



# When Opera parodies Opera

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**All works of art,** including operas, are created in the context of a web of conventions. A work may fully conform to or partially defy the conventions of its day, but it cannot escape being measured against them. And this can be fuel for comedy, which may choose to parody the conventions either implicitly or explicitly. In such a case, the translator needs to be aware of the conventions and make sure that the parody survives in the translation. Meanwhile, the opera translator is working to solve the usual problems: preserving meanings, diction levels, syllable counts, stress patterns, word burdens, aural closures; perhaps also trying to re-create rapid-fire, cleverly rhyming patter. Of course, the result must be singable, and, above all, funny.

These are the problems faced by translators making a performable English translation of *L'occasione fa il ladro ossia Il cambio della valigia / A Thief by Chance or Baggage Astray* by the Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868). This 80-minute, one-act opera was first performed in Venice in 1812. Its libretto is by Luigi Prividali, adapted from the French *Le prétendu par hasard, ou l'occasion fait le larron* (1810) by the prolific Eugène Scribe (1791-1861). The critical orchestral score for this work was published by the Fondazione Rossini Pesaro in 1994<sup>1</sup>; the companion piano-

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vocal score, published in 2007 by Ricordi, includes our translation, which is copyright 2007 by CASA RICORDI-BMG Ricordi S.p.A.<sup>2</sup> All excerpts from *L'occasione fa il ladro* included here are taken from these two scores and are used with permission.

Five late 18th- and early 19th-century European operatic conventions are gleefully employed to the point of parody in *L'occasione fa il ladro*: identity switching, falling in love with a portrait, falling in love at first sight, overly complex plots, and the cowardly, scheming nature of servants. Another convention of both opera and the society of its time, the arranged marriage, is used to motivate dramatic action.

It is easy to retain the parody inherent in this work simply by translating fairly literally. The point is that being aware of the conventions is necessary in order to appreciate the libretto. For instance, to those who know the conventions, the plot is not silly, but satire: an important distinction. In other words, knowledge informs the tone of a translation in a way that is hard to pin down, or to demonstrate by individual examples. Knowledge helped the authors to enjoy the opera and to enjoy translating it—and, we hope, to convey that enjoyment to performers and audiences.

Some of *L'occasione*'s parody of complex plots is evident even in a plot summary, which we will recount here to help readers follow a discussion of an opera they have probably never heard of.

### The Story

On a dark and stormy night, our hero, the baritone Don Parmenione, is

at a country inn enjoying his dinner while his servant, Martino, cringes in fear of the lightning. Our other hero, the tenor Count Alberto, together with his bit-part servant, comes in to escape the rain. Alberto is going to Naples for an arranged marriage to a woman he has never met. When Alberto leaves, his servant mistakenly takes Parmenione's bag instead of Alberto's.

Parmenione and Martino go through Alberto's bag, finding money, papers, clothes, and a portrait of a girl they assume to be Alberto's fiancée. Parmenione—of course!—falls in love with the portrait and rushes off, Martino in tow, intending to impersonate Alberto and steal his fiancée.

Meanwhile—of course there is a “meanwhile”—in Naples, our heroine, Berenice, is awaiting the arrival of her fiancé, whom she has never met. Berenice is a countess who lives with her uncle Don Eusebio and Ernestina, our other heroine. Ernestina, Berenice's companion, for an as yet an unknown reason, is—of course—posing as a servant. Berenice would like to assess her fiancé without his knowledge, and so persuades Ernestina to switch identities with her.

Enter Parmenione, wearing Alberto's clothes, and Martino, for Alberto is—of course—the fiancé. Parmenione meets Ernestina and again falls in love at once, not caring that she looks nothing like the portrait. Ernestina thinks he is a bit bizarre, but very nice, and hauls him off to meet Don Eusebio, Berenice's uncle.

Enter Alberto, received by Berenice in disguise. (Remember, Countess Berenice is now pretending

to be Ernestina pretending to be a servant, while Ernestina is pretending to be Berenice.) Alberto and Berenice immediately take to each other, and Alberto, too, is brought to meet Uncle Eusebio. When the couples and Eusebio are assembled, both Parmenione and Alberto claim to be Alberto, and both believe Alberto is engaged to Ernestina. The five vent their confusion in a quintet.

The second half of the opera is devoted to unraveling the confusion. Berenice is determined to set things right. She rather likes Alberto, but detests Parmenione. She sets herself to trap Parmenione in an inconsistency, which is no difficult task, and reveals her identity.

Now Parmenione and Alberto are confused. The question switches from “Who is the real Alberto?” to “Who is the real Berenice?” Parmenione and Alberto make a pact. If servant-clothed Berenice is the countess, Parmenione will give Alberto back his identity. If she is indeed a servant, Parmenione will continue as Alberto. This sounds like a good solution, but, since this is comedy and parody, there must be more confusion. Berenice says that if Alberto does not tell her the truth at once, she will have nothing more of him in any persona.

Needless to say, after a little more maneuvering, everyone's true identity is revealed and all is forgiven. Through it all, the chief concern of Martino—remember him, Parmenione's servant?—has been to find something to eat.

But wait! Why is Ernestina in disguise? And whose is the portrait Parmenione first fell in love with? A few lines of recitative explain all. Ernestina is in hiding to escape a “vile seducer” who never appears in the opera. The girl in the portrait is Alberto's sister, who never appears in the opera. And, lest the plot ➡

not be complicated enough, the coincidences not piled high enough, Parmenione is a friend of Ernestina's brother (who never appears in the opera), who has been sent to Naples for the specific purpose of finding out what had happened to Ernestina.

In tried and true comedic convention, a double wedding is planned.

### Switched Identities

Obviously prominent in the plot of *L'occasione fa il ladro* are switched identities, a staple of 19th-century fiction in general and operas in particular. *L'occasione* librettist Prividali was probably specifically making fun of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, which was first performed in 1790. In *Così*, two men, disguised as "Albanian" strangers, woo and win each other's fiancées.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the stuffy 19th century, some found this plot scandalous.

*L'occasione* makes fun of *Così* by upping the ante. Not only do the men switch identities, but also the women. "Behold," *L'occasione* implies, "I am not scandalous because my lovers, albeit unknowingly, are correctly paired off."

### Falling in Love with a Portrait

*L'occasione fa il ladro* turns to yet another Mozart opera to parody the plot device of a hero who falls in love with a portrait. In Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* / *The Magic Flute*, first performed in 1791,<sup>4</sup> Tamino falls in love with Pamina's picture. He sings an impassioned aria about it, beginning:

*Dies Bildnis is bezaubernd schön,  
wie noch kein Auge je gesehn.  
Ich fühl' es, wie dies Götterbild  
mein Herz mit neuer Regung füllt.*

[This picture is enchantingly beautiful,  
more than any eye has yet seen.  
I feel how this godly image

fills my heart with new emotion/  
agitation.]

This boy is definitely in love!

Here is our performable English translation:

I gaze in wonder at a face  
whose beauty art cannot portray.  
This portrait transports me to a  
world apart!  
A strange emotion fills my heart!<sup>5</sup>

Tamino, the hero, rushes off to rescue Pamina, the heroine. Though the situation turns out to be not quite as he thought, he does get the girl in the end. And while *Die Zauberflöte* is a comedy, his love for Pamina is supposed to be accepted by the audience as deep and real.

*L'occasione* proceeds differently, and much less seriously. Parmenione, unlike Tamino and despite our appellation in the plot summary, is *not* a hero. He does not seek to rescue a girl, but to steal her from another man by means of deception. The girl whose portrait has charmed him is not the heroine of the opera. Indeed, the girl in the portrait never even appears in the opera. And Parmenione promptly falls for the first other girl he sees on his way to his supposed beloved.

The aria Parmenione sings is totally different in mood from that of Tamino. Tamino is impassioned and confused. Parmenione is impassioned and scheming:

*D'arrogarmi un nome finto  
veramente il passo è ardito, sì, sì;  
e può mettermi in procinto  
di mangiare il pan pentito, sì, sì;  
ma se l'oro all' altro io rendo,  
se rinunzio a ogn' altro effetto,  
l'interesse non offendo,  
non pregiudico l'onor.*

*Ma poi questo bel visetto  
fa scusabile ogni error.*

[To claim a false name for myself,  
truly the step is bold, yes, yes;  
and it could place me on the point  
of eating penitential bread, yes, yes;  
but if I repay the gold to the other man,  
if I renounce everything else,  
I do not offend his interests,  
I do not prejudice his honor.  
And of course this beautiful face  
excuses every error.]

In our performable translation, Parmenione sings:

I will take another's name  
for I am bold enough to do it.  
Oh, yes.  
I will play a dangerous game  
though truth to tell I well may rue it.  
Oh, yes.  
Yet if I return his money,  
it is little that he loses.  
It is not as if his honor were subjected to assault.  
And besides her face excuses  
every failing, every fault.

### Overly Complex Plots

The twists and turns in the story of *L'occasione* parody a long line of overly complex opera plots, and the creators of *L'occasione* were obviously aware of what they were doing, as two passages of meta-drama make clear. (In meta-drama, characters step outside the dramatic action to comment on the work in which they are appearing.)

In the middle of the opera, all the main characters sing a quintet, which ends with the lyrics:

*Di tanto equivoco,  
di tal disordine  
nel cupo, orribile,  
confuso vortice,  
urta, precipita,*

*s'avvolge, rotola,  
perduto il cerebro  
per aria va:  
ma si dissimuli,  
che senza strepito  
già tutto in seguito  
si scoprirà.*

[Because of such misunderstanding, of such disorder in a dark, horrible, confused whirlpool, he knocks about, plunges headlong, embroils himself, spins; brain lost, through the air he goes: but he is deceived, because without any hubbub, of course all later on will be laid bare.]

Since modern audiences often experience instances of meta-drama, we felt that we had to exaggerate somewhat or Privaldi's "Without any hubbub, of course all later on will be laid bare" might not be noticed. Therefore, we added the word "masquerade":

Oh how confusedly  
implausibilities  
of great perplexity  
resist analyses!  
Insane complexities  
increase relentlessly  
in whirling vortices  
of growing force!  
But soon reality  
will end the masquerade  
and everything will be  
made clear of course.

Another passage of meta-drama occurs near the end of the opera. Though all, or almost all, has been explained, Eusebio sings, "*Io sbalordito resto*": "I remain bewildered." Just before Eusebio sings, Ernestina and Parmenione sing their own conclusions. The three phrases,

as we have translated them, are: "Oh what a happy moment!" "Oh what a stroke of fortune!" "Oh what complete confusion!" Though explanations have been given, the characters, and perhaps also the audience, remain thoroughly confused.

And not only the audience! Richard Osborne, who wrote the entry on *L'occasione* in the *Grove Dictionary of Opera*, incorrectly states that the portrait in Alberto's luggage is of Berenice.<sup>6</sup> This is the portrait with which Parmenione first falls in love. Since it is a major plot point that neither Alberto nor Parmenione have any idea what Berenice looks like prior to their arrival in Naples, Osborne's error converts *L'occasione* from a complex and somewhat confusing opera into one that makes no sense whatsoever: "Oh what complete confusion!"

### Cowardly Scheming Servants

All of the parody discussed so far has pertained to plot. However, one convention parodied by *L'occasione* pertains to character. The scheming and/or cowardly servant dates back to the classic comic drama of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Once again, *L'occasione fa il ladro* indicates it is making fun of the conventions per se, as opposed to merely conforming to them, by having the performers almost step out of character to comment. When he is being grilled about the identity of his master, Martino says:

*La verità! Ma come mai, signore,  
pretenderla si può da un servitore?*

[The truth! But how, sir, can that be asked of a servant?]

Martino conforms with a vengeance to all stage conventions regarding servants. His cowardice is prodigious. He is

in almost constant fear of death, by lightning, by beating, even by starvation. He schemes to obtain food for himself and more money for Parmenione: when he and Parmenione discover that the suitcases have been switched, Martino's eye is on Alberto's fat wallet. However, his scheme is crushed under the weight of Parmenione's scheme. Stealing the money, says Parmenione, would be unforgivable, dishonorable. Stealing the fiancée, however...and off they go.

However, as convention decrees, Martino is also hilariously clever. While refusing to reveal his master's identity, he slips in a devastating word-picture of Parmenione, which, he has, of course, told everyone is a lie. Or is it? His aria begins:

*Il mio padrone è un uomo,  
ognun che il vede il sa:  
rassembra un galantuomo,  
e forse lo sarà.  
Vecchio non è né giovine,  
né brutto, né avvenente,  
non è villan, né principe,  
né ricco, né indigente,  
insomma è un di quegli esseri  
comuni in società.*

[My master is a man, anyone who sees him knows this: he seems to be a gentleman, and perhaps he will be. He is not old nor young, nor ugly, nor handsome, not a peasant, nor a prince, not a rich man, not a pauper, in sum he is one of those who may be common in society.]

Our singable version goes:

My master is a man, sir, as anyone  
can see,  
indeed a man of honor, if looks and  
truth agree,  
indeed a man of honor, if

looks and truth agree.  
Neither a youth nor elderly, and  
neither plain nor handsome,  
and neither sunk in poverty, nor  
rich enough for ransom.  
He's not a prince, nor a pauper.  
In essence, he's a common type in  
our society,  
a very common type in our society,  
as common as can be in our society.

### Falling in Love at First Sight and Arranged Marriages

The convention of falling in love at first sight is obviously parodied in *L'occasione fa il ladro*: Parmenione does it twice, once with a portrait and once with Ernestina. Upon meeting Ernestina, he bubbles over with joy:

*Quel gentil, quel vago, vago, vago,  
vago, vago oggetto,  
che a voi sposo, che a voi sposo,  
che a voi sposo il ciel destina,  
tutto foco s'avvicina, tutto foco  
s'avvicina  
alla cara, alla cara, alla cara sua  
metà.*

[What an amiable, what a charming, charming, charming, charming, charming object, he whom to you as husband, he whom to you as husband heaven destines, all passion he is nearing, all passion he is nearing to his dear, to his dear, to his dear [better] half.]

We had to capture this effervescence in our translation:

Oh you amiable, amiable, amiable creature!  
Heaven sends me, heaven sends me here to you to share your future.  
I approach you full of ardor, I approach you full of ardor:

you're my better, you're my better,  
you're my better half to be.

Ernestina, in her turn, begins to fall in love with Parmenione. She does so because of what she mistakenly believes is Parmenione's reaction to another operatic (and societal) convention with which the opera is playing: the arranged marriage. Alberto's and Berenice's marriage was arranged without their ever having met. Because of the switched identities, Parmenione and Ernestina each wrongly believe the other to be a party to that arranged marriage. Ernestina does *not* take Parmenione's protestations of love as genuine. Instead, she assumes that Parmenione is saying, "Though you have to marry me, I intend to woo you and try to ensure that our marriage will be a happy one." Ernestina takes this as a great courtesy and kindness, and this motivates her attraction to Parmenione. She says:

*Io m'inchino con rispetto alla  
vostra gran bontà,  
con rispetto alla vostra civiltà.*

[I bow my head with respect at your great goodness,  
with respect at your civility.]

and, aside,

*È bizzarro, ma grazioso.*

[He is eccentric, but gracious.]

Her appreciation of Parmenione's eccentricity bodes well for their relationship. Therefore, the ending of the opera is indeed happy for these two, and, apparently, for Alberto and Berenice also.

And also for Rossini. His opera parodying operas was one of his first big successes, the harbinger of many more successful operas to come.

### Notes

1. Rossini, Gioacchino, composer. *L'occasione fa il ladro*. Libretto by Luigi Prividali. Operatic farce in one act. Orchestral score. Critical edition under the editorial direction of the Rossini Foundation of Pesaro. Edited by Giovanni Carli Ballola, Patricia Brauner, and Philip Gossett (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1994), Distributed by Ricordi.
2. Rossini, Gioacchino, composer. *L'occasione fa il ladro*. Libretto by Luigi Prividali. Piano-vocal score based on the critical edition of the orchestral score. English translation by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter (Milan: Ricordi, 2007).
3. Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, composer. *Così fan tutte*. Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte. Opera in two acts (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1970).
4. Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, composer. *Die Zauberflöte*. Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder. Opera in two acts. Edited by Gernot Gruber and Alfred Orel (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1970).
5. Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, composer. *Die Zauberflöte*. Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder. Piano-vocal score. English translation by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter (1982).
6. Osborne, Richard. "L'occasione fa il ladro." In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, III: 644. Stanley Sadie, ed. Four volumes (London: Macmillan Press Limited and New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music Inc., 1992).