LUCIA: some accidents of locality

PART 2

As you will remember from Part 1 of this essay the story of The Bride of Lammermoor is marked by an interplay of extremes and the evolution of the tale from its origins by some big shifts from one point of view to another (for example Scott's Lord Ashton has a weak character in contrast with the robust image of Sir James Dalrymple, the supposed original). As we venture further into the world of the dramatic derivatives from Scott's novel on our route to the objective of the Donizetti/Cammarano opera the pattern of apparently slight changes with big consequences will continue to evolve unpredictably.

And so to the history of stage representations of Scott's novel. The first was by Dibdin and is lost, but is likely to have been in the kind of high-flown English of the nineteenth century that makes us cringe nowadays. The first 'opera' was Le Caleb de Walter Scott, a comedy by d'Artois and Planard with music by Adam (which turns out on further examination to be a pasticcio including music by Rossini) and it held the stage of the Théâtre des Nouveautés in Paris for 52 nights starting in December 1827. The events portrayed centre on Ravenswood's butler and factotum Caleb Balderstone. The happy ending has not ensured a continuing stage life for this strange hybrid-but the impact of popular theatre on our story will reappear later in a slightly different context. In order to better understand why so few of the many stages versions have survived (really only the Donizetti/Cammarano opera gets any attention nowadays) I plan to compare five early versions of the story, and more particularly I shall concentrate on the representation of events following Edgar/Edgard/Edgardo's precipitate return from France to disrupt the betrothal/wedding of the browbeaten Lucy/Lucia-an event common to all. The five versions of these closing events are: the original novel first published in 1819; the first play to have survived, that of J W Calcraft (known as Old King Cole) first performed on 1st May 1822 in the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh; the first 'real' opera, by Michele Carafa (libretto by Balochi) performed at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris on 12th December 1829; Ducange's melodrama La Fiancée de Lammermoor performed at the Porte Saint Martin on 25th March 1828, and finally the Donizetti/Cammarano opera of 26th September 1835 (Naples).

QUINTETTO

In the novel the entry of Edgar to interrupt the betrothal ceremony occurs on page 320 of the 349 page novel leaving little space in which to elaborate the consequences. Henry Ashton, Lucy's 15-year old brother, had been particularly active in the preparations for the betrothal and, after his mother has enquired the reason for the intrusion, he again takes the lead in dealing with Edgar's interruption by trying to draw the intruder away. Like much in these closing pages the male-male conversations are taken as little more than challenges to future duels. Edgar ignores the youthful Henry and seeks instead for confirmation from Lucy that her signature appears on both the betrothal contract and a recent letter that he produces (it is Edgar's letters that have been interrupted, though the motive for letting Lucy's letters

continue to be sent is obscure). Lucy says 'yes' but is thereafter silent for the most of the scene. Edgar demands a private audience with Lucy, who is now unable to respond. Her mother tries to prevent the private meeting. As a compromise solution the Presbyterian minister Bide-the-bent and Lady Ashton are reluctantly accepted as witnesses and the majority of those present now withdraw.

Once the company has been reduced to the nominated four, Edgar asks of Lucy on what basis she wishes to set aside their previous pledge to marry. Bide-the-bent answers on the issue of scriptural law and Lady Ashton, having been named by Lucy as responsible for the change of plans, alleges that no duress had been applied to Lucy-a somewhat improbable claim although the novel glosses over the means used. At this point, and with little corroboration as to Lucy's agreement to the foregoing, Edgar destroys the gold talisman that they had divided between them and that both carried to denote their troth, and departs issuing challenges to most of the men of the house. In spite of being distracted and saying that she has lost her grip on life (a condition brought on by the loss of the gold talisman), Lucy allows the wedding to go ahead. Bride and groom are duly installed in their bridal chamber in order to consummate their marriage. In response to screams the wedding party enter the chamber to find the groom near-murdered and Lucy in a state of distraction. She soon fades away to an unspecified death. When they later encounter each other, Henry tells Edgar of Lucy's death. Edgar, realising that Lucy has been true to him, restates his challenge-a threat that is never put into action because Edgar disappears, probably into the quicksand on his way to the duel.

To this fleetingly elusive version of events Calcraft sought to make only 'the changes necessary to transfer events to the stage'. As we shall see his 'minimal changes' amounted to rather more, but first the text of his short preface to the published text of his play (1823) on the subject of the part of Lucy Ashton is worth reproducing: "Mrs H SIDDONS' performance stands alone, and any praise I could bestow on it would be but a feeble addition to the general admiration with which her efforts have been witnessed. The character of Lucy Ashton is one of singular difficulty; and requires, from its representative, a display of mental powers, of a much higher order than those which, frequently triumph over many of the more brilliant and imposing heroines of the tragic drama. It is a part, almost exclusively of silent and intense expression,-deriving little assistance, either from the energy of the language or the commanding nature of the situations. On reading the play alone, it would be very difficult to form any just conception of the effect produced by Mrs H SIDDONS, throughout the last two acts of this character." Silence, if that is what is being recommended, is a somewhat limiting performance technique when applied to an operatic heroine.

In Calcraft's play the betrothal scene comes in Act V scene 2. The first variation to the novel's version of events is that Edgar actually hears Lucy's reaction to the loss of the talisman-'the last link which bound me to life' (in the novel he had already left). This stops his departure whilst Lucy demonstrates the truth of her statement by dying quietly. Edgar's provocation makes Colonel Ashton draw his sword and in the preparation for a duel Edgar deliberately runs onto the sword and dies. As a dramatic conclusion this has to be called 'minimal', whilst I would also call it perfunctory and somewhat improbable.

After that minimalism the Carafa/Balochi opera brings an embarrassment of riches. This veritable cornucopia is dubbed 'semi-seria' and seeks to compress the full gamut from tragedy to farce apparent in the novel into the narrow confines of a single operatic storyline. It should be no surprise that loyalty to Scott's tale has been sacrificed. Lucia's motivation, prepared in the scenes leading up to the wedding by a confrontation with her mother, allows no chance of depicting her mental powers in the manner recommended by Calcraft. That said both Carafa/Balochi and Calcraft deviate from the novel from the same point. In this opera Lucia reveals that she has poisoned herself in the belief that Edgardo has betrayed her. Promising to be reunited in Heaven (would a Presbyterian qualify after suicide?) she dies and Edgardo follows her into eternity by no specified means (Hell for both, or Purgatory for conspiracy?-I have inserted these ironic questions to remind readers that this is a tale written by a lawyer (Scott) about events concerning another (Dalrymple): legal verisimilitude should therefore be important). The chorus concludes the opera conventionally with dolorous expressions of grief. This sequence has occupied most of 'Part 3' of the opera, so the proportion is increasing as the musical influence strengthens (most of these plays have had background music of some sort but with nothing on the scale of operatic music to fill out whole scenes). As a minor detail the spelling of ASHTON is correct on the first full page of personaggi: it is only on the following page, in the brief personaggi that the misspelling ASTHON appears and remains consistently to the end of the score. Thereafter the misspelling is endemic to the operatic literature including the Donizetti/Cammarano opera.

In the hands of Victor Ducange Edgard makes his entrance at the end of scene X of Act 3. Lucie is confused as to how she is hearing her absent lover's voice (have his looks changed that much?) When shown the signed betrothal contract Edgard hurls his gold talisman at Lucie. Instead of the requested departure of most of the company to permit a private talk between Lucie and Edgard the exodus includes Edgard and is 'Au rivage!' for the purposes of a duel. Lucie, left behind with her friend Anna, reveals that she must live or die with Edgard, whom she follows. 'Au rivage' the two lovers are reunited in a tableau that shows them marooned on a rock whilst they are engulfed by a rip tide (a characteristic of the Solway Firth but not of the Firth of Forth). This theatrical embellishment makes Calcraft's compromise look unexciting.

It should be clear by this point that the successful dramatisation of Scott's handful of concluding pages and the creation of a 'good curtain' has caused many difficulties. The fact that so many tried but only one survived should make us to look more closely at how Donizetti and Cammarano succeeded. Although there is no evidence that either read more than the last 30 or 40 pages of Scott's novel (ie the bit that was dictated rather than written) it is quite clear that they had a better grasp of how to make the events work in the theatre. Their solution, which occupies nearly half of the opera, provides a series of musical Himalayas mounting to the final Everest. It may be superfluous for the readers of this essay familiar with the opera to retell the sequence of scenes with which it ends, but with their forbearance I shall tell them briefly to complete the comparison.

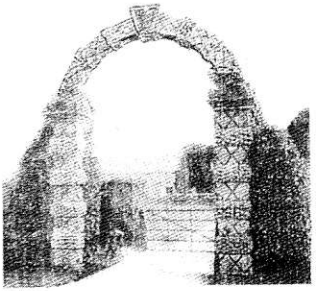
Up to the point at which Edgardo curses Lucia for signing the betrothal the novel is followed with the various reactions to the intrusion making up the ensembles that frame the scene. The lovers return the rings, which replace the divided gold talisman of the novel. The scene ends Act 2 on a grand but dramatically uncertain note. To start the following Act with the scene between Edgardo and Enrico (which in the novel follows and announces Lucy's death to Edgar) certainly relieves tension, but is in danger of being superfluous. The wedding itself is glossed over, as in the novel, and the scene set for the consequences. Here Lucia has definitely killed her new husband and the sight of a woman deranged and in extremis, somnambulating in complete self-absorption to the point of delirium and death is given to us complete with on-stage audience providing a running commentary. The expansion and articulation of this scene goes far beyond any of the previous versions, and it leaves the pallid representations of horror in Gothic Novels far behind. After that the final scene may be necessary to complete the story (Scott left it hanging in the air) but it puts the tenor Edgardo in a deep shadow thrown by the preceding histrionics. Only Donizetti could save him, and he does with an aria good enough to salve tenor pride and almost convince us that this has been a 'tenor opera'.

INTERLUDE

There must be some explanation for the extraordinary explosion of emotion represented by the 'mad scene', but the source is far from obvious. A previous survey of operatic madness (the stage variety rather than the front-of-house or journalistic kind) by John Cordingly (Rose Bruford dissertation, 2002) shows a suspicious blank between Paisiello's Nina (Caserta, 1789) and Lucia (Naples, 1835). It is only by pure chance that I can suggest how that gap came to be filled. I followed up a reference to a ballet scenario by Scribe (La Somnambule, ou L'arrivée d'un nouveau Seigner, 1827, music by Hérold) that had been quoted as the source for Bellini's opera. Once I had found the source (in a complete Scribe in 24 volumes at the British Library) it turned out to have been a comédie-vaudeville written jointly with Delavigne, and first performed in the Théâtre du Vaudeville on 6th December 1819. The detail of the work (and its place as Romani's source-it is a tale en cabinet, not au village) doesn't concern us here. It is the sleepwalking scene that is of interest. It places the heroine in a state of total self-absorption before an on-stage audience to humorous as well as dramatic purpose. The specified musical accompaniment to the scene is the contredanse from Nina, thus linking this work with the earlier operatic manifestation and with the theme of madness. On the page the scene reads more like a trial run for the Lady Macbeth scene in Verdi than for Lucia's madness, but it would be true to say that the genesis of both owes much to Scribe (and other popular examples of the fascination for watching a woman in extremis). Here I would suggest that amidst the popular theatrical tradition of the times (which often threatened to drain away adherents from the opera houses) lie the seeds of the novelty in the treatment of Lucia's madness. What better way to attract attention and audience than by out-doing the weak (and mildly humorous) efforts of the boulevardiers? And with a glass harmonica as the final garnish? The result, as they say, has become operatic history.

FINALE ULTIMO

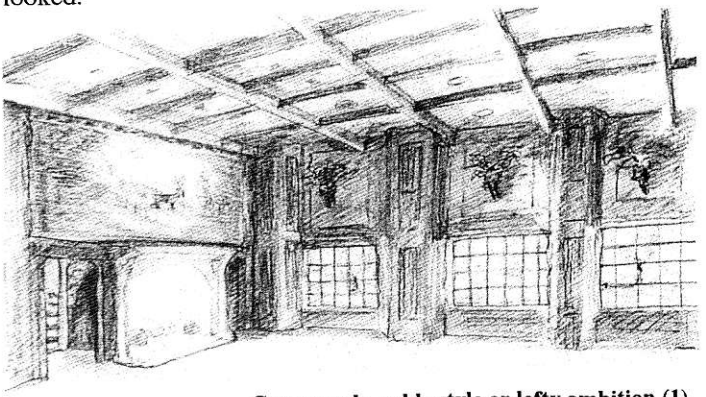
In part one of this essay I suggested that religion really was neutral in the events on which Lucia was based and not the mainspring. Of course I was wrong. Religion lies like a pall over the whole period of Scottish politics from the Stuart Restoration to the Act of Union. By a steady stream of allusions to supernatural forces (without ever giving them credence for causing anything: Scott maintained the Gothic fiction tradition of showing all supposed spiritual interventions as having natural causes) the undercurrent of unworldliness is maintained. It is tempting to put this into visual form by introducing an extravagant renaissance excrescence on the broken pediments of the Baldoon gateway like this:



Baldoon, an ostentatious fantasy (2)

The result is architectural nonsense, of course, (in spite of similarities to the King's Advocate's Arch of equivalent date preserved in Edinburgh) but is temptingly 'stagy', and brings to the fore my last objective: to explore the visual implications of all these localtions for productions of the Donizetti opera.

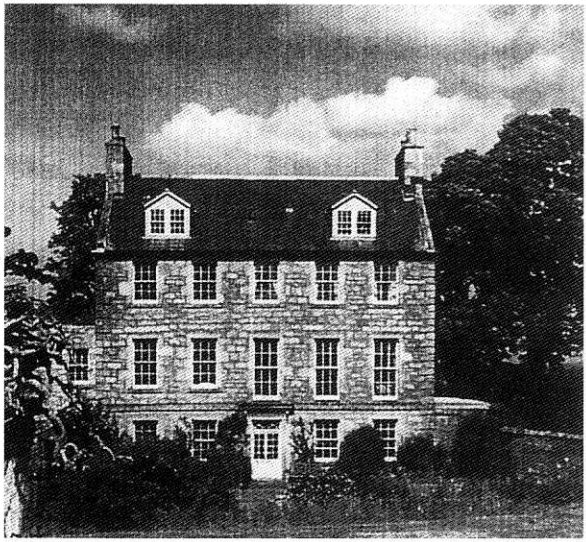
By far the most difficult of the houses to visualise is the one most crucial to the tale: Carscreugh Castle. The present ruin gives no hint as to what kind of family home hosted the doomed wedding party. The pall of finto-Gothic looms too easily over my thoughts (and those of scenic designers worldwide, apparently) but it has to be resisted if the right balance between passion and zeal; warmth or austerity is to be maintained. With minimal evidence to guide me I have tried to recreate the interior of the castle as it might have looked:



Carscreugh, noble style or lofty ambition (1)

The result is not particularly 'stagy' but it has the merit of getting away from those high mock-Tudor halls in which traditional productions of the opera tend to take place. The domestic scale certainly brings the whole thing down to a human size, and the enormity of the tragedy down to that of the individuals caught up in it.

By far the more interesting location to visualise is the one closest to Scott's own world and the one that I suggested might have played the biggest role in his imagination: Hunthill House. Unlike the other two it has survived and, in spite of periods of decline, has blossomed into a modern family home. Courtesy of Lord and Lady Belfast, the current owners, I was able to visit and photograph the glen close to the garden for part one of this essay. But I have chosen to represent the house itself not with a picture of its present glory. with a modern wing sympathetically added to the 17th century original, but more as it might have looked to the young Scott.



Hunthill, a recent view (3) **(The pair of wych-elms have since succumbed to disease)**

Here at last we can glimpse the Eden for which Lucy yearned and the kind of Scotland for which Scott campaigned all his life. It is also the house from which the disappointed Archibald Rutherford apparently departed to join a regiment abroad and die soon after. It is only when faced with this image of unequivocally serene beauty, close to that which is evident in Scott's beloved Abbotsford, that the whole tale makes any sense. It is here that the elusive private Scott can come into focus as the pretension of public image recedes along with other political ephemera to leave only the ambivalence of the novels.

Perhaps I was right that religion really doesn't signify. Brush the cobwebs of mystical unions, spiritual obligations and cursed houses aside: in the end the drama comes from the individuals. At the heart of this tale is a young woman whose life is overwhelmed to some of the grandest music in all Romantic Italian opera. I am always struck by how happy she sounds in her madness, leaving the woefully tragic plangent tones to the tenor in the last

scene. Janet Dalrymple never courted any fame as a result of her fate, nor has her image survived, to my knowledge (Castle Kennedy burnt down in 1767 so any family portrait would have been destroyed). All I can therefore do is bring my tale to a close with an attempt (based on a portrait of her father) to imagine the real un-romanticised person from whom all this has flowed..

ENVOI

Scott's tale contains many contrasts: wildness and tranquillity; calm and ferocity. Also the barren and the fertile, the traditional and the modern; and there is humour too as well as stern ardour-much lightness to contrast with the darkness. Had he been able with his own hand to scribe the final scenes would the conclusion have come out the same? The Bride of Lammermoor is the only Scott novel to end 'badly' and perhaps this might be taken to reflect Scott's own view of the Act of Union between England and Scotland. But I think it is more likely that it was a warning of the upshot from unrestrained self-interest amongst those in power at the time. If so then it is a remarkably modern view, and one with which we can all readily identify.

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The belief, not contradicted by our Journal 7, that *La Belle France* has some catching-up to do is amusingly clear from Diapason's interview with Natalie Dessay (December 2004):

"Et je me suis finalement décidée à reprendre Lucia en italien à la Bastille dans la production d'Andrei Serban, qui a pour sa part accepté de la retravailler avec moi. J'y retrouverai la tessiture traditionelle abordée à Chicago, qui autorise dans la scène de la folie des intervalles larges et finalement plus pertinents du point de vue dramatique, et vous devriez entendre pour la première fois le glass-harmonica dont Donizetti rêvait dans la cadence!"*

* (!!!)

Tu parles is all I can say..

(but the fabulous Miss Dessay does add in compensation that she is thinking of *Maria Stuarda*)