

# *Reading Opera*

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EDITED BY ARTHUR GROOS  
AND ROGER PARKER

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## Boito and F.-V. Hugo's "Magnificent Translation": A Study in the Genesis of the *Otello* Libretto

Arrigo Boito's libretto for *Otello* is a complex, multilayered document, the antithesis of a "spontaneous" work of art. It is the product of a slowly and carefully created first draft dating from the Summer and Autumn of 1879, which was followed by seven years of sporadic plot and text revisions, most of them undertaken at Verdi's request.<sup>1</sup> Surely no other completed opera of Verdi's underwent such painstakingly intense "textual thinking." Every word, every rhyme, every metrical choice was meticulously plotted. Even the intricacies of *Falstaff* came to Boito far more easily.

I am concerned here with the earliest stages of the *Otello* text, that period of its initial drafting from July to November 1879—months in which Boito first distilled Shakespeare's *Othello* into a workable libretto. Needless to say, the topic of Verdi, Boito, and Shakespeare is almost fatiguingly perennial. Its treatment has ranged from program-note summaries and college term papers to more elevated statements of how Boito condensed and altered the Shakespearean original: among these last, the writings of Joseph Kerman, Winton Dean, Julian Budden, Stefan Kunze, and several others.<sup>2</sup> Often stressing narrative concerns—an account of the

<sup>1</sup> Boito began drafting the text shortly after the *Otello* project had been broached to Verdi in Milan, c. 30 June 1879. An initial draft of the proposed libretto was given to Verdi in two installments, on c. 1–6 November (probably at least the first two acts) and on 18 November 1879 (the remainder of the opera). For a chronological account of the drafting and revising of the libretto, see James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello* (Cambridge, 1987), 21–47. See also Alessandro Luzio, ed., "Il libretto di *Otello*," *Carteggi verdiani*, II (Rome, 1935), 95–141; and Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, III: *From "Don Carlos" to "Falstaff"* (New York, 1981), 295–332.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Joseph Kerman, "Otello: Traditional Opera and the Image of Shakespeare," *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956), 129–67; Winton Dean, "Verdi's 'Otello': A Shakespearean Masterpiece," *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 87–96; Roy Aycock, "Shakespeare, Boito, and Verdi," *The Musical Quarterly*, 58 (1972), 588–604; Peter Conrad, *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* (Berkeley, 1977), 46–69; Budden, 95–141; Graham Bradshaw, "A Shakespearean Perspective: Verdi and Boito as Translators," in Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1983), 152–71; Stefan Kunze, "Der Verfall des Helden: Über Verdis 'Otello,'" *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello: Texte, Materialien, Kommentare*, Ro-

deletions and interpolations made to produce an efficient libretto—these discussions have typically compared the ultimate source, Shakespeare, with the final product, Boito's Italian opera text, without probing into the influence of intermediate texts. From many perspectives this is a defensible, and not infrequently a fruitful, enterprise; but we may wish to ask more pointed questions of the libretto. What exactly was Boito's knowledge of Shakespeare? From which cultural and interpretive grounds does his understanding of the play spring? Our understanding springs from a tradition of English-language criticism extending from the commentaries of Thomas Rymer, Samuel Johnson, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge through those of A. C. Bradley, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and so on.<sup>3</sup> But whose critical opinions shaped Boito's Continental, nineteenth-century feeling for Shakespeare? More precisely, which factors of critical and cultural mediation helped to transform *Othello* into *Otello*?<sup>4</sup>

Boito, for instance, never hid the fact that he worked principally from translations. In 1887, the year of the *Otello* premiere, the English correspondent Blanche Roosevelt published an account of a discussion that she had recently had with him:

By the way, I haven't told you of Boito's personal appearance, nor the literary gods at whose shrine he worships. These latter are three poets, Dante, Victor Hugo, and Shakespeare. . . .

His worship of poetry and his three poets reaches idolatry. Of

roro Opernbücher, ed. Attila Csampai and Dietmar Holland (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981), 9–36. Reflecting more modern approaches, Kunze's essay is particularly sensitive to the cultural and aesthetic context in which *Otello* was created, as is Francesco Degrada, "Otello: da Boito a Verdi" [1976], *Il palazzo incantato: Studi sulla tradizione del melodramma dal Barocco al Romanticismo* (Fiesole, 1979), II, 155–66. See also William Weaver, "Verdi, Shakespeare, and the Italian Audience," *Otello*, English National Opera Guide no. 7 (London, 1981), 23–26.

<sup>3</sup> Summaries of influential English-language *Othello* criticism may be found in Albert Gerard, "'Egregiously an Ass': The Dark Side of the Moor: A View of Othello's Mind," *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), 98–106; Helen Gardner, "Othello: A Retrospect, 1900–67," *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 1–11; John Wain, ed., *Shakespeare: Othello: A Casebook* (London, 1971), 11–33; Robert Hapgood, "Othello," *Shakespeare, Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (London, 1973). Wain also anthologizes much of this criticism.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, recent studies of Verdi's *Macbeth* have addressed some of these issues and mediating elements directly. See especially Francesco Degrada, "Lettura del *Macbeth*" [1975–77], *Il palazzo incantato*, 79–141; Degrada, "Observations on the Genesis of Verdi's *Macbeth*," *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook*, ed. David Rosen and Andrew Porter (New York, 1984), 156–73; Daniela Goldin, "Il *Macbeth* verdiano: Genesi e linguaggio di un libretto," *Analecta musicologica*, 19 (1979), 336–72, rev. in Goldin, *La vera fenice: Librettisti e libretti tra Sette e Ottocento* (Turin, 1985), 230–82; and William Weaver, "The Shakespeare Verdi Knew," *Verdi's Macbeth: A Sourcebook*, 144–48.

course, he is at his best in the Italian or French authors; he reads Shakespeare very well in English, but told me he had learned *Othello* by heart in "François Hugo's magnificent [French] translation and that of the Italian author Maffei."<sup>5</sup>

Boito's acquaintance with the English text is attested to by the presence in his personal library of three copies of Shakespeare in English. To judge from the present condition of the books, his most frequently consulted copy was a one-volume edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by the German scholar Nicolaus Delius and published in 1854 by Baumgärtner in Leipzig.<sup>6</sup> Boito went through several plays in this collection, *Othello* among them, and underscored a few lines of text here and there. At times the underlinings intersect with important lines in the libretto; at times they do not. For instance, toward the end of Act I, on p. 734, he underscored five separate sentences of Iago: "It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will"; "These Moors are changeable in their wills—fill thy purse with money"; "She must change for youth"; "I hate the Moor; my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason"; and "There are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered" (*Oth.* I.iii, 326, 336–37, 348–49, 350–51, 353–54).<sup>7</sup> More suggestive, perhaps, is the isolated underlining of Iago's "Ha! I like not that" (p. 742, *Oth.* III.iii, 35; cf. "Ciò m'accora," vocal score 124/1/2),<sup>8</sup> but it cannot be proven that this marking dates from 1879. Other plays in the volume are similarly marked (for example, *The Merchant of Venice*), and the relationship of Boito's *Othello* entries here and the eventual *Otello* libretto remains uncertain.

Probably more important, in Delius's edition of *Othello*, some of whose readings derive from the notorious nineteenth-century forgeries of John Payne Collier, Boito seems to have been concerned primarily with correcting in the margins the words of an annoyingly corrupt text.<sup>9</sup> For

<sup>5</sup> Blanche Roosevelt, *Verdi: Milan, and "Othello"* (London, 1887), 239–40.

<sup>6</sup> Boito's library is now housed in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma. The Leipzig Shakespeare title reads: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. The Text Regulated by the Old Copies and by the Recently Discovered Folio of 1632, Containing Early Manuscript Emendations. With Notes, Selected and Original, A Copious and Almost New Glossary, The Poet's Life and Portrait.* Concerning Delius, see William Jaggard, *Shakespeare Bibliography* (Stratford-on-Avon, n.d.), 531.

<sup>7</sup> Line numbers within *Othello* refer to The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> All references to the opera *Otello* refer to the currently available vocal score published by Ricordi, Milan, pl. no. 52105, ed. Mario Parenti, 1964. Citations refer to page number/system number/bar number.

<sup>9</sup> The impact of the "recently discovered folio of 1632" mentioned on the title page (see n. 6 above) is elaborated upon in the introduction to the volume, written by "Dr. D." [De-

instance, on p. 736 he changed Desdemona's incorrect last word in the 1854 edition's "How say you, Cassio? is he not a most profane and liberal censurer?" to the proper "counsellor" (*Oth.* II.i, 159–60); on p. 737 he corrected Iago's "If this poor brach of Venice, whom I trash" to the more correct (but still problematic) "If this poor trash of Venice, whom I trace" (*Oth.* II.i, 284); on p. 744 he emended the last word in the first line of Iago's "But pardon me; I do not in suspicion / Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear" to the correct "position" (*Oth.* III.iii, 236–37); on p. 745 he changed the second line of Iago's "It were a tedious difficulty, I think, / To bring it to that prospect" to "To bring them to that prospect" (*Oth.* III.iii, 398–99); and so on.<sup>10</sup> His preoccupation with correcting Delius was scholarly, philological—an essential part of his character—but, again, no evidence links these markings directly with the creation of the *Otello* libretto; they might have been made at a different period. His other two English editions, the thirteen-volume compact set of *The Handy-Volume Shakspeare* [sic], probably acquired no earlier than the 1870s,<sup>11</sup> and an apparently later "Chandos Classics" edition of *The*

lius): "The preparations for the present edition . . . had not yet been completed, when the corrections and emendations of the Shakespearian text, discovered by Payne Collier in a copy of the folio-edition of 1632, became known, and created so great a sensation in the literary world. . . . [The present editor] has received all those [corrections] which undoubtedly are to be called *emendations*" (p. iii). The "sensation" referred to was Collier's newly claimed set of manuscript corrections on the "Perkins Folio," a copy of the second folio then in his possession. Collier had announced these to the world in 1852 in his *Notes and Emendations to the Text of Shakespeare's Plays*, and in 1853 he brought out an edition of the *Plays . . . The Text Regulated by the Old Copies and by the Recently Discovered Folio of 1632 Containing Early Manuscript Emendations* (Jaggard, 56–57, 50; cf. the title page of Delius's 1854 Leipzig edition, n. 6 above). Collier's supposed discoveries, however, were immediately disputed in England and were exposed as forgeries in 1859 and 1860.

Delius's edition—Boito's principal copy of the English-language Shakespeare—is thus textually flawed. It seems likely that Boito was aware of the Collier forgeries; that is, realizing at some point that his English edition of Shakespeare contained corrupt readings, he must have compared its texts with others that he considered more reliable in order to alter the inaccurate words. (He even makes a passing reference to a reading in Collier's 1632 manuscript in the margin of p. 741 of the Delius *Othello*, the beginning of Act III.) The important point is that Boito's concern for textual correction is not unique to *Othello*, and it need not be linked with the libretto-making process.

<sup>10</sup> Not all of Boito's alterations were accurate. For instance, on p. 744 he changed the word "mocks" in *Othello*'s "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself" (III.iii, 280) to the incorrect "doth mock."

<sup>11</sup> Containing only two underscored passages (again, "Ha! I like not that," but now continuing through "or if—I know not what" [III.iii, 35–36]; and "But for a satisfaction of my thought; No further harm" [III.iii, 96–97]), Boito's copy of *The Handy-Volume Shakspeare* (c. 3 × 4 5/8 inches) was published by Bradbury, Agnew & Co. and lacks a printed date. This thirteen-volume set (edited by "Q. D.") was first brought out in 16° in 1866 and 1867 by Bradbury, Evans & Co. and was treated to at least three reprints (in 12°, 16°, and

*Works of Shakespeare* (London, after 1883)<sup>12</sup> provide little further indication of any close study of the English *Othello*. One's general impression is that Boito struggled through the original version of the play, was happy to have it at hand, but did not rely heavily on it for the libretto.

Nor does the language of the various Italian translations seem to have been particularly important. Curiously, no copies of Shakespeare in Italian have turned up in Boito's personal library. Boito, of course, was aware of the Italian translations, and, as will emerge, he did use some of them for an occasional turn of phrase; but, at least with regard to his own choice of vocabulary for *Otello*, he seems to have been less reliant on them than he would be, for instance, for the *Falstaff* libretto.<sup>13</sup> Although nineteenth-century Italy saw a number of *Othello* translations, Boito would have been most likely to encounter—or to take seriously—only three: the widely circulated and often inaccurate prose version of Carlo Rusconi (1838–39); the poetic version (in *endecasillabi sciolti*, also prominent in passages of Boito's *Otello*) of Giulio Carcano (published 1857–58, initially prepared in 1852 at the request of the Italian actor Ernesto Rossi); and the version mentioned by Boito to Blanche Roosevelt, that of Andrea Maffei (1869, also in *endecasillabi sciolti*).<sup>14</sup> Both Rusconi and Maffei, it should be added, had included Giovanni Gherardini's influential translation (1817) of August Wilhelm Schlegel's commentary (1809–11) on the play. This was surely the most readily available discussion of

18°) in the next few years. The first thirteen-volume "Bradbury, Agnew & Co." printing (in 12°) seems to have occurred in 1876. (A thirty-nine-volume edition in 16° followed in c. 1898.) See Jaggard, 539, 540, 544, 546, and 554.

<sup>12</sup> The eighty-volume "Chandos Classics" were issued in various editions by F. Warne and Co., London, from 1868 onward. Boito's one-volume copy of *The Works of Shakespeare* bears the printer's date on the final page, p. 748, "31/5/83." *Othello* appears on pp. 639–61 and is unmarked by Boito. (Some passages of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, however, are underlined, suggesting that this volume might have been consulted as part of the preparation for *Falstaff*.)

<sup>13</sup> For some of the indebtedness of *Falstaff* to the Italian translations of Shakespeare, see James A. Hepokoski, "The Compositional History of Verdi's *Falstaff*: A Study of the Autograph Score and Early Editions," Diss. Harvard 1979, 13–14, 21–22; and *Giuseppe Verdi: Falstaff*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> The clearest treatment of nineteenth-century Italian *Othello* translations may be found in Anna Busi, *Otello in Italia (1777–1972)* (Bari, 1973). Busi includes discussions of the translations of Rusconi, *Teatro completo di Shakespeare*, originally published in Padua, with numerous subsequent editions published in various cities, the eleventh, for example, in Rome in 1884 (71–78); Carcano, *Teatro scelto di Guglielmo Shakespeare*, published in Milan (78–87); and Maffei, *Otello e La Tempesta di G. Shakespeare, Arminio e Dorothea di Wolfgang Goethe*, published in Florence (91–96). See also Busi's full bibliography of Italian translations, 309–10.

*Othello* in nineteenth-century Italy, and it profoundly influenced both the *ottocento* acting tradition and Boito's understanding of the play.<sup>15</sup> (Verdi himself seems to have relied primarily on the Rusconi and Maffei translations of *Othello*.)<sup>16</sup>

More immediately important to Boito than either the English text or an Italian translation was the 1860 French version of *Othello* by François-Victor Hugo, the son of Victor Hugo: this is the "magnificent translation" of which Boito spoke to Blanche Roosevelt. Hugo's translation of Shakespeare's complete works was an enormously important literary event for French readers, and his renderings immediately replaced earlier, less careful versions of the individual plays. Paul de Saint-Victor, writing in 1873 at Hugo's death, would summarize the translator's achievement: "François-Victor Hugo has done for France what Schlegel did for Germany: he has naturalized the genius of Shakespeare into our language."<sup>17</sup> And a typical reaction to the translations had been that of Jules Janin, who responded on 24 January 1859 in the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* to the appearance of the first volume (*Les Deux Hamlet*): "It is supremely faithful; it reproduces laments and sobs, pain and nuance, melody and groaning, the soul and the body, *the military spirit*, going so far as [to capture] the dark reflection of armor in the pale brightness of the winter moon."<sup>18</sup> Hugo's value lay in the depth and quality of his scholarship (since at least 1853 he had been tracking down not only Shakespeare's own sources, but also contemporary English plays and important English and Continental Shakespeare criticism) and in his devotion to textual fidelity and precise French verbal equivalents. His father, Victor Hugo, described the whole scholarly project as an "oeuvre philologique," an "oeuvre critique et historique."<sup>19</sup> François-Victor Hugo's passion for exactitude, however, did not always find complete approval among French readers. Some were reluctant to acknowledge this meticulousness as a virtue; and even some supportive readers occasionally feared that he had sometimes been, if anything, "excessively close to the

<sup>15</sup> Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 163–89.

<sup>16</sup> See Verdi to Boito, 8 May 1886, in which the composer, in order to clarify an individual point within the *Otello* libretto, mentions the translations of Hugo, Maffei, and Rusconi, in *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, ed. Mario Medici and Marcello Conati (Parma, 1978), I, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Frances Vernor Guille, *François-Victor Hugo et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1950), 197. (Unless otherwise indicated, the translations throughout this study are my own.) The following remarks in the text are based on Guille's discussion of Hugo's Shakespeare project, 171–99.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Guille, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Guille, 178.

text . . . too faithful to Shakespeare."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in its authority, thoroughness, scholarship, and "close reading" of the original texts it was something of a non-English-speaking scholar's dream. This was its appeal to Boito.

Hugo's translations passed through three slightly varied nineteenth-century editions. The first two were published by Pagnerre in Paris: the first in fourteen volumes, *Oeuvres complètes de W. Shakespeare*, dating from 1859–64 (the *Sonnets*—originally issued separately in 1857—and the doubtful works, the *Apocryphes*, would appear as later volumes of the set in subsequent years); the second edition appeared in 1865–73. A third, more popular edition, smaller in format, was brought out beginning in 1871 by the Parisian publisher Alphonse Lemerre.<sup>21</sup> Boito owned all three editions, and his copies are still preserved and may be consulted today: the first in the Library of the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan (TE.P.20.2); the second and third in an uncatalogued collection in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma. Hugo's first edition of Shakespeare (1859–64) remained Boito's principal and most extensively read copy. Containing personal underlinings, markings, and general reactions, it was, as we shall see, the practical working source of the *Otello* libretto. (His copy of the second edition is virtually unmarked—it seems in mint condition, almost unopened. Boito's copy of the third edition does contain a few marginal notes, but far fewer than those found in the first edition. Moreover, most of these later notes seem to have been transferred from his copy of the first edition.)

It is with the La Scala copy of the Hugo translation, then, that we shall be concerned here. The following discussion is divided into two sections. The first of these is an elaboration of the evidence that this copy of the translation is indeed the source from which Boito constructed the *Otello* libretto. This will entail an inventory of the most important of Boito's markings. As will be seen, certain groups of annotations and underlinings occasionally suggest interpretive decisions that Boito made when creating the libretto—lines that he considered important or essential to one or more of the characters. Readers less concerned with a detailed demonstration of this evidence may wish to skip over to Part II, a more general consideration of the ways in which Hugo's translation and scholarly apparatus affected Boito's thinking about *Otello*. It deals with the librettist's conception of his characters in general—a conception forged with a keen awareness of Hugo's views—and with two operatic texts directly

<sup>20</sup> Guille, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Guille, 186, 197.

traceable to Boito's copy of the Hugo translation: Desdemona's "Willow Song" and Iago's "Credo."

## I

Hugo's *Othello* translation is to be found in volume V, part II of the first edition (1860).<sup>22</sup> Boito's La Scala copy bears the flourish of his signature, "A. Boito," in red pencil on the half-title page, and the red-pencil, black-pencil, and (especially) blue-pencil annotations within attest to Boito's reactions to the play.<sup>23</sup> The nature of the annotations permits us to date them to the period of the initial *Otello* draft, July–November 1879. Evidence for the operatic relevance of this copy of the first edition is clear even before the opening words of the play. In the list of "Personnages" (Hugo, p. 232) Boito underlined in blue pencil the names of "Othello, le More de Venise," "Cassio, lieutenant honorable," "Iago, un scélerat," "Roderigo, gentilhomme dupe," "Montano, gouverneur de Chypre," the "Gentilshommes de Chypre," "Desdémona," and "Émilie"—the essential characters that appear in the opera. He either left unmarked or provided with a different mark, a blue "check" of omission, the characters that would not be included in *Otello*: Brabantio, "Le Doge de Venise," "Sénateurs," "Matelots," "Le Clown," and "Bianca." For Lodovico and Gratiano he underlined only their description, "nobles vénitiens." Lodovico would be transferred to the opera; Gratiano would not. This last point suggests that the underlining occurred at an early stage of libretto-making, one in which the precise extent of the roles of Lodovico and, possibly, Gratiano had not yet been determined.

Within Act I of the Hugo translation, the contents of which Boito was largely to discard, one finds several scattered lines underscored in blue.

<sup>22</sup> Because Hugo preferred to group plays thematically, *Cymbeline* and *Othello* are presented together in this second part of volume V, "Les Jaloux." (Part I of "Les Jaloux" [1859] had contained translations of *Troilus and Cressida*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank M.<sup>o</sup> Giampiero Tintori and his staff at the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan, for the opportunity to examine this copy of Hugo's *Othello*, on which the present study is based.

The existence of this volume with Boito's markings was first noted—briefly—by Piero Nardi, *Vita di Arrigo Boito* (Verona, 1942), 566 and 594, and *Arrigo Boito: Tutti gli scritti* (Verona, 1942), 1541. Subsequent studies of the later Verdi operas have ignored this point, and no account of Boito's markings in the Hugo volume has appeared in print. Nardi mentions that Boito's copies of the Hugo translations of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the two parts of *Henry IV* also contain marginal annotations and were the immediate sources of the *Falstaff* libretto. Those plays, however, are less thoroughly marked than is *Othello*; moreover, some "non-Verdian" Shakespearean plays are similarly annotated. Whether the Hugo translations played the same role in the creation of *Falstaff*, then, remains uncertain.

As might be expected, many of these are lines that he decided to retain in the subsequent action of his libretto. (Boito's Act I is based on the play's Act II, with a few notable interpolations from the "deleted" Act I.) These include several summary-lines that refer to Iago's motives and initiate his plotting with Roderigo; <sup>24</sup> a line in which Roderigo gives vent to despair ("Je vais incontinent me noyer" [p. 257], "I will incontinently drown myself" [I.iii, 301], "d'affogarmi" [vocal score, 31/1/3]); Roderigo's racial epithet for the Moor ("l'homme aux grosses lèvres" [p. 235], "the thick-lips" [I.i, 67], given by Boito to Iago, "quel selvaggio dalle gonfie labbra" [32/2/2–32/3/1]); and so on. Throughout Act I the blue-pencil underlinings stand out as key phrases that Boito wished to call to his own attention, evidently things that he wanted to keep in mind while preparing the libretto in the Summer of 1879.

The carving-out of potentially operatic text is especially clear with relation to the opera's Act I Love Duet. This piece—Othello's and Desdemona's reminiscence of how they came to be enamored of each other—is a composite of three extracts from Shakespeare's play: Othello's narration of how Desdemona fell in love with him after hearing the stories of his past adventures (I.iii, 127–69); a single line of Desdemona, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii, 248); and various lines from Othello's victorious entrance into Cyprus (II.i, 174–93, "O my fair warrior!" etc.). Within these three extracts only those lines that would be directly transferred to the Love Duet are underscored in blue pencil in Boito's copy of the first edition of Hugo. The blue-penciled Hugo translation, therefore, graphically illustrates Boito's "extraction" process. Here, for instance, is a list of the phrases that Boito underlined in the Love Duet passages of the play; I have re-ordered them to correspond with their representation in the duet:

[OTH.] Si après chaque tempête viennent de pareils calmes, – puissent les vents souffler jusqu'à réveiller la mort! [Hugo, p. 269; *Oth.* II.i, 177–78]. . . . O ma belle guerrière! [269; II.i, 173]. . . . Pour écouter ces choses, – Desdémone montrait une curiosité sérieuse

<sup>24</sup> For example, the first words and sentences that Boito underlined in blue pencil in the Hugo translation are: [IAGO:] "Tudieu!"; "Cassio, un Florentin, – un garçon presque condamné à la vie d'une jolie femme, – qui n'a jamais rangé en bataille un escadron"; "N'importe! à lui la préférence!"; "Et moi, qui, sous les yeux de l'autre, ai fait mes preuves – à Rhodes, à Chypre et dans maints pays – chrétiens et païens, il faut que je reste en panne et que je sois dépassé"; "et moi, je reste l'enseigne (titre que Dieu bénisse!) de Sa Seigneurie more"; [RODERIGO:] "Par le ciel!"; [IAGO:] "jugez-vous même – si je suis engagé par de justes raisons – à aimer le More" (pp. 233–34; I.i, 4 ["'Sblood"], 20–22, 27, 28–30, 33, [Roderigo] 34, [Iago] 38–40; cf. *Otello*, Act I, "Quell'azzimato capitano," etc., vocal score, 34/1/2–35/2/1 [see n. 8 above]).

[251; I.iii, 144–45]. . . . [il me demandait] l'histoire de ma vie, – née par année, les batailles, les sièges, les hasards – que j'avais traversés. – Je parcourus tout, depuis les jours de mon enfance – jusqu'au moment même où il m'avait prié de raconter. – Alors je parlai de chances désastreuses, – d'aventures émouvantes sur terre et sur mer, – de morts esquivées d'un cheveu sur la brèche menaçante, – de ma capture par l'insolent ennemi, – de ma vente comme esclave, de mon rachat, – et de ce qui suivit [251; I.iii, 128–38]. . . . [J'y consentis, et] souvent je lui dérobai des larmes [251; I.iii, 154–55]. . . . C'est dans le génie d'Othello que j'ai vu son visage [255; I.iii, 248]. . . . elle m'aimait pour les dangers que j'avais traversés, – et je l'aimais pour la sympathie qu'elle y avait prise [252; I.iii, 166–67]. . . . Si le moment était venu de mourir, – ce serait maintenant le bonheur suprême; car j'ai peur, – tant le contentement de mon âme est absolu, – qu'il n'y ait pas un ravissement pareil à celui-ci – dans l'avenir inconnu de ma destinée! [DES.] Fasse le ciel – au contraire que nos amours et nos joies augmentent avec – nos années! [OTH.] Dites amen à cela, adorables puissances! – Je ne puis pas expliquer ce ravissement. – Il m'étouffe, c'est trop de joie. – Tiens! Tiens encore! [269; II.i, 181–90, including "And this, and this," the source of the "Bacio" passage]. . . . [IAGO, à part] Oh! vous êtes en harmonie à présent! – Mais je broierai les clefs qui règlent ce concert, – foi d'honnête homme! [269; II.i, 191–93].

Figure 1 is a transcription of two relevant pages of Boito's Hugo (from *Oth.* I.iii). At the bottom of p. 269 Boito has underlined Iago's eavesdropping, "Oh! vous êtes en harmonie à présent" and so forth. These lines were included in the first version of the Love Duet but were eventually excised; Boito paraphrased them much later, in December 1886, at Verdi's request, and transferred them to the end of the Act II Homage Chorus, where they stand in the final version.<sup>25</sup>

In the margin of p. 269, to the right of "Si après chaque tempête" Boito made a problematic entry that at first seems to read "parafe 6." The word could be the Italian "parafa," translating as the English cognate "paraph," a formal embellishing flourish at the end of a signature (and the lines to the left of the sign are among the last lines of Othello's first stanza in the Love Duet) or an official signature of initials meant to authenticate a formal document; it could also be a contraction of "parafra-sare," to paraphrase. What looks like a "6" is not a number, but a sign that Boito used to highlight lines that he found essential for understand-

<sup>25</sup> See the letters exchanged by Verdi, Ricordi, and Boito on 15 December, c. 16–17 December, and 18 December 1886, in *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, II, 356; I, 117–18.

FIGURE 1. HUGO, PP. 268–69 (DIPLOMATIC FACSIMILE FROM ORIGINAL IN MUSEO TEATRALE ALLA SCALA)

DESDEMONA.  
 A A quoi?  
 IAGO.  
 A A faire têter des niais et à tenir un compte de petite bière.  
 DESDEMONA.  
 Oh! quelle conclusion boiteuse et impotente!... Ne prends pas leçon de lui, Émilía, tout ton mari qu'il est... Que dites-vous, Cassio? Voilà, n'est-ce pas? un conseiller bien profane et bien licencieux.  
 CASSIO.  
 Il parle sans façon, Madame: vous trouverez en lui le soldat de meilleur goût que l'érudit.  
 Cassio parle à voix basse à Desdémóna et soutient avec elle une conversation animée.  
 IAGO, à part, les observant.  
 Il la prend par le creux de la main... Oúi, bien dit! Chuchote, va! Une toile d'araignée aussi mince me suffit pour attraper cette grosse mouche de Cassio. Oúi, souris-lui, va: je te garrotterai dans ta propre courtoisie... Vous dites vrai, c'est bien ça. Si ces grimaces-là vous enlèvent votre grade, lieutenant, vous auriez mieux fait de ne pas baiser si souvent vos trois doigts, comme sans doute vous allez le faire encore pour jouer au beau sire!  
 Cassio envoie du bout des doigts un baiser à Desdémóna.  
 Très-bien! bien baisé! excellente courtoisie! c'est cela, ma foi. Oúi, encore vos doigts à vos lèvres! Puisse-t-ils être pour vous autant de canules de clystère!...

Fanfares.

A Le More! je reconnais sa trompette.  
 CASSIO.  
 C'est vrai.  
 DESDEMONA.  
 Allons au-devant de lui pour le recevoir.

CASSIO.  
 Ah! le voici qui vient!  
 Entre Othello avec sa suite. La foule se presse derrière lui.  
 OTHELLO.  
 —O ma belle guerrière!  
 DESDEMONA.  
 Mon cher Othello!  
 OTHELLO.  
 — C'est pour moi une surprise égale à mon ravissement — de vous voir ici avant moi. O joie de mon âme! — Si après chaque tempête viennent de pareils calmes, — puissent les vents souffler jusqu'à réveiller la mort! — Puisse ma barque s'évertuer à gravir sur les mers des sommets — hauts comme l'Olympe, et à replonger ensuite aussi loin — que l'enfer l'est du ciel! Si le moment était venu de mourir, — ce serait maintenant le bonheur suprême; car j'ai peur, — tant le contentement de mon âme est absolu, — qu'il n'y ait pas un ravissement pareil à celui-ci — dans l'avenir inconnu de ma destinée!  
 DESDEMONA.  
 Fasse le ciel — au contraire que nos amours et nos joies augmentent avec — nos années!  
 OTHELLO.  
 Dites amen à cela, adorables puissances! — Je ne puis pas expliquer ce ravissement. — Il m'étouffe, c'est trop de joie. — Tiens! Tiens encoure!  
 Il l'embrasse.  
 Que ce soient là les plus grands désaccords — que fassent nos cœurs!  
 IAGO, à part.  
 Oh! vous êtes en harmonie à présent! — Mais je broierai les clefs qui règlent ce concert, — foi d'honnête homme!

parag.  
6

THE GENESIS OF THE OTELLO LIBRETTO

ing Othello's character. It is an "Othello sign," in fact, and in nearly every case where it appears the sign flags neighboring lines that were included in the Love Duet: on pp. 251, 252, 255, and 269. The sign is also found alongside four "non-Love-Duet" passages in Act I, all of which similarly characterize Othello's personality. It may be that these four "extra" passages may at one time have been considered as potential lines for inclusion into the Love Duet. In any event, Boito's underlinings and the related sign make it clear that the principal dramatic function of the Love Duet was to sketch the contours of Othello's character—just as the "Credo" would ultimately trace out those of Iago. The four additional Act I passages with the "Othello sign" are:

1. p. 241: "si je n'aimais pas la gentille Desdémóna, — je ne voudrais pas restreindre mon existence, libre sous le ciel, — au cercle d'un intérieur, — non, pour tous les trésors de la mer." (I.ii, 25–28: "But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth.")
2. p. 249: "Je suis rude en mon langage, — et peu doué de l'éloquence apprêtée de la paix" (I.iii, 81–82: "Rude am I in my speech / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace"; cf. Othello's lines in the Act II Quartet: "Forse perchè gl'inganni / D'arguto amor non tendo" [158/2/1ff]).
3. p. 249: "et je sais peu de chose de ce vaste monde — qui n'ait rapport aux faits de guerre et de bataille" (I.iii, 86–87: "And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle").
4. p. 254: "Très graves sénateurs, ce tyran, l'habitude, — a fait de la couche et de la guerre, couche de pierre et d'acier, — le lit de plume le plus doux pour moi." (I.iii, 226–28: "The tyrant custom, most grave senators, / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down.")

Boito has been attracted here to lines that address the central problem of Othello's character, his gullibility. He has underscored those lines suggesting that Othello, as a rough-hewn, expansive man of war—accustomed to solving issues swiftly through rugged physical action—is glaringly naive in the ways of the world, quite unprepared for non-military intrigues. This seems important, and although Boito did not place most of these lines directly into the libretto, we may assume that they contain important "background" information for him about the hero.

This conclusion is reinforced by Boito's other annotations and markings. For instance, we find ten individual, horizontal lines drawn across

the page, and five of them, all but one in blue pencil, are similar in function.<sup>26</sup> The significance of three of these is immediately evident: they represent operatic “curtains,” the moments that will become the end of the opera’s Act II (p. 314, after Iago’s “quelques sanglants que soient ses ordres!”; III.iii, 470, “What bloody business ever”), the beginning of Act IV (alone among the five a black-pencil line, p. 352, before Emilia’s “Comment cela va-t-il à présent?”; IV.iii, 10, “How goes it now?”), and the end of Act IV (p. 383, after Othello’s “qu’à mourir en me tuant sur un baiser!”; V.ii, 355, “Killing myself, to die upon a kiss”), under which printed line Boito has written “Fine.” The two other similar horizontal blue-pencil lines are probably also “curtain”-related. The first (p. 285) designates the point in the play where, after the Duel, Othello leads Desdemona offstage (pp. 284–85, Othello’s “Allons, Desdémone; c’est la vie du soldat – de voir ses salutaires sommeils troublés par l’alerte,” II.iii, 237–38; “Come, Desdemona,” etc.—in effect, minus the Love Duet, the end of the operatic Act I, or, conversely, a marking of the moment immediately preceding the operatic Act II). The second (p. 339) occurs at the very end of the play’s Act IV, scene i—that is, shortly after the climactic moment in which Othello has struck Desdemona, shocking all onlookers, especially Lodovico, who ends this scene in brief dialogue with Iago. We may perhaps see here the outlines of Boito’s original 1879 ending to Act III, now lost: a short ending that had apparently concluded efficiently after the “Eavesdropping” Terzetto, without any large interior-finale *concertato* ensemble; an ending that Verdi would find too brief and ineffective and that would, after numerous revisions requested by the composer, be expanded into the mammoth non-Shakespearean ensemble that now ends Act III.<sup>27</sup>

Somewhat related to the horizontal “curtain”-lines (or to the “Othello sign”) are four marginal capital-letter codes, “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D.” For the most part, the four letters seem to refer to the beginnings of or

<sup>26</sup> The remaining five lines, less obviously interrelated, occur on p. 329 (in black pencil, before the equivalent of IV.i, 106, Cassio’s “Alas, poor caitiff!”, that is, near the beginning of the opera’s Act III Terzetto); p. 338 (two somewhat casual black-pencil lines surrounding IV.i, 252–54, Othello’s “Cassio shall have my place. . . . Goats and monkeys!”—also, perhaps, as a possible ending for the original operatic Act III?); p. 341 (in black pencil, above IV.ii, 24, Othello’s “Let me see your eyes,” isolating a point within what would become the Act III Desdemona-Otello Duet); and p. 367 (in red pencil, above V.ii, 48, Othello’s “That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee,” within the Murder Scene; this line also marks the onset of Boito’s marginal blue-pencil stars, mentioned above).

<sup>27</sup> The problem of ascertaining the ending of Act III in Boito’s initial libretto is discussed in Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 32–33. That it did not contain an extended *concertato* seems clear from the composer’s insistence that one be added: see Verdi to Boito, 15 August 1880, *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, I, 1–2.

inclusions in individual acts, “A” referring to the first act, “B” to the second, and so on. “A” occurs only once, on p. 273 (before the brief scene for the Herald, “C’est le bon plaisir d’Othello”; II.ii, “It is Othello’s pleasure”); this is clearly an *aide-mémoire* for Boito, reminding himself that the Herald’s words of celebration on Othello’s victorious return (pp. 273–74, “les uns en dansant, les autres en faisant des feux de joie”) suggest operatic first-act Victory and Fire Choruses. Boito’s marginal “B” occurs most notably on p. 285 (beside Iago’s “Quoi! êtes vous blessé, lieutenant?”; II.iii, 239, “What, are you hurt, lieutenant?”), directly below a horizontal blue line (see above): this is to be the beginning of the opera’s second act. Two earlier passages are also flagged by the marginal “B” code. Both of these are important soliloquies for Iago—and it is therefore evident that Boito is planning a solo piece for Iago near the opening of Act II. The first of these earlier letters is on p. 260, beside Iago’s remarks that conclude Act I (much of it also underlined, from “Je hais le More,” “I hate the Moor,” onward). The second “B,” entered, then erased, is on p. 273, alongside Iago’s soliloquy concluding II.i. Both passages stress Iago’s suspicions of being cuckolded by Othello, a “motivation” ultimately ignored in the text of the opera.

The “C” marginal sign, the most frequent, occurs six times, five of which clearly indicate large passages to be used for the Act III Desdemona-Otello Duet. One occurs on p. 315, “Où puis-je avoir perdu ce mouchoir, Émilie?” (III.iv, 19, “Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?”). Although the actual source of the beginning of the opera’s Act III Duet occurs a few lines later, at III.iv, 31 (unflagged by Boito), the “C” on p. 315 surely refers to the ensuing Shakespearean scene (which Boito did mark off with vertical pencil lines and carets). Four other Duet-related “C”s are to be found on pp. 341, 342, 343, and 344: the passage is the equivalent of *Oth.* IV.ii, 23–93, beginning “My Lord, what is your will?” The remaining “C” indicates a prior reference to the handkerchief on p. 308, Iago’s “Je veux perdre ce mouchoir chez Cassio” (III.iii, 322, “I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin”), words ultimately given to the operatic Iago after the Act II Quartet (170/1/1–170/3/1). Boito’s single marginal “D,” on p. 352 below the black-pencil horizontal “curtain”-line mentioned above, clearly indicates the beginning of the opera’s fourth act. Also similar in function to the letter-codes and the “Othello sign” is a shower of blue-pencil stars—both functional grouping-stars and sheer explosions of Boitian excitement—during the murder scene (see also n. 26 above). This set of pages (pp. 367–83) is among the most moving in Boito’s copy of Hugo’s first edition.

There are dozens of other details within the Hugo volume to confirm its centrality to Boito’s libretto-making. Some of them refer to musical or

poetic and metrical features. In Act V, as Othello enters Desdemona's bedchamber and embraces his still sleeping wife (p. 365, at Othello's "il faudra qu'elle se flétrisse! Je veux la respirer sur la tige!"; V.ii, 15, "It needs must wither. I'll smell it on the tree") Boito writes in a very light, red pencil: "reminisc[en]za del I° atto" (reminiscence of the first act)—a critically important musical and dramatic feature of the opera (the return of the Act I "Bacio" theme, 343/3/3ff, evidently envisaged by Boito before the music had been written), but not of the play. And of special concern to those interested in the techniques of libretto poetry are Boito's numerous metrical suggestions or designations in the margins: the many entries of "lir" or "liric" that may stand for *versi lirici*, rhymed, regular verse; "due volte" (twice) in the Eavesdropping Scene, on p. 330 (at the point of IV.i, 113, "She gives it out that you shall marry her") to indicate an expansion of the action into the structurally formal first two stanzas of the Act III Terzetto; "mart. lir." (*martelliani lirici*, Italian alexandrines or *doppi settenari*, 2 × 7 syllables per line) on p. 312 for the Cassio quotations within Iago's narrative of the dream (III.iii, 420, "In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,' " etc.); and "14 sdrucchiolo" on p. 313 to indicate the unusual meter, an antique "trochaic catalectic tetrameter," of the pseudo-cabaletta at the conclusion of Act II, "Sì, pel ciel."<sup>28</sup>

## II

Once it is established that Boito did rely on this copy of the Hugo translation, several other issues emerge. To what extent, for instance, could it have affected the librettist's word choices? For the most part, though the majority of Boito's lines are textually faithful to those in the play, the idiosyncrasies of Hugo's language do not often echo in the operatic text: much of the verbal texture of *Otello* seems Boito's own. Still, on occasion it is clear that Boito based this or that line directly on Hugo's translation. The reader may have noticed above, for example, that Hugo's translation of the lines of the Herald bidding the people to celebrate Othello's victory, "les uns en dansant, les autres en faisant des feux de joie" (pp. 273–74) immediately suggests Boito's wording, "Fuoco di gioia!"; for the leading image of the Act I Fire Chorus (36/4/1ff). Indeed, Boito is unlikely to have borrowed the word "gioia" (joy) from any other source. The original reads "some to dance, some to make bonfires" (II.ii, 3–4); Rusconi's translation is the misleading "e s'intreccino danze, e s'imbandiscano mense"; Carcano's is "con danze, fuochi d'allegrezza"; Maffei's is "Sia

<sup>28</sup> Boito's metrical designations in the Hugo volume are also mentioned in Harold S. Powers, "Otello I.2.3: A Case Study in Multivalent Analysis" (unpublished typescript); and Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 26–27.

con balli e con fochi artificciati." Here and in a few other instances the textual basis in Hugo is clear. On the other hand, Boito did from time to time re-use a phrase or line from the Italian translators. Maffei's "breccia mortal" was included in the Love Duet, for instance (98/3/1; "deadly breach" in I.iii, 135), and Carcano's and Maffei's translations of Othello's "And this, and this" (II.i, 190) provided Boito with one of the key phrases of the same duet—and of the opera: in Carcano, "Un bacio, e un altro!"; in Maffei, "Un bacio ... un altro!" (As will be seen below, this "bacio/baiser" wording also appears at a crucial point in Hugo's introduction to the play.)

There is one instance, however, in which the impact of words found in Hugo is undeniable. This concerns not the 1879 libretto draft but one of the subsequent revisions of the text: Boito's 1885 refashioning of the Act IV Willow Song.<sup>29</sup> In this case it was not Hugo's Shakespearean text that was the inspiration; rather, it was his scholarly commentary, located in the notes at the end of the play. This is one of the clearest instances of a non-Shakespearean source for a portion of the *Otello* libretto. On p. 411 Hugo—ever the thorough scholar—cites as n. 51 what he considered to be the source of Desdemona's Act IV, scene 3 Willow Song ("l'original de la romance répétée ici par Desdémone"): an English ballad reprinted in Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*—curiously, a ballad to be sung by a man, not a woman. Hugo does not mention that Percy's version contains twenty-three stanzas, and he translates and prints only stanzas 1, 5, 6, and 7, allowing the implication that they constitute the complete poem. This endnote, concluding with Hugo's four stanzas translated from Percy, is the real source of the operatic Desdemona's interrupted three-stanza Willow Song, "Piangea cantando":

Un pauvre être était assis soupirant sous un sycomore,

O saule! saule! saule!

Sa main sur son sein, sa tête sur son genou.

O saule! saule! saule!

O saule! saule! saule!

Chantez: Oh! le saule vert sera ma guirlande.

Les froids ruisseaux couraient près de lui; ses yeux pleuraient sans cesse.

O saule! saule! saule!

Les larmes salées tombaient de lui et noyaient sa face.

O saule! saule! saule!

O saule! saule! saule!

Chantez: Oh! le saule vert sera ma guirlande.

<sup>29</sup> A complete, but slightly inaccurate, version of Boito's 1879 version of the song may be found in Luzio, II, 118.

Les oiseaux muets se juchaient près de lui, apprivoisés par ses plaintes.

O saule! saule! saule!

Les larmes salées tombaient de lui et attendrissaient les pierres.

O saule! saule! saule!

O saule! saule! saule!

Chantez: Oh! le saule vert sera ma guirlande.

Que personne ne me blame, je mérite ses dédain.

O saule! saule! saule!

Elle était née pour être belle, moi, pour mourir épris d'elle.

O saule! saule! saule!

O saule! saule! saule!

Chantez: Oh! le saule vert sera ma guirlande.<sup>30</sup>

Like the operatic song, Hugo's Percy translation includes repeated utterances of "O saule! saule! saule!" in each stanza (notice the word "O" instead of Shakespeare's "Sing willow, willow, willow," IV.iii, 41ff; cf. 329/1/4), and each of its stanzas concludes with the "Chantez" refrain. Even more to the point, the beginning of Hugo's third stanza does not appear in Shakespeare but nevertheless begins Boito's third stanza, "Scendean l'augelli a vol dai rami cupi" (332/4/1ff). Boito marked off Hugo's n. 51 (as he had several others) with a blue-pencil caret, and he was particularly attracted to one of its phrases, "attendrissaient les pierres," which he underlined and retained prominently in his own third stanza in the libretto ("impietosir le rupi," 333/3/2-5). (The words "softened the stones," of course, also occur in Shakespeare, IV.iii, 44.)

Apart from the question of word selection, Hugo's work helped Boito to form general conceptions of the play and of its main individual characters. As mentioned before, this French translation was remarkable in its scholarly apparatus, which included a thirty-five-page critical introduction to the play, primarily concerned with analyzing the characters of Othello and Iago. That Boito read—and perhaps even pondered—this introduction is evident, once again, from his marginal signs and remarks.

The issue that this observation raises—that of general influence or, stated otherwise, the intellectual and interpretive context within which the libretto was created—is admittedly a complicated one. It was by no means exclusively Hugo's analysis of the play that led to Boito's *Otello*. Rather, it was a confluence of three Continental streams: Hugo; the earlier, deeply influential *Othello* criticism of Schlegel, available in nearly all

<sup>30</sup> The poem may be found in Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765; rpt. New York, 1961), 199-203. The sources of Shakespeare's Willow Song are given a more thorough, modern treatment in Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 191-99.

Italian translations; and the Italian *Othello* acting tradition from the mid-1850s onward, most notably the famous "primitive" interpretation of Ernesto Rossi and the more "elevated" interpretation of Tommaso Salvini.<sup>31</sup> In brief, the librettist selected from Hugo what he found useful; for other views he turned elsewhere. Yet Hugo's arguments were often persuasive. His criticism was erudite, boldly provocative, and skillfully argued. But its flaw was that his devotion to the cause of Shakespeare occasionally lacked objectivity and common sense: this was a commentary committed to praise, one that suppressed potentially negative judgments.<sup>32</sup> Although Boito read Hugo's remarks with great interest, he exercised his own critical judgment about the translator's conclusions.

We begin with an example of Boito's actively considering, but ultimately rejecting, Hugo's advice—an instance in which even Boito's rejection tells us much about his understanding of the play. Much of Hugo's introduction is devoted to a strained defense of Othello's actions and, above all, to controverting Schlegel's view that Othello's central flaw is racial. Schlegel had praised Shakespeare's "happy error" in creating Othello as a "real Ethiopian" and argued that the hero's adopted Venetian virtues amounted to little. According to his widely disseminated interpretation, only a thin coating of European constraints and values covered the inner savage; only "one drop of [Iago's] poison" was needed to release within Othello the inevitably lurking "tyranny of the blood."<sup>33</sup> Hugo's protracted counter-argument, an uncomfortable one for modern readers, begins by citing Coleridge's remark in the *Literary Remains* that it was self-evident that the virtuous, pure Desdemona would never have married a truly black man; and by the time Hugo's elaborate socio-historical-linguistic argument is finished Othello has been transformed into a light-skinned Middle Eastern noble of the Arab-Saracen race—an unusual point of view for nineteenth-century Continental criticism.<sup>34</sup> The following are representative excerpts:

It is also very true that [within the play] the Moor of Venice is frequently designated as "black" . . . But did the word "black" . . . have in Shakespeare's time the absolute sense that the American and German critics have attributed to it? I do not think so. . . . [Consider: in Sonnet 130, including the line "If snow be white, why then her

<sup>31</sup> Rossi's practice is closer to Schlegel's *Othello*; Salvini's to Hugo's. See *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 163-89.

<sup>32</sup> Guille, 190-92.

<sup>33</sup> From the Italian translation of Schlegel in Maffei, 3-4. Subsequent references in the text are to this translation.

<sup>34</sup> Guille, 185.

breasts are dun,") one sees that Shakespeare is enamored of a brown woman [d'une brune]. . . . And later [in Sonnet 131] . . . he declares "Thy *black* is fairest in my judgment's place". . . . (p. 54) Thus it is certain that the word "black" did not have an absolute sense, and it could, by extension, designate a "brown" man or woman. . . . (p. 55) [Consider also the stage directions found at the beginning of the second act of *The Merchant of Venice*:] "Enter Marochius [sic], a tawny Moor, all in white". . . . Here no more doubt is possible. . . . No, the seducer of the doges' daughter was certainly no black, even though the German and American critics have said so. Shakespeare was able to throw a bit of dusk on the noble face of Othello; but he did not put night there. He did not commit the unjustifiable mistake for which Schlegel congratulates him. He did not confuse a Moor with a black. . . . (p. 56)

The daughter of the senator Brabantio therefore did not lower herself in marrying the son of the Saracen kings. Othello's and Desdemona's union is no misalliance; it is the sympathetic fusion of these two primordial types of human beauty, the Semitic type and the Caucasian type; it symbolizes before all eyes the legitimate rapprochement of the two great rival races who, throughout the entire Middle Ages, disputed about the civilization of the world. . . . (p. 58)

Upon arriving at these last points, Boito disagreed with Hugo in the margin of p. 58: "eppure è un negro" (and yet he *is* a black), he wrote. Four more pages of Hugo's argument follow on the "interior" qualities of Othello's true, noble race:

In his drama Shakespeare wished to show us the omnipotence of jealousy. To make this demonstration conclusive, should he have chosen (as Schlegel claims) a creature inferior to other creatures, a poorly reared barbarian, a being half-conquered by his instincts, in whom the savage has dominated the moral man? No. . . . [On the contrary,] Othello's intellectual and moral superiority is intimately linked with the very idea of the drama. It is essential. . . . It alone can explain Iago's fierce hatred and Desdemona's fierce love. "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," exclaims the beautiful Venetian woman before the Senate. (pp. 61–62)

At this point of the argument, Boito seized upon the quotation and closed the case: again penciled in the margin one finds "dunque poteva anche essere un negro" (So, then, he could also be a black). One should also notice that Boito was careful to place this line from I.iii, 248, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," in a pivotal position within the middle of

the Act I Love Duet (the opera's principal Othello-definer), although there its wording is characteristically Boitian—florid, structurally intricate, and palpably (even disturbingly) physical: "Ed io vedea fra le tue tempie oscura / Splendor del genio l'eterea beltà" ([101/3/1ff]; "And I saw the ethereal beauty of genius shine between your dark temples"). As if with their summarizing utterance all merely "social" obstacles to Othello's and Desdemona's marriage dissolve, they function as the trigger for the climactic, repeated final lines of the central set piece: "E tu m'amavi per le mie sventure" (102/1/1ff, "And you loved me for my misfortunes"). With these final lines we arrive at the sole moment of the opera in which the musical styles of Othello and Desdemona are explicitly fused, rendered identical. Desdemona's strategically delivered "Ed io vedea" becomes the gateway to the musical image of their union.

Despite Boito's skepticism about Hugo's racial point, there are aspects of Hugo's conception of Othello that seem to be more directly reflected in the opera, even though Boito did not mark them off in his copy of the French translation. Apart from the matter of race, Hugo's main argument is that Othello's drama was essentially one of deep love and high honor:

Othello is a murderer, but he is an honorable murderer. He did nothing for hatred's sake; rather, he did everything for honor! . . . Do not forget . . . that Othello believes that he is obeying honor when he strikes down his wife. . . . Ah! Weep for the victim, but pity also the executioner. Desdemona suffers, but do you not think that Othello also suffers? . . .

Othello never loved his wife so much as the moment when he is about to kill her. Never has she seemed more beautiful, more seductive, more desirable, more irresistible! . . . He leans over the condemned woman. He listens to the last harmonies of that breath that is about to cease [!]. . . . *Un baiser, un baiser encore*, one more, and that will be the last! . . .

[With regard to Othello's suicide:] Desdemona's murder is there crying for revenge, and Othello is not the man to grant a reprieve to a murderer. Should he bring it to the Venetian courts? He finds the formalities of social justice to be too slow-moving. . . . Just as moments ago he condemned Desdemona, now he condemns himself. (pp. 76–78)

Such ideas are important strands of Boito's libretto. They suggest, for example, the centrality of "un bacio, un bacio ancora"—words also attributable to the Italian translations, as mentioned earlier—and they suggest a mode within which the operatic Othello's suicide might be understood. Still, in the libretto—particularly as set by Verdi—all of this is

curiously intertwined with its Schlegelian opposite, the drama of primitive uncontrolled jealousy. Boito's *Otello* alternates between two distinct countenances: that sketched by Schlegel and that prescribed by Hugo.

Notwithstanding its thorough discussion of *Othello*, Hugo's introduction gives little attention to Desdemona. Her selflessness, her chastity, and her elevated position are taken for granted, and the translator is content to refer to her evocatively as "la Vénitienne" (pp. 59, 64, 67, 68, 70, etc.), "la belle Vénitienne" (pp. 53, 60, 62, etc.), "la noble enfant" (p. 63), "la fille du sénateur Brabantio" (p. 58), and so on. In this one-dimensional conception of Desdemona, characteristic of the nineteenth century, Hugo follows Coleridge and, even more directly, Schlegel, who had robed Desdemona in celestial or mystical garments as "Othello's good angel":

Desdemona is a victim without stain. . . . She is sweet, humble, simple, and so innocent that she cannot even conceive the idea of infidelity. She seems to have been created precisely to be a tender and affectionate wife. The need to consecrate her life to another, this natural instinct in women, brought about her only error, marrying without her father's knowledge. . . . [That which touched her heart in choosing *Othello*] as her protector and her lord [was] admiration for his courage, pity for the dangers he had faced. . . . In order to place the purity of this angelic being in even higher relief, Shakespeare has given her in Emilia a companion of rather equivocal behavior. . . . (Maffei, p. 5)

Hugo, too, sees Desdemona as "spiritualiste et presque mystique" (p. 67, spiritual and almost mystic). For him she is "éprise d'idéal" (p. 67, in love with an ideal), and in a brief earlier passage, noted by Boito with a vertical black-pencil line, Hugo clarifies his position:

In her passion for the Moor the noble child has renounced all her liberty, all her initiative, all her critical thought [*à tout examen*]. Her enthusiasm is cultish; her affection is a superstition. Illuminated by love, she [even] finds in the harsh treatments that she undergoes a certain unidentifiable pleasure of mortification. Her master's caprice is for her an article of faith; his will is her fate. (p. 63)

Boito's—and Verdi's—Desdemona, likewise, is passive, adoring, and very nearly beatified in scenes such as the Act II Homage Chorus.<sup>35</sup> In his revealing character sketches in the preface to the 1887 *disposizione scenica* (production book) Boito, like Hugo, had little to say about the char-

<sup>35</sup> See especially the discussions of Desdemona in Degrada, "Otello: da Boito a Verdi"; and in Kunze, 29–30.

acter of Desdemona. But he does provide the predictable list of virtues: "A feeling of love, purity, nobility, docility, ingenuousness and resignation should pervade the most chaste and harmonious figure of Desdemona in the highest degree."<sup>36</sup> More trenchant, and most Schlegel- and Hugo-like of all, however, are Verdi's remarks about the heroine. As early as 1876 he had described her, along with Cordelia (*King Lear*) and Imogen (*Cymbeline*), as one of Shakespeare's "angels."<sup>37</sup> And in a celebrated letter dated 22 April 1887 Verdi insisted that she is "not a woman [but] a type! She's the type of goodness, of resignation, of sacrifice [cf. Hugo]! They are creatures born for others [cf. Schlegel], unconscious of their own ego!"<sup>38</sup> While not uniquely linked with the criticism of Hugo, then, the opera's Desdemona, an unproblematic—even relatively empty—figure, is conceived squarely within a tradition of nineteenth-century Continental criticism.

It is primarily in the delineating of Iago that Hugo most helped Boito—primarily, it would seem, because Hugo agreed so totally with Schlegel's earlier assessment of Iago as diabolical, "an evil Genius": "There was never put on the stage," Schlegel had asserted, "a more cunning villain than Iago" (Maffei, p. 4). The issue here is doubly provocative because the sources for the opera's Iago-definer, the Credo, have seemed so elusive. As is well known, there is no clear Shakespearean equivalent for Iago's "Credo in un Dio crudel."<sup>39</sup> This has been viewed as one of the problematic texts of the opera, and Boito has been arraigned by more than one critic for including such an overtly Mephistophelean, glaringly *scapigliato* text. The discomfort of English and American critics has been particularly acute. Julian Budden, for instance, judges it to be "a piece of high-flown nonsense which has its entire justification in the musical setting,"<sup>40</sup> and the tradition of treating the Credo condescendingly goes back a century, extending to the year of the opera's premiere. Thus, Blanche Roosevelt's initial reaction in 1887:

In the second act a credo for Iago is most noble music, but M. Boïto's poetry here is weak. If I understand it rightly, it is a very free adaptation of Iago's last speech with Cassio, act ii. of [the] original. Iago

<sup>36</sup> Budden, 329.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Clarina Maffei, 20 October 1876, in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1959), IV, 17.

<sup>38</sup> In Abbiati, IV, 331–32. The translation used here is that of Martin Chusid, "Verdi's Own Words: His Thoughts on Performance, with Special Reference to *Don Carlos*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*," *The Verdi Companion*, ed. William Weaver and Martin Chusid (New York, 1979), 161.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the fragmentary sources suggested in Dean, 88 and 90.

<sup>40</sup> Budden, 318.

speaks of devils, etcetera—you know the lines—and here M. Boïto gives him a tirade about what he believes and does not believe.<sup>41</sup>

It now seems clear, however, that the real sources for the Credo lie in Hugo's discussion of Iago. Once again, we are guided by Boïto's pencil marks—carets and vertical lines—in the margins. What caught his attention on pp. 64 and 65 was the explanation of why Iago hated Othello, those very causes that Boïto seems to have downplayed in the opera. Boïto's first "motivation" caret, toward the bottom of p. 64, signals a passage dealing with Iago's resentment at having been passed over for promotion in favor of Cassio: "First of all, his military service has been ignored. . . ." Another caret on p. 64 flags the often-mentioned infidelity issue: "Next, Iago's wife, Emilia, is very much a flirt, and—rightly or wrongly—rumor has circulated that she has had an affair with [*des complaisances pour*] Othello. . . ." But what follows is crucial. Hugo now proceeds to go beyond the text of the play—and beyond Coleridge's celebrated "motive-hunting of motiveless malignity"—to explain the underlying source of Iago's hatred. Boïto took special note of this, and on p. 65 he marked the following passage with a series of three black-pencil vertical lines and a single caret:

But the principal cause, the true cause of Iago's hatred must be sought in his own nature [that is, not in the text of the play]. Iago is a man who is unable to accept or endure any kind of superiority. He admits it somewhere [V.i, 19–20] with cynical frankness: another's *daily beauty makes him ugly*. Now, it is not only by rank that Othello is above Iago; it is also by character, by talent, and by the respect that he inspires; it is by the glory that shines around him; it is above all by his goodness. . . .

Here are the real crimes of the Moor. Iago envies Othello for being everything that he is not. He resents him for being powerful; he resents him for being great; he resents him for being honest; . . . heroic; . . . victorious; . . . loved by the people; . . . adored by Desdemona. And that is why he wants revenge. Ah! Othello is genius! Well then, let him be careful! for Iago is envy.

A reading of Hugo, in short, must have suggested to Boïto that he go beyond a listing of motivations and concentrate on a more fundamental, psychological motivation: envy, a covetousness that preys on the aspects in which others shine, the positive turned negative through envy. This point had been at the center of the Act II solo that Boïto had first written for Iago, the 1879 text that would be abandoned and replaced in 1884 by

<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt, 195.

the Credo.<sup>42</sup> The 1879 text was a four-quatrain structure in *doppio quinario* that begins, "Tesa è l'insidia—ho in man le frodi, / Ti gonfia, Indivia—che mi corrodi" (The trap is set—I have the deceptions in hand, / Swell up, Envy,—you who corrode me!). Clearly an apostrophe to Envy, the text had included such similar, Hugo-based sentiments as "D'Otello il fato—io guido, io nomo, / *Son scellerato—perchè son uomo*, / Perchè ho la scoria—dell'odio in cor, / Mentr'ei di gloria—vive e d'amor" (I guide, I worship Otello's fate. / I am wicked, because I am a man [The only line that would be retained in the 1884 Credo]. / Because I have the dross of hatred in my heart / While he lives on glory and love).<sup>43</sup> Here the conceptual source in Hugo is transparent, and we are reminded of it once again eight years later, in Boïto's summary descriptions of the operatic characters in the preface to the *disposizione scenica*; there Boïto's first words about Iago are "Iago è l'Invidia" (Iago is Envy).<sup>44</sup>

Hugo's exegetical point is obviously also a main source of the 1884 Credo, which relies so heavily on the reversal of values—the ridiculing of positives into negatives. But even further, some of Hugo's subsequent expansions of the idea of pervasive envy seem to have contributed to the tone and imagery of Boïto's 1884 Credo. The most telling of these expansions occurs on p. 67. That it is unmarked by Boïto is perhaps explainable by the later date of the substituted text; most of the markings in the book date from 1879, the year of the initial draft:

Iago himself is convinced of it; *il n'est qu'un critique*, "I am nothing if not critical." But this is a critical faculty that never sees anything but the bad sides. He is incapable of admiration and enthusiasm. Morally he has the hypocrisy of Tartuffe. Intellectually he has the skepticism of Don Juan. He lacks only supernatural power to be Mephistopheles. Poetically—for Iago sometimes improvises—he never produced nor could have produced anything but epigrams. Lyricism is thus denied him, as is faith, and for him the sublime is only the neighbor of the ridiculous. Thus, in reality, he regards such a grand passion as Desdemona has conceived for the Moor as perfectly grotesque. Desdemona, spiritual and almost mystic, sees only the soul of the Moor and admires it; Iago, a materialist and almost a nihilist, sees only the body of the Moor and laughs.

<sup>42</sup> The replacement of the earlier text with the Credo is documented in Boïto's letter to Verdi, shortly after 26 April 1884, in *Carteggio Verdi-Boïto*, I, 74–76.

<sup>43</sup> The complete text may be found in Luzio, II, 110. A few lines of the text seem indebted to Iago's soliloquy at the end of II.i. For example, "(*Tocandosi la fronte*) L'idea qui regna—salda, segreta," the beginning of the second quatrain, recalls Iago's "'Tis here, but yet confused."

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., the translation in Budden, 328.

Boito's Credo may be understood as a series of potent images illustrating Hugo's ideas. One recognizes Iago the materialist, both in "sento il fango originario in me" (115/2/3ff, I feel the primal mud within me) and in the embracing of the idea of birth "d'un germe o d'un atomo" (114/5/1ff, from a germ or an atom). All noble ideas, "il giusto", "Lagrime, bacio, sguardo, / Sacrificio ed onor" (117/1/2, 117/3/2ff, justice, tears, kisses, glances, sacrifices, honor), are subject only to ridicule. The "positive" attributes that Iago invokes are evidently selected to refer to recognizable characteristics of Otello and Desdemona. One scarcely need be reminded that Otello's "onor" and Otello as "il giusto" have been the specific topics of the previous act, and that the words "lagrime" and the crucial "bacio" have been uttered in the immediately preceding Love Duet. Iago insists that the sincerities witnessed in Act I be ascribed to "un istrion beffardo" (117/2/1, a derisive actor), that their seemingly positive substance is "bugiardo" (117/3/2, mendacious or false). Similarly, the "nihilist" element mentioned by Hugo is probably the most potent image in the Credo: Iago as God-denier. And, finally, Hugo's reference to Iago's penchant for "epigrams" may in part have led to Boito's choice of (or Verdi's desire for) the unusual "metro rotto e non simetrico" (broken, non-symmetrical poetic meter) of the Credo—a seemingly anarchic, jagged mixture of rhymed *quinari*, *settenari*, and *endecasillabi*.<sup>45</sup> It is from such considerations as these that Verdi was moved to write to his librettist that he found the new Credo "potentissimo e shaespeariano [sic] in tutto e per tutto."<sup>46</sup>

One may conclude that in his operatic monologue Iago is not concerned with expounding a philosophy of action or even with revealing his true beliefs, except as those beliefs happen to be casually provoked by circumstance. The circumstance at hand is the condition of Otello and Desdemona, and Iago's unstated envy of them: "envy," the key word, but one never uttered in this more subtle form of Iago's soliloquy. To restate this another way, the two central ideas that generate the Credo—envy and the mere existence of a wondrously happy Otello and Desdemona—never appear as verbal images. Iago hides them from us (and perhaps from himself); or at least he refrains from expressing them bluntly, for his essence is subtlety and deception. Rather, they must be inferred by the astute reader—or the astute spectator—as providing what Hugo called "the true cause of Iago's hatred." In sum, the Credo may be understood by the psychoanalytically inclined as a kind of psychopathological reaction of Iago: a smokescreen of private rationalizations; a web of psychic

<sup>45</sup> See Boito to Verdi, after 26 April 1884, *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, I, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Verdi to Boito, 3 May 1884, *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, I, 76.

distortion that shields him from the burden of confronting himself more directly. Or, as the footlight staging of the 1887 *disposizione scenica* suggests, it may be understood as little more than sheer audience manipulation. As we spectators are being distracted and toyed with by the consummate deceiver, we may perceive as little of his "true self" as do Otello, Roderigo, and Cassio.

This helps to solve the perennial problem of Boito's minimizing of Iago's motivations—above all, of his taking away of the issue of Emilia's supposed infidelity. Doubtless after reading Hugo and reflecting on the "true cause," envy, Boito saw little need to stock his libretto with peripheral, lesser causes. A knowledge of Boito's sources not only helps us understand why he made the textual choices that he did but also points the way toward a line of critical interpretation that, at least, is supportable by historical demonstration.

### III

Similar investigations into the genesis of Boito's *Otello*, of course, could be carried on here at further length. But the essential point is clear: when confronting the text and images of the *Otello* libretto, a knowledge of the rich tradition of English-language criticism, an awareness of the English *Othello* acting tradition, a comparison of Boito's *Otello* with the text of Shakespeare's play, a study of the contrived libretto structures—all of these things may be valuable, but the evidence that we ought to begin with is the nineteenth-century Continental understanding of Shakespeare, and the details of certain key Shakespearean translations, commentaries, and interpretations (Schlegel, Hugo, the Italian translations, and the Italian acting traditions). As part of our initial textual-analytical strategy, we need to immerse ourselves in that portion of the reception history of Shakespeare with which Boito and Verdi actually intersected, particularly because the Shakespearean lands in which they dwelled can be quite foreign to our own, very differently conditioned minds. There is much evidence that remains to be uncovered. Speculation, analysis, and textual parsing are all very well—indeed, this work must proceed—but such study, when possible, needs to be grounded firmly in real source documents.