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The Evolution of Madness: the Portrayal of Insanity in Opera

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There have always been certain themes that have persistently fascinated people over the centuries when it comes to art and entertainment. Ideas like love, death, and insanity have been used in nearly every single culture and time period to allow audiences the opportunity to experience without personally enduring them. Insanity has especially been an undeniably enthralling subject owing to its alien status in real life. As an art form, opera in particular has elevated insanity into a dramatic constant by using it over and over. That being said, the exact portrayal of operatic madness has distinctly changed over the centuries. In fact, there have been four notable shifts that can be connected to specific periods of time: the Early Modern (before the 18th century), Bel Canto (18th to mid-19th century), Romantic (19th century), and lastly the current Modern period, beginning with the 20th century. There are several possible reasons for the change, but one in particular that could be considered at least indirectly responsible is the development of psychology. The field of psychology as it is viewed in modern times only began to form during the start of the 19th century, but as the major ideas about real-life insanity evolved, so did opera's use of madness. As the understanding of madness changed, the operatic depiction also reformed in accordance with new public expectations of what madness was supposed to look like, even to the point of selectively assigning it to a specific gender. It is important to recognize how insanity was thought of in order to understand the cultural

and societal backdrop each period's mad operas in which were being produced. Influenced by the most widely held academic beliefs, the public perspective of insanity can be considered indirectly responsible for the changing dramatic representations of insanity in opera. Each period, its specific representation and interpretation of madness, as well as the state of psychology at those time periods, will be evaluated in detail in order to demonstrate the influence public perception had upon the creation of mad operas.

When considering operatic insanity, most people immediately concentrate on the 19th century Bel Canto era, which will be later covered in detail. However, there were also highly popular "mad" operas as early as the 17th and 18th centuries. This earlier time span serves as the predecessor for the later Bel Canto model, and is here labeled as the Early Modern period. It is important to note there was no structured study of mental disorders or insanity during this era, as we might understand it in today's terms.[1] It was not uncommon during the time preceding the 18th century Enlightenment period for abnormal behavior to be deemed a spiritual affliction, rather than emotional or even mental, and to have been seen as being caused by demonic possession through Satan or as punishment by God for sin.[2] That interpretation would come to change during the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. Art and science underwent massive transformations to focus more on humanism for the individual, which in turn reformed major views of society and nature, including the understanding of insanity. Rather than being caused solely by spirits and unseen forces, doctors and priests

[1] Elisabet Rakel Sigurdoardottir, "Women and Madness in the 19th Century: The effects of Oppression on Women's Mental Health" (Master's Thesis, University of Iceland, 2013), 1-2.

[2] G. S. Rousseau, "'A Strange Pathology': Hysteria in the Early Modern World, 1500-1800," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 98.

began to concede that some forms of insanity "were a kind of illness, brought about by traumatic injury, or by physical disorders that had mental effects."[3] This new flexibility allowed intellectuals to analyze mental disorders in ways that they could not previously without going against religious conventions. During the 16th and 17th centuries, accompanying the more scientific approach to illness, there was a great interest in the ideas of the ancient Greeks. Rediscovered works, such as Hippocrates's humoural theories, were being translated for the first time and accordingly were incorporated into the previous religious understanding of insanity.

Hippocrates' humoural theories in particular acted as the foundation for the earliest forerunners of psychology. His explanation that insanity was caused by an imbalance of four humors would endure all the way to the Enlightenment and Early Modern period of the 18th century. From the four humors came four major diagnoses used to explain insanity: Dementia, Idiocy, Mania, and especially Melancholy.[4] It is the latter two that would remain particularly prominent during the Early Modern period. Michel Scull defines mania as taking the form of "…wild ravings and unpredictable actions…menacing and perhaps destroying people or property, or others apparently on the brink of self-destruction…"[5] On the other side of the coin, melancholics were known to suffer hallucinations and delusions caused by an imbalance of dark humors, or as physician Timothie Bright described the conditions, melancholy "…counterfetteth terrible objectes to the fantasie…[and] causeth it without externall occasion, to forge

[3] Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 91.

[4] Ellen Goldstein, *Console and Classify: the French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 45.

[5] Scull, *Madness in Civilization,* 97

monstrous fictions', so that 'the hart, which hath no judgement of discretion in itself, but giving credit to the mistaken report of the braine, breaketh out into that inordinate passion, against reason. '"[6] Melancholy in particular gained special popularity as a sort of intellectual vogue during the 17th century in connection to creative genius and accomplishment in artistic and humanistic works, such as poetry, theater, and even opera. These concepts acted as the foundation for the public perspective of what insanity was supposed to look like during that time, both for academics and for art, and opera was not an exception. Frequently overlooked for later more melodramatic examples, such as the unworldly Lucia or Shakespeare's Ophelia, were Early Modern mad operas such as Handel's *Orlando* (1733) from the late Baroque era, and Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781) from the Classical.

Handel's *Orlando* was an *opera seria* (meaning serious opera) reworking of an earlier epic poem from 1516 by Ludovico Ariosto called *Orlando Furioso*. Both the poem and opera tell the story of Orlando, a soldier from Charlemagne's army who falls in love with Angelica, a foreign princess who is already in love with another man named Medoro. Driven insane by jealousy and betrayal, in Handel's operatic version, Orlando has several delusions about seeing mythical beings. During his major mad scene, "Vaghe pupille" at the end of the Second Act, he imagines himself to be in the Underworld where he encounters creatures such as Cerberus, Charon, and the Queen herself, Proserpina. He later confuses another female character, Dorinda, for Venus and then a male warrior, before burning her home to the ground and unknowingly killing his love rival. He also strikes down Angelica when he mistakes her for a monster. When his sanity is returned

[6] Ibid., 92

through a magical potion, he is horrified at his actions and wishes to die as well. However, following the Baroque trend for happy endings even for their *opera serias*, it is revealed both Medoro and Angelica were saved by the same wizard who gave Orlando the magical potion that cured his insanity. The opera closes with the happy couple being married with Orlando's blessing.

A character's mad scene is the best representation of how an opera depicts insanity, and that includes Orlando's mad scene, "Vaghe pupille." *Orlando* was a Baroque opera that used several of the normal expected conventions for the time like ornamentation, recitative and de capo arias.[7] Yet, just as frequently, Handel deviated from expectations to depict Orlando's instability. As Ellen Rosand has said, "[Orlando] shifts wildly back and forth between fury and despair, between self-pity and aggression…The rate of change, the violence of the changes, and the very nature of the musical gestures themselves are abnormal for the [Baroque] style…" [8] There are at least five abrupt shifts in mood and music during the course of the aria as Orlando's visions overwhelm him and as his thoughts grow increasingly irrational and fragmented. In parallel, the orchestra grows gradually more frenzied as he distances himself from reality. He only begins to have hallucinations when recalling how he has been abandoned and betrayed by Angelica, as through his depression is triggering his instability. As Michael Foucault has stated, "…the mind of the melancholic is entirely occupied by reflection…"[9] During his mad scene, it is shown that Orlando's insanity, as represented

[7] Mary Ann Smart, "Dalla Tomba Uscita: Representations of Madness in Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera" (PhD Diss., Cornell University, 1994), 21.

[8] Ellen Rosand, "*Operatic Madness: a Challenge to Convention*", in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries,* ed. Steven Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 286.

[9] Michael Foucault, *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 125.

by both the music and text, is intimately linked to his emotional state; accordingly, Orlando's representation of insanity might be considered similar to several of the attributes associated with melancholy. Overcome by his emotions at Angelica's rejection, his melancholic delusions drive the plot of the entire opera, making the sequence of events occur as a result of his madness.

In the other hand, his insanity could be interpreted as both melancholic and manic for the (perhaps unintentional) death and destruction he causes while wrapped up in the visions triggered by his broken heart. It is interesting to note, in the original poem the opera was based on, Orlando tears his clothing and armor off and goes a murderous rampage through Europe and Africa, maniacally destroying everything in his path, but he does not have delusions of mythical beings.[10] From Handel's specifically chosen portrayal of madness, it is clear he wrote *Orlando* with his audience in mind. It could be considered a consequence that his depiction revolves around what was expected for a person suffering from melancholy or even to a lesser degree for mania, but it is far more likely that Handel wrote the character of Orlando based on what his audience would best recognize as madness. As might be seen in another example from the Early Modern period, Mozart's *Idomeneo,* it could be argued that the operatic portrayal of madness was influenced by its public perception during that same time.

After the Baroque era came the Classical era, and with it, another notable mad opera: Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Just as science and medicine were taking their cues from Greek theory, there was also a major trend during this time in the arts to recreate stories

[10] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. John Hoole (1799; California Digital Library, 2010), Vol. 3, Canto 24, 170. https://archive.org/details/orlandofurioso03arioiala.

from Greek mythology, including *Idomeneo*. This opera from 1733 depicted the story of King Idomeneo's return home after the Trojan wars and the events that followed. When news spread that Idomeneo's ship had been lost at sea, Electra, a Greek princess, despaired that a foreign princess named Ilia could soon become the Queen of Crete through marriage to Idomeneo's son, Idamante, for whom she also has feelings. Her jealousy triggers the first indication of her madness, which comes during the First Act, when Electra imagines that furies from Hades are tormenting her. Meanwhile, Idomeneo was saved by Neptune from a storm in return for promising to sacrifice the first living thing he met, which unfortunately ends up being his son, Idamante. He attempts to renege on his promise, only for a sea serpent of Neptune to appear, terrifying the countryside. The serpent is killed by Idamante, who then offers to sacrifice himself to prevent further destruction. Ilia offers to take his place, but following the tradition of happy endings during this period in opera, Neptune decides to forgive all involved if the throne be given to Idamante and Ilia. The only one without a happy ending would be Electra, whose extreme jealousy over Neptune's command leads to her pivotal mad scene at the end of the opera, "D'Oreste, d'Ajace."

Mozart's complex rhythms, varied instrumentation, and wide dynamic range herald Electra's madness early on in the First Act, but it is her mad scene that best characterizes her insanity. When finally thwarted in her desire for Idamante's love, she, "…gives expression to her despair and her anger, her voice soaring, and then dissolving into fragmentary hysterical cries, while the agitated orchestral accompaniment mixes…harmonically unstable elements with dissonance, an explosive combination that

evokes her raging, tormented soul."[11] As the aria progresses, the orchestra grows increasingly frenzied and aggressive, ascending in sharp surges that are undercut with brief hesitations, where Electra's outbreaks dominate. There are several points where the frenzy of the music and her voice suddenly draw back, as though she cannot sustain her rage, instead dissolving back into despair and then flaring into anger again. The degree of dissonance gradually reaches an eerie peak at the close of the aria as Electra almost laughingly discusses killing herself.

Electra's rage could certainly be interpreted as being manic in nature. She desires the furies to take revenge on her love rival and when still thwarted, for those same furies to tear out her heart, so she can join her brother Orestes in Hades to spend the rest of eternity lamenting. In comparison to Orlando's mad scene, it is clear that both the music and text of Electra's mad scene are far more hostile in nature. It is a quite violent kind of insanity, but despite its excesses, it is also impotent in its rage. Electra never actually causes any damage to either herself or to Idamante and his new lover. There are some productions that choose for Electra's aria to end in her suicide, but in the original libretto, she seethes without taking any real action. As Foucault observes, "…melancholia never reaches violence; it is madness at the limits of its powerlessness."[12] For that reason, along with being manic, Electra's madness could also be taken as melancholic.

Both examples—Orlando's delusions and Electra's fury—could be interpreted as possessing elements of both mania and melancholy as they were understood during the Early Modern Period. Despite being created nearly half a century apart and under

[11] Scull, *Madness in Civilization*, 133.
[12] Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*, 122.

different musical eras, both used a single major scene to exemplify each character's mental breakdown, in each case caused by love that resulted in melancholic delusions and manic rage. As Sean Parr has said, "Love lost, stolen, or unrequited is the oft-mentioned cause of melancholy, a malady which, when exaggerated or combined with mania, was deemed madness in the seventeenth century."[13] Given the similarities between how both examples demonstrated madness and the actual descriptions given to mania and melancholy, they could be considered to have indirectly influenced how opera represented insanity during the Early Modern period.

After the turn of the 18th century, opera would move away from Early Modern styles in favor of Bel Canto, a period that flourished in the early 19th century. The label itself, "Bel Canto" (which means, "beautiful singing"), only began to be applied during the 20th century to indicate a specific vocal convention that became prevalent across most of Europe during the late18th and early 19th centuries. Even today, there is not necessarily a fixed definition or interpretation for Bel Canto. In modern times, the Bel Canto style is generally understood as singing that stresses pure tones, the appearance of effortless smooth phasing (known as legato), and especially a performance style known as coloratura that had been widespread in the Early Modern period.[14] The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines coloratura as "elaborate vocal ornamentation, through running passages and trills up through the highest vocal ranges with high precision and agility."[15] It was the coloratura flair and the types of ornamentation and embellishment

[13] Sean M. Parr, *Melismatic Madness: Coloratura and Female Vocality in Mid Nineteenth-Century French and Italian Opera* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), 170.

[14] Naomi Andre, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera,* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 175.

[15] Don Michael Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 191.

that it enabled, inherited from the Early Modern period, that made the Bel Canto style so well suited to display dramatic insanity in opera. Undoubtedly due to the prominent use of its famous (or infamous) mad scenes and soprano coloratura after the turn of the 18th century, most people focus on the latter half of the period as the ultimate peak of operatic madness. The soprano voice is particularly well-matched to that style, so perhaps it cannot be considered surprising the entire period is best known for its characteristic soprano mad scenes.

On the psychology side of things, just as the peak of the Bel Canto period was beginning in the early 19th century, earlier concepts like mania and melancholia began to exhibit some degree of gender bias. Mania started to be considered masculine, while melancholia was feminine. During the end of the 18th century and the first few decades of the 19th, those terms were beginning to decline in use as the earliest psychological doctors were no longer diagnosing their patients as just maniacs or melancholics. A wider range of symptoms and potential disorders were recognized, but the precursory assumption of insanity as a gendered problem influenced future diagnoses. There have always been links culturally between gender and madness, and "Hysteria," another Greek-based term that came to overshadow mania and melancholia during the mid- to latter half of the 19th century, is a prime example. The phrase itself comes from the Greek word for "uterus" and that label was hardly a coincidence, considering how it was used.[16] Hysteria began to reemerge around the end of the 18th century, but it did not reach its peak in use until the mid-19th century. It was used as a sort-of blanket diagnosis for

[16] Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 104.

women with real psychological problems or who did not fall exactly into the assigned gender roles and expected behaviors for a woman during that time. It was not uncommon for women suffering from an unidentified illness to be labelled as hysterical for lack of another term.

Hysteria was determined to be a primarily feminine illness that all women were constantly at risk of, but there was never a widely accepted set of symptoms or characteristics throughout the long time span it was commonly used in psychology. However, the commonly held belief of what caused a woman to turn hysterical changed between the early and late 19th century. When the peak of the Bel Canto period of opera took place in the early 19th century, the understanding of hysteria was still heavily based on the original Greek definition of the term. The Greeks believed hysteria was a form of insanity caused by the female reproductive system stemming from a lack of sexual intercourse and pregnancy.[17] Therefore in the early 19th century, despite not being as excessively sexualized as would later be the case, it was commonly believed that young unmarried women or widows who had lost their husbands were especially vulnerable to becoming hysterical.[18] Early hysteria at the turn of the 18th century was thought to be caused by the inherent natural fragility of the female nervous system, which could not withstand excessive burdens of its own emotions and/or sexuality. As Elisabeth Bronfen notes, "The hysteric of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was a sensitive creature, prone to dreaming…" with symptoms such as "…fainting spells,

[17] Helen King, "Once upon a Text: Hysteria from Hippocrates," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 14.

[18] Roy Porter, "The Body and the Mind, The Doctor and the Patient: Negotiating Hysteria," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 252.

lethargy,…delirium, hallucinations, amnesia, and a histrionic vacillation between laughter and crying."[19] Women's bodies were thought to have a more delicate constitution than men's, which made them naturally more susceptible to being overwhelmed by their own emotions.

The idea of hysteria as a feminine disorder became so prevalent that it would later become synonymous with what female insanity was generally understood as, both in real life and in art. The initial application of this gender bias would become apparent during the mad operas from the Bel Canto period. A Bel Canto mad scene has several common factors involved for its signature portrayal of insanity. A character, almost exclusively female, would suffer various stressors in her life, commonly related to love or rejection, until experiencing a sudden and severe break from reality. The heroine's mental break-down would typically end with at least her own death. Two well-known examples include Bellini's *I Puritani* (1835) and especially Donizetti's famous *Lucia Di Lammermoor* (1835).

In Bellini's *I Puritani,* Elvira falls in love with a Royalist solider named Arturo whom her father granted her permission to marry. An unknown woman, secretly Enrichetta the widow of the executed Royalist King, appears during the wedding preparations to be escorted to appear before the Parliament as a suspected spy. Arturo discovers this and vows to save her, despite his wedding plans to Elvira. Unknowingly, Elvira provides the Queen with a potential escape route by placing her wedding veil over her. Arturo and Enrichetta take the disguise and opportunity to escape, leaving a bereft

[19] Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject,* 111

Elvira standing at the altar. She then goes mad at her abandonment. Elvira wanders about, disheveled, begging an absent Arturo to return and keep his promises of marriage in her characteristic mad scene, "Qui la voce sua soave." She mistakes other men for Arturo in her delusion and continues to sing bits of love songs she used to share with him. When Arturo returns for Elvira, while avoiding enemy soldiers since he has been deemed a fugitive, he joins her in singing their old love songs until Elvira is temporarily restored to sanity. When the drumbeats of nearby soldiers interrupt, Elvira briefly goes mad again as she thinks they will be parted with Arturo's death sentence. However, he is pardoned at the last minute by the opposing Puritan general who has just defeated the Royalists, allowing a happy ending for the lovers as Elvira finally regains all of her senses.

As compared to earlier mad scenes, Elvira's "Qui la voce sua soave" offers an interesting change. Instead of being dominated by self-pity or aggression, despair briefly wells before a sort-of false joy takes over. The scene begins as Elvira neatly lays out Arturo's betrayal, recounting his promise of being faithful to her that was broken when he suddenly abandoned her at the altar. The orchestra is very soft and sweeping; it has an almost dream-like feel, as through Elvira is aware of the situation, but not actively processing it. Even in her despair when she wishes to die, there isn't a hint of anger, only an indistinct sadness. With her very next line, however, the hints of her insanity begin to appear in full force. When she is interrupted by another character, the music immediately changes in both pace and tone as Elvira happily informs everyone to prepare for her wedding. The orchestra frequently "…signifies the emotional changes taking place in the mind of Elvira…[When she] believes her lover Arturo has returned, her joy is mirrored in

the orchestra, which changes into a faster tempo, featuring a dance-like meter."[20] At the height of her disconnect from reality, as she imagines she is with Arturo, both her voice and the music remain exuberant and light-hearted, making the descending scales in her lilting coloratura all the more jarring. As Charlotte Pipes describes, "…these descending scales become increasingly chromatic, perhaps signaling the heroine's increasing madness…Bellini utilizes the ornamentation to enhance the dramatic effect of the scene. For a character in such distress to sing so joyfully aids in the depiction of insanity.[21] Any time another character speaks, the tone briefly becomes more solemn as through reality is attempting to return before becoming dominated by Elvira's false and almost desperate joy for the rest of her mad scene.

Elvira's insanity is not violent in nature. If anything, it might be called reverie. She spends her entire mad scene wrapped in her fantasy, since she cannot handle reality when she is overwhelmed by both her own feelings and crushed dreams. Based on the characteristics she showed, it is easily possible Elvira could have been understood as hysterical under the early 19th century interpretation. Hysteria was believed to occur when a woman became overwhelmed by her emotions, which is what happens with Elvira. Her lover Arturo is shown to genuinely love her and want to marry her, but he is not the one that loses his mind over their separation. He causes their separation, but it is still Elvira who breaks down and exhibits several of the hysterical symptoms, such as delirium, hallucinations, and sudden shifts in mood as she gently longs for her own death. On the other hand, most of her insanity is expressed in a positive delusion, as she

[20] Charlotte Fakier Pipes, "A Study of Six Selected Coloratura Soprano 'Mad Scenes' in Nineteenth-Century Opera" (Master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1990), 59.

[21] Ibid, 57.

imagines her marriage which did not occur. Such complete illusions are a characteristic more commonly associated with melancholia. To recount, by the time of the Bel Canto period reached its peak and *I Puritani* was created, melancholia had come to be considered feminine. So perhaps, Elvira's portrayal of insanity could be interpreted as melancholic, hysterical, or even both. That same potential flexibility in interpretation can be also observed in the other prime example from the Bel Canto period: Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor.*

In Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor,* the title character is in love with a man, Edgardo, whose family has been in a long-standing feud with hers. Early on, while Lucia waits to meet with Edgardo, she recounts how she has seen the ghost of a woman who was killed by a jealous ancestor of Edgardo's, thus serving as an omen for her own relationship. Despite this, Lucia still secretly gets engaged to Edgardo. Her brother, Enrico, however wants to use Lucia for a political marriage to a man named Arturo and accordingly tricks her into thinking Edgardo has been unfaithful to her, using a forged letter to induce her agree to the marriage. Lucia signs the marriage contract, only for Edgardo to appear and reject her as being unfaithful to him. Lucia continues with the wedding, only to go mad and kill her new bridegroom in her pinnacle mad scene, "Il dolce suono."

Lucia's mad scene, "Il dolce suono" is frequently considered to the absolute peak of insanity in opera, and for good reason. From the very beginning, Lucia's separation from reality is so complete that the resulting delusion she has built for herself incorporates insanity and beauty in a way that is next to peerless. Lucia has just murdered her new bridegroom, but at the start of her mad scene, there is no rage. Instead, there is an

otherworldly and excessive happiness, as Lucia imagines she is with her lover Edgardo before the altar. Her thoughts come in fragments as the orchestra delicately supports the spectacle she has become in her insanity. As Charlotte Pipes summarizes, "…Donizetti, like many composers before him, employed coloratura to express heightened emotion. In the case of Lucia, the extreme emotion expressed by the heroine comes as a result of her insane mental condition…Donizetti often utilized broken, interrupted phrases in the vocal line to illustrate Lucia's fragmented thoughts."[22] Lucia addresses Edgardo several times without ever hinting that she is aware that he is not actually present. She cannot withstand her reality, so she retreats into a dream in which she can be happily married to the lover that was denied her. Her insanity is caused by her rejection and separation from the man she wanted so desperately to marry. She is not a victim of sexual desire so much as she is a victim of her own desire for love. Unlike Elvira, whose insanity was cured by her lover's return, Lucia never recovers.

Both Elvira and Lucia were made into victims through no fault of their own when their lovers abandoned them, leaving them in a situation from which they cannot escape, ultimately overwhelmed by their own emotions. In response to the societal restrictions and cultural limitations placed on these tragic heroines, they take what seems to be the only path available to them: absolute insanity. There are several greatly varying interpretations of what Bel Canto heroines are achieving through their madness. For example, Susan McClary has suggested they are escaping from the restrictions of their lives and achieving freedom essentially through going mad, when they cannot withstand

[22] Ibid, 71-73.

their own disappointed hopes and desire for love.[23] With heroines like Elvira and Lucia, the Bel Canto portrayal of insanity could be considered idealized. Their madness has a higher degree of spectacle than might be expected with melancholy and mania, nor is as sexualized as full hysteria would become later in the 19th century. Lucia's and Elvira's insanity could perhaps be viewed as the transitional model, between the melancholy of the past Early Modern period and the sexual hysteria was beginning to bloom for the coming Romantic period. Along with these two examples, there were others from the Bel Canto period that used a similar depiction of insanity, including Bellini's *Il Pirata* and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena.* Precursory psychologists, such as Thomas Willis and Philippe Pinel,[24] informed the public that insanity was a feminine issue and specified the form it would take, so many of the most enduring popular mad opera's subjects from the Bel Canto period were not only female, but also were very close in keeping with what the public likely expected of early hysteria.

Hysteria may have reemerged during the Bel Canto period, but it would reach its peak during the ensuring Romantic period. While earlier psychological concepts were based almost entirely on their original Greek sources, it was the 19th century when psychology as a field started to grow as a modern phenomenon. Continuing where the earlier understanding left off, approaches to mental illness became increasingly structured. Early psychologists grew more comfortable in their new task of attempting to understand insanity and began to start producing their own ideas. For some, that meant

[23] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 98.

[24] Cecilia Tasca et al., "Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health," *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health* 8 (2012): 113-114.

creating entirely new explanations for the causes of different forms of insanity and how to cure them. For others, that meant reinterpreting the major concepts already in use, including hysteria. As psychology became more established, one aspect that endured to influence both the Bel Canto and the Romantic periods was the idea of insanity as a gendered problem. While in earlier theories, hysteria was attributed to the female body and its natural fragility, during the course of the nineteenth-century, it "... came to be seen more and more as the inextricable knot between an expression of passion and a simulation of passion…"[25] Instead of hysteria being caused solely by an overabundance of emotion, it became increasingly and specifically linked with an excess of feminine sexuality and desire: a clarification that can perhaps be accredited to Sigmund Freud. Freud argued that hysteria "…was the somatization of repressed sexual wishes and fantasies [and that] the social and cultural factors that enforced the relegation…of these highly charged mental contents also encouraged the spread of the disease."[26] Hysteria was still academically deemed a feminine issue, but during the Romantic period, there was a much greater public interest in psychology. Psychologists could easily gain almost celebrity status as it became popular to discuss psychology even at the average person's level; accordingly, there was a greater general understanding of psychological theories as they were published.

Subsequently, there are some who accredit the increasingly common knowledge of psychology with the decline in mad operas after the Bel Canto. As people gained understanding of real insanity, it could have been harder for a composer to use insanity

[25] Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject,* 114.
[26] Jan Ellen Goldstein, *Console and Classify,* 325.

without receiving excessive criticism, in turn causing insanity to be discarded as a dramatic theme during this period. On the other hand, there are others who instead credit the overall shift of subject material that indicated the start of the Romantic period around 1830. After the idealism that reigned supreme during the Bel Canto period, composers and artists began to use more reliable scenarios and characters with which their audiences could identify. As the name of the period might suggest, there was frequently an emphasis on love and passion. More weight was placed on emotional revelation, individualism, and self-expression in all art, including opera.[27] That doesn't mean there was any less drama, only that the concepts, themes, and how they were used, underwent transformation.

As a result, after the sheer spectacle the Bel Canto period made of operatic insanity, there was a decline in the number of operas that addressed or used madness in any form beyond the mid-19th century. The few mad operas from this period generally fall into two categories. They were a production of a Shakespearean play, such as Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* and Verdi's *Macbeth*, or their form of insanity was more similar to passion than to any representation of insanity that had previously been used in opera. In the latter case, their representation of madness was distinctly different than either the Early Modern or Bel Canto models. Two of the few major operas that used madness during the Romantic period included Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) and Bizet's *Carmen* (1875).

[27] D. Bentley and G. Dura-Vila, "Opera and Madness: Britten's Peter Grimes—a case study," *J. Med. Ethics; Medical Humanities* 35, (2009): 107.

Verdi's *La Traviata* (meaning, "The Fallen Woman") opens on a lavish party where a Parisian courtesan named Violetta is celebrating her recovery from a recent illness. During the party, Violetta is overcome with an uncontrollable coughing spell which foreshadows the illness that would later take her life, consumption. Alfredo assists her and confesses his love for her, despite only having seen her from a distance. She at first rejects him on the grounds that she needs her freedom to live her life as she wishes. As a courtesan, Violetta uses her beauty, intellect, and charisma to seduce men into providing her with the luxuries and lifestyles she desires, so she had always protected herself by remaining emotionally distant from men. Despite herself, Violetta falls in love with Alfredo in return and runs away with him to the countryside, abandoning the extravagance of her former life in the higher society of Paris. Ultimately, Alfredo's father forces Violetta to abandon Alfredo for the sake of his sister's marriage prospects, sacrificing her happiness to theirs. After returning to the high life of Paris and rejection from a misled Alfredo, Violetta's illness swiftly grows worse, leaving her on the edge of death. Alfredo's father finally informs him of her sacrifice and he rushes back to her side too late. Violetta briefly imagines she has gained her health and then dies in Alfredo's arms.

In the closest aria that could be considered Violetta's mad scene at the end of Act One, "Sempre libera," she acknowledges her new love with Alfredo as a fever that compounds the literal illness (consumption) that will eventually cause her death. Violetta mentally and audibly whirls into coloratura as she attempts to justify her emotional state, ultimately losing herself in a willing delusion that she can live happily with Alfredo as she imagines hearing his voice. There are several indications of the madness she is

inflicting on herself. As Sean Parr describes, "...coloratura, the ultimate Bel canto singing style…becomes the symbol, even the harbinger, of death…in Verdi's middle-period operas, the vocalizing is…a sign that a situation is too good to be true."[28] Violetta's coloratura reveals she will not come to a happy end, despite her best efforts and self-delusions. The rapid high notes and desperate, crazed, laughter during a serious scene indicates Violetta's instability. She knows she is doomed, but she actively chooses to continue with her path of accepting Alfredo and to die of pleasure, knowing that it can't last. For the first time in opera, there is a blatantly sexual aspect to a character's insanity. Violetta is not deliberately deluding herself only for the sake of Alfredo's love; she specifically states she will take the pleasures life has to offer. Violetta's insanity, however subtle compared to other earlier examples, can be directly connected to her desires, both sexual and emotional. She displays the characteristics of a hysteria as generally defined by early psychologists during the Romantic period. As McClary candidly describes, "…these two features of modern culture—psychiatry and public art—inform each other: the more science tells us that it is women who go mad from an excess of sexuality, the more artists reflect that understanding; but the more art gives us vivid representations of sexually frenzied madwomen, the more society as a whole (including is scientists) takes for granted the bond between madness and femininity."[29] On that note, Violetta would be hysterical in the full meaning of the term for the 19th century.

As during the Bel Canto period, Romantic madwomen dominated the insane operatic stage, but the slight adjustment to the general understanding of hysteria also

[28] Sean M. Parr, *Melismatic Madness,* 183.
[29] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings,* 84.

allowed men to become potentially hysterical. They would be considered as feminine for doing so, but it was at this point in time that the long-held gender bias about insanity began to falter. Another mad opera from the Romantic period, Bizet's *Carmen,* is a rare example in that its primary mad character was actually male, rather than female. The title character, a sensual and flighty gypsy named Carmen, unashamedly flirts with a soldier names José, who is initially annoyed by her boldness. When placed under arrest for attacking another woman at her workplace, Carmen seduces José into releasing her by singing of dancing and passion with an unnamed lover. José is then arrested in her place for neglect of duty. José is released after a month of confinement, only to be further beguiled by Carmen into attacking a superior officer in a tavern and being forced to desert with a band of smugglers. After a while, Carmen grows bored with him and abandons him for a bullfighter named Escamillo. During Escamillo's match, with "C'est toi! C'est moi!", a desperate José confronts Carmen, only to have her throw the ring he gave her in his face and to be rejected again. The opera ends with a crime of passion when José stabs Carmen while the crowd cheers Escamillo's victory in the background.

Three times in the background, the crowd cheers Escamillo's victory and at each time, Don José is pushed ever closer to the edge. Each time is immediately preceded by another of Carmen's blunt rejections, as through the crowd is cheering Escamillo's victory, not over his fight over the bull, but over his fight with Don José for Carmen's affections. The pace picks up and does not fully relax again, as the situation becomes increasingly intense. Don José gets closer to his breaking point, but Carmen remains in constant power during the entire scene, just like she had been for the rest of the opera. The orchestra grows faster and harsher, underlining the threat Don José represents to

Carmen with each new rejection. Just before the climax of both the scene and the entire opera, the music is down-right sinister with several strings playing eerie ascending scales, only for it all to cut out with Carmen's death. The second she is dead, the threatening tone to both the music and to Don José is gone. Don José kills Carmen, only to immediately collapse into grief at her death. Don José commits a crime of passion, yes, but in one way, his madness was generally among the most realistic to real-life insanity that had been used in opera to this point in time.

Don José did not really have a sudden and total break from reality; he is perfectly aware of what is happening at all times. He does not suffer any hallucinations such as those seen in all the previous mad operas. In Don José's insanity, however brief, one can sense the major shift that took place from the Early Modern and Bel Canto periods of opera. His insanity is caused by his overabundance of passion. In a rare example, Don José could be considered to be a male hysteric. As Susan McClary explains, "…the growing 'science' of psychiatry came to differentiate radically between explanations for unreason in men (which ranged from grief or guilt to congenital defectiveness) and the cause (singular) of madness in women, namely, female sexual excess. Over the course of the nineteenth century, psychiatrists obsessed over the mechanisms of feminine dementia to the extent that madness came to be perceived tout court as feminine—even when it occurred in men."[30] He is made to appear almost feminine in that Carmen has almost the entirety of the power in their relationship. In one way, Don José could considered the victim of a femme fatale. Carmen's seduction ruined his life and led him down the path of no return as he briefly lost his mind over his extreme desire for her. His uncontrolled

[30] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings,* 84.

passion is what lead to both of their downfalls. He was not a traditional hysteric, but Don José represents a male hysteric in nearly the only way that could have been accepted to an audience fully informed about the state of psychology.

Freud's work allows for the possibility of male hysterics, but it also could have led to hysteria's decline. Between the efforts of psychologists such as Jean Martin Charot, Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud, hysteria enjoyed its Golden age during the 19th century Romantic period. However, favor is fleeting and hysteria drastically declined as a commonly used diagnosis just after the end of the 19th century.[31] Some psychologists who specialize in historical hysteria, such as Mark Micale, accredited the increasingly common knowledge of psychology at the average person's level during the Romantic period. In particular, Freud's ideas had a major influence on how the general public viewed hysteria. As mentioned before, he believed that hysteria was the result of sexual repression and intense emotional oppression that was compounded by the earlier Victorian social system. Once those conditions were past and society became less restrictive, hysteria would also disappear because the situations causing them disappeared. In other words, "…the disappearance of hysteria is the result of de-Victorianization."[32] Hysteria became more sexualized before declining, and psychology itself became more analytical and logical in its approach. Mental derangement had an organic cause that produced the insanity, or vice versa, problems with psychological processes would result in the formation of psychogenic physical symptoms. Psychology

[31] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 129.

[32] Mark S. Micale, "On the 'Disappearance' of Hysteria: A Study in the Clinical Deconstruction of a Diagnosis," *History of Science Society* 84, no. 3 (1993): 499.

itself was much more clinical than before, and one can observe a similar shift in how opera treated insanity. As hysteria declined, so did the gender biases that had accompanied psychological diagnoses for nearly two centuries. There begin to be more mad operas with both male and female subjects, in direct contrast to the earlier tradition of predominantly madwomen. The representations of modern insanity in opera also became more psychological and analytical in nature. Rather than the mad character's derangement cumulating into a sudden break from reality, madness in opera became generally more gradual and logical. Instead of a single major Mad Scene, a character's insanity would frequently take the entire span of the opera to develop. Two such operas include Richard Strauss' *Elektra* (1903) and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925).

Strauss' *Elektra* is a one-act opera that was also based on another story from ancient Greek myth, like Mozart's much-earlier *Idomeneo*, both involving the princess Electra, but how she was represented in each could not be more different. In *Idomeneo*, Electra is a minor character, while still being an important one. With Strauss' title character, Elektra is definitely at the center of the show. In the original Greek story, Elektra's father Agamemnon offended the goddess Artemis and had to sacrifice Elektra's sister Iphigenia in order for both he and his ships to reach Troy for the war. Agamemnon obeyed, causing his wife and Elektra's mother, Klytaemnestra, to hate him. Once he returned from the Trojan War, Klytaemnestra and her new lover murdered her husband in cold blood and then feared the wrath of her remaining children for killing their father. It is at this point in the story that Strauss' opera begins. Elektra and her sister Chrysothemis remain in their mother's court to be scorned and mistreated, while their brother Oreste was banished. Elektra in particular is enraged and makes a daily ritual out of obsessively

remembering her father's murder and promising that his children will avenge him in the first of what might be considered one of her mad scenes, "Allein! Weh, ganz allein." Klytaemnestra continues to have nightmares that her son will kill her and decides another sacrifice will be necessary to appease the gods for her crimes. Elektra taunts her mother with hints of the victim's identity and questions why her brother is not allowed to return. When she is told he has gone mad, she realizes her mother is lying and intends to have Orest killed. Elektra then reveals and describes in detail that it is Klytaemnestra herself who must be killed by Orest with the same weapon she used to murder her husband to appease the gods and make her nightmares stop forever. While Klytaemnestra trembles with fear from Elektra's claims, it is announced that Orest is dead from being trampled. Grief-stricken, Elektra still informs her sister that the task of their mother's murder still falls to them. When Chrysothemis shows doubt, Elektra attempts to seduce her into helping, only to be rejected. Enraged again, Elektra searches for the axe used to kill her father to do the job herself, only to be interrupted by someone who is revealed to be Orest. She informs him of how her womanly beauty has become diminished in her pursuit of revenge in her second major mad scene, "Orest!" Orest proceeds to kill both his mother and her lover to Elektra's extreme excitement. Elektra begins her final, if brief, mad scene with "Schweig, und tanze." Elektra dances in celebration that her father's murder has finally been avenged. She grows increasingly erratic in her triumph, until she finally collapses and dies just before the curtain falls.

Elektra, even by today's standards, can be a shocking experience. It is not a particularly long opera at only a single act, but its insanity is no less potent for that. As Richard Chessick has observed, "…in this opera, Strauss moved out of the post-Romantic

stage to attempt a new kind of harmony, a new and powerful kind of melody, and a progressive style…frightened by what he saw, Strauss withdrew, and never again experimented with the kind of jagged harmony and psychology underlining that [made] Elektra [one] of the most provocative operas of the century."[33] Elektra's insanity is unlike any before it. She is motivated by the desire for revenge, not desire for a lover, despite her brazen sexuality. Rather than being limited to a single scene, the entire opera is the stage for her insanity to play out. With each person Elektra encounters, the audience is given more insight into her mental state. As an opera, *Elektra* can be and has been interpreted as demonstrating "…the oedipal constellation and…a number of seminal psychoanalytic concepts, including incest, sado-masochism and perverse fantasies."[34] As Linda Hutcheon explains, "When *Elektra* premiered in 1909, Freud's theories of hysteria were used by reviewers to try to understand (and condemn) its protagonist."[35] Elektra's portrayal of insanity is unique in that it has such a clear psychological basis, to the point of being able to directly connect specific concepts. That same heavily psychological influence is also apparent in other mad operas from the Modern period, such as Berg's *Wozzeck.*

In Berg's *Wozzeck*, the title character is a soldier who is in a relationship with a woman named Marie, with whom he had a child out of wedlock. The opera opens on Wozzeck shaving his captain and passively accepting his abuse as he is repeatedly insulted for his situation. Wozzeck had a philosophical debate with the Captain, stating

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[33] Richard Chessick, "On the Unique Impact of Richard Strauss's *Elektra*," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 42, no. 4 (1988): 587.

[34] Alexander Carpenter, "Toward a History of Operatic Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalysis and History* 12, no. 2 (2010): 181.

[35] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: the Art of Dying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 116.

that he might have been virtuous, if only he was wealthy. After being dismissed for confusing his captain, Wozzeck is cutting wood when he is overtaken by frightening hallucinations from which his friend Andres cannot calm him down. Wozzeck later tells Marie about his visions and gives her his pay without stopping to see their son, leaving Marie to lament being poor. In an effort to make some additional money, Wozzeck has agreed to act as a human guinea pig for the Doctor's experiments, who is delighted when he hears of Wozzeck's visions. He unfeelingly diagnoses Wozzeck as paranoia and sends him away. At the same time, Marie is having an affair with the Drum-major, who gives her a new pair of earrings. When Wozzeck questions her about them later, she lies and says she found them. Unconvinced, Wozzeck leaves again to encounter the Doctor and the Captain, who imply to him that Marie is being unfaithful. When confronted, Marie does not deny it, which enrages him further. Later on, Wozzeck sees Marie dancing with the Drum-major and seethes. Wozzeck later fights the Drum-major, only to be badly beaten and emasculated. After Marie wishes to be forgiven for her actions, she and Wozzeck go for a walk in the woods. Under a blood-red moon, Wozzeck has a psychotic episode and murders Marie, so that no one else might have her. Wozzeck returns to town in a daze covered in her blood and then returns to the murder scene. He becomes obsessed with the idea of being incriminated over his murder weapon and throws it into a nearby lake. When the red moon reappears, he frantically worries the knife wasn't thrown far enough and descends into the lake, only to drown. The next day, Marie's body is discovered, becoming a spectacle for several children, including Marie and Wozzeck's unknowing child.

Unlike earlier mad characters whose troubles might be linked to a single thing, such as rejection or abandonment by a lover, there are several causes to which Wozzeck's insanity could be attributed. Was he driven mad by the constant emasculation and verbal abuse from his captain and others, like the drum major? Were his delusions caused by malnutrition from the strict diet and experimentation performed on him by the unsympathetic Doctor? Or in keeping with tradition, did he go insane because of his jealousy over Marie's adultery? It could have been any one of them or a combination of all three. In any case, it is clear that Wozzeck's insanity is distinctly different than that of earlier operatic mad characters. In no way is his derangement idealized. He is suffering and commits terrible acts, having lost his mind, but never is his insanity framed as liberating, beautiful or even as an escape from the real world, as with earlier operas. Wozzeck's death "…starkly contrasts Romantic ideals. Wozzeck does not die the honorable masculine death…he capitulates to madness, misery, and poverty."[36] There was no nobility or even dignity about his madness; it took on the frame of how real insanity had begun to be viewed—as mental illness. The same trends can be observed in other examples from the Modern period, such as Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945) or Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1924). Under the influence of Freud, the aftereffects of which can still be felt in today's psychology, insanity was mental illness in both the eyes of the professionals and in the public. Operatic depiction changed accordingly, just as it had shortly after each major change in the field of psychology.

[36] Meaghan Parker, "'Wir Arme Leut': Undignified Death and Madness in Berg's *Wozzeck," Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 6, no. 1 (2013): 89

To easily observe the fundamental differences that characterize the portrayal of insanity between the Romantic and Modern periods of opera, it is simple enough to just compare *Carmen* and *Wozzeck*. There are several similarities between the two in terms of plot and representation. Both operas have a mad male character who ultimately kills his love interest presumably out of jealousy when betrayed for another man. Beyond that point, it is the handling and the set-up of each opera that best displays the varied representation of insanity that was used during each different period of opera in which they were created. Both female leads die, but only Wozzeck dies of the male leads. Carmen as an opera is far more sexualized than Wozzeck. That also goes for the females themselves. Marie's sexuality is an important aspect of the plot, but not to the degree that Carmen's is. Carmen's sexuality is almost weaponized in the opera, making her out to be a sort of femme fatale who ultimately causes José to lose his mind from an overabundance of frustrated passion for her. The focus of this opera is the relationship between Carmen and Jose; therefore the build-up throughout the entire plot cumulates in a crime of passion with Carmen's murder, ending the opera as their relationship is ended forever. Despite being mad, José is still treated as a masculine and almost noble, if unfortunate, Romantic hero. Depending on how you view it, José could have been a victim of poorly-chosen love, or more precisely a victim of Carmen's sexual power, while still remaining fairly masculine. Wozzeck offers an interesting contrast. Throughout the opera, Wozzeck is emasculated several times: when Marie cheats on him, when he is beaten by the Drum-major, even at the first signs of his delusions. He is made out to be almost feminine in nature for all the ways in which he cannot match up to the hyper-masculine foil of the Drum-major, both as a man and as a lover. The focus of this

opera is not really the relationship between Wozzeck and Marie; it is about Wozzeck and his instability. The story doesn't stop with the female lead's death as in the case of Carmen; it ends with Wozzeck's death, because the opera is truly about him and his mental state.

The stories are similar, but the focus of those stories in the actual operas are appropriately different to the time periods in which they were created. *Carmen* is undoubtedly a Romantic opera for which love was a vital social force that attributed to its conclusion. *Wozzeck*, in comparison, is a psychological opera. Love did not cause its result; Wozzeck's mental illness did. *Wozzeck* is more of a character study than a love story gone wrong. Each of these operas could be considered characteristic examples of how insanity was considered and used during each period. As the perception of insanity changed due to escalating psychological studies between the two periods, Romantic and Modern, the representation of insanity in opera changed accordingly which is perfectly exemplified in *Carmen* and *Wozzeck.*

Similar comparisons could be made for all four different periods: Early Modern, Bel Canto, Romantic, and Modern. From the mania and melancholy of the Early Modern, through the forms of hysteria in the Bel Canto and Romantic, to the psychological or even Freudian aspects of the Modern period, several of the most famous mad operas ever created could be interpreted by genuine psychological terms that were being used to label real-life insanity during the same times. Throughout the course of this work, it has been described how various mad operas could be interpreted as portraying dramatic insanity in ways that parallel the most popular psychological terms from the same time they were created. It is extremely important to state that both insanity and gender are subjective to

the culture and society in question; so is the interpretation of an opera. Comparing psychological terms to opera's various portrayals of insanity is simply one of those potential interpretations. For each comparison drawn up, it is always possible that another interpretation could counteract it. There are some who consider *Orlando* and *Idomeneo* to be among the earliest Bel Canto operas for their coloratura and ornamentation. There are also some who included *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *I Puritani* to be Romantic operas. There are several who would not consider *Carmen* or *La Traviata* to be genuine mad operas at all. As Mary Smart states, "Perhaps the enterprise of studying madness in opera merely intensifies the problems of opera analysis in general: the critic must attempt to extract a rational structure, not from 'meaningless disorder', but from a sea of interlocking but often contradictory elements."[37] There are no concrete interpretations, but what this work does allow, is placing all those mad operas into context.

There is a general tendency when analyzing opera to consider each work as purely isolated. The plot, the characters, or the music might be considered alone or collectively, but it is much rarer for an opera to be evaluated in the context it was actually created. Aspects of the societies they were created in often times affect that creation in ways that are both more extensive and surprising than might be casually thought. How insanity was considered culturally could easily be an example. How a society thinks about gender and/or madness can inform the dramatic understanding and subsequent representation of insanity in opera. As outlined here, the evolution of operatic madness can be taken as life informing art in its own way.

[37] Mary Ann Smart, "The Silencing of Lucia," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992): 140

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