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The Literary Genetics of an Opera: translation and adaptation in Rossini's *Otello*

This presentation explores the role of translation and adaptation in the transformation of Shakespeare's plays into 19th century Italian opera. Rossini's *Otello* has often been censured for its infidelity to the Bard. When Lord Byron attended a production of the opera in 1818, he famously declared, "They have been crucifying Othello into an opera." While it may seem natural to take measure of a Shakespearean opera by the source play, this kind of comparison can prove to be problematic once we delve into the literary history behind the opera.

In the case of *Otello*, neither the composer nor his librettist had any knowledge of English. They were therefore obliged to work with translations and adaptations in French and Italian. This already intricate network of texts was rendered even more complicated by the fact that the authors of some of these translations and adaptations were themselves unfamiliar with English, and therefore had to rely on other translations and adaptations.

The first part of this presentation will be devoted to reconstructing the literary genealogy behind Rossini's opera with the help of documentation such as translator notes and opera programmes. While some parts of this genealogy have been well-documented by scholars, others have been entirely ignored. The second part of the presentation will propose a methodology for analysing the migration of language from one text to another, taking into account the specific features of each text, the particularities of its genre, and the aesthetic and historical context in which it was developed.

My aim, on the one hand, is to demonstrate how complex indirect translation and intersemiotic translation processes may lead us to reconsider traditional notions in translation studies, such as the source and target text dichotomy. On the other hand, by tracing the evolution of a text from Shakespeare's play to Rossini's opera, I will reveal how the tools and concepts of translation studies can be applied to the world of opera and, in particular, libretto studies. Given the many layers of translation and adaptation involved, to what degree can we even consider this so-called Shakespearean opera to be Shakespearean at all?

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