Lady Macbeth

“Hasten! That I may enflame that cold heart of yours! Boldness is needed to complete this task. I will give you courage.”

Throughout the opera, Lady Macbeth pushes Macbeth to commit bloody deeds so that they may have the throne. While Shakespeare makes Lady Macbeth ask to be ‘unsexed’ in order to have this strength of will, Verdi’s Lady Macbeth asks for no such thing – suggesting that she has had this strength all along.

“Are you a man?”

When Macbeth hesitates to clean up after murdering Duncan and starts to see ghosts, Lady Macbeth questions his masculinity. She knows that his effeminate emotions put him under her power, and she uses it to convince him to kill Banquo. After Macbeth speaks with the witches one last time, he finds that “death and revenge deafe[n] all other thoughts.” This change proves fatal to Lady Macbeth; since Macbeth now knows what to do, and no longer hesitates (very masculine traits to exhibit), she no longer has the power to persuade him to do her bidding.

“Forever tinged with human blood...

All Arabia with its perfumes can not cleanse this little hand.”

Tosca for the people of Scotland seems to fall for her guise in the drinking song of Act I. Guilt overrides her, like it once had Macbeth in his effeminate state of mind, and it kills her.

The Queen of the Night

“However, futile was her pleading,
For all my effort was too weak.”

With these words the Queen of the Night attempts to convince Tamino to save her daughter from Sarastro. Though she has the resources and the power to provide Papageno with food, and has knowledge of goings-on without being present, she does not have enough power to save her daughter. Sarastro, the High Priest of the Temple of Wisdom, shows the audience through this act of kidnapping that the wise would not let a mother have power over a kingdom.

“Abandoned be forever,
Forsaken be forever,
And shattered be forever,
All the force of nature’s tie
If not through you Sarastro’s life be taken!”

The Queen tries to persuade her daughter to kill Sarastro by threatening to disown her. This is the most un-motherly deed a woman could commit, save for infanticide. Without needing to look after her daughter, however, the Queen will be free to fight Sarastro for her right to rule the world. She promises her daughter’s hand in marriage to her next valiant soldier, an offer which is neither fulfilled nor withdrawn (as it very well could be), since she loses the final battle for sovereignty from Sarastro. The fulfillment or withdrawal of this promise would show if a queen could be a mother and rule over her realm.

These Women and Gender

“Opera is ‘a great masculine scheme surrounding a spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character.’”

While this is particularly true for Tosca whose situation audiences may show empathy, it also applies to the Queen of the Night. This woman has had her daughter and her power forcibly taken from her. She attempts to find another willing to defeat Sarastro for her, but when that effort fails, she leads her followers in a battle against Sarastro and loses. Although Verdi’s Lady Macbeth is not easy to love, the people of Scotland seem to fall for her guise in the drinking song of Act II.

“vengeful, scheming, defiant toward male authority, proud, violent, and stubborn...critical reception almost invariably views these qualities as unattractive in a woman, even when the story offers them some measure of validation.”

“ ‘mother love’ – that mysterious quasi-instinctual emotion that is affirmed as immutable – cannot genuinely exist in a woman who places such a premium on her own personal power and the well-being of her realm: it is assumed that there is something ‘masculine’ and therefore aberrant, about her.”

The three leading ladies of this study all come under the ‘unattractive’ category in one way or another. This passage specifically aims to describe the Queen of the Night, but Lady Macbeth too is vengeful, scheming, defiant toward male authority, proud, and stubborn. Tosca is proud and violent as well, but she is not defiant towards men. She does not fight one directly as the Queen of the Night does, nor does she betilt a man like Lady Macbeth does. The only way in which she could be considered defiant of male authority is to consider her murderous as directed against males, though in truth it was truly an act of defiance towards rape culture.

Tosca

“Oh, the Holy Mother sees us.
No, Mario, no!
Let me offer my prayers and flowers.”

Floria Tosca, who is in love with Mario Cavaradossi, is a very complex female character. She loves the Holy Mother and God devoutly, and yet acts in ways that are contrary to her devotion. By kissing Mario in the Church, and acting on her jealous emotions, she transgresses against the sanctity of the Church. What the audience sees in her is a woman who owns her agency, though that may come to harm her in the end.

“Despairing of tomorrow, my head is bowed in sorrow.
Oh why, my Lord, withdraw Your hand from me?”

Scarpia, the head of the Roman police, tortures Mario and manipulates Tosca into revealing where Mario is hiding a rebel. Tosca offers a bribe for Mario’s safety to Scarpia, to which he responds: “I’m not for sale to lovely ladies / for something cheap as money.” If Tosca goes through with his request, not only will she have transgressed against Catholic teaching, but against her love for Mario as well.

“With my life! Oh, Scarpia, the Lord will judge.”

Tosca kills Scarpia, and attempts to flee with Mario. He too is killed. When Scarpia’s men find that Tosca killed Scarpia, she takes her agency to the ultimate level. Without the prospect of a peaceful life with Mario, she determines that her life is unlivable. Her last words before she kills herself, suggest that the Lord will judge Scarpia, but not her. She is her only evaluator.

“ opera is ‘a great masculine scheme surrounding a spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character.’”


The representation of gender is at once its constitution and its mirror; there is nothing else.”


All of these women must perform. The Queen of the Night has to perform supernatural rhetoric in order to persuade and frighten those she wishes would kill Sarastro. Lady Macbeth must keep Macbeth’s madness from the public’s sight when celebrating their ascent to the throne. Tosca is not only a performer of religious cantatas, but she must pretend that Mario will die during his ‘fake execution’. All of these women have to perform in such ways as to obtain what they want – what they otherwise would have if not for the men onstage.