FROM HUGO'S HERNANI AND LE ROI S'AMUSE TO VERDI'S ERNANI AND RIGOLETTO: NEW DIRECTIONS IN THEATRE AND MUSIC

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I propose to examine the process by which two romantic dramas of Victor Hugo--Hernani and Le Roi s'amuse--were transformed first into libretti by Francesco Maria Piave, and then into operas by Giuseppe Verdi. Most scholars and critics agree that Piave's and Verdi's adaptations of Hugo's plays are the more successful as dramatic works, and one of my objectives is to illustrate why this judgement has been made.

Since both the plays and the operas in question are products of European romanticism, they are infused with the revolutionary spirit that characterizes many of the artistic endeavours of the time. Since both Hugo's and Verdi's art was often viewed as politically subversive, it was subjected to official scrutiny and censorship. Thus, my second main objective is to show how Hugo and Verdi played active roles in the struggle for political and artistic freedom in nineteenth-century European society.

My approach throughout the thesis is primarily historical, since the artistic creations of both Hugo and Verdi were clearly a reflection of the social and political upheavals of their times.

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INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, the vast majority of Italian operas were based upon the literature of other countries, notably France, England and Germany. As Julian Budden states in his introduction to The Operas of Verdi: "Besides the dramas of Schiller, Shakespeare, Byron and Hugo, the novels of Scott and Bulwer Lytton, a favorite hunting ground was the Parisian theatre world, which produced on an average fifty new plays in a year" (21). In this thesis I propose to explore the relationship between French romantic theatre and Italian opera of the same period. Specifically I wish to focus on two plays of Victor Hugo --Hernani and Le Roi s'amuse--and their subsequent adaptations as operas by Giuseppe Verdi and his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave. Ernani is one of the composer's early successes, whereas Rigoletto is regarded as one of Verdi's most innovative and enduringly popular masterpieces. Crucial to this discussion is the fact that in the first half of the nineteenth century, French theatre and Italian opera underwent a similar metamorphosis. Casting off the constraints imposed upon them in the previous century, the two genres gradually came to assimilate the aesthetics of romanticism, an artistic movement that had been gaining momentum since the late eighteenth century. Although there was strong opposition from political leaders and conservative audiences, romanticism in theatre and opera eventually triumphed and ushered in a new period of artistic freedom.

Although working in different countries and under different

political and social circumstances, Hugo and Verdi encountered similar resistance on the part of government officials who viewed many of their works as politically subversive. Censorship battles were frequent. Le Roi s'amuse, for example, created such a scandal at its premiere that the government immediately prohibited further performances. Verdi too encountered similar problems with government censors who were disturbed by the revolutionary overtones in his operas. However, in the face of such powerful opposition, both men demonstrated courage and tenacity in their fight for artistic freedom--a fight which, Hugo in particular, viewed as a sacred duty.

My first objective in this thesis is to define the social and political context against which Hugo and Verdi were reacting. As romantic artists, both men consciously infused their works with the revolutionary spirit that characterizes much of the artistic endeavour of the period. In the first chapter I discuss the impact of romanticism upon French dramatic theories and practices. Victor Hugo played a leading role in the creation of a new kind of drama--the romantic *drame*. The discussion focuses on the *Bataille d'Hernani*, an event which symbolized the victory of romanticism over neo-classicism in French theatre.

In Chapter 2 I describe the political and social climate in early nineteenth-century Italy. The Italian struggle for independance--the Risorgimento--was the backdrop for the emergence of Italian romantic opera. Like much of the literature it was based on, Italian opera became politicised, reflecting the fervor and the ideals of the nationalist cause. Early on in his career Verdi was hailed as the composer of the Risorgimento. In

Ernani, Verdi takes what is essentially Hugolian melodrama and transforms it into a musical allegory of the Italian fight for freedom and independance.

In the third chapter I focus on Le Roi s'amuse and on Hugo's battles with the Parisian censors. At the time that Hugo was writing his romantic dramas, political censorship, although theoretically abolished, still affected almost every literary endeavor. In this chapter I outline the limitations placed upon French dramatists by the ultra-conservative regime of Louis-Philippe. Because Le Roi s'amuse was viewed as an attack on the established political and social order, it was banned after its first performance. As a result, Hugo took the unprecedented step of launching a court case against the government in an attempt to prove that censorship was both illegal and immoral.

Chapter 4 of this thesis concentrates on the relationship between Hugo and Verdi, and in particular, on the transformation of Le Roi s'amuse into Rigoletto. It is significant that the play upon which this epoch-making opera is based has been considered a failure on several levels. At the premiere of Le Roi s'amuse in 1832, audiences and critics alike were shocked and repulsed by its "immorality," its morbid plot, and its grotesque characters. Literary scholars affirm that the play's inherent flaws as a dramatic work prevented its success. Moreover, most musicologists agree that Hugo's plays have fared much better as operas than as spoken dramas--Rigoletto being a case in point. A hundred years ago George Bernard Shaw stated that "the chief glory of Victor Hugo as a stage poet was to have provided libretti for Verdi" (qtd. in Barricelli 17). Indeed, of the

dozen or so plays that Hugo wrote, few are today considered worthy of performance. This contrasts with the enduring popularity of Verdi's operas. What is it about Hugo's plays, then, that has caused us to regard them primarily as "versified melodramas?" And what is it about Verdi's operas that ensures their continued prominence in the repertoire? Is there something in the nature of the two theatrical genres that accounts for this disparity? These are the questions I wish to address in my discussion of Le Roi s'amuse and Rigoletto.

Although Verdi continually expressed his admiration for the dramatic potential of Hugo's plays, Hugo, by contrast, harboured a deep resentment towards the composer. In spite of their immense popularity, he dismissed Ernani and Rigoletto as clumsy travesties. But as I hope to demonstrate in my discussion of these operas, Hugo had much to envy, and to admire. So not only was he the champion of romanticism in French theatre, Victor Hugo also played an important (if unwilling) role in the the dawn of a new, glorious era in Italian opera.

CHAPTER 1

LA BATAILLE D'"HERNANI"

Hugo's Hernani is commonly regarded by literary scholars as the play which symbolized the defeat of French neo-classical drama and assured the success of the romantic school of play writing. The year 1830, the year of the first production of this play and the ensuing *Bataille d'Hernani*, represents a turning point in French theatrical history. In this chapter I wish to examine the social, political and aesthetic context that provided the backdrop to the creation of Hernani, and more specifically, the ways in which Hugo aggressively defied the theatrical conventions of the 1820's. In particular, the questions that I wish to consider are: what was revolutionary about Hernani, and what was its impact on the public, the critics, and on French theatre in general?

The emergence of French Romantic Drama

Before one can arrive at an understanding of what was new and innovative about Hernani, it is necessary to examine the neo-classical precedents and traditions to which the play was reacting. For more than 150 years, from the mid-seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth, French drama had been subjected to rigid constraints regarding form, subject matter and use of language. The Aristotelian unities of time, place and action, as well as the "implicit fourth unity, unity of tone, which was even more important than the notorious [other] three," (Howarth Drama 207) had been strictly adhered to from the days of

Corneille and Racine, to the Revolution, and beyond. During this period, neo-classicism remained virtually unchallenged as the only acceptable model for dramatic expression. New theatrical genres, such as the *comédie larmoyante* and the *drame bourgeois* began to deviate from neo-classical rules, though their influence was not immediately felt. David Evans states in his introduction to Hernani:

> Whatever may have been the influence of such plays . . . upon [neo-classical tragedy] (and they were numerous enough to have made a considerable impression), as a form of art the eighteenth-century *drame* was not destined to survive. . . . This aesthetic failure of the *drame bourgeois* must be ascribed to the fact that the conventions governing literature were too strong yet to be overcome. Nor was there in evidence a definite desire to overcome them. Despite their keen interest in drama and the importance which they attached to its spectacular side, Diderot and his followers were, on the whole, too much taken up with Philosophy to have time for debating such questions as the Rules of Unity. Throughout the century, therefore, the *tragédie* continued to be regarded as the sole legitimate form of serious drama by those whose opinions mattered, until the turmoil of revolution swept aside these arbiters of taste. . . . (16-17)

The early romanticism of other countries in the latter half of the eighteenth century had little impact on the French theatrical establishment. The German *Sturm und Drang* of the 1770's and the romantic plays of Goethe and Schiller went largely unnoticed mainly because of their incompatablity with neo-classical rules. Whereas the German dramatists of this period looked to Shakespeare for inspiration, the French advocates of Shakespeare were all but silenced by the authority of the *Philosophes* of the Enlightenment, particularly Voltaire.

Voltaire, who had praised Shakespeare in the 1730's, changed his views towards the end of his life, and his admiration was replaced by a profound distaste. In an essay on romantic drama, William Howarth writes: "Shakespeare, hailed [by Voltaire] in 1734 as a poet of genius, had become, by the time of the Preface to Irène (1778), 'un sauvage avec des étincelles de génie qui brillent dans une nuit horrible'" (Drama 206). What Voltaire and other writers of the French Enlightenment found particularly unacceptable was Shakespeare's total disregard for *les règles*; the unities were not respected, comic and tragic elements were found in the same play, and Shakespearean language was considered to be too crude and contained too many banalities--in short, it wasn't "heroic" enough.

Voltaire's criticism of the beginning of Hamlet is typical of the neo-classical point of view. When the guard says that there is "not a mouse stirring" to describe the quietness of the night, Voltaire comments, "Je vous dirai qu'il n'y a ni harmonie ni vérité intéressante dans ce quilobet d'un soldat: 'Je n'ai entendu une souris trotter'" (qtd. in Howarth Drama 207). "Mouse" belongs to the language of common, everyday experience, and according to the neo-classicists, such banalities had no place on the tragic stage. Howarth continues:

> Such total inability to accept a freer and more suggestive poetic expression, as a valid alternative to *le style noble* from which all concrete, technical or everyday vocabulary was excluded, was the principal obstacle to the creation of a drama capable of expressing the new ideas of the Age of Sensibililty. Voltaire's translation of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy from Hamlet . . . is a clear demonstration of the incompatability of two imaginative processes:

> Shakespeare's rich and colourful imagery is throughout replaced by the colourless abstractions and the cliché-like epithets that characterised the neo-classical tragedies themselves. (Drama 207)

The neo-classical tradition was so firmly entrenched in the French artistic psyche that most tragedies of the early nineteenth century showed little evolution since the time of Louis XIV. Though no longer restricted to the history and mythology of ancient Greece and Rome, dramatists were still deprived of the linguistic resources with which to represent local colour, or to express ideas and feelings specific to a given time and place.

By the early nineteenth century, however, the French literary scene began to change. One of the most influential of the early romantic theorists was Madame de Staël. In De l'Allemagne (1810) she provided an in-depth discussion of German literature, including the plays of Goethe and Schiller. She encouraged the young writers of France to regard the German theatre, as well as the plays of Shakespeare, as their model. Partly because of de Staël's influence, the French began to show a much greater interest in the theatrical traditions of other cultures, and translations of foreign authors flooded the market in the years leading up to the Restoration. Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, Schiller and Milton were sold and read in enormous quantity, but the overall effect on the theatre was negligible. Apparently "it proved easier to pontificate than to create" (Wren 12). The public was not yet ready for a new form of drama, and the successes of the period, plays like Lebrun's Marie Stuart

(1820), were written largely to conform to existing neo-classical norms. To make matters more difficult, full censorship was reimposed in 1820 by the Bourbon government, a condition which certainly discouraged the creation of plays that could be thought of as innovative or controversial. Indeed, it was the time of the *scène historique*, closet dramas meant to be read rather than performed, and which often contained a dissenting political message. Wren states: "Manifestos abounded . . . Stendhal's two pamphlets entitled 'Racine' and 'Shakespeare' (1823 and 1825) are the best known--but theories were not successfully put into practise" (12-13).

Victor Hugo played an important role in the creation of a new dramatic form. Interestingly, Hugo's attitudes towards neo-classicism had not always been so critical. At an early age he had received official recognition for his talents as a poet and had been championed by the political and literary establishment of the Restoration. From 1817 to 1819 he had success in competitions organized by the Académie, and in 1820 he received a *gratification* from Louis XVII for an "Ode sur la mort du duc de Berry." Two years later he was awarded a royal pension upon the publication of his Odes et Poésies diverses. It is not surprising, then, that he should adopt a conservative point of view and uphold the neo-classical traditions. For example, in 1820 he wrote that the plays of Shakespeare and Schiller were inferior to those of Corneille and Racine. But in his development as an artist, and particularly through his contact with other young romantic writers--men such as Nodier, Vigny and Soumet--he soon found that the traditional views were

artistically restrictive and incompatible with his emerging democratic ideals.

In his 1823 review of Scott's Quentin Durward, Hugo proposed that drama is a reflection of all human life, that in life there is a constant interplay between the elements of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, comic and tragic. In 1827 these ideas were definitively expressed in the "Préface de Cromwell," a document in which Hugo turned his back on two hundred years of French drama and proposed new aesthetic principles for the theatre of the future. As there already had been much theorizing on theatrical reform by many of Hugo's contemporaries, the actual message of the Preface was not entirely new or original. It was, however, a brilliant synthesis of the ideas that a new generation of French writers and intellectuals had been formulating for several years. Because of its powerful, imaginative language combined with its relative brevity, the "Préface de Cromwell" created an enormous stir--greater, to be sure, than the play it preceded.

In the Preface Hugo calls for the abolition of the unities of time and place, and the retention of the unity of action, "la seule vraie et fondée" (66). He rejects all imitation and all rules, except the rules of nature--"il n'y a ni règles ni modèles"--arguing that "tout ce qui est dans la nature est dans l'art" (77). However, it is not enough that art simply hold up a mirror to nature--mere reproduction does not constitute art--but art should act like a "miroir de concentration" (82) to give it coherence and focus, to make it appear, in fact, larger than life. Hugo argues that

> [this] process . . . is assisted by the retention of verse, "la forme optique de la pensée" which preserves the *drame* from prosaism. The alexandrine meter, nevertheless, had to be liberated in both form and content from *le style noble*--"un vers libre, franc, loyal, osant tout dire sans pruderie, tout exprimer sans recherche." (Wren 13)

Tragedy, with its roots in the pagan antiquity of classical Greece and Rome, was to give way to the *drame* which was more suited to our Christian era in that, like Christianity, it acknowledged the duality of man, the *sublime* and the *grotesque* elements of human nature. A truer portrayal of human nature could thus be realized through the blending of comic and tragic genres, and through the creation of characters who, like real people, are a mixture of good and evil. When a character is able to transcend the *grotesque* side of his nature--Triboulet in Le Roi s'amuse being an obvious example--he is able to rise to the level of the *sublime*.[1]

To sum up, the "Préface de Cromwell" was Hugo's theatrical credo in which he rejected many of the old rules and restrictions of neo-classical drama; two of the three unities were to be eliminated, with only the unity of action being retained. Although alexandrine versification remained the mode of expression most suited to the new *drame*, the cold, abstract *style noble* was to yield to a much freer, more colourful use of language. Finally, drama was to reflect, or somehow magnify, nature; the *sublime* and *grotesque* sides of nature--particularly

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[1]Sometimes, however, either the *grotesque* or the *sublime* dominates a character completely--Doña Sol being an example of the latter.

human nature--were to receive equal representation on the stage.[2]

In addition to the "Préface de Cromwell," another important influence on the romantic drama was melodrama. The *mélodrames* of the Parisian Boulevard theatres had enjoyed enormous popularity since the late eighteenth century. Established by Guilbert de Pixérécourt and others around 1800, melodrama was a simple, unsophisticated art form for the entertainment and the moral instruction of a simple, unsophisticated audience. Pixérécourt claimed that he wrote "pour ceux qui ne savent pas lire" (qtd. in Coe 58). Simple as they were, by the 1820's these plays were diverting audiences away from the Théâtre-Français and the other bastions of neo-classical tragedy. After the Revolution, melodrama became increasingly the form of entertainment to which the public turned, since many were no longer satisfied by plays which embodied the elitist ideals and restrictions of the *Ancien Régime*. In an article on French melodrama, Maureen Turim writes: "melodrama was born out of a shared impulse to compete with the official theatres linked to royal decree and the aristocracy. So . . . melodrama represents a more popular theatrical form, the beginnings of a mass entertainment, to be consumed by the urban proletariat and the bourgeoisie" (308). It is interesting to note that, unlike the melodramas of other countries--England and Germany, for example--French melodrama was the most cautious in

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[2]Ironically, the "Préface de Cromwell" turned out to be of far greater importance than Cromwell itself, which was unstageable owing to its excessive length and number of characters. However, Cromwell blazed the trail, not only for Hugo, but for other French romantic dramatists. It should be noted that, although Hugo was the pioneer, it was Musset who, in 1833, created the true *chef-d'oeuvre* of the French romantic theatre: Lorenzaccio.

its defiance of the neo-classical tradition. Turim writes that many French melodramas retained the unities of time, space and action, and it wasn't until later in the history of French melodrama that "the imperative of formal unity relax[ed], with spatial unity being the first to disappear" (308-9).

Beyond the familiarity of its form, what was it about melodrama that made it so popular not only with the working-class, but with the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy as well? More than anything else, it offered action and passion. The morals may have been simple, but the plots were bafflingly complex. In their analysis of Hernani, Jacques and Sylvie Dauvin write of the popularity of melodrama and its influence on young romantic authors like Hugo:

> Le public? Il se presse au Bouleverd du Temple, aux mélodrames populaires: action violente, *suspense*, empoisonnements, amoureux attendrissants, traîtres plus noirs que l'encre, bref, tous les ingrédients d'un policier de série B. Les jeunes auteurs romantiques y retrouvent--même caricaturé--ce qui leur a plu dans le théâtre de Schiller ou de Shakespeare. Le moment semble venu de donner au public la tragédie moderne qu'il attend. (6)

Peter Brooks affirms: "It would only be a slight exaggeration to argue that in France melodrama quite literally lies at the source of romantic aesthetics of dramatization, in the theatre and the novel" (qtd. in Howarth 217). In a sense melodrama constituted the real theatrical avant-garde of the 1820's:

> Elaborate set designs and realistic effects were the stock-in-trade of the melodrama. Designers . . . abandoned the neo-classical conventions of design for the exotic locales, atmospheric effects, and local color advocated by the romantics. In fact, in scenic terms, the complete romantic iconography--natural vistas, melancholy ruins, historical accuracy--was to be found in the boulevard theatres of the 1820's. It was also on the boulevard that a new generation of actors was trained in a style both more "passionate" and more "realistic" than that of the actors of the Comédie-Française. (Daniels 9)

Indeed, in Hernani itself there are passages that appear to be lifted directly from Pixérécourt's L'Homme à trois visages, which he wrote in 1801. If one compares act 2, scene 12 from Pixérécourt with act 2, scene 3 from Hugo's play, for example, one notices that in action and in mood the imitation is obvious. Both scenes involve a confrontation between a powerful political leader and the young hero he has wronged. In L'Homme à trois visages the Doge of Venice has banished and mistreated Vivaldi, a situation identical to that of Hernani and Don Carlos. Both are bravura scenes in which Vivaldi and Hernani swear that they will avenge the injustices of their persecutors. In his study of Hernani, George Lote remarks: "La situation et le mouvement des deux scènes, chez Pixérécourt et chez Hugo, sont donc identiques. . . . [Les similarités] prouvent que V. Hugo connaissait à fond le répertoire du Boulevard, et qu'il en était l'admirateur" (167-8). What distinguishes Hugo's verse drama from simple melodrama, however, is his genius for lyrical language. Although Hernani, Ruy Blas and Le Roi s'amuse are loaded with stock melodramatic devices and situations, it is the beauty of Hugo's poetry that truly saves these plays and elevates them to a level above and

beyond the popular art form.

La Bataille d'"Hernani"

> The period 1827-1830 was marked by an increase of [literary] activity as the climactic first night of Hernani approached. . . . By the end of the 1820's, the French romantics had produced a significant body of literature including poetry, novels, historical sketches, and theory. It remained for them to conquer the theatre. This would be the work of the year beginning in February 1829 and culminating with the production of Hernani in February 1830. (Daniels 7-8)

The final battle of French romanticism was waged in the theatre, and it was carefully commanded by Victor Hugo. Hugo had many allies in the war against neo-classicism; many were members of his *Cénacle*--a circle of writers and intellectuals who shared his aesthetic and political views. These included Nodier, Gautier, Stendhal, and Musset. This group of young poets and novelists was directly opposed to the neo-classicists, and their mission was to ensure the triumph of the romantic aesthetic, an aesthetic which so far had received its most eloquent expression in the "Préface de Cromwell."

Because of his literary brilliance and his advocacy of artistic and social freedoms, Hugo had become something of a cult figure for an entire generation of young people in France, a generation restless and agitating for change. Born at the beginning of the century, they had missed the emotion and the idealism of the Revolution and the heroics of the Napoleonic wars. Jacques and Sylvie Dauvin compare Hugo's generation to the counter-culture generation of the 1960's and, indeed, their comparison seems apt:

> Désemparés, le vague à l'âme, ils manifestent à leur façon leur révolte: ils laissent pousser leurs cheveux, s'accoutrent de vêtements excentriques et débraillés; c'est le style *Jeune-France*. Ces révoltés--si proches par tant de côtés (mal de vivre, goût des grandes idées, folklore vestimentaire) de ceux qu'on appelait en 1968 *les contestataires*--trouvent une réponse à leur malaise dans une forme nouvelle d'art: le romantisme. Dans cet art nouveau, mis en oeuvre par des artistes de leur âge, ils se reconnaissent mieux que dans les vieilles gloires dont parlent leurs manuels scolaires. (5)

Hugo's position as a sort of guru for these disillusioned *Jeunes-France* had begun to worry the conservative establishment since his views, both artistic and political, were clearly opposed to the status quo. Hugo criticized the Bourbon monarchy on the grounds that it was repressive and intolerant, and he spoke out against the death penalty and other forms of social injustice. In short, Hugo called for freedom and tolerance both in art and politics, and he saw the two as interrelated. In the preface to Hernani he makes his position clear:

> . . . le libéralisme littéraire ne sera pas moins populaire que le libéralisme politique. La liberté dans l'art, la liberté dans la société, voilà le double but auquel doivent tendre d'un même pas tous les esprits conséquents et logiques; voilà la double bannière qui rallie . . . toute la jeunesse si forte et si patiente d'aujourd'hui. . . . (311-2)

Later he states that the will of the people is sacred, and that art, like government, should answer to their demands for tolerance and freedom. Clearly Hugo's call for tolerance and freedom applies not only to literature, but to politics as well: "Cette voix haute et puissante du peuple, qui ressemble à celle

de Dieu, veut désormais que la poésie ait la même devise que la politique: TOLÉRANCE ET LIBERTÉ. Maintenant vienne le poète! Il a un public" (313).

Hernani premiered on 25 February 1830, and as it was the first play produced to carry his name, Hugo took great pains to ensure its success. Aware that a *cabale* would be formed by neo-classical opponents to romantic drama, Hugo mobilized his own group of supporters--"poètes et rapins de vingt ans" (Richard 14) as well as literary friends--in order to outnumber and intimidate the opposition. Also, foreseeing an extremely negative reaction on the part of the press, Hugo published anonymously a favorable article in the Journal des Débats the day before the first performance.

The opening night and the ensuing *Bataille d'Hernani* represent the decisive victory of romanticism over neo-classicism in French theatre. Indeed, as an event the *Bataille* has created far greater interest than the work that prompted it. With almost military precision and smoothness, "l'armée romantique" was mobilized in order to thwart "les manoeuvres des classiques" (Lote 63). The pro-Hugo *claque* was in the theatre by two o'clock in the afternoon and had taken up positions on the *parterre* and in the second gallery. Pierre Richard offers an amusing description of the scene:

> Cette claque gratuite [Hugo had paid for their admission], remplaçant la claque payée, considérée comme suspecte, fit échec à l'opposition classique des fauteuils et des loges, qu'elle bouscula de ses outrances vestimentaires et capilaires, de ses apostrophes à l'emporte-pièce, de ses farces gamines. (14)

Richard elaborates on a few of these "farces" which are not only amusing for their impertinence, but also underline the symbolic importance that both sides saw in the performance: "Pendant que Balzac recevait en plein figure un trognon de chou, un *Jeune-France* répondait à une dame mûre, 'Ne riez pas Madame, vous montrez vos dents'" (32). At another point there began a "pluie de petits papiers sur les perruques et les jabots des classiques." Jacques and Sylvie Dauvin note that the *Bataille* did not end with the first performance:

> La pièce se joue dans un chahut monstre, on entend à peine, mais c'est un triomphe. Une large partie de presse prend sa revanche le lendemain et se déchaîne contre Hugo, "un insensé, ami de truands" qui présente des criminels comme des héros. La bataille s'amplifie aux représentations suivantes: offensives et contre-offensives opposent longtemps Hernanistes et leurs adversaires, ce qui assure--scandale oblige--une recette exceptionnelle. (8)

The *Bataille d'Hernani* lasted for the entire run of the play (36 performances between 25 February and 22 June 1830) but it subsided thereafter: "Après 1830, la cabale ayant cessé, la pièce ne soulève plus la moindre protestation et suit une carrière normale" (Halbwachs 70).

What was it about Hernani that provoked such a violent reaction? First of all, as dramatic literature, Hernani violated almost all the rules of neo-classicism. Secondly, the play was seen as politically subversive, since the hero of the play, an aristocrat-turned-outlaw, acts in direct defiance to the laws of his king and his society. There are numerous instances where Hugo makes his political views quite clear. In the monologue of

act 4, scene 2, in particular, in which Don Carlos invokes Charlemagne, Hugo "makes a sustained attack on the Bourbon government while asserting his Bonapartist ideals" (Wren 35). Newly-elected as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Carlos stands before the tomb of Charlemagne where he undergoes a rather unconvincing metamorphosis, suddenly changing from a morally bankrupt *ravisseur* of women and political megalomaniac to a clement and responsible leader. In this scene Carlos is little more than Hugo's political mouthpiece, and his rhetoric has less to do with Charlemagne or Carlos' character than with Hugo's admiration for Napoleon and his vision of an ideal political régime led by an elected ruler.

But it was the language of Hernani, more than its political overtones or its melodramatic plot, that was the main source of delight or disgust, depending upon which side one was on. Hugo has been credited with the liberation of the alexandrine and the expansion of the poetic vocabulary. Hugo opens the play with Doña Josepha's famous *enjambement*--"Serait-ce déjà lui? C'est bien à l'escalier / Dérobé" (1.1.1-2)--which is followed almost immediately by three further examples of the same device, in lines spoken by Don Carlos. The suppression of the *style noble* resulted in a far greater range of expression, and the richness and the lyrical intensity of the language are the chief glories of the play. By liberating the language from its neo-classical constraints, Hugo created a kind of drama that was entirely new. The various monologues and the "love duets" of Hernani and Doña Sol are almost operatic in their intensity and create a "charged and charmed atmosphere" (Wren 24). Howarth too compares the

language of Hernani to romantic opera. He states:

> . . . the kind of imaginative writing exemplified by such varied passages as Hernani's lyrical description of the bandit's life, his invective against Carlos, Ruy Gomez's elegy on old age, Carlos's act 4 monologue, or the marvellous love-duet of the last act, is no superficial decoration; it permeates the whole of Hugo's drama. As in romantic opera, these virtuoso passages--together with the flow and sparkle of imaginative writing, in lower key, throughout the play --are really what count. . . . It is by his operatic treatment of . . . perennial themes, which denotes a concept of drama totally different from the worn-out neo-classical formula, that Hugo the tragic poet has succeeded in creating a new *sublime*. (Hugo 70-1)

Ruy Gomez's speech in act 3, in which he laments the passing of his youth, exemplifies of the kind of operatic lyricism that Howarth describes:

> Quand passe un jeune pâtre--oui, c'en est là!--souvent,
> Tandis que nous allons, lui chantant, moi rêvant,
> Lui dans son pré vert, moi dans mes noires allées,
> Souvent je dis tout bas: O mes tours crénelées,
> Mon vieux donjon ducal, que je vous donnerais,
> Oh! que je donnerais mes blés et mes forêts,
> Et les vastes troupeaux qui tondent mes collines,
> Mon vieux nom, mon vieux titre, et toutes mes ruines,
> Et tous mes vieux aïeux qui bientôt m'attendront,
> Pour sa chaumière neuve et pour son jeune front!
> Car ses cheveux sont noirs, car son oeil reluit comme
> Le tien, tu peux le voir, et dire: Ce jeune homme!
> Et puis, penser à moi qui suis vieux. Je le sais!
> Pourtant j'ai nom Silva, mais ce n'est plus assez!
> Oui, je me dis cela. Vois à quel point je t'aime!
> Le tout, pour être jeune et beau, comme toi-même!
> Mais à quoi vais-je ici rêver? Moi, jeune et beau!
> Qui te dois de si loin devancer au tombeau! (3.1.735-52)

The devices Hugo uses in this passage are simple, and are based on the requirements of spoken delivery. However, these devices,

such as repetition ("que je vous donnerais / Oh! que je donnerais"; "Mon vieux nom, mon vieux titre"; "Et toutes mes ruines, / Et tous mes vieux aïeux"), alliteration ("Mon vieux donjon ducal, que je vous donnerais"; "Et les vastes troupeaux qui tondent mes collines"), and the constant play on the opposition between "jeune" and "vieux," impart a genuinely musical character to Ruy Gomez's reflections on old age and death. Howarth comments further:

> Such a passage is far from being an isolated *hors d'oeuvre*; it expresses the very essence if the character's situation throughout the play . . . . These are not gratuitous "lyrical" embellishments on the surface of a conventionally "dramatic" plot: the two elements are integrated into a new concept of "lyrical drama," and the term fits Hugo's tragedies just as well as the opera to which it is more often applied. (71)

To sum up, in writing Hernani, Hugo's principal aim of liberating verse drama from its previous constraints was largely realized, and as a result, he succeeded in creating a new kind of theatrical experience. Despite its obvious flaws (an implausible plot, numerous historical inaccuracies, superficial character development, etc.), Hernani succeeds on the strength of its lyricism and its youthful ardour. Ultimately, the *Bataille d'Hernani* spelled doom for a generation whose ideas and aesthetics no longer prevailed in the rapidly changing world of the 1830's. For these people, the writings of Hugo, the paintings of Delacroix, and the music of Berlioz represented all that was violent, chaotic and irrational. It was an artistic revolution. Pierre Halbwachs eloquently describes the fear and

anger that the older generation must have felt upon viewing the spectacle of Hernani: "Pour les esprits conservateurs, légimitistes et ultras, c'était l'anarchie imposée par la violence, la dictature de la démagogie et de la canaille, c'était bien la Révolution française montrant sur la scène son mufle ensanglanté" (108). For Hugo, Hernani was a trial run for a new kind of theatre. For the *jeune garde*, however, Hernani was about them--about their hopes and their confused ideas, their love for life and their disgust for society.

CHAPTER 2

"ERNANI INVOLAMI": ITALIAN ROMANTIC OPERA AND THE RISORGIMENTO

Like Hugo's Hernani, which had been a triumph for the author fourteen years earlier, Verdi's 1844 adaptation of the play is similarly regarded as an early milestone in the composer's career. Although the opera owed most of its success to its youthful energy and its "wealth of gloriously singable tunes," (Osborne Operas 91) the work also contained an obvious political message. It was no secret that Verdi sympathised with the patriotic cause of the Risorgimento, and like most of his countrymen, he dreamed of the day when Italy would be free from foreign control. In this chapter I propose to examine Italian romantic opera in the context of the Italians' struggle for freedom and independance. Moreover, like Hugo's Hernani, Verdi's opera furthered the development of romanticism in art while challenging an oppressive political régime.

The political background

For the better part of the nineteenth century, Italy was in political chaos as Italian nationalists struggled to transform their country from an agglomeration of foreign-controlled principalities into a unified, modern nation. For three hundred years, Italy was divided into small states. Those in the north were under Austrian control, whereas the south was ruled by the Spanish Bourbons. Rome and several other territories remained under papal rule. From 1796 to 1815, France controlled Italy, but after the collapse of the Napoleonic régime, Austria and

Spain assumed their former powers. As Luigi Villari points out,

> . . . the newly restored governments might easily have achieved popularity among peoples worn out by the terrrible drain of men and money caused by the Napoleonic wars. But in their terror of revolution, they failed to realize that the past [French] regime had wafted a breath of new life into Italy, and that the new-born idea of Italian unity was a force to be reckoned with. . . . [There] was a sense of despair at Italy's degradation and an incipient hatred of foreign rule. . . . (801-2)

By the 1830's this hatred had reached the boiling point, and for the next forty years, Italy was the scene of a bloody but determined struggle for independance. In 1848 there were revolutionary uprisings in Milan and Rome (as there were in Paris and Vienna), but these were suppressed. It wasn't until 1870, after a struggle of more than half a century, that the liberation and unity of Italy were finally achieved.

The Rise of Romantic Opera

Despite the political turmoil during this time, opera continued to flourish; indeed, the nineteenth century is considered the Golden Age of Italian opera. As Budden states, the enormous popularity of opera at this time was primarily due to its status as a national institution:

> In Italy, empires might rise and empires might fall, but La Scala, Milan, and the Teatro la Fenice, Venice, still needed their two opere d'obbligo (new operas) for the winter season. Even in the darkest days of warfare and military occupation Italian opera remained a thriving industry with a wide market at home and abroad, largely due to the prowess of Italian singers. (Operas 3)

In addition, like French melodrama, or the cinema of the twentieth-century Depression years, Italian opera of the Risorgimento period became a means of escaping the harsh realities of war, political oppression, and economic hardship.

In Italy, as in most European countries, the linking of art to politics flourished with the rise of romanticism. By the 1830's, opera had become a medium by which nationalistic ideas could be communicated throughout the entire country. Unlike the French experience, however, the emergence of Italian romanticism in music and literature was much less tumultuous; there was no Italian "Préface de Cromwell," nothing as scandalous as the *Bataille d'Hernani*. In an article in which he compares Hugo's Hernani to Verdi's opera on the same subject, Jean-Paul Barricelli points out that in Italy romanticism was much less "sensational" than in France, mostly because Italians were more caught up with such immediate concerns as national unity than with sweeping changes in aesthetics (22-3). The assimilation of romantic ideals into opera was gradual, and composers were careful to offer their audiences a benign mixture of the old and the new.

Nevertheless, Italian opera underwent a dramatic transformation between 1790 and 1830. The most obvious changes resulted from the search for new modes of musical and dramatic expression. In the eighteenth century, composers were limited to two clearly delineated operatic genres: *seria* and *buffa*. Opera seria ("serious opera") was comparable in mood and subject to the neo-classical tragedies of Corneille, Racine and Voltaire. Opera

buffa, on the other hand, was similar to (and often based on) the sparkling comedies of Molière, Marivaux and Beaumarchais. Like their French dramatic counterparts, both genres strictly adhered to time-honoured conventions regarding almost every aspect of their form and their content. More than simply refined forms of entertainment, French tragedy and Italian opera seria were also highly didactic, often reflecting eighteenth-century ideals of reason, virtue, harmony, and noble self-sacrifice.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, Italian opera seria had become largely devoid of originality. Most operas were written as quickly as possible, and most attempted to appeal to the conservative tastes of patrons and audiences, or to the caprices of the singers. More often than not a composer would write his music with particular singers in mind, and it was normal for them to demand that an aria be altered in such a way as to better display their talents (or to mask their deficiencies). As a result, character or plot development were often secondary to virtuosity.

Most musical scholars credit Rossini for having rescued Italian opera. Budden states: "[Rossini] arrived on the scene in 1810, at a time when Italian opera had almost completely lost its way. . . . In ten years, from his double triumph with Tancredi and L'Italiana in Algeri in 1813 till his departure for Paris in 1822 after Semiramide, Rossini had revitalized the world of Italian opera, refashioning it in his own image" (Operas 9). Yet Rossini was no romantic; philosophically and stylistically he was much closer to Mozart than to Verdi. Nevertheless, Rossini was able to breathe new life into Italian opera. His influence on

later composers is undeniable, and his legacy was to have defined the form and language of early nineteenth-century Italian opera once and for all.

How might Italian opera of the 1830's and 40's--the "post-Rossini" period--be characterized? First, a new musical idiom had evolved which was based on the Italian tradition of *bel canto* (a simple, sweeping melodic line, often ravishingly beautiful) as well as on traditional folk melodies. Orchestration became more subtle and complex, more symphonic in nature.

Second, there was a tendency towards greater dramatic continuity. Gone were the days when operas consisted primarily of a series of extended solo arias (sometimes lasting more than a quarter of an hour) connected by *secco* (unaccompanied) recitatives. This structure repeatedly interrupted the flow of the action, and accounts for the static nature of most eighteenth-century opera. By contrast, in Verdi's operas for example, the dramatic tension is established immediately, and the plot advances much more quickly and convincingly. Although one encounters extended bravura arias in all of romantic opera, they are primarily intended to further our understanding of the character, rather than simply to show off the the singer's vocal skills. At the very least, they create a mood that is more in keeping with the dramatic situation at hand.

Third, romantic operas were often based on contemporary plays, novels and poems. Thus the idealized heroics of opera seria and the elegant farces of opera buffa were replaced by subjects which emulated the romantic literature of the period. As many of these subjects were highly melodramatic, the operas

they inspired were similarly dark and lurid, their endings often pessimistic. And fourth, by virtue of their patriotic or humanistic themes, these operas were much more "political" than their eighteenth-century predecessors. As we shall see in the last section of this chapter, works such as Ernani contained messages which challenged an oppressive political régime.

The Road to *Ernani*

Verdi wrote his first opera, Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio (1839) when he was 26. By the same age Hugo was already enjoying celebrity status as an important, if controversial, literary figure. Verdi's rise to fame, on the other hand, was not so meteoric. As a first attempt, Budden describes Oberto as an "interesting achievement . . . but let us not exaggerate" (Operas 66). Nevertheless, the opera enjoyed considerable success when it was performed during the Autumn season of 1839, and was revived on several occasions thereafter. On the strength of the work's popularity, Verdi was commissioned by La Scala to compose three more operas, to be performed at eight-month intervals. It was a promising start.

However, Verdi's next undertaking, Un Giorno di Regno, was a crushing failure when it premiered the following year. It was written when the composer was grieving the sudden loss of his wife. The preceding two years had also seen the deaths of his two children. Verdi described himself at the time as a "poor ailing young man working under pressure and heartbroken by a terrible catastrophe" (qtd. in Kimbell 96). It is easy to understand why Verdi had little heart for the composition of an

opera buffa, and the hostile reception given to Un Giorno de Regno caused him to renounce all aspirations of composing ever again. Thanks to the tactful encouragement of Merelli, the director of La Scala, as well as the successful revivals of Oberto, Verdi was at last persuaded to try again. In the early months of 1841 Merelli showed Verdi a recently completed libretto by Solera entitled Nabucodonosor. The composer's version of the story is that he took the manuscript home and threw it down on a table. His gaze fell upon the fateful line "Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate," which formed the basis of the famous patriotic chorus in the opera: "I ran through the verses that followed and was much moved, all the more because they were almost a paraphrase from the Bible, the reading of which had always delighted me" (qtd. in Kimbell 104).

Nabucco was first performed at La Scala on 9 March 1842. This work represented Verdi's first triumph with the Milanese audiences. Although the music was highly praised, the wildly enthusiastic response to the opera was due in part to its Risorgimento overtones. Nabucco is based on Old Testament references to the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar and his subjugation of Jerusalem. The chorus, "Va, pensiero," which had so moved Verdi when he first glanced at the libretto, is sung by the captive Jews as they toil on the banks of the Euphrates. Verdi's heartfelt setting of it caused the Milanese audience to identify themselves with the Jews of the Bible, and from that moment on, Verdi became the unofficial composer of the Risorgimento. As Osborne states, however, "[that] the composer had any conscious intention to stir his audience politically is

highly unlikely. But his sympathies were with the liberal cause of the Risorgimento, and there is no reason the think that he was at all displeased with the association made by his audiences" (Verdi 28). So unlike Hugo, who deliberately sought to provoke audiences by infusing his *drames* with subversive and revolutionary undercurrents, Verdi appears initially to have been more cautious. His main objective in writing Nabucco (and later Ernani) was to ensure his success with the public. Overtly patriotic operas such as Attila (1846) and La Battaglia di Legnano (1849) were to come later.

Neverthless, Verdi's next opera, I Lombardi (1843), aroused similar nationalistic fervor. The work was based on the narrative poem "I Lombardi alla prima crociata" ("The Lombards at the First Crusade") by the Milanese poet, Tomasso Grossi. When it was published in 1826, Grossi's poem about the eleventh-century defenders of the Christian faith had caused a great stir in northern Italy. Although its plot has been described as "sheer operatic kitsch," (Osborne Operas 74) I Lombardi was a huge popular success and was performed 27 times before the end of the season. Again, some of the opera's popularity was due to the fact that the Milanese audience saw themselves as the Lombards of old, and their Austrian overlords as the oppressive Saracens.

This brings us to Ernani, Verdi's next opera which was written for the autumn season of 1844. Although this was the work which firmly established Verdi's reputation as Italy's most gifted young composer, Hugo's play was not among the first subjects considered. Verdi seemed much more interested in plots derived from English drama or literature, among them Byron's "The

Corsair" and "The Two Foscari," both destined later to become Verdi operas. Another possibility was an opera about Catherine Howard, the unfortunate fifth wife of Henry VIII.

While Verdi was trying to decide upon a subject for his new opera, Francisco Maria Piave, a friend of the secretary of the Fenice in Venice, wrote to Verdi offering to provide him with a libretto entitled Cromvello. Piave was completely inexperienced as a librettist, but he was an excellent lyric poet. Verdi encouraged him to complete Cromvello, stating that he might eventually find a use for it. The two men were to become good friends, and Piave remained Verdi's regular librettist for nearly 20 years.

Piave's libretto for Cromvello proved unsatisfactory, however. Hugo's Hernani was mentioned, an idea which immediately fired Verdi's imagination. A few days later he wrote:

> Oh, if only we could do Hernani! how wonderful it would be! It's true that it would mean a lot of work for [Piave], but I would make it my duty to try to compensate him, and we would certainly create a much finer effect for the public. After all, Signor Piave has great facility in versifying, and in Hernani he would only have to condense and tighten up; the action is all there, ready made, and it's immensely theatrical. (qtd. in Osborne Verdi 36)

Once the synopsis had been passed by the censorship authorities (whose main concern was that the emperor Charles V of Spain should be made to appear as liberal and impressive and the conspirators as unthreatening as possible), Piave began work on the libretto. By the middle of November 1843, Verdi had completed the greater part of the opera. Ernani was given its

first performance at the Fenice on 6 March 1844, and was an immediate and resounding success. The Gazzetta Privilegiata di Venezia called the new opera "a triumph, in which everyone was happy and contented," while the critic of Il Gondoliere wrote:

> On the walls of our leading theatre there waves a banner on which there is written in letters of gold, Ernani. With a hundred voices the populace and the senators applaud this Spanish bandit. . . . The original drama is by Hugo, the Italian adaptation is by F. Piave, and the harmonies by Verdi, the delightful creator of I Lombardi and Nabucco. His latest strains intoxicate, four times over, even the souls of grave pedants and severe matrons. In the foyers, in the streets, in drawing-rooms, in cultivated gatherings, the new songs are on all lips. (qtd. in Osborne Verdi 39)

While the critics and the public applauded the "sweet melodies," the "choice harmonies," and the "splendid instrumentation," (qtd. in Osborne Verdi 39) the opera succeeded perhaps even more effectively than the play in expressing the revolutionary determination of the Italian nationalists. When Elvira invoked the bandit Ernani to come to rescue her from the repulsive embrace of Silva, it was clear to audiences that she represented the young Italy extending her arms to someone to deliver her from her old oppressors. In the conspiracy scene with the male chorus full of "incendiary phrases," (Osborne Operas 90) it was easy for the spectator to substitute mentally the word "Italy" for the word "Iberia." This chorus--"Si ridesti il Leon di Castiglia!" ("Awake, Lion of Castille!")--was at first banned by the censors, though Verdi was able to appease them by modifying a few verses. Osborne describes this chorus as "the

first of Verdi's stirringly active patriotic choruses as opposed to the . . . nostalgic choral numbers exemplified by 'Va, pensiero' in Nabucco. Out of context the Lion of Castille chorus sounds banal, but in the opera it . . . is capable of awakening feelings of group solidarity and togetherness" (Operas 90).

Like the play upon which it was based, Ernani was a powerful allegory which embodied the dreams of an entire generation. Hugo's drama spoke for the disilliusioned *Jeunes-France*, whereas Verdi's opera voices the passionate determination of the Italian nationalists. Thus when the Hugolian Hernani was transplanted across the Alps to become the Verdian Ernani, the subject acquired an explosive power that Hugo could never have suspected.

Ironically, one of the most hostile critics of Ernani was the playwright himself. Far from applauding the opera's beautiful music or, more significantly, its revolutionary overtones, Hugo condemned Ernani as a clumsy travesty of his play. Indeed, when the opera arrived at the Théâtre des Italiens two years later he insisted that the title and the names of the characters be changed. Such a reaction seems strange, given that both artists were creating works which advocated similar democratic ideals. In the case of Ernani, Hugo demonstrated the sort of *orgueil* for which he was sometimes criticised. Disregarding any artistic or social value that the opera might contain, Hugo was convinced that Verdi and Piave had exploited his play as a means of achieving fame and fortune, and disregarded Several years later Hugo expressed similar resentment towards Rigoletto. In Chapter 4 I discuss the relationship between the author and the composer in more detail.

By comparing Le Roi s'amuse to Rigoletto, I hope to demonstrate that Hugo's criticism was perhaps unfounded, motivated it would seem by pride and envy rather than by an understanding of the composer or his operas.

CHAPTER 3

LE ROI S'AMUSE: "LE WATERLOO DU ROMANTISME"

Whereas Hernani represented the triumph of romanticism in French theatre, Le Roi s'amuse, written two years later, was in many respects a disappointing failure. Although it was created in what appeared to be the more tolerant atmosphere of the July Monarchy, the ill-fated play was neverthless banned by the censors the day after its first performance on 22 November 1832. The reasons behind the suppression of the play were twofold. First, it violated accepted moral and aesthetic codes of the time, and second, the government considered the play to be politically subversive, both in its unflattering portrait of François I and its depiction of an attempt at regicide. (Ironically, and unfortunately for Hugo, there had been an actual attempt on Louis-Phillipe's life the day before the first performance.) To make matters worse, Le Roi s'amuse was dismissed by the public and the critics as a "dégoûtant tableau," (Pouilliart 445) and the turbulent premiere of the play came to be known as "le Waterloo du Romantisme."

In this chapter I propose to show that the failure of Le Roi s'amuse was primarily the result of the conservatism and the fear of revolution that pervaded French bourgeois society in the early 1830's. Central to this discussion, of course, is the government's capricious policy of censorship and its effects on French romantic theatre.

The political and social climate: August 1830 - September 1835

Before focusing on Le Roi s'amuse itself, I would like to examine the political and social climate in France in the early 1830's and its impact on romantic theatre. The period in question begins with the abolition of censorship by the July Monarchy in August 1830, and ends with its reinstatement in September 1835.

In Popular French Romanticism James Allen Smith describes the eighteenth-century emergence in France of a society based on bourgeois values:

> Traditionally the year 1830 has marked something of a minor historical watershed. Early historians . . . characterized the three glorious days as the completion of a self-consciously middle-class revolution that had its origins in 1789. For forty-one years it had been frustrated by a succession of régimes--republican, oligarchical, imperial, and royalist. But July brought about at last the political triumph of established commercial and financial elites embodied in the citizen-king Louis-Philippe. . . . (Allen 178)

For the writers, the artists, and the intellectuals who had supported it, the July Monarchy eventually came to symbolize the failure of a great hope. To their dismay, the monarchy of Louis-Philippe soon proved itself to be as conservative and repressive as the recently deposed Bourbon régime. As Roger Fayolle states in an article on nineteenth-century criticism: "The revolution had been made possible by the active rallying of all those who had regained confidence in progress and who refused to acquiesce in the re-establishment of the old order. The united front of the various trends in the romantic movement, all of which

abandoned the defence of a retrograde monarchy in order to ensure the liberty of art, appeared as one manifestation, among others, as a rejection of the past" (263). However, *les trois glorieuses* were not successful in turning France into a nation united in its support of its new great men: its politicians, professors, generals, poets and artists. "A new régime was established," continues Fayolle, "under the protection of Louis-Philippe, a mediocre, bourgeois king, to the advantage of the manufacturers and bankers, and in the midst of bitter rivalry between factions" (263). Indeed, with the accession of Louis-Philippe, the industrial bourgeoisie was firmly established as arbitor of taste in French culture: "The romantics had yearned to be the glorious representatives of a new art welcomed and recognized by history. In fact, that art was now regarded as no more than the art of a particular school or even chapel, and one much resented and opposed" (Fayolle 263).

At the outset, however, the July Monarchy had appeared to espouse more lenient policies concerning artistic and intellectual freedom of expression. A major step was taken in August 1830, when Louis-Philippe's government abolished censorship of the press. The famous seventh article in the new Charter stated: "Les Français ont le droit de publier et de faire imprimer leurs opinions, en se conformant aux lois; la censure ne peut jamais être rétablie" (qtd. in Krakovitch Hugo censuré 7). In "Les Romantiques et la censure au théâtre," Odile Krakovitch writes: "Le gouvernement de Louis-Philippe qui ne pensait qu'à la presse . . . donna ainsi, inconsciemment et probablement contre son gré, la liberté à la parole en même temps qu'à l'écrit" (56).

However, the government's motives for abolishing censorship had in fact little to do with liberalism. Politicians knew that the press had enormous power to inflame the public with subversive and revolutionary ideas, yet they also realized the potential danger of imposing too many restrictions. The drastic steps taken by the Bourbon government to control publishing had backfired, and it was clear that censorship had, at least in part, indirectly led to the July Revolution. Louis-Philippe was fearful that any further provocation of the press could lead to his downfall as well, and so, contrary to his instincts, he abolished censorship. As Krakovitch notes, freedom of publication also implied freedom of speech, and this was cause for celebration among the romantic playwrights (58). For the first time in the history of French theatre, plays could be mounted without government interference, and many works which formerly had been strictly prohibited were finally staged.

Not surprisingly, a great many of these plays contained harsh criticisms of both the monarchy and the bourgeoisie and the conservative, materialistic values they espoused. Louis-Philippe soon realized, a little late perhaps, the danger of having relinquished all control to the theatres, "les seuls moyens de culture populaire en ce Paris au tiers illettré" (Krakovitch "Romantiques" 58). Moreover, it was increasingly difficult for the government to maintain order in a society that was constantly on the brink of revolt. The economy was in recession, food prices were high, and the working classes were beginning to agitate for better wages and working conditions. A writer at the time observed: "Like the smell of gunpowder . . . revolt was

everywhere: in the streets, in books, and in the theatre" (qtd. in Allen 178). The social and political instability were reflected in the literature of the time, and the theatre was no exception. As a result, by 1831 Louis-Philippe was already calling for a reinstatement of censorship. Ultimately, works such as Robert Macaire, as well as other "subversive" plays which appeared during the next few years, were more than the government could tolerate. In an attempt to reverse what it viewed as an increasing trend towards anarchy and vice, the French government reinstated censorship by a law passed in September 1835. A brief period of freedom in the theatre thus ended.

Between 1830 and 1835, Hugo was prolific in terms of his theatrical output. During this period he completed four *drames*, all of which were based on historical subjects, and all of which were staged. He was also successful in mounting the previously banned Marion de Lorme (1829). Shortly after the *débâcle* of Le Roi s'amuse, Hugo completed Lucrèce Borgia (1833), a play whose plot and themes are similar to the former, and is therefore considered its twin. It was followed by Marie Tudor (1833) and Angelo, tyran de Padoue (1835). In order to avoid further problems with the censors, the three plays which succeeded Le Roi s'amuse were set in sixteenth century England and Italy. As long as Hugo steered clear of French history and politics, he was permitted to produce his plays in relative peace. Noteworthy too is the fact that these three plays were written in prose, for reasons which will be discussed momentarily.

None of these plays retain any great hold on the public's affection, however, and their importance lies perhaps less in

their qualities as dramatic works than in the prefaces which Hugo composed to accompany their publication, and which contain an exposition of his ideas about the significance of the theatre and the responsibility of the writer. The preface to Lucrèce Borgia clearly states this responsibility:

> Le théâtre, on ne saurait trop le répéter, a de nos jours une importance immense, et qui tend à s'accroître sans cesse avec la civilisation même. Le théâtre est une tribune. Le théâtre est une chaire. . . . L'auteur . . . sait que le drame, sans sortir des limites impartiales de l'art, a une mission nationale, une mission humaine. . . . Il ne faut pas que la multitude sorte du théâtre sans emporter avec elle quelque moralité austère et profonde. (47-8)

The references to the political ("tribune") and even the quasi-religious ("chaire") purpose of the theatre seem a far cry from the more aesthetic concerns of the "Préface de Cromwell." By now Hugo viewed the theatre as a place where the public should be enlightened and educated, and it was the responsibility of the dramatist to provide suitable moral lessons. Hugo's departure from the use of verse, which he had so strongly advocated in 1827, is directly attributable to his preoccupation with reaching a wider public. Moreover, despite his scathing attack on the July Monarchy in the preface to Le Roi s'amuse, which culminated in the sarcastic question "Est-ce qu'il y a eu en effet quelque chose qu'on a appelé la révolution de juillet?" (448) Hugo's didacticism in these *drames* is not essentially political. In Marion de Lorme, Le Roi s'amuse and Lucrèce Borgia, political concerns are downplayed, whereas the themes of morality and fatality appear to be of greater concern. It is perhaps ironic

that the government chose to ban Le Roi s'amuse. Although this play contains some provocative lines in reference to François I and the nobility, it is hardly comparable to Hernani as a political call to arms.

I would now like to turn to Le Roi s'amuse and discuss the reasons why it received such a disastrous response, why the government suspended the play after only one performance, and the ways in which Hugo attempted to defend his work.

Although I discuss the play in much greater detail in the next chapter, it seems appropriate to give a brief overview of the plot at this point. The play centres on Triboulet, the hunchbacked jester who has free rein at the court of François I. He ridicules the noblemen whose wives the King has seduced, and they in turn plot their revenge. Both Triboulet and the King are cursed by Saint-Vallier, a nobleman whose daughter, Diane de Poitiers has been seduced by the licentious monarch. Triboulet's daughter Blanche, the epitome of innocence, meets a similar fate. Now it is Triboulet who swears revenge, and he plots to have the King murdered. However, the buffoon's scheme backfires, and it is Blanche who is killed, whereas the King escapes unharmed.

Since he had been granted permission to stage Marion de Lorme, Hugo's fears of censorship had greatly diminished. They still hadn't entirely disappeared, however, and almost instinctively, Hugo took the precaution of planning a supplementary act in the eventuality that the censors would try to prohibit Le Roi s'amuse. His intuition proved to be correct, since on 15 November 1832, two weeks before the play was to open at the Théâtre-Français, he was summoned by the ministry.

Krakovitch notes:

> L'entretien roula uniquement sur le personnage de François Ier qui, d'après le comte d'Argout, fourmillait d'allusions contre Louis-Philippe. Victor Hugo répondit qu'il "n'avait pas l'habitude de procéder par allusions et qu'en peignant François Ier, c'est François Ier qu'il a voulu peindre." Il obtint l'autorisation. (Hugo Censuré 17)

The morning of the performance Hugo distributed tickets to his supporters who occupied large sections of the theatre. As the play unfolded, however, it became apparent that most of the audience was far from pleased with what they were watching. Le Courrier des Théâtres reported that the reaction of the audience was "mêlée" and that the two first acts were applauded "avec transport." However, during the second act "une opposition assez vive s'est déclarée, et elle n'a point cessé jusqu'à la chute du rideau" (Pouilliart 445).

In her definitive study of Hugo's plays entitled Le Roi et le bouffon, Anne Uberfseld describes the first performance of Le Roi s'amuse as "un des grands scandales de cette période pourtant fertile en représentations troublées. Non pas un échec, mais une déroute, une catastrophe" (121). The critics were unanimous in their condemnation of the play. Merle, writing for La Quotidienne, was disgusted by what he considered as a surfeit of "l'horrible, et de l'ignoble, de la réalité trop crue" (qtd. in Krakovitch, Hugo censuré 19). According to him, Le Roi s'amuse represented "le Waterloo du Romantisme." Other critics attacked the play's language, its historical innaccuracies, and in particular, the play's moral stance. In Le Roi et le bouffon

Ubersfeld comments:

> Or ce n'est pas un public de philistins qui a condamné Le Roi s'amuse, ce sont des écrivains, des artistes, les plus éclairés parmi les banquiers, les hommes d'affaires, les directeurs de journaux. Toute la bourgeoisie organisée, avec toutes les nuances de son arc-en-ciel politique, s'affirme hostile à la tentative de Hugo au Théâtre-Français. (127)

What was condemned was not the political aspect of the play (the audience applauded Triboulet's tirades against the courtiers) as much as its blatant violation of the established moral code. Referring nostalgically to the decorum of neo-classical theatre, the Le Journal des Débats asked:

> Sont-ce de telles moeurs que l'art doit exposer aux yeux du public? Est-ce là que devaient nous mener ces nouvelles fastueuses théories? Dans le théâtre antique, la royauté proscrite et malheureuse allait se réfugier au pied du Cythéron, appuyée au bras d'Antigone; dans notre théâtre maintenant, la royauté ivre vient dormir dans un mauvais lieu, entre les bras d'une fille publique. Voilà ce qu'on nomme progrès! (qtd. in Pouilliart 627)

Another article in the same journal offered a succinct analysis of the reasons for the audience's distaste for Le Roi s'amuse:

> Toutes les fois que l'auteur s'élevait à la passion, jetait dans son dialogue quelques grandes pensées, quelques sentiments vrais du coeur humain, alors toutes les sympathies s'éveillaient, toutes les croyances littéraires même, s'empressaient de lui rendre justice; mais lorsqu'il tombait dans le bouffon, le trivial, le populaire, aussitôt naissaient l'inattention et le dégoût. (qtd. in Ubersfeld Le Roi 127)

The consensus was that in writing Le Roi s'amuse, Hugo had violated the foundations upon which French bourgeois culture was based. Clearly Hugo had misjudged his audience, and by aggressively inflicting upon them a type of theatre to which they could only object, he had been the architect of his own failure.

The government, likewise convinced that Hugo had gone too far, was quick to step in, and on 23 November 1832, further performances of Le Roi s'amuse were prohibited. Hugo was incredulous, since the Charter of 1830 had expressly guaranteed literary freedom. Moreover, many plays which criticized the social and political status quo were being staged without interference. Hugo was justifiably shocked by the suddenness of the suspension and the lack of explanation for it. Despite the public's hostile reception of Le Roi s'amuse, Hugo hardly expected the play to be permanently suppressed. Two weeks later the government finally issued a terse statement claiming that the play had been suspended on the grounds that "dans un grand nombre de scènes . . . les moeurs sont outragées" (qtd. in Ubersfeld Le Roi 139). It was obvious to Hugo, however, that the play's political overtones were the real reason for such prompt and drastic measures.

Immediately Hugo launched a two-pronged counter-attack. First, he mounted a legal case against the Comédie-Française for breach of contract, and second, he wrote the preface to Le Roi s'amuse, in which he pilloried the July Monarchy and defended both himself and his play. Hugo's real quarrel was with the government, not with the theatre. However, by launching a case against the Comédie-Française, Hugo hoped that the government

would be implicated as well. Since it had taken the unlawful step of imposing censorship, the government had thus prevented the theatre from fulfilling its contract with the author. Moreover, as Ubersfeld comments in Le Roi et le bouffon: "en faisant un procès à la Comédie-Française . . . d'un certain sens [Hugo] servait les intérêts des comédiens qui avaient fait des frais pour une pièce qu'ils ne pouvaient pas jouer; s'il avait gagné, il eût mis le gouvernement dans un grand embarras" (154). Ultimately, however, the fight was futile, and Hugo had to admit that the government's power to uphold its actions, however reprehensible, was practically limitless.

But victory or defeat was not the main issue in the trial of Le Roi s'amuse. As a man who possessed a keen sense of publicity and theatre, Hugo knew that a courtroom drama with himself in the leading role would be an excellent means of winning public support and sympathy. The scope of this chapter does not allow for a detailed account of the complexities of the entire legal battle. Suffice it to say that the trial revealed a lack of clearly defined legal guidelines regarding the the necessity or the use of censorship. The government had abused its power in singling out and suppressing a work which was seen to challenge its authority. On 13 December Le National noted that "en dépit de la Charte, le ministère s'obstine à maintenir la censure sur les ouvrages dramatiques: car nous ne pouvons donner une autre qualification à l'arbitraire qui s'arroge le pouvoir en permettant ou en interdisant la représentation de certaines pièces de théâtre" (qtd. in Ubersfeld Le Roi 141-2). In his testimony, Hugo clearly underlined the dangers of a political

régime which could impose its will so flagrantly and so capriciously on the people. According to him, an act of censorship today could mean a total loss of civil rights tomorrow:

> Aujourd'hui on me fait prendre ma liberté de poète par un censeur, demain on me fera prendre ma liberté de citoyen par un gendarme: aujourd'hui on me bannit du théâtre, demain on me déportera; aujourd'hui l'état de siège est dans la littérature, demain il sera dans la cité. De liberté, de garanties, de Charte, de droit public, plus un mot. Néant. (qtd. in Uberseld Le Roi 150)

Hugo's second line of defense was to write the famous preface to the first edition of Le Roi s'amuse which came out in the midst of the trial. The preface begins with a reaffirmation that the Charter of 1830 had completely and irrevocably abolished censorship. This act was supposed to guarantee every citizen the freedom of speech and of publication. This freedom also applied to the theatre, since as Hugo argues: "Le théâtre n'est qu'un moyen de publication comme la presse, comme la gravure, comme la lithographie. La liberté du théâtre est donc implicitment écrite dans la Charte, avec toutes les autres libertés de la pensée" (447). Hugo also reminds his readers that the Charter had prohibited the confiscation of personal property and that in seizing the play, the government had flagrantly disregarded its own law. The suppression of Le Roi s'amuse was thus "un acte monstrueux de censure et d'arbitraire, [et] une véritable confiscation; c'est une propriété violemment dérobée au théâtre et à l'auteur" (447-8).

Hugo then defends his play against the government's charge that it is immoral: "La pièce est immorale? Croyez-vous? Est-ce par le fond? Voici le fond. Triboulet est difforme, Triboulet est malade, Triboulet est bouffon de cour; triple misère qui le rend méchant" (450). Despite Triboulet's misanthropy and his role in pushing the King towards vice and tyranny, the fact remains that in losing Blanche he is ultimately punished. According to Hugo, this renders the play "moral par l'invention." Act 2, which contains Triboulet's most savage attack on the nobility ("Vous êtes tous bâtards!"), is nevertheless intended to create an impression that is "chaste, vertueuse, et honnête." Moreover, Hugo argues that the sordid situations depicted in acts 4 and 5 are hardly unprecedented: "Depuis quand n'est-il plus permis à un roi de courtiser sur la scène une servante d'auberge?" Even Maguelonne is no more brazen than "Toutes les Lisettes et toutes les Martons du vieux théâtre." Admittedly, Saltabadil's tavern is "un lieu sinistre, terrible, horrible", but it is not "un lieu obscène" (452).

As was the case with his testimony before the Tribunal, Hugo's main purpose in the preface was to chastise the government and to alert his readers to what he saw as an inevitable march towards despotism. Ubersfeld states that the preface was "choquante, non seulement par ce qu'elle osait dire, en dépit de certaines inflexions, mais par le ton d'ironie destructrice . . . par la hauteur dédaigneuse . . . enfin par une sorte de détachement et hautaine vulgarité" (Le Roi 114). Hugo expressed in no uncertain terms his profound disgust for a government that had lost its nerve and had regressed into pettiness and

intolerance:

> Le moment de transition politique où nous sommes est curieux. C'est un des instants de fatigue générale et tous les actes despotiques sont possibles dans la société même la plus infiltrée d'idées d'émancipation et de liberté. La France a marché vite en juillet 1830; elle a fait trois bonnes journées; elle a fait trois grandes étapes dans le champ de la civilisation et du progrès. Maintenant beaucoup sont harassés, beaucoup sont essoufflés, beaucoup demandent à faire halte.... A notre avis, le gouvernement abuse de cette disposition au repos et de cette crainte des révolutions nouvelles. Il en est venu à tyranniser petitement. Il a tort pour lui et pour nous. (455-6)

Echoing his testimony before the court, Hugo states; "L'état de siège sera levé dans la cité littéraire comme dans la cité politique" (457).

In his preface Hugo thus accused the July Monarchy of a lack of honesty and integrity. The suppression of Le Roi s'amuse on the grounds of immorality was but a smokescreen, part of an elaborate "échafaudage des mauvaises et honteuses raisons" (454). Although those responsible wouldn't admit to it, it was very likely that one of principal reasons for the suppression of the play was to make an example of Hugo and his work. According to the poet, "ils ont voulu à la fin, poussés à bout, faire, à travers toutes les lois et tous les droits, un exemple sur un ouvrage et un écrivain" (453). Perhaps, as he believed, Hugo was truly the victim of "un petit coup d'Etat littéraire" which was supported by a rival "cabale" of arch-conservative politicians, artists and intellectuals.

As a post-script to this chapter it should be mentioned that

Verdi experienced similar problems with censorship throughout his career. Rigoletto in particular involved the composer and his librettist in a struggle with the censor. As in France, the most common method by which the various governments in Italy attempted to stem the revolutionary tide was to impose strict censorship laws. The Austrian authorities were the most lenient in the whole of Italy, thus Verdi, whose early years were largely spent in the Austrian territories, suffered little in the way of censorship provided that he was composing for Milan or Venice. However, when he tried to introduce his Risorgimento idealism or his dramatic boldness to Rome or Naples, he encountered numerous obstacles.

Censorship in Italy was primarily concerned with three issues: politics, religion, and morals. In general, the latter category was of lesser importance than the former two, although even in the Austrian territories there was a ban on a great number of romantic dramas, including, not surprisingly, those of Victor Hugo. The authorities were well aware of the scandals created by Hernani and Le Roi s'amuse, and they wished to avoid similar disturbances in their own domains. The reports of the prefect of the Milan police clearly illustrate the official view on such matters: "Theatres are designed to correct morals, and must therefore never present anything but moral themes, or if they present wickedness, it must be done in such a way that virtue appears the more glorious and beautiful as a result" (qtd. in Kimbell 24).

But it was on political issues that the censors were the most sensitive. Subjects and situations that could be

interpreted as disrespectful towards sovereigns or established governments, expressions of patriotism or libertarianism, mention of conspiracy or assassination of a ruler, were all regarded with distrust. In those parts of the country under more severe rule than in Milan, political overtones often led to a libretto's being drastically altered, or suppressed altogether.

In April 1850 Verdi became interested in Le Roi s'amuse. He brought the subject to the attention of Piave, encouraging him to consider the play's musical possiblities:

> Have a try! The subject is grand, immense, and there's a character in it who is one of the greatest creations that the theatre of all countries and all times can boast. The subject is Le Roi s'amuse and the character I'm speaking about is Triboulet. . . . As soon as you get this letter . . . run about the city and find someone of influence to get us permission to do Le Roi s'amuse. (qtd. in Budden Operas 477)

Hugo's drama had remained highly controversial since it was banned in Paris 18 years earlier, but since the Venetian authorities had permitted Ernani, Verdi hoped they might also permit Le Roi s'amuse. Inevitably, however, censorship became a serious threat. In the aftermath of the uprisings of 1848, the Venetian authorities had become less tolerant. In any case, Verdi and Piave certainly overestimated the censor's readiness to accept an opera based on Le Roi s'amuse. When the military governor of Venice, Cavalier de Gorzkowski, eventually got around to performing his censor's duty, he was horrified by the content of the proposed libretto. Here was a drama depicting a royal household as a hotbed of debauchery and corruption; a story

pivoting on a curse, a seduction, and an assassination; a list of characters including a libertine monarch, a hunchback buffoon, a professional assassin and his harlot sister. The whole thing, which Verdi and Piave had entitled La Maledizione, was disgusting to him, and was totally alien to the noble, humanist traditions of Italian opera. In early December Gorzkowski had the following message conveyed to the management of the Fenice:

> His Excellency . . . has commanded me to inform the Noble Prezidenza [Mazari, president of La Fenice] that he regrets that the poet Piave and the celebrated Maestro Verdi have not been able to choose some other theme on which to exhibit their talents than one of such repellent immorality and obscene triviality as the subject of the libretto entitled La Maledizione. . . . His Excellency has therefore determined absolutely to forbid the performance, and wishes me, at the same time, to admonish the Prezidenza to refrain from further representations on this matter. (qtd. in Kimbell 268-9)

Verdi was stunned: "Coming so soon after the 'castration' of Stiffelio [also heavily censored] it seems to have deprived him, momentarily, of all determination and resource. Had things depended upon him at this juncture, it looks as if Rigoletto would have got no further" (Kimbell 269). Verdi was furious at his librettist and blamed him for having bungled the affair. Piave had been commissioned on the understanding that he would be able to obtain the censor's approval, but he had failed to do so. The weeks that followed saw a complicated and exhausting series of negotiations involving Verdi, Piave, and Guglielmo Brenna (the secretary of La Fenice) on one side, and the General Director of Public Order, one Martello, on the other. It is interesting to

note that during these negotiations, Verdi quoted sections from Hugo's preface to Le Roi s'amuse in order to defend his own artistic freedom. Fortunately, Martello proved to be more open-minded than anticipated, and the version of the libretto which he approved required only some very minor changes. In a letter to Martello, Verdi summarized the elements of the story he would be willing to change, as well as those which he insisted must remain unaltered:

> 1. The scene shall be changed from the French court to that of an independent Duke of Burgundy or Normandy, or to the court of a minor absolutist Italian state, preferably that of Pier Luigi Farnese, and in the period most suitable for scenic and dramatic effect.
>
> 2. The original characters of the drama Le Roi s'amuse by Victor Hugo shall be retained, but other names shall be found for them, dependent on the period chosen.
>
> 3. The scene in which Francesco appears determined to use the key in his possession to enter the room of the abducted [Blanche] shall be omitted. It shall be replaced by another which preserves the decencies but does not detract from the interest of the play.
>
> 4. The King or Duke shall come to the rendezvous in Magellona's tavern as the result of a pretended invitation brought to him by the Triboletto character.
>
> 5. In the scene in which the sack containing the corpse of Triboletto's daughter appears, Maestro Verdi reserves to himself the right to make such changes as he considers necessary.
>
> 6. The above-mentioned changes require more time than was originally supposed. Therefore Maestro Verdi declares that the new opera cannot be performed before 28 February or 1 March. (qtd. in Osborne, Verdi 107)

Ultimately, Verdi had his way, but it was not until the end of January 1851, six weeks before the opera's premiere, that the

heroic engagement with the Venetian censors ended. The rest of the music was composed very quickly, as Verdi later admitted that much of the score had been already written some months earlier.

In this chapter I have attempted to illustrate the extreme control that many governments exercised over artists during the first half of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, Hugo and Verdi were not exempt from this rule, and censorship battles would continue to frustrate their creative endeavors for many years. Nevertheless, the two men demonstrated uncommon tenacity in their resistance to political régimes which tried to stifle their political, moral and aesthetic views. Although some defeats were inevitable, real progress was made in the fight for artistic and intellectual freedom. Hugo may have lost the court battle over Le Roi s'amuse, for example, but the trial at least had the effect of slowing down the re-establishment of a policy of censorship.

CHAPTER 4

LE ROI S'AMUSE AND *RIGOLETTO*: FROM FAILURE TO SUCCESS

With the creation of Rigoletto in 1851, Verdi took Italian opera to unprecedented heights. This opera, and the two which immediately followed it--Il Trovatore and La Traviata (both premiering in 1853)--represented the full flowering of Verdi's genius as a dramatic composer. Moreover, many musical scholars affirm that Rigoletto was truly revolutionary, for in this work the composer rejected many of the conventions that had governed early Italian romantic opera. Once audiences and critics became used its innovative and sometimes even shocking qualitites, Rigoletto established itself as one of most enduringly popular operas ever written.

By contrast, Le Roi s'amuse, the play which was the inspiration for Rigoletto, is considered by many as a critical and a public failure. Many scholars speculate that even if it had not been abruptly suppressed, the play would most certainly have failed due to its inherent weaknesses as a dramatic work.

Despite the almost universal condemnation of Le Roi s'amuse, Verdi was greatly impressed by it. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, he found the play to be "grand" and "immense." He even described Triboulet as a "creation worthy of Shakespeare" (qtd. in Budden Operas 477). This was high praise indeed for a work which had been decisively rejected by audiences and critics alike. The comparison with Shakespeare is significant, since for some time Verdi had been considering the possibility of basing an opera on King Lear. In fact, this play would become a life-long

obsession for the composer, even though the project was never realized.[3] Given the similarities between Le Roi s'amuse and Shakespeare's drama, it is easy to comprehend why Verdi was drawn to Hugo's play. Both King Lear and Le Roi s'amuse are tragedies of paternity and self-deception. Like Lear, Triboulet plays a role--albeit an unwitting one--in the destruction of his beloved daughter. Despite their power and influence, the two protagonists are unable to prevent the series of horrific events that fate has condemned them to.

Conscious of the parallels between the two plays, Verdi's dramatic instincts told him that Le Roi s'amuse had considerable operatic potential. Indeed, the composer's enthusiastic praise of Hugo's play indicates his willingness to overlook many of its inherent flaws, as well as its history of scandal and failure. Verdi thus insisted that the libretto should reflect Hugo's work as much as possible. His wish was largely realized, since apart from the change in setting and the alteration of most of the names, Piave's text closely parallels Le Roi s'amuse. Ironically, however, in their desire to emulate Le Roi s'amuse, Verdi and Piave succeed in creating an opera which, on several levels, far surpasses Hugo's play.

In this chapter I will examine how many of the weaknesses of Le Roi s'amuse are overcome in Rigoletto. Despite obvious similarities between the two works, there are notable differences

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[3]Howarth notes: "It has been suggested by Julian Budden that in Rigoletto the composer realizes his ambition to 'blend the comic and the terrible in Shakespeare's manner'; while the same critic, referring to Verdi's obsession with King Lear, elsewhere calls Rigoletto 'one of the Lears that might have been'" ("From Le Roi s'amuse to Rigoletto" 83-4).

which ensure much of the opera's success. The first section of the chapter is devoted to a comparison of Hugo's play and Piave's libretto. By juxtaposing the two texts I hope to demonstrate that Piave's is the more successful in its ability to create and sustain dramatic tension. In the the second part of this chapter I discuss the importance of Verdi's music to the enduring success of Rigoletto.

The libretto and the play

Considering his hostile reaction to Ernani, it is not surprising that Hugo expressed similar sentiments towards Rigoletto. In the case of the latter opera, the writer resented what he viewed as the demotion of his drama into a "mere libretto" (Martin 275).[4] But had Hugo taken the time to acquaint himself with the text of the opera, he may have changed his views. Although Piave's libretto retains much of Hugo's story, it also represents some real improvements. In the cases where Piave deviates from the play, either by necessity or by choice, the story usually gains in dramatic power.

The most obvious difference between the two texts is that the libretto is much shorter. Not only is the number of lines greatly reduced (the play contains 1660 lines as compared to the libretto's 705), but the acts are reduced from five to three. Also reduced is the number of roles. In Le Roi s'amuse there are twenty characters listed as well as a unspecified number of non-

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[4]Moreover, Hugo was adamant that Rigoletto should not be performed in Paris, and due to his influence, it was six years before Parisians were able to hear this masterpiece.

speaking roles, whereas in Rigoletto Piave reduced the number to thirteen. The librettist compensates for the loss of these characters by making use of the chorus who speak as a single voice, interjecting and commenting on the action.

Piave presents the story in four *tableaux* which mirror the first four acts of Le Roi s'amuse (much of act 5 in the play is omitted for reasons I will address later). Act 1 of Rigoletto is based on acts 1 and 2 of Le Roi s'amuse. After a brief though ominous orchestral prelude, the curtain rises on a scene of glitter and gaiety. Hugo tells us that it is a "fête de nuit au Louvre" during the reign of François I. The year is stated as "152-." A night of revelry is drawing to a close, and as Hugo's stage directions indicate, "une certaine liberté règne; la fête a un peu le caractère d'une orgie" (461). Since it was agreed that the opera's setting could not be historically accurate (thus making it impossible to sully the reputation of any past monarch -French, Italian, or otherwise), Piave moves the action to the court of an imaginary duke of Mantua.

Both playwright and librettist waste little time in getting right to the story, and their opening scenes contain a great deal of restless activity. Like the King in the play, the Duke mentions to Borsa (Hugo's de la Tour-Landry) that he wants "to bring to a head [his] adventure with the unkown beauty of the town." He is referring to Gilda (Blanche) whom he has noticed in church. Like his Hugolian counterpart, the Duke suddenly abandons his thoughts of Gilda to pursue the Countess Ceprano (Madame de Cossé). Both the music and the words of his ballata "Questa o quella" clearly reveal his philosophy (and his

hypocrisy) on romantic matters: "This woman or that, to me they're just the same / As all the others I see around me."

As in the play, the stylized courtliness of the Duke's flirtations is suddenly demolished by the interruption of Rigoletto, appearing out of nowhere to throw an insult at Ceprano. Godefroy notes that the entry of Rigoletto is subtle: "He is the protagonist; but in this brilliant gathering of the nobility he is a cipher, lumbering with a bitter heart in a twisted body" (199). While the Duke and his jester are off stage for a few moments, the courtiers discuss the sensational revelation that the jester has a "mistress." Hugo's "Triboulet la nuit se change en Cupido" (1.2.144) is echoed by "Il gobbo in Cupido or s'è transformato." Since many of the characters in this scene have been absorbed by the chorus (only de Cossé, Marot and de La Tour-Landry remain as Ceprano, Marullo, and Borsa respectively) a great deal of the play's allusion and repartee at this point has been lost. Although they have sacrificed their personalities, Piave ensures that the courtiers at least preserve their idle superficiality. We do we miss Hugo's acid-tongued Triboulet, however, for the dramatist took pains to show us why the courtiers all hated him. For example, Triboulet provokes de Cossé with such impudent lines as "Où donc est la nécessité / De ne pas vous couper la tête?" (1.4.263-4)

The libretto now calls for a crowd of dancers to flock on to the stage as the chorus sings "All is gaiety and pleasure, / Everything invites us to enjoyment! See, does this not seem / The very kingdom of revelry?" This contrasts with the sinister plottings of the courtiers against Rigoletto as well as sets the

scene for the first of several *coups de théâtre* devised by Hugo. Above the revels of the courtiers emerges the lone voice of Monterone, demanding an audience with the Duke. Based on Hugo's Saint-Vallier, Monterone is a venerable old nobleman whose daughter, Diane de Poitiers, has been "ternie, souillée, déshonorée, brisée" by the King.

Saint-Vallier's arrival puts a sudden end to what he describes as the court's "orgies." In a 73-line *morceau de bravoure* he rails against the King's debaucheries, and swears vengeance. Although his tirade is eloquent, its excessive length interrupts the flow of the story, and is the first of several occasions in Le Roi s'amuse where Hugo allows poetry to take precedence over drama. In the libretto, on the other hand, the cause of Monterone's anger with the Duke is described in much briefer terms: the nobleman refers only to a "father's grief" and to the "atrocious insult" to his family. Typically, Piave's version of this scene progresses much more rapidly, thus allowing the dramatic tension of Monterone's confrontation with the courtiers to continue without interruption. Like Triboulet, Rigoletto does what he can to make the old man look foolish, and here Verdi's supreme ability to portray character through music is fully evident. Godefroy remarks that Rigoletto's

> . . . tasteless deportment is accurately depicted by the strings, which swagger defiantly as he moves, aping his insolent gestures and hollow heroics . . . . Having taken up his position, the buffoon taunts the old nobleman about his daughter's dishonour. . . . A twisting figure in the orchestra succinctly portrays the bent mind and body of the clown. (201)

What follows in the play is Saint-Vallier's "malédiction" which sets in motion the unstoppable mechanism of Fatality:

> Soyez maudits, tous deux! --Sire, ce n'est pas bien.
> Sur le lion mourant vous lâchez votre chien!
> Qui que tu sois, valet à langue de vipère,
> Qui fais risée ainsi de la douleur d'un père,
> Sois maudit! --J'avais droit d'être par vous traité
> Comme une majesté par une majesté.
> Vous êtes roi, moi père, et l'âge vaut le trône.
> Nous avons tous les deux au front une couronne
> Où nul ne doit lever de regards insolents,
> Vous, de fleurs-de-lys d'or, et moi de cheveaux blancs.
> Roi, quand un sacrilège ose insulter la vôtre,
> C'est vous qui la vengez; --c'est Dieu qui venge l'autre! (1.5.383-94)

Since Saint-Vallier's curse is expressed in the same eloquent vein as his preceding tirade (except for his insulting reference to Triboulet as "tu"), it lacks some of the directness that Piave's shorter passage achieves. Clearly both the librettist and the composer understand how central Monterone's curse is to the drama. Indeed, while Rigoletto was still in the planning stages, Verdi advised Piave:

> The whole theme lies in that curse, which also becomes [the] moral. An unhappy father who weeps over his daughter's honour, which has been stolen; mocked by a court jester, whom the father curses; and this curse strikes the jester in the most terrifying way, [all] this seems moral to me and great, stupendously great. Be sure that [Saint-Vallier] should appear only twice (as in the French play), and say a very, very few, strong, prophetic words. I say again that the whole theme lies in that curse. (qtd. in Phillips-Matz 266)

Piave thus gives Monterone the following explosive outburst: "May you both be accursed!"/ 'Tis base, o Duke, to set your curs upon

a dying lion," which is followed by lines directed at Rigoletto alone: "And you, vile snake, / Who mock at a father's grief, / My curse be upon you!" (1.6) The effect of these words is immediate, and Rigoletto's smugness is replaced by stunned terror.

Hugo concludes act 1 as Saint-Vallier is led off to prison, but Piave and Verdi choose to end the act with an exciting ensemble finale. While the courtiers express their irritation at Monterone's intrusion, Rigoletto, almost speechless with fear, can only repeat "What do I hear! Horror!"

The second *tableau* of act 1 is based on act 2 of Hugo's play. The night-time setting provides an effective contrast to the light and splendour of the previous scenes. As in Le Roi s'amuse, the stage is divided. On one side we see the courtyard of Rigoletto's modest house, with its enclosed terrace and garden. On the other side is the darkened street, flanked by Rigoletto's high garden wall. On the second floor of the house there is a balcony which is high enough to be seen from the street. In the background the Hôtel de Cossé becomes the Palazzo di Ceprano.

Rigoletto enters the dark gloom of the street. His opening words, "The old man cursed me" are exactly those which Triboulet utters at the beginning of act 2 in Le Roi s'amuse: "Ce vieillard m'a maudit!" Sparafucile (Saltabadil) makes his appearance. He is a hired assassin who offers his services with the "self-conscious rectitude of an honest tradesman," (Budden Operas 492) claiming simply to be a man "who for a modest fee / Would rid you of a rival." Here Piave manages to retain much of the cloak and

dagger atmosphere of the play with its undercurrent of black humour. Out of this dialogue Verdi creates a duet which "recaptures all of the gallows-humour of the original" (Budden Operas 492).

In the play Saltabadil's exit is followed by another extended, impassioned monologue. Triboulet laments his fate as a physical and a moral *grotesque*--a monster created by nature and society. Having dropped the mask of the court jester with his "langue acérée," he appears as a man who is fearful and vulnerable. Moreover, he is ashamed of the conduct that his public role demands of him:

> Ah, la nature et les hommes m'ont fait
> Bien méchant, bien cruel et bien lâche en effet!
> O rage! être bouffon! ô rage! être difforme!
> Toujours cette pensée! et qu'on veille ou on dorme,
> Quand le monde en rêvant vous avez fait le tour,
> Retomber sur ceci: Je suis bouffon de cour!
> Ne vouloir, ne pouvoir, ne devoir et ne faire
> Que rire! --Quel excès d'opprobre et de misère!
> (2.2.463-70)

It is obvious that Hugo wants the reader to understand and even to pity the hunchback. But despite the outpouring of emotion, Triboulet is almost too articulate in the expression of his sufferings. Although he talks at length about his excessive misery, much of the emotion that Triboulet is attempting to describe is lost in the endless floods of his poetry.

Piave, however, is able to convey the essence of this 74-line speech in just 20 lines. Like Triboulet, Rigoletto begins by equating himself with Sparafucile: "We are alike! I with my tongue, / He with a dagger; I am the man who mocks, / He the one

who slays . . ." The lines which follow--"O rabbia . . . Esser difforme . . . Esser buffone . . . / Non dover, non poter altro che ridere"--echo Triboulet's lines. Finally, Rigoletto lashes out at his oppressors: "I loathe you, you sneering courtiers! / How I love to sting you! / If I am evil you alone are the cause!" For his part, Verdi resists the temptation to develop this monologue into an extended, formal aria, as many composers would have done. Instead he keeps to recitative, judging that Rigoletto's emotional turmoil is better conveyed by this less structured form.

For the remainder of act 1, Piave makes few changes to Hugo's plot. Rigoletto enters his garden where Gilda awaits him. Like Blanche, Gilda is a symbol of beauty and innocence. She is the idealized antithesis to the corruption of the outside world--a world from which she has always been sheltered. Blanche is one of Hugo's characters who are a pure embodiment of the *sublime*. Moreover, it is through his love for Blanche that Triboulet is morally redeemed and is able to transcend his lowly station as a *grotesque*.

Like her counterpart in the play, Gilda knows almost nothing about her father or her dead mother, but Rigoletto is unwilling to enlighten her. He shares Triboulet's fear that his daughter may be tempted to leave the confines of their walled garden, that she might be seen, seduced, and lost for ever. Their duet is interrupted by Rigoletto's sudden suspicion that someone may be lurking outside and he breaks off in mid-phrase to investigate. As he rushes out into the street the Duke, disguised in "bourgeois dress," slips into the garden and conceals himself.

Rigoletto returns to give Gilda a few more words of warning, and departs once more.

Rigoletto's unexplained departure is a structural weakness inherited from Hugo, since the audience is left wondering why the hunchback should be obliged to go out again so soon without even entering his house. If he had pressing business elsewhere, why come home at all? Of course, Rigoletto has to be out of the way for Gilda's love scene with the Duke, just as he has to return for the dramatic finale in which he unknowingly participates in his daughter's abduction. In the play Triboulet remarks vaguely that "il est temps de reprendre mon collier," (2.3.640) but the revels at the Louvre have ended, and it is doubtful that the King would be needing his services at this time. Piave's Rigoletto makes no sort of excuse, however. He just sings "Addio" and departs.

Gilda is now alone with Giovanna, the duenna. Of course the Duke is lurking in the shadows, yet until now he has contributed but two brief interpolations: "Rigoletto!" and "Sua figlia!" Godefroy notes that this contrasts with the play, since Hugo's King "indulged in much by-play over the bribery of Dame Bérarde. His comment on discovering that the girl is the jester's daughter--'l'histoire est impayable!'--gives an insolent bravado to the escapade" (205). Not realizing that the Duke can overhear her, Gilda confides in Giovanna. She fantasizes about the unknown stranger whom she has seen in church, saying that she would love him even more if he were poor. These sentiments parallel those of Blanche when she says "Je ne voudrais pas qu'il fût seigneur ni prince. / Mais un pauvre écolier qui vient de sa

province" (2.4.693-4). The Duke suddenly emerges from his hiding-place. Gilda cries for help but the Duke has sent Giovanna away. She begs the intruder to leave, but he will not hear of it. They are soon caught up in a passionate duet in which the Duke's words are a seductive ploy to which the simple Gilda naturally responds. Before he departs, the Duke states that his name is Gualtier Maldè (obviously derived from Hugo's Gaucher Mahiet), and that he indeed is a poor student. Once she is alone, Gilda muses on his name. In the play Blanche murmurs: "Gaucher Mahiet! nom de celui que j'aime, / Grave-toi dans mon coeur!" (2.5.766-7) In the opera, however, Piave and Verdi seize upon this utterance and transform it into the aria which brings Gilda so completely to life:

> Dearest name which first
> Made my heart beat fast,
> You fill my mind
> With visions of love's delight!
> My thoughts and desires
> Now fly to you for ever
> And with my last breath
> I'll utter that sweet name.

For all its simplicity, "Caro nome" is a perfectly conceived expression of Gilda's character, one which captures her fragility, her cloistered prudery, her tentative yearning. Her music also allows us an emotional connection with Gilda which the corresponding moment in Hugo's play does not provide. "Caro nome" is one of the best examples of Piave and Verdi using some very basic dramatic material to create a character who is both captivating and convincing.

The act concludes with the kidnapping of Gilda and in which Rigoletto unwittingly participates. The events unfold almost exactly as they do in the play, and call for the same suspension of disbelief by the audience. Although the scene is awkwardly contrived, Piave recognizes its importance to the story and resigns himself to getting it over with as quickly (and as painlessly) as possible. Perhaps to compensate for the unreality of the events taking place on the stage (or even to distract us from them), Verdi contributes one of his best known choruses, "Zitti, zitti moviamo a vendetta" ("Quietly, quietly we work at our revenge"). Sung *sotto voce* by the courtiers, "Zitti, zitti" conveys their mischievious glee. Gilda is dragged out, bound and gagged. The courtiers cry "Vittoria!" and disappear into the night with their victim. Rigoletto finally realizes that something is wrong and tears off the blindfold. Seeing the door of his house wide open and Gilda's shawl on the ground, he rushes into the courtyard, calling her name. After a great effort, Rigoletto at last cries out "Ah! la maledizione!" and collapses.

The second act of the opera, based on act 3 of Le Roi s'amuse, takes place in a hall of the Duke's palace. At this point there is a departure from the play as demanded by the Venetian censor. In Le Roi s'amuse the King brandishes a key which he uses to gain entry to the bedroom where Blanche has taken refuge. However, due to the censor's insistence that the "key scene" be omitted because of its sexual overones, Piave was obliged to invent an alternative to this scenario. In Le Roi s'amuse the King is party to Blanche's abduction, whereas in Rigoletto it happens without his knowledge. In despair, the Duke

thinks that Gilda has been taken from him and believes, at least for the moment, that she is the one person in the world who could have inspired him with lasting love. To portray his depressed state, Verdi and Piave devised a fairly conventional *scena* which begins with a recitative, "Ella mi fu rapita!" ("She was stolen from me!") The aria which follows, "Parmi veder le lagrime," is rather surprising, for it seems almost too beautiful, tender and sincere, and appears to conflict with everything we know about the Duke's character. Up to this point we have seen him only as a libertine and a hypocrite, devoid of morals or a conscience. But unlike Hugo in his one-sided portrayal of the King, Verdi and Piave want to show us that the Duke is a human being, and not a monster. Although this scene has been heavily criticised and is often omitted in performance, it is in fact a masterly stroke of characterization. Budden notes: "To the compulsive amorist the woman [the Duke] desires but is prevented from having is precisely the one with whom he could happily have shared the rest of his days. It is not so much an insincere as a self-deceiving emotion. . . " (Operas 499).

The following scene, in which Rigoletto confronts the courtiers about Gilda's abduction, is again based on similar events in Le Roi s'amuse. At this point in the play we witness Triboulet's transition from the defiant court jester to the despairing and humiliated father. It is another bravura scene carefully engineered by Hugo for maximum dramatic effect. Admittedly, there are some exciting moments, for example the *coup de théâtre* where Triboulet yells out "Je veux ma fille!" and at which the courtiers realize their mistake in thinking that

Blanche is his mistress. This is followed by the infamous lines in which Triboulet gives full vent to his hatred of the courtiers:

> Courtisans! courtisans! démons! race damnée!
> . . . . . .
> Vos mères aux laquais se sont prostituées!
> Vous êtes tous bâtards! (3.3.988-1017)

As in the play, the courtiers watch with cruel amusement as Rigoletto looks everywhere for signs of his daughter. He accosts Ceprano and hints that he is aware of Gilda's abduction, but the nobleman denies any knowledge of the events of the previous night. Eventually the truth tumbles out and Rigoletto at last realizes that Gilda is in the palace, and even worse, she is with the Duke. He demands that his daughter be returned to him. Everyone is stupified: "His daughter!" Rigoletto hurls himself at the door of the Duke's bedchamber, but is repulsed by the courtiers. He lashes out at them with "Vile, damnable race of courtiers," but does not go so far as to include Triboulet's infamous reference to their legitimacy. Howarth comments on Piave's more concise adaptation of Triboulet's tirade:

> But whereas in Hugo's play [Triboulet's] tirade develops into a *tour de force* of ninety lines, broken only by the briefest of interjections by one or another of the courtiers, who bar his passage as he seeks to follow his daughter into the king's apartment, Piave and Verdi reduce this into two short stanzas, one on either side of Rigoletto's scuffle with the courtiers; the first is an angry, vehement outburst, the second the pathetic plea of a broken man. ("From Le Roi s'amuse" 82)

At this point in the play Blanche suddenly emerges from the the King's bedroom. Hugo describes her as being "éperdue, égarée, en désordre," and Gilda's appearance is similarly disheveled. Hugo makes it clear that Gilda has been raped, but Piave, ever mindful of the censors, is not so explicit. When Blanche mutters "la honte . . ." Triboulet understands. Shaking with rage, he cries "Oh! l'infâme!--Elle aussi!" Gilda, on the other hand, refers only to "Those men who carried me off / And brought me here by force / In most cruel anguish." As with the ommission of the key scene, Piave again avoids explicit sexual references. However, Gilda implies enough, and her father comprehends. Echoing Triboulet, he cries, "The altar is overthrown / And all is lost! Weep, my child, and let your tears / Fall upon my heart."

Following this exchange is a vigorous duet in which Rigoletto swears vengeance, not only on his own account, but also on behalf of Monterone, who passes by as he is led off to prison. He pauses before a portrait of the Duke (Piave's invention), lamenting that his curse was in vain and that the Duke will continue to prosper. Rigoletto assures him that he is mistaken, and that he will be avenged. Hugo's single line at this point: "Comte! vous vous trompez. Quelqu'un vous vengera!" (3.4.1158) has an exact counterpart in "No, vecchio, t'inganni . . . un vindice avrai," which leads into a "marvelous finale of suspense and tension for which there was no source at all in the text of Le Roi s'amuse" (Howarth "From Le Roi s'amuse 85). In their cabaletta, father and daughter sing the same music successively, though in different keys. Rigoletto sings of "Revenge, terrible

revenge /. . . / The jester knows how to strike you / Like a thunderbolt hurled by God," whereas Gilda begs her father to forgive the man who has betrayed her, but whom she still loves:

> Forgive him . . . even as for us
> A voice from Heaven will call for pardon.
> (He betrayed me, but I love him: O God,
> I plead for pardon for his sin!) (2.8)

The setting of act 3 of Rigoletto corresponds to acts 4 and 5 of Le Roi s'amuse. Once again, the stage is divided. On one side sits Sparafucile's dilapitated tavern, on the other there is a road which runs along a deserted river bank. Inside the tavern we see Sparafucile polishing his belt while Gilda and Rigoletto converse outside. She affirms that she still loves the Duke and believes that he has remained faithful. Rigoletto knows otherwise, and hopes that by showing her the truth, Gilda will be cured of her infatuation. They peer through a hole in the tavern wall as the Duke arrives, dressed as a cavalry officer. Almost immediately he bursts into his famous song "La donna è mobile," inspired by a ditty in Le Roi s'amuse, "Souvent femme varie."

By this time Maddalena (Maguelonne) has entered. Coquettishly she eludes the Duke's advances while Sparafucile slips out to converse with Rigoletto. At this point one of the highlights of the opera--the famous quartet--begins. It is a brilliant piece of vocal writing and, like "Caro nome," is another example of Piave and Verdi's ability to overcome the melodramatic clichés of Hugo's scenario. The quartet is based on act 4, scene 2 of Le Roi s'amuse in which Blanche and Triboulet

observe and comment on the flirtation between the King and Maguelonne inside the tavern. Piave provides each character with a six-line verse which encapsulates their emotions at this moment. The Duke, thinking of nothing but the conquest of Maddalena, serenades her with "Lovely daughter of pleasure, / I'm enslaved by your charms." This is inspired by the King's line where he exclaims "Quelle fille d'amour délicieuse et folle!" Maddalena, who is not taken in by these sentiments, replies laughingly, "I know exactly / What your flattery is worth. / I'm familiar, handsome sir, / With advances like these." Gilda, horrified by the spectacle unfolding before her, sings "Ah, I have heard the traitor / Speak words of love like these to me! / Betrayed, unhappy heart, / Do not break from misery." Similarly, Blanche utters "O trahison!-- L'ingrat!-- Grand Dieu! mon coeur se fend! / Oh! comme il me trompait!--mais c'est qu'il n'a point d'âme!" Rigoletto promises Gilda that he will avenge her: "Hush, and let mine be the task / Of exacting vengeance. / It shall be soon, and fatal: I shall strike him down." This reflects Triboulet's line: "Pas de pleurs. Laisse-moi te venger!"

Despite its melodramatic content, act 4 of Le Roi s'amuse is at least more quickly paced than the three acts which precede it. By using short lines and matter-of-fact language, particularly in the final two scenes, Hugo is able to create a mood that is truly dramatic and suspenseful. Moreover, these scenes provide some welcome relief from the verbosity which weighs down most of the play. Consequently, Piave's task in this section of the libretto is mostly one of translation. He also retains the storm which provides an appropriate backdrop to the series of events which

culminate in Gilda's death as she sacrifices her own life in order to spare her perfidious lover. The trio which Piave and Verdi devise as a lead-up to Gilda's murder begins to build in intensity. Like Blanche, Gilda now realizes that the Duke no longer loves her, and that she was simply another in a long list of his conquests. Inexplicably she still loves him, however, and decides to sacrifice her own life in order to thwart Rigoletto's plans to have him killed. Saint-like, Gilda goes to her death, forgiving her malefactors, and imploring her father's pardon.

At this point in the play there is a quick curtain, signaling the end of act 4. Piave, however, chooses not to break the action at this point, thereby allowing the dramatic tension of the scene to continue uninterrupted. At the stroke of midnight Rigoletto returns and knocks at the door of the inn. Sparafucile drags out a sack containing what is supposed to be the murdered Duke. He offers to help throw it in the river, but like Triboulet, Rigoletto wants to savour his moment of revenge. Sparafucile bids him goodnight and disappears, leaving Rigoletto alone with prize. In the play Triboulet now embarks on a final bravura speech in which he gloats "with half-crazed megalomania" (Howarth "From Le Roi s'amuse" 78) over his imagined victory over the King:

> . . . . Maintenant, monde, regarde-moi.
> Ceci, c'est un bouffon, et ceci, c'est un roi!
> Et quel roi! le premier de tous! le roi suprême!
> Le voilà sous mes pieds, je le tiens. C'est lui-même.
> La Seine pour sépulcre, et ce sac pour linceul.
> Qui donc a fait cela? Hé bien! oui, c'est moi seul!
> (5.3.1483-9)

All this is a set-up for the ghastly revelation that awaits him, and in Hugo's play this ought to be the supreme moment of dramatic suspense. However, for sixty-six lines Triboulet declaims over what he imagines to be the body of the King, and by the end of this speech our suspense wanes considerably. Since the play has just recently gained some much-needed energy and excitement, Triboulet's oration at this climactic moment seems out of place. Despite its rhetorical brilliance, this speech only underlines the deficiencies of Hugo's dramatic technique. Howarth comments:

> This passage is typical of Hugo's grandiose imagination; with its fanciful dialogue between God and the earth, it looks forward to the more visionary pieces of the Légende des siècles. There is no denying the power of the writing; but the incongruity of such apocalyptic fantasies, when put into the mouth of a court jester, is inescapable. ("From Le Roi s'amuse" 78-9)

By contrast, Piave reduces this long, vehement outburst to a brief solo which conveys the gist of the first dozen lines of Hugo's scene. He makes no attempt, however, to reproduce the twenty lines in which Triboulet's soliloquy digresses into philosophical abstractions.

As Rigoletto is about to heave the sack into the river he hears the voice of the Duke singing "La donna è mobile," which parallels the King's repetition of "Souvent femme varie." This is another *coup de théâtre* taken directly from the play, for in a few seconds the terrible truth is discovered. Rigoletto cuts open the sack and a flash of lightning reveals his daughter's

face. He is horrified, but his senses do not deceive him. He hears the faint voice of Gilda, who is barely alive. In a final short duet, Gilda begs her father to forgive both her and the Duke. All the while Rigoletto's urgent phrases break in upon Gilda's unearthly harmonies, but they are unheard, and futile. In the middle of a word she dies, and Rigoletto lets out a final anguished cry of "La maledizione!" and collapses over the body of his daughter. The curtain falls as the orchestra thunders out repeated chords of D flat minor.

The play concludes on a different, though arguably less powerful, note. After Blanche's death, Hugo has Triboulet desperately ringing a ferry bell by the Seine. Various people appear, including a surgeon. Triboulet's downfall is now complete, for he who recently taunted the nobility at the Louvre is now abject and quite unrecognized by the passers-by of Paris. However, his final words--"J'ai tué mon enfant"--seem considerably less forthright and catastrophic than Rigoletto's final utterance. "Ah! La maledizione!" allows Piave to emphasize more strongly the underlying theme of the story, the implaccablity of Fate--a force which is as incomprehensible as it is unstoppable (Godefroy 222).

In this section I have attempted to illustrate some of the reasons why the libretto of Rigoletto may be considered more effectively dramatic than Le Roi s'amuse itself. Although it is not nearly on the same poetic level as Hugo's play, Piave's streamlined version of the story is superior in its ability to establish and to maintain far greater momentum. The librettist recognizes and successfully exploits those elements in Le Roi

s'amuse which have genuine dramatic power, while at the same time he condenses the play's numerous long speeches. Despite their lyrical beauty, these monologues are sometimes only marginally relevant to the story, and have the decidedly undramatic effect of bringing the action to a complete stop.

From "versified melodrama" to operatic triumph

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Le Roi s'amuse contains many flaws as a dramatic work for the stage. Most of the initial criticism of the play (and the reason for its suppression) was in response to its aggressive violation of a collective moral code of conduct--a code which was specific to a particular time and place. But beyond the play's moral or aesthetic stance, it is very likely that other inherent problems would have contributed to its eventual failure. Some of the obvious weaknesses regarding the plot have been pointed out in the preceding section. But other aspects of the play, such as pacing or character development, pose more serious problems. Ligier, who was cast as Triboulet for the play's premiere, found the work extremely moving when it was first read to him, especially the final act. But he also testified to the extreme difficulty of this same act from the point of view of the actor playing the central role. It is an exceptionally difficult part, both in its unusual length and the emotional intensity called for. From the end of act 2 onwards, when Triboulet discovers that Blanche has been abducted, there is a sustained intensity of feeling, with only a brief respite in act 4 when the King flirts playfully with Maguelonne. The whole of the last act is a series

of impassioned, even frenzied soliloquies, with little contribution from the other characters.

Another flaw common to Hugo's *drames* is the author's difficulty in creating rounded, convincing characters. In this respect I feel that Le Roi s'amuse is particularly defective. In Triboulet we see an example of characterization by the juxtaposition of quite incompatible elements. As he appears in act 1, Triboulet is a rancorous and spiteful court fool, as morally degenerate as the King, and who laughs at the misfortunes of others. This act closes with Saint-Vallier's "malédiction" which seals Triboulet's fate, but despite the goodness and repentance that he later demonstrates, Triboulet is not spared. It is almost as if retribution were falling on the head of an innocent person, as if the sins of the court jester were being paid for by a complete stranger. Indeed, when Triboulet, grief stricken at the death of Blanche, asks "Ô Dieu! pourquoi?" the answer is clear neither to him nor to the reader.

To summarize, most of Hugo's works for the stage betray his obsession with the "violent, the picturesque, the contrary" (Kimbell 463). Moreover, those qualities which are generally regarded as crucial to good spoken drama--the ability to characterize, to devise plots that develop naturally out of the interaction of character and situation, to impart the dialogues and soliloquies, however beautiful they may be, with a certain dynamic that bears upon the course of the drama--appear to have concerned Hugo very little. It is also characteristic of Hugo's dramatic style that the traditional relationship between poetry and drama is reversed. In Hugo's plays the purpose of the poetry

does not seem to be the development or the illumination of the drama, rather it is the purpose of the drama to contrive situations in which the characters can launch themselves into poetic speeches. In some cases these speeches are only tangentally relevant to the main issues of the play. Ultimately, Hugo's ambition to create a new, all-encompasing kind of drama was only partially realized. Too often in his plays the scenes of spectacle and the outpourings of emotion are strung along and prompted by a chain of rapid, violent and none-too-rational incidents. As a result, a play such as Hernani resembles what Kimbell describes as "a monstrously inflated opera libretto" (465).

Although Kimbell's judgement is perhaps a little severe, it raises an interesting point, since it was precisely the "operatic" quality of Hugo's plays that drew Verdi (and many other composers) to them. So although none of Hugo's plays is included among the great masterpieces for the stage, many musicians have found them to be ideally suited for musical adaptation. The composer Busoni once stated: "While for the drama there are almost boundless possibilities of material, it seems that for the opera the only suitable subjects are such as could not exist or reach complete expression without music--which demand music and only become complete through it" (qtd. in Barricelli 26). This insight may help us understand how Verdi is able to overcome the deficiencies of Le Roi s'amuse as a spoken play by giving "complete expression," as Busoni puts it, to those elements in the work which have true dramatic potential. Indeed, from beginning to end, Rigoletto is filled with examples where

Verdi's music is able to create a strong emotional response in the listener. The opening prelude, for instance, firmly establishes the dark, brooding atmospere which pervades the work. Though barely three minutes in length, the prelude gives us a foretaste of the horror, the shame, the disgust and the despair that will pursue Rigoletto and his daughter to their catastrophic end. Even the festive dance music which signals the beginning of act 1 cannot dispel our feeling of impending disaster.

Another example where Verdi's music is able to create an emotionally charged atmosphere occurs in the trio in act 3. A musical storm acts as the backdrop to the climactic series of events which culminates in Gilda's murder, and here the composer takes particular care to make the scene as exciting as possible. At one point the trio pauses for a clock to strike the half hour before midnight, the hour when Rigoletto is to return to claim his prize. Gilda to knocks twice on the door of the inn between peals of thunder. Offstage the chorus hums in imitation of the moaning wind, a startlingly effective innovation. Knowing that she is about to die in order to save the faithless Duke, Gilda knocks for the last time, and is admitted. The storm suddenly bursts overhead with alarming violence:

> Verdi lets all hell loose for sixty-three bars with the whole orchestra pouring down torrents together with drummage and cymbalclature and a thunder machine. Woodwind depicts the pattering rain, 'cellos and basses rumble, violins race, the chorus adds its weirdly gothic moaning. Then oboes, flutes and violins flicker fitfully as the storm abates its fury. (Godefroy 217)

Admittedly this scenario contains many melodramatic clichés that

could come across as ludicrous in the hands of a lesser composer. But Verdi is able to transcend the banalities of the scene and creates a dramatic moment that is as plausible as it is exciting.

Whereas Hugo's methods of dramatic characterization have been shown to be ineffective, Verdi is more successful in his ability to create rounded, believable characters. We see how Gilda is vividly brought to life in "Caro nome." The Duke's arias "Parmi veder le lagrime" and "Le donna è mobile" are similarly revelatory of his character. Moreover, although both Triboulet and Rigoletto undergo the same swift metamorphosis from the evil court buffoon to the loving, morally upright father, Verdi's version of this transformation seems easier to accept. Rigoletto's music allows us to sympathise with his pain, his rage, and his despair to an extent that we cannot with Triboulet.

One of the best examples of Verdi's characterization of Rigoletto occurs in act 2 where the jester confronts the courtiers after Gilda's abduction. Verdi's shortened version of Triboulet's tirade is presented in three contrasting sections, "each stage in his abjection being marked by a further move to the flat side of the key" (Budden Operas 501). The first section, beginning with "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata!" has a restless accompaniment which seems to hearken back to Verdi's less mature style. However, as Budden comments, the orchestration here is "no mere pedestal for a larger than life character. It absorbs the impetus of the preceding movement and at the same time embodies Rigoletto's impotent despair as he hurls himself at the courtiers" (Operas 501). This is followed by the slower "Ebben io piango, Marullo . . . signore" in which

Rigoletto breaks down and weeps while appealing to Marullo's "gentle heart." Budden continues: "The musical pattern in this section is one of pleading, to which the violas give an added poignancy by doubling part of the violin line at the lower octave" (Operas 501). Finally, his pride and defiance gone, Rigoletto begs the courtiers to forgive him and to give him back his daughter. Here the instrumentaion takes on the character of chamber music, music of an almost unbearable intimacy as Rigoletto's humiliation is complete. Howarth, too, stresses the effectiveness of this aria

> . . . whose innovation consists in the inversion of the traditional development, which would have increased in energy and volume from beginning to end. The reverse development here, together with the much greater economy, shows a considerable increase in psychological credibility, stressing the coherence that Verdi and his librettist sought to produce in their central figure by a synthesis of contrasting elements rather than a bizarre juxtaposition of opposites. ("From Le Roi s'amuse" 83)

With Rigoletto, Verdi and Piave had succeeded in creating an opera that was highly unconventional for its time. In this work many of the accepted structural and stylistic conventions which had governed early Italian romantic opera were rejected, and the result was an entirely new kind of theatrical experience. It is little wonder that those who heard Rigoletto for the first time were baffled, even intimidated, by such innovative and complex music. A review which appeared in the Gazzetta di Venezia exemplifies the common reaction of those who heard Rigoletto for the first time:

> An opera like this cannot be judged in one evening. Yesterday we were almost overwhelmed by its originality; originality or rather strangeness in the choice of subject; originality in the music, in the style, even in the form of the pieces; and we did not comprehend it in its entirety. Nevertheless the opera had the most complete success and the composer was applauded, called for and acclaimed at almost every piece; two of them had to be repeated. And in truth, the skill of the orchestration is stupendous, wonderful: the orchestra speaks to you, weeps for you, transfuses passion. Never was the eloquence of sound more powerful. The vocal part was less splendid, or so it seemed at a first hearing. It is quite distinct from the style previously employed, since large ensembles are wanting, and a quartet and trio in the last act in which the musical thought was not even perfectly grasped scarcely gained our attention. (qtd. in Kimbell 279)

At the beginning of this section I mentioned Hugo's vehement opposition to the success of Rigoletto, and how he even prevented its being performed in Paris for several years. However, when the opera was finally staged in the French capital in 1857, the author was persuaded to forget his ill-will towards Verdi and he attended a performance. During the course of the evening Hugo's criticism was replaced by increasingly enthusiastic praise, and at last he acknowledged the composer's genius and the beauty of the opera. It is reported that at the end of the quartet in the last act he jumped to his feet and exclaimed: "If I could only make four characters in my plays speak at the same time and have the audience grasp the words and sentiments of each, I would obtain the very same effect" (qtd. in Gatti 125). Although Hugo finally expressed his admiration both for Verdi and the dramatic possibilities of opera, it is tempting to speculate that the poet must also have felt a certain amount of pride in the knowledge that his play had been the inspiration for such a masterpiece.

Rigoletto could thus be said to represent both a victory for Verdi and a kind of vindication for Hugo. It was almost as if Hugo's "Romantic Waterloo" had been refought, and won.

CONCLUSION

Hugo's verse dramas and Verdi's Risorgimento operas are infused with the revolutionary spirit of European romanticism. However, the view that each held of his own work in the context of the artistic and social events of his society was markedly different. To Victor Hugo, the maverick, romanticism represented a means by which many artistic and social freedoms could be won. Hugo was particularly determined to liberate French drama from the constraints of neo-classical tragedy, a form which had changed little since the seventeenth century and which was derided by the romantics as a stylistic dinosaur. Beginning with Cromwell and its famous preface, Hugo tried to put his dramatic theories into practise. While not always successful, his plays were nevertheless both controversial and influential. Consequently, works such as Hernani and Le Roi s'amuse are remembered less for their literary merit than for their strategic importance in the war against neo-classicism.

Like most of his contemporaries, Hugo was influenced by the literature of other countries and other centuries. For Hugo, Shakespeare was the model for the creation of a new kind of drama, one in which all walks of life and all the variety of nature were represented. Consequently, marked contrast, particularly between the *sublime* and the *grotesque*, became Hugo's principal dramatic technique. He also borrowed heavily from popular melodrama--perhaps too heavily, for some critics dismiss Hugo's plays simply as well written melodramas.

Despite his shortcomings as a playwright it is undeniable

that Hugo's dramas had a positive influence on French theatre of the 1830's. Perhaps his most important contribution was his liberation of the poetic language from the limitations imposed upon it by the neo-classical *style noble*. In both Hernani and Le Roi s'amuse Hugo's poetic genius is strikingly apparent--overflowing with invention and exuberance, yet capable of a most moving lyricism.

Giuseppe Verdi was not the charismatic trail blazer that Hugo was. Although he came to be revered as the greatest Italian composer of his century, Verdi's early artistic development consisted of a slow and often frustrating process of assimilation and imitation. Rather than impetuously rejecting all that was sacred, Verdi initially preferred to work within the boundaries and conventions already established by other composers. In the end his apprenticeship served him well, since the astounding innovation that distinguishes such operas as Rigoletto was only achieved by a mastery of traditional forms and techniques.

Like the French writers of the period, the Italian composers of opera drew their inspiration not only from the past, but from contemporary literary sources as well. Eight of Hugo's plays, for example, were set to music before the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that Verdi and other composers were adapting the works of contemporary writers indicates how much Italian opera seria had changed since the eighteenth century. Like neo-classsical tragedy, opera seria had previously restricted itself to the portrayal of an arcadian world populated by the gods and heroes of antiquity. These characters were conceived as idealized models of virtue and bore little

resemblance to real people. But by the 1830's the situation had changed. Not only were the actual subjects of operas far more varied and unconventional, but the cast of characters had been substantially broadened to represent all levels of society. Luisa Miller (1849), for example, is a *drame bourgeois* in which Verdi portrays the struggles and emotions of ordinary people (Budden Verdi 206-7).

As the dramatic element become much more important, composers began to take a more holistic approach to their work. From the quality of the libretto and the nuances of the score, to the details of costumes and staging, all aspects of production were carefully planned and coordinated. The result was an entirely new kind of opera. Here at last were characters one could believe in and sympathize with; here was the entire spectacle of the human heart revealed and animated by vividly powerful music.

Of course, no artist in Restoration France or Risorgimento Italy was free from the threat of political censorship, and both Hugo and Verdi knew too well the indignity of having their works expunged or banned outright by overzealous officials. The political leaders of these countries were intolerant of much of what the romantic "rabble" professed and produced. To the *Ultras*, romantic art represented the disintegration of civilized society. Plays such as Le Roi s'amuse were viewed as subversive and were quickly suppressed. For the same reason Rigoletto and many other Verdi operas often had to be extensively altered before they were allowed to be performed. Hugo was more deliberate than Verdi in his provocation of the censor's wrath,

and relished the publicity incurred by the banning of Le Roi s'amuse and the sensational trial that ensued. Indeed, Hugo firmly believed that his most sacred responsibility as France's premier *homme de lettres* was to take a stand against the political and intellectual Establishment, a group infamous for its conservatism. Although Verdi was not the political extremist that Hugo was, he quite openly supported the Italian nationalist cause. Works such as Ernani and La Battaglia di Legnano betray Verdi's Risorgimento sympathies, and he inevitably came to be regarded as the official composer of the movement. Moreover, when he felt that his artistic freedom was threatened, Verdi, like Hugo, rarely hesitated to challenge his oppressors.

Although Hugo was a brilliant poet, many scholars criticize his skills as a dramatist. A commonly cited problem is his inability to devise plots that advance in a plausible manner, and too often he relies on a great deal of elaborate stage business borrowed from popular melodrama. More serious difficulties are posed by his methods of characterization. Typically Hugo presents characters who are either all good or all evil, or he creates still more unlikely figures compounded of contrasting characteristics without troubling to demonstrate the relationship between them.

Despite the validity of many of these criticisms, I also agree with those scholars who assert that the best of Hugo's verse plays--particularly Hernani and Ruy Blas--belong to a distinctly Hugolian genre: the *drame lyrique*. Indeed, because of the lyricism and the emotional intensity that infuses much of their writing, works such as Hernani, Marion de Lorme, and Ruy

Blas create an effect that is closer to opera than to spoken drama. Consequently, many of the criteria by which plays are normally judged cannot, in all fairness, be applied to Hugo's verse dramas. Howarth comments:

> With Hugo, rationalistic concepts of plausibility of characterization are not really appropriate. In [Hernani] perhaps more than anywhere else in Hugo's theatre, characters are above all vehicles for poetic developments of a lyrical, elegaic, or satirical nature. It is impossible not to be struck by . . . the distinctly *operatic* quality of Hugo's dramatic writing. For the playwright has rejected the linear plot-development of the traditional serious drama of the rationalist neoclassical era, in which even soliloquies fulfilled a dialectical function; in place of this we have a structure in which "plot" is a framework for a series of solos and duets, arias and recitatives. . . . ("Hugo and the Romantic Drama in Verse" 70)

Unlike the heroes of neo-classical drama, who are intensely inward looking and constrained by their particular circumstances, Hugo's characters, like Shakespeare's, look outward from the particular to the universal. Their imaginative flights transcend the limitations of context, and it is the function of the imagery, like that of the music in opera, to give memorable, striking form to their utterances (Howarth "Hugo and the Romantic Drama in Verse" 70). Seen in this light, even Le Roi s'amuse, with its cumbersome, melodramatic plot and its heavy-handed *sublime/grotesque* antithesis, contains many passages which convey both a dramatic grandeur and a lyrical beauty. Triboulet's soliloquy in the last act, for example, although incongruous with his character, is neverthless a glorious expression of a *folie de grandeur* (Howarth "Drama" 223), and stands on its own as a kind

of spoken "concert aria":

> Songer que si demain Dieu disait à la terre:
> --O terre, quel volcan vient d'ouvrir son cratère?
> Qui donc émeut ainsi le chrétien, l'ottoman,
> Clément-Sept, Doria, Charles Quint, Soliman?
> Quel César, quel Jésus, quel guerrier, quel apôtre,
> Jette les nations ainsi l'une sur l'autre?
> Quel bras te fait trembler, terre, comme il lui plaît?
> La terre avec terreur répondrait: Triboulet!
> Oh! jouis, vil bouffon, dans ta fierté profonde.
> La vengeance d'un fou fait osciller le monde!
> (5.1.1457-66)

Barricelli affims that whereas Hugo wrote more for the reader, Verdi wrote more for the listener. He argues that Hugo's plays succeed on an intellectual level, whereas Verdi's operas speak to our emotions. For this reason Barricelli considers Hernani to be "roman manqué" while Ernani is a "drame réalisé" (26). In my opinion, this judgement does not do justice to Hugo's achievement as a dramatist. It is true that most of his plays have fallen into obscurity, whereas Verdi and Piave's adaptations of them--particularly Rigoletto--continue to enjoy popular and critical success. Neverthless, it was Hugo who provided the original inspiration for these and other masterpieces of the operatic repertoire. But far from simply serving as grist for the operatic mill, Hugo's verse dramas possess a lyricism and an exuberance which attest to his poetic genius, and which still have the power to move us.

Like Verdi's operas, Hugo's plays changed the course of French theatre forever. Moreover, like Verdi, Hugo not only decisively rejected the aesthetic and political traditions of the previous century, but he created something new and beautiful in

the process. In Chapter 4 I cite a review of the premiere performance of Rigoletto which states: "Never was the eloquence of sound more powerful," a judgement which I believe applies as easily to the music of Verdi's operas as to the poetry that inspired them.

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