Maria Stuarda
The Libretto, its Source, the Historical Background and Variants

By
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THE LIBRETTO AND ITS SOURCE

The ultimate source of Giuseppe Bardari's libretto for Maria Stuarda is Schiller's famous play Maria Stuart (first performed at Weimar on June 14, 1800). By 1830 Schiller's play had been translated into Italian at least twice. Once in prose by an anonymous translator as L'ultimo giorno di Maria Stuarda, once in verse by Andrea Maffei. Maffei translated a number of Schiller's plays into Italian and later wrote a libretto for Verdi based on Schiller's Die Räuber.

It is evident that Bardari relied chiefly on Maffei's more accurate (if rather windy and rhetorical) translation. The anonymous prose version is far from accurate, being a crude adaptation of Schiller's drama to comply with the classical unities of time and place. Unlike Schiller's play with the second and fourth acts at Westminster, this prose version transfers all the action to Mary's prison at Fotheringhay. It also suppresses a number of Schiller's characters, including Talbot, who appears in the Maffei version, and who is one of the few characters retained in Bardari's libretto. (It seems likely that the anonymous translator of L'ultimo giorno di Maria Stuarda did not work directly from Schiller but from an intermediary French text, a Marie Stuart by Lebrum, which was produced at the Comédie Francaise in 1820).

At first glance Bardari appears to have hacked and simplified Schiller's plot unmercifully. Of the rich background of political intrigue that serves as background to the dramatic contrast between the Queen of Scotland and the Queen of England little is left but a few vague allusions. Bardari drastically reduces

Schiller's 21 characters to just 6. In cutting all this this material and in eliminating all these characters, Bardari, working undoubtedly with Donizetti's explicit directions, showed a keen awareness of how the demands of the opera house differ from those of the spoken stage.

Recitative is scarcely the ideal medium for extended exposition, which the explanation of political intrigue would require. The musical conventions of Donizetti's day demanded a regular succession of arias, duets, and ensembles, all of which imposes upon the listener a far less realistic sense of the passage of stage time than that found in spoken drama. Further, these musical numbers tend to stress not factual information but the emotional reactions and inter-actions of characters, even beyond their emphasis in a play. It is not so surprising, therefore, to find that Bardari was forced to reject so much of Schiller's plot.

He does retain, however, the chief highlights of Schiller's play. He eliminates Schiller's first act, but he keeps the main business of the second act of the play. Here we have Elizabeth's reaction to the proposal of the Duc d'Anjou. Although Bardari suppresses the important character of Mortimer, he divides some of his plot-function between Leicester and Talbot. In the libretto it is Talbot who brings Mary's letter and portrait to Leicester, who in turn gives the letter to Elizabeth, thereby persuading her to meet Mary during a hunt near Fotheringhay.

The second act of the libretto stems from Schiller's third act. Its climax is the famous encounter between the two queens - the moment where Bardari most nearly approaches the dramatic power of his source. Earlier in this act Bardari comes close to one of Schiller's lyrical highpoints in Maria's nostalgic aria about her beloved France (Oh nube! che lieve per l'aria). When Bardari wrote the verses for this aria, he undoubtedly had Maffei's translation in front of him, so frequent are Bardari's textual echoes of Maffei.

Bardari divides the third and final act of his libretto into three scenes, drawing on Schiller's fourth and fifth acts. Much is simplified - for instance, Elizabeth's signing of the death warrant. Much is omitted - for example, Leicester's betrayal of Mortimer to save his own neck. But much is retained - Elizabeth's command that Leicester witness Mary's

execution, the scene of Mary's confession and her receiving absolution (in the libretto it is Talbot who performs this rite, not Melville as in the play), and Mary's final plea that her enemies be forgiven. All in all, Bardari's infidelities to Schiller are not so great as they first appear.

The libretto's chief transformation is the character of Leicester, who as has already been pointed out is principally a combination of Schiller's Leicester (but shorn of his compromised motives) and Mortimer (stressing his selfless devotion for Mary, but with rather less of his erotic passion). Bardari's new view of Leicester as a tenor-hero type works very well in Act 1, passably in Act 2, but it is ultimately unsatisfactory at the end, where for all his earlier protestation that he will set Mary free he can only stand miserably by as Mary is led off to the block. Schiller makes a great deal more of this moment.

If Leicester is greatly altered in the libretto, the character of Elizabeth is likewise somewhat diminished. But here it is not just the simplifications of Bardari's plot that are to blame, but also the stereotype of Queen Elizabeth 1 that was current on the Italian operatic stage during the 1830's. She was regularly presented as unrestrainedly jealous, wilful, and easily overwrought. This is the portrait of Elizabeth found, not too unexpectedly, in Bardari's libretto. Gone almost without trace are the magnificent complexities of Schiller's portrait of Elizabeth.

Of all the characters the least modified and the most true to Schiller is the figure of Mary, Queen of Scots. She is the libretto's greatest strength, for Bardari has succeeded in preserving her dignity, her force of character, and her deep religious conviction.

Well-founded structurally, Bardari's libretto is uneven on the level of verbal expression. He uses a good deal of the stilted diction that hobbles most librettos of this period; his rhymes are not always achieved without strain. Yet the text contains some fine moments. The confrontation between Mary and Elizabeth really bursts into flame. Some of the interplay between Elizabeth and Leicester has bite and incisiveness. The absolution scene is genuinely moving. But, for me, the apex of Bardari's eloquence occurs in Maria's first aria, Oh nube! che lieve per

l'aria, where the nostalgia is understated and utterly convincing.

A final word on the subject of Mary Stuart in Italy. Even before Schiller's drama was first translated into Italian in 1821, the subject had been treated by Alfieri (in 1778), but his plot dealt with Mary's tribulations in Scotland, not with her execution. The romantic emphasis of Schiller's drama and his rejection of classical formulas soon won considerable popularity for his play in Italy, where it has been more frequently performed than any other of his works. Among early actresses who won fame in the title role were Carlotta Marchionni and the celebrated Adelaide Ristori; in 1952 the role was played with notable success by Elena Zareschi. Among recent Italian translations of Schiller's play, there is a powerful one by Emilio Mariano, which was published in the December 1959 issue of Il Dramma to coincide with the bi-centenary of Schiller's birth.

The reasons for the popularity of the subject in Italy are not far to seek. The spectacle of a Catholic queen going to her death a martyr to her faith is one that continues to work movingly upon Italian audiences.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

If much of what occurs in the plot of Maria Stuarda seems ill-founded as history — in point of fact Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots never met — the charge must be laid at Schiller's feet rather than at Donizetti's. The following discussion of the relationship of the action of the opera (and the drama) to actual historical events is intended as clarification, not as criticism.

Certain occurrences which are presented as contemporary are actually distant in time. It is clear, for instance, from Talbot's words to Leicester in Act I of the libretto that Mary is already imprisoned at Fotheringhay. She was confined there only from 25 September 1586 until her beheading on 8 February 1587. Yet the proposed marriage of Elizabeth to the Duc d'Anjou, which is mentioned at the opening of Act I, was under consideration in 1569.

This proposed marriage, while not a matter of moment in the opera, is of considerable importance in Schiller's play, as it accounts for the Schiller—

Leicester's motivation to seek to marry Mary now that Elizabeth seems out of the running. As early as 1563, five years before Mary came to be imprisoned in England, Elizabeth had capriciously suggested her favorite Robert Dudley, soon to become Earl of Leicester, as a possible husband for the Scottish Queen. In 1569 there was further talk of such a match, but there is no evidence of any romantic attachment between Mary and Leicester, or that they had even seen each other except at long intervals.

George Talbot, the Earl of Shrewsbury, for some years served as Mary's jailer, but before her removal to Fotheringhay. Undoubtedly he had some sympathy for Mary, but not to the extent of the adultery that his jealous wife accused him of. Shrewsbury was a witness of Mary's execution and wept at the spectacle, but he was certainly no disguised Catholic priest who heard Mary's final confession. In Schiller's play that function is performed by Sir James Melville (a character Bardari omitted), who was, in fact, one of the six loyal servants to Mary who were allowed to be present at her death. Mary did not make her final confession to Melville either, but in the form of a letter of her secret chaplain de Preau.

The other characters who appear in the libretto - Cecil and Anna Kennedy - are both historical figures. William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer and most trusted and loyal adviser. While it is true he was no friend to Mary, neither was he blindly obsessed with the necessity for her execution. In fact less than two months before the final blow, Cecil had actually compiled a list of arguments opposing the death of Mary. Bardari's Cecil is a composite character, representing such men as Walsingham and Paulet, who were bent on Mary's death for political and religious reasons. Anna Kennedy - although her first name was really Jane - is represented accurately enough. A woman of mature years, she has been Mary's favorite personal servant throughout her captivity. She was also one of the six loyal servants who witnessed the execution, and it was she who placed the blindfold about Mary's eyes.

The libretto, further, contains some references to persons who do not appear in the action. Lord Henry Darnley (Arrigo is what Bardari calls him) was Mary's second husband and was murdered under suspicious and unpleasant circumstances in February 1567. Mary was widely suspected of being implicated in the plot aginst Darnley, but today her complicity is widely questioned. Much of the shadow that darkened Mary's reputation at this point was cast by Bothwell, who with unbecoming haste became her third husband and who was the undoubted author of the plot to murder Darnley.

The libretto also mentions Rizzio. He was Mary's private secretary, and he had been murdered in Mary's presence on 9 March 1566. His murder, politically motivated, grew out of a conspiracy headed by Darnley and the Earl of Moray, who by stabbing Rizzio before Mary's eyes sought to intimidate her into carrying out their projects. Mary's enemies were quick to accuse her of adultery with Rizzio - the view of the wanton Catholic queen was a popular one with the Puritans - but the charge has never been proved.

The name of Babington appears twice in the libretto. He was a young English Catholic who headed a conspiracy designed to rescue Mary and place her on the English throne - a necessary concomittant of this plot was the assassination of Elizabeth. Mary was convicted at her trial principally on the basis of her correspondence with Babington, in which she had given her tacit approval to Elizabeth's murder. The whole Babington affair was doomed to failure because Walsingham, the head of Elizabeth's efficient spy service, was in complete control of the secret correspondence between Babington and Mary. Babington was arrested in August 1586 and executed with hideous cruelty the following month. The Babington plot was ironical indeed: while Mary hoped it would free her, actually Walsingham manipulated it as a sufficient means to bring her to her death.

VARIOUS VERSIONS OF THE LIBRETTO

From the collection of librettos at the Fondazione Cini, Venice, I have collated nine different 19th century editions of Maria Stuarda. These editions contain a number of differences, as it was the practice in Italy up to about 1860 to print the text as it was

actually performed in each particular production of the opera. This practice is enlightening as it reveals whether any material was cut, or changed by the censor, or whether anything was added or substituted.

The most frequently encountered change in these librettos is a different version of the Maria-Leicester duet in Act 2. Instead of the original text, Da tutti abandonata, different words to be sung to this original melody were substituted: Ben io comprendi, and this would be followed by a new text for the cabaletta of the duet: either Non è in me vigor cotanto (more frequently) or Può la mia fiamma estinguersi. The new text for this duet was not by Bardari, but by Callisto Bassi, a functionary at La Scala at this period whose talents extended to revising and translating librettos. His version of the duet was used at La Scala in 1835-36, at Florence in 1839-40, and at Padua in 1843-4. At Venice in the Spring Season of 1840, when Ronzi got her chance to appear publicly as Maria, the duet between Maria and Leicester was cut entirely. (This omission probably occurred because the melody of the duet was used by Donizetti for the first time in a gala production of his Fausta, with new numbers added, at Venice in 1833, and therefore the Venetian public would be quick to note and resent Donizetti's self-borrowing.

One strange addition to Maria Stuarda occurred at Padua in 1843-4. Between the opening chorus and Elisabetta's first entrance there was inserted a double-aria for Talbot. Talbot's addition did not use music by Donizetti, but by Mariano Manzocchi, the brother of the baritone, Giuseppe Manzocchi, who sang Talbot on this occasion. This aria seems to come from an opera by Manzocchi, rather than having been written 'expressly' for this occasion, as it calls for the participation of a secondary character named Celso, whose name is not in the list of characters in Maria Stuarda.

The most interesting changes are those imposed by the censorship. These changes occur in two places. First and most obviously, there are the lines of invective, culminating in vil bastarda, that Maria directs toward Elisabetta during their encounter in Act 2. The original lines are strong stuff. From La Scala in 1835-36 onward, probably in a revision by Callisto Bassi, these lines are toned down to read :

Maria

Di Bolena oscura figlia,
parli tu di disonore?
E chi mai ti rassomiglia?
In te cada il mio rossore.
Profonato è il soglio inglese,
donna vile, dal tuo piè
Ma quel vel che ti difese
fia rimossa un di per me.

Maria

Anne Boleyn's obscure daughter,
do you speak of dishonor?
And who has ever been like you?
May my blushing fall upon you.
The English throne is sullied,
vile woman, by your foot.
But may that veil which protects you
be torn away one day by me.

In this censored version the charge of Elisabetta's illegitimacy is made far less direct. A peculiar feature of this change is that it is two lines longer than the passage originally set by Donizetti. These extra lines were 'virgolati': i.e. printed in the libretto-booklet for completeness' sake, even though they were not set to music by the composer. I cannot help believing, however, even though these diluted lines were printed at the La Scala production of 1835-36, that Malibran actually sang the original text, vil bastarda and all, on that occasion. I believe this is so because I believe Donizetti meant what he wrote to Bardari in early March 1836 (Z* 199). He says : 'La Stuarda after 6 evenings at Milan was forbidden and at the moment it was going really well. They didn't want Bastarda; they didn't want the Order of the Golden Fleece worn at the neck; they didn't want that she should kneel for her confession to Talbot....' From the way Donizetti expresses himself here it seem clear that the censors objected to these things after

Z* G. Zavadini, Donizetti: Vita - Musiche - Epistolario (Bergamo, 1948).

six performances, finally becoming aware, perhaps, that there was some discrepancy between what was in the printed libretto and what was actually being sung on the stage. If this is so and if there were a considerable fuss made about it, it would help explain why Malibran, who always enjoyed doing the daring thing, would refuse to appear further in Maria Stuarda and why two acts of Rossini's Otello, featuring her Desdemona, were substituted for the acts of Stuarda in which the title character appears.

The censors also tampered with one crucial line in the confession scene between Talbot and Maria. Originally Talbot asks her : 'Uniti era a Babington?' He is asking her whether she had been joined consciously in Babington's conspiracy, but the question also inquires whether there had been a physical union between Maria and Babington. In all the censored versions Talbot's question becomes : 'Noto non ti era Babington?' Now Talbot is merely asking if she had been acquainted with Babington. Bardari's original text modifies Schiller, as the corresponding question in the play is limited to Maria's knowledge of Babington's plot. Just why Bardari made this significant shift of emphasis, a shift the Italian censors were quick to seize upon, is puzzling.

I am inclined to believe that Donizetti, frustrated by the shoddy, silly compromises the censors had forced upon him and his fellow composers, had deliberately encouraged Bardari to write a strong text for Maria Stuarda - including the famous vil bastarda. If this is so, then Maria Stuarda becomes a deliberate challenge to the whole corrupting system of censorship.

