains:

Il velame del futuro
Alle streghe io squarcierò.
I will rend asunder
the witches' veil of the future.

Both the "sigillo del futuro" and the "velame del futuro" are obstacles that stand between Macbeth and the future which he seeks to know, but "velame del futuro" when combined with the verb "squarciare" rings intertextual bells. In a celebrated passage from *La divina commedia*, Count Ugolino tells Dante of the nightmare that revealed the future to him — that he, his two sons, and two grandsons would be starved to death in their prison and possibly (a famous crux later in the canto) that Ugolino would be reduced to cannibalism: "...io feci 'l mal sonno / Che del futuro mi squarcì 'l velame" (*Inferno*, Canto 33, lines 25-7). And so, in this opera premiered in the city of Dante, Verdi has altered Piave's original lines to evoke a famous passage in the *Commedia*, thus underscoring a similarity in the situation of the two characters. Dante has placed Ugolino in Antenora, the second ring of Cocytus, in the ninth circle of Hell — the realm of traitors to their homeland or party. As the texts of the opening chorus of Act IV ("Patria oppressa!") and the stretta of Macduff's aria ("Patria tradita") emphasize, Macbeth has not only murdered his King and his guest, but also oppressed and betrayed his people. But there is also a crucial difference: whereas Ugolino's dream prophetically reveals to him the cruel future that awaits him, Macbeth's determination to have the witches reveal the future to him leads once again to their optimistic, encouraging lies — "disinformation," we would say today — and thereby to his downfall.

Notes


3. Compare "Stringero la mano a Giovanni," where "I will shake Giovanni's hand," a simple possessive, would be the normal translation; it would be strange to render it as "I will shake Giovanni's hand for him" (a benefactive dative).

4. For the text of Piave's original manuscript and the alterations in the hands of Verdi and of Andrea Maffei, see Francesco Degrada, "The 'Scala' Macbeth Libretto: a Genetic Edition," Rosen and Porter, Verdi's "Macbeth," 306-338; here 327. The first two lines come from Shakespeare's "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood" ("Sangue egli chiede, e l'avrà; il sangue, dicono, chiama sangue" in Carlo Rusconi's prose translation, Verdi's principal source for Shakespeare's text [Padua: La Minerva, 1838]). However, there is no Shakespearean (or Rusconian) equivalent for the image of the "seal of the future" or the "curtain for the future" lines in the quatrain — that comes directly from another source, as we shall see.

5. The Ugolino episode is, of course, a famous passage, not only for school children who read it in their anthologies, but also for composers such as Vincenzo Galilei, Ignaz von Seyfried, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Niccolò Zingarelli, Francesco Morlacchi, Gaetano Donizetti (who set it to music), and Riccardo Zandonai (see Petrobelli, "On Dante," 231, 234; Roglieri, *Dante and Music*, 109-122). On 5 July 1894, nearly fifty years after composing *Macbeth*, Verdi wrote to the librarian at the Florence Conservatory to request that a copy of Galilei's setting be made for his inspection. See *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Alessandro Luzio and Gaetano Cesari (Milan: Commissione esecutiva per le Onoranze a Giuseppe Verdi nel primo centenario della nascita, Milano, 1913), 634.

6. I am grateful to Daniel Tonozzi for suggesting this connection to me.