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Comparing notes: Amelia/Maria and the '*larve del passato*'

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In his recent book on *Hamlet*, Stephen Greenblatt writes:

> What there is again and again in Shakespeare, . . . is a sense that ghosts, real or imagined, are good theatre – indeed, that they are good for thinking about theatre's capacity to fashion realities, to call realities into question, to tell compelling stories, to puncture the illusions that these stories generate, and to salvage something on the other side of disillusionment.[1]

This comment can apply as well to *Simon Boccanegra*, since, although there are no 'real' ghosts, almost all characters, and especially the Doge, are unceasingly haunted by phantasmatic manifestations of their past. The 'imagined' ghosts that populate the opera are fully exploited for their peculiar theatricality, that is, for their status as simulacra placed between reality and illusion, and for their status as 'revenants', situated between past and present. In the figure of the ghost, as Greenblatt has observed, we can see how theatre deals with itself: how it deals with representation, negotiating its actuality between illusion and reality; and how it deals with performance – itself also a revenant of sorts, a figure of eternal return, negotiating its present out of its past. It would be possible to follow an interesting path connecting *Simon Boccanegra* to Shakespearean dramaturgy – a path whose traces are visible both in the play by Antonio Garcìa Gutiérrez that served as the source for Francesco Maria Piave's libretto, and in the constant fascination Shakespeare exerted on Verdi and his librettists. Here, however, I will limit my scope to the ghosts of Boccanegra. In what follows, I will try to show how these presences are related to the recurrence of narratives (the so-called *racconti*), and how the opera constructs the act of seeing ghosts through a particular way of looking.

In a way, *racconti* share the dramatic status of ghosts. Operatic narratives, like ghosts, exist at the threshold between past and present, as manifestations of the past that act on the present. Furthermore, as inherently un-theatrical acts of recounting which still never lack in performativity, narratives also mark the threshold between showing and telling. The insertion of narratives into the unfolding action is hardly unusual in nineteenth-century Italian opera, but in the first half of *Simon Boccanegra* retellings of past events appear with such frequency as to almost destabilize the drama, which thus continually vacillates between action and narration. The opera's first two acts contain five *racconti*. In the Prologue, Simone's friend and political supporter Paolo stirs the mood of the Genoese crowd with tales of the spectral apparitions that have been glimpsed behind the façade of the Fieschi palace; later Simone tells his enemy Fiesco of the disappearance of his daughter. Act I, set

[1] *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, 2001), 200.

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twenty-five years after the events of the Prologue, adds three further narrative numbers: Fiesco tells the young Gabriele that the Amelia he loves is not really a member of the noble Grimaldi family with whom she lives, Amelia tells Simone the tale of her true origins, and in the finale, she gives the Council an account of how she was abducted. The insistent recounting might perhaps also be related to the intricacies of the plot; that is, narratives may serve partly to compensate for the story's much noted obscurity: the sometimes confused unfolding of the events is halted in order to explain and clarify through narrative. However, a closer look reveals that most of these *racconti* are but different takes of just one story: that of Amelia/Maria.

'Se la speme . . . fosse sogno!'

This central tale is given a momentous and complex recounting in Act I by Amelia herself, in her duet with Simone. Amelia is living as a daughter of the noble Grimaldi family in Genoa. When Simone, now the Doge of Genoa, visits the Grimaldi palace to repeal the exile of Amelia's adopted brothers, she finds herself drawn to reveal the secret of her identity to this man she has never met before. Through her narrative Amelia defines herself, and also enables Simone to recognize her. But, as we shall see, rather than offering a privileged access to knowledge and identity, this act of recognition is dangerously caught between reality and illusion, past and present.

At the outset of their interview, Amelia tells Simone simply that she is not a Grimaldi. Then, to answer his question 'who are you?', she narrates a curious story. She was an orphan living with an old woman in a poor hut by the sea in Pisa; but the woman died and she remained alone. The story she tells, however, is far from adequate to describe her identity. Notably, it fails to provide an alternative to the Amelia Grimaldi she is not: she does not define herself with a name, and the account of her past is hardly thorough. What is more, the isolated episode Amelia narrates lacks any causal link with her present situation: it is a fragment from the past, with no before or after. Instead of explaining, for instance, why she ended up assuming a different name, her narrative drifts, halfway through, into a very detailed account of a short tragic moment, a kind of 'close up' on the death of the old woman. Thus, Amelia defines herself through the story of the traumatic moment that made of her an abandoned orphan, a moment whose significance is ascribed to its pathetic content and its potential to affect the listener.

Amelia: Orfanella il tetto umile (strophe 1)
M'accogliea d'una meschina,
Dove presso la marina
Sorge Pisa . . .
Doge: In Pisa tu?
Amelia: Grave d'anni quella pia (strophe 2)
Era solo a me sostegno;
Io provai del ciel lo sdegno,
Involata ella mi fu.

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	Colla tremola sua mano	(strophe 3)
	Pinta effigie mi porgea.	
	Le sembianze esser dicea	
	Della madre ignota a me.	
	Mi baciò, mi benedisse,	(strophe 4)
	Levò al ciel, pregando, i rai . . .	
	Quante volte la chiamai	
	L'eco sol risposta diè.	
Doge:	(Se la speme, o ciel clemente,	(strophe 5)
	Ch'or sorride all'alma mia,	
	Fosse sogno! . . . estinto io sia	
	Della larva al disparir!)[2]	

[1. *Amelia*: As an orphan, the humble roof / of a poor woman sheltered me, / by the sea / where Pisa rises . . . *Doge*: In Pisa, you? 2. *Amelia*: That pious woman, heavy with years, / was my only support; / I suffered Heaven's wrath, / and she was taken from me. 3. With her trembling hand / she gave me a portrait. / She said it was the semblance / of the mother I had never known. 4. She kissed me, she blessed me, / she raised her eyes to heaven in prayer. / So many times I called to her, but echo alone answered. 5. *Doge* (aside): Merciful heaven, if this hope / which now smiles on my soul / was but a dream! . . . may I die / as soon as the vision (phantasm) disappears.]

The shift of focus operated by the last two quatrains of Amelia's narrative is in fact also a rhetorical shift. Amelia does not merely report what happened, but compellingly presents to Simone what she saw, so that he too can see the old woman dying: the trembling hand that consigns the portrait, the last kiss, the blessing, her eyes raised to heavens, the last prayer, and then the silence as sole answer to the little girl's pleas. By restaging the scene in such vivid detail, she draws in her interlocutor, who is placed in the position of spectator.

The importance that Verdi and his librettist attached to this moment becomes all the more evident when we compare this passage from the 1857 libretto (which was unchanged in the 1881 revision) to the corresponding passage in the prose adaptation of the Garcìa Gutiérrez play that Verdi had prepared during a preliminary stage of work on the opera.[3] Where the libretto in general either translates the prose of the synopsis almost verbatim into 'operatic' language, or reduces it to a more synthetic poetic idiom, here the libretto instead adds considerable emphasis to the vignette of the old woman's death expanding what had been one rapid sentence of the prose into two full quatrains:

Susanna [=Amelia]: Orfana e bambina fui allevata, fui allevata in povera ed umile stanza presso le sponde del mare in Pisa.
Doge: In Pisa! . . .

[2] All references are to the 1881 libretto, included in facsimile in *Simon Boccanegra di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Marcello Conati and Natalia Grilli (Milan, 1993), Collana di Disposizioni sceniche diretta da F. Degrada e M. Viale Ferrero, 109–23.

[3] For a detailed discussion of the various phases of adaptation, from the original Gutiérrez drama to Verdi's prose draft to Piave's libretto, see Daniela Goldin, 'Il *Simon Boccanegra* da Piave a Boito e la drammaturgia verdiana', in *La vera fenice. Librettisti e libretti tra Sette e Ottocento* (Turin, 1985), 283–334.

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Susanna: Una povera vecchia come figlia mi amava, era il mio solo sostegno. Ma fu breve la mia sorte, ché di Dio la collera provai. *Una notte la povera vecchia a sé mi chiamò; una medaglia mi porse, l'effigie di mia madre; alzò gli occhi al cielo, mi benedisse, e morì.*
Doge: (Gran Dio! gran Dio! . . . non sia questa illusione . . . non togliermi questa speranza, o fammi piuttosto morire.)[4]

[*Susanna*: As a child and an orphan I was raised in a poor and humble dwelling by the sea in Pisa. *Doge*: In Pisa! . . . *Susanna*: A poor old woman loved me as if I was her daughter, and she was my only support. But my fortune was brief, since I suffered God's wrath. *One night the poor old woman summoned me; she gave me a medal, my mother's portrait; she raised her eyes to heaven, blessed me, and died. Doge*: (Good God! Good God! . . . let it not be an illusion . . . don't deprive me of this hope, or allow me to die instead.)]

The libretto transforms Verdi's more straightforward report of the scene into a succession of melodramatic gestures, whose emotional content is conveyed through their emphatic visual meaning.

Such change of register and shift of focus midway through the narrative are predictably reflected in the music. The third stanza is preceded by a sudden change in the orchestral accompaniment: the quiet melancholy of the oboe doubling the voice is replaced by an agitated motive of staccato notes in the basses that leads into the dreary atmosphere of the death scene (see Ex. 1). The music varies again at the third line, when Amelia mentions the portrait of her unknown mother (bar 5): the strings sustain the repeated d^2 in the voice with a descending figure, and retreat to an emphatic silence punctuated by the basses at the end of the stanza. The music then turns to G major for the closing statement (bar 10ff.), which is a new melody rather than a reprise. In sum, the orchestra, with its flexible accompaniment that changes along with the narrative, seems to pursue the same rhetorical stance laid out by the libretto, and thus to assume the point of view of the narrator, appropriating the look cast by Amelia on her past.

One detail, however, suggests that the matter is not so straightforward: the tonal change from G minor to G major happens right at the beginning of the fourth stanza. Why here? The music has been faithfully following the dramatic content of the *racconto* up to this point, and the tonal change placed here is strangely out of synch with the unfolding of the narrative, since the text of Amelia's last stanza is but a continuation of the scene described in the previous quatrain. The modulation could certainly be explained in terms of musical form and genre, perhaps as the final stage in an elaboration of the 'solita forma' of the minor–major romanza, in which the shift to major would be a necessary musical gesture for closure. Still, why this change precisely here, in the middle of Amelia's restaging of the old woman's death? Rather than associating this tonal change with either the changing emotional states of Amelia as narrator or the content of her narrative, I believe that the surprising

[4] The manuscript prose draft (Venice, Archive of Teatro La Fenice) was published first as an appendix to Massimo Bogiankino, '*Simon Boccanegra*: il testo in prosa, i libretti, le prime esecuzioni delle due versioni al Teatro alla Scala e la critica milanese del tempo', *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia della Università degli Studi di Perugia*, 14 (1976–77), 335–59; it later appeared, in a more accurate version edited by Daniela Goldin, in the programme book '*Simon Boccanegra*'. *Teatro Comunale di Firenze. Stagione lirica 1988–89* (Florence, 1988), 145–74, here 158. Emphasis and translation are mine.

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Ex. 1

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timing of the modulation is instead most closely connected to Amelia's audience: to Simone and the way he listens. If we look at the shift to major from Simone's 'point of view', we can see that it occurs right after Amelia's reference to the portrait of her unknown mother, and, 'colouring' her ending strophe, it leads and points to Simone's *risposta*. Thus we might conclude that, as often happens, the music here pursues two ends: it conveys both the affective power of the events narrated, and the emotional response they elicit. The tonal shift signals that Simone is engaged and moved by the narrative.

But there is more. Simone's ensuing aside introduces a new melodic idea, accompanied by cellos, as well as a new dramatic element. As his words well illustrate, what he sees is far more than just the scene conjured up by Amelia: 'Ah! Se la speme, o ciel clemente, / Ch'or sorride all'alma mia, / Fosse sogno! . . . estinto io sia / Della larva al disparir' [Ah! Merciful heaven, if this hope which now smiles on my soul was but a dream, may I die as soon as the vision (phantasm) disappears]. A phantasm has been summoned. In order to define herself, Amelia has conjured up a scene from her past and she has made Simone its empathic 'spectator'. That change to G major, however, not only hints at his presence as a spectator, but also signals that the story has suddenly acquired a different emotional connotation because it has been looked at from a different angle. Amelia's whole narrative, seen retrospectively from this point, may start to resemble a projection of Simone's look, a *larva* conjured up by his desire. Simone wonders if the image that is taking shape in his mind is but a dream because it is too good to be true: it cannot belong to reality because it coincides even too perfectly with might be called 'the real' of his desire.

This desire that has power to transform – a characteristic of the Doge throughout the opera – has already appeared in the duet's opening section, or '*tempo d'attacco*', embodied in the orchestral pattern that ties together the fragmented *parlante* statements of the principals and lends a conversational veneer to their charged exchange (see Ex. 2). As Julian Budden has noted, this violin theme progressively filters into the voices, leading them to abandon their *parlante* texture: 'as mutual understanding grows, so the voices tend to double the orchestral theme more and more'.[5] But this understanding is *not* mutual: what the music reflects is Simone's 'understanding' of Amelia, his capacity to win her confidence, and to make her speak – to reveal that she is not who she seems but, rather, who he hopes her to be. In this sense it is significant that Amelia joins the orchestral theme on the words 'Ah! . . . mi leggesti in core!' [Ah! . . . you have read into my heart!]. And when the violin theme returns, varied and compressed, in the duet's central transitional section (the '*tempo di mezzo*'), it reappears when, following Amelia's *racconto*, Simone recognizes her and gives her a name: that of Maria, her dead mother (see Ex. 3). This 'conversational theme', therefore, frames the *racconto*, functioning as the driving force that compels Amelia to confess and recollect, and as the Doge's desire to see in the 'orfanella' the long lost daughter.

[5] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), II, 298.

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Ex. 2

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Ex. 2 *continued.*

'D'allora indarno cercata io l'ho'

Amelia's story, however, is hardly new: by the time she gets to tell it in Act I we have already heard it in the Prologue narrated by Boccanegra to Fiesco in very similar words:

Simone: Del mar sul lido tra gente ostile
Crescea nell'ombra quella gentile;
Crescea lontana dagli occhi miei,
Vegliava annosa donna su lei.

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Ex. 3

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Ex. 3 *continued.*

Di là una notte varcando, solo
Dalla mia nave scesi a quel suolo.
Corsi alla casa . . . n'era la porta
Serrata, muta!
Fiesco: La donna?
Simone: Morta.
Fiesco: E la tua figlia? . . .
Simone: Misera, trista,
Tre giorni pianse, tre giorni errò;
Scomparve poscia, né fu più vista,
D'allora indarno cercata io l'ho.

[*Simone*: On the seashore, among hostile people, / that gentle child grew up concealed; / she grew up far from my eyes, / an old woman watched over her. / Sailing by one night, I alone / disembarked from my ship to that soil. / I hurried to the house . . . the door / was locked, silent! *Fiesco*: The woman? *Simone*: Dead. / *Fiesco*: And your daughter? . . . *Simone*: Wretched, dejected, / she wept for three days, three days she wandered; / then she disappeared, and was seen no more, / since then I have looked for her in vain.]

It seems that both Amelia and Simone belong to the same story, or, conversely, that the same story belongs to both. Their *racconti* patently allude to each other, primarily by unfolding through a chain of identical details: the place by the sea, the old woman, her death. Moreover, by providing two supplementary versions of the same story, one narrative defers to the other, so that the recognition scene of Act I functions as much as a recognition of narratives. The details that recur in both *racconti* are analogues for the birthmark, the classic melodramatic sign of identity,

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and as such they are legible signs testifying of the past story that pertains to both characters. Their very identity is played out in this exchange of recollections: Amelia, once she is revealed as the daughter who had disappeared from Simone's life twenty-five years before, steps into her new identity first of all by resuming her role in Simone's story. And Simone, for his part, rediscovers not only his daughter, but also 'Maria' – a part of his past and a part of himself.

Where Simone's *racconto* differs crucially from Amelia's is in the void at its centre, the reiterated lack around which the story revolves. The daughter 'grew up far from his eyes', 'concealed'; one night he discovered the house shut and silent, he couldn't see her; then, she 'disappeared and was seen no more', and he had 'looked for her since'. And Simone's *racconto* is triggered by Fiesco's request for custody of his granddaughter, a child 'he has yet not seen', in exchange for his forgiveness. Immediately afterwards, Simone will decide to enter the Fieschi palace in order to see his beloved Maria: 'vederla io voglio' [I want to see her].

Simone's recollection is centred on this 'not-seeing' his daughter, or, in other words, on his desire to see her. This desire to see is not only what leads to the recognition, but, more generally, as often happens in opera, as in theatre and film, the act of seeing is used as a strategy to narrativize events. In the Prologue, Simone's desire to see induces him to enter the Fieschi palace where he will find the corpse – where, that is, he will *not see* Maria. This same unfulfilled desire allows him in Act I to see Amelia as Maria: his desiring look makes of the orphan his daughter.

But what do the characters eventually see? It seems that in *Simon Boccanegra* repeated intrusions of the past continually interfere with the possibility of accessing and knowing reality through vision.[6] By the end of the Act I Amelia–Simone duet, for example, the recognition seems well rooted in the reality of the present: it has been established through the ocular proof provided by the portraits, and, even more cogently, the tangible actuality of their reunion has been sanctioned through the music of the cabaletta, which gives the two characters the opportunity to perform their father–daughter relationship. The instrumental postlude to the cabaletta, however, undoes this sense of presentness and plunges the reunification back into the visionary, phantasmatic register.

The characters' valediction is accompanied by the orchestral restatement of the cabaletta's first theme, to which is added the eerie sound of a harp. Father and daughter embrace, and as Maria moves away to enter the Grimaldi palace on the left, they again call to each other in a high, lyrically expanded phrase. Simone watches Maria while she leaves, and then, as the stage direction in the vocal score announces, he 'dice un'ultima volta' [says for the last time] 'Figlia!' (see Ex. 4). Such an ending is not merely emphatic; it almost suggests the logic of a dream. The *disposizione scenica*

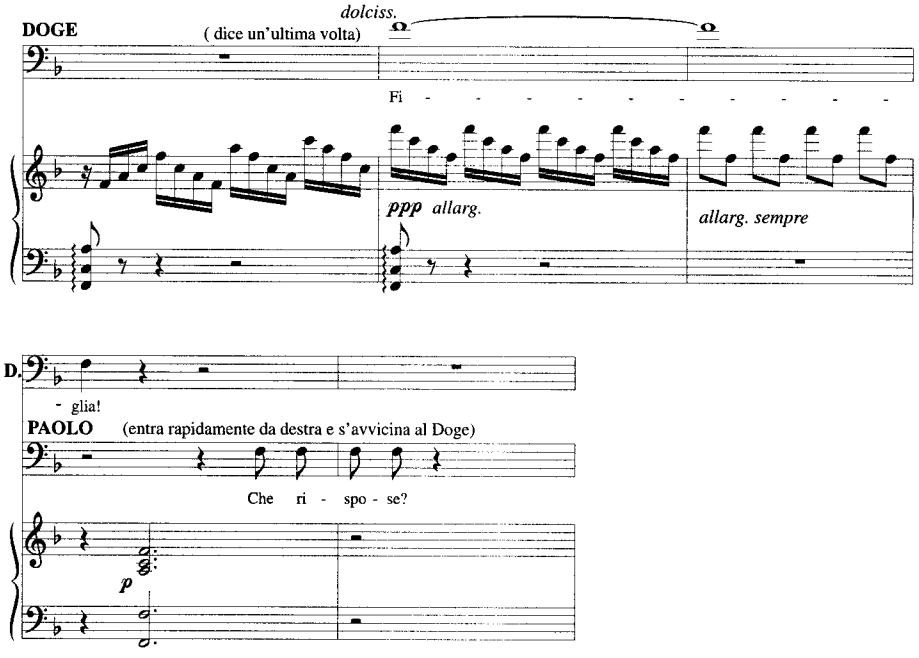
[6] I have addressed this issue elsewhere, suggesting that the visible is often complicated by phantasmagoric images projected on to the screen of 'reality'; '*Il menzognero incanto*: Sight and Insight in *Simon Boccanegra*', *Studi verdiani*, 13 (1998), 59–87.

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Ex. 4

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Ex. 4 *continued.*

at this point emerges out of silence (there are almost no instructions for the rest of the duet[7]) and gives a curious warning:

Si badi però che tutta questa ultima parte della scena non deve essere fatta alla ribalta, ma presso la tela del fondo a destra, da dove partirà Amelia: il Doge rimarrà immobile, estatico, quasi contemplando la figlia che sarà entrata nel palazzo, ed in tale posizione e con accento dolcissimo sospirerà un'ultima volta *Figlia*! . . .[8]

[Take care, however, that this final part of the scene should not be played at the footlights, but by the backcloth on the right, from where Amelia will exit: the Doge will remain ecstatic, almost contemplating the daughter entering the palace, and in this pose and with the sweetest inflection he will sigh for the last time *Figlia*! . . .]

What would be more obvious to the two actors than to deliver this moving climactic ending from downstage? But the staging manual severely warns against it. The most elementary reason is perhaps to allow the soprano to leave the stage in the time allotted by the music without having to run. On the other hand, the set for this first

[7] 'Le interrogazioni dell'uno, le risposte dell'altra, l'ansia, l'interesse ognor più crescente del Doge sono troppo chiaramente scolpiti dalla musica, perché sia necessario indicare minutamente l'azione da seguirsi dai due attori . . .' [The questions of the one, the replies of the other, the eagerness, the ever-increasing interest of the Doge are too clearly depicted in the music for it to be necessary to indicate in detail the movements to be carried out by the two actors . . .]. All references are to the facsimile published in *Simon Boccanegra di Giuseppe Verdi* (see n. 2), 127–86; henceforth '*disposizione scenica*' with page numbers referring to the *disposizione*'s own pagination, here 15–16; trans. in Budden, II, 300 n.

[8] *Disposizione scenica*, 16.

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Fig. 1.

part of Act I is quite shallow (it is a '*scena cortissima*'), and she might have disappeared behind the closest wing.[9] I believe that what can be read between the lines of this surprising directive is that the spectacle of heavenly joy offered by father and daughter finally reunited (in Simone's words 'un mondo di ineffabili letizie' [a world of ineffable bliss]) needs to be viewed from afar. Hence, the staging manual requires the actors to be upstage by the backcloth in order to place them well into the scenery, as far as possible from the audience.

What is more, as James Hepokoski has suggested, the prominent sound of the harp endows this scene with a 'celestial' quality.[10] Pushing his interpretation a bit

[9] *Disposizione scenica*, 12

[10] 'At the close of the coda father and daughter embrace to a beatified restatement of [the cabaletta theme] (notice the 'celestial' harp – *musica angelica*)'; Hepokoski, 'An Introduction to the 1881 Score', *Simon Boccanegra*, English National Opera Guide 32 (London and New York, 1985), 19–20. Moreover, the sound of the harp seems evoked by the two characters' words: 'Avrem gioie romite / note soltanto al ciel' [we will enjoy undiscovered happiness / known only to heaven].

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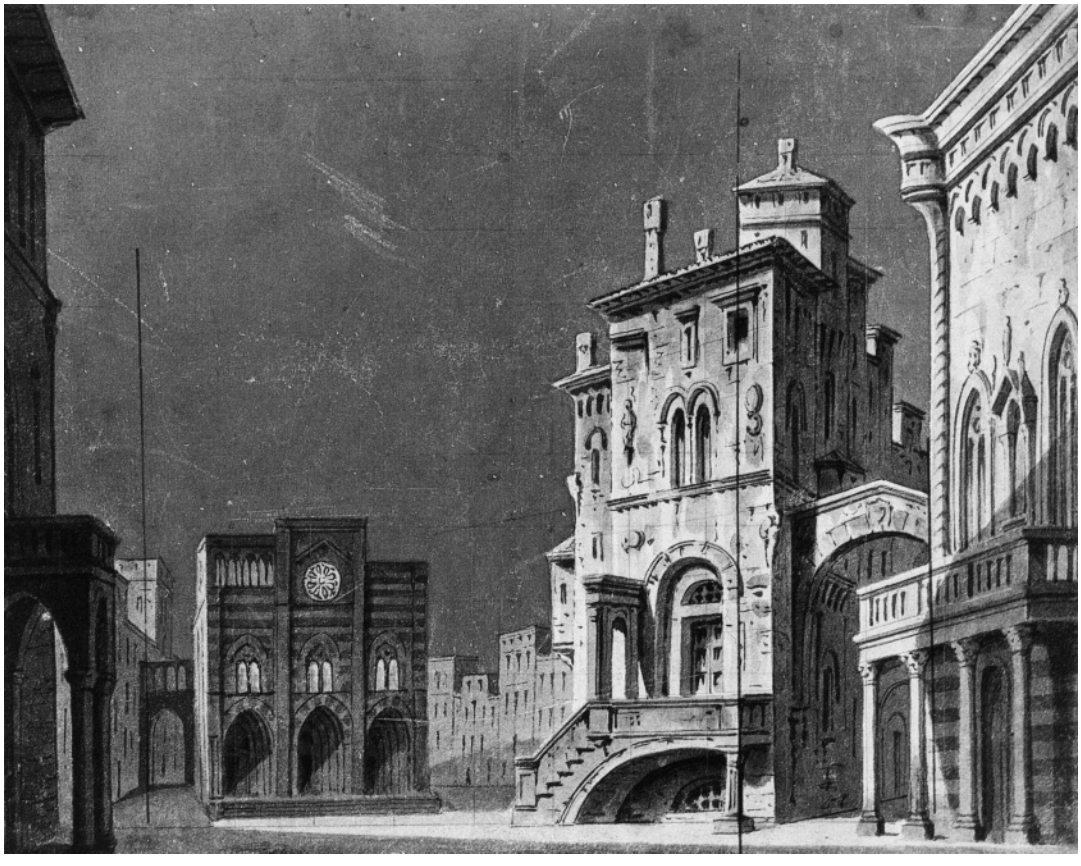


Fig. 2.

further, I would say that the harp here functions like a cinematic trick that subjectifies the image. I am thinking of the effect obtained by adding a filter to the camera lens, so that, for instance, the contours appear smoother or distorted, as if the image is slightly out of focus. Such techniques are used to signal when the camera adopts the look of a specific character, as in dreams, hallucinations or flashbacks. The 'celestial' harp projects over the ending a sense of unreality, so that the whole father–daughter encounter is ultimately perceived as the product of Simone's subjective vision, as his dream.

In a sense, the doubt the Doge had raised at the end of Amelia's *racconto* remains: what if this is all just a dream, or a phantom, conjured up by my desire? Let us pause for a moment on this final image of Simone rapturously looking at the palace's façade (see Fig. 1). The scene designed by Girolamo Magnani for the 1881 La Scala performance depicts the palace by way of wings on the left side of the stage: we can picture Boccanegra in the middle of this scene, half turned towards the arcades on the left, his look also directed to the left, towards where his newly found daughter has just disappeared. What he saw here is perhaps a dream or a phantasm because 'too good to be true'.

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This image recalls another, similar but much darker, from the end of the Prologue (see Fig. 2). Here too there is the arcaded façade of a palace, but this time on the right side of the stage. This arcade represents the entrance to the Fieschi palace, the place where the first Maria, Amelia's mother, is hidden. Simone looks for her and finds instead her corpse; he emerges from this palace 'atterito da una tremenda, orribile visione' [terrified by a frightful, horrifying vision].[11] What he saw was 'too horrible to be true' and thus, again, a dream, a phantasm giving shape to his worst fears ('Sì spaventoso, atroce sogno è il mio' [Yes, this is a frightening, horrible dream]).

The two scenes not only present specular pictures of the same act of seeing, but they also illustrate what characterizes Simone's look, his way of seeing 'reality': a seeing 'too much', that grasps something in excess of reality, and which is represented in both by way of the off-centre (eccentric) position assumed by the character in looking at the palaces. It might be said in fact that Boccanegra 'looks awry', and that the two scenes literalize a metaphor used by Slavoj Žižek as the title of one of his books.[12] Placed as he is on the side of both façades, Simone's apprehension of reality is altered by this oblique point of view. It is this peculiar position that connotes his look, and distinguishes it, for instance, from Fiesco's: the old patrician is not able to recognize in Amelia Grimaldi his granddaughter precisely because he 'looks straight', in a manner undeviated by desire.

The literary quotation that provided Žižek with his title is charged with an ambiguity that seems particularly pertinent to my argument. In Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act II, scene 2) the servant Bushy tries to reassure the Queen that her fears about the King's departure are just an illusion caused by her grief, but he gets caught in contradiction.

> Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
> Which shows like grief itself, but it is not so;
> For Sorrow's eyes, glazed with blinding tears,
> Divides one thing entire to many objects,
> Like perspectives, which, rightly gazed upon,
> Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry,
> Distinguish form. So your sweet majesty,
> Looking awry upon your lord's departure,
> Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail,
> Which, looked on as it is, is naught but shadows
> Of what it is not.[13]

Bushy's intentions are indeed quite simple: he wants to dispel the Queen's apprehension by demonstrating that viewing reality through eyes tinted by emotions leads one to see but shadows – that is also to say that a distorted or modified vision

[11] *Disposizione scenica*, 9.
[12] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jaques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).
[13] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, ed. Charles R. Forker, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 2002), 276.

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cannot but apprehend a false reality. However, as he elaborates on this truism, something else emerges: midway through the speech Bushy introduces another metaphor for modified vision, that of anamorphosis, which radically overturns the reasoning. In anamorphosis, in fact, only a distorted vision can apprehend and make sense of the object painted: as a peculiarly elaborate perspectival artifice, if we look at it frontally and straightforwardly we can see only confused and meaningless forms, whereas it suddenly makes sense if we look at it awry, from an oblique position; that is, if our look is not direct but diverted, distorted. Žižek brilliantly uses this passage to illustrate how in the 'movement of desire' 'something comes from nothing': a confused form, a nothing, becomes something when it is invested with desire.[14]

Here, however, I would like to pause on the ambiguity of Bushy's speech. When he links the metaphor of anamorphosis to the Queen's apprehensions, he seems to say that, after all, her preoccupation might be justified, since the 'shapes of grief' she sees by 'looking awry upon [her] lord's departure' are indeed distinct shapes, meaningful images. Has the Queen, by looking awry, recognized the truth, or has she just seen shadows? And isn't this the question Simon Boccanegra keeps asking throughout the opera – 'Am I dreaming? Are these phantoms?'

[14] Žižek, 12.

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