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Bare interiors

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Abstract: Opera is a genre that prizes interior expression. How then does it cope with characters who are defined by reticence and inscrutability? Donizetti's 1837 opera *Roberto Devereux* thematises these issues – a reflection, in part, of the nineteenth century's growing anxieties over public self-expression. Engaging with contemporary 1830s criticism, this article focuses on two numbers in the work that were identified as problematic by early audiences, arguing that their perceived failure is a consequence of the work's inventive depiction of its characters' vacant subjectivities. Donizetti's opera can be seen to stretch *primo Ottocento* operatic conventions to their limits, in the process undoing the traditional correspondence between interior expression and self-definition.

To a degree unmatched by most other art forms, opera allows its audiences access to individuals' inner emotions and motivations, laid bare at moments of lyric expression. This preoccupation with characters' interiors gives opera of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries its distinctive dramatic rhythm, oscillating between periods of action and moments of static reflection. Whether it takes the form of a private soliloquy or aside, or of open discourse audible in the stage world, such interior expression is usually unproblematic, unmarked by any trace of surreptitiousness or stealth. Almost never does it occur to characters that airing their private sentiments might be hazardous or inadvisable – an attitude to which opera panders by mandating that lyric moments not be encroached upon by the world outside. This straightforward representation of interiority comes at a price, however, and the unrealism that results is an easy bone for the picking of unsympathetic critics. The frequency with which opera's characters break into insouciant song at moments when wiser individuals would have kept silent or fled has long been a standing joke, brilliantly parodied by Rossini in the Act II trio of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

The carefree nature of interior expression holds true even in the courtly intrigues in vogue during the early nineteenth century, a subgenre inhabited by secretive individuals who anxiously try to interpret the expressions of others, while keeping their own thoughts well hidden. Yet, despite an atmosphere thick with hissed asides and suspicious glances, characters here are still able to sing freely and without fear, and lyric expression is rarely inflected by worries over privacy. Contemporary librettists used considerable ingenuity to engineer situations in which characters might reasonably sing to their hearts' content without stretching too far the suspension of audiences' disbelief; when that failed, they could always invoke the expedient of the aside, so ensuring that private emotions remained, in the stage world at least, private.

A rare instance at which this arrangement breaks down can be found in Donizetti's 1837 opera *Roberto Devereux*, a work that can be seen in many ways to thematise issues of privacy and concealment. The curtain rises on the opera's final scene to reveal Elisabetta the jilted queen engaged in a moment of private reflection. Set apart from her ladies-in-waiting, she indulges in a lengthy aside, in which she

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ruminates on her unrequited love and the sorrow it causes her. As one might expect, the aside translates into an apparently straightforward slow movement, in which the queen gives the audience a glimpse into her emotional state, which nevertheless remains hidden from the watching courtiers. So far, so unremarkable. But matters take a strange turn at the beginning of the aria's second stanza, when Elisabetta realises she is being watched and abruptly breaks off her contemplations:

(Vivi, ingrato, a lei d'accanto,
Il mio core a te perdona . . .
Vivi, o crudo, e m'abbandona
In eterno a sospirar . . .

Ah! si celi questo pianto,
(Gettando uno sguardo alle dame, e rammentandosi d'essere osservata.)
Ah! non sia chi dica in terra:
La regina d'Inghilterra
Ho veduto lagrimar.)

[(Live, ungrateful man, beside her, / my heart pardons you . . . / Live, o cruel man, and abandon me / to eternal weeping . . . / Ah! let this tear be hidden, *(Darting a glance at the ladies in waiting, and remembering that she is being watched.)* / Ah! never let it be said on earth: / I have seen the Queen / of England weep.)]

One would expect this slow movement, as an aside, to be partitioned off from the 'diegetic' world that surrounds it, guaranteeing the queen's privacy. But as she looks round, it becomes clear that conventional interior expression is not as secure as we might imagine: although her text is clearly bracketed as an aside, her interior sentiments are not hidden from the stage world. On the contrary, the sorrow about which she sings is plainly visible in her face for those around to see. The courtiers remark to one another that 'Ha nel turbato aspetto / D'alto martir le impronte! . . . / Più non brilla in fronte / L'usata maestà' ('Her troubled countenance shows / the signs of great suffering! . . . / In her face no longer shines / her accustomed majesty').

The blurring of the boundary between the realistic dramaturgy of the stage world and the artificially private space of the aside creates an anxiety about being watched that leaves manifest traces on the slow movement itself. The courtiers' invasive gaze is mirrored on one level by the typographical intrusion – the stage direction that disrupts the conventional *mise en page* of the two quatrains. More striking from the listener's point of view, however, is the curious incongruity to which it gives rise. Although the piece continues to *sound* like a slow movement, its expressive function is curtailed and the contemplative mood dissipated. During the course of the number, self-expression becomes its opposite. One might say that Elisabetta ends up singing about not singing.

At stake here is the question of what it means to be a sovereign. Both the queen's aria and the courtiers' hushed comments imply that visible evidence of inner emotion constitutes some sort of threat to the queen's majesty. This draws on traditional conceptions of sovereignty, which understood royal power as sustained

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by the monarch's mask-like demeanour, a combination of impassiveness and invulnerability. In one sense this is a straightforward derivation from the logic of absolutism, according to which the divinely appointed sovereign was accountable to none but God, and the workings of her mind thus concealed from the gaze of men. The terrible impossibility of fathoming the minds of princes was reflected in official portraits of Elizabeth I, Elisabetta's historical model, which represented her face as a series of 'frozen masks . . . their very inscrutability capable of exerting an uncanny hypnotic power'.[1]

Elisabetta's comportment is clearly consistent with this image of the impenetrable sovereign, since even at moments of great turmoil she conceals her interior emotions from her subjects.[2] But the element of furtiveness in the queen's behaviour in this scene suggests that there are other discourses in play here besides those of absolutist sovereignty. This circumspect Elisabetta differs significantly from her earlier incarnations in Donizetti's *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (1827) and its immediate model, Rossini's *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* (1815). Both works feature a queen equally at ease singing in public or in private, and never threatened by others' intrusive gaze.[3] The anxiety about self-expression that characterises the 1837 Elisabetta is unprecedented, and locates *Roberto Devereux* at a significant historical moment at which issues of emotional display were becoming the subject of intense attention. Richard Sennett's powerful narrative of changing public morals during the past three centuries proposes that nineteenth-century public behaviour was characterised by growing self-consciousness, and the instinctual suppression of public expressions of emotion.[4] Sennett regards this new reticence as a symptom of the atrophy of nineteenth-century public life, as an entire vocabulary of public interaction was lost in the face of the mystifying forces of secularism and industrial capitalism. Attempting to come to terms with these rapid social changes, individuals increasingly withdrew into silence, fearful of exposing their true selves to strangers. In *Roberto Devereux* these discourses of privacy and openness are superimposed onto the work's representation of absolutist sovereignty; by a curious twist, Elisabetta's regal inscrutability becomes the analogue of what has been identified as a specifically nineteenth-century mode of behaviour.

If Donizetti's opera can be seen as a response to this new understanding of public life, however, its attempt to embrace an aesthetics of reticence inevitably placed strain on the conventional forms of a genre that traditionally prized unfettered expression above all else. The queen's vigilance attracted the attention of one contemporary critic, Achille de Lauzières, who in his review of the opera's première remarked approvingly how Elisabetta, 'though a lover and a lover spurned, always

[1] Marianna Jenkins, *The State Portrait, its Origin and Evolution*, Monographs on Archaeology and Fine Arts (New York, 1947), 12, quoted in Christopher Pye, *The Regal Phantasm: Shakespeare and the Politics of Spectacle* (London, 1990), 64.

[2] See, for example, the moment in Act II, when Elisabetta 'shakes with fury, but, casting a glance towards Gualtiero, recovers her majestic bearing' ('riprende la sua maestà').

[3] The same is true of Elisabetta's character in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* (1834), though the part belongs to the seconda donna.

[4] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977).

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recalls the Queen of England . . . as when, in her grief, she darts a glance at her ladies-in-waiting and realises that she is being watched'.[5] Once again, free expression is deemed unfitting for a sovereign. But de Lauzières' praise for the queen's withdrawal from expression has far-reaching repercussions, since it implicitly valorises the ways in which the piece infringes the traditional conventions of the operatic soliloquy – the tacit understanding that lyric asides be exempt from anxieties over eavesdropping. The suggestion that carefree slow movements are inappropriate for the representation of majesty – that the hauteur and reserve proper to a sovereign are ill served by the traditional 'confessional' mode of operatic expression – raises fundamental questions about the relationship between opera and characters who seek to hide their interior emotions. De Lauzières comes close to suggesting that we are dealing with a mode of subjectivity that falls outside the bounds of normal operatic representation.

Modern critics may well agree. In a recent article, Melina Esse draws attention to *primo Ottocento* opera's appropriation of the aesthetics of melodrama to make its characters' interiors legible.[6] Discussing Verdi's 1848 opera *Il corsaro*, a reworking of Byron's poem *The Corsair*, Esse notes that, whereas Byron's brooding hero Conrad is characterised by a sphinx-like opacity, his emotions practically unrepresentable, his similarly taciturn Verdian counterpart Corrado is accompanied by obsessive sobbing gestures in the orchestra, which betray his preoccupation with his weeping lover. Opera cannot help but make Corrado's private thoughts public. Underscoring opera's inexorable tendency to disclose its characters' interior emotions, Esse's article forces us once again to confront the possibility that inscrutability may be essentially unoperatic. For when operatic characters refuse to sing, music itself leaps into the breach, adopting the hyperbolic register of melodrama to lay bare their internal sentiments even as they seek to conceal them. And if even Conrad, one of the most opaque characters in nineteenth-century literature, is rendered transparent by the operatic gaze, then the prospects for other aspiring operatic enigmas do not look promising.

As a relentless apparatus of disclosure, opera's behaviour here is consistent with a number of popular (and rarely examined) assumptions about its function. We tend to view opera as a genre that depicts and defines, one that gradually brings hidden aspects of character into focus. It is second nature to think of operatic individuals as better rounded, more lifelike, the more they sing.[7] A sophisticated version of this view of opera as an essentially procreant art form underlies much recent theoretical work, which tends to emphasise the role of operatic singing as a means of self-definition. Through song, characters realise their identities, find their voice; through music, opera conjures its characters into being.

[5] *Il globo*, 9 November 1837. This and the rest of the opera's Neapolitan reviews are reprinted in *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva*, ed. Annalisa Bini and Jeremy Commons (Rome, 1997), 647–67, here 659.

[6] Melina Esse, ' "Chi piange, qual forza m'arretra?" Verdi's Interior Voices', *this journal*, 14 (2002), 59–78.

[7] For a provocative characterisation of this trend, see Barry Emslie, 'Handel the Postmodernist', *this journal*, 15 (2003), 185–98, esp. 192–4.

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In *Roberto Devereux* we are confronted with a work that seems to fall outside this paradigm. If we are accustomed to hearing opera as bringing characters to life, here music often seems to have the opposite effect, colluding with individuals' refusal or inability to express, or destroying them altogether. Where opera elsewhere tends to frustrate characters' reticence by betraying their inner secrets, Donizetti's work offers us a series of occasions on which music declines to fill the gap left by non-expression. Such moments – notably the Act I duet for the principals, and the cabaletta of the soprano's final *rondò* – cause the operatic apparatus to creak audibly, something that did not go unremarked by early audiences. Although the opera was generally well received at its first performances, those present seem to have been left nonplussed by the unconventional approach of such pieces. By paying close attention to these moments, and trying to hear them through the ears of contemporary listeners, I want to explore the extent to which *primo Ottocento* opera may sometimes incline, not toward straightforward representation, but to blankness and disintegration.

Operatic tenors are not known for their reticence. Donizetti's, in particular, frequently seem incapable of restraining themselves from spontaneous expression, often at inappropriate moments. Perhaps the best example is the voluble Percy in *Anna Bolena* (Milan 1830), a character seemingly unable to help himself. On his return from exile, in the slow movement of his Act I aria he sings of his thwarted love for Anna, the king's wife. Unnerved by the ardour of Percy's sentiments (which verge on the adulterous), and seeing the royal retinue beginning to assemble, his friend Rochefort encourages him to keep quiet. Percy ignores the warning, however, and breaks into an equally indiscreet cabaletta ('Ah! così ne' dì ridenti'), to the pained accompaniment of Rochefort's *pertichino* 'Be quiet! someone will hear you'. Unable to silence him, his exasperated friend is forced to drag him into the wings as the king arrives on the scene.

If Percy conforms to a common nineteenth-century operatic type, Donizetti's last Tudor opera marks a departure. The fruit of his exceptionally fertile association with the young and original Neapolitan librettist Salvadore Cammarano, *Roberto Devereux* sports a reticent, distant tenor, whose repeated failure to express his emotions, in marked contrast to Percy, forms the premise of the plot.[8] Modelled on a contemporary French *tragédie* in five acts and immaculate alexandrines, the opera unfolds at the Elizabethan court, and opens with the return from exile of Roberto, Earl of Essex, who has been summoned to a private audience with the infatuated queen.[9] A court plot against him is gathering pace, and false charges of treason have

[8] *Roberto Devereux* was the fifth in a string of collaborations between Donizetti and Cammarano, beginning with *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples 1835) and including *Belisario* (Venice 1836), *L'assedio di Calais* (Naples 1836), and *Pia de' Tolomei* (Venice 1837). On Cammarano, see John Black, *The Italian Romantic Libretto: A Study of Salvadore Cammarano* (Edinburgh, 1984); *idem*, 'Cammarano's Libretti for Donizetti', *Studi Donizettiani*, 3 (1978), 115–29.

[9] Jacques-Arsène-François-Polycarpe Ancelot, *Elisabeth d'Angleterre* (Paris, 1829). The play had already been used as the basis for Saverio Mercadante's opera *Il Conte d'Essex* (Milan 1833), whose libretto, by Felice Romani, Cammarano has been accused – and acquitted – of

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been brought, but he still enjoys the protection of the queen, who imagines her love reciprocated. At their meeting – the first for several years – Elisabetta probes Roberto for signs of tenderness, but he remains expressionless and uncommunicative. It soon becomes evident that he has taken another lover, but his refusal to reveal her identity (it is the wife of Nottingham, his closest ally) infuriates the queen. After a second encounter, and incensed by Roberto's continued silence, she angrily signs his death warrant, though never intending that the sentence be carried out. However, through the machinations of the cuckolded Nottingham (who has discovered his wife's sentimental attachment), Elisabetta is delayed in sending news of Roberto's pardon, and the cannon shot announcing his death is heard just as the messenger has been dispatched to free him.

Roberto goes to his death for his determination that his emotions remain private. Only once in the opera – in a duet with Sara, his lover – is his interior unguarded. At all other times he maintains the blank impassiveness that so frustrates the queen, and which is evident from his first entrance in their Act I duet. As the moment at which the two characters and their opposing agendas first come into contact (and conflict), the piece repays detailed examination. Elisabetta has summoned Roberto hoping to hear a declaration of love, and, attempting to cajole one from him, she subjects him to a strange interrogation that veers between tenderness and severity. Her first tactic is to try to reignite his emotions by invoking past happiness. What she seems to have in mind, in other words, is a conventional love duet, in which old lovers reawaken passion through recollections of a shared past:

> Un tenero core mi rese felice:
> Provai quel contento che labbro non dice . . .
> Un sogno d'amore la vita mi parve! . . .
> Ma il sogno disparve – disparve quel cor!

[A tender heart made me happy: / I experienced contentment that words cannot describe . . . / Life appeared to be a dream of love! . . . / but the dream disappeared – that heart disappeared!]

However, instead of sharing memories equally in a dialogue of alternating stanzas, Roberto rebuffs Elisabetta's invitation. His response is, in effect, silence, as his answering stanza takes the form of an aside – an 'inaudible' soliloquy about emptiness and loss:

> (Indarno la sorte un trono m'addita;
> Per me di speranze non ride la vita,
> Per me l'universo è muto e deserto,
> Le gemme del serto – non hanno splendor.)

[(In vain fate pointed out a throne for me; / for me life does not smile with hope, / for me the universe is silent and deserted, / the jewels of the crown – have no splendour.)]

plagiarising; see John Black's detailed comparison of the two works in '*Elisabeth d'Angleterre*, *Il Conte d'Essex*, and *Roberto Devereux*', *Donizetti Society Journal*, 5 (1984), 135–46. For an account of the numerous dramatic and operatic treatments of the story, see Reinhard Strohm, 'The Earl of Essex: servitore di due padrone', in his *Dramma per musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1997), 294–305.

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'Per me l'universo è muto e deserto': Roberto's lines give a glimpse not, as we might expect (and Elisabetta wish), of his subjectivity, but of a world devoid of meaning. Actually, his stanza might more accurately be described as an anti-soliloquy, since it represents his interior entirely in negative terms – vacant and emotionless. With this blank riposte the queen's imagined love duet degenerates into a one-sided search for intimacy. Roberto's response, inaudible in the stage world, does little more than go through the motions, transforming what ought to be a moment of affirmation into its opposite. In a genre predicated on revelation, one in which characters are supposed to declare who they are and what they feel, Roberto's failure to 'tell' ('non favelli', the queen complains[10]) marks a yawning gap.

Musically, too, the slow movement exhibits traces of this emptiness. With the exception of the tempo d'attacco, everything sung by Roberto in this duet originates as Elisabetta's music (see Ex. 1). In itself, this is hardly unusual: characters in duets of this period are frequently given matching material. But there is something curiously inexpressive about the exactitude with which Roberto reproduces the queen's musical line. His 'reply' – which begins before her speech has finished, the two passages dovetailing seamlessly – fits his line remarkably closely to her musical profile. With the exception of the small inflection at bar 27, and the final cadence, Roberto does very little to make this music his, but reproduces Elisabetta's melodic material in a manner that seems almost perfunctory, distanced. Even the ornament at bar 14 – the catch in Elisabetta's voice at the dotted *échappée* figure – is replicated exactly in Roberto's line (b. 29), as if his impassive face has become a mirror, blankly reflecting the queen's gaze back at her.

As the andante gives way to a passage of *parlante* dialogue (bb. 37–52), Elisabetta rebukes Roberto, her words unconsciously echoing his own description of his silent universe: 'Muto resti? È dunque vero! Sei cangiato? ('You remain silent? So it's true! You have changed?'). Elisabetta continues to press him, but Roberto remains silent until the queen finally asks him outright whether he loves her. His flat denial, echoed by the orchestra's dry unison stab (b. 83) triggers the ensuing stretta, in which Elisabetta contemplates revenge, and Roberto imminent doom. Here too there is only emptiness and obscurity: in a situation that demands telling, calls for narrative, Roberto sings of oblivion and knowledge unrevealed:

Elisabetta (Un lampo, un lampo orribile
Agli occhi miei splendea! . . .
Spera sottrasi al vindice
Mio sdegno invan la rea.
Morrà l'infido, il perfido,
Morrà di morte acerba,
E la rival superba
Punita in lui sarà.)

[10] 'Non favelli' appears in Cammarano's autograph libretto, but Donizetti replaces the phrase with 'Muto resti' (Ex. 1, b. 37). The libretto is held at the library of the Conservatorio di Musica San Pietro a Majella, Naples, together with Cammarano's manuscript *programma* (prose synopsis). I am grateful to John Black for furnishing copies of these. For a detailed discussion of the autograph libretto, see his article 'Librettist, Composer and Censor: The Text of *Roberto Devereux*', *Bergomum*, 92 (1997), 65–74.

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Ex. 1: Donizetti, *Roberto Devereux*, Elisabetta's and Roberto's duet (omitting the final *a due* statement of the stretta).

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Ex. 1: *continued*

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Ex. 1: *continued.*

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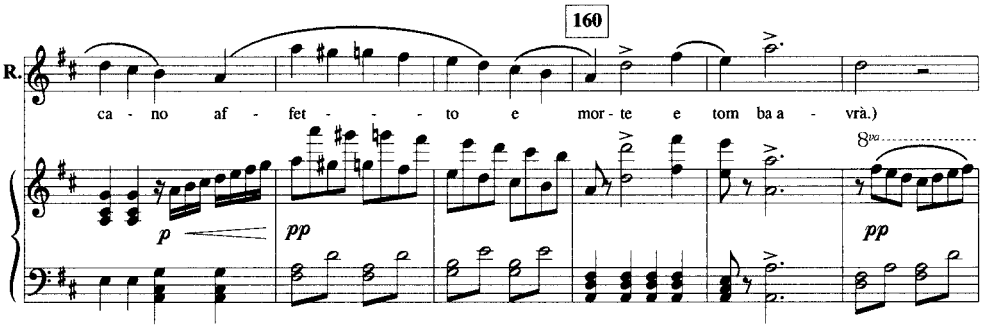
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Ex. 1: *continued.*

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Ex. 1: *continued.*

Roberto (D'orrendo precipizio
Il pie' sull'orlo è giunto!
Dal ferro del carnefice
Or mi divide un punto!–
Cadrò, ma sola vittima
Del suo fatal sospetto . . .
Con me l'arcano affetto
E morte, e tomba avrà.)

[*Elisabetta*: (A flash, a horrible flash / shines before my eyes! . . . / To flee from my just vengeance / the guilty woman hopes in vain. / The faithless, perfidious man will die, / will die a bitter death, / and the proud rival / will be punished through him.) *Roberto*: (On the edge of a dreadful precipice / my feet are standing! / From the executioner's blade / I am separated by inches!– / I shall fall, but as the only victim / of her deadly suspicion . . . / With me the secret passion / will die and be entombed.)]

Roberto's refusal to engage with Elisabetta results in an uncomfortable relationship between expectation and silence that is reflected in the piece's musical conception. As is apparent from the autograph score, the duet cost Donizetti considerable effort. In what by his normal standards is a relatively clean manuscript, the duet – and the stretta in particular – is remarkable for its alterations and deletions, with long sections of the vocal parts reworked on neighbouring staves.[11] His pen-chewing was spent almost exclusively over melodic issues – matters of range, line and ornament. The duet's formal scheme, by contrast, is laid out with a remarkably sure hand, a characteristic especially noteworthy given Donizetti's usual habit of composing straight into score.[12] This large-scale confidence is particularly striking given the duet's formal freedom: while hardly radically innovative, the

[11] The autograph score is published in facsimile as *Roberto Devereux: tragedia lirica in Three Acts*, ed. with an introduction by Philip Gossett, Early Romantic Opera (New York, 1982).

[12] Although he sometimes made isolated sketches of the important melodic moments in an opera, Donizetti's habit when composing continuous drafts was to set down initially only the vocal lines and the outer orchestral parts. This so-called skeleton score would be orchestrated only after the whole opera had been drafted.

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musical setting nevertheless eschews the conventional four-movement scheme (the so-called *solita forma*) usual in the 1830s.[13]

Although Cammarano clearly marks the duet's different 'movements', casting slow movement, tempo di mezzo and stretta in different metres – respectively *doppi senari* ('Un tenero core'), *ottonari* ('Non favelli? È dunque vero') and *settenari* ('Un lampo, un lampo orribile') – Donizetti goes out of his way to avoid articulating the sectional plan envisaged by the librettist, employing a variety of means to blur the duet's formal boundaries. The slow movement cantabile, for instance, never cadences decisively on the tonic, its first appearance passing seamlessly into the *parlante* section (b. 37); on its reprise, the final cadence interrupts to ♭VI (b. 64). Especially unusual is the way in which the cantabile is brought back after the *parlante* dialogue, a clear departure from the *solita forma*.[14] Also noteworthy is the way the number is bound together thematically. In the slow movement, at the words 'il sogno disparve' ('the dream disappeared'), in a moment of clear musical pictorialism, Elisabetta's dream evaporates in a puff of flute sixty-fourth notes (b. 19). The motif then recurs (in thirty-second notes) as the thematic basis of the more active *parlante* passage before the return of the slow movement theme.

It is possible to hear this ambiguous sectionality as reflecting the nature of the transaction being negotiated here. The fluctuation between cantabile and *parlante* – the way that slow-movement material bleeds into the rest of the scene – seems to echo the give and take between the two characters' opposing philosophies of action and reflection. Roberto is keen to avoid the realm of sensibility. Using his body to shield his interior emotions, he points to his scars as evidence of his loyalty, and steers the exchange away from questions of sentiment. But Elisabetta is uninterested in practical testimony – witness her exasperated 'Vuoi pugnar!' ('You wish to fight!'). In search of intimate confession, she manipulates the exchange, constantly (and vainly) pulling it back into the arena of sensibility signified by the operatic cantabile:

Elisabetta Non favelli? è dunque vero!
Sei cangiato?
(In tuono di rimprovero, in cui traspira tutta la sua tenerezza.)
Roberto No . . . che dici! . . .
Parla un detto, ed il guerriero
Sorge, e fuga i tuoi nemici.
D'obbedienza, di valore
Prove avrai.

[13] This four-movement plan comprised a tempo d'attacco, slow movement, tempo di mezzo, and stretta. Cammarano provides no tempo d'attacco, but vestiges are recognisable in Donizetti's treatment of 'Domata in campo' and 'Quando chiamò la tromba', which sport the matching melodies characteristic of the tempo d'attacco. For more on the *solita forma*, see Harold Powers, ' "La solita forma" and "The Uses of Convention" ', in *Nuove prospettive nella ricerca verdiana* (Parma and Milan, 1987), 74–109; also published in *Acta musicologica*, 59 (1987), 65–90. See also Roger Parker's caveat in ' "Insolite forme", or Basevi's Garden Path', in *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997), 42–60.

[14] The mismatch between Cammarano's metrical and Donizetti's formal schemes results in a further blurring of the duet's sectional articulation, as the returning cantabile is overlaid with *ottonari*, not *doppi senari* as at its first appearance.

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Elisabetta (Ma non d'amore!) –
Vuoi pugnar! ma di', non pensi
(Con simulata calma, ed affiggendo in Roberto uno sguardo scrutatore.)
Che bagnar faresti un ciglio
Qui di pianto?
Roberto (Ahimè, quai sensi! . . .)
Elisabetta Che l'idea del tuo periglio
Palpitar farebbe un core?
Roberto Palpitar?
Elisabetta Di tal, che amore
Teco strinse.
Roberto Ah! dunque sai?..
(Ciel, che dico! . . .)
Elisabetta Ebben? Finisci:
(Reprimendosi appena.)
L'alma tua mi svela omai.
Che paventi? . . . Ardisci, ardisci,
Noma pur. la tua diletta . . .
All'altare io vi trarrò.
Roberto Mal ti apponi . . .
Elisabetta (O mia vendetta! . . .)
E non ami? Bada!
(Atteggiandosi di terribile maestà.)
Roberto Io? . . . – No.

[*Elisabetta*: You say nothing? It's true then! / You have changed? *(In a tone of reproach, in which all her tenderness is evident.) Roberto*: No . . . what are you saying! . . . / Speak one word, and the warrior / will spring up, and your enemies will flee. / Of obedience, of valour / you shall have proof. *Elisabetta*: (But not of love!) – / You wish to fight! But tell me, do you not think / *(With simulated calm, and fixing Roberto with a scrutinising gaze.)* that you might make an eye / fill with tears here? *Roberto*: (Alas, what sentiments! . . .) *Elisabetta*: That the idea of your peril / would not make a heart beat faster? / *Roberto*: Beat faster? *Elisabetta*: Of her whom love / attracted to you. *Roberto*: Ah! then you know? . . . / (Heavens, what am I saying! . . .) *Elisabetta*: Well? Continue: / *(Just managing to pull herself together.)* Reveal your heart to me now. / What are you afraid of? . . . Be bold, be bold, / only name your beloved . . . / and I'll lead you both to the altar. / *Roberto*: You guess wrong . . . *Elisabetta*: (O my revenge! . . .) / Are you not in love? Beware! *(Assuming terrible majesty.) Roberto*: I? . . . – No.]

Much of the duet's dramatic power seems to arise from this negotiation between two opposing positions, a remarkable clash of forces that in some ways has more in common with the dramaturgy of late Verdi than the historical intrigues of the *primo Ottocento*. Unsurprisingly for so unusual a piece, the singers for whom it was written were already well known to Donizetti. At the opera's première at Naples' Teatro San Carlo on 28 October 1837, the principal roles were played by Giorgio Basadonna, a talented Neapolitan *tenore di forza*, and the formidable Elisabetta Ronzi de Begnis, who had already created the title roles of two of Donizetti's previous

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operas for Naples.[15] Curiously, Ronzi's San Carlo debut in the spring of 1831 had been as an earlier incarnation of the same character, Elisabetta in Rossini's *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*. On that occasion, too, the tenor lead, Norfolk, was played by Basadonna (the pair's Act I duet was particularly well received). While it may seem slightly fanciful to see Donizetti's duet for Elisabetta and Roberto as in some way replaying the scene of Ronzi's debut, it is nevertheless clear that the piece was designed to cater to her famously regal manner (frequently associated with her portrayals of Elisabetta), cultivated from the beginning of her Neapolitan career.[16]

At the opera's first performances, however, the duet baffled audiences and critics alike. One journalist, Luigi Mira, writing for the local newspaper *L'interprete commerciale*, described it as 'of little effect', adding,

> we do not understand why the *poet* and the *composer* allow two *soliloquies* to fall in the *stretta* of a *duet*; first, since this leads to the loss of much of the *colpo di scena*; and second because it flies in the face of good sense that the two characters, while they are talking to themselves [i.e. in asides], should have to yell like a pair of Stentors.[17]

'This duet', Mira continues, 'was received in silence' – and not just by its audiences. Most critics did not dignify it with a mention, with only a single reviewer bothering to note that it was 'a weak piece'.[18] Professional music journalism developed relatively late in Naples, and opera reviews from the 1830s often seem to furnish little more than a synopsis of the libretto and an account of who clapped when.[19] Mira's detailed review, though, is refreshingly considered, and of particular interest for its close attention to matters of operatic convention. Two aspects in particular deserve comment. First, Mira is extremely alert to the different modes of operatic discourse and their proper places within generic structures. For example, while it was not unusual for one character in a stretta to be soliloquising, for both to do so 'flies in the face of good sense'. Second, we might be struck by the way in which realist criteria (characters talking to themselves ought not to be shouting) sit strangely beside more 'theatrical' concerns (the scene lacks *colpo di scena* – read: 'the scene doesn't make for good theatre').

Mira's objection to the stretta's twin soliloquies immediately stands out as odd – it seems a trifling detail to seize upon when there is so much else one could say about the duet (and in any case, dual soliloquies are not that unusual, whatever the

[15] *Fausta* (1831) and *Sancia di Castiglia* (1832). In these works the characters of Crispo and Rodrigo respectively were written for Basadonna. The lead role in the abortive *Maria Stuarda* (1834) was originally intended for Ronzi, though it was ultimately premièred by Maria Malibran (in Milan in 1835).

[16] One journalist present at her Neapolitan debut described how 'she appeared on the stage as a queen – an omen, perhaps, that she would conquer the heart of every spectator. The attractiveness of her figure, the nobility of her bearing, and her beautiful singing could not but excite general enthusiasm'. *L'indifferente*, 2 (1831), 5–6.

[17] 20 November 1837 (Bini and Commons, *Le prime rappresentazioni*, 663).

[18] Vincenzo Torelli, in *L'omnibus*, 4 November 1837 (Bini and Commons, 656).

[19] The city's first dedicated music periodical, the *Gazzetta musicale di Napoli*, was not founded until 1852. On the development of Neapolitan music criticism, see Tiziana Grande, 'Neapolitan Music Periodicals in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Fontes Artis Musicae*, 44 (1997), 151–68.

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implication here).[20] However, Mira seems to have been aiming at something deeper, of which the soliloquies are only symptoms. What he sensed, I think, is the duet's growing sense of isolation, its inexorable slide from the promise of intimacy to bleak non-communication. The double soliloquy is only the final straw, the culmination of a process that began with Roberto's silent aside during the slow movement. As the two characters sing inside their soundproof spheres, neither able to hear the other, Roberto's silent universe seems finally to have invaded the entire stage world.

We have come a long way from Elisabetta's imagined love duet. Indeed, it is hard to think of another piece by Donizetti that stages disengagement and estrangement so explicitly (it is startling to realise that every one of Roberto's lyric lines is an aside – that Elisabetta hears *nothing* he sings). Roberto's stubborn refusal to emote effectively robs the scene of content, providing nothingness in place of revelation. And whereas, for us, it is possible to read this curious duet *manqué* as an instance of inventive play with character stereotypes, for Mira – responding to the number's poor reception – there is no such possibility. Emotional blankness is simply not the stuff of opera. Roberto's bare interior causes what seems to have been perceived as a 'duet failure', and we perhaps come a little closer to understanding early audiences' lack of enthusiasm.

It is possible that the duet's indifferent reception in Naples played a part in Donizetti's decision to rewrite the stretta for its first Parisian outing in December 1838.[21] It should be noted, however, that such revision was far from unusual, since composers of Italian opera took for granted the necessity of tailoring their imported works to French tastes. Donizetti's alterations to the duet in fact conform to a pattern popularised by Meyerbeer when adapting Italian musical forms for use in his own *grands opéras*. Instead of constructing the stretta from repetitions of a single melody as was customary in Italy, Meyerbeer frequently set the two characters' strophes to different music.[22] Correspondingly, where Donizetti's original Neapolitan stretta required Roberto to repeat the cantilena already heard in Elisabetta's opening stanza, the Paris version supplies Roberto with new music that is smoother and more lyrical than the queen's. With its different orchestral underpinning and without the irregularities and rhythmic jaggedness that characterise her line, this contrasting material gives him a musical persona quite apart from hers. Whatever the reason for these changes, their effect on the musical dramaturgy is telling. For

[20] Though more commonly associated with the concertato finale, simultaneous asides are not infrequently found in duets. See, for example, the first meeting of Cenerentola and Don Ramiro in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (Rome 1817), and the Act I encounter between Israele and Faliero in Donizetti's *Marino Faliero* (Paris 1835). A later instance is the duet 'Due vaticini' in Act I of Verdi's *Macbeth* (Florence 1847).

[21] The Parisian première took place at the Théâtre-Italien on 27 December 1838.

[22] See Steven Huebner, 'Italianate Duets in Meyerbeer's Grand Operas', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 8 (1989), 203–58, esp. 239. Huebner draws attention to French critics' broad disdain for the predictability and monotonous symmetry of the Italian *solita forma*. Duets came in for particular censure, especially the practice of having the characters sing the stretta melody in turn. Anton Reicha remarked that 'this way of tossing the ball from one to another is cold and not very dramatic', a comment that would seem to bear directly on Donizetti's revisions to *Roberto Devereux* (Reicha, *Art du compositeur dramatique* [Paris, 1833], 44, quoted in Huebner, 211).

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if in the Naples version of the duet Roberto was able to remain unreadable by exactly reproducing Elisabetta's music, the Parisian stretta forces him speak for himself, rendering slightly more visible – more audible, I should say – the self he takes such pains to keep concealed.

But this is little more than a chink in Roberto's mask. If anything, his tendency to shrink from self-expression seems to bleed into other moments in the plot, even his famous prison scene in Act III, a moment at which we might fully expect an outpouring of interiority. In assigning the tenor hero an aria to sing in a dank dungeon, the opera invites obvious comparison with the opening of Act II of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. As William Ashbrook has remarked, the aria's long, gloomy prelude looks back to Florestan's dungeon scene (the two pieces also exhibit close motivic similarities).[23] Alert to the aesthetics of early nineteenth-century opera, we might expect this claustrophobic murk to prompt a moment of introspection, the enclosed space serving, as in *Fidelio*, as a neat metaphor for the character's own subjective interior. But even in these circumstances, seemingly set up to provoke self-reflection, Roberto manages to deflect attention from his own character. His slow movement, 'Come un spirto angelico / Pura è la tua consorte', is a description of Sara's virtuous nature, addressed to Nottingham ('Like an angelic spirit / your wife is innocent'). Roberto is, in effect, singing about someone *else*'s self. Even in private, he evades self-definition, his interior a cipher.

Elisabetta's failure to read Roberto is all the more unusual since throughout the opera she is characterised by her penetrating gaze, a central aspect of her aura of royal power. Described variously as a 'sguardo rigoroso', or 'sguardo scrutatore', this gaze belongs to an all-seeing eye that strikes fear into those with guilty secrets. While its panoptic quality obviously recalls nineteenth-century Benthamite theories of power, the regal gaze is also a feature of the model of impenetrable sovereignty discussed earlier. Theorists of absolutism figured royal power in terms of an asymmetric relationship whereby the sovereign's eyes emitted a piercing beam of vision that laid bare all before it, while the royal visage itself remained opaque.[24] The play of gazes in *Roberto Devereux* is integral to Cammarano's representation of Elisabetta's sovereignty, informed by traditional understandings of the mechanics of majesty. Elisabetta's inability to penetrate Roberto's defences thus has direct

[23] Although Ashbrook states that Donizetti cannot have known *Fidelio* on the grounds that it was not performed in Italy until 1886, it seems probable that he would have known the work in printed form (vocal scores of the work circulated from 1810, and the full score of the final version appeared in 1826). Intimately familiar with German music, his teacher Simone Mayr would have had a particular professional interest in *Fidelio*, having himself composed an opera based on the same plot, *L'amor coniugale* (Padua 1805). Winton Dean draws a convincing motivic parallel between Roberto's dungeon scene and Ulrica's similarly dank incantation scene in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (1859). See Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas* (Cambridge, 1982), 689n36; Dean, 'Donizetti's Serious Operas', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 100 (1973–4), 123–41.

[24] On early political theorists' attempt to account for this asymmetry, see Christopher Pye, 'The Sovereign, the Theater and the Kingdome of Darknesse: Hobbes and the Spectacle of Power', *Representations*, 8 (1984), 84–106.

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repercussions for her royal power; the failure of the queen's gaze marks the beginnings of her demise.[25]

Where eighteenth-century opera seria had staged the glory of sovereignty, nineteenth-century opera increasingly depicted its limits or failure. Thirty years after *Roberto Devereux*, another sixteenth-century sovereign, Philippe in Verdi's *Don Carlos*, would lament the limits of royal power in terms that Elisabetta would surely have endorsed: 'Ah! si la royauté nous donnait le pouvoir / De lire au fond des coeurs où Dieu seul peut tout voir!' ('Ah! If only sovereignty could give us the power / to read deep into men's hearts, where only God can see!').[26] It is telling that, as with Elisabetta, the heart hidden from Philippe belongs not to a plotting subject but to an unreciprocating lover. Adversaries in their lifetimes, in the operatic universe the two monarchs share a common tragedy – the incompatibility of sovereignty and true intimacy, which requires the very type of interior expression that a monarch cannot afford to undertake. We saw earlier how Elisabetta conceals her private emotions from her subjects, in conformity with traditional conceptions of regal behaviour that date back centuries. Elizabethan political theorists counselled against any attempt to 'peer into sovereignty', and glosses on fables such as that of Diana and Acteon cautioned 'how dangerous a curiosity it is to search into the secrets of Princes, or by chance to discover their nakedness'.[27] But, whereas Elizabeth's own subjects were warned not to try to look behind the mask, later generations have viewed the queen rather differently. The nineteenth century nursed a particular fascination with the woman 'beneath the robes', a sign of the growing interest in the humanity – and human frailty – that lay behind majesty.[28]

This fascination is nowhere more evident than in Elisabetta's *rondò finale*, the moment at which the previously impenetrable queen finally abandons majesty and sings in public. After the plot's disastrous dénouement – Roberto's unintended execution, and the discovery of the Nottinghams' treachery – in the final cabaletta we see Elisabetta for the first time as vulnerable and exposed. The scene's staging represents her new position with brutal explicitness. As the curtain rises, the queen is discovered in her private chamber (*gabinetto*), an unusually intimate space, as the stage directions make clear: '*Elisabetta has collapsed on a sofa, her elbow resting on a table*

[25] Unlike the previous generation of librettists, whose approach to libretto writing had been primarily literary, Cammarano was essentially a man of the theatre, with an acute sense of staging. One of the eccentricities of this libretto, indeed one of its most notable differences from its French model, lies in the unprecedented attention it gives to gazes and expressions: instructions regarding the actors' eyes constitute an unusually large proportion of the stage directions.

[26] The lines occur in Philippe's Act IV aria, 'Je dormirai dans mon manteau royal'.

[27] George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Englished, Mythologiz'd and Represented in Figures* (Oxford, 1632), 151–2, quoted in Pye, *The Regal Phantasm*, 59.

[28] Lytton Strachey's account of the affair between Elizabeth and Robert Devereux is typical of this attitude, summed up in his arch preamble: 'The lionhearted heroine, who flung back the insolence of Spain and crushed the tyranny of Rome with splendid unhesitating gestures, no more resembles the Queen of fact than the clothed Elizabeth the naked one. But, after all, posterity is privileged. Let us draw nearer; we shall do no wrong now to that Majesty, if we look below the robes.' *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928; rpt. London, 2000), 10–11.

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on which her crown is resplendent: the ladies-in-waiting stand about her, sad and silent'. Robbed of the pomp of her customary entrance, in this scene the queen is still further divested of her regal paraphernalia – the crown set aside, a sofa in place of a throne (we are close to discovering the queen, as our Elizabethan commentator might have it, 'in her nakedness').

It is in the libretto's poetry, however, that the queen's exposure is most clearly shown. The image of the disintegrating queen presented Cammarano with an opportunity that he clearly relished. With considerable panache, and demonstrating a distinct flair for Grand Guignol exhibitionism, he has Elisabetta's private ghosts paraded out in the open, as the visions of her disordered interior are projected into the public realm. The piece is remarkable for the extraordinary profusion of text provided by Cammarano, a surfeit that will stretch the musical form to its limits. Cabalettas by tradition rarely exceed eight lines, usually divided into two quatrains. Cammarano gives Elisabetta two stanzas of eight lines each, and sets the verse in *doppi senari*, the longest line available in Italian libretto verse. With sixteen twelve-syllable lines, 'Quel sangue versato' contains as much text as is possible within a single movement, even discounting the additional couplet appended as a final coda (the queen's abdication in favour of James I is a deviation from historical fact that continues to distress literal-minded commentators).

The sheer abundance of words here contrasts markedly with Elisabetta's avoidance of public self-expression throughout the rest of the opera. Whereas elsewhere in the work she appears blank and inexpressive, surely here at last is something approaching plenitude:

> Quel sangue versato al cielo s'innalza,
> Giustizia domanda, reclama vendetta . . .
> Già l'angiol di morte fremente v'incalza . . .
> Supplizio inaudito entrambi vi aspetta . . .
> Sì vil tradimento, delitto sì rio
> Clemenza non merta, non merta pietà . . .
> Nell'ultimo istante volgetevi a Dio;
> Ei solo perdono conceder potrà.
>
> Mirate quel palco . . . di sangue rosseggia! . . .
> È tutto di sangue il serto bagnato! . . .
> Un orrido spettro percorre la reggia,
> Tenendo nel pugno il capo troncato! . . .
> Di gemiti, e grida il cielo rimbomba! . . .
> Pallente del giorno il raggio si fe! . . .
> Dov'era il mio trono s'innalza una tomba . . .
> In quella discendo . . . fu schiusa per me.
>
> Non regno . . . non vivo . . . Escite . . . lo voglio . . . –
> Dell'anglica terra sia Giacomo il re.

[This spilled blood rises to heaven, / it demands justice, calls for vengeance . . . / The angel of death already stands raging above you . . . / Unheard-of suffering awaits you both . . . /

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Such base betrayal, so treacherous a crime / merits no clemency, no pity . . . / In your final moments turn towards God; / He alone will be able to pardon you. / Behold the royal daïs . . . stained red with blood! . . . / The crown is bathed in blood! . . . / A horrible spectre runs through the palace, / holding his severed head in his fist! . . . / The heavens echo with screams and wails! . . . / The light of day grows dim! . . . / In place of my throne a tomb is erected . . . / I descend into it . . . for me it has been opened. / I do not reign . . . I do not live . . . Go . . . I wish it . . . – / Let James be king of England.]

But this is far from straightforward lyric expression. Donizetti matches Cammarano's effusion with a rare *maestoso* cabaletta, but his setting has a distinctly unwholesome quality, as the musical fabric distorts to extreme lengths to accommodate the copious text (see Ex. 2). By setting only one of the stanzas, and omitting the other, Donizetti could have elected to manage the excess in some way. His decision to set Cammarano's text in its entirety is thus highly significant, especially since it requires the soprano to forgo her customary ornamented repeat. Depriving the singer of an opportunity for display, Donizetti provides an elegant musical analogy to Cammarano's image of a discarded crown. Indeed, far from managing the excess, Donizetti seems to go out of his way to underscore the awkwardness caused by Elisabetta's swollen stanzas, focusing attention onto the seams of the musical form, which bulge and strain audibly. The setting initially conforms to the conventional 'lyric prototype' ($a^1\ a^2\ b\ a^3$) in which each four-bar section consumes one line of text.[29] But the lyric prototype had evolved to deal with quatrains; applied to octaves, something must give. And indeed, during the b section (bb. 10–13), the text consumption suddenly doubles, each four-bar section consuming two lines of text instead of one. In this way the form manages to accommodate Cammarano's double-length stanzas, but only by abruptly shifting gears halfway through, an awkward change of pace that draws attention to the piece's strained formal boundaries.

The melodic writing displays a similar lack of elegance, its jagged line designed to tax the athleticism of even the finest singers. The opening phrases' serrated profile thematises awkward melodic disjunctures. The falling seventh outlined in bar 2 (f♯″–d″–g♯′), is transformed into leaps in both directions (c♯′–b″ [b. 4]; g♯′–f♯″ [b. 8]), and the phrase includes a difficult leap up a minor tenth (c♯′–e″ [b. 5]), before concluding with the octave plunge from a″ to a′ (b. 9). In addition, the b section outlines a tritone, leaping between b♭′ and e″ (bb. 10 and 12).

After a melodic climax on the word 'pietà' (b. 19), the registral extremes opened up in the first section are filled in with stepwise motion. The final two lines of text hurtle along a melodic switchback whose envelope incorporates no fewer than three registral climaxes (on a″, b″ and b″ [bb. 19, 23 and 28]), as the line distends grotesquely to accommodate Elisabetta's verbal outpouring. Once again, Donizetti's setting presents the queen's expression as pathological – those long, long phrases seem calculated to draw the last ounce of breath from the singer, forcing her to expire utterly.

[29] The structure was identified by Friedrich Lippmann as characteristic of much of the operatic music of the 1830s. See his 'Verdi e Bellini', *Atti del I° congresso internazionale di studi verdiani 1966* (Parma, 1969), 184–96.

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Ex. 2: Donizetti, *Roberto Devereux*, cabaletta of Elisabetta's *rondò finale*, first stanza.

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Ex. 2: *continued.*

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And so the queen sings – but at what cost? De Lauzières earlier seemed to suggest that the mode of inward expression demanded by opera was incompatible with the bare interior cultivated by the sovereign. He appears to have been proved right: Elisabetta bares her soul, but at the price of her majesty. Only when shorn of the accoutrements of regal power can Elisabetta provide the sort of heedless self-expression we expect from an operatic character.

The moment could be read as one more example of opera forcing individuals to express against their inclination. Music at last forces itself into the gap left by the queen's bare interior, filling it, and creating a truly operatic character. But the abnormalities of the musical setting indicate that things are not that simple. Attempting to capture in words the effect of this final cabaletta, one contemporary critic was forced to resort to a curiously paradoxical turn of phrase:

> And no offence will be taken if we find a few trifling defects in the allegro [i.e. cabaletta] of Elisabetta's final aria, on account of the great number of *senarii doppii*, which gives rise to a void in the musical part, the composer not being able to repeat the cantilena as is customary.[30]

Recasting the aria's excesses in terms of lack, the critic suggests that the profusion of *doppi senari* gives rise, ultimately, to just another empty space. Of course, he meant only to draw attention to the absence of the soprano's ornamented repeat: where Elisabetta should have been given the opportunity for vocal display, she has only more words. But the contorted linguistic trope seems to gesture towards a deeper truth. In its strange juxtaposition of surplus and lack, the critic's observation comes closer than he perhaps knew to the true nature of the queen's expression here. For as the operatic fabric distends to accommodate the volume of words pouring from her, it becomes clear that this is not abundance, but immoderation: Elisabetta does not display subjectivity so much as haemorrhage it. Reckless self-expression is here coterminous not just with the surrender of the throne, but with spiritual death. Elisabetta gives up life as well as sovereignty in a dual abdication ('non vivo' / 'non regno') that drives home the point that this mode of lyric expression constitutes not the affirmation of character, but its negation. Elisabetta destroys herself in song.

Roberto Devereux's idiosyncratic dramaturgy suggests that sometimes in opera, telling one's emotions may be cognate not with positive self-definition, but with oblivion and spiritual death. Upending the commonplace assumption of a simple congruence between interior expression and self-definition – that characters become more real, more 'alive' the more they sing – *Roberto Devereux* presents us with a rather different scenario: one in which individuals seem, in the very act of self-definition, to risk bringing about their own annihilation. We are, in short, faced with a pair whose existence as viable characters depends precisely on their ability to *avoid* true 'operatic' expression. Roberto, realising this, keeps silent; Elisabetta sings – and expires.

In failing conspicuously to stage interiority in the manner to which we have become accustomed, *Roberto Devereux* can be seen to have taken to heart the

[30] M. D'A [Francesco d'Arcais?], in *La toletta*, 15 November 1837 (Bini and Commons, *Le prime rappresentazioni*, 661).

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nineteenth-century apprehension of the high stakes of interior expression. In this respect, however, the work remains all but unique. Few other operas, if any, have confronted the issue of inscrutability and illegibility with such directness or invention. In one sense this ought not to surprise us: the conventions of opera are primed to express emotion, not suppress it; and, as the perplexed reactions of contemporary audiences suggest, radical departures from this scheme flirted with failure. The work may offer us a reminder that, despite opera's 'expressionist' poetics, the genre can occasionally collude with characters' determination to remain unreadable. Nevertheless, it should come as no surprise that in search of the operatic subject – which ought ostensibly to be displayed in glorious operatic technicolor – audiences might have found it unsettling, even perverse, to discover only empty spaces.

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