**Dialectic *Norma*: Some Reflections on Bellini’s Opera**

**Introduction**

*Norma* has been the subject of research in opera studies for many generations. Scholars have explored its literary themes and musical structure, and its place in Bellini’s work and in the realm of *bel canto* in general. It appears to me, however, that two significant, and to a certain extent interconnected, topics associated with this masterpiece have escaped the focus of scholarly research or have not received the attention that they deserve. One of them is the complexity of *Norma*’s literary sources, stemming, *inter alia*, from the variety of their cultural background.[[1]](#endnote-1) The other is the dialectic concept of this opera. The aim of my paper is to discuss these topics and to elucidate the points of their possible interconnection through a multi-disciplinary approach, including aspects of history, literature, musicology, philology, gender studies, psychology, and performance studies. The discussion also explores the affinities between *Norma* and Greek tragedy, a topic which, although frequently mentioned in passing in the research literature, has not been analyzed in depth.

Although most readers are certainly familiar with the plot, a brief summary is not out of place, particularly since it provides a basis for the subsequent discussion and an opportunity for clarifying the historical background. The action takes place more than two thousand years ago, in the second half of the 1st century BCE, in Roman Gaul − i.e., Gaul under Roman conquest.[[2]](#endnote-2) Norma is the great priestess and prophetess of the Druids, a privileged sect among the Celtic native tribes led by her father, Oroveso. Despite her chastity vows and the obligation of strict loyalty to her community, Norma is leading a double life: she fell in love with the Roman proconsul of Gaul, Pollione, and is the mother of two children born in secret out of this sacrilegious liaison. Under these circumstances, she constantly tries to prevent the Druids from revolting against their Roman oppressors. However, Pollione has fallen in love with a younger Druid priestess, Adalgisa, whom he plans to marry at Rome, now that his term of office has unexpectedly come to an end. The discovery of Pollione’s betrayal makes Norma furious to the point of contemplating murdering their children, but maternal feelings lead her to change her mind. Planning to commit suicide, she asks her rival to accept Pollione’s proposal and take care of her children in Rome. Adalgisa rejects her proposal and generously suggests that she might try to persuade Pollione to return to Norma. Following the failure of Adalgisa’s attempt, Norma, stricken by fury, calls on the Druids to revolt against the Romans. As the Druids are in search of a human sacrifice to secure the success of their revolt,[[3]](#endnote-3) Pollione is caught in the sacred forest while trying to abduct Adalgisa. Under the pretext of needing to be left alone with the prisoner in order to interrogate him, Norma offers him an ultimatum: she will save his life if he swears to give up Adalgisa forever. Furious at his refusal, Norma threatens to take revenge by denouncing Adalgisa, but then, surprisingly, decides to reveal her own sacrilege. Moved by her magnanimity, Pollione falls in love again with Norma and willingly accompanies her to the pyre. Before her death, Norma successfully implores her father, Oroveso, to save the children’s life. There is a sharp contrast between the apparently melodramatic character of the plot and the tragic essence of this opera – one of the many dichotomies that are discussed below in an attempt to show the affinities between *Norma* and Greek tragedy.

Usually, *Norma* is performed in the traditional way, in its ancient setting, but recently, under the impact of what is called in German *Regieoper* (“direction opera” or “director’s opera”), there have been attempts to transfer the action to modern times. I discuss this aspect of performance studies in the last section of this paper.

1. ***Norma*’s Sources**

*Norma’*s première took place in December 1831 at La Scala in Milan, when Bellini was thirty years old (four years before his death). The librettist was Felice Romani, who worked in close collaboration with Bellini under the inspiration of Alexandre Soumet’s poetical drama entitled *Norma, ou L’infanticide*. This had premiered in Paris nine months earlier, which may throw light on the speed of the creation process, although the plot and the concept underwent highly significant changes.

Medea’s act of madness —murdering her own children to revenge her abandonment by her lover—which was the main motif in Soumet’s play, as shown by the title, had aroused a vivid interest in early modern culture in France and Italy. In 1635, Pierre Corneille wrote a tragedy, *Médée* inspired to a great extent by ancient authors, especially Euripides and Seneca. At the end of the 17th century, Charpentier composed an opera on Medea. About a century later (in 1797), Medea also figured as the eponymous heroine in a highly successful opera composed by Cherubini. Ewans claims that Cherubini and his librettist, Hoffman, were the first to bring back to Medea the tragic dimension that characterized Euripides' play, after a long period during which the French theater turned the subject into a melodrama of love, intrigue and witchcraft.[[4]](#endnote-4) In 1813, Felice Romani, *Norma*’s librettist, wrote a libretto for the opera *Medea in Corinth* by Simone Mayr.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Despite her close associations with Medea, the case of Norma as created by Romani is different: the motivation behind her infanticidal thoughts is more complex than those of Medea in all her versions (jealousy, fury and seeking revenge): her children’s lives appear to her to be intolerable both in Gaul and in Rome owing to their origin and birth circumstances (II.1). Unlike both Medea (in mythology and tragedy) and Norma in Soumet’s play, Bellini’s Norma, for all her fury against her treacherous lover, does not murder her children but does everything in her power to save their lives. This highly significant transformation of the classical-pagan tradition about Medea at the hands of the librettist may be due to the concept and sanctity of motherhood in Christian mentality. As I shall try to demonstrate, *Norma* contains a series of Christian values, many of which appear to have been influenced by Chateaubriand, the so-called Father of French Romanticism.

Chateaubriand wrote an epic (in prose) that was a common source of inspiration of both Soumet and Felice Romani. That epic, *Les Martyres*, published in 1809, revolves around a Druid heroine named Velleda (meaning “prophetess” in Celtic, a generic denomination similar to that of the Delphic Pythia, Apollo’s priestess), who called for revolt against Roman rule but eventually fell desperately in love with a Roman commander and paid for that with her life. In Chateaubriand’s work, the plot takes place in the age of Diocletian, about three hundred years later than the period of *Norma*’s plot, and includes easily discernible Christian traits, such as forgiveness and unconditional love, typical of the author’s mindset—as known on the theoretical-ideological level from his work *The Genius of Christianity* (*Le génie du christianisme*) as well as from the preface to *Les Martyres*.

Two years before the publication of Chateaubriand’s epic, Spontini’s opera *The Vestal* (*La Vestale)* was premiered in Paris. The plot focused on a forbidden love affair between Licinius, a Roman general, and Iulia, a Vestal Virgin. (In ancient Rome the Vestal Virgins were in charge of the rituals associated with Vesta, the goddess of the family). Adalgisa’s courting by Pollione in *Norma* is reminiscent of Iulia’s courting by Licinius in Spontini’s *La* *Vestale.* It appears that similarly to the infanticide theme of Medea, the motif of a virgin priestess’ seduction by a (Roman) general was also stirring the imagination of Bellini’s contemporaries. In terms of gender studies this work appears to be relevant for connecting the seduction theme with social/sexual subjugation and the male-female power imbalance.

In 1820 another opera entitled *The Priestess of Irminsul* (*La Sacerdotessa d’Irminsul*) by Giovanni Pacini was premiered in Trieste and the librettist was also Felice Romani. The plot is significantly different from that of *Norma*: it was located in the early Middle Ages (as much of the Romantic contemporary literature) − in the period of Charles the Great (Charlemagne) − and focused on a different love triangle: two nobles in love with the same lady, a melodrama with a happy end. Yet this work reiterates the motif of a priestess’ seduction by an army commander, and its libretto has some similarities with that of *Norma*. It should be stressed that Norma was also priestess of Irminsul, a god of war.

Felice Romani, who had a classicist’s background, could have found inspiration for the libretto of *Norma* in Latin literature as well – Virgil’s *Aeneid*: the motif of a chastity vow’s break by the Carthaginian queen Dido, owing to her passionate love for the Trojan hero Aeneas.[[6]](#endnote-6) A few lines in Norma’s libretto are strikingly similar to the furious reproach addressed by Dido to her former lover and the curse she inflicted on him.’[[7]](#endnote-7) The ‘cruel Trojan,’ as Aeneas is portrayed by Dido, became the ‘cruel Roman’ (‘*Crudel Romano’*) in Norma’s portrayal of Pollione, a metamorphosis which is of special significance bearing in mind that the Trojan hero Aeneas was considered by the Romans as their distinguished ancestor. Vindictive fury is a key term in both the *Aeneid* and *Norma*: *ira/ furia* and *furor/furore* respectively (which are frequently rhymed with *dolor/e* and *amor/e*) and accompanied by threats to pursue the ‘perfidious traitor’ over the sea wherever he goes:

*Te sull’onde e te sui venti*

*seguiranno mie furie ardenti,*

*Mia vendetta e notte e giorno*

*ruggirà d’intorno a te.*

Over the sea on the wings of the winds

My burning rage will pursue you

Night and day my wild vendetta

Will keep roaring around you (*Norma*, I.9)

At the lexical level, the first line is obviously inspired by Dido’s imagery – ‘by waves’ (‘*per undas’*) and ‘by winds’ (‘ventis’) in Virgil’s *Aeneid* IV. 381. So is the librettist’s use of ‘furie’ (rage in the plural), which goes back Dido’s words some lines before the above quotation (line 376). This word is noteworthy for ambivalence and rich mythological associations: it may refer to Dido’s /Norma’s personal rage, but Furie may also be taken as a reference to the Furies (Erynies in Greek) − female chthonic deities of vengeance and retribution for committing crimes against the natural order or swearing a false oath (perjury). These are, by the way, the ironically so-called *Eumenides* (‘The Kindly Ones’) in the last play of Aeschylus’ trilogy *Oresteia* pursuing Orestes to punish him for the murder of his mother. It is an ingenious idea of Felice Romani as a classicist to ascribe this word (with all its religious and cultural connotations in the Greco-Roman civilization) to a Druid priestess rebuking a Roman proconsul.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the idea of Norma’s death in flames was possibly inspired by the depiction of Dido contemplating her own funeral pyre (before falling on the sword that Aeneas had given her), though in Norma’s case the two protagonists share their fate on the pyre. Carthage's Phoenician Queen of Virgil's *Aeneid* seems also to have provided Felice Romani with the inspiration for creating the flamboyantly royal aura and heroic temper of the Druid priestess. The image of destructive fire conveyed by the epithet ‘burning’ is dominant throughout the opera, as an anticipation of its finale.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In composing *Norma*’s libretto, Romani followed the basic structure of Soumet’s play of that name but introduced significant changes, the most drastic of which was to delete completely the last act (as already mentioned, Romani’s Norma did not kill her children). By the way, unlike the children in Soumet’s play who have an active role, in Romani’s libretto they never utter a single word. It should be stressed that in addition to Soumet’s play, Romani relied on *all* of the above sources and succeeded in creating a very special synthesis − a rare blend of erudition and poetic virtuosity, with a flowing, naturally musical rhythm and rhyme.[[9]](#endnote-9) The text contains extremely impressive figures of speech, subtle ambiguities, metaphors, rhetorical discourse and a lot of cultural allusions (as that mentioned above with respect to the Furies) expressed with great finesse − all of which are reflected and amplified by Bellini’s *bel canto*. The cultural differences between the between the historical background and character of the above sources may explain some aspects in the dialectic profile of this opera.

1. ***Norma***’**s *Dialectics***

*Norma* is a dialectic opera − built on a series of contrasts and dichotomies which merge into a complex synthesis. One aspect of this binary concept is associated with the two worlds of the eponymous heroine, the public sphere and the private sphere: chief priestess committed to a vow of chastity on the one hand, secret lover and mother on the other hand. The world of her inner feelings is full of dichotomies: love and hate; jealousy and empathy (for her rival); cruelty and generosity; lust for revenge and readiness for clemency; hope and despair; fury and reconciliation.

Norma appears as a remarkably powerful and authoritative woman, an ‘iron lady,’ but also a sensitive one, vulnerable in the extreme. Even as a mother she incarnates the wide spectrum between the infanticide thoughts and the final plea for saving her children’s lives (in a lament aria in which she implores her father to have pity on his innocent grandchildren).[[10]](#endnote-10) Her atrocious call for war in Act II stands in sharp contrast to her exhortation for peace in Act I in the famous *Casta Diva*, where she prays the chaste goddess of the moon to spread peace on earth as she does in heaven (although for a long time the Druid priestess had been far from chaste). Norma’s *volte-face* is obviously due to a personal factor. There is an inner contrast also in the fact that, as priestess of Irminsul, the Druids’ god of war, Norma’s initial recitative speaks strongly against ‘seditious voices, voices of war’ (‘*sediziose voci*, *voci di guerra*’) among her own people. The subsequent exhortation for peace in the *Casta Diva cantabile*, which refers to the public sphere, is followed after a brief interlude (*tempo di mezzo* in operatic terms) by the *cabaletta* ‘*Ah! bello a me ritorna*’ (‘Ah, come back to me, charming’), which relates to the private sphere – her prayer that Pollione will return to her as he was in the first flush of his love. The *cabaletta* indicates that her reasons for preventing a revolt against the Romans were personally motivated and throws a different light on all that she has said so far in public.

In the political background there is a dichotomy between conquerors and conquered, between Romans and Druids, though the Romans are represented on stage only by the proconsul Pollione and by Flavio, his centurion and friend. Pollione, who despises the Druids (to whom he refers as ‘barbarians’) and their religion, ironically finds his love in the bosom of two Druid priestesses. Later he encounters his death in flames in the sacred forest that he had threatened to burn in a moment of hubris at the beginning of the opera (I.2; note again the centrality of fire in the opera). Before her death, Norma asks her father to protect her children from ‘barbarians’ (II.11). Does this term refer to the Romans or to savages from her own people (in this case assuming a Roman perspective)[[11]](#endnote-11)? The ambivalence is probably intentional. In abstract terms Norma also reveals an antithesis between the sublime and the bestial in human nature.

Another example of subtle ambivalence in the libretto is provided by the scene in which Norma confesses of being the sacrilegious priestess (II.11). Pollione, as prisoner, asks the Druids not to believe her, at which her pithy riposte is ‘Norma doesn’t lie’ (‘*Norma non mente’*). This utterance of ‘imperial brevity’ is ambiguous: taken at its face value it obviously expresses her refusal to lie and save her own life. But when coming as a prompt reaction to Pollione, it can also be interpreted as a contrast to his infidelity – unlike her lover, she had always been faithful to him. But then when addressed to her own community, the Druids, this firm statement, contains an obvious dramatic irony because she had been deceiving them for a long time by manipulating religion in the service of her illicit liaison with their arch-enemy, the Roman proconsul. To put it in dialectic terms – her ultimate loyalty to Pollione was tantamount to her ultimate betrayal of her people.

At times there is a striking contrast between the music and the words, which brings into high relief the subtle dialectics of the opera. The best example is the scene preceding the above one (II.10) when, at her request, Norma is left alone with Pollione, allegedly in order to interrogate him. Their duet starts with Norma’s statement: ‘At last you are in my hands’ *(‘In mia man’ alfin tu sei’*) which, at its face value, reveals vindictive fury and the satisfaction of her approaching retribution. Yet the caressing melody of these words expresses profound affection and nostalgia rather than cruelty and lust for revenge. This is a classic example of contradiction between text and music in opera – in this case an ingenious use of melody in the service of *Norma*’s dialectics. Later in this scene, after a brief *stichomythia* dialogue (one character, one line), Norma becomes increasingly violent, and the initially harmonious and calm melody turns into an outburst of uncontrolled anger− an explosive cry for sanguinary revenge on Adalgisa and on the Romans (This is reminiscent of Dido’s vindictive anger in Virgil’s *Aeneid,* IV. 604-606, against all Aeneas’ tribe, which she desires to see annihilated in flames). In order to perceive the full intensity of this dramatic scene one has to bear in mind that the man weeping and praying at Norma’s feet (‘*al tuo piè son io piangente’*), ready to pay with his life in order to bring Norma back to her senses, is a *proconsul*, that is in the recent past one of the two consuls − heads of State in the Roman Republic! This is a remarkable inversion of roles from the viewpoint of political subjugation as well as the usual male-female balance of power. The inversion of roles is particularly significant as taking place within the central confrontation of the work (*agon* in terms of Greek tragedy). In the following scene (II.11) the violent sounds of Norma’s rage give place again to the elegiac calm and quietness of melody within her mild reproach to the perplexed Pollione: ‘What a heart you betrayed, what a heart you lost’ (‘*Qual cor tradisti, qual cor perdisti’*). Here music and text are in perfect harmony.

Norma is a tragic figure in classical, Aristotelian, terms: despite her lofty virtues, she has a human flaw (*hamartia* in the Greek tragic lexicon) that inevitably leads to her bitter end. She also ends up becoming a ritual victim, like Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, for the sake of victory in war − in this case the Druids’ revolt against the Romans. But, unlike Iphigenia, it is she who calls for a war, and the sacrifice of her life for the sake of victory is her own initiative, as a retribution for her sins. Therefore her final death on the pyre is a kind of altruistic and anomic suicide (in the sociological and psychological paradigm of Émile Durkheim).[[12]](#endnote-12)

The dichotomy between the apparently melodramatic character of the plot and the tragic essence of the opera is also a component of *Norma*’s binaries. In this case the dramatic concept, the structural elements, the psychological world of the protagonists, in particular that of the eponymous heroine, the poetics of the text and, above all, the power of music – all these have contributed to the creation of a lyric tragedy. The tragic profile of *Norma* was already observed by the 19th-century German philosopher, Schopenhauer:

Quite apart from its excellent music and considered only according to its motives and to its interior economy, this piece is in general a tragedy of extreme perfection, a true model of the tragic disposition of the motives, of the tragic progress of the action, and of tragic development, together with the effect of these on the frame of mind of the heroes, which surmounts the world. [[13]](#endnote-13)

Apart from the character of the protagonist and her affinities to Medea, the similarity between *Norma* and Greek tragedy is expressed through a series of structural elements, most of which were presented by Aristotle (*Poetics*, chs. 8-14) as typical of *tragoidia* as an artistic genre: the tendency to maintain the ‘classical unities’ ─ the unity of place (Irminsul’s forest and its immediate vicinity), the unity of time (the short duration of the action, less than one day) and the unity of action (the absence of any subplot); a central confrontation (*agon)* between the protagonists representing opposing feelings and attitudes, ensuing in the inevitable calamity;the reversal point (*peripeteia*) in the plot leading to its denouement and the recognition of their fault (*anagnorisis*) by the protagonists (Norma and Pollione). The inevitability of fate as a superior power dominating human life, a basic theme of Greek tragedy, is invoked by Norma in her address to Pollione before their death, in a sort of tragic recognition and reconciliation. The (former) priestess of Irminsul does not mention any specific divinity; at this stage she is speaking about the power of destiny in universal terms:

*Un nume, un fato di te più forte*

*Ci vuole uniti in vita e in morte*.

A god, a destiny stronger than you

Wishes us united in life and in death (II.11)

There are additional elements associated with Greek tragedy, such as the religious-ritual dimension, the role or the choir throughout as an *active* factor in the drama representing the whole community, its consciousness and set of values;[[14]](#endnote-14) the role of the *choragus*, i.e. the chorus leader (Oroveso), typically a heroic bass in the opera; the pollution of the sacred sphere by an illicit sexual relationship and the necessity of purification. Pollione’s premonitory dream, motivated by the fear of Norma’s fury, is also a typically tragic ingredient,[[15]](#endnote-15) as is his hubris when threatening to burn Irminsul’s forest and destroy his altar (I.2). No less important are the feelings of horror and pity that the opera evokes and the catharsis that accompanies them at the finale.[[16]](#endnote-16)

When Norma was composed, the literary struggle between the Romanticists and the Neo-classicists (or Neo-classics) was in progress. The terms are ambiguous since the latter labelled themselves simply as Classics and are frequently described as such in contemporary literature. Viewed from this cultural perspective, the opera exhibits a blend between the classical tradition (through all the above structural traits, which had become the canon of decorum for the Neo-classical school) and elements typical of Romanticism. The latter include the complexity of the protagonist's emotions and their extreme spontaneity; a plethora of unpredictable and irrational responses; the readiness to self-sacrifice; the multiplicity of oaths; the suicidal tendencies of the protagonists and the encounter between love and death; the exotic diversity of pagan worship.[[17]](#endnote-17) It is not surprising that Romantic composers, such as Chopin and Liszt, adapted for piano variations several motifs of *Norma*.[[18]](#endnote-18) Most of the above elements of literary romanticism are present in Victor Hugo’s play about the noble bandit *Hernani* (1830), which premiered a year before *Norma* and became a symbol in the struggle between Romanticists and their opponents for iconoclastically breaking the classical norms and standards. Bellini started working with Romani on the project of an opera based on this play but, fearing censorship, they abandoned it within a short time;[[19]](#endnote-19) the only operatic version of the original *Hernani* is Verdi’s *Ernani* (1844), which is in perfectly in line with the Romantic spirit of the play.

On the political level, Romanticism is reflected in the ‘national’ struggle for liberation and the patriotic sentiment of the choral sections. Like the Hebrew slaves’ chorus in Verdi's Nabucco, excerpts from the Druid choirs, especially the enthusiastic cry for war (‘*Guerra, Guerra*!’ – II.7), became a symbol during the struggle for the liberation and unification of Italy although, paradoxically, these choirs were expressing hatred against one of the central symbols of the Italian *Risorgimento* – Imperial Rome. It should be noted, by the way, that even the savage call for war by the Druid choir ‘*Guerra, Guerra*!’ ends in a pastoral coda with the final words ‘a ray of sunshine’ (‘*un raggio di sol’*) – yet another example of the binary concept of this work. A central aspect of *Norma*’s dialectics in the Hegelian sense consists of the above synthesis between elements belonging to the two almost irreconcilable currents of art and systems of thought − Neo-classicism and Romanticism.

The opera contains topics that spoke to the hearts of Bellini’s contemporaries in the first half of the 19th century and are still relevant today, although in different ways and contexts: the place of a strong and dominant woman in a patriarchal society; the male-female balance of power; the hatred towards foreign rule – the imperial rule of conquerors and the uprising against it. Certain motifs of the work have a particular attraction nowadays. One of them is the clash of civilizations − one regarding the other as ‘barbarian.’[[20]](#endnote-20) In this respect the opera may also evoke associations with renewed outbursts of ‘tribal’ and religious fanaticism that often result in human sacrifices, not only in the metaphorical sense. *Norma* presents us with an emotional, mental, political and religious world that on the one hand seems so desperately foreign and remote but, on the other hand, it also appears to be familiar to us. No wonder that this work inspired attempts at moving the plot from ancient to modern times in the spirit of *Regieoper* − a topic to be discussed in the next section.

Another motif of great interest today is the solidarity and empathy between women. Some have tried to find a feminist or proto-feminist element in the opera (even a hint of lesbian attraction between the two heroines). Thus, for instance, to describe the relationship between Norma and Adalgisa, one scholar uses terms such as ‘romantic friendship,’ ‘female homosociality’ and ‘homoeroticism.’[[21]](#endnote-21) Incidentally, the opera inspired the *Norma '44* play (1986) by the Italian feminist writer Dacia Maraini.[[22]](#endnote-22) The plot of the play parallels that of the opera, which also serves as a musical and cultural subtext throughout.

Many believe that one of the universal motifs in *Norma* lies in the protagonist’s dilemma between her love for Pollione and her loyalty and commitment to her people, her homeland and her religion; some scholars find a parallel in Aida’s dilemmas.[[23]](#endnote-23) While this analogy holds true to a certain extent as far as Adalgisa is concerned,[[24]](#endnote-24) for Norma, according to her explicit testimony, the dilemma no longer existed. For her, Pollione was above all: in his love she found ‘life, homeland and heaven’( I.4): (‘*E vita nel tuo seno / e patria e cielo avrò’*). This is a significantly dialectic statement: The Druid priestess and leader finds in the arch-enemy of her people and homeland a new homeland – *patria*! For Pollione she is ready to leave everything behind and assume a new ‘national’ identity − to put it in modern terms − an interesting perspective on the flexibility of identities, which provides yet another topic of high relevance nowadays. Upon learning about Pollione’s sudden recall to Rome, Norma expected her secret lover to take her and their children with him − as she confessed to her confidant, Clotilde (I.7). This absolute love explains the depth of disappointment and the intensity of her frustration, jealousy, suffering and rage when confronted with his betrayal. But despite her anger, jealousy, and aggressive threats, Norma is unable to destroy her children, nor Pollione and Adalgisa. In the end, she is willing to sacrifice herself. In this sense the pagan chief priestess appears to share in the spirit of Christianity (and Romanticism) – a trait that probably goes back to Chateaubriand and creates an additional dimension to the dialectics of *Norma.*

On the psychological level, fury and vindictiveness typical of the classical tradition and paganism (as incarnated by the reactions of Medea and Dido) are finally counterbalanced and neutralized by love and forgiveness in the spirit of Christianity. This is reinforced through the ultimate declaration of ‘Love has triumphed’ by the Druid patriarch, Norma’s father (‘*Ha vinto amor’ –* II.11). In other words, in the last scene of the operaa pagan priest is made to speak in Christian terms.

The peculiar mixture of paganism, Christianity and Romanticism can be detected in previous scenes of the opera, especially in Adalgisa’ confession to Norma about her passionate love and the latter’s nostalgic recognition of herself and her own romantic love throughout that confession (I.8). Another significant example may be found in the depictions of Adalagisa by Pollione, as a ‘heavenly virgin’ (‘*vergine celeste’*) or ‘beloved virgin’ (‘*vergin*e *adorata’*) (I.5). Thus, Spontini’s Vestal virgin and Chateaubriand’s Christian virgin have coalesced in Felice Romani’s semiotic synthesis.

Moreover, Pollione, the pagan seducer, is finally 'converted' to the spirit of Christianity, that permeates his last words in which death is perceived as a new beginning -- the means of reaching a purer, holier (i.e. spiritual) and eternal love:

*Il tuo rogo, o Norma, è il mio*!

*Là più santo incomincia*

*eterno amor!*

Your pyre, o Norma, is mine as well

There beyond begins a love,

Holier, to last forever!

1. **The Performative Challenge and the Problem of *Regieoper***

I will discuss briefly two radical examples of relatively recent interpretations that have tried to bring into high relief *Norma*’s relevance by staging the opera in a modern context. One of them premiered on October 2016 at the Royal Opera House in London under the stage direction of Àlex Ollé (from the Catalan troupe *La Fura dels Baus*) and his Argentinian assistant Valentina Carrasco, with designs by Alfons Flores. The other production made its debut three years earlier at the Salzburg festival and was presented on several stages in Western Europe (including the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, in Paris).

I shall start with the London production. To use the staging of an opera for conveying a message against militarism and religious fundamentalism may be an attractive idea, but in this case it risks the danger of coming at the expense of a frequent incompatibility between the text of the libretto, the historical context and the staging. In this production the Druids have metamorphosed into a clerical and military sect, which on the religious level bears unmistakably Spanish-catholic traits (associated with the Eastern processions or, *mutatis mutandis*, the Inquisition). Their children wear red and black ritual uniform and high triangular hats reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. On the political level the Druids are presented as a fascist military junta; Oroveso has the appearance of a generalissimo. The pagan divinities mentioned in the text are totally incompatible with the suggested Christian context and with a modern background, thereby affecting plausibility and raising a cultural problem. Moreover, the Christian elements in the libretto, interpolated most probably under the influence of Chateaubriand, have nothing to do with oppression or fanaticism; on the contrary, as observed above, they are allegorically associated with unconditional love, self-sacrifice, altruism and forgiveness.

Another problem is that these ‘neo-Druids’ in their spectacular forest of crucifixes do not appear to be oppressed by anybody except themselves and their own religious fanaticism. Indeed, some oppressed groups of people may become fanatics, but who is here the substitute of the Roman oppressor? Unlike the ‘neo-Druid’ clerical and military uniforms, the modern and elegant suits of Pollione and Flavio do not provide any specific clue as to their transformed identity.[[25]](#endnote-25) But without oppression, rebellion makes no sense. The modernized narrative not only suffers from a dramatic lacuna and lack of coherency, but also loses its political aspect, originally associated with the emergence of 19th-century national movements, especially the Italian *Risorgimento*. One last comment about the finale of this production: the stage directors have taken the license of making a surprising change. In an invented *coup de theatre* Oroveso embraces his daughter and shoots her in the head on her way to the pyre – an innovation incompatible not only the facts of the libretto but also with its words and spirit.

The other production, which made its debut at the Salzburg Festival in 2013 under the stage direction of Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, leaves the site of the plot, France (roughly Roman Gaul), but moves it about two thousand years ahead - into World War II and the Vichy regime. In this version the Druids have become the resistance fighters against the Nazi occupation. Norma, a school teacher and major figure in the resistance movement, falls in love with a German officer. The plot takes place in a school where the resistance fighters secretly meet. There is an attempt to adhere to details associated with the new context, not only in the dress habits: for example, before the school goes up in flames, with the two protagonists tied to chairs, Norma’s head is shaved, in line with what used to be there the practice of humiliating women who collaborated with the Nazis. Unlike Ollé and Carasco, Leiser and Caurier at least respect the political motif of conquest, oppression and insurrection, but the incongruity between the pagan divinities mentioned in the text (e.g. the moon goddess, Irminsul, Venus/Venere) and French Catholicism becomes even more problematic owing to the otherwise clearly realistic character of this production. Moreover, the Roman titles and symbols are devoid of their significance in the new context (e.g. proconsul, ‘city of the Caesars’).

Both productions encounter a basic problem of most *Regioper*: making nonsense of a considerable part of the libretto because of the blatant incompatibility between the text and the new context, that adopted and imposed by the stage directors in order to convey their own message to the audience. In some cases, such as the English National Opera production of *Rigoletto* under Jonathan Miller’s stage direction,[[26]](#endnote-26) the creative practice of *Regieoper* may reach satisfactorily coherent results, but *Norma* provides an example of an opera which is hardly translatable and adaptable to a modernized context.

There are significant innovations in the Leiser/ Caurier production that belong to the field of musicology. The most prominent is Cecilia Bartoli’s attempt to get as close as possible to Bellini's original intentions through collaboration with the conductor and musicologist Giovanni Antonini and *La Scintilla* Orchestra of Zurich (which plays only musical instruments belonging to Bellini’s period). Antonini sought to reach the ultimate original version of Bellini, including the many revisions the composer had made in the manuscript after the hasty premiere. But the most radical change alleged to have followed Bellini’s original intention is the reversal of vocal roles: contrary to the usual productions of *Norma*, Bartoli, as a mezzo-soprano, undertakes the title role, while Adalgisa’s role (normally performed by a mezzo) is performed by a lyric soprano. I won’t discuss here the musical effect of this interpretation because it is beyond the scope of my paper.[[27]](#endnote-27) All in all, there is a basic contrast between the claim of trying on the musical level to restore *Norma* to its original method of performance and the dramatic methodology of *Regieoper*, which so drastically distances itself from the original concept. Ironically, to the complex dialectics of this opera, the *Regieoper* provides an additional dimension from the field of performing arts.

**Conclusion**

*Norma*’s libretto is much more complex than it is usually considered to be: it is based not only on the contemporary play of that name by Alexandre Soumet, but on a series of other sources, including *inter alia* various plays and operas focused on the Medea motif from antiquity to Bellini’s age, a prose epic by Chateaubriand imbued with Christian values*,* another opera about a Vestal Virgin and some passages from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The cultural differences between the historical background and character of these sources contribute to explaining some aspects in the dialectic profile of this opera, especially the tension between pagan and Christian concepts and values.

Indeed, one of the most important traits of *Norma* consists of its complex dialectics, which reflect *inter alia* the conflict between Neo-classicism and Romanticism in 19th-century culture − the quarrel between ‘Ancients’ and ‘Moderns’ The dichotomies of the libretto with respect to the personality of the eponymous heroine, the historical background, the clash of civilizations, the male-female balance of power, the solidarity between women, the flexibility of ‘national,’ cultural and religious identities and other topics of universal relevance are brought into high relief throughout the opera by the sophisticated nuances of Bellini’s music. In many respects *Norma*’s world, strikingly similar to that of Greek tragedy, with which the opera has many structural affinities, is desperately foreign and yet profoundly familiar to us. Despite recent adaptations to modernized contexts in the spirit of *Regioper*, I believe that this duality of ‘foreign’ and ‘familiar,’ with its vast semantic circle, is most efficiently expressed by paying due respect to the text (and subtext) of the libretto as well as to its historical context.

NOTES

1. To be sure, there are general summaries of *Norma*’s literary sources, e.g. Kimbell 1998: 16-28 and Colas 2915. The latter is more detailed though not exhaustive, while the possible interconnection between *Norma*’s sources and its dialectics has never been discussed. Ancient sources are quoted throughout by the conventional method (prevalent in the research literature) that makes text references easily accessible in all academic editions, with no need of further bibliographic data. The opera libretto is quoted by the number of the act, followed by that of the scene. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There is no specific chronological indication in the libretto. The phrase ‘the city of the Caesars’ (*la città dei cesari*) in I.1 may sound anachronistic for the period of the Roman Republic, but it does not have to apply to the Caesars in a strictly historical sense, i.e. emperors, starting with Augustus. It may well refer to the arch-enemy of the Gauls, Julius Caesar, and his fellow Romans. Caesar served as pro-consul in Gaul (Gallia) between 58-51 BCE, completed its conquest and suppressed Vercingetorix’s revolt. The late-first century BCE or the early-first-century CE is the most plausible chronological framework. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On human sacrifices among the Druid tribes, see Strabo, *Geography*, IV.1.13; Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War* (*De bello gallico*), VI, 16; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXII.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Ewans 2007: 6, 55-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For the similarities between this opera and *Norma*, see André 2006: 158-164 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It should be noted though that Aeneas had not abandoned Dido for another woman, but intended to leave in order to fulfill his mission − the project of laying the foundation of Rome. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Compare Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV. 305-330; 380-386; 584-629 with *Norm*a, I.9; cf. D’Angelo 2014/15: 48-52 with references to further literature in Italian. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. At times fire is associated with love: e.g., ‘burning flame’ (‘fiamma ardente) in Adalgisa’ s depiction of her growing passion for Pollione (I.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For Felice Romani as a librettist see, e.g., Vardino 2007; D’Angelo 2014/2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On the inner conflicts of Norma as leader and priestess, lover, mother and daughter, see Isaacson 2012: 1-39, with musical analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For Norma’s readiness to adopt a new identity by living with Pollione and their children in Rome, see below. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Durkheim 1930: 264-331 makes the distinction between three suicidal patterns: the egoistic, the altruistic and the anomic. Incidentally, in Soumet’s play Norma commits suicide by jumping off a cliff after the murder of her children, as befits a melodrama... [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Schopenhauer 2008 (1859): vol. II, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, see Gagné and Govers-Hopman 2013, with copious bibliography. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For Pollione’s dream see *Norma*, I.2. Worthy of note in this respect is also Norma’s warning, as quoted by Pollione’s companion, Flavio, in a sort of dramatic anticipation typical of tragic genre: ‘Death reigns in that forest’ (‘*In quella selva è morte’*: *ibidem*). For a psychoanalytic approach to dreams in Greek tragedy, see Devereux 1976. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For an innovative approach to catharsis and other Aristotelian concepts of tragedy from the perspective of neuroscience, see Meineck 2018: 195-211. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For elements typical of Romanticism in *Norma*, cf. Erasmi 1988/89, who compares the love triangle of this opera with that of Aida/Radames/Amneris in Verdi’s *Aida*. But the place of this trio in the socio-political power system was quite different from that of Norma/Pollione/Adalgisa. For Romanticism in Italy and its French sources of inspiration, see especially Gorofalo 2005: 238-255. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Kimbell 1998: 126-130. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. As Bellini stated in a letter to one of his friends – quoted by Weinstock 1972: 94 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In this respect one may recall the appeal of populist politicians in France to the Gallic roots of the nation in their attempt to protect national identity from outsiders. Thus Sarkozy recently claimed that, as citizens, all immigrants should see the Gallic natives as their ancestors. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Smith 1997: 94-100, with references to gender studies. Smith refers to ‘latently erotic female homosociality so often associated with the convent’ (p. 97) and then observes that: ‘There are few instances in opera…of such passionate declamation of feeling between women.’ (pp. 98-99). But the Sapphic theory is based mainly on a few ambiguous lines in the duet between Norma and Adalgisa starting with ‘*Mira, o Norma*.’ Smith fails to mention an important argument in support of her theory: Norma’s proposal to save Pollione’s life, and never see him again, in exchange of his vow to give up his liaison with Adalgisa. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The action of this play takes place in a concentration camp and is focused on a love triangle: the connection between two Italian-Jewish women (an actress and a singer) and a German officer who happened to be a passionate admirer of Bellini’s *Norma*. See Streifer 2013. For tragedy and feminism in general, see Wohl 2005: 145-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See , e.g., Arblaster 1992: 82; Smith 1997: 93-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Initially Adalgisa is torn between her religious duties and her love, but she is going to follow Norma’s path in coping with the dilemma: in her case too, the feeling of love overcomes religious and patriotic commitment. She is also ready to leave everything behind and assume a new identity. Adalgisa is in fact a sort of Norma’s young replica, an *alter ego* of Norma, as made most obvious by Norma’s reactions to her confession of having fallen in love (I.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. By the way, the palpably modern and laic setting of Norma’s flat, meant to stress her split personality and her secret integration (or acculturation) into Pollione’s world, is tantamount to a bold and eccentric gimmick liable to create a ludicrous effect totally foreign to the spirit of this lyric tragedy (especially at the sight of the children watching television …). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jonathan Miller successfully transfers *Rigoletto*’s plot from the 16th-century Mantua to the Mafia World of Little Italy in New York City of the 1950’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. It is, however, in place to maintain that Giuditta Pasta, the first performer of Norma, was not a regular mezzo-soprano or soprano. She had an ‘absolute voice’ (*voce assoluta*) - a term that in the operatic lexicon refers to a rare ability of singing with equal flexibility, self-control and ornamentation both lyrical and dramatic roles (a similar term is *soprano sfogato*); see, e.g., Riggs 2003; Rutherford 2007. Incidentally, as an actress, Giuditta Pasta had also the royal aura and charisma that are essential for performing Norma’s role; cf. Qin 2015: 26-84.

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    [↑](#endnote-ref-27)