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

**Introduction**

*Norma*, first produced in 1831, has long been the subject of research in opera studies, with scholars exploring its literary themes and musical structure, as well as its place in Bellini’s work and in the realm of *bel canto* in general. However, two significant and, to a certain extent, interconnected topics aspects of this masterpiece appear to have been overlooked in scholarly research, or, at the very least, have not received adequate attention. One of these is the complexity of *Norma*’s literary sources, due to, in part to their diverse cultural origins.[[1]](#endnote-1) The second is the dialectic concept of this opera. This paper seeks to examine these topics and elucidate how they may be connected using a multidisciplinary approach that draws on history, literature, musicology, philology, gender studies, psychology, and performance studies. This paper 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.

While most readers are likely familiar with the opera’s plot, a brief summary is still useful, particularly as it provides a basis for later discussion in the paper and an opportunity for clarifying the historical background. The action takes place over two thousand years earlier, in the second half of the first century BCE, in Roman Gaul, when Gaul was 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 vows of chastity and the obligation of strict loyalty to her community, Norma has been leading a double life: having fallen in love with the Roman proconsul of Gaul, Pollione, she mothered his two children, born in secret out of this sacrilegious liaison. Because of her dueling loyalties, she constantly tries to prevent the Druids from revolting against their Roman oppressors. However, Pollione has since fallen in love with a younger Druid priestess, Adalgisa, whom he plans to marry in Rome now that his term of office has unexpectedly come to an end. The discovery of Pollione’s betrayal so enrages Norma that she contemplates the murder of their children, ultimately deciding to spare them, as her maternal feelings are stronger even than her fury. Planning to commit suicide, she asks her rival to accept Pollione’s proposal and to take care of her children in Rome. Adalgisa rejects Norma’s entreaty, and generously suggests that she, Adalgisa, would try to persuade Pollione to return to Norma. Following the failure of Adalgisa’s attempt, Norma, consumed with rage, calls on the Druids to revolt against the Romans. While the Druids searcj for a human sacrifice to secure the success of their revolt,[[3]](#endnote-3) Pollione is caught in the sacred forest as he tries 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 vows to give up Adalgisa forever. Furious at his refusal, Norma threatens to exact revenge by denouncing Adalgisa, but then, surprisingly, decides to reveal her own sacrilege. Moved by her magnanimity, Pollione falls in love with Norma again and willingly accompanies her to the pyre. Before her death, Norma successfully implores her father, Oroveso, to save the children’s lives. 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 examined in this paper’s discussion of the affinities between *Norma* and Greek tragedy.

Traditionally, *Norma* has been performed in its ancient setting, but in recent years, under the influence of what is called in German *Regieoper* (“direction opera” or “director’s opera”), there have been attempts to transfer the action to modern times. This aspect of performance studies is discussed 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, and who had been inspired by Alexandre Soumet’s poetical drama, *Norma, ou L’infanticide*. This had premiered in Paris nine months earlier, which may help explain the speed of the opera’s creation process, although the plot and the concept of Soumet’s drama were significantly changed in the opera.

Medea’s act of madness, murdering her own children to avenge her lover’s rejection, which was the main motif in Soumet’s play, as indicated by the title, had aroused intense interest in early modern cultural circles in France and Italy. Already in 1635, Pierre Corneille wrote a tragedy, *Médée*, inspired to a great extent by ancient authors, especially Euripides and Seneca, and at the end of the 17th century, Charpentier composed an opera about Medea. Nearly 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 restore to Medea the tragic dimension that characterized Euripides’ drama, after a long period during which French theater had 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* composed by Simone Mayr.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Despite the close associations between the stories of Medea and Norma, the Norma created by Romani differs from Euripides’ Medea in several respects. First, the motivation behind Norma’s infanticidal thoughts is more complex than the motivations of Medea in all her versions (including jealousy, fury and vengefulness), as Norma appears to believe that her children’s lives are intolerable in both Gaul and in Rome owing to their origin and the circumstances of their birth (II.1). Unlike Medea (in mythology and tragedy), or the Norma of Soumet’s play, Bellini’s Norma, for all her rage 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 attributable to the concept and sanctity of motherhood in Christian mentality. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, *Norma* expresses a number of Christian values, many of which appear to have been influenced by Chateaubriand, the so-called father of French Romanticism.

Chateaubriand wrote a prose epic which served as a source of inspiration for both Soumet and Romani. That epic, *Les Martyres*, published in 1809, revolves around a Druid heroine named Velleda (meaning “prophetess” in Celtic, a generic appellation 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, for which she paid 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 values, such as forgiveness and unconditional love, quite representative of the author’s ethos, as is clear 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*), premiered in Paris. Its 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.) Pollione’s courtship of Adalgisa in *Norma* resembles Licinius’s courtship of Iulia in Spontini’s *La* *Vestale.* It appears that the motif of a virgin priestess’ seduction by a Roman general, like the infanticide theme of Medea, also stirred the imagination of Bellini’s contemporaries. In the context of gender studies, this line of analysis has relevance work in terms of connecting the seduction theme with social/sexual subjugation and the male-female power imbalance.

In 1820, another opera for which Romani also wrote the libretto, *The Priestess of Irminsul* (*La Sacerdotessa d’Irminsul*) by Giovanni Pacini, premiered in Trieste. The plot differs significantly from that of *Norma.* The action of *The Priestess* takes place in the early Middle Ages (as did much of the contemporary Romantic literature), during the period of Charles the Great (Charlemagne), and focuses on a different love triangle, with two nobles in love with the same woman. While this melodrama has a happy ending, it still reiterates the motif of a priestess’s seduction by an army commander, and its libretto has some similarities with that of *Norma*. It should be stressed that Norma was also the priestess of Irminsul, a god of war.

Romani, who had a classicist’s background, could have found inspiration for the libretto of *Norma* in Latin literature as well, such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where the motif of the breaking of a vow of chastity appears in the Carthaginian queen Dido’s passionate love affair with 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 Aeneas and the curse she inflicted on him.[[7]](#endnote-7) The “cruel Trojan,” as Aeneas is referred to by Dido, became the “cruel Roman” (“Crudel Romano”) in Norma’s depiction of Pollione, a metamorphosis which is of special significance given that the Trojan hero Aeneas was considered a distinguished ancestor by the Romans. Vindictive fury is a key term in both the *Aeneid* and in *Norma*: *ira/furia* and *furor/furore*, respectively (which are frequently rhymed with *dolor/e* and *amor/e*, respectively), and the phrase is often 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 refers back to Dido’s words some lines preceding the above quotation (line 376). This word is noteworthy for its ambiguity and rich mythological associations. Furie may refer to Dido’s or Norma’s personal rage, but the word may also be considered a reference to the Furies (Erinyes in Greek), female chthonic deities of vengeance and retribution for the commission of crimes against the natural order or for swearing a false oath (perjury). The Furies also happen to be the ironically named *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 ingenious of Romani, as a classicist, to have this word, with all its religious and cultural connotations in the Greco-Roman civilization, uttered by 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, although in *Norma*, the two protagonists share their fate on the pyre. Carthage’s Phoenician Queen of Virgil’s *Aeneid* seems also to have provided Romani with the inspiration for the flamboyantly royal aura and heroic temper with which he infused the Druid priestess. The image of destructive fire conveyed by the epithet “burning” is dominant throughout the opera, anticipating its tragic finale.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In composing *Norma*’s libretto, Romani followed the basic structure of Soumet’s play of the same name but introduced significant changes, the most drastic of which was to delete completely Soumet’s last act; as already noted, Romani’s Norma did not kill her children, as did Medea and Soumet’s Norma. Interestingly, in contrast to the children in Soumet’s play, who have an active role, in Romani’s libretto, the children in *Norma* never utter a single word, perhaps because the real drama in the opera is the metamorphosis of the heroine and not the fate of the children. 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 sophisticated figures of speech, subtle ambiguities, metaphors, rhetorical discourse and numerous cultural allusions (such 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 among the historical backgrounds and characters of the above sources may explain some elements of 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 heroine: the public sphere and the private sphere; a chief priestess who is committed to a vow of chastity, but is also secretly a paramour and a mother. The world of her inner feelings is replete with dichotomies: love and hate; jealousy and empathy (for her rival); cruelty and generosity; lust for revenge and readiness for forgiveness; 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 a vast spectrum between thoughts of infanticide and the final plea to save her children’s lives (in an aria of lament in which she implores her father to have pity on his innocent grandchildren).[[10]](#endnote-10) Her near-savage call for war in Act II stands in sharp contrast to her exhortation for peace in Act I in the famous aria “Casta Diva,” where she prays to the chaste goddess of the moon to spread peace on earth as she does in heaven (although the Druid priestess had been far from chaste for quite some time). Norma’s *volte-face* is obviously due to a personal factor. Her inner duality is also expressed in Norma’s initial recitative when, as priestess of Irminsul, the Druids’ god of war, she makes strong declarations 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, beautiful”), 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* reveals that her reasons for preventing a revolt against the Romans were personally motivated, thus casting a different light on all that she has said so far in public.

In the political background, there are dichotomies between conquerors and conquered, and between Romans and Druids, although 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, paradoxically finds love in the bosom of two Druid priestesses. Later, he suffers his death in flames in the same sacred forest 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 among her own people (in this case assuming a Roman perspective)?[[11]](#endnote-11) It appears likely that the ambivalence is intentional. In abstract terms, Norma also expresses an antithesis between the sublime and the bestial in human nature.

Another example of subtle ambivalence in the libretto is found in the scene in which Norma confesses to being the sacrilegious priestess (II.11). Pollione, now a prisoner, asks the Druids not to believe her, to which her succinct riposte is “Norma doesn’t lie” (“Norma non mente*”*). This utterance of “imperial brevity” is ambiguous: taken at face value, it clearly expresses her refusal to lie to save her own life. However, as it is delivered as an immediate rejoinder to Pollione, it can also be interpreted as an antithesis of his infidelity; unlike her lover, she has always been faithful to him. An even further layer of meaning arises from her address to her own community, the Druids. Her firm declaration is marked by an obvious dramatic irony, because she has long been deceiving them by manipulating religion in order to engage in her illicit liaison with their arch-enemy, the Roman proconsul. In dialectic terms, her ultimate loyalty to Pollione is tantamount to her ultimate betrayal of her people.

At times, there is a striking contrast between the music and the words in *Norma*, which throws the subtle dialectics of the opera into sharp relief. The best example is the scene preceding the above (II.10) when, at her request, Norma is left alone with Pollione, ostensibly 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 face value, expresses vindictive fury and the satisfaction of her approaching retribution. However, the caressing melody of these words reveals profound affection and yearning rather than cruelty and lust for revenge. This is a classic example of a contradiction between text and music in opera: in this case, an ingenious use of melody to give voice to *Norma*’s dialectics. Later in this scene, after a brief *stichomythia* dialogue (in which two characters speak alternate lines), Norma becomes increasingly violent, and the initially harmonious and calm melody transforms 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 Aeneas’ entire tribe, which she desires to see annihilated in flames. In order to perceive the full intensity of this dramatic scene, it should be borne 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, formerly one of the two consuls who were heads of state in the Roman Republic. This is a remarkable inversion of roles from the perspectives of political subjugation male-female power dynamics. This role reversal is particularly significant in that it takes place within the central confrontation of the work (*agon* in the terminology of Greek tragedy). In the following scene (II.11), the violent sounds of Norma’s rage give way again to elegiac calm and quietness in the melody of her mild reproach to the perplexed Pollione: “What a heart you betrayed, what a heart you lost” (“Qual cor tradisti, qual cor perdesti*”*). 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 and tragic end. Like Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, Norma also ultimately becomes a ritual victim for the sake of victory in war: in Norma’s case, the Druids’ revolt against the Romans. However, unlike Iphigenia, who is an unwitting victim, it is Norma who calls for war, and who undertakes to sacrifice her life for the sake of victory as reparation for her sins. Therefore, her final death on the pyre can be seen as an altruistic and anomic suicide (in the sociological and psychological paradigm of Émile Durkheim).[[12]](#endnote-12)

In addition to 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 Aristotle defined as typical of *tragoidia* as an artistic genre (*Poetics*, chs. 8-14): 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); the central confrontation (*agon*) between the protagonists representing opposing feelings and attitudes, resulting in the inevitable calamity;and the pivotal point of reversal (*peripeteia*) in the plot, leading to its denouement and the protagonists’ (here, Norma and Pollione) acknowledgment of their responsibility (*anagnorisis*) ). 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 form of tragic recognition and reconciliation. Rather than referring to any specific divinity, the (former) priestess of Irminsul describes 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 of the choir throughout as an active factor in the drama, representing the whole community, its consciousness and set of values;[[13]](#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,[[14]](#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.[[15]](#endnote-16)

The dichotomy between the apparently melodramatic character of the plot and the tragic essence of the opera is also a component of *Norma*’s dualities. 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, have all contributed to the creation of a lyric tragedy. The tragic nature of *Norma* was recognized 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. [[16]](#endnote-17)

Norma was composed in the era of the literary struggle between the Romanticists and the Neo-classicists (or Neo-classics). 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 of the classical structural traits above (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; and the exotic diversity of pagan worship.[[17]](#endnote-18) It is not surprising that Romantic composers, such as Chopin and Liszt, adapted several motifs of *Norma* for piano variations.[[18]](#endnote-19) 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,* iconoclastically breaking the classical norms and standards, and becoming emblematic of the struggle between Romanticists and their opponents. Bellini started working with Romani on an opera based on this play, but, fearing censorship, they abandoned it within a short time.[[19]](#endnote-20) The only operatic version of the original *Hernani* is Verdi’s *Ernani* (1844), which is perfectly consistent 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]), were adopted as anthems of the struggle for the liberation and unification of Italy, although, paradoxically, these choirs were expressing hatred towards one of the central symbols of the Italian *Risorgimento —* Imperial Rome. It should be noted that even the Druid choir’s savage call for war in “Guerra, Guerra!” ends in a pastoral coda with the final words “a ray of sunshine” (“un raggio di sol”), yet another example of the juxtaposition of binary opposites in this work. The above synthesis between elements belonging to the two almost irreconcilable currents of art and systems of thought — Neo-classicism and Romanticism — is central to *Norma*’s dialectics in the Hegelian sense.

The opera contains themes 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 balance of power between men and women; hatred towards foreign rule and the imperial rule of conquerors; and rebellion against it. Certain motifs of the work have a particular attraction in the modern era. One of them is the clash of civilizations, with one regarding the other as “barbarian.”[[20]](#endnote-21) 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 intensely foreign and remote but, on the other hand, also appears familiar to us. It is no surprise, then, that this work has inspired attempts at moving the plot from ancient to modern times in the spirit of *Regieoper*, a topic 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 *Norma* (even a hint of lesbian attraction between the two heroines). One scholar, in describing the relationship between Norma and Adalgisa, uses terms such as “romantic friendship,” “female homosociality” and “homoeroticism.”[[21]](#endnote-22) In fact, the opera inspired the play *Norma '44* (1986) by the Italian feminist writer Dacia Maraini.[[22]](#endnote-23) The plot of the play parallels that of the opera, which also serves as a musical and cultural subtext throughout.

One of the universal motifs in *Norma* is the painful dilemma the protagonist faces in having to choose between her love for Pollione and her loyalty and commitment to her people, her homeland and her religion. Indeed, some scholars have discerned a parallel in Aida’s dilemmas in Verdi’s opera.[[23]](#endnote-24) However, while this dilemma may have burdened Adalgisa to a certain extent,[[24]](#endnote-25) for Norma, according to her own explicit testimony, the dilemma no longer existed. Pollione was supreme for Norma: in his love, she finds “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 archenemy of her people and homeland a new homeland — *patria.* She is ready to leave everything behind for Pollione, and assume a new national identity, to put it in contemporary terms. Her response presents an interesting perspective on the fluidity of identities, yet another theme that is highly relevant in the modern era. Upon learning of Pollione’s sudden recall to Rome, Norma expects her secret lover to take her and their children with him, as she confesses to her confidant, Clotilde (I.7). This absolute love explains the depth of her disappointment and the intensity of her frustration, jealousy, suffering and rage when learning of his betrayal. However, despite her anger, jealousy and aggressive threats, Norma is unable to destroy her children, or Pollione, or Adalgisa. In the end, she is willing to sacrifice herself. In this sense, the pagan chief priestess appears to embrace the spirit of Christianity (and Romanticism), a transformation that can arguably be traced back to Chateaubriand, and which adds yet another dimension to the dialectics of *Norma.*

On the psychological level, in *Norma*, the fury and vindictiveness typical of the classical tradition and paganism (as exemplified by the reactions of Medea and Dido) are finally counterbalanced and neutralized by love and forgiveness in the spirit of Christianity. This Christian sensibility is reinforced in the ultimate declaration of “Love has triumphed” by the Druid patriarch, Norma’s father (“Ha vinto amor*”*[II.11]). Remarkably, in the last scene of the opera,a pagan priest is made to speak in Christian terms.

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

Moreover, Pollione, the pagan seducer, is finally “converted” to the spirit of Christianity, which 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***

This chapter briefly discusses two examples of relatively recent productions of *Norma* which feature radical interpretations that try to highlight *Norma*’s relevance by staging the opera in a modern context. One of them premiered in 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).

To use the staging of an opera to convey a message against militarism and religious fundamentalism may be an attractive idea, but in the case of the London production, it comes at the expense of a frequent incompatibility between 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 uniforms and high triangular hats reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. On the political level, the Druids are presented as a fascist military junta, with Oroveso appearing as a generalissimo. The pagan divinities mentioned in the text are totally incompatible with the suggested Christian context and with a modern background, thereby affecting their plausibility in the production and creating a cultural dissonance. Moreover, the Christian elements in the libretto, probably influenced, even unconsciously, by 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 with the interpretation in the modern London production is that these “neo-Druids” in their spectacular forest of crucifixes do not appear to be oppressed by anybody other than themselves and their own religious fanaticism. Indeed, some oppressed groups of people may become fanatics. But who are the equivalent of the Roman oppressor here? Unlike the “neo-Druid” clerical and military uniforms, the modern and elegant suits of Pollione and Flavio do not provide any specific clues as to their transformed identity.[[25]](#endnote-26) Without any clear oppression, rebellion makes no sense. The modernized narrative not only suffers from a dramatic lacuna and lack of coherency, but also loses the opera’s original political message referring to the emergence of 19th-century national movements, especially the Italian *Risorgimento*. In a final blow to the original intent of the opera, the stage directors took the liberty of making a shocking change in the finale of this production. In an invented *coup de theatre*, Oroveso embraces his daughter and shoots her in the head on her way to the pyre — a contrivance incompatible not only with 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 setting of the plot in France but moves the time period forward by about two thousand years from Roman Gaul to World War II and the Vichy regime. In this version, the Druids have become resistance fighters against the Nazi occupation. Norma, a schoolteacher 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, and not only in the costumes. For example, before the school goes up in flames, with the two protagonists tied to chairs, Norma’s head is shaved, in line with the historical French practice of humiliating women who collaborated with the Nazis. Unlike Ollé and Carasco in London, Leiser and Caurier at least respect *Norma’*s 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 jarring in a production that is otherwise clearly realistic. 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 *Regieoper*: rendering a considerable part of the libretto preposterous because of the blatant incompatibility between the original text and the new context imposed by the stage directors in order to convey their own personal messages to the audience. In some cases, such as the English National Opera production of *Rigoletto* under Jonathan Miller’s stage direction,[[26]](#endnote-27) the creative practice of *Regieoper* may achieve satisfactorily coherent results, but *Norma* provides an example of an opera which is hardly translatable and adaptable to a modernized context.

There are significant musicological innovations in the Leiser/Caurier production. The most prominent is Cecilia Bartoli’s efforts to reproduce Bellini's original intentions as faithfully as possible through collaboration with the conductor and musicologist Giovanni Antonini and the La Scintilla Orchestra of Zurich (which plays only on musical instruments belonging to Bellini’s period). Antonini sought to create the ultimate original version of Bellini, including the many revisions the composer made to the manuscript after the hasty premiere. However, the most radical change which purportedly was in keeping with Bellini’s original intention is the reversal of vocal roles: unlike in most productions of *Norma*, Bartoli, a mezzo-soprano, undertakes the title role, usually sung by a soprano, while Adalgisa’s role, normally performed by a mezzo-soprano, is performed by a lyric soprano. While the musical effect of this interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper,[[27]](#endnote-28) this vocal change, too, underscores a fundamental discordance between the claim of restoring the original musical intent of *Norma* and the dramatic methodology of *Regieoper*, which so drastically distances itself from the original concept. Paradoxically, the *Regieoper* provides an additional dimension to the complex dialectics of this opera.

**Conclusion**

Close examination reveals that *Norma*’s libretto is actually far more sophisticated than it is usually considered to be: it is based not only on the contemporary play of the same name by Alexandre Soumet, but on a series of other sources, including various plays and operas focused on the Medea motif from antiquity to Bellini’s era, 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 among the diverse historical backgrounds and characters of these sources provide a partial explanation for some aspects of the dialectic nature of this opera, especially the tension between pagan and Christian concepts and values.

Indeed, one of the most important aspects of *Norma* is its complex dialectics, which reflect, inter alia, the conflict between Neo-classicism and Romanticism in 19th-century culture: the dispute 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 themes of universal relevance are highlighted 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 intensely foreign and yet profoundly familiar to us. Despite recent adaptations to modernized contexts in the spirit of *Regieoper*, it can be argued that this duality of “foreign” and “familiar,” with its vast semantic resonance, can be best understood by seriously delving into the text (and subtext) of the libretto as well as its historical context.

NOTES

1. General summaries of *Norma*’s literary sources exist, e.g., Kimbell (1998), 16–28 and Colas (2015) (the latter is more detailed, though not exhaustive), but the possible interconnection between *Norma*’s sources and its dialectics has never been examined. Throughout this text, ancient sources are cited using the conventional method used in the research literature that makes text references easily accessible in all academic editions, with no need for 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 could be interpreted as referring to the arch-enemy of the Gauls, Julius Caesar, and his fellow Romans, rather than to the later line of emperors starting with Augustus. Caesar served as proconsul in Gaul (Gallia) between 58 and 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 setting. [↑](#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, however, that Aeneas had not abandoned Dido for another woman but intended to leave in order to fulfill his mission of founding of Rome. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Compare Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV. 305-330; 380-386; 584–629 with *Norma*, 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 s description of her growing passion for Pollione (I.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For Felice Romani as a librettist, see, e.g., (D’Angelo 2014/2015); Vardino (2007). [↑](#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. Notably, 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. For the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, see Gagné and Govers-Hopman (2013), and their copious bibliography. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. For Pollione’s dream, see *Norma*, I.2; also noteworthy in this respect is Norma’s warning, as quoted by Pollione’s companion, Flavio, in a somewhat dramatic anticipation typical of the 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)
15. 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)
16. Schopenhauer (2008/1859): vol. II, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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*. However, 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-18)
18. See, e.g., Kimbell (1998), 126–130. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. As Bellini wrote in a letter to one of his friends, quoted by Weinstock (1972), 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. 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. For example, former French President Nicholas Sarkozy recently claimed that, as citizens, all immigrants should see the Gallic natives as their ancestors. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
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). However, 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 for his vow to forgo his liaison with Adalgisa. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
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 happens 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-23)
23. See, e.g., Arblaster (1992), 82; Smith (1997), 93–94. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Initially, Adalgisa is torn between her religious duties and her love, but she follows Norma’s path in coping with the dilemma. In her case too, the emotion 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 young replica or an alter ego of Norma, as evidenced most clearly by Norma’s reactions to her confession of having fallen in love (I.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. The palpably modern and secular setting of Norma’s flat in this production, meant to stress her split personality and her secret integration (or acculturation) into Pollione’s world, is essentially a bold and eccentric gimmick likely to create a ludicrous effect totally foreign to the spirit of this lyric tragedy (especially the sight of the children watching television). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Jonathan Miller successfully transfers *Rigoletto*’s plot from 16th-century Mantua to the Mafia world of Little Italy in the New York City of the 1950s. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. It is, however, relevant to mention that Giuditta Pasta, the first singer to perform the role of Norma, was neither a regular mezzo-soprano or a soprano. She had an “absolute voice” (voce assoluta), a term that, in the operatic lexicon, refers to a rare ability of singing both lyrical and dramatic roles with equal flexibility, self-control and ornamentation (a similar term is *soprano sfogato*); see, e.g., Riggs (2003); Rutherford (2007). Incidentally, as an actress, Giuditta Pasta also had the royal aura and charisma that are essential for performing Norma’s role; cf. Qin (2015): 26–84.

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    [↑](#endnote-ref-28)