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## ***THE TEMPORAL DURABILITY OF SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO IN ITS MUSICAL REWRITINGS***

**Keywords:** *durability, musical dramaturgy, dichotomy, race, religion, sexuality, otherness.*

**Abstract:** *This paper looks at the tragic vein in Shakespeare's Othello as a fruitful source for operatic exploitation. The study compares the bard's play and two of the operas it inspired across cultural borders, composed by Rossini and Verdi. It shows how the rigours of the operatic tradition imposed various transformations from spoken to sung language, entailing a dramatic metamorphosis which results in the alteration of the plot and the reduction of the number of acts and characters. Another central issue is that of translation and adaptation. The power and effect of Shakespeare's language are weighed in the light of Frank Kermode's theories against the foreign librettists' solutions. From a thematic point of view, this study analyses a number of disquieting black-and-white dichotomies, mainly regarding race, sexuality (Valerie Traub), religion and the occult. The realm of opera provides the possibility of increasing the dramatic tension and the ability of outlining characters through the means germane to music: tonal structure, rhythm, timbre, vocal virtuosity, etc. The paper analyses how the felicitous entwinement between dramatic warp and musical invention in the operas determines their temporal durability or transience, concluding that the otherness of these variants is enriching, increasing the fame, popularity and durability of Shakespeare's tragedy.*

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a relentless battle between ever-shifting meanings of black and white. At face value, the most poignant dichotomy is that between the Moor's black skin and the pearl-like diaphanous countenance of the Venetian blonde. However, this obvious antithesis is undermined by deeper, more troubling undertones.

At the core of the score, so to say, lies the otherness of the larger-than-life figure of the Moor. The very term is telling, as it is totally imprecise in its ethnological delimitation. It has been used ever since the Middle Ages to cover practically any tribes originating in North-Africa – Arabs, Berbers, inhabitants of Mauritania, Morocco and what not. The word, however, is more than relevant. The exact etymology is not known, but it may be derived either from the Greek *mauros* (meaning black) or from the Spanish *Moreno* (meaning brown). The identity of this people is, therefore, racial, lent by the colour of their skin. “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe”, Iago tells Brabantio. (I, 1, 88-89) The allusions to Othello's blackness are ubiquitous (Iago drinks to the health of “black Othello” (in I, 3, 32); “the thick-lips” – Iago, I, 1, 66; “his Moorship” – Iago - 33), but so are those to his alien nature. The senator's daughter is “cover'd with a Barbary horse” (111) – a double emphasis on his otherness: the Barbary Coast is everything which is not Christian, and the horse is a reference to the Arabs' indissociability from the beasts that they use as a means of transport. And such references are grafted upon the tame, civilised setting of domestic Venice: “What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My house is not a grange.” – Brabantio, I, 1, 105-6)

Brabantio indirectly calls Othello a bond-slave and a pagan (I, 2, 98-99), alluding to yet another essential difference – that of religion. Moors are notoriously Muslim, yet references seem to be at odds in this respect, as Shakespeare makes Othello's religious identity quite blurred. As, after Desdemona's murder, he reminds the stunned witnesses of his services to the Venetian state one last time before he dies, he says: “Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took

by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him, thus.” (V, 2, 361-4) The protagonist therefore quite clearly identifies with Christianity, being ever triumphant in his battles against the Turks. (Actually Iago says that for Desdemona, Othello would “renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin” – III, 1, 352-3 – thus ascertaining his Christian faith.)

In her insightful discussion of *Othello* in *Desire and Anxiety – Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Valerie Traub quite convincingly argues that Othello has a “split identity” which leads to his “inability to trust his own self-identity and self-worth”, as he has “internalized the racist tensions of his culture.” (Traub 36)

But his cultural and religious difference, as well as his African background, associates him with another vein of alterity in the play: the belief in, and possibly practice of, black magic. Once he has taken the bait of the handkerchief mock-evidence, he invests it with occult powers. The Egyptian or gipsy who gave it to his mother “could almost read / The thoughts of people.” (III, 4, 57-8) The handkerchief had controlled his father’s love for his mother and would now take power over his, as “there’s magic in the web of it.” (69) Likewise, Brabantio accuses him: “thou hast practiced on her with foul charms, / Abus’d her delicate youth with drugs or minerals (...) I therefore apprehend and do attach thee / For an abuser of the world, a practiser / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant. (I, 2, 73-9) She is abus’d, stol’n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.” (I, 3, 60-1)

However, another black-and-white dichotomy stems from this issue, that between the tawny colour of the Moor’s face and the “whiteness”, *i.e.* the righteousness of his soul and spirit. Othello is a soldier *par excellence*, a nature to which he is faithful to the end as, killing himself, he makes no mention whatsoever of Desdemona, but keeps reminiscing about his feats of bravery. His very love is based upon these accounts of “the story of my life / (...) the battles, sieges, fortunes.” (I, 3, 129-130) Othello is trusting and trustworthy. Gullible and easily duped, he nevertheless bases his moral myopia on honesty, fairness and the sense of justice (Iago calls him “this honest fool” II, 3, 362). The Duke, the whole Senate and all the noblemen of Venice admire and befriend him. Both his rectitude and his military prowess are reflected in his rhetoric, which Frank Kermode defines as “orotund” in his book, *Shakespeare’s Language*: “He is meant to be a man whose sole reason for existence is to command; (...) the Duke is proud that his warrior deputy talks exactly as he would be expected to fight, superbly. (...) he rarely uses language appropriate to prose.” (Kermode 180-181)

But the military environment provides the trigger for another potent dichotomy in the play: that between the outwardly black soldier, who is morally luminous, and the white-faced soldier whose soul is sooty. As Kermode remarks, “Shakespeare had plenty of experience doing the military (...), but he had not hitherto attempted that almost invariant type, the foul-mouthed N.C.O [non-commissioned officer]. I myself have memories, happily remote, of Iago-like warrant officers, sycophantic self-seekers, the main difference being that Iago has a surprisingly educated vocabulary. At its core, however, is filth.” (166)

Indeed, his first cue is “‘Sblood”<sup>1</sup>, his first word to Brabantio is “‘Zounds”<sup>2</sup> and he will exclaim “Pish” to Roderigo (II, 1, 272). The oaths, however, do not only occur in the trivial context of the military camp, but also in what grows throughout the play into Iago’s defining feature, a simultaneous obsession with, and disgust for, sex and sexuality, expressed with typical voyeuristic voluptuousness. Indeed, all Iago seems to think about is sex, yet without any hint at personal arousal – on the contrary, evincing every type of contempt and disgust for the act. He warns Brabantio that his “daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.” (I, 1, 116) In his dialogue with Roderigo, he dwells on the image of Desdemona engaged in “the act of sport.” (I 227) Talking to Cassio, he tells him that Othello “hath

<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ blood.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ wound.

boarded a land carract”, meaning that “he has gone aboard her, almost as an act of piracy or rape” (Kermode 169); he also wishes the new couple “happiness to their sheets!” (I, 3, 18) He tells Othello “That he is too familiar with his wife” (I, 3, 396-7) Finally, even in the fake dream that he allots to Cassio, he unleashes an exuberance of obscene, slightly homoerotic imagination: “I lay with Cassio lately. (...) And then, sir, he would (...) kiss me hard (...) then laid his leg over my thigh.” (III, 3, 413-26); just as when producing the handkerchief stunt, he claims having seen Cassio wipe his beard with it (III, 3, 440), a bawdy allusion reminiscent of Chaucer in *The Miller’s Tale*.

Iago’s obsession, as well as Roderigo’s emotional fixation, lead us to another, far more disquieting opposition in the play. The union of the two lovers in *Othello* is a match between “an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian” (I, 355-6). Black men were and are reputedly oversexed (“the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” – I, 1, 127; “the lusty Moor” – II, 1, 307), while Venetian ladies have always been known for their sophisticated love affairs. Upon finding out his daughter’s elopement, Brabantio exclaims: “A maiden never bold; / Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion / Blushed at herself” (I, 3, 94-96), confirming the saying that still waters are deep, or that barking dogs never bite and that quiet ones implicitly do. The subliminal suggestion is, throughout the play, that Desdemona’s angelic, virginal and shy appearance is misleading, masking a dark, overpowering and perverse sexuality. The stress is on the unnatural side of her attraction. Her distraught father protests that “a maid (...) So opposite to marriage that she shunned / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation / Would [n]ever have (...) / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom” of a Moor. (I, 2, 66-70) And later he says:

in spite of nature,  
Of years, of country, credit, every thing,  
To fall in love with what she fear’d to look on!  
It is a judgment maim’d and most imperfect  
That will confess perfection so could err  
Against all rules of nature. (I, 3, 96-101)

The only explanation he can find is that the Moor, an alien and therefore occult figure, has exerted his fore-mentioned black magic upon her: “For nature so preposterously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not.” (I, 3, 62-4)

Desdemona is indeed the engine that triggers the electric sexual tension in the play. Othello, apparently insensitive to the charms of other women, is enthralled by her. According to Valerie Traub, her sexuality is equated with stormy violence, and Othello’s greeting after his safe arrival in Cyprus is a roundabout description of sexual intercourse: “let the labouring bark climb hills of seas / Olympus-high and duck again as low / As hell’s from heaven!” (II, 1, 185-7) He has already told the story of his wooing, which had actually been initiated by her: “she wish’d / That heaven made her such a man; she thanked me, / And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her.” (I, 3, 162-66) Apparently childish and covert, this stratagem is both forward and provocative. Besides, what has actually moved her is the account of more strange and unnatural things: “It was my hint to speak, such was the process; / And of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders.” (I, 3, 142-5) The “eating” question is: are we faced with a child-wife who day-dreams and “devours” ogre-peopled fairy-tales, or a budding, yet inexperienced woman who will grow into an insatiable, “carnivorous” man-eater? Once suspicious of her, Othello exclaims: “O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!” (III, 3, 274-6) Reference to possession as well as appetite is recurrent, coming both from Iago and from Othello.

Desdemona's sexuality is addictive and vampirical. Iago remarks that the Moor is "eaten up with passion." (III, 3, 396) Having already become disgusted with the certainty of her infidelity, Othello tells Iago: this night I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again." (IV, 1, 203-5) This image portrays Desdemona as hypnotic, evincing the craft of a witch's art.

According to Iago, "she's framed as fruitful / As the free elements" (III, 1, 350-1), a symbol of fecundity. He remarks that Othello "is so enfeather'd to her love, / That she may make, unmake, do what she list, / Even as her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function" (III, 1, 354-7) – a disparaging insult to his manhood and an intriguing view upon her scheming nature, which verges on profanation, as she would make him relinquish his baptism and thus resume the original sin. These lines complete her depiction as an enslaving witch.

Roderigo is besotted with Desdemona, convinced that she is corruptible by the very evidence of her attraction to the Moor, so unnatural as to speak volumes of her lusty nature.

The young wife herself, who had to be brought from the Sagittary (a name which suggests Cupid's arrows and quiver), admits her erotic desire frankly: "That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world." (I, 3, 251-3) Thus, she is the first to associate her sexuality to stormy violence and, as Valerie Traub sharply remarks, "the linguistic proximity of 'storm' and 'trumpet' allows a conflation of consonants, producing 'strumpet'" (Traub 37) – anticipating Othello's accusation in Act IV (2, 79.)

The father of the bride himself sows the seed of suspicion, warning Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived a father, and may thee." (I, 3, 295-6)

Shakespeare inspired his play from Giraldi Cinthio's novella, published in the "Hecatommithi" in 1566, in which Iago himself has vainly aspired to Desdemona's love, which is part of the reason for his hatred for the Moor. Shakespeare suppresses this motivation, replacing it with a more credible and characteristic one, which often gets strangely overlooked: Iago's unproved suspicion that Othello has cuckolded him by doing "his office" in his wife Emilia's sheets. (I, 3, 392-6) Therefore he has inside knowledge of the "green-ey'd monster!" (III, 3, 166)

Desdemona will subsequently die because of the combination between her pervasive sexuality and the evil chameleonic manipulation of Iago who, perhaps not accidentally swears "By Janus!"<sup>3</sup> (I, 1, 33) Her name, of Greek origin, means wretchedness. ("Excellent wretch!" – III, 3, 90) But the English sonority might also associate her with her purging function in the play, as her virtue will eventually oust the demon from Othello's subjugated mind. (DES-DEMONA; the Italian stress on the second *e* is even better.)

Related to the alarming discrepancy between Desdemona's virtue and her gushing sexuality is another paramount dichotomy in the play, that between appearance and reality – "to seem" vs. "to be", contained in a nutshell in the constant play upon the word "honest". But I shall not elaborate upon this black-and-white dilemma at this point.

G. B. Shaw often remarked with derogatory intent that *Othello* is the most operatic of Shakespeare's tragedies. Perhaps this is why it has offered the basis for the works of two of the most outstanding opera composers: Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) and Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). An analysis of the relation between the text and the music of these two works will try to establish a connection between this link and their temporal durability.

<sup>3</sup> In archaic Roman mythology, Janus was the god of gates, doors (from the Etruscan word *jauna* - "door"), doorways, beginnings and endings. 1 January was dedicated to him. Very early statues of Janus (around the 2nd century B.C.) depict him with four faces. But Janus is commonly depicted with two faces, one regarding what is behind and the other looking toward what lies ahead. The obvious connection with Iago would be his two-faced nature.

In his *Life of Rossini*, Stendhal wrote the following of his friend, the librettist, “marchese Berio, a man who is as charming a companion in society as he is unfortunate and abominable as a poet!” He also speaks of “the unmentionable literary hack” whose “unspeakable ineptitude” led to the libretto’s “orgy of blunders.” (Schmidgall’s *Shakespeare and Opera* 306) Nevertheless, he exalted the opera and, as Gary Schmidgall humorously puts it, “he was not about to let a mere travesty of Shakespeare spoil his pleasure.” (Schmidgall 306) Instead, he comes with a solution:

One factor alone contrives to redeem *Otello*, and that is *our* reminiscences of Shakespeare’s *Othello*... we are so electrified by the magnificent musical quality... so spellbound, so overwhelmed by the incomparable beauty of the theme, that we invent our own libretto to match. (Schmidgall 306)

Byron shared the exact same view. On 20 February 1818, he wrote to John Murray from Venice:

Tomorrow night I am going to see *Otello*, an opera from our *Othello* – and one of Rossini’s best, it is said... It will be curious to see in Venice... the Venetian story itself represented... besides to discover what they will make of Shakespeare in music. (Gosset 8)

After the performance, the review ensues in a letter to Samuel Rogers on 3 March:

They have been crucifying *Othello* into an opera. Music good but lugubrious – but as for the words! All the real scenes with Iago cut out – and the greatest nonsense instead: the handkerchief turned into a *billet doux*... Scenery, dresses and music very good. (Gosset 8)

Indeed, the opera pays tribute to the conventions of the time, requiring certain archetypes and patterns: a love triangle (here a quadrangle, as Berio reverts to Cinthio’s novella and portrays Iago as past pining for Desdemona); a secret marriage between a military hero and a young lady; a hostile father who wishes another spouse for his daughter due to social impositions; a scheming confidante; a duel between rivals; a father’s curse; a near-mad-scene or a nuptial celebration violently interrupted (see Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* after Walter Scott.) To this, Rossini added some haunts of his own: the inescapable storm (with its famous counterparts in the comedies, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Cenerentola*, between which it was composed), and his unavoidable self-quotations.

So, as pre-eminent American Rossini scholar Philip Gosset puts it, “to appreciate Rossini’s *Otello*, we must set Shakespeare firmly aside and examine the opera itself.” (9)

This was Rossini’s 19<sup>th</sup> opera as he was still a very young man, not yet 25, and freshly appointed director of the Neapolitan theatres, probably the best in Italy. He was still nervous, but *Otello* is groundbreaking in several respects. First of all, it is the first Italian opera to break with the tradition of the *recitativo secco* (accompanied by harpsichord) and proceed to the recitative accompanied by orchestra. It is also one of the first Italian operas to accept a tragic ending, although Rossini was later compelled to come up with a preposterous alternative happy ending for the theatres whose directors might be offended by Desdemona’s death. This is a very Shakespearean solution in itself, if we think of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the gentle lion!

Therefore, the first act disappears altogether. The whole opera takes place in Venice. The whole economy of the play revolves around the love plot, with no hint at military pursuits or rivalries. Moreover, the character Cassio disappears altogether (and with him Iago’s envy against his lieutenancy.) Desdemona’s father unfathomably turns from Brabantio into Elmira and his part grows extensively, as he

is present throughout the three acts. Emilia is no longer Iago's wife (hence he can no longer be jealous), but merely Desdemona's confidante. Her role is also expanded. The reason is, no doubt, the need for vocal balance within the score, Elmiro and Emilia providing the only low ranges of the work (a bass and a mezzo-soprano respectively). Emilia is definitely akin to the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, and indeed the whole opera tends to migrate towards the significances of that play.

As mentioned previously, the handkerchief is replaced by a letter and Cassio's dream could correspond to a "raped" lock. One way or the other, as Shaw remarks, never disappointing in his mercilessly biting comments, it is a cheap device: the plot "is a pure farce plot: that is to say, it is supported on an artificially manufactured and desperately precarious trick with a handkerchief which a chance word might upset at any moment." (Shaw 224) To top it all, in the end Otello stabs Desdemona. Illogically, she knows that Iago is dishonest, yet does not wonder at all why Roderigo's death should be a punishment to her. Equally incongruous is the finale, in which the whole court – the Doge, Elmiro and Roderigo included – are happy to pardon the exiled (!) Moor and grant him Desdemona's hand only because Iago has confessed to his treachery.

As Schmidgall puts it, "the opera's largest dollop of nonsense [is] the handling of Shakespeare's Roderigo." (307) From a weak languishing bore and a dupe easily manipulated, he turns into no less than the Doge's son and a serious love rival for Otello. The reason for this alteration is not only musical but also "historical". At the time, Barbaia's theatre in Naples boasted a peerless panoply of gifted tenors, which led to the uncanny (and today nightmarish) idea of casting no less than five tenors in *Otello*, out of which three are principals!

Nevertheless, the third act is faithful to Shakespeare's spirit and truly accomplished music-wise. (Meyerbeer thought it "truly divine.") It also includes an inspired and moving addition, the insertion of an element of the Italian literary legacy: the gondolier's song on a stanza from Dante's "Inferno", Canto V – the story of lovers Francesca and Paolo, perhaps the best instance of black and white reversed, as marriage is sinful (hurried on by deceit) and adultery is righteous, since it is prodded by true love. The lines "Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria" ("There is no greater woe / than to recall past bliss / while in distress") seamlessly echoes the atmosphere of the Willow song (in which the so significant name of Barbara is turned into the meaningless Isaura.) This insertion is the only meaningful addition made by librettist Francesca Maria Berio, since Francesca and Paolo fall in love when reading about the illicit affair between Guinevere and Lancelot ("E Galeotto fu il libbro..."), while Desdemona falls in love with Othello as he tells her fabulous stories about his vicissitudes and prowess. Desdemona's aria will also borrow the melismas in the gondolier's song, thus illustrating the kinship between the two couples at musical level too.

Philip Gosset, a major authority on Rossini, has asserted that "if one were to choose a single moment as the watershed between the worlds of 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian opera, it would have to be the third act of *Otello*." (13) Rossini seems to have been of the same mind. As others before us have worried about the issue of durability, Rossini was asked, late in his life, what he thought would survive in his creation. His reply was: "The last act of *Otello*, the second act of *Tell* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*." Fairly accurate. At any rate, *Otello* is still performed, recorded and enjoyed. The frantic ravings of its libretto, as well as some of its great servitudes to convention and fashion, prevent it from being one of the most enduring operas though.

It is sobering to remark the accuracy of Stendhal's prophecy, as well as wonder why he thought of raising such a question at all. In the middle of his study on *Otello*, he unexpectedly pronounces: "whoever the young composer may be who is ultimately destined to eclipse Rossini, the great secret of his triumph will be found to lie in the *simplicity* of his style." (Schmidgall 312)

The once young composer destined to eclipse Rossini had already grown quite old before tackling *Othello*. And the secret of his success lay indeed in the simplicity of his style, but not only. Twinned with his music was the miraculous text of a fellow-spirit, that of poet, composer and critic Arrigo Boito. Nothing in their brief collaboration for the *Hymn of the Nations* in 1862 had announced the humbling effect of their two last masterpieces, *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

Verdi found his few idols – Michelangelo, Dante, Schiller and most of all Shakespeare – outside music. When in 1865 his first Shakespearean opera, *Macbeth*, was poorly received, he was accused he did not know his Shakespeare, at which he lashed out: “I have had him in my hands from my earliest youth, and I read and reread him continually.” (Huscher 13) In 1850 he said he intended to compose settings to “all the major works of the great tragedian.” (13) *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* loomed large as favourites. *Lear* haunted him throughout his life and remained his one great unfulfilled hope.

A constant creed throughout his creation was that music and text should melt together into perfect symbiosis, and therefore he had a totally uncompromising attitude towards the libretti. He only worked with the best authors and never shied away from advising, cajoling, chivvying and bullying them into producing just what he wanted.

In his literary creation, Boito was especially accomplished in the long allegorical poem *Re Orso*, strongly influenced by Nordic romanticism, Baudelaire and Victor Hugo. It introduces a character that was to remain central to his writing – the Eternal Worm, the ultimate inescapable principle of destruction.

Obsessed by a sense of the dualism inherent through nature and above all in the human condition, he sees good and evil, weakness and strength, creation and destruction as interdependent forces, and a man’s life as ‘an eternal wavering between heaven and hell.’ (Mandeville 16)

Accordingly, his opera masterpiece, *Mephistophele*, draws upon Goethe’s *Faust*, another demonic figure characterised by a schizoid split. Likewise, no view could have been more appropriate for the adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the fashioning of one facet of the Eternal Worm, Iago, whose monologue, *Credo*, Boito wrote himself. With no word taken from Shakespeare, nothing could be more Shakespearean – a nihilistic fiend, two-faced, atheistic and iconoclastic.

Boito was not only serious about writing poetry and opera. He also meditated profoundly upon the problems inherent to libretti and, in 1864, came up with an article for *Figaro* in which he proposed a reform based upon 4 principles: the complete obliteration of *formula*; the creation of *form*; the actualisation of the vastest tonal and rhythmic development possible; the supreme incarnation of the drama.

Verdi’s *Otello* (1887) sticks to these precepts faithfully. It is a tragedy for the music theatre rather than anything like a traditional libretto; not one recognisable formula, not one rondo, not one cabaletta, no display pieces for vocal virtuosi, no hold-up of the action. The result has even been considered to improve the original in some respects.

Music, obviously, still takes its toll: the first act is gone and with it Venice and the characters of Brabantio and the Doge, as well as Iago’s suspicion of Othello’s intercourse with Emilia. The essence is preserved from it though – the reason for the mutual love between Othello and Desdemona (the two sing an unforgettable duet in which Desdemona confesses she loved Othello for the suffering he had endured, while Othello acknowledges he endeared her for the pity she had shown. The musical motif of the kiss, introduced in this duet, will be repeated at the end, as Othello “die[s] upon a kiss” – V, 2, 357.) Boito reduced Shakespeare’s play to less than a quarter, but also made some considerable insertions of completely original material.

What Verdi did with the music... is another story. I shall not elaborate on it now. Suffice it to say that it reflects years of silent rumination on Wagner’s work and anticipates the revelation he was to

experience at the death of his wife Giuseppina in 1897: “Great sorrow does not demand great expression; it asks for silence, isolation, I would even say the torture of reflection.” (Huscher 17)

He himself died in 1901, and Boito was there, unflinching beside the man who had given him his only real taste of greatness. “To be the faithful servant of Verdi, and of that other,<sup>4</sup> born on the Avon – I ask no more”, he said. (Huscher 17)

There is no way in which this monument will not last. The Bard in unseverable alliance with musical genius has proved to triumph upon operatic convention.

Nevertheless, this felicitous encounter between three giants under a benignant star<sup>5</sup> has succeeded in crossing not only the temporal border between ages and fashions, but also that impossible frontier between art and reality. The legacy of *Othello* is a building near the heart of Milan. The Casa di Riposo per Musicisti was built on land Verdi bought with the proceeds from *Otello* and was designed by Camillo Boito, Arrigo’s brother. It was erected to house old, retired and impoverished musicians and soothe them in the battle against old age, loneliness and oblivion by fighting them with music and companionship. In his last years, Verdi would call it the favourite of all his works. And this, too, will endure...

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<sup>4</sup> In awe of the Bard, Boito does not mention Shakespeare’s name.

<sup>5</sup> Boito makes Othello contemplate Desdemona dead and grieve: “*Pia creatura nata sotto maligna stella*” – “Pious creature born under a malignant star”, thus introducing the idea of predestination.