

Falstaff

Italian opera in three acts

by

Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito

after Shakespeare's

The Merry Wives of Windsor (1600)

Henry IV, Part One (1597)

Henry IV, Part Two (1598)

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan,
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Story Synopsis

Sir John Falstaff contrives a preposterous plan to relieve his diminishing financial resources: he will lure the wealthy wives, Mistresses Ford and Page, into love affairs. He sends each of the ladies identical letters that offers them his love: they realize his duplicity, scorn his impudence, and plot to teach him a lesson.

Nannetta, Ford's daughter, is upset because her father wants her to marry Dr. Caius: she is in love with Fenton. Mr. Ford learns about Falstaff's insidious plans to seduce the wives; seething with jealousy, he devises his own plan of revenge against the wily knight.

Dame Quickly advises Falstaff that Alice Ford ecstatically anticipates a rendezvous with him. Mr. Ford, in disguise, beseeches Falstaff to help him win Alice Ford's favors. Falstaff romances Alice but is interrupted by the avenging Ford and his co-conspirators: the wives hide Falstaff in a laundry basket, and as all watch, the basket is dumped into the Thames river.

Although Falstaff is humiliated, Dame Quickly convinces him that Alice still yearns for his love: a rendezvous is arranged in Windsor park at midnight that evening. All the conspirators – wives and husbands – await Falstaff, intending to humble and debase him: they beat, castigate, and denounce him.

At a wedding in the park, disguises are changed: Ford inadvertently weds Nannetta with Fenton, rather than with Dr. Caius. In the end, Mr. Ford and Sir John Falstaff become victims of their own folly.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Sir John Falstaff, a fat, seedy knight	Baritone
Bardolph, a cohort	Tenor
Pistol, a cohort	Tenor
Ford, a wealthy burgher	Baritone
Alice Ford, his wife	Soprano
Nannetta Ford, their daughter	Soprano
Fenton, Nannetta's suitor	Tenor
Dr. Caius, another suitor	Tenor
Meg Page, a neighbor	Soprano
Dame Quickly, servant to Dr. Caius	Soprano

Servants, citizens of Windsor, masqueraders,
witches and fairies

TIME and PLACE: Fifteenth century,
Windsor, England, during the reign of Henry IV

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Act I – Scene 1: A room in the Garter Inn

At the Garter Inn, Falstaff, a jovial, fat rogue, quaffs huge drafts while he busily seals two letters: looking on are his rowdy and rambunctious cohorts, Bardolph and Pistol. Falstaff has conjured up a plan to alleviate the low state of his financial resources: he has written identical letters to Mistresses Page and Ford, the wives of two wealthy burghers with whom he hopes to conclude a profitable liaison.

The contentious Dr. Caius arrives and immediately quarrels with Falstaff, claiming that his depraved friends, Bardolph and Pistol, got him drunk the night before, picked his pockets, thrashed his servants, and stole two of his horses. After an exchange of furious insults, Pistol and Dr. Caius duel mockingly. Falstaff calmly dismisses the humiliated Dr. Caius, who, solemnly promises never again to drink in the presence of such scoundrels.

Falstaff, feigning virtue and morality, admonishes his colleagues about their future behavior: “Steal politely, and at the right time.”

Falstaff: Rubar con garbo e a tempo

Piu lento
FALSTAFF

The musical notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It begins with a half rest, followed by a half note B-flat, a quarter note A, a quarter note G, a half note F, a quarter note E, a quarter note D, a half note C, and a final quarter note B. A long, sweeping slur covers the entire melody. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in two lines: "Ru - bar con gar - bo e a tem - po." and "Steal politely and at the right time."

Ru - bar con gar - bo e a tem - po.
Steal politely and at the right time.

Falstaff orders Bardolph and Pistol to deliver his love letters respectively to Mistresses Ford and Page: his rogue accomplices refuse, claiming that to partake in such an insidious plan would be beneath their integrity and honor. Undaunted, Falstaff calls a page to deliver the letters.

Falstaff is exasperated by his cohorts' betrayal: he rebukes them in an ironical sermon filled with sarcasm and mock pomposity; a scathing harangue about honor that condemns them as *cloache d'ignominia*, “sewers of ignominy.”

Falstaff: L'Onore!

Allegro sostenuto
FALSTAFF

The musical notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It begins with a half note B-flat, followed by a quarter note A, a quarter note G, a half note F, a quarter note E, a quarter note D, a half note C, and a final quarter note B. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in two lines: "L'O - nor - re!" and "La - dri!" with the translations "Honor!" and "Thieves!" respectively.

L'O - nor - re! La - dri!
Honor! Thieves!

Bardolph and Pistol, the latter seeking revenge against Falstaff for humiliating them: Bardolph and Pistol have betrayed Falstaff and exposed his plan to seduce the Windsor wives to Mr. Ford.

The men leave to plot their intrigue, but Fenton and Nannetta remain behind and romance each other: Nannetta is disturbed and perplexed because her father has arranged for her to marry the contemptible Dr. Caius.

Fenton and Nannetta: Labbra di foco! Labbra di fiori!

Allegretto
NANNETTA and FENTON

The musical score is for a duet in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. Nannetta's part begins with the lyrics 'Labbra di fiori! Sweet lips!' and Fenton's part begins with 'Labbra di foco! Hot lips!'. They then sing together: 'Chi il ve - ro gio - ro san - no a - mo - re / Whose beautiful joy heals the pains of love.' The score includes vocal staves for both characters with their respective lyrics in Italian and English.

The wives conspire to launch their intrigue against Falstaff: they decide to send Dame Quickly to Falstaff with a message advising the knight that Alice Ford has consented to his offer: thus, they will lure Falstaff to the Ford house and deal with him accordingly.

Unbeknownst to the wives, the men have contrived their own intrigue to trap Falstaff: Ford will meet Falstaff in disguise and with an assumed name; he will lure Falstaff to his house and exact unmerciful punishment on him.

Act II – Scene 1: At the Garter Inn

Bardolph and Pistol, with feigned sincerity, offer chest-beating penance, begging Falstaff to forgive them and restore them to his good graces.

Bardolph and Pistol: Siam pentiti e contriti

Molto piu lento
BARDOLFO and PISTOLA

The musical score is for a duet in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The tempo is 'Molto piu lento'. The lyrics are 'Siam pen - ti - ti e con - tri - ti / We are penitent and contrite.' The score includes vocal staves for both characters with their respective lyrics in Italian and English.

Dame Quickly is announced: she bows to Falstaff and addresses him as *reverenza*, “Your reverence,” a subtly mocking allusion which flatters the naïve knight to distraction.

Dame Quickly: Reverenza

Assai moderato
DAME QUICKLY



Dame Quickly advises Falstaff that Alice is a hapless woman: he has awakened her desires, and she is desperate for his love; a *Povera donna*, “Poor woman.” Quickly arranges for Falstaff to meet Alice at her home, but only when her violently jealous husband is away: *dalle due alle tre*, “Between two and three”; Falstaff repeats the time of the appointment with lecherous zeal.

Dame Quickly and Falstaff: Dalle due alle tre

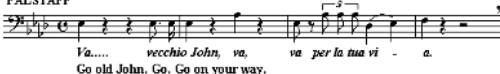
DAME QUICKLY and
FALSTAFF



After Dame Quickly departs, Falstaff expresses his self- satisfaction, confident that his personal charm and dashing elan will make his amorous adventure with Alice Ford a raging success.

Falstaff: Va vecchio John

Allegro sostenuto
FALSTAFF



Bardolph announces that a stranger desires to make Falstaff’s acquaintance: he is a *Signor Fontana*. (Mr. Ford in disguise: Mr. Brook in Shakespeare). He has expressed his gratitude by bringing Falstaff a gift: a large bottle of Cyprus.

Signor Fontana addresses Falstaff nobly, complimenting him that by reputation he is worldly, and as such, he will certainly be able to resolve his dilemma. He tells Falstaff that he desperately loves

the virtuous Mistress Ford, but so far, she has refused to heed his entreaties for her love. He suggests that if Falstaff would intervene on his behalf, romance her, melt her coldness, and win her favor, afterwards, she would be more receptive to him.

Signor Fontana easily convinces Falstaff, offering him gold as his reward if he would help him win Mistress Ford's favors, a compelling offer to the financially destitute knight: Falstaff erupts into ecstasy at the idea.

Falstaff: Caro signor Fontana!

FALSTAFF

The musical score for Falstaff's aria is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of two staves. The first staff has a long melisma over the word 'na!' in the Italian lyrics. The second staff continues the melody with a more rhythmic pattern.

Ca - ro si - gnor Fon - ta - na!
Dear Mr. Fountain!

Vo - glia - ro con voi più am - pia co - no - scen - za.
I should like to know you better.

Without hesitation, Falstaff excitedly accepts *Signor Fontana*'s commission, exacerbating Ford by telling him casually that he already has an appointment with Mistress Ford: *dalle due alle tre*, the afternoon hours when her husband is always away. Falstaff, exhilarated by his new role as intermediary for the despairing *Signor Fontana*, prides his new role: *Te lo cornifico*, "I am a cuckold for you." Falstaff excuses himself: he goes off to dress himself in his best attire.

Alone, Ford becomes perplexed and bewildered, unable to believe that his wife is deceptive and unfaithful: *È sogno*, "It is a dream." Then he erupts into rage, condemning the institution of marriage and demonic women: he vows his determination to seek vengeance.

Ford: O matrimonio: Inferno!

FORD

The musical score for Ford's aria is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of two staves. The first staff has a long melisma over the word 'no!' in the Italian lyrics. The second staff continues the melody with a more rhythmic pattern.

O ma - tri - mo - nio: In - fer - no!
Marriage: an Inferno!

Don - na: De - mo - nio!
Woman: Demons!

Falstaff returns, arrayed in his most exquisite finery. As both exit arm-in-arm, they exchange elaborate courtesies and exaggerated politeness: the knight is elated as he contemplates his forthcoming victory; Ford, behind feigned smiles, fumes in agonized rage.

Act II – Scene 2: A room in Ford's house

Dame Quickly provides a detailed report about her meeting with Falstaff to Mistresses Ford and Page, ridiculing Falstaff as she repeats the time of the appointment: *dalle due alle tre*.

The wives prepare for the arrival of their victim: servants place a large laundry basket near a window and are advised that when called, they are to empty the basket in the river. Nannetta interrupts the busy preparations to tearfully report to her mother that her father insists that she marry the repulsive Dr. Caius. Mistress Ford, sympathetic and understanding of her daughter's dilemma, assures her that she will intervene and do everything to contravert her father's wishes.

Falstaff is announced. All hide, leaving Mistress Alice Ford sitting calmly in a chair with her lute. Falstaff wastes no time in pursuing his courtship of Alice. As he woos her, he excuses his obesity: *Quand'ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk*, "When I was the page to the Duke of Norfolk," a boast about his youth when "I was so slim, so supple and so agile, that I could have slipped through a ring."

Falstaff: *Quand'ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk*

Allegro con brio

FALSTAFF



Just as the rogue knight's courtship of Alice is about to approach intimacy, Dame Quickly announces the imminent arrival of a distraught and agitated Meg Page: Falstaff quickly hides behind a screen. Meg announces that Ford is en route: he is insanely jealous, convinced that Alice has a lover concealed in the house, and is determined to expose him.

Ford arrives, accompanied by Fenton, Dr. Caius, Bardolph, Pistol, and other co-conspirators. Ford suspects that Falstaff is hiding in the laundry basket: he opens the basket, flings all the dirty linen over the floor, but does not find Falstaff. In frustration, he and the men proceed to search another part of the house where they expect to find the rakish knight.

After the men leave, Falstaff emerges from behind the screen, and the the women hurriedly conceal him in the large laundry basket, pile soiled clothes over him, and fasten the lid. During the commotion,

Nannetta and Fenton are unnoticed as they quietly hide behind a screen. A moment later, Ford and his cohorts return, this time more furious and more determined than ever to find the rakish knight.

As all stand frozen in silence, a loud kiss resounds from behind a screen: Ford is elated, convinced that he has finally caught the evasive Falstaff. The men advance toward the screen, prepared to pounce on the knight with full fury; the women's laughter muffles Falstaff's cries; he is suffocating from his confinement in the laundry basket.

The men overturn the screen, and to their amazement, they discover Fenton and Nannetta, the unsuspecting lovers stealing a moment of love, and oblivious to all the commotion surrounding them. Ford, frustrated again, becomes more enraged than ever, rebukes Fenton, and orders him from his house. Suddenly, Bardolph announces that he sees Falstaff outside: Ford and the men rush out in pursuit.

With the men gone, Mistress Ford summons her servants, who, with a huge effort, lift the laundry basket up to the window and throw it into the Thames which flows below. Ford returns, delighted as he witnesses Falstaff climbing clumsily from the water: their revenge achieved, all erupt into a riotous fanfare of triumph.

Act III – Scene 1: In front of the Garter Inn

As the sun sets, Falstaff returns to the Garter Inn: disgruntled, sad, disillusioned, bemoaning his disgrace and humiliation, and reviling the wickedness of the world. He orders a glass of hot wine, gulps it down, and then recounts the outrageous treatment he received from the Windsor wives. Gradually, the wine overcomes him, reviving his faith in himself: his spirits, courage, and ego become rejuvenated.

Suddenly, Dame Quickly appears before him: she bears another message from Alice, but Falstaff rebuffs her, her repeated *reverenzas* transforming him into a vindictive fury. Dame Quickly perseveres in restoring the knight's confidence in her: she appeals to Falstaff's vulnerability by assuring him of Alice's continuing affection for him.

Dame Quickly arranges another meeting between Falstaff and Mistress Ford: at midnight, they will meet at Herne's Oak in Windsor Park: he is to be disguised as the Black Huntsman, the "Black Knight" whose

ghost reputedly haunts the spot. Both enter the Inn to discuss their plans in a more private setting.

However, all the conspirators have been eavesdropping on their conversation: Alice, Meg, Nannetta, Ford, Fenton, and Dr. Caius. The plotters unite and decide they will exact their final revenge on Falstaff: they will terrify the unsuspecting Falstaff wearing the disguises of fairies, elves, and devils.

Ford and Dr. Caius conspire another intrigue. Caius will disguise himself in monk's robes, and Nannetta will be veiled in white: they will marry that very night, and Ford will bless the union. However, Dame Quickly has overheard their intrigue and vows to stop them: she runs off to advise Alice Ford and Nannetta about their plot.

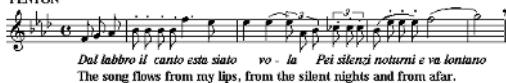
Act III – Scene 2: Herne's Oak in Windsor Park

On a moonlit night, all the conspirators appear in their disguises.

Fenton intones a serenade to Nannetta.

Fenton: Dal labbro il canto.

Dolcissimo
FENTON



Nannetta arrives and they embrace. Alice Ford and Dame Quickly are determined to upset Ford's plans to have Dr. Caius marry Nannetta: they give Fenton a monk's disguise to wear.

Falstaff appears, wearing two stag horns and an enormous cloak. After he solemnly counts the 12 bells of midnight, Nannetta is heard invoking the fairies in song.

Nannetta: Sul fil d'un soffio etesio

NANNETTA



Alice Ford appears, and Falstaff immediately makes awkward attempts to embrace and romance her: Alice dissuades him, cautioning him that Meg is close behind. Indeed, Meg suddenly appears to warn them that a pack of witches is pursuing her: Alice

flees in mock terror.

Nannetta and spirits appear, Meg disguised as a Green Nymph, Pistol as a satyr, and children dressed as imps and fairies. All dance around Falstaff: they thrash and kick him, and then condemn him as an “impure mortal,” all the while shouting *pizzica, pizzica*, “Pinch and bite him.” Falstaff is scared out of his senses and transforms into frightful fear: he believes he will be doomed if he gazes on supernatural beings, and throws himself face down on the ground, all the while promising that he will mend his ways.

Suddenly, Bardolph’s hood accidentally slips off. Falstaff recognizes him, and the entire charade is unmasked. Falstaff assumes a new stature, philosophically accepting his humiliation with rueful good humor. In Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives*, Falstaff laments, “I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass,” and in *Henry IV, Part One*, “they could not have had all this enjoyment without me,” and “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.”

Ford agreed to give his daughter, Nannetta, to Dr. Caius in marriage, but the women are determined to upset his plan. Dame Quickly disguises Bardolph as the Fairy Queen, dressing him in gown and veil: Dr. Caius joins the Fairy Queen (Bardolph), believing it is Nannetta. Fenton, wearing a monk’s disguise, is joined with Nannetta. Alice Ford urges her husband, unaware of the real identities of the parties, to bless both pairs in a double marriage ceremony. After the marriage, everyone unmask and the charade is exposed: the Fairy Queen, Bardolph in disguise, has been “married” to Dr. Caius, and the two young lovers, Fenton and Nannetta, have finally wed.

Ford accepts defeat graciously: Falstaff, humiliated, finds comfort that another has been the victim of ridicule.

All join in a tribute to man’s foolishness: *Tutto nel mondo è burla*, “Everything in the world is a joke.”

Falstaff: Tutto il mondo é burla.

Allegro brioso

FALSTAFF



Tutto nel mondo è burla. L'uom è nato burlone, burlone, burlone.
All the world is a joke. Man is born a fool.

Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise. Proverbs 17:28

Verdi.....and Falstaff

Giuseppe Verdi was a man possessing supreme artistic and human integrity: he dissolved his whole self into his art; he was a moralist, a humanitarian, and a man clearly sensitive to the injustices in the world, at times, considering himself a priest dedicated through his art, to awaken man to morality and humanity.

Temperamentally, Verdi epitomized Enlightenment ideals: he possessed a noble conception of humanity that abominated absolutism and deified civil liberty, struggling during his entire lifetime against tyranny in all its forms; personal, social, political, or ecclesiastical. For Verdi, the opera art form, a medium combining the potency of text with the emotive power of music, was his forum to convey profound human idealism.

Early in his career, he had become a national hero in his beloved Italy: his operas provided the musical inspiration for his country's struggle for unity and independence. From 1839 to 1851, he composed 16 operas, each of which contained underlying nationalistic themes glorifying liberty and freedom: symbolically and allegorically his operas portrayed the Italian people suffering under Austrian, French, and Papal domination and oppression. His music, imbedded with patriotic aspirations, became the anthems for Italian liberation: the letters of his name became an anagram for Italy's nationalistic aspirations; V E R D I stood for *Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia*, a call for the return of the exiled King Victor Emanuel to rule Italy. The mourners at his funeral erupted into the inspirational *Va pensiero* chorus of Hebrew slaves from his third opera, *Nabucco* (1842), a profound and appropriate tribute to an esteemed Italian patriot.

Verdi's early musical style mirrored the Italian *primo ottocento*, the early 19th century romantic period of *bel canto* that had become the trademark of his predecessors: Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. In the *bel canto* genre, vocal virtuosity dominated the art form, the dramatic effect rendered through singer's inflections and articulations: words and text were secondary to vocal art. *Bel canto* operas generally featured a series of arias and set-pieces which provided the characters' reflections, self-revelation, and introspection, all separated by recitative which

would provide the action. In those early traditions and conventions, the operas were not unified or integrated into an organic whole, either textually, musically, or dramatically: the ideal of music drama on the opera stage was yet to mature.

As the 1850s unfolded, Verdi entered a new phase in his career. With *bel canto* in decline, and his burning mission for Italy's independence an imminent *fait accompli*, he decided to abandon the heroic pathos and nationalistic themes of his early operas: he decided to seek more profound operatic subjects; bold subjects with greater dramatic and psychological depth that accented spiritual values, intimate humanity, and tender emotions. From this point forward, he became ceaseless in his goal to create an expressiveness and acute delineation of the human soul that had never before been realized on the opera stage. From the first opera in this "middle period," *Rigoletto* in 1851, to *Falstaff*, his last opera in 1893, his creative art flowered as his operatic inventions continually developed toward more intense dramatic qualities, an exceptional lyricism, a greater fusion between text and music, and a profound characterization of humanity.

Profound transformations occurred in opera as the second half of the nineteenth century unfolded: Gounod's *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliet* (1867) introduced the sublime traditions of the French *lyrique*; Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) portrayed the fiery passions of *verisme*; and Wagner reinvented opera with his music dramas; the first *Ring* operas of *Das Rheingold* (1854) and *Die Walkure* (1856), followed by *Tristan und Isolde* (1859), and *Die Meistersinger* (1867). Nevertheless Italian opera reigned supreme, and Verdi was its standard bearer and icon.

Beginning with Verdi's "middle period," he composed some of his best-loved works: *Rigoletto* (1851); *Il Trovatore* (1853); *La Traviata* (1853); *I Vespri Siciliani* (1855); *Simon Boccanegra* (1857); *Aroldo* (1857); *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859); *La Forza del Destino* (1862); *Don Carlos* (1867); and *Aïda* (1871).

When *Aïda* premiered in 1871, Verdi seemed to have created the crowning glory of his career: *Aïda* was a grand, grand opera, a magnificent blend of spectacle, dramatic action, gorgeous and intense melodic invention, and a portrayal of profound human

passion. After *Aïda*, he composed the *Requiem* (1874), a tribute to his beloved idol, Alessandro Manzoni, the renowned Italian poet, the writer of the classic novel, *I Promessi Sposi*.

In 1874, at the age of 61, Verdi felt that the time had come for him to fade from the world music scene and fulfill his life-long dream to retire to his farm at Sant'Agata. He also sensed that he had fallen from favor, isolated from the transformations and changes that were affecting contemporary opera: the avant-garde and modernists had accused him of being distinctly old-fashioned, passé, and out of touch with the times; the pan-Europeans had espoused Wagner's ideas and conceptions of music-drama; and the *giovanni scuola*, the blossoming "Young School" of Italian *verismo* composers, had introduced a new "truth" and realism to operatic subjects.

The great composer who had dominated Italian and international opera for much of the nineteenth century, felt that his star had fallen: as a result, he became despondent, bitter, melancholy, and frustrated. More importantly, he became disillusioned that Italian opera was losing its unique esteem and sinking beneath a tide of new aesthetic ideas that he was powerless to stem: in particular, Wagnerism.

Wagner had become a thorn in Verdi's later musical life; their differing operatic approaches resulting in a clash of operatic titans. Whereas Verdi's style focused on action and melody, Wagner's style was introspective, his later music dramas solidly integrating text and music that was enhanced through symphonic leitmotif development. The Wagnerian onslaught was so prevalent that Verdi's influential publisher, Giulio Ricordi, in opposition, turned the city of Milan into a virtual anti-Wagnerian stronghold.

Sixteen years after *Aïda*, in 1887, the seventy-four year-old composer was in retirement and relishing his golden years: it was the time when the fires of ambition were supposed to extinguish, and the time when most people become spectators in life rather than its stars. But despite his age, Verdi was lured out of his self-imposed retirement: he proceeded to astonish the musical world with his twenty-seventh opera, *Otello*, demonstrating beyond all doubt that the fierce creative spirit that was burning within him was not only very much alive, but indeed a glorious living genius that still glowed brightly. Verdi's success

with *Otello* epitomized the words of Robert Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra: "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be." Indeed, with *Otello*, Verdi overturned the equation and transformed his old age into a glory.

Otello was an Italian opera to the core: it unequivocally challenged Verdi's contemporary critics. *Otello* became the Italian *music of the future*, a quintessential music drama composed in the Italian style: it possessed the essence of Italian opera; melody, lyricism, and vocal beauty. On the one hand, *Otello* represented a powerful demonstration of Verdi's incessant creative energy and his capacity for self-renewal and continuing artistic maturity, but on the other hand, it single-handedly reestablished the supremacy and quality of the Italian operatic style.

The greatness of the opera art form is that it integrates words with music. Words provoke thought, but words combined with music, provoke feelings, emotions, and passions: words sublimely fused with music can express what language alone had exhausted. Verdi saturated *Otello* with a magnificent blend of melody together with swift dramatic action: his music endows the tragedy with melodramatic intensity and powerful human passions as the hero's sensibilities change rapidly as he heads towards the abyss of pathological destruction. Nevertheless, *Otello's* internal structural style retains past traditions: the opera indeed contains conventional arias, duets, and ensembles, but they are modernized in style and texture, their finite conception providing a profound musico-dramatic continuity.

In *Otello*, the structural unit of the *act* takes precedence over the *scene*, and as such, the opera contains an almost seamless stream of dramatic continuity. Librettist Boito's passionate and powerful words are all fused and integrated with Verdi's music into an organic unity, providing the opera with an unrelenting pace, drive, and compulsion, all of which serve to emphasize emotions and passions, and deepen psychological confrontations.

Verdi sculpts confrontational situations with clear and vivid words which stand out in relief: his ideal of the *parola scenica*, "by which I mean the word that clinches the situation and makes it absolutely clear...": quintessential examples, Amneris's *Trema vil schiava*, "Tremble vile slave" in *Aida*, and *Otello's* passionate explosion of vengeance, *Sangue, sangue, sangue*, "Blood, blood, blood."

Otello and *Falstaff*, Verdi's last operas, represent a logical evolution in the composer's development. These final masterpieces were written by a composer very different from the composer of *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*, *Don Carlo* or *Aida*. Nevertheless, both operas represented the *Italian music of the future*: each was a culmination of the composer's development and evolution toward an integration of words and music; music drama, or sung speech; however, at all times they bore the unique signature of the Italian opera style, and specifically, Giuseppe Verdi.

With *Otello*, Verdi ordained the future of the Italian lyric theater: it became his own conception of Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk*, or *total artwork*, certainly without artistic compromise to his genius or integrity. Verdi's heirs, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Ponchielli, Cilea, Giordano, and Puccini, would continue the great tradition, most in the short-lived *verismo* genre. Nevertheless, all of their works would be saturated with a profound dramatic synthesis of words and music, all driven by the essence of the Italian opera style: profound melody and lyricism.

The evolution of *Otello*, and ultimately his final masterpiece, *Falstaff*, owes its origins to Giulio Ricordi, Verdi's dynamic publisher who foresaw the splendid possibilities of a flowering artistic partnership between the great composer and the equally renowned poet, Arrigo Boito. Nevertheless, creating that collaboration was a long and stormy operatic event in itself: Verdi and Boito were in the throes of a love-hate relationship that was saturated with intense emotions and passions. Verdi and Boito were incomparably diverse in terms of age, background, and temperament. Verdi came from humble peasant origins, and in personality and character, was extremely practical rather than philosophical. Boito was half-Polish, a man of letters, an opera composer, and a musician. But more importantly, he was one of those late nineteenth century pan-Europeans who had idealized visions about the future of contemporary art.

Boito considered contemporary Italian opera in decay and degeneration: he launched an active crusade to modernize the art form and bring it painfully into the vanguard of modern European culture. He became associated with the *Scapigliatura*, "the Unkempt

Ones,” a group of *avant-guardists* who were not only iconoclasts, but dedicated to ridding Italian art of all of its earlier traditions. Through satire and derision, the *scapigliati* ridiculed Italian opera, envisioning its redemption in Wagner’s *music of the future*: it was the onset of the nineteenth century clash of opera titans; Verdi vs. Wagner; Italian opera vs. German music drama.

As a composer, Boito’s seminal opera, *Mefistofele*, premiered at La Scala in 1868. Boito’s music made no significant impression on Verdi who deemed its musical and dramatic integration too Wagnerian, its orchestration too heavy, and its use of leitmotifs rather amateurish. In particular, he felt that *Mefistofele* lacked essential musical development, commenting that it was “as though the composer had renounced all form of melody for fear of losing touch with the text.”

Contrarily, Boito was an antagonist who doubted if Verdi could continue to play a role in the future of Italian opera. Boito speculated about a new champion who would redeem Italian opera: “Perhaps the man is already born who will elevate the art of music in all its chaste purity above that altar now befouled like the walls of a brothel.” Whether Boito’s bombast was directed to Verdi or not, he assumed that he was the specific target of Boito’s vicious insults: the enemy of Italian art. As a result, Boito’s presumed affront against Verdi remained an obstacle to Ricordi’s efforts to unite the composer and poet, and their historical feud fed Verdi’s mistrust, and continued to undermine Ricordi’s dream of their future collaboration.

Nevertheless, Verdi’s personal reservations about Boito’s ideals and musical talent precluded his respect and admiration for his literary talent. In 1862, in Paris, the twenty year-old Boito, then a music student, had the honor of meeting both Rossini and Verdi. Verdi was impressed by Boito and commissioned him to write the text for the *Inno delle nazioni*, “The Hymn of the Nations,” a work that received prominence during World War II when Arturo Toscanini performed it copiously: it represented a testament to allied opposition to Italian fascism.

As a librettist, Boito consistently believed that the key ingredient of music drama was to achieve fluidity between its words and music: a continuous and swift succession of dramatic confrontations rather than patterns of reflection. As such, he strove to achieve greater realism and naturalism in a form of

sung drama: opera would approach the rhythms and voice inflections that would be imitative of spoken theater.

Boito's primary strengths were his ability to simplify a complicated plot. He was a writer with a varied poetic language, a brilliant affinity for obscure polysyllables, and a keen sense of balance and proportion. Boito was the librettist for a number of all but forgotten operas, the single exception, his text written for Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876), the opera's plot was loosely derived from Hugo's *Angelo*. Boito changed the story's venue to Venice in order to introduce local color, however, it possessed a flamboyant melodramatic style; bold and far from subtle characterizations that faithfully mirrored Hugo.

Boito frequently wrote under the pseudonym *Tobio Gorrio*, an anagram of his name. Of his many literary achievements, he was instrumental in introducing German works to Italy, translating German *lieder* into Italian, among them Wagner's *Wesendonk Lieder*, as well as an Italian translation of Wagner's *Rienzi*.

Giulio Ricordi, now in the role of peacemaker, wisely understood a poet's ability to aid and stimulate the thoughts of a composer. In effect, Ricordi resolved to create a Verdi-Boito partnership similar to other classic composer-librettist collaborations: Lorenzo da Ponte with Mozart, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal with Richard Strauss. Ricordi astutely recognized that before Verdi and Boito could proceed toward the infinitely great task of *Otello*, they needed a "trial balloon," an opportunity to work together and test the chemistry of their relationship.

Ricordi initiated a series of intrigues that were coupled with diplomacy and tact. Boito had been working on his own opera, *Nerone*, and Ricordi learned that Verdi also had expressed interest in that same subject for a new opera. Ricordi persuaded Boito to magnanimously offer to relinquish the libretto to Verdi, however, Verdi was still smoldering from Boito's earlier assault against Italian art, and Ricordi's attempt to create a Verdi-Boito collaboration on *Nerone* never materialized.

A more likely opportunity for a "trial balloon" was floating on the horizon. Verdi had been unhappy with the final libretto of *Simon Boccanegra* (1857),

and he agreed to test Boito's talent and urged him to submit revisions. The results were immensely satisfying to Verdi: Boito added the Council Chamber scene to *Simon Boccanegra*, and ecstatic with the results, concluded that Boito had redeemed his opera.

Poet and composer became cautiously reconciled, and the door was open for their possible collaboration on *Otello*. Verdi showed cautious enthusiasm for the project, hesitant to affront the venerated Rossini who had composed his *Otello* in 1816. Nevertheless, when Boito submitted his libretto for *Otello* to Verdi, its quality severely impressed him and sealed his collaboration with Verdi, a friendship and relationship Boito eventually regarded as the climax of his artistic life.

Verdi had a life-long veneration for Shakespeare, his singular and most popular source of inspiration, far more profound than the playwrights Goldoni, Goethe, Schiller, Hugo, and Racine. Verdi said of Shakespeare: "He is a favorite poet of mine whom I have had in my hands from earliest youth and whom I read and reread constantly."

Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies are well-suited to the opera medium: their themes are heavily saturated and dominated by extravagant passions involving love, hate, jealousy, and revenge. Yet transforming Shakespeare's theatrical art and poetic language into opera is intrinsically challenging because his works depend on lightning verbal intricacies, word-play, wit, and eloquent speech; an art driven by powerful words, and perhaps the reason that many operatic adaptations are far removed from the original.

Nevertheless, three of Verdi's operas have assured Shakespeare a place in Verdi's operatic canon: *Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. Throughout Verdi's entire career, he contemplated his dream of bringing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to the operatic stage: both projects, ambitions that never reached fruition. In later life, Boito submitted a sketch to Verdi for *King Lear*; but he became deterred by its text's intricacy and bold extremities, hesitating, and considering himself too old to undertake what he considered a monumental challenge.

Macbeth, Verdi's seventh opera, premiered early in his career in 1847 and was a rousing musico-dramatic success. In the opera, Verdi elevated the role

of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters to the Witches, capturing a supernatural splendor in their music. In the title role, he introduced his new "high baritone," a new voice type that provided heretofore unknown possibilities for vocal expression: it possessed greater range, and as such, brought other vocal characterizations into sharper contrast and focus. Lady Macbeth became the dominant character in the opera: her Sleepwalking scene becoming a climax of the work that transformed Shakespeare's scene of recollection into a moment of grand operatic assertion.

Verdi composed *Otello* almost a half century after *Macbeth*. Verdi considered Shakespeare's *Othello* a high tragedy with consummate colossal power, perhaps the best constructed and most vividly theatrical of all of his dramas, and a work that essentially progresses with no sub-plots, no episodes that fail to bear on the central action, and one in which all of its action focused toward its central dramatic core and purpose.

Boito's challenge in writing the libretto for *Otello* involved the inherent necessity to condense and transform the drama's complex elements into broader and simpler contexts. Shakespeare's hero is multifaceted: he possesses a nihilistic "nature" combined with combinations of the heroic, the demonic, and the innocently pure. The Verdi-Boito *Otello* became an ambivalent, two-sided hero: he is a man of lofty, heroic nobility, and then transforms into a psychopathic, collapsing soul, who plunges into exaggerated savagery. Verdi's music emphasizes the conflict of a defeated hero: Otello is a courageous man of great deed whose ultimate tragedy becomes his loss of glory and honor. Boito's prose portrays Otello as a profound, soul-searching man who suffers from internal psychological conflict, a struggling victim who has lost love and respect, and self-destructs from hubris, pride, and arrogance. Verdi's music is saturated with glory and grandeur, and many times, directly opposed to Boito's words which express the hero's deeper, psychological turmoil

For *Otello's* libretto, Boito challenged Shakespeare's 3500 lines of prose, condensing them to 700 lines, a task he brilliantly achieved while at the same time retaining the complete essence of the original drama. Boito omitted Shakespeare's Act I Venetian scene in which Brabantio, Desdemona's father, accuses Othello of seducing his daughter, Othello eloquently defending himself: "She loved me

for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them.” Boito salvaged Shakespeare’s magnificent prose by ingeniously incorporating its essence into the intensely romantic and passionate Act I *Love Duet* between Otello and Desdemona. There, Otello speaks of his pride in winning Desdemona’s love, *E tu m’amavi le miei sventure*, Boito altering the pronoun “she” to “you” so that in the opera text, Otello’s words to Desdemona are, “You loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved you that you did pity them.” Desdemona responds, repeating the phrase in the first person, “I loved you for the dangers you had passed....”

The opera portrays the hero’s agonizing path to jealousy, his doubts about himself and his marriage, and his road to psychopathic savagery. In Verdi’s opera, Desdemona’s characterization is transformed from Shakespeare’s original: she is not characterized as Shakespeare’s brave and willful woman who dared to enter into a secret and unorthodox marriage. Desdemona is transformed into a naïve image of purity, innocence, and utterly devoted love, surrounded by music that bears an almost saintly connotation, a semi-divine, angelic image that is completed by the insertion of her Ave Maria in Act IV.

The opera builds incessantly on Iago’s poison, his “green monster” which Verdi provides as a haunting musical leitmotif. Iago is the demonic figure of the drama who forms a striking contrast to Otello’s heroism and Desdemona’s purity. Iago’s diabolic motivations are brilliantly established in this Verdi-Boito creation, composer and librettist adding a completely un-Shakespearean Credo; the laws of heresy in Shakespeare’s day forbade specific Christian references on stage.

Shakespeare’s tragedy of *Othello* provided Verdi with the theatrical arena to breathe life into the moral issue of good and evil, what he believed was humanity’s archetypal, eternal moral struggle. The virtues of good are represented by Desdemona, the faithful, virtuous, and loyal wife of Otello: its counterforce is Iago, the epitome of psychopathic evil. Otello himself becomes the battlefield where the forces of good and evil collide and conflict. In the end, the essence of the tragedy is that the forces of evil become the victors: evil claims the warrior’s soul.

Verdi assured a place for Shakespeare in the opera house with his *Macbeth* (1847), but most assuredly,

with his tour de force which triumphantly premiered 40 years later: *Otello*. After the success of *Otello*, Verdi became rejuvenated, inspired, and motivated forward. During his entire life he contemplated a comedy: he had found his muse in Boito, a man who had struggled with artistic dualism throughout his life; literature vs. music. Nevertheless, literature proved his quintessential talent: it was Boito's great collaboration with Verdi that would achieve his artistic immortality in the history of opera. Boito and Verdi had yet another Shakespearean gem to bring to the opera stage: *Falstaff*.

Fifty-three years had passed since Verdi had composed a comic opera. His second opera, *Un Giorno di Regno*, (1840), "A King for a Day," also titled, *Il Finto Stanislao*, "The False Stanislaus," was his only comic work until his last opera, *Falstaff*.

Un Giorno di Regno was composed at great speed and was an unqualified disaster, withdrawn after only one performance. The action of the opera takes place near Brest during the early 18th century. Belfiore, a Parisian officer, poses as King Stanislaus of Poland in order to protect the King from harm, acting as a decoy while the real Stanislaus attempts to secure his throne. Disguised as the King, Belfiore visits Baron Kelbar's castle and helps his daughter, Giulietta, unite with her true lover, Edoardo, by removing her unwanted betrothed, Edoardo's uncle, the state Treasurer, La Rocca. At the same time, Belfiore reconciles with his true love, the Marchesa del Poggio, who thought he had abandoned her.

Stylistically, *Un Giorno di Regno* is a sentimental, light comedy possessing strong influences of Rossini and Donizetti. In retrospect, the opera must be judged as an unfortunate interlude in Verdi's progress, even though stylistically, it contains glimpses of that vital individuality that was to emerge so decisively in his future works. In contemporary reviews, as well as in Verdi's later recollections, its failure had as much to do with the poor quality of the performance as with the poor libretto, and, its underlying music.

The opera's failure coincided with traumatic events in Verdi's life. Verdi's two children had recently died, and in June 1840, three months before the completion and premiere of *Un Giorno di Regno*, his wife Margherita died. Verdi made every attempt possible to be released from his contract, but was

forced to return to Milan from Busetto in the midst of his terrible sorrows and oversee the production of his comic opera.

Comic opera, *opera buffa*, required delicacy and grace, musical and dramatic qualities Verdi seemed to be lacking at that time. There is little imaginative scoring, and he found difficulty sustaining numbers that were so emphatically separated by unaccompanied or dry recitative: *secco*.

This attempt at *opera buffa* was clumsy: the public whistled and jeered, and critics wrote with varying degrees of pity and contempt, considering the work an insipid comedy. Nevertheless, some critics were compassionate, recognizing Verdi's tragic personal circumstances: the young composer had been forced to complete a work of gaiety at a time when he was heartbroken and experiencing a cruel and unexpected catastrophe that had struck his innermost soul. In effect, *Un Giorno di Regno*, Verdi's second operatic venture, fell far short of the expectations aroused by the first, *Oberto*. Ironically, five years after its failed premiere, the comedy opera that had been hissed off the La Scala stage became a surprising success at the comedy theater, Teatro San Benedetto, in Venice, and later at San Carlo, Naples, in 1859. Both *Oberto* and *Un Giorno di Regno* are rarely performed in the standard repertory of today's contemporary opera theaters: when performed, it is more for curiosity rather than operatic merit.

One can only speculate as to how much of the composer's bereavement or the pressures of time contributed to the comedy's failure. Nevertheless, its failure represented a bitter moment in Verdi's career, and the wound took a long time to heal. Ironically, with the phenomenal success of his first opera, *Oberto*, Verdi had literally become "King for a Day": with his opera actually titled "King for a Day," it now seemed to be all over. In bitterness and resentment, Verdi swore he would never compose a comic opera again, but more emphatically, he was ready to quit opera composing entirely.

Nevertheless, Verdi was lured back to his destiny after he was presented with the libretto for *Nabucco*: he stared at the prose lines of the Hebrew slaves, *Va pensiero sull'ali dorati*, and became struck by them. In the end, Verdi's operatic pen could not be silenced. In later reminiscence, he said, "With this opera (*Nabucco*) my artistic career may be said to have begun."

Verdi's ambition to compose a comedy haunted him throughout his career, however, he never found the libretto that would stimulate his muse: he indeed wanted to vindicate the failure of *Un Giorno di Regno*, and certainly, he wanted to prove that he was capable of composing a comedy. Verdi would fulfill his dream, and that illusive comedy would indeed become his final work: a comedy based on the works of his favorite poet: William Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Sir John Falstaff, appears in four of Shakespeare's plays: he is perhaps one of the most comic character creations in all English literature.

Shakespeare reputedly modeled his character, Falstaff, after Sir John Oldcastle, a soldier and martyred leader. In his first version of *Henry IV, Part One* (1597), Shakespeare indeed originally called this comic character Sir John Oldcastle, but he was later forced to change the name after Oldcastle's descendants, prominent at the court, protested and threatened litigation.

Shakespeare then turned to Sir John Fastolf, 1378-1459, an English career soldier who fought and made his fortune in the second phase of the Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337-1453). Fastolf served with distinction against the French at Agincourt (1415), Verneuil (1424), and in the "Battle of the Herrings" at Rouvay (1429), where he is reputed to have used herring barrels to shield his troops. Later, after his forces were defeated at Patay (1429), he was accused of cowardice but was subsequently cleared of the charge. In 1440 he retired from military service.

Shakespeare was able to document much of Fastolf's life and irascible personality through papers he left with a Norfolk friend. Fastolf was an acquisitive man, utterly ruthless in his business dealings, and being childless, left his possessions to the University of Oxford which used them as their financial source for their new Magdalen College.

Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One* (1597), is the second in a sequence of four history plays: *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part One*, *Henry IV, Part Two*, and *Henry V*, each play dealing with an aspect of the power struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York. By creating Sir John Falstaff (Fastolf), Shakespeare added an element of comedy to the somber tone of the plays.

The history plays follow the deposition of King Richard II: they are set in a kingdom plagued with rebellion, treachery, and shifting alliances. The two parts of *Henry IV* focus on Prince Hal, later to become Henry V, his development and maturity from young spendthrift, idler, and loafer, to prudent ruler. As *Part One* begins, Henry IV laments the cowardice and frivolous life of his son, who, with his thriving rogue cronies, the fat and boisterous Falstaff and his red-nosed sidekick, Bardolph, drink and play childish pranks at Mistress Quickly's inn at Eastcheap.

In the next segment, *Henry IV, Part Two*, Prince Hal aids his father in war and proves his valor in battle. He kills the rebel, Hotspur, in personal combat and compassionately laments the wasteful death of his noble opponent while his cowardly companion, Falstaff, lies on the ground nearby feigning death. After Prince Hal becomes King Henry V, he transforms, rejecting Falstaff and chiding him for his malingering and drunkenness, and ultimately banishing him.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600), Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff appears again, this time, resurrected yet reduced to a dissolute and clowning character, and an opportunistic seducer involved in comic and romantic misadventures. According to unsupported tradition, *Merry Wives* was written by Shakespeare at the express command of Queen Elizabeth I who had wished to see Falstaff in love.

In *Merry Wives*, Falstaff attempts to seduce Mistresses Page and Ford, two married women whose financial substance he covets. He shares his plan with his comrades, Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym, but after Falstaff discharges the services of Pistol and Nym, they betray him and reveal his scheme to the husbands of Mistresses Page and Ford.

After the wives compare their identical love letters from Falstaff, they resolve to trick the "greasy knight." Falstaff is twice humiliated by the wives: first he is dumped into a muddy ditch, and later, with the women disguised as witches, he is beaten. The trickery of the two women also serves to frustrate the jealous behavior of Master Ford.

The play's secondary plot concerns the wooing of the Pages' charming daughter, Anne, whose affection is the object of 3 rival suitors: Dr. Caius, Slender, and Fenton. With great comic effect, all three suitors employ Mistress Quickly, Caius' servant, to

act as an intermediary to argue their case to young Anne. Slender is favored by Master Page, the latter devising an intrigue so that he can elope with his daughter: Mistress Page favors Caius as a son-in-law and devises a similar plan.

The final scene is a masquerade in which the plotters fully trick and humiliate Falstaff. Falstaff expects a rendezvous with Alice Ford and appears in a ridiculous disguise complete with stag's horns. The women and their husbands appear as witches and frighten and tease Falstaff. The marriage plans conceived by the Page's become foiled when Anne elopes with the suitor of her choice, Fenton. In the end, all identities are revealed, and in an atmosphere of good humor, Fenton is welcomed into the Page family and Falstaff is forgiven.

Many scholars are chagrined at Shakespeare's denigration of the courageous *Henry IV* Falstaff character into the ridiculed and humiliated Falstaff of *Merry Wives*: in the latter, his nobility becomes transformed into a pale reflection of his former self, a victim of indignities and an almost sado-masochistic farce that erupts into a pathetic carnival of humiliation and rejection, causing him to be baffled, duped, beaten, burnt, pricked, mocked, insulted, and perhaps worst of all, repentant.

Verdi's muse was essentially a tragic muse, but composing a comedy opera was the fulfillment of a cherished ambition. Two years after the miraculous success of *Otello*, the directors of La Scala suggested that he compose a comic opera based on Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, but Verdi refused, content to remain at Sant'Agata and occupy himself with the life of a farmer and country affairs: in particular, he was preoccupied with the building of a hospital, reducing rents on his farms, improving properties with new irrigation systems, and in general, combating the depression in his area by developing ways to provide more employment.

Boito sent him the synopsis of a proposed libretto to be called *Falstaff*, based primarily on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Immediately, Verdi's enthusiasm was aroused: he had finally found the comic libretto that he had dreamed of all of his life. Boito's inventions enthralled and dazzled him and he could not suppress his delight: "What a joy to be able to say to the public, Here we are again! Come

and see us!" The 80 year-old composer became rejuvenated and resilient, the idea of *Falstaff* breathing new life into his creative spirits. Boito would become Verdi's catalyst and provide him with that necessary emotional scope to compose his music.

Nevertheless, Verdi had reservations and concerns about his advancing age, the fatigue he would necessarily encounter, and his frequent bouts of depression that had arisen after the deaths of so many of his dear friends. Boito became Verdi's gadfly, admonishing him that becoming immersed in laughter and comedy would exhilarate his mind, body, and spirit: a tragedy causes its author genuinely to suffer because one's thoughts undergo suggestions of sadness which render the nerves morbidly sensitive: "There is only one way to end your career more splendidly than with *Otello*, and that is to end it with *Falstaff*." Boito reassured him that with *Falstaff*, composed while in his 80th year, he would prove to his critics, among them the now dead Rossini, that he could write with great wit, and with an almost Mozartian subtlety. Verdi's confidence began to grow. After all, he had proven in the past that he could enliven tragedy with comic elements: there are indeed comic inventions in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and in *La Forza del Destino*, there is the quasi-comic Fra Melitone character.

There had been other operatic attempts at Shakespeare's irascible rogue knight: Antonio Salieri's *Falstaff* (1799); Balfe's *Falstaff* (1838); and from Verdi's supposed arch-rival, Otto Nicolai's *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* (1849), a bubbling and sparkling Rossini-like *opera buffa*.

Verdi was ready to attack comedy: he had all the ammunition he needed; Shakespeare and Boito. Boito not only served to rejuvenate Verdi, he infected him. He provided Verdi with a concentrated, highly literary, beautifully balanced and paced, sparkling comic libretto: Verdi became inspired to illuminate the story of "Fatpaunch" in music, proving again that he possessed ingenious technical skill and musical inventiveness.

Verdi knew from experience that only a librettist with Boito's intellectual range could understand and transcend Shakespeare's nuances in order to transform *Merry Wives* for the operatic medium. For

Verdi, the essence of the comic Falstaff character was to have him emerge in rich magnificence and splendor: only Boito, with his extraordinary fondness and talent for word-play and irony, was capable of achieving those results.

In meeting those expectations, Boito took many liberties with the Falstaff character. He adapted and synthesized his underlying story scenario from both *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the *Henry IV* plays, extracting the poor jokes, and turning bad ones into excellent verse.

Verdi accepted Boito's libretto almost without alteration. Verdi was enthralled with the characterization of Falstaff: Falstaff was an archetype, a loveable fat scoundrel and rogue who amusingly indulges in mischief; the humorous keystone of the plot, the fat knight's assault on the virtue of two rich tradesmen's wives with a view to helping himself to their husbands' money.

Verdi made it clear that Falstaff would be quite different from any opera he had ever written: *Falstaff* was the comedy he had wanted to compose all his life but had been prevented from for lack of the right libretto; with Falstaff, above all, he would make himself laugh.

Boito, as he did in *Otello*, faced the challenge of simplifying the play's structure: he had to produce a leaner plot that contained no unnecessary characters that would clutter the action. His basic plot retains the two major episodes from Shakespeare's *Merry Wives*: the laundry basket scene, and the intrigue and disguise in the forest scene. However, with much persuasion from Verdi, he charmingly develops the romantic subplot of the lovers, Nannetta and Fenton, a romance that brings the plot into the world of opera: their world is one of stolen love that Verdi underscored with beautiful love duets, prompting Boito to describe the Nannetta-Fenton episodes as "sprinkled like sugar on a tart."

In paring down the number of characters, Boito dispensed with Justice Shallow and his stupid nephew, Sir Hugh Evans, Nym, and even Mr. Page. As a result, Mistress Page takes the spotlight as a freelance intriguer, while Nannetta (Anne Page) becomes one of the Ford family, her two unwelcome suitors becoming just Fenton and Dr. Caius. Boito's excisions and alterations are almost without exception

beautifully judged, causing the plot to move forward with a tighter and more focused cast of characters.

In many respects, *Falstaff*, a fusion of three Shakespeare plays, possesses more subtlety than its models. Shakespeare, particularly in *Merry Wives*, provides a comedy involving much trickery, deception, and a series of humiliations, its farcical episodes containing threads of malice and cruelty. Verdi's opera offers a more rambunctious and happier world than Shakespeare in which deception and trickery seem to be relished for the sheer joy of intriguing and plotting. In the opera, no one seems to take Falstaff's offences very seriously: Falstaff is not so much the victim of deceit and trickery as the cause of fun, frolic, and laughter, all of which ultimately resolves into forgiveness, tolerance, and a world full of loving harmony.

In *Falstaff's* music, Verdi most assuredly departs from traditions that had been the cornerstone of his art. *Falstaff's* musical focus is not on extensive thematic development of conventional arias, duets and trios, or in ensembles packed with drama, emotion, or psychological development: those conventions are sparse throughout the score, with the rare exceptions of Ford's aria, *O sogno*, and the short romantic duets between Nannetta and Fenton.

In character, *Falstaff's* music is light and airy, bubbly, delicate, episodic, and possesses an almost seamless accumulation of clever, fragmentary musical inventions, all of which dutifully follow the mercurial quality of the libretto. Verdi proves that he is a supreme craftsman: the music possesses a combination of brilliance, classical purity, gracefulness, clarity of construction, and tenderness; its explosions are humorous and witty, never extravagant or vulgar.

The score, particularly in the ensembles, is saturated with *scherzos* (a sprightly and humorous compositional form in rapid tempo), and *fugues* (two or more themes developed with a continuous interweaving of their vocal parts). Most of the *scherzos* and *fugues* appear during the concerted finales of each act: these comic inventions are composed with brevity, clarity, and organic unity, requiring excellent acting-singers who possess clear diction and deft verbal and musical attack in order to

convey their comic essence.

Verdi scatters a profusion of ingenious melodic inventions throughout the score, fragments that become memorable melodic leitmotifs: Falstaff's *Honor* monologue; Quickly's absurd *reverenza*, *povera donna*, and her interplay with Falstaff on *dalle due alle tre*; and Falstaff's explosion of ecstasy, *Caro Signor Fontana*. But there are indeed arias: Falstaff's endearingly smug aria of self-love, *Va vecchio John*, his wooing of Alice Ford, *Quand'èrò paggio del Duca di Norfolk*, and Ford's jealous explosion, *È sogno*, a serious introspective moment in which he explores the dramatic ambiguity of his feelings.

Falstaff is a wonder of the opera world, an outpouring from a true master of tragic works who ended his career with an ingenious masterpiece that has taken its rightful place beside other great comic operas: Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

Falstaff's success is a tribute to Verdi's genius and versatility. It is an opera that possesses the beauty, subtlety, wit, and wisdom of Mozart's three great Italian operas, and an almost Beethoven-like chamber music delicacy in its orchestral expression.

Shaw noted that "It is not often that a man's strength is so immense that he can remain an athlete after bartering half of it to old age for experience; but the thing happens occasionally, and need not so greatly surprise us in Verdi's case."

The premiere of *Falstaff* took place at La Scala almost six years to the day of *Otello's* premiere. Inevitably, it became an immediate and huge triumph, a national and international sensation. Verdi was delighted that it escaped being called Wagnerian, although today it is spoken of in the same breath as Wagner's considerably heavier and longer comedy, *Die Meistersinger*. Richard Strauss, a man who had for many years worshipped at the Bayreuth shrine, declared *Falstaff* to be one of the masterpieces of all time.

After Verdi completed the final act, he accompanied it with a note to Ricordi, paraphrasing a passage in Boito's libretto:

Tutto è finito, Va, va, vecchio John. Cammina per la tua via fin che tu puoi. Vicertente tupe di briccone eternamente vero sotto Maschera diversa in ogni tempo, in ogni luogo. Va, va, cammina, cammina, Addio.

“It is all finished. Go, go, old John. Go on your way for as long as you can. Amusing rogue, forever true beneath the masks you wear in different times and places. Go, go, on your way. Farewell.”

Falstaff possesses timeless humor and gaiety: it represents the golden warmth and ironic laughter of Verdi's old age; a magnificent operatic comic farewell from the master of operatic tragedy.

