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Love and its Subversions in Verdi's *Otello* and *Aida*

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Introduction

The legacy of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) is comprised of some of the most beloved operas in the modern repertory, including *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Rigoletto*. Like many 19th century opera composers, the drama and pathos in Verdi's work revolve around romantic love, and, like many works of art which analysts have explored, his operas illustrate and enact the dynamics which often take center stage in psychoanalysis. In this essay, I offer some reflections on two of Verdi's operas, *Otello* and *Aida*. Taken together, these operas dramatize the unbidden arrival of love, the jealousy and envy it can unleash, and the social forces with which love must contend, in short, the forces which subvert love. I will approach *Otello* as a dramatization of the fundamental dynamics of love, trust, and vulnerability in the pre-Oedipal register, and I will explore *Aida* in terms of conflicts of love and loyalty in the Oedipal register at the level of family and the broader social order (Freud, 1930).

Like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (2005), both *Aida* and *Otello* have earlier oral and literary precursors and may be thought of as crystallized condensations of complex, over-determined, and enduring emotional themes. Therefore, to further contextualize the process of putting these operas 'on the couch', I approach them as myths in which the characters are distilled into a psychodrama of conflict between different aspects of the self. In this sense, each character represents certain aspects of the psyche as it encounters

the other. It would be as limiting to claim any interpretation of *Aida* or *Otello* as a ‘correct’ reading as it would be to claim that Freud’s (1910, p. 171; 1985, pp. 270-272) reading of the Oedipus myth is more correct than the additional readings offered by Klein (1945) and Bion (1963, pp. 42-63). As myths, both operas are rich and complex, contain many scenes, and lend themselves to other interpretations, but I will concentrate my attention on scenes that illustrate the themes mentioned above.

Part I: Otello

Synopsis

The curtain rises on a tempestuous storm. A crowd watches anxiously while their governor Otello navigates the dangerous waters on his victorious return from battle. Otello’s right-hand man, Iago, secretly plots revenge for being passed over for a promotion given instead by Otello to Cassio. Iago toasts Otello and his wife Desdemona, but also maneuvers to get Cassio very drunk and involved in a brawl. Otello angrily intervenes and demotes Cassio. Otello and Desdemona sing a love duet recalling how she has so often comforted him, and he asks for a kiss.

At Iago’s urging, Cassio approaches Desdemona to persuade Otello to reinstate him. Iago, hatching his plot, sings his Credo: “I believe in a cruel God...” and tells Otello that Cassio and Desdemona are lovers. Otello demands proof while a chorus of children in the background praise Desdemona’s beauty and purity. Desdemona comforts a mysteriously upset Otello with a special handkerchief he had given to her for their engagement. He throws it angrily to the floor. Emilia worries as she watches her husband Iago grab the handkerchief and secret it away. Iago later fuels Otello’s jealousy by

telling him that he saw Cassio clutching Desdemona's handkerchief. Otello and Iago together swear an oath of vengeance on Desdemona and Cassio.

When officials arrive to announce that Otello will be replaced by Cassio as governor, Otello's jealousy escalates, and he angrily denigrates Desdemona publically. Iago, having planted the purloined handkerchief in the innocent Cassio's lodgings, then engineers a scene that makes it appear to Otello that Cassio is bragging about Desdemona and the handkerchief. Otello determines to kill his wife and Iago pledges to eliminate Cassio.

In the final act, Otello suffocates Desdemona while she pleads innocence. Emilia bursts into the room calling Otello a murderer. He retorts that Iago gave him proof of Desdemona's infidelity with the handkerchief. Emilia reveals Iago's plot as Iago flees. Horrified by what he has done, Otello kills himself with a dagger.

*Otello's dramatic power hinges on the cynical manipulations of Iago as he plays Otello against Desdemona and tragically destroys their pure and innocent love. The opera's psychological power derives from the manner in which it dramatizes the conflict within each of us (Otello) between love and hope on one hand (Desdemona), and cynical withdrawal on the other (Iago). Taken this way, *Otello* hints at the storms of childhood dependency, attachment, love, and vulnerability, and the resulting brew of hatred, jealousy, and envy that can spill over into adult relational life. I want to call attention to several scenes that offer an X-ray view into this emotional progression.*

The opening of the opera takes us by surprise. Without any overture, the curtain rises to a thunderous cataclysmic orchestral chord. Before getting our bearings, we are cast headlong into a terrible storm where we watch helplessly with those on shore to see whether Otello will navigate his return safely or be dashed upon the rocks. This scene is

not part of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1622), and is unique to Verdi. While it serves to introduce Othello's heroism before his tragic fall, psychologically speaking, it hints at something deeper. The music conveys anxiety and discontent with a wash of closely spaced and dissonant intervals underscored by percussion that resolves only with Othello's safe return. The disturbing dissonance seems to signal the arrival of conflict and even an assault on order and emotional safety. Verdi's *Otello*, from the outset of this storm, will continue to involve the eruption of primitive dreads that subvert harmonious relations.

Great music often sounds the way emotion feels. The music of *Otello's* opening scene could be understood as a portrayal of the emotional tempest each of us must always emerge from if we are to love and trust, and of the stormy elemental forces we must navigate to arrive on the grounds of trust. This opening scene also invites us to identify with the anxious emotions of those who wait for the return of their leader and protector. In this way, the opera subtly introduces the theme of emotional dependence. To the analyst, it is a reminder that the drama of adult love is fleshed out on the backbone of the child's earliest needs, fears, and disappointments. In fact, the joyful music sung by the crowd as Othello arrives home might be the joyful song of the return of mother to child.

In the love duet that follows between Desdemona and Othello (Act I Scene 3), this mother-child theme finds further expression. Desdemona's gorgeous melodies in "Ginella notte densa" ("Now the night is dark and silent") are reminiscent of a soothing lullaby sung to an upset child, in this case a grown-up child who returns to mother's comfort from his battles, blazing deserts, misadventures and captivity. Othello sings:

As you listened to my story your lovely face was filled with tears.... And you loved me for the dangers I had known, and I loved you because you took pity on them. (Otello, Act I, Scene 3)

When Otello pleads for a kiss (“un bacio”), the extremely delicate and tender music lends a mood more reminiscent of a troubled boy’s request than that of a passionate lover. One might be reminded of Proust’s (1981) protagonist whose childhood anxiety and frustrated longing for mother’s reassuring kiss become the prototype for later love affairs.

Desdemona’s maternal core is further portrayed in a chorus scene (Act-I, Scene 3) where women and children sing her praises as a Madonna figure. The children strew flowers, the traditional symbols of love and growth, and the lyrics sung refer to “nature’s fertile womb”. In a typical stage production, Otello must turn his back to the audience to open a door in the fence behind himself to glimpse this. It is as if he were opening a door in his mind and looking backward in time to see some of his own dependence on a mother. This maternal theme returns later when it is reprised in the “Ave Maria” aria which continues the character sketch of Desdemona as a Madonna of forgiveness and benevolence.

Act II is introduced by an ominous bass figure which sets the stage for Iago so sing his famous ‘Credo’ to represent the forces of cynicism and destructiveness in the personality:

I believe in a cruel God
Who created me in his image
And who in fury I name.
From the very vileness of a germ

Or an atom, vile I was born.
I am a wretch because I am a man,
And I feel within me the primeval slime.
Yes! This is my creed!
I believe with a heart as steadfast
as that of a widow in church,
that the evil I think
and that which I perform
I think and do by destiny's decree...

(Act 11, Scene 2):

Compared with the lyrical beauty of the love duet, the adoring music of the children's chorus, and the "Ave Maria" sung later, the Credo is sung to menacing and icy orchestral accompaniment: "I believe in a cruel God who made me in his own image" sings Iago. Regarding Iago's motivation, Verdi turns Shakespeare's complex Iago into a more straightforwardly satanic figure (Verdi's librettist, Boito, had composed his own opera, *Mefistofele*, several years earlier).

The question of whether Iago is motivated by situational revenge or inherent destructiveness is significant for the way it mirrors a longstanding theoretical debate in psychoanalysis: Are aggression, hatred and cruelty better understood as innate human drives or better understood as reactions to frustration and disappointment? I am making the case here that *Otello* supports the latter perspective overall, but in the Credo Iago portrays himself not as situationally motivated, but rather evil and cruel by nature and by "destiny's decree". From an analytic perspective, he is like the patient who, unable as yet to reflect more deeply, says "That's just the way I am".

Another way of framing this is that Iago is unconscious of any other roots of his cold cruelty and destructiveness. We could consider that Iago is unconsciously engineering a re-enactment of his own fall from innocent attachment, love, and disappointment, and retreating into cynicism about love and goodness. This is certainly a dynamic familiar to therapists exploring issues of trust and love in relationships. Perhaps Iago is putting Otello through a repetition of his own repressed emotional history of embitterment resulting in a negation and denial of all the love and good he once wished for.

It is useful here to distinguish jealousy from envy. If we personify jealousy and love for just a moment, we could distinguish them as follows. While jealousy anxiously aims to hold onto what is good and loved, envy goes further and, just as in Aesop's (2002) fable of the fox and the sour grapes, aims to destroy the very frustrating idea that there is any good one does not possess. In extreme situations destructive envy may become crystallized in the personality, becoming a chronic state of being rather than a situational response; a way of life seeking to overturn good altogether. We might think here of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the fall of Satan, the most beautiful of angels, who tragically becomes the most evil because, as he himself says "Better to reign in hell, than to serve in heav'n" (Milton, 1667, p. 218, line 263).

Taken as a whole then, *Otello* portrays an emotional trajectory from beginning innocent love, moving on a path through insecurity onward to jealousy, envy, and, perhaps even "evil'-doing" as a form of spoiling the existence of love, compassion, generosity, and benevolence. By the time we get to the duet oath ("Si, pel ciel marmoreo giuro" , "Yes, I swear by the highest heavens") sung by Otello and Iago at the end of Act II, the distance has been collapsed and Iago and Otello hold hands and merge.

Psychologically speaking, Otello's love and Iago's hatred are two sides of human nature at play when we love. Iago represents what might arise when the tension between these two sides exceeds what we can bear. Soon Otello will "become" Iago by killing off love in what is essentially an act of emotional suicide. Is there any hope?

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the hopeful element is represented by the character of Emilia, or the "Emilia" part of the personality. It is she who tries to resist giving the handkerchief to Iago, and it is she who questions what he is plotting. It is she who knocks on the door bursting in to witness Otello's deed, and it is she who calls for help in Act IV, Scene 3 ("Aprite, Aprite!" "Open up the door!"). Emilia represents the mixture of conscience, curiosity, and search for emotional truth that, if it is resilient enough, makes working through jealousy, envy, and maliciousness possible. With the Emilia part of the personality as an ally, analytic work may make its entrance, but that would be another opera altogether!

Part II. Aida

Synopsis

The setting is ancient Egypt during war with Ethiopia. The Ethiopian king's daughter, Aida, has been captured and is now a slave in the service of the Pharaoh's daughter, Amneris. The warrior Radames loves Aida but is loved by Amneris. He is appointed general of the Egyptian army and marches off to war. Amneris tricks Aida into revealing her love for Radames and is consumed with jealousy and disbelief that her beloved could be in love with a lowly slave. Radames eventually returns in triumph from battle and is rewarded by the Pharaoh with the unwelcome hand of Amneris in marriage.

Aida's father, Amonasro (not yet recognized as the king of Ethiopia), has been taken prisoner, his life spared at the intercession of Radames. When he learns of the love affair, Amonasro induces his daughter to act as a spy and help him to discover the plans of the Egyptian army. Although she is highly conflicted in her loyalties, she carries out her father's wish in a secret meeting with Radames. When Amonasro steps forward to let them know he has been listening in, Radames realizes with horror that he has betrayed Egypt. Aida and Amonasro take flight, but the apparent treachery of Radames is now revealed and he is condemned to death, to the dismay of Amneris. In the final scene Radames is buried alive directly beneath the temple in a stone tomb, where Aida joins him. As they die, Amneris, in the temple above the tomb, prays for her beloved Radames.

A typical performance of *Aida* consists of riveting drama, passionate arias, powerful choral work, and glittering spectacle. Although most of us will never be caught up in such dramatic political tumult, the roles of Aida, Radames, Amneris, and Amonasro symbolize some of the deepest emotional conflicts of love. Compared with *Otello*, the characters in *Aida* function even more as mythic archetypes than as distinctive individual personalities. In this sense, *Aida*, though often approached as a tragic love story, is also a psychological parable or mythical rendering of the eruption of erotic love, the shockwaves that follow, and the counterforces of suppression that can subvert love. The final scene in which the temple towers over the tomb nicely concretizes this theme. It brings into high relief the tensions between the private and public that swirl around erotic love. In fact, a large part of *Aida's* emotional impact comes from the way Verdi moves skillfully back and forth between two different registers of experience that each of us must inhabit: the collective, public, orderly, civilized dimension, on the one hand, and the

private, unruly, emotional and uncivilized psychological dimension on the other (Freud, 1930).

In Act I, Radames' aria ("Celeste Aida", "Radiant Aida") and later the trio ("Vieni O diletti", "Come dearest friend") in which Amneris realizes Aida is her rival introduce the arrival of romantic love. These arias highlight love's indifference to the status quo as Radames and Aida are swept up in emotions that break the bounds of propriety. Visited by Eros, they are suddenly thrown into a situation where they may be able to choose how to act, but they will not be able to choose how to feel. Love arrives unbidden. How can it be, Amneris asks, that Radames is in love with her own lowly slave! Amneris is not only the voice of jealousy in the rather transparent Oedipal triangle composed with Radames and Aida, but also the voice of protest that love does not make sense and has the power to pit us against public and personal roles, duties and loyalties. Interestingly, Amneris' jealousy, however Oedipal it might be, is almost peripheral to the story when compared with the emotional conflicts of loyalty that ensnare Radames and Aida in love.

Psychoanalysis began as a psychology of love and analysts have their ways of talking about love, particularly about the traces of childhood life that color it. We are often called upon to help people searching for love or hurting from love. And yet, like the poets, while we can describe love and follow its twists and turns, in the end we bow before its mystery. We do know, however, that one of the most profound satisfactions of romantic love is the feeling of being deeply known for who we really are underneath our superficial personas, selves, or positions in the social hierarchy. We all long for this recognition. The image of Aida as lowly slave stripped of her royal prerogatives, could be read as an Oedipal boy's fantasy that mother is degraded by her servitude to father. But, on a different note, I think Aida's secret royalty invites us to project into Aida and

Radames the sense that they have truly discovered each other, not as daughter, princess, hero, or slave, but as particular and unique persons. Radames falls in love with Aida without regard for her apparent lowly position, only later discovering her royal blood. In a very real way, one of the deepest pleasures of being loved is the sense that someone has recognized our true “inner royalty”.

When Radames is given a patriotic send-off to war, Aida publically echoes the Chorus in praying he will return victorious, but privately finds herself caught between love for her father and her country, and love for Radames. This scene reflects a deep emotional reality. Two people coming together in love to create themselves a couple form a new bond that may be consciously and/or unconsciously transgressive. Marriage rituals serve to sanction and contain this process, for example, when a parent ‘gives their child away’, but it can present a developmental challenge for the parents and adult children to further separate. As a continuation of the Oedipus complex, romantic bonds are unconsciously experienced on both sides as matricide or patricide, and create subtle conflicts exemplified by Aida’s dilemma.

As we so often see in couples work, this separation-individuation process may continue into married life trickling down into such matters as where to live, how to raise children, what holiday traditions to observe and so on. Issues such as these require conscious and unconscious navigation and working through. Staying within *Aida*’s metaphor, the new couple will have to settle whether to live as Ethiopians or Egyptians. If the separation-individuation process proceeds well, they will become neither, and instead, through a process that is simultaneously creative and destructive, they will arrive at something of a new ‘melting pot’ identity.

Using the Oedipus complex as a framework often leads to a focus on jealousy, competition, and hostile feelings towards the rival parent, but conflicts concerning positive and loyal feelings are every bit as central, and they are central to this opera. This is expressed in the theme of patriotism that runs throughout *Aida*, for example in Act II when the chorus sings “Glory to Egypt”, (“Esultate”) or Act III when Aida’s father persuades her to spy for Ethiopia. Psychoanalytically speaking, patriotism may be viewed as the projection of love for mother or father (land) on the one hand, and the projection of narcissism into culture, tradition, and geography on the other. George Bernard Shaw captured this well in his oft-quoted remark that “Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it” (cited in Ben-Ze’Ev, 2000, p. 259). I’ll return to this theme of loyalty in a moment.

It makes a sort of poetic sense that in Act II, after Amneris tricks Aida into revealing her love and is consumed with jealousy and hatred, the action moves to the gates of Thebes, not the Thebes of Oedipus in Greece, but Thebes in Egypt. With the heralding fanfare of the trumpets, Radames returns victorious, and the Pharaoh is ready to grant any wish. The all-seeing audience knows Radames’ true wish is for the hand of Aida, but he hesitates (out of guilt and fear) to make his desire known. In the background, the Priests (as superego figures) call for the execution of the Ethiopians while Radames pleads for mercy. The Pharaoh then issues a stunning announcement: “Radames, the country owes everything to you. The hand of Amneris shall be your reward. One day, with her, you shall rule over Egypt” (Act II, Scene I)

This scene reflects the uneasy and ambivalent resolution of the Oedipal complex. The Law of the Father decrees that the “son” shall not have the woman he truly desires, but instead, in her place, he is offered the promise of a substitute woman once he has

grown up and is ready for his own kingdom. The uneasy acceptance of the Law of the Father is played out in Act III which is essentially an extended dramatic meditation on the conflict between loyalty to father and love for the true object of desire. In the aria between Aida and Amonasro, Aida's father persuades her to put loyalty to father and country above love for Radames. Later, in Aida's aria she persuades Radames to put love for her above loyalty to his fatherland.

In the background of the stage set, the Evil Eye stares on relentlessly, symbolizing the fateful forces of civilization poised against the lovers. Radames is sentenced to death for betraying his country. In Act IV the drama completes its arc from the celestial to the earthbound, from Radames' "Celeste Aida" ("Heavenly Aida") which opens the opera, to the duet "O, terra, addio, valle di pianti!" ("Oh, earth, farewell! Farewell, vale of tears!"). We have arrived at the dénouement of the opera, the famous scene in which the temple towers over the tomb. This scene is traditionally staged with the temple literally positioned above the tomb in a huge 'two-story' (conscious-unconscious) stage set. The Pharaoh, the priests, and Amneris stand far above Radames, who is entombed far below where, to his surprise, he is joined by Aida to be buried alive with their love.

Concluding Comments

The development of the full potential for intimacy, excitement, and emotional depth in romantic love is central to our work with patients and, for most of us personally, central to experiencing life with a sense of meaning and vitality. It would seem from our collective explorations in psychoanalytic work that romantic love must run a gauntlet thrown down first by the omnipotent ego invested in protecting itself from the vulnerability of dependence, and secondly by the conflicted loyalties of the Oedipus

situation and the social order. In this essay I have suggested that the former themes are primary in *Otello*, and that the latter themes are primary in *Aida*. In *Otello*, love subverts the illusion of omnipotent independence through the challenge of vulnerability and dependence. In *Aida*, love subverts the pre-existing balance of parental loyalties, and is in turn subverted by the family social order. Developmentally speaking, the challenges dramatized in *Aida* are sequential to, and made possible by, traversing the challenges enacted in *Otello*. Of course, in actual emotional life, the complexity of love is never so clear-cut, and both themes will be intricately and organically intertwined.

In the Oedipus myth, the Sphinx poses the well-known question: “What is it that goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?” In the reading of *Aida* and *Otello* I have been discussing, the question posed is: “What is it that arrives unbidden in the morning, disturbs everyone in the afternoon, and must be entombed in the evening?” The answer appears to be love: love that challenges the omnipotent ego, love that challenges the family triangle, and love that challenges pre-existing duty and loyalty. These elements of love in *Otello* and *Aida* are the exploded, scattered, kaleidoscopic remnants of the infantile pre-Oedipal and Oedipal situation. The final stage set in *Aida* beautifully dramatizes the archeological metaphors so favored by Freud: illicit and threatening forms of love must be buried and entombed...in a word, repressed. From the standpoint of those in the temple (consciousness), the temple appears to have triumphed over the tomb (unconscious). However, from the analytic position of the audience, we recognize the total situation and perhaps identify with the subterranean triumph of the lovers who have secretly succeeded in remaining together for eternity. In the motherland and fatherland of the psyche, the uneasy tension and balance between the temple and the tomb lives on timelessly and forever.

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