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IDENTITY AND DISSIMILARITY: SHAKESPEARE'S THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR AND THE OPERAS IT INSPIRED

Abstract: *This paper looks at the humour in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor as a fruitful source for operatic exploitation. The study focuses on the identity and the dissimilarity between the bard's play and the most famous operas it inspired, composed by Salieri, Otto Nicolai, Verdi and Vaughan Williams. It analyses the way the prototype of the ridiculous wooing senex (Sir John Falstaff, a carnivalesque figure scrutinised in Bakhtinian terms) is at first inscribed within the hackneyed traditions of the opera buffa and Singspiel only to evolve into an endearing and unique modern character. Likewise, this essay monitors the metamorphoses of the female figures as they travel across genres – shrunk, blown up or eliminated according to the librettist's whim, looming large as main characters or only playing second fiddle to the fat knight.*

The paper shows how the rigours of the operatic tradition imposed numerous and various transformations of Shakespeare's text from spoken to sung language. The passage from one genre to the other entails a dramatic metamorphosis resulting in the alteration of the plot, the reduction of the number of characters, or the contraction of several characters into one.

Another central issue is that of translation – the replacement of the comic effects typical of the English language with a new linguistic richness specific to the language of the libretto. The power and effect of language in Shakespeare's play are weighed in the light of Frank Kermode's study against the foreign librettists' solutions (especially von Mosenthal's and Boito's).

The realm of opera in its turn 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 concludes that the identity between the Elizabethan play and the core of all these more recent variants grants authority and recognition to the operas, while their dissimilarity to the original is enriching, enhancing the fame and popularity of Shakespeare's comedy.