

CAMMARANO'S SELF-BORROWINGS the libretto of POLIUTO

J.N.Black

The circumstances surrounding the prohibition of POLIUTO in 1838, at the instance of the King of the Two Sicilies, are now generally well understood (1); so, too, is Donizetti's redeployment of the music he wrote to Cammarano's libretto, and its appearance in Paris, 2 years later, as LES MARTYRS (2). What is less well known is the fate of the original libretto; it was apparently condemned to oblivion, and with it the mellifluous verses on which Cammarano's reputation very largely depended. In fact, for some years thereafter Cammarano used the libretto of POLIUTO as a quarry from which he could extract verses for other texts. Self-borrowing by opera composers of the period was extensive (and in this respect Donizetti was certainly no exception); self-borrowing by librettists is a much neglected topic, undoubtedly because so very few studies of the output and working methods of librettists have as yet been published (3). A concentration on Cammarano as the librettist of Donizetti, or of Verdi, or of Mercadante, is not likely to identify such features of his work as can only be illuminated by a study of the whole canon of his libretti (4).

The use of POLIUTO as a source of verses for other libretti was noted by Schlitzer in 1954: "Il poeta Cammarano non ebbe scrupuli di servirsi di alcuni versi del suo libretto, interpolandoli nella VESTALE, che nel "40 scrisse per Mercadante"" (5), but Cammarano himself made no secret of what he had done. When POLIUTO finally reached the Italian stage, at the S Carlo in Naples on 30 November 1848, the librettist found it prudent to add

this footnote to the "Avvertimento" (6):

NB Alcuni versi di questo Melodramma, che parve condannato all'obblio, fecer mostra di se in altri miei lavori: era ovvio sostituire ai menzionati altri versi, ma ciò poteva nuocere alla musica, ed è in rispetto di essa, e dell'insigne, quanto infelice amico che ne fu l'autore, se io lascio la poesia qual fu in origine, invocando all'uopo la pubblica indulgenza.

Cammarano was a writer with a considerable artistic conscience, and he had clearly no wish to be thought of as a self-plagiarist. To be fair to him, no instances other than those from POLIUTO have been identified, even though some of the operas using his libretti had been taken off after the first night, or shortly thereafter, never to be performed again, and he might well have been forgiven for considering that they, too, had been completely forgotten. The difference was, of course, that as a result of the prohibition the text of POLIUTO had never been printed, so that he felt free to draw upon it with impunity - until the relaxation of the censorship 10 years later put him in a difficult position. There are other instances of self-borrowing - verses in Cammarano's uncompleted libretto GABRIELLA DI VERGY - discarded when the arrrival of Nourrit led to the composition of POLIUTO - surfaced again in a revised version of ROBERTO DEVEREUX (7), and some charming lines from LA SPOSA recur in MARIA DE RUDENZ, LUIGI ROLLA and LA FIDANZATA CORSA.

Before turning to the transplanted verses themselves, it is worth considering how it could have come about that verses (using the word in its accepted English sense, and not as a translation of the Italian versi = lines) written for one libretto might be used in a different one. There are three basic elements in an Italian libretto of that period: (a) recitativo, in unstressed lines of 11 or 7 syllables, used for dialogue and soliloquy; (b) seamless passages in rhymed verse, split between a number of characters, sometimes stretching for several pages in a jog-trot manner, often spanning several scenes; and (c) arias, duets, concerted passages, set pieces in

closed verse forms of varying lengths. The first two elements were generally used for the development of the plot, while the third was used essentially for commentary - emotional responses to a situation; choruses of welcome or assertion; rondo-finales and the like. In dramatic terms, these set pieces tend to hold up the action - time has to stand still while the characters comment on what has happened: for example, to express their fury (or, in Cammarano, more likely their self-pity) at the discovery of an unfaithful spouse; jealousy, grief, joy, passion or whatever it may be. For instance, two people are likely to discover that after all they are still in love with each other in a section of "open" verse.

The dramatic fact having been established, their emotional response to the discovery takes the form of a duet in a closed verse form "set piece". The plot of an opera was designed to provide a sequence of these emotional responses so that great singers could be heard - and compared - in a range of situations. It is necessary to remember this if the crudity of plot and the waywardness of motivation in some of the operas of the Italian romantic period are to be seen in true perspective.

Discounting the large scale, pivotal concertato passage of the second act finale, and its concluding stretta, there are some 15 of these "set pieces" in POLIUTO (counting a double aria as two, since each section could be reused independently). Some of them - notably the choruses - contain specific references - usually religious - which tie them to POLIUTO. Of the rest, no less than eight found their way into other works which Cammarano wrote between 1838 and 1842 - none of them into texts for Donizetti, since POLIUTO was the last they wrote together (MARIA DI ROHAN, first given in Vienna in 1843, had a text by Cammarano, but it was written as IL CONTE DI CHALAIS for Lillo (Naples, 6 November 1839) and the alterations made successively to it for the performances in Vienna, Paris and Parma were not his work (8).)

A LA VESTALE

The first libretto to incorporate verses which had previously been used in POLIUTO was LA VESTALE (9), which Cammarano wrote for Mercadante. It was first performed at the S Carlo in Naples on 10 March 1840. This opera, like POLIUTO, was set in classical times, but in Rome rather than Armenia. It is possible that it was this similarity of background that made Cammarano think of POLIUTO as a source of verses, but, as will be seen, the immediate reasons are to be found in the similarity of the dramatic situations. No less than four extracts from POLIUTO recur in LA VESTALE; two of them are taken over without change, the other two being rewritten to a greater or lesser extent.

1 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 5

PAOLINA (Perchè di stolto giubbilo
Mi balzi o cor in petto?
Vive l'amato oggetto,
Ma spento egli è per me!
Condanna questi palpiti
Il mio dover ... la sorte ...
Il palpito di morte
Meglio s'addice a te.)

At this point in the opera, Paolina, Poliuto's wife, has just heard that Severo, with whom she was once in love, had not been killed in battle, as she had thought, and was, moreover, about to arrive in Mytilene to take up office as the Roman Proconsul. As martial music is heard in the distance, she finds herself unexpectedly agitated, and recognizes that above all she had to overcome her feelings.

Cammarano used this passage at a very similar point in LA VESTALE. Emilia had become a Vestal Virgin when her beloved, Decio, had been reported killed in battle. In Act I scene 2 she learns that he had survived, and was returning from Gaul to a triumphal reception. The situation is almost exactly the same as the one in POLIUTO, and, as the trumpets are sounding to announce Decio's arrival, Emilia gives expression to her feelings

with the same words as had earlier been given to Paolina. The only difference is that in LA VESTALE they are used as the first part of a duet between Emilia and her confidante, Giunia.

2 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 6

CORO Plausi all'inclito Severo
Lauri eterni alla sua chioma,
Egli è vita dell'Impero,
Scudo e brando egli è di Roma.
Saggio in pace, e prode in guerra
Fra i mortali un Dio sembrò:
Ed ogni eco della terra
Del suo nome rimbombò!

This is the chorus which greets Severo as he enters in triumph, preceded by his legions. The text of this chorus is clearly tailored to POLIUTO, since Severo is referred to by name. In LA VESTALE, Decio, like Severo, arrives with his victorious legions, accompanied in his case by trumpeters, prisoners in chains and all the paraphernalia of a triumphal entry into Rome. It only needed a little careful rewriting to adapt the chorus for Decio:

LA VESTALE - ACT I, Scene 4

CORO Plauso al duce vincitore,
Lauri eterni alla sua chioma:
Egli esempio di valore,
Scudo e brando egli è di Roma:
Parve il nume della guerra,
I nemici debellò:
Ed ogn' eco della terra
Del suo nome rimbombò.

3 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 7

SEVERO (No, l'acciar non fu spietato
Che spargeva il sangue mio,
Ma il destino avverso e rio,
Che la vita mi serbò!

Ah! gioisci, o core ingrato,
Gel di morte in sen mi piomba ...
Questo avanzo della tomba
Alla tomba io rendero.)

After his triumphant arrival, Severo is greeted by POLIUTO, the High Priest, and Paolina's father, the Governor of Mytilene. From them he learns that Paolina and Poliuto are now married. The Act finishes as he contemplates the sad position in which he finds himself: he feels the hand of death already upon him. In LA VESTALE, Decio, having survived the shock of being crowned with laurel leaves by the Vestal Virgin he had hoped to marry, visits her unexpectedly and secretly at night in the temple where she is watching over the sacred flame. She tries to escape from him, taking refuge on the altar steps; when he tries to follow her, he is overcome with terror. The same 8 lines with which Severo had expressed his sense of shock are used to form Decio's part of the ensuing duet.

4 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 2

POLIUTO D'un alma troppo fervida
Tempra buon Dio gli affetti ...
Tu che lo puoi, tu dissipa
Gli orrendi miei sospetti ...
Nel combattuto core
Discenda il tuo favore,
Nè piu lo scuota un palpito
Che indegno sia di te.

NEARCO Vieni, e ti guidi un angelo
Del tuo delubro a piè.

The first act of POLIUTO opens with the Christians assembling in a rocky place, for a service in a cave. They are joined by Poliuto, a Roman magistrate recently converted to Christianity. He is deeply troubled, jealous, and suspicious of his wife. His friends urge him to pray to God for help and guidance, and this he does, asking God to ease his state of mind and remove his horrible suspicions. The identical prayer is used in LA VESTALE, Act II scene 1. As the curtain rises, Giunia,

Emilia's confidante, is discovered in the Temple of Vesta, praying that the Goddess may intervene on behalf of her friend. The circumstances in which the prayers in POLIUTO and LA VESTALE are uttered are quite different, but they are both prayers for intercession, the first on behalf of the individual himself and the second on behalf of a friend. Cammarano had additionally to make the transition from a prayer to the Christian God to one to a pagan Goddess. The first 4½ and the last two lines of Poliuto's prayer had to be rewritten, and only 3½ lines remained in their original form:

LA VESTALE - ACT II, Scene 1

GIUNIA Se fino al Cielo ascendere
Può d'un'amica il pianto,
O Dea, tu sciogli Emilia
Dall'amoroso incanto.
In quel trafitto core
Discenda il tuo favore,
Più non lo scuota un palpito
Che indegno sia di te ...
Non scorran queste lagrime
Senza ottener merce.

B SAFFO

The next libretto in which Cammarano incorporated material from POLIUTO was SAFFO (10) written for Pacini and first performed at the S Carlo in Naples on 29 November 1840, some 8 months later than LA VESTALE. Only one section of six lines was used in SAFFO, but they became justly famous as part of a libretto that was generally recognised at the time as being the best Cammarano wrote, containing some of his finest verses. SAFFO was certainly the text by which his later libretti were judged ("worthy of the author of SAFFO" was a comment on his MEROPE, 7 years later).

5 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 4

PAOLINA
Di quai soavi lagrime
Aspersa è la mia gota! ...
Qual mi ricerca l'anima
Dolce potenza ignota! ...
Somiglia una speranza ...
L'umana gioja avanza ...
Par che dal ciglio infranto
Mi cada un fosco vel! ...
Par che il devoto canto
Ritrovi un eco in ciel! -

Paolina has followed her husband to the lonely place where the Christians are meeting, and realises for the first time that he has joined the forbidden sect. Voices rise from the depths of the cave; she hears the Christians praying for themselves, their wives and families, even for their enemies. She is overcome with conflicting emotions. She is a prey to a strange uneasiness, and the prayer finds its way to her heart, in a sense of hope revived.

In SAFFO, the circumstancesin which these lines are used are totally different. Saffo has been searching for Faone, who has deserted her. She takes refuge with Climene, who is just about to be married - in fact, to Faone, though neither of the women realise who he is. Climene receives Saffo with kindness and compassion, and they join together in a tender duet of renewed hope for the future. The first six lines of the passage from POLIUTO are used again as the basis of this duet, but the last four lines are new:

SAFFO - ACT II, Scene 2

CLIMENE, SAFFO a 2
Di quai soavi lagrime
Aspersa è la mia gota! ...
Qual mi recerca l'anima
Dolce potenza ignota! ...
Somiglia una speranza ...
L'umana gioia avanza ...
Par che involato bene
Amico Iddio mi renda! ...
Par che il mio core intenda
I moti del tuo cor!

It is perhaps worth noting that there is an echo of the opening line of this passage in a later text which Cammarano wrote for Mercadante, ORAZI E CURIAZI (Naples, S Carlo 1846), Act I scene 2, in Camilla's cabaletta, which begins with the line "Di quai soavi palpiti" - but there the resemblance ends.

C IL PROSCRITTO

Two years after writing LA VESTALE and SAFFO Cammarano was again engaged in writing another text for Mercadante. This was IL PROSCRITTO, (11) which was produced - with little success - at the S Carlo in Naples on 4 January 1842. The French play on which this libretto is based contains a great deal of overtly political material of the Napoleonic period, and Cammarano thought it prudent to remove the action to 18th Century Scotland (the ultimate location for a number of his texts when he had reason to fear difficulties with the neapolitan censorship). It is a domestic tragedy of a woman forced by the exigencies of a civil war to choose between loyalty to a husband who was believed to be dead, and to a lover from the opposing party. It is far removed from the worlds of POLIUTO, LA VESTALE or SAFFO, and at first sight it might seem surprising that Cammarano should have thought of POLIUTO when writing it - but there are some obvious similarities in the dramatic situations.

6 POLIUTO - ACT I, Scene 6

SEVERO
Di tua beltade immagine
È questo sol ch'io miro;
Piena è di te quest'aura,
Piena del tuo respiro ...
Ah! tutto in queste arene
Parla contento e amor!

This scene in POLIUTO follows the triumphant reception of Severo on his arrival at the main square of Mytilene. He is looking forward eagerly to an early meeting with his beloved Paolina; he already senses her near him and his whole being is suffused with her presence. IL PROSCRITTO opens with a scene of great festivity; the assembled company is joined by Arturo, who is to marry

Malvina, whose outlawed husband is thought to have drowned at sea. Arturo immediately declares his love for her, and muses on his feelings as he draws near to her. In this one instance, Cammarano also lifts from POLIUTO the last two lines of the introductory recitativo, and then follows on with a rewritten version of the first four lines of Severo's aria, completing it with four new lines. There is no dramatic reason why this passage should have been so drastically rewritten, but the POLIUTO version is far from satisfactory, much less smoothly flowing than Cammarano could usually achieve (it must be admitted that in its rewritten form it becomes one of the few satisfactory parts of an undistinguished libretto). Despite the difference in place and time, there is an obvious similarity of emotional situation - both men are expressing their feelings as a meeting with their beloveds draws nearer:

IL PROSCRITTO - ACT I, Scene 3

ARTURO
Son del tuo volto immagine
Gli astri del ciel ch'io miro!
Piena è d'amor quest'aura,
Piena del tuo respiro!
Ah! solo a te vicino
La vita è un ben per me!
Brillar del mio destino
Veggo la stella in te!

D IL REGGENTE

In 1843, a year after IL PROSCRITTO, Cammarano wrote another libretto for Mercadante. This was a version of Eugene Scribe's GUSTAVE III (music by Auber, Paris 1833), with the title IL REGGENTE (12); it was first performed at the Regio at Turin on 2 February 1843. It is a story familiar to every opera-lover through Verdi's treatment, UN BALLO IN MASCHERA of 1859, and, again, Cammarano moved the plot to Scotland.

7 POLIUTO - ACT II, Scene 2

PAOLINA
(Ei non vegga il pianto mio,
Le mie smanie non intenda ...
Se pietoso in ciel v'è un Dio,
Da me stessa mi diffenda.
Tutto, ah! tutto il primo ardore
Si ridesta nel mio core ...
Io son donna, ed ha pur troppo
Un confine la virtù!)

Quest'alma è troppo debole
In cosi rio cimento! ...
Fuggi ... nol sai che perdere
Mio puote un sol momento?
Ah! d'un rimorso orribile
Non far ch'io sparga il pianto ...
Lasciami, o crudo, gemere,
Ma di dolor soltanto ...
Pura, innocente lasciami
Spirar lontan da te.

In the second act of POLIUTO, Severo forces Paolina to admit that she had never given up her love for him, even though she is now married to Poliuto. She is racked by remorse and begs him to leave her. The passages quoted are Paolina's parts of the double duet that closes this scene, before Severo rushes desperately away. In IL REGGENTE, the Regent Count Murray is in love with the wife of his chief minister, the Duke of Hamilton. In Cammarano's treatment of this story, they were at one time to have been married, but at the request of her dying father (a typical Cammarano touch) she had, in the Regent's absence, married the Duke of Hamilton. They meet at midnight in a wild rocky place near the cemetery where condemned criminals were buried, and he pours out his love for her. She admits that her love for him is still strong, but repulses him, just as Paolina repulsed Severo, and with almost identical words. The Regent's verses are however, totally different from Severo's. Amelia's verses for the cabaletta of the duet (Quest'alma e troppo debole etc) are taken over unchanged, but those for the cantabile are altered.

IL REGGENTE - ACT II, Scene 1

AMELIA (Ei non vegga il pianto mio ...
Le mie smanie non intenda ...
Se invocar mi lice Iddio,
Da me stessa ei mi diffenda.
Tutto, ah! tutto il primo ardore
Si ridesta nel mio core! ...
Io son donna! donna alfine!
Può mancar la mia virtù!)

There is interesting documentary evidence that Cammarano did indeed turn to the libretto of POLIUTO when writing IL REGGENTE. One of the two surviving original "fair copies" of the libretto of POLIUTO is preserved in the Conservatorio S Pietro a Majella in Naples, and bound up in the middle of it are two sheets of odd paper, both with some rather hurried dialogue in Cammarano's unmistakable handwriting. They are obviously nothing to do with POLIUTO, and are, in fact, drafts of a section of recitativo in IL REGGENTE, Act II scene 5, beginning with the very line "Non odi un calpestio?" which follows the duet between the Regent and Amelia. It would seem that Cammarano turned to that very copy of the libretto (it is the one which Donizetti had used, since his manuscript annotations are on it) which he had presumably retained after the prohibition of the opera in 1838. Having found and copied out the passages he remembered, he seems to have allowed some pages of his drafts for IL REGGENTE to be gathered up between the pages of POLIUTO, to remain there till they were all bound up together. One of the two pages of draft is to be found immediately following the page with the Paolina/Severo duet, the other a few pages earlier.

Though Cammarano re-used about half the "set pieces" from POLIUTO, he did not use them all (or, if he did, their new location had not been identified). Some of the best known lines of POLIUTO, such as "Il suon dell'arpe angeliche" were perhaps too closely tied to its Christian vs pagan background to find a ready place elsewhere. However some of them could certainly have fitted a number of comparable situations in later libretti. As it happens, the sections of POLIUTO all come from the first half of the opera; this could well be because, as the plot

develops, the verses become more closely related to the specific aspects of the story.

The way in which the verses are re-used demonstrates that the setting and time of the action had no restricting influence on the universality of the emotions embedded in the verse. Paolina rejects Severo with the same words that Amelia rejects the Regent - place and time were far removed but for the characters the circumstances were the same and their reactions to them, too, were the same. The arrival of a Proconsul in Mytilene was greeted with much the same words as was the entry of a Roman general into the eternal city. A prayer of intercession remains a prayer of intercession, even if the circumstances which give rise to it are different. A magistrate's wife in Mytilene expresses her reaction to the news that her beloved was not, after all, killed in battle with the same words as does a Vestal Virgin, and she rejects him with the same words as the Chief Minister's wife rejects her old suitor, the Regent. Though the setting and the epoch of the dramas might be worlds apart, the human circumstances are identical; and so are the emotional reactions to them. On this basis Cammarano was justified in returning to a libretto which he thought would never see the light of day, and making use of his verses.

When the censorship was relaxed in 1848, he was found out - but the lesson to be learnt from his self-borrowing is that it is not the particular circumstances in which the characters are caught up that are of interest, but their emotional respnse to them. It is this emotional contemplation at points where the dramatic time has to stand still that provides the central clue to the nature of Italian romantic opera.

NOTES

1 In the spring of 1838, Donizetti and Cammarano were collaborating on an opera for the autumn season at the S Carlo in Naples. The subject was possibly GABRIELLA DI VERGY (see the article by Don White, accompanying the Opera Rara recording of this work). When the famous tenor Adolphe Nourrit was engaged for the season, this proposal was dropped, as an opera with a major role for a tenor was required. Cammarano then turned to Corneille's POLYEUCTE of 1642 and Nourrit himself helped with planning the adaptation. At the last moment, however, the performance was prohibited by the King himself, against the recommendation of the censor Royer, on the grounds that it was of too sacred a character for the stage.

2 Donizetti left Naples for Paris in October 1838, and padded out the music he had written for POLIUTO (see his letter to Mayr, 8 April 1839, (Zavadini No 319)) to fit a libretto written by Scribe for the Parisian stage. In this form, as LES MARTYRS, it was performed at the Opera on 10 April 1840.

3 The only full length studies of major librettists of the Italian romantic opera are those on Felice Romani by Mario Rinaldi (Rome, 1965) and Jacopo Ferretti by Alberto Cametti (Milan n.d but 1898), and these are biographical rather than critical. There are, of course, numerous scattered articles.

4 Salvadore Cammarano (1801-1852) wrote between 35 and 40 opera libretti, the exact number depending on the status accorded to his revisions of other librettists works. The first appeared in 1834 (LA SPOSA, with music by Vignozzi). His first success was INES DE CASTRO (Persiani 1835), though he was responsible only for the versification). Following the triumphant success of LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR in 1835, he collaborated with Donizetti on 6 further operas, and wrote 8 libretti for Mercadante and 5 for Pacini, as well as a number for other less well known composers. His collaboration with Verdi in 4 works

culminated in IL TROVATORE which - contrary to received opinion - he finished just before he died. From 1834 till his death he was on the staff of the Royal Theatres in Naples as poet and producer.

5 See Franco Schlitzer, Mondo teatrale dell'Ottocento. Naples 1954, p 53.

6 POLIUTO, Tragedia lirica in tre atti. Naples (Flautina) 1848 (p 3).

7 See Don White's article referred to in note 1. The verses "Giovin, leggiadra, amabile/Ti vidi e t'adorai" from Act I scene 1 of GABRIELLA DI VERGY were substituted for Sara's aria "All' afflitto è dolce il pianto" in Act I scene 1 of ROBERTO DEVEREUX for the Paris production.

8 See, for instance, the article on MARIA DI ROHAN by Guglielmo Barblan in the Journal of the Donizetti Society, 2, 15-33, 1975.

9 LA VESTALE, tragedia lirica in tre atti. Napoli (Flautina) 1840.

10 SAFFO, tragedia lirica in tre parti. Napoli (Flautina) 1840.

11 IL PROSCRITTO, melodramma tragico in tre atti. Napoli (Flautina) 1842.

12 IL REGGENTE, tragedia lirica in tre atti. Torino (Favale) s.d (but1843).