

Queen of Dissent: Mary Stuart and the opera in her honour by Carlo Coccia

Alexander Weatherson

That the sprightly Neapolitan, Carlo Coccia, came to see Mary Stuart through English eyes goes without saying. A highly professional operatic refugee from the Rossinian torrent in his beloved native city he had first paused in Lisbon (writing four operas and a National Song) before coming on to London in 1823 where - as musical director of the largest and most glamorous opera house in the city, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket (Covent Garden at that time being merely a *teatro di prosa*) - he became a sort-of figurehead endearing himself as no visiting Italian had done before, not even during the brilliant succession of Italian composers in the eighteenth century. Urbane, imperturbable and ready to greet the great *pesarese* himself with admirable sangfroid when he too arrived in London (and later conducting his *Zelmira* between clenched-teeth) as the famous maestro alighted from his coach with Isabella Colbran on one arm and a large green parrot on the other, all three white-faced after a frightful channel crossing. Soon this pupil of Paisiello was professor of singing at the brand-new Royal Academy of Music in London with a stream of eminent pupils. Indeed, it was the friendly, gregarious Coccia (1782-1873) who restored the high-profile of Italian song in that proud and stubborn island, Italian Opera once again re-emerging from the mists with honour and acclaim.

Scotland too re-emerged from the mists as far as the English were concerned at much the same time. The last of the exiled Stuarts was dead, the pathetically threadbare Henry Stuart, Cardinal York (1725-1807), cadet brother of the Young Pretender Charles Edward Stuart had breathed his last in Rome, his tomb in St Peter's had been paid-for by King George III but it was the latter's modish elder son King George IV who snatched-up the paternal torch and brought all things Caledonian back to life. He was painted wearing a kilt; he ennobled Sir Walter Scott; the Scottish regalia was bundled out of an old chest in Edinburgh Castle; shortbread (a kind of Highland biscuit) and porridge (a stodgy oatmeal soup), appeared on genteel

tables in the Home Counties and everything Hebridian was coated with a thick layer of well-meaning sentimentality. After 1820, and George IV's Coronation in Westminster Abbey, the Scottish capital moved an inch or two closer to London.

As a kind-of bonus, Mary Stuart came out of the woodwork into which she had been confined ever since her decapitation in 1587. Poetically-inclined melancholy ladies sighed over her sad fate, a veil was drawn over many of the details of her vexatious career. As a result, and in 1827, Carlo Coccia wrote the one opera of his four-year stay in England - the *opera seria in tre atti, Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* for the great soprano Giuditta Pasta, a work that represented a complete change of style.

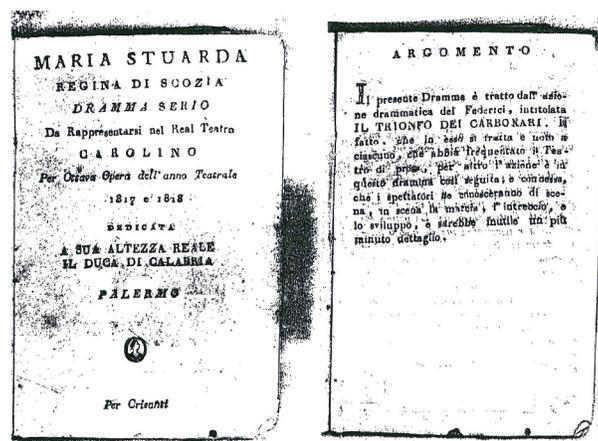
No one could complain that Italy had ever abandoned the Scottish queen. Theatrically speaking she had shown a marked resilience – but not really on account of her spiritual perfection, where it existed – it was as a political symbol that she had captured the imagination of Italian radicals and their kith and kin. There was a restless interest in this tormented figure. In the earliest years of the nineteenth century performances of Alfieri's (1780) and Schiller's (1801) far-fetched historical plays staged in her honour rubbed-shoulders with a lesser political layer - with a dim 'Maria Stuarda restituita dai Carbonari' for example - a rag-bag of fact and fiction that somehow managed to bridge the gap between fervent Catholicism and Jacobin wishful-thinking.ⁱ It found a place among a host of similar popularist plays that included August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue's 'Edoardo Stuart in Scozia'ⁱⁱ and the screaming tabloids 'Il principe Eugenio all'assedio di Tamisvar' and 'Il trionfo di Napoleone il Grande' aimed directly at a credulous public. They shared the footlights with an even more imaginative 'Matilde ossia I Carbonari' in 1809 - which presented the unhappy queen with a fictitious daughter (who too would figure, rather later, in Rossini's *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* but shorn of any disloyal aspects), as well as a cut-price 'I carbonari di Dombar' [ie *Dunbar*] of similar construction.

All these ephemeral plays had something in common, and were favoured by a dissident public. Needless to say, it was not long before the "Jacobin" Queen of Scotland was given a musical setting: Pietro Casella's *Maria Stuarda* (Firenze 4.1812) was prudent enough, but Pasquale Sogner's *Maria Stuarda ossia I carbonari di Scozia* (Venezia 26.12.1814) - omitting to name its poet - sparked-off a political row which was stamped-out when the newly-installed Austrians in Venice put a stop to all such nonsense as they saw it. When the Neapolitan Michele Carafa staged his *Elisabetta in Derbyshire ossia Il castello di Fotheringhay* with a libretto by Antonio

Peracchi at La Fenice on 26.12.1818 (based upon Schiller) the maestro took care not to upset anyone with either its title or its text (only with some of its spelling) while Saverio Mercadante, whose *Maria Stuarda regina di Scozia* with verses by the Venice-based Gaetano Rossi (Bologna 29.5.1821) - though not more than obliquely dependent upon any of these sources - was astute enough to stage it as far away from Naples as possible.

There was a good reason. A far more testing opera had preceded both, and this was to play havoc with the reputation of the incautious former monarch as viewed by the Bourbons of Naples.

Luigi Carlini's sadly foolhardy *Maria Stuarda regina di Scozia* was his most important opera. He wrote the libretto himself it seems - but based it - as its preface makes clear, upon a drama by Camillo Federici, *pseudonym* of Giovanni Battista Viassolo, entitled IL TRIONFO DEI CARBONARI (printed in capitals, as here, in the libretto) a play published in Padua in 1802 which itself was the unattributed source for most of the dubious plays listed above. Federici (1749-1802) was a former actor, a *piemontesi* and the author of pulp dramas whose subject-matter encroached upon those of Schiller and Kotzebue but far more politically charged. He complained, and with justice, that many of these had been pirated by anonymous opportunists. Carlini's ill-fated and ill-timed opera made its first and only appearance at the Real Teatro Carolino of Palermo as the eighth opera of the stagione of 1818 and was dedicated, not very prudently, to none other than SUA ALTEZZA REALE IL DUCA DI CALABRIA (also in capitals) the heir to the throne.



Luigi Carlini *Maria Stuarda, regina di Scozia* Teatro Carolino, Palermo 1818

The cast was optimum with Girolama Dardanelli (niece of the composer) in

the title role; Giovanni David as Ormondo; Luigi Sirletti as Lenox; and Luigi Lablache as Duglas (sic) - which roster of stars would nowadays fill La Scala three times over. It is unnecessary to report that poor Carlini's melodrama with such a boldly proclaimed source and with such a dedicatee promptly vanished without a trace, deleted from all record with wonderful efficiency.ⁱⁱⁱ

This was a shame. Though the Carlini *dramma serio* was certainly viewed with dismay by the Royal Palace of Naples (and by its dedicatee, naturally) it was in fact a fairly innocuous effort with some attempt at historical accuracy; the villain "Ormondo" may have been nothing but a bland personification of Mary's hooligan of a third husband, Bothwell, and the *Congiurati*, who figure prominently, merely release the Queen from the durance vile of the "Castello di Dombar". But the theme was political dynamite of course, 1818, in its own way, was a watershed for dissent.

Naturally the dangerous political acquaintances of the incautious Queen of Scots had not escaped eagle eyes in Naples. The legends had been grimly noted. During her English imprisonment all sorts of plots and plans to release the perjured queen had flown back and forth - or so the stories go. Arising from a convoluted version of the Babington plot of 1586 (referred-to in Bardari's libretto for Donizetti) in which Elizabeth's assassination was fully envisaged, a whole host of conspiratorial myths, fantasies and inventions had been put forward by continental sympathisers. That they were absurd was no impediment to their dissemination. Indeed, the most fantastic of all supplied the most potent impetus for political change: that an undercover chain of seditious Charcoal-burners (*Carbonari*) secretly deployed throughout the forests of England was a cover for a band of sworn conspirators intent upon the destitution of the "usurped" throne of England! The Romantic Era was always ready to adopt extravagant metaphors for its most serious projects. Dreams, visions and technicolour improbabilities were the currency of the day. But none of this was good news for Mary Stuart, and certainly not in 1818. She, like Carlini's opera, was fatally compromised by association. Conspiracy! A usurped throne! And in Naples in the wake of Murat? As far as the Bourbons were concerned she went back into the woodwork for good. That the Neapolitan branch was descended from Mary Stuart was no excuse (they were equally descended from the Tudors like practically every royal family of Europe), nor was her decapitation any kind of mitigation (there were far more recent bloody decapitations under their nose). But it was *conspiracy* that undid her. Even 30 years later Verdi could write (to Piave): "*They allowed Ernani, so they*

might allow this too, as there is no conspiracy."^{iv} Conspiracy was the ultimate unforgivable sin, indeed pathologically-so, as far as the Bourbons of Naples were concerned. A TRIUMPH OF THE CARBONARI was not to be contemplated - not even in the cause of any "martyred" Catholic queen, ancestral or otherwise. It needed no spelling-out "*sarebbe inutile un più minuto dettaglio*" as it says so cogently in the preamble to Carlini's libretto.

*

In London, free from the shadow of the Bourbons, Coccia turned his attention to this unhappy tale. Possibly it was a declaration of independence, perhaps exile had made him bold - there is no way of telling. Maybe Pasta herself made the choice, she favoured regal models for her art and had been to Westminster Abbey to view the tomb of the "martyr", we know nothing more than this. Pietro Giannone, Coccia's modenese expatriate librettist, was certainly aware of the explosive nature of this theme at home in Italy^v but he too played his cards close to his chest. The title page of the opera reads as follows:

MARIA STUART,
REGINA DI SCOZIA,

opera seria

In Tre Atti

POESIA DEL SIGNOR GIANNONE,

MUSICA DEL SIGNOR COCCIA.

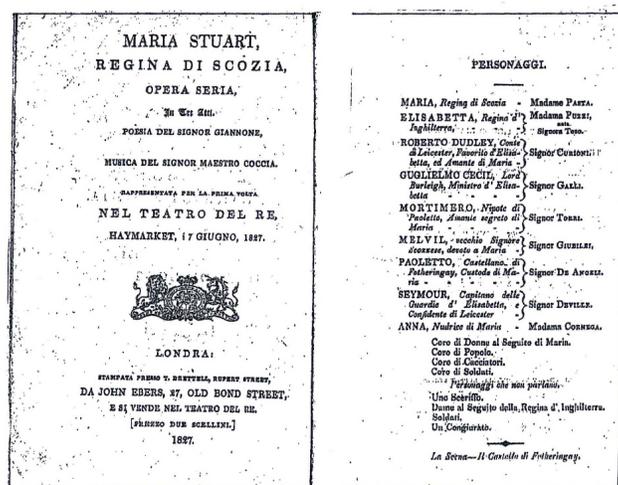
RAPPRESENTATA PER LA PRIMA VOLTA

NEL TEATRO DEL RE

HAYMARKET, 7 GIUGNO, 1827^{vi}

For Coccia, the project was full of novelty. In a London resounding to the portentous accents of Weber and Beethoven his orchestration took wings, a darker mood began to infiltrate the Rossinian certainties that had for some time been his anchor. In the city where Shakespearian tragedy was a yardstick for dramatic integrity something more than facile diversion was mandatory, especially if his hard-won operatic sobriety was not to be crucified unmercifully by the critics. And then too he had a great star at his disposal, music and text would be obliged to bridge a credibility gap between the perception of Italian Opera as mere vocal entertainment and a streetwise (if

in an historical sense exclusively) audience. Only with Pasta's name at his disposal could he have dared tackle such a theme. Through English eyes - those now of Coccia - Mary Stuart needed very careful handling, her unprecedented oleographic aura made demands that would have nonplussed even a native composer. Above all else there must have been a fear of inadvertently offending the susceptibilities of those very same people to whom she had had lost her head so many years before. His own head, he may have felt, could well be poised above the very same block.



Carlo Coccia *Maria Stuart, regina di Scozia* The King's Theatre, London 1827

That discretion was paramount is obvious by the text. Giannone bends over nearly backwards to do some kind of factual justice to his heroine and her all-powerful rival. Indeed, comparing Giannone's *Maria Stuart* with the *Maria Stuarda* of Bardari for Donizetti reveals the latter to be not just concise but a miracle of temerity. Coccia's opera was one of the most wordy ever performed it would seem, there are sub-plots galore. His cast is much longer and differs significantly: Maria, Elisabetta, Leicester, Cecil (usually called Burleigh here - his real-life title) and Anna, are more or less the same in both operas but the role of Talbot (arch-loyal to Elizabeth in history, and whose noble descendents would certainly have gone to law had he been portrayed otherwise) is split between Melvil, a Scottish rather than English sympathiser, who takes on some of Talbot's role as well as part of that of Leicester, while new is Paoletto (ie Sir Amyas Paulet - Mary Stuart's chilling jailor at Fotheringhay Castle), as well as a certain Mortimero,^{vii} or Sir Mortimero his nephew (or son-in-law - it is not clear at all) a stripling at once in love with the Scottish Queen, romantic bungler and a Babington

figure of sorts as well as an outright amorous rival to the two-timing Leicester

Giannone's lack of focus is disconcerting. Three only scenes can be found in exact parallel with that of Donizetti: Maria's outdoor excursion into the park of the castle [Act 1 Sc.10]; the infamous "*dialogo delle due regine*" as Donizetti wryly calls it [Act I Sc.12]; and the final scene of the scaffold [Act 3 Sc.4], all the rest differ greatly. In no case are the verses quite the same in the two operas but they are *similar*. Elisabetta is as antagonistic in Coccia as in Donizetti but less ironic and has more scruples, Maria is more arrogant (which makes her execution more logical), indeed she is superbly boastful but less vulgar; Leicester's double-dealing is more overt (but this may have been nothing but the truth); important differences include an unconcealed duplicity on the part of every character on the stage - which may have been a current view of the Tudors in London in 1827, plus one major and significant difference: an assassination attempt upon Elisabetta during the angry squall between the two queens which is the actual trigger for the execution of the hated rival. It was not a gratuitous insult addressed to Anne Boleyn (who too had been given a recent whitewashing) which led her very distant cousin to the axe - the fishwife slanging-match of Donizetti's libretto would never have been permitted in London, no more than it was in Milan.

The most obvious difference of all, however, especially to Italian eyes, is the absence of religion: Maria is not a Catholic heroine in Coccia's opera. No one (and certainly not the English Catholics) took her religious credentials very seriously - she had married two protestants - except in that they precluded her from claiming to be heir to the throne. The conflict is one of statecraft, not of reformed religion. There is no "confession scene", no absolution, no concealed vestments, no crucifix (in its place is a love scene between Maria and Leicester!). The irony of course, is that the King of Naples could have found little to complain-about on this account.^{viii}

Coccia may even have hoped to be able to revive the opera one day at home - *pace* the misadventure of poor Carlini. In this he was doomed to disappointment of course. His opera was performed four times in London and never again, not anywhere in the world. It was not the valedictory triumph he might have hoped for. All sorts of clumsy hitches seem to have afflicted the London staging, it was poorly rehearsed, the singers took great liberties with their music improvising boldly and inserting cadenzas without warning, it was badly-dressed (according to some accounts) and the orchestra did not know the score - no wonder it puzzled many listeners. All

of which catalogue of defects is perfectly astonishing when, after all, Coccia was Musical Director of the theatre in question! It was far too long. Due to its inordinate length it was shortened even before the prima and then successively over the three evenings that remained so that one third of its music at least was missing at the ultimate curtain.

But these cuts have a certain relevance: *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* in the form it was performed on its last days resembles very closely that of the *Maria Stuarda* as originally conceived by Donizetti in Naples in 1834. Its structure, sequence, content and dramatic flow are very much the same. This may be one of the first of the many compelling reasons for claiming that it was the genial Neapolitan Carlo Coccia who supplied a model to his Bergamasc friend when he got back to his native city. Coccia took his score with him under his arm when he left London for Italy a few months later. It was still in his possession at his death in 1873.

Coccia's roster of singers was not the least interesting aspect of his staging. At the side of Giuditta Pasta in the title-role was an unexpected Elisabetta - a vocal rival in no way less important. This was a newcomer, a soprano who would later assume the same role at La Scala at the official prima of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* in 1835, as such, she too would be a potent link between the two maestri. Giacinta Toso, the piemontese wife of the celebrated horn player Giovanni Puzzi, was something of an enigma,^{ix} she had been taking lessons from Coccia in London, or so it would seem, and had established herself there. Together with her part-time impresario of a husband they rented a large house in Piccadilly in which they could give fashionable concerts for almost half a century, only shaking off the London murk after his death in 1876 when she returned home to Italy. Among the famous singers whose concerts the Puzzi couple hosted and which brought them a considerable fortune were Pasta herself, Giulia Grisi, Rubini, Mario, Lablache, Tamburini, Duprez, Jenny Lind, Frascini, and significantly - the charismatic Maria Malibran and her sister Pauline Viardot. In fact the resulting equation: *Coccia + Giacinta Puzzi-Toso = Malibran* throws some light upon the otherwise rather puzzling choice of Elisabetta to sing in the belated prima of Donizetti's opera in 1835. She was not an inconsiderable actress according to the reviews but being scarcely twenty-years-old and very tall, she had difficulty in portraying the middle-aged Virgin Queen who in real life was not much taller than her modern counterpart. This notwithstanding, she had a mini-triumph in her confrontation with Pasta and sang with distinction. The tenor Alberico Curioni sang the role of Roberto Dudley; the *profondo* Filippo Galli that of Cecil/Burleigh; another tenor

Giuseppe Torri that of Mortimero and the basso Arturo Giubilei sang that of Melvil, with the smaller roles of Paoletto, Seymour and Anna taken by De Angeli, Deville and Nina Cornega respectively. All these artists (with the exception of the three last) had substantial music to sing, Coccia was as generous with his music as Giannone with his text. Each had a show-piece of sorts - that is, before everything began to slip away over the four eventful days at the King's Theatre.

In the *Maria Stuarda* of Donizetti, a fictional confrontation of the two queens - Schiller's brainchild- is made theatrically irresistible by their invective, thus elevating romanticism to a popular artform vividly dependant upon a feeling for historical justice, however nonsensical in real life. In Coccia's *Maria Stuart* there is nothing of the kind, despite a vicious encounter worthy of any continental fantasist. This was not only through an immediate threat of indignant departure of the audience - and indeed vulgarity led to instant exits in the royal theatres of London - but because both queens were embedded in the immutable charisma they had acquired over the years: Queen Elizabeth I was an icon, "Gloriana", impassive, high-nosed, bejeweled and superb; Mary Queen of Scots (as she was always called) was *douce*, "unfortunate", perpetually young, a domestic parable of sweet sentiment in adversity. Both queens indeed (probably justifiably) would have been thought incapable of any such coarse public behavior, indeed Donizetti's opinion that "those two queens were whores" ("*ma p... erano quelle due*") would not have gone down well at all. The two operas took their point of departure from differing stage conventions: Coccia's opera was a (moderately) decorous historical tapestry; Donizetti's opera was a love-story contest in which neither woman wins (with a veneer of religiosity), a "*due illustri rivali*" in fact - a major librettistic theme in the romantic phantasmagoria of the day. It was a case of two dishes with a common recipe, but a different dinner in mind. The music, however, of *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* would have astonished Coccia's admirers in Italy and pleased those of Donizetti. Nothing remained of Paisiello's tutelage, nothing of the bucolic charm that had invested his celebrated *Clotilde*^x still going the rounds. From the beginning he offered an unsettling sombre score, arrestingly coloured and full of urgent pulsation, bouncing rhythms, dotted-note patterns and a vocalism abounding in florid ascending and descending scale passages which set-off its extraordinary length and variety. Coccia now unveiled the remarkable operatic continuity, the *ostinati* and mastery of ground-bass that would distinguish all his later stage-works. This was new. His orchestration - refashioned by Coccia over four

long years - was replete with wildly dramatic and extended obbligati, intermezzi and mini-concerti for favoured wind-players (one of them Giovanni Puzzi) so that its perception as an *Italian Opera* - Pasta, Curioni et al notwithstanding - was viewed with some scepticism by the audience. There were those who considered he had surrendered too much to historical ardour. Ambitious, fascinating, full of energy, even so its best features did not quite dispel the impression that the composer was only part way to something new.

Nine pieces were published in vocal score in London, nothing in full score. They are as follows:

Act 1

In quella torre infausta cavatina (Leicester) Act 1 Sc.2

Quale audacia! in te credei duetto (Maria/Mortimero) Act 1 Sc.7

Scende al core cavatina (Maria) Act 1 Sc.10

Ecco l'indegna (finale primo) Act 1 Sc.12

Act 11

Come mi palpita duetto (Maria/Leicester con pertichini) Act 11 Sc.4

Tremante atterito quartettino (Cecil/Mortimero/Maria/Leicester) do.

A que' detti, a qual sembante duetto (Elisabetta/Leicester) Act 11 Sc.5

Act 111

Tu, cui fanno al ciel diletto duetto (Maria/Melvil) Act 111 Sc.3

Sposo! ah teco or tu mi vuoi aria finale (Maria) Act 111 Sc.4

That these were the most immediately striking pieces in the opera will be clear, but nearly half of them were brutally dropped during the bloodbath of performance. Leicester's cavatina *In quella torre infausta* with its recitative was cut immediately; Maria's brilliant duet with Mortimer *Quale audacia! in te credei* simply disappeared without trace, revealing that even his most vivid music was not spared; the touching encounter between Maria and Melvil which forms an essential part of the final dénouement *Tu, cui fanno al ciel diletto* (whose parallel in Donizetti's opera would have to be the valedictory duet *Or che morente è il raggio* between Maria and Talbot) lost its two opening quatrains. Of the unpublished music most of the Act 1 *Introduzione* was discarded; Paoletto's recitative in Act 1 Sc.5 was dropped; as was Maria's recitative in Sc.6; in Act 11 all of the opening music: Sc.1 and 2 and half of Sc.3 were cut; so too was all of Sc.6 thus removing Burleigh's great aria con coro; all of Sc.8 and two-thirds of Sc.9 also vanished depriving Elisabetta of most of the aria that ends the act. Happily Act 111 - the shortest in the opera - lost only the part of the duet mentioned above. Of the portions that survived we can make several important

comparisons with Donizetti's later score. Though Coccia's *Maria Stuart* makes an early appearance in the unfolding of the argument unlike the heroine of *Maria Stuarda*, it is her "freedom" aria in the park of Fotheringhay that first invites an immediate comparison:

Coccia Act 1 Sc.10 Parco del Castello di Fotheringa

Maria

Ebben, si goda
D'un momento di gioia-Oh mira! dov'è
Sorgon que'bigi monti, ivi è la dolce
Mia Scozia; è queste nubi
Che discendon di là, fors'han veduta
De' miei padri la reggia!
E ver la Francia or vanno!-Oh, salutate
Quelle al mio cor sì grate
Soavi sponde, o nuvole leggiere!
Siate voi di Maria la messaggiera.

Donizetti Act 1 Sc.4 Parco di Forteringa

Maria

Guarda:
Su' prati appare
Odorosetta e bella
La famiglia de' fiori...e a me sorride,
E il zeffiro che torna
Da' bei lidi di Francia,
Ch'io gioisca mi dice
Come alla prima gioventù felice.
Oh, nube! che lieve per l'aria t'aggiri,
Tu reca il mio affetto, to reca i sospiri
Al suolo beato che un dì mi nudri,
Deh, scendi cortese, mi accogli sui vanni,
Mi rendi alla Francia

There are many striking similarities above of course. Coccia's aria for Maria *Scende al core, inebbria l'anima* traces an identical ecstatic vein as the above, but his cabaletta has a totally different mood

O suon, che ricordi
I giorni ridenti
Di puri contenti,
D'innocui piacer.
Tu scacci dal petto

Le cure segrete,
D'immagini liete
Tu m'empj il pensier

sung by Pasta con coro upon hearing the hunting horns which announce the imminent arrival of Elisabetta it could scarcely be in greater contrast with Donizetti's impulsively violent equivalent

Nella pace del mesto riposo
Vuol colpirmi di nuovo spavento
Io la chiesi..e vederla non oso...
Tal coraggio nell'alma mi sento!

From the outset the later composer has elected to stress a far more telling portrayal of the two queens, Maria's *innocui piacer* is not in evidence at all. Their actual confrontation in the finale primo of *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* - which ends Act 1 (as is the case with the modern [critical edition] of *Maria Stuarda* but was not that of Donizetti's pre-Malibran version which was written in three acts) - contains many further moments in common. Coccia's "Dialogo delle due regine" is a very much more protracted affair, some thirty minutes of music in all and is divided into marked blocks of concertati. It lacks the focus as well as the vehemence of the later version, but its pacing, pregnant pauses and menace are anything but ineffective. Here again the sequence of events is closely paralleled in *Maria Stuarda*. The ladies view each other from afar opening with uniform disdain in both operas:

Elisabetta /Maria

Ecco l'indegna

Maria in due course conceals her repugnance and kneels before her rival; her humiliation is not received gracefully in either instance:

Coccia Act 1 finale primo

Maria

O Sorella! Il ciel decise
A mio danno, a tuo favo
Or pietà ti schiuda il core
Per chi tanto, oh dio! soffri....

Elis.

Questo loco a te conviene.

Donizetti Act 1 finale primo

Maria

Ah! Sorella ormai ti basti
quanto oltraggio a me recasti
Deh! Solleva un'infelice
che riposa sul tuo cor.

Elis.

No, quel loco a te si addice

The crucial rejoinder, however, is less pungent in the first of these exchanges, if equally nasty:

Coccia

Maria

Non già da'tuoi natali,
Retaggio hai tu d'onore:
Si sa per quale errore
La madre tua peri

Elis.

Indegna!

Donizetti

Maria

No. Figlia impura di Bolena
Parli tu di disonore?
Meretrice indegna oscena,
in te cada il mio rossore.
Profanato è il suolo Inglese:
Vil bastarda dal tuo piè

Elis.

Guardie! Olà

At this precise point in Coccia's opera Maria claims to be Queen of England:

Oh! nella polvere
Discendi omai dal trono:
La tue regina io sono:
Tu dei cadermi al piè

which intrepid fantasy is immediately followed by an assassination attempt upon the furious rival in question, as a result of which Maria is led back to her prison in a storm of quasi-canonic choral imprecations. There is not even a hint of triumph for Mary Stuart in Coccia's opera.

Musically, this finale primo of Coccia is fascinating and its not-at-all coincidental relationship with that of Donizetti distinctly tantalising. The whole encounter pulsates, from the cheerful hunting horns of the opening to the fighting-cock glares and postures of the rivals which are set-off by a gaily tripping figure, curling and twisting like a sardonic commentary; the actual insult to the angry Tudor having a prefatory *ostinato* that goes even further - a figuration that resembles nothing so much as a bouncing rubber ball happily pointing her wounding remarks. In general, this tripping arabesque is set for strings - in Coccia sometimes underpinned by woodwind as is Donizetti's mocking equivalent - with precisely the same lightness and in precisely the same malicious context. If Coccia takes more time than Donizetti to come to the point, he is at once more faithful to Schiller's original (where an assassination attempt also features) and supplies an admirable model.

Donizetti's second act (in the Milanese version) could find even earlier parallels in Coccia (his *Quella vita a me funesta* of Elisabetta, for instance, is paralleled by Coccia's *Pretesto agl'infidi!*^{xi} with the same bitter accusations and at which time too she signs Maria's sentence of death); the scene at the scaffold, above all, contains many moments which have become familiar in the later opera: Burleigh announces Elisabetta's willingness to accede to Maria's final wishes; as Leicester is present throughout (or perhaps *because* he is present throughout) Maria addresses her final thoughts to Darnley (extreme oddly, historically speaking) *Sposo! ah teco or tu mi vuoi* in an ethereal cantabile of great delicacy which Pasta sang to huge effect; there is no *preghiera* of course. She is half-fainting, Leicester supports her, thus her cabaletta ultima has an uncanny resemblance to that of the opera written seven years later:

Coccia Act 111 cabaletta ultima

Maria

Tardi ah troppo! a un infelice
La promessa, o conte, attieni!
Così a reggermi tu vieni
Del mio carcere ad uscir!

Donizetti Act II (or III) cabaletta ultima

Maria

Ah! Se un giorno da queste ritorte
Il tuo braccio involarmi dovea,
or mi guidi a morire da forte
per estremo conforto d'amor.

The apocalyptic canon shot which announces the demise of *Maria*, and the “flagello punitor” offered to England and supplied so movingly by the great Bergamesc, have no equivalent, alas, in the opera of his predecessor.

It will be asked: what music from Coccia’s *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* was available for Donizetti to see in Naples in 1834. Girard published six pieces in vocal score; ^{xii} from Act 1 the duetto *Quale audacia! in te credei* and Maria’s cavatina *Scende al core*; from Act 11 *Come mi palpita* and *A que’detti, a qual sembante*; from Act 111 *Tu, cui fanno al ciel* and the affecting aria finale for the heroine *Sposo! ah teco or tu mi vuoi*. As more than one of these pieces had been discarded in whole or in part in London it seems improbable that they played any special part in the engendering of the score of the Bergamasc. More probably, Carlo Coccia - who was Musical Director of the San Carlo theatre in that very year of 1834 - allowed Donizetti to examine the full-score in his possession together with a copy of Giannone’s libretto. In addition, to whet his appetite, Pasta could have shown him some of the music from the earlier opera either at the time of *Anna Bolena* (when Donizetti was staying at her Como villa) or more recently at the time of his revision of *Fausta* for her voice. More urgently, it will be asked if Donizetti knew that the topic of Mary Stuart was taboo with the Bourbons? That Coccia was unaware is frankly unbelievable, he made no attempt to revive his innovative opera in Naples despite its partial publication. And Donizetti? I suggest that the use of a near-adolescent poet to supply the verse for *Maria Stuarda* is sufficiently exotic for us to postulate a tactical cover to defuse royal displeasure. Indeed the offended innocence of the celebrated maestro at the banning of his opera has always been oddly disingenuous. We know that "Giovanna Gray" was instantly put forward as an alternative subject. She had been kept in reserve, so to speak, in the eventuality of a royal ukase. But, it will be asked, was this not yet another royal martyr? Another bloody victim from whom one could claim descent? Another *sad subject unsuitable for gala occasions*? Would not the King/Queen/Censura/Police Chief whoever or whatever have objected equally to any such decapitated replacement? *Il nostro*, I would respectfully suggest, in this instance was willing to acknowledge that an ill-treated Lady Jane Grey was not under unsolicited escort from a coven of Carbonari!

Ferdinando II, King of the Two Sicilies, was not to be trifled-with however, she was brushed aside, and the Queen of Dissent had to wait for a re-mastered nemesis far away at La Scala the following year.

Donizetti’s attitude, no doubt, could be summed-up as *artless*. His art however - as we are fully aware - is all in his music.

ⁱ At the Teatro Comunitativo di Ravenna, to give one example, the Comica Compagnia Alessandro Riva succeeded in performing most of these plays between 1804 and 1810

ⁱⁱ Also set to music by Carlo Coccia as *Edoardo in Iscozia* on 8 May 1831 at Naples

ⁱⁱⁱ It features neither in Schmidl, Caselli, Sesini, Melisi, Dassori, Regli or Stieger; Ottavio Tiby *Il Real Teatro Carolino e L'Ottocento musicale palermitano* (Firenze 1857) names the opera but "*Maria Stuart...L.Carlini*" is the sum total of his entry and it can only be concluded that Tiby saw neither a note of the music nor a word of the text. A finely bound manuscript full score of Carlini's opera is conserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale de España (Biblioteca del Infanta Don Francisco de Paula) in Madrid, possibly a gift to that music-mad prince, friend of Rossini and brother-in-law of the Duca di Calabria in question. It is a poignant fact that Luigi Carlini's rejected opera ended up in friendly Bourbon territory across the ocean

^{iv} Letter of 28 April 1850 upon *Rigoletto* (cfr Budden *Le opere di Verdi* Vol 1 (Torino 1958) 521

^v The Duke of Modena was (if unwillingly) the "official" candidate for the "usurped Jacobite throne" of England!

^{vi} The autograph score of Coccia's *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia* is to be found in the Istituto Civico Musicale Brera di Novara. It has the appearance of being an earlier version than that which was performed in London in 1827

^{vii} This name Mortimer or Mortimero is a standby of the opera of the day, sometimes Wortimer, it has never been quite clear which English nobleman precisely is intended by generations of Italian librettists

^{viii} But the King of Naples in 1827 was none other than Francesco I "SUA ALTEZZA REALE IL DUCA DI CALABRIA" of the Carlini disaster of 1818

^{ix} Giacinta Puzzi-Toso (1807-1889). Formerly a student at the Milan Conservatorio among the handful of roles she sang in London was that of the dubious Matilde in Rossini's *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* with Adelaide Tosi in the title-role, a staging that took place at the King's Theatre the following year. The "modest vocal means" attributed to her in the Critical Edition of *Maria Stuarda* is factually unfounded

^x *Clotilde* melodramma semiserio in due atti (Venice 1815) an opera within an opera, was an enduring success and ran well into the fourth decade of the nineteenth century

^{xi} La Puzzi-Toso was very highly praised for her singing of this bipartite aria - even though it was heavily cut

^{xii} These can be ascribed to 1831

[2001/2016]

<http://alexander.weatherson.info>