

“BEVE, BEVE CON ME”:  
AN OPERATIC BRINDISI — FOR AND TO  
GIAN-PAOLO BIASIN<sup>1</sup>

When Richard Wagner wrote disparagingly of Gioacchino Rossini’s “narcotic-drunken melody,” he was questioning the composer’s seriousness by reducing his music to intoxication, that is, to excess and virtuosity. But Herbert Lindenberger has pointed out that *all* opera is extravagant — larger than life, addictive, excessive (*Opera in History* 76, 271; *Opera*). In other words, moderation is *not* opera’s reigning mode; on the contrary, excess is. One form of excess — the drinking of alcohol — has a prominent place in opera in general and Italian opera in particular (as our title from Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito’s *Otello* is meant to suggest). Yet, from Hippocrates and the Bible to the present, we have all been advised that, in life, moderation — not excess — is the ideal.<sup>2</sup> Because worries about disinhibition have always been strong, drinking became carefully regulated. Whenever a character drinks on stage, this act is a sign with multiple possible meanings. Yet, in Italian (as in other) cultures, drinking is a highly coded activity: there are certain socially acceptable codes of behavior governing drink, so that the questions of “who? what? where? when? and why?” are all relevant. When these codes are broken, the transgression is significant and meaningful.

Unlike other contemporaneous representations of drinking practices — temperance tracts, medical treatises, and even works of literature — opera, it seems, does not seek to change those practices, but merely to put them on the stage and use them to telling dramatic ends. Given the rise of literary naturalism in nineteenth-century Europe, novels, short stories, and plays were all enlisted in support of the growing temperance movements of Europe, and many worked hard to expose the evils of drink.<sup>3</sup> But Italian opera, it would appear, can usually be trusted not to exaggerate or distort in negative ways its representations of drinkers and drinking; indeed, it can be counted upon to sing the glories of the grape.

Opera’s penchant for exuberant *brindisi* and drinking songs has not gone unnoticed: Franco Onorati’s playful account of drinking and eating among musicians, composers and operatic characters is called “*Libiamo, libiamo...*,” recalling one of the most famous of *brindisi* — that of Alfredo

and Violetta in *La Traviata* (1853). But there are dozens of others he could have used, including another toast from the same composer and librettist, Verdi and Piave. In the operatic version of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* (1847), Lady Macbeth, of all people, sings another typical *brindisi* in order to distract her guests from her husband's terror at seeing Banquo's ghost:

Si colmi il calice  
 di vino eletto;  
 nasca il delitto,  
 muoia il dolor.  
 Da noi s'involino  
 gli odi e gli sdegni,  
 folleggi e regni  
 qui solo amor...<sup>4</sup>

Operas often call attention to arias like this by marking them as what is called phenomenal song, that is, as a self-conscious singing performance: Alfredo is quite specifically asked by the partygoers, including Violetta, to sing a *brindisi*. While few operas are totally centered on the experience of drinking, equally few are without some sort of toast — using alcohol to consecrate something (be it love, life, or health) — or else some other kind of drinking song, celebrating the virtues and pleasures of drink.

If, as it has been argued (Haine 100), a study of the vocabulary surrounding the drinking experience can tell us much about a culture and about the multiple meanings and interpretations generated by drink, then we feel that a study of Italian opera's frequent enacted scenes of drinking — in the name of celebration, consolation, or inspiration — can just as clearly document cultural views of alcohol and its social functions. In so doing, it can offer us considerable information about Italian society, for (as anthropologists have argued) drinking articulates in many and diverse ways with other aspects of culture: social organization, economics, politics and conflict management; interethnic and international relations; diet and nutrition; language and folklore; religion and ritual; healing and curing (Heath, "Some Generalizations" 348). In short, the representations of drinking that we see and hear on stage are never innocent or neutral.

Sometimes, though, they seem pretty harmless, especially when they provoke comic responses: yet what makes an audience in Bologna laugh

may differ from what a New York audience finds funny — particularly when it comes to changing attitudes to drinking in general (and also public displays of drunkenness) in North American society today. Nevertheless, when the inebriation is clearly feigned, the laughter is likely unconditional in either culture and at any time in history: in Rossini and Sterbini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), the amorous Count Almaviva masquerades as a drunken soldier to gain entrance into Don Bartolo's house to see his beloved Rosina. With their repetitions and clumsy rhythms, his music and speech in this scene offer a parody of those of a drunkard. He keeps mis-singing Bartolo's surname to great comic effect, calling him Balordo, Bertoldo, and Barbaro. When corrected, he simply asserts that there's little difference between those versions and Bartolo!

The physical impact — whether real or feigned — of alcohol on the body raises the issue of the relation between physiology and psychology or between the body and the psyche in alcohol consumption. There is no doubt that intoxication has organic effects on the body and its nervous system, but these are also tied to changes in consciousness. This combination is said to alter our awareness of our body in the world.<sup>5</sup> Experimental evidence argues that the reflective functions (of the thinking mind), the effector functions (of the acting mind), and the affective processes (of the feeling mind) are all seriously influenced by the physical consumption of ethanol (see Pandina). While it is true that alcohol can be shown to affect almost every tissue in the body in some way as it is metabolized and absorbed (Roach 17), that bodily impact is experienced by the psyche too and manifested in the person's behavior: aggression, clowning, maudlin sentimentality, loquaciousness.

It is at this point, however, that social and cultural factors enter the picture. Much of this alcohol-related behavior, it has been argued, is learned behavior, shaped by expectations as well as physiology.<sup>6</sup> People drink in part in order to obtain effects they have been taught to expect. Alcohol is a complex “biopsychosocial” phenomenon (Heath, “An Introduction” 2): drinking is a social act, embedded in a context of implicit values, attitudes, and conceptions of reality which vary from one group to another (Heath, “Anthropological Perspectives” 45). David Mandelbaum eloquently puts the case for the social and cultural construction of drinking:

When a man lifts a cup, it is not only the kind of drink that is in it, the amount he is likely to take, and the circumstances under which he will do the drinking that are specified in advance for him, but also whether the contents of the cup will cheer or stupify, whether they will induce affection or aggression, guilt or unalloyed pleasure. These and many other cultural definitions attach to the drink even before it touches the lips. (17)

That different nations have different associations with drinking is well known. The French, who had long been “normalized” drinkers of wine and beer, did not consider alcoholism a French problem for many years, but they saw the German, English and American temperance movements as necessary “to moderate the hereditary ardor of the Teutonic race and the Anglo-Saxon race for alcoholic spirits” (Barrows 206). When they did admit to the existence of alcoholism in France, they limited it to a disease of those who drank distilled spirits, and not wine or beer. Clearly the forms and meanings of drinking are, as Mandelbaum argues, culturally defined, as are the expectations that regulate the emotional consequences of drink. And anthropological and sociological research has shown these different cultural responses operating at the level of community (Gefou-Madianou 5).

Nevertheless, in recent years, epidemiological approaches have also revealed previously unnoticed cross-cultural uniformities (see Heath, *International Handbook*). And, as we shall see, opera offers further evidence of such cross-cultural continuities — at least within Europe, which is the source of the greatest number of operas in the canonical repertoire. Europe contains only approximately 13% of the world’s population, but it is said to account for at least 50% of the world’s alcohol consumption. While, in this study, we want to use Italian opera to reveal what are, in fact, European commonalities of behavior and belief, we also do not want to underplay the cultural distinctions that obviously do exist: it has been argued, in fact, that geography is crucial to the differences in drinking habits even within Europe (see Babor 41-58). In the vine-growing south, wine is the beverage of choice and, despite high alcohol consumption, drunkenness is not seen as a major social problem. Instead, wine is a social lubricant, a medicinal and a stimulant.<sup>7</sup> Witness Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s one act Italian folk opera called *Bacco in Toscana* (1931) which brings together scientists, scholars, aristocrats from Pisa and Florence and, of course, Bacchus and his

satyrs to celebrate the glories of Tuscan wine (Rossi 96). In the north of Europe, where grains and fruits provide the base for alcoholic beverages, spirits prevail and with them, seems to come a hard-drinking culture — at least during festive occasions and weekends. In between these two geographical extremes, hops and barley grow best, and so beer becomes the national drink, as in Germany.<sup>8</sup> With this particular form of consumption often comes a liberal attitude to drink in general, because of its associations with sociability: in Austria, the beer halls and gardens are still seen as family places today.

The differences in these regions of Europe are certainly evident in their diverse attitudes to and evaluations of drink and its effects — physical, psychological and social. But there are also common denominators that cross regions and offer a sense of what we might call a pan-European view of drinking, and it is these that Italian opera articulates so admirably. There are what we might call existential constants: alcohol as a consolation for a hard, unsure life; as a way of seizing the fleeting joys of the present moment (*carpe diem*); as a way of forgetting troubles temporarily. But there are also social constants that are shared by many European operas — and cultures: drinking as social bonding (mostly male); as an accomplice in amatory pursuits; as a release from social and psychic inhibitions (both positive and negative). It is to these that we now turn.

Drinking is fundamentally a social act, performed in recognized social contexts, and for that reason, those contexts merit some attention. The sacramental sense of communion found in religious ceremonies involving wine is found in secularized form in customs of hospitality throughout Europe. As one scholar notes: “Wherever one goes in the West, alcohol is offered like the grasp of a hand — or in place of it” (Lenson 43). And, as Mary Douglas (4) has pointed out, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in groups of people also depend on the symbolic value of drink in certain communities — from longshoremen to connoisseurs. In Europe, most often those communities are male, and so the social bonding is that between men, often as part of a shared tavern culture with ritualized customs (Partanen 237). Sociability is the most often cited reason for drinking among men, for shared drink is seen as central to community solidarity, male bonding, hospitality, and recreation. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, alcoholic beverages have long been seen as social facilita-

tors, promoting friendship and camaraderie (Marshall, “Conclusions” 453). Generalizations like this are common and perhaps even warranted, for the social bonding produced by drinking appears to transcend national and cultural boundaries in Europe: no matter how different an Italian cafe is from a German beer hall, certain constants remain.

Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West* (1910) opens in the Polka Saloon during the California Gold Rush (1849-50), and here, in the saloon (which was the major leisure space of American working men at the time) (see Burnham 53-9) the comforting rituals of communal drinking and fellowship are represented clearly. So too, however, are the more negative effects of drink — in the form of quick tempers over gambling. Tavern or cafe culture included, of course, smoking and gambling and in some cases had become associated with a less than reputable clientele (Haydon 114). The culture of male sociability had been part of this social drinking life since at least the eighteenth century: in this context, a drinker could demonstrate his “willingness to spend and consume, to socialize and associate” by drinking, toasting, and by buying rounds of drinks for others (Brennan 234). The tradition of toasts is no doubt a secular vestige of older sacrificial libations in which the sacred wine or blood was offered to the gods in exchange for a wish. This religious context is also likely why one cannot refuse to drink to the health or happiness of the one being toasted, as we shall see shortly.<sup>9</sup>

While the southern parts of Europe — Italy, but also Spain and Greece — show less tolerance for excess, drinking is still associated with male sociability. Here, excess is seen as incompatible with the elaborate network of social relationships based on drinking that is part of these cultures (Cottino, “Italy” 158). In the Sicilian village of Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), Turiddu sings a *brindisi* to sparkling wine, which, like the laugh of a lover, brings joy:

Viva il vino ch’è sincero  
e che annega l’umor nero  
nell’ebbrezza tenera.

He offers a glass to Alfio, the cuckolded husband of his lover Lola. When Alfio refuses, saying it would be like poison in his breast, he is in fact refusing any relationship of community with Turiddu. The audience recognizes that this breach of the custom of hospitality is the sign of a deliberate

and major social infraction: in fact, we expect that the two men will exchange challenges and agree to fight, and so they do.

It is because these strict codes of social bonding are so well known and so widely accepted, that infringing upon them can be a powerful dramatic device in an opera. In Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), the Duke can make manifest his evil character on stage by offering a friendly drink — ostensibly, to keep up the ancient customs of his ancestors — to a man he then poisons. This sets the stage for the infamous Lucrezia herself to betray these same social codes and, in the final scene, poison with wine her enemies — and, inadvertently, her own son. The fact that, in this case, it is a woman (along with an evil man) who breaks the rules established for male social bonding is not surprising; indeed, there are numerous other examples of this in European opera, a sign perhaps of the resolute maleness of tavern culture in many countries.<sup>10</sup>

But, if that is so, what about “wine, women, and song”? Of course, this connection is so frequently made on the Italian operatic stage that it has become a cliché. In Act 3 of Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896), the voices heard from inside the tavern where Marcello and Musetta work sing the pleasures of love and wine:

Chi nel ber trovò il piacer  
 nel suo bicchier, nel suo bicchier! Aa!  
 D'una bocca nell'ardor,  
 trovò l'amor, trovò l'amor!

Of course there has been a long association of alcohol with the arousal and intensification of erotic desire, at least when consumed in moderation: it seems that, for men, excess leads to impotence, if not simply sleep. But moderate drinking appears to result in social disinhibition and an increase in sexual risk-taking (Schuster 115). Yet recent experiments have shown that women as well can feel that sexual arousal is facilitated by drinking even when the physiological evidence doesn't exist to support it (Schuster 117). Perhaps that is why drink is featured so often as an aid to seduction. Mozart and Da Ponte's disreputable Don Giovanni tells his servant Leporello to prepare a great drunken feast for the local peasants:

Fin ch'han dal vino  
 calda la testa,

un gran festa  
fa preparar...

His aim? The next morning there should be more women's names to add to the Don's famous list of conquests. The man whom Leporello describes as having a "barbaro appetito" — for women, wine, and food — understands well the time-tested relationship between wine and sexual conquest.<sup>11</sup>

But the even more frequent dramatic task of alcohol in opera is to act as a more benign kind of facilitator or mediator in love. It is not accidental that love potions are usually wine-based — be these potions real or fake. Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) tells the story of love aided and abetted by wine. The heroine reads aloud the legend of Tristan and Isolde (not the operatic one, for it came later) and tells of the love potion that sealed their passion and their fate. A visiting quack then sells the desperate and gullible hero a bottle of wine, which he claims is the love potion of Queen Isolde. As he drinks the claret, Nemorino sings of its pleasant warmth coursing through his body: "qual di vena in vena / dolce calor mi scorre!" He begins to believe in the efficacy of the "potion" when all the village girls start to pay attention to him: what he does not yet know is that they are already aware that his rich uncle has died and made him a wealthy and thus exceedingly attractive man.

However, it does not take the pretence of a love potion for wine to have a positive effect on relations between the sexes. In that famous *brindisi* in *La Traviata* (1853), Alfredo's toast is to the joy of drink that, as the libretto puts it, can bring on love and even warmer kisses. Violetta answers him with a *carpe diem* message focussed entirely on love — as if the wine were no longer even required:

Godiam, fugace e rapido  
è il gaudio dell'amore;  
e un fior che nasce e muore,  
né più si può goder.

Because of this recurrent cultural linking of alcohol and passion, the toast to love is commonplace in opera. A bridegroom toasts his future wedding in *L'elisir d'amore*:

Per me l'amore e il vino  
due numi saranno.

Compensan d'ogni affanno  
la donna ed il bicchier.

It is because of the strength and ubiquity of this love-toast convention that transgressions of it stand out for audiences as morally reprehensible. In Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904), just before the American sailor, Pinkerton is about to “marry” the devoted Japanese Cio-Cio-San, he sings a cynical toast to the day on which he will marry for real — that is, to an American wife (“E al giorno in cui mi sposerò con vere nozze, a una vera sposa...americana.”). For Pinkerton to betray the social conventions of the love toast is, in effect, publicly to declare himself to the audience as the cad he is.

Clearly, then, not all operatic drinking scenes are necessarily straightforwardly celebratory. But there are other reasons for this besides the moral weakness and hypocrisy of Pinkerton, because among the many effects of too much alcohol on the body and psyche is the release of inhibitions. Though this is a much discussed topic, it seems that it is difficult to study experimentally. What is known is that this release may liberate people to increased pleasure, but it can just as easily lead to aggression and violence. In either case, the lifting of inhibitions is invariably connected with consuming too much alcohol. The reasoning behind the age-old injunction — from ancient Greece to today — not to indulge in excessive drinking is clearly related to the fear of what happens when inhibitions are lifted. Yet Plato, for instance, actually felt that drunken excess could have positive moral training value, if administered in carefully controlled situations (Belfiore 424). And much early medical theory saw wine as allopathic and cathartic, and so getting drunk was one positive way of purging the body (Nahoum-Grappe, “France” 80).

If ever there was a dramatic character who incarnated these more positive values of excess in drink, it is Falstaff. This is true of Shakespeare's original creation and, even more so, of Boito's operatic version for Verdi's 1893 opera named after its protagonist. There has been a long line of “passionate apologists” for Falstaff (Jeanne Roberts 87), for he and his drinking mates were favorites with audiences from the start. Among the other operas written about him are Antonio Salieri/Carlo Prospero Defranceschi's *Falstaff o sia le tre burle* (1798), M.W. Balfe/S.M. Maggioni's *Falstaff* (1838), Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Sir John in Love* (1929), and

Otto Nicolai/Salomon H. Rosenthal's *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* (1849).<sup>12</sup> While the complexity and ambivalence of Shakespeare's character from the *Henry* plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are lost in most of these operatic versions, Boito restores both qualities. He did, however, have to make major cuts to the play texts, and thereby changed the balance of character presentation. The Falstaff of the opera version is less victimized, more active; he is certainly less mercenary, but perhaps is a bit more self-satisfied than the Shakespearean original. In the seventeenth-century English context, it may well be the case that "[r]iotous behavior is frowned on and any form of excess, even excess in pleasure, is considered disruptive. Falstaff is excessive in body as in behavior and he arouses most vilification" (White 14).<sup>13</sup> But the late nineteenth-century Italian opera offers a more tolerant take on the excessive protagonist who nevertheless shocks the mores of the English gentilefolk of Windsor. As one commentator put the difference, "[t]he great critical debates about whether Falstaff is a sordid vice-figure or an inspired jester have been decisively arbitrated by Verdi and Boito in favour of the latter" (White 81); another has noted that, to Romantic writers, Falstaff was heroic *because of his excesses* "which cause failure but also ensure distinction" (Jeanne Roberts 106). It is true, as Peter Conrad argues, that Boito "repatriated" Falstaff from "puritanical England to sensual Italy" (36), but he also moved from a play to an opera, and thus to very different conventions for and tolerance of excess.

In an adaptation of the play's first scene, *Falstaff* opens with a focus on drinking and its consequences. Dr. Caius appears at the inn, accusing Falstaff's men, Bardolph and Pistol, of having made him drunk and robbing him. This is almost an inversion of the traditional *brindisi*, this time emphasizing the bad rather than the good things that can happen when you drink. The two comic drunks agree they all did imbibe together, thereby accounting for their own considerable hangovers ("che dolore!... Ho l'intestino guasto"), but they deny the robbery, claiming that Caius simply holds his drink badly:

Costui beve  
 poi pel gran bere  
 perde i suoi cinque sensi...

It seems that Caius ended up falling asleep under the table. In disgust, the doctor swears that if he ever gets drunk in an inn again, he'll do it with “gente onesta, sobria, civile e pia.” His phrases here are punctuated in the music with pretentious brass fanfares that underline the ludicrousness of his oath (Corse 95).

Falstaff is presented with his bill by the innkeeper, and immediately blames his companions for *their* excessive drinking which costs him too much, while *he* proceeds to order yet another bottle of wine. The self-satisfied knight here prides himself on his excessive body size, and Bardolph and Pistol encourage him with supportive cries of “Falstaff immenso!” and “Enorme Falstaff.” The Shakespearean emphasis on cunning and money is here replaced with an operatic celebration of drink and its corporeal benefits. Patting his paunch, Falstaff announces: “Questo è il mio regno / Lo ingrandirò.” This shift of emphasis continues throughout the opera. When the “merry wives,” Alice Ford and Meg Page, choose their terms of abuse for him, the insults are related not simply to his size (as in the play) but specifically to his drinking and excess: “Quell’otre! Quel tino! / Quel re delle pancie....” Caius tells the jealous, suspicious husband Ford that Falstaff has “voglie voraci,” and Bardolph uses elaborate descriptive imagery that draws on Falstaff’s bad habits: “Quel paffuto plenilunio / che il color del vino imporpora.” The faithless Pistol too advises Ford to ply Falstaff with wine in order to get him to talk, since the knight inclines toward wine the way the willow tree leans toward the water (“Come all’acqua inclina il salice / così al vin quel Cavaliere”).

The plot here follows that of the play, with the wives attempting to trick and humiliate Falstaff while still teaching the jealous Ford a lesson. When Falstaff pays a secret amatory visit to Alice, she hides him from her enraged husband in a laundry basket which is then tossed into the Thames. Act 3 opens with Falstaff recovering from this dunking, suddenly and movingly aware of his size and age as negatives, as if for the first time. The Host of the Garter Inn brings him a cup of heated wine, which turns out to be just the thing to restore his forces and to provoke a song in praise of wine’s positive effects on the human body:

Buono. Ber del vin dolce  
e sbottonarsi al sole, dolce cosa!  
Il buon vino sperde

le tetre fole dello sconforto,  
 accende l'occhio e il pensier,  
 dal labbro sale al cervel  
 e quivi risveglia  
 il picciol fabbro dei trilli;  
 un negro grillo che vibra  
 entro l'uom brillo..  
 Trilla ogni fibra in cor,  
 l'allegro etere al trillo guizza  
 e il giocondo globo squilibra

una demenza trillante!  
 E il trillo invade il mondo!!!

During the word play on *grillo* / *brillo* / *trillo*, actual trills predominate in the music, and on that final line about their universal invasion “the whole orchestra resolves into a gigantic unison trill.” (Corse 108).<sup>14</sup> As Falstaff warms up with his wine, the music heats up as well.

While it is true that, as in the play, the operatic Falstaff is scapegoated and ritually mocked at the end, he always retains his joy in excess. He responds to his tormentors' insults and threats with the repeated request “Ma salvagli l'addomine,” as he tries to protect that paunch which constitutes his kingdom and his identity. In contrast to Lindenberger's sense that Falstaff is an operatic character in a “relatively unoperatic context” (*Opera* 78), we would argue instead that the operatic version of the character is perfectly in keeping with the genre's celebration of excess.

On the other side of the coin, however, it is occasionally the violence induced by drink that is used to dramatic effect in opera, and it has impact in part because such violence fractures the audience's social notions of companionship and community associated with people drinking together. Studies of the neurophysiological and endocrinological consequences of alcohol do indeed show how it acts on brain mechanisms directly associated with aggressive behavior, and many sociological investigations have supported these findings.<sup>15</sup> Court records, of course, document at length the relationship between drink and arguments leading to violence.<sup>16</sup> In fact, aggression is another of those constants in the discourse of drinking that appear to cross European cultural boundaries. In Italy, as in other parts of Europe, excessive alcohol consumption has been seen as a cause of crimi-

nal behavior, dangerous to public order (Cottino, “Science” 49-52); therefore, it is also a useful plot device that could be counted on to work dramatically on the operatic stage.

Again adapting a Shakespearean play, Verdi and Boito created in their *Otello* (1887) a drinking situation loaded with multiple symbolic meanings. As in the stage drama, the villain, Iago, is jealous of Cassio’s command (as Captain) and plots to use alcohol as a means to entrap and disgrace him. To this end, he invites Cassio to drink in celebration of their leader Otello’s marriage. The Captain resists: “Già m’arde il cervello / Per un nappo vuotato.” But Cassio is caught in a real double bind, one knowingly orchestrated by Iago: he is about to go on duty and therefore has a *professional* obligation not to imbibe, but there is also an equally strong *social* obligation not to refuse to drink to his leader’s marriage. This tension is precisely what Iago proceeds to play upon, knowing that “S’ei s’inebria, è perduto.”

But this is the opera and not the play: so, in order to get him to drink more, Iago sings a memorable and diabolically effective drinking song. In subject matter, it begins with a simple *carpe diem* theme (drink while you may) but musically other signals are being given to the audience: its “snake-like” chromatically descending scales tells another story (Kerman 116). An early reviewer called that scale (descending from F to G sharp) “outright sinister and fatal,” and in a sense he was right.<sup>17</sup> This is a devilish drinking song, whose “striding melody with its vigorous bass line is as heady as the wine which it celebrates” (Budden 3: 345). It also breaks all the *brindisi* conventions, for its formal strophic structure is broken up by Cassio’s increasingly drunken interventions, resulting in broken lines and the laughter of the chorus. The “disposizione scenica” (or production book) of the original La Scala performance describes these interventions in revealing detail: as Cassio begins to totter and to become more animated as he drinks, he suddenly recalls Iago’s *brindisi* and “would like to start the first tune up again, but he does not remember it. Holding himself up with his legs somewhat spread apart and facing the audience with a glass in his hand, he persists in looking for the line with which Iago [sic] began his *brindisi*” (Busch 2: 510). He continues to persist in these efforts, stammering to a hiccupping accompaniment in the music, coming in early, forgetting words, and stumbling around the stage (see Hepokoski 5; Budden 3: 347). Throughout, Iago holds an amphora of wine and fills Cassio’s glass as well as those of the chorus members. And, throughout, he repeats his

invitation to drink with him, with increasing excitement in the orchestra and chorus: “Beve, beve con me!” The high A on the “Beve” actually gives, as one critic puts it, a “flavour of excess” (Hepokoski 4).

Iago then taunts Cassio to drink even more or risk showing himself to be a coward and hypocrite:

Fuggan dal vivo  
 nappo i codardi  
 che in cor nascondono  
 frodi...

Another early reviewer was also right on the mark when he noted that the plot “hinges on this Bacchic scene: Cassio must become tipsy so that his drunkenness leads to quarrels, scandal, and Otello’s fury.”<sup>18</sup> As the production book written by the first Iago, Victor Maurel, vividly and succinctly described the situation, once everyone has become carried away with drink, Iago “begins to weave his plot while Cassio leaves his reason in the bottom of his glass” (in Busch 2: 644). Provoked into a violent fight, Cassio not only is a threat to public order but proves himself to be in no shape to do his job, that is, to take his turn on the watch. Iago deliberately makes matters worse by announcing that he is often drunk like this. Just before Otello himself enters to restore order and strip Cassio of his rank — in Iago’s favor — the complexity of the music gives a strong effect of “confusion, urgency, intensity” (Kerman 116) worthy of the culmination of this unorthodox *brindisi* that “swaggerers with lusty *cameraderie*” (Hepokoski 4).<sup>19</sup> In this scene, then, we can see many of those social conventions associated with drinking: hospitality; social bonding; the obligation to drink to the health or happiness of the one toasted; the demand for sobriety on the job. But, we also find associations with bravery and manliness, as well as with violence and lack of control. Like its source text, *Otello* becomes a case-study in European drinking habits and their dramatic potentialities.

Of course, not all release of inhibitions necessarily leads to negative results. There is also a long cultural tradition of “Bacchus Liber” which that connoisseur of excess, Rabelais, linked to the god Pluto, the one who reveals hidden truths. Erasmus wrote generically of the truth to be found through drinking — “in vino veritas” — but Rabelais believed that wine was simply the mirror of the individual soul: the god of wine took away inhibitions and revealed the more personal truths beneath (Antonioli 135-

7). These traditions have their roots, of course, in real physiological responses: in alcohol's indirect effect in suppressing the function of inhibitory brain centers. In addition, because alcohol suppresses anxiety, it can also lead to a gradual removal of social inhibitions.<sup>20</sup> This is why drinking, even when considered a bad habit, has sometimes been seen as an attractive and gratifying one.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, in opera, drinking is largely presented in this way as a positive act, one that is usually celebrated, even (or perhaps especially) in its most excessive forms. The penchant for violence and the resulting loss of control that we witness in *Otello* offer one of the few negative representations. Even in Puccini's one and only truly "naturalist" opera, the one-act *Il Tabarro* (1918), wine is presented as giving joy in release to hard-working stevedores on the Seine ("Tanta felicità per la gioia che dà!"). Its one clearly alcoholic character, Tinca, sings that he drowns his sad thoughts in wine:

Fa bene il vino!  
 Si affogano i pensieri di rivolta;  
 che se bevo non penso,  
 e se penso non rido!

By way of contrast, French and German naturalistic novels and certainly some American films have often portrayed the drinker as pathological and drinking as having only negative personal and social results.<sup>22</sup> While some Russian and Finnish operas do stage the dangerous effects of over-consumption — especially for the social order<sup>23</sup> — we can find few Italian (or even French) ones that do. Perhaps this reflects differences in both the kind and amount of alcohol consumed in the various cultures as well as differences in the attitudes toward the effects it induces. Statistically speaking, however, the act of drinking and its results are most often celebrated with gusto on the European operatic stage.

So, while drinking habits and their evaluation may well be culturally specific, there are common denominators beyond the obvious physiological ones (to which most of us can likely testify from personal experience). There are, once again, those existential constants: alcohol can be seen as a source of consolation or welcome oblivion, or it can symbolize the desire to live life to the fullest (*carpe diem*). These, in fact, form the topics of operatic *brindisi* from Mozart to Puccini and beyond. But there are also

social constants represented in opera: drinking together acts as a means of social bonding for men, but alcohol can also heighten passion. The excessive art form that is opera is obviously attracted to the narrative possibilities of staging excess, and the effects of the release of inhibitions on the staged body offer many a dramatic plot possibility. As a widely used means of altering human consciousness, alcohol has generated elaborate social rituals and rules to control its effects on the human body and psyche (Marshall, "Introduction" 2). As a result, for opera audiences, when the excessive body drinks on stage, it always signifies. Salute!

LINDA HUTCHEON AND MICHAEL HUTCHEON, M.D.

*University of Toronto*

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<sup>1</sup> It seems fitting to toast a man who taught us so much not only about Italian literature, scholarship, and other things professional, but also about good food, wine, and fellowship. Gian-Paolo Biasin was "best man" at our wedding in Firenze in 1970, and one of the best men we have ever known. He was also supervisor of Linda Hutcheon's MA thesis at Cornell University.

<sup>2</sup> To cite a latinate Hippocrates: "id est cibi, potus, somnii, Venus, omnia moderata sint" (all things in moderation: food, drink, sleep, Venus); "Luxuriosa res vinum et tumultuosa ebrietas" (wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging); St. Benedict's rules include: "Vinum apostatare facit enim sapientes" (wine makes even wise men go astray).

<sup>3</sup> Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso linked criminality and mental derangement to alcohol abuse, and with the translation into many languages of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, the risk of progressive deterioration through hereditary decline was taken very seriously across Western Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Following musicological if not literary convention, we will not provide specific editions for the operatic texts cited (given the vast number of variants in productions). In each case, we will use the standard edition where available, however.

<sup>5</sup> See Nahoum-Grappe, *La Culture* 26 on "la conscience cénesthésique de soi" that changes with alcohol use. Such a view challenges the famous Cartesian duality of mind and body, suggesting that the body's physical incorporation of this substance cannot be so easily separated from the psychological and cognitive effects it produces. See Thorne 38-9 on the failure of even realist fiction, such as Zola's, to represent this combination: concentrating on the physical consequences, the novels disregard the mind of the drunkard, he argues.

<sup>6</sup> On the learned quality of drinking behavior, see Heath, "Some Generalizations" 355; McDonald 10. Even physiological effects can be understood differently in different cultures: blushing, fainting, crying, belching can all have different meanings.

See Heath, “Anthropological Perspectives” 49. And even seemingly culture-free physiological responses can be coloured by the cultural assumptions of medicine. See McDonald 13.

<sup>7</sup> For the French, it is tied to national self-identity, as well as to notions of health, strength, virility, courage, romance, and friendship. In that 1875 French opera about the Spanish gypsy Carmen, it is as much this French chain of associations as the Spanish tradition of communal drinking that is invoked by her invitation to Don José to drink manzanilla with her at Lillas Pastias’ tavern. On French drinking associations with national self-definition, see Sadoun, Lolli and Silverman 48-9. The historical reason for this was that wine became a symbol of national unity when France united with the duchy of Bretagne which had links to Bourgogne in the sixteenth century (Antonoli 132-3). On Spanish drinking, see Gamella.

<sup>8</sup> Germany, in a way, is a mini-version of all of Europe: the Elbe is where spirits predominate; the Rhine Valley produces wine, and Bavaria is the beer center. See Vogt 88. On the early history of drinking in Germany — its rituals and its *Trinkliteratur* — see Tlusty. See also James Roberts 116.

<sup>9</sup> See Nahoum-Grappe, “France” 76, 81. That these same customs prevail even in the operatic universe of a very carnivalesque medieval Parisian underworld suggests the strength of this convention. In *Esmeralda* (1883), A. Goring Thomas’s opera based on Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the male thieves are all given wine — “heaven in a jug” — to celebrate the wedding of Esmeralda and Gringoire.

<sup>10</sup> There are exceptions, at least in certain periods. On women in eighteenth-century English pubs, see Younger 307 and Haydon 173; on early German taverns, see Tlusty 242.

<sup>11</sup> He may well have taught this general lesson to the villainous but equally excessive Scarpia in Puccini’s *Tosca*, who cynically sings:

Dio creò diverse beltà  
e vini diversi.  
Io vo’gustare quanto più posso  
dell’opra divina!

<sup>12</sup> See Schmidgall 321-9 on the other operas on this subject.

<sup>13</sup> Tolman tries to argue (without great success) that Shakespeare was against drunkenness. Of interest is his noting of the diary entry of John Ward, Vicar of Stratford: “Shakespeare, Drayton, and Ben Jonson had a merry meeting, and it seems drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted” (88).

<sup>14</sup> See Onorati’s account of how the score accepts the challenge of the text: “man mano che il vino riscalda Falstaff, l’orchestra ci invia prima il trillo del flauto, poi quello degli archi e dei fiati, fino al coinvolgimento di tutta l’orchestra sulla battuta finale di Falstaff: ‘E il trillo invade il mondo!’” (161).

<sup>15</sup> On the physiological studies, see Brain; for a typical study of violence and drink, see Forrest and Gordon.

<sup>16</sup> But the conclusions drawn are sometimes surprising. For certain cultures at certain moments in history, intoxication was actually considered a legal defense: the inebriated were not deemed responsible for their behavior. On France, see Haine 102, 115; on English and American legal decisions, see McCord.

<sup>17</sup> Review by Filippo Filippi in *La perseveranza*, 15 February 1887, in Busch 2: 683.

<sup>18</sup> Camille Bellaigue, in the *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 March 1887, in Busch 2: 694.

<sup>19</sup> In a letter to Verdi (6 September 1886), Boito wrote that women could be added to the chorus in this scene as long as they didn't spoil "the masculine boldness of this piece." See Busch 1: 235.

<sup>20</sup> See Bruun 224 on Donald Horton's work on how drink reduces feelings of anxiety and is therefore experienced as a reward, gets repeated, and then becomes a social custom. But drink also encourages transgression of social norms through expressions of sexual and aggressive impulses.

<sup>21</sup> See Burhnam for an extended study of the role of respectability and counter-cultural "bad habits."

<sup>22</sup> On fiction, see Müller. Much has been written on the portrayal of drunkenness in American films. While positive images of drinking do exist, associated with manliness and sometimes sociability — as in the 1930s tough guy hero, the urban sophisticate, or the bohemian artist — the much more common representation of the man who takes to the "demon drink" is utterly negative: the antisocial, solo, compulsive drunk. Perhaps the long temperance and Prohibition history of the United States comes into play here, in contrast with the more permissive and normalized use of alcohol in parts of western Europe. Or perhaps it is America's puritan religious heritage that plays a role in this negativity and pathologization. See Rohrer; Schneider; Hooker 127 especially. In contrast, even Cassio is not presented as pathological; he is merely tricked into inebriation by Iago.

<sup>23</sup> Here we are thinking of Russian operas such as Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* (1886) or, from Finland, Madetoja's *Pohjalaisia* (*The Ostrobothnians*) (1914).

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