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Renzo and Lucia at Det Kongelige Teater

From Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi* (1827) to Hans Christian Andersen's operetta *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* (1849)

In her *A Theory of Adaptation* Linda Hutcheon explains that the most common type of adaptation is that “from the telling to the showing mode”, “from print to performance”.¹ This process of adaptation requires at least two main stages: the adaptation of a printed text, as for instance a novel, into a dramatised version of this text and, subsequently, the adaptation of the printed dramatic text into a convincing performance. In this article I will explore the processes of adaptation from the telling to the showing mode analysing the case of Hans Christian Andersen's (1805–1875) operetta *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen*, which was published and staged at the Det Kongelige Teater in Copenhagen in 1849. This operetta is in fact based on some chapters of the famous Italian historical novel *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed) by Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) published in 1827. In order to examine the process of transformation from novel to operetta, I will start by analysing Andersen's adaptation of Manzoni's novel into a sixteen-page libretto. Why did Andersen choose an Italian text as the basis for the plot of his operetta? How is a complex novel such as *I promessi sposi* made into light operetta material? What is omitted or expanded? How is the love story of Renzo and Lucia represented? I will then move on to analyse the function within the operetta of the music and songs composed by Franz Gläser (1798–1861) and to reconstruct August Bournonville's (1805–1879) arrangements for the scenography and choreography of *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* at Det Kongelige Teater. How was the stage setting created? What dance was added to make the Italian setting of the operetta more believable? On the whole, what made this adaptation a success when it was performed twelve times between January 1849 and March 1852?

Before examining the process of adaptation from novel to operetta, it is necessary to place *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* within its wider context. Italian and Italianate plays and operas had become a staple of the repertoire at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Italy managed to infiltrate the Danish dramatic scene through a series of different channels and traditions. The first one was that of the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of professional theatre based on improvisation, set scenarios and well-known Italian masks. Originated in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, the *commedia dell'arte* spread to other European countries in the course of the following century.² *Commedia dell'arte* troupes reached the Nordic countries, Denmark in particular, at the end of the seventeenth century and brought with them their set of stock plots and characters, which later became an important part of the programme of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. A range of costumes of *commedia dell'arte* types, such as that of Harlequin, were in fact kept, ready for use, in the wardrobe of Det Kongelige Teater.³ Linked to this tradition is the Italianate or Italian-like drama which developed in other European countries, particularly in France, and which appeared on Danish stages in the mid-eighteenth century.⁴ From the end of the seventeenth century Italian opera was also popular.⁵ Moreover, since his arrival in Copenhagen August Bournonville contributed to enrich Italian dramatic representations with his Italian ballets and choreographies. Two of his most famous works are *Festen i Albano* (1839), created to celebrate the return of the Danish sculptor Albert Bertel Thorvaldsen (1776–1844) from Italy to Denmark, and *Napoli* (1841).⁶ The relationship between Italy and the Danish dramatic tradition was made even stronger by the presence in Copenhagen of Italian actors, theatre directors and choreographers, such as Vincenzo Galeotti (1733–1816) and Giuseppe Casorti (1749–1826).⁷

Italy and Italians were thus a significant part of the Danish dramatic tradition. The first half of the nineteenth century was characterised by a general admiration towards Italian opera and dramatic pieces about Italy, an admiration that later in the century was sometimes made fun of, as it is documented by two caricatures published in the Danish satiric newspaper *Corsaren* in 1842. The two pictures by lithographer A. Flinch represent the same scene of a drama performed by 'Italienske Italiener' and 'Danske Italiener'. The Italian Italians look extremely agitated: the woman is shouting and trying to escape while the man is clenching his fist and threatening the woman. The Danish Italians on the other hand are barely moving: the man has managed to run a sword through the woman, but neither of them displays any feeling or emotion. The two caricatures are accompanied by the following observation: "Næppe

have de blomsterkrandsede, med italiensk Begeistring hilse Italienerne forladt os, før vi nyde de danske Italienerne [...]”.⁸ The cartoons, which clearly joke about the fact that dramatic representations of Italians by Danes seem to lack *pathos*, drama and movement, also emphasise that even when by mid-nineteenth century Italian actors, choreographers and stage directors had mostly left Denmark, the Italian dramatic tradition continued to live on.

Andersen’s operetta is part of this tradition of Danish Italians treading the stage of Det Kongelige Teater. At the same time it also occupies a specific place in Andersen’s authorship. Andersen travelled to Italy for the first time in 1833 and stayed there until 1834. In 1835 he published *Improvisatoren*, his debut novel set in Italy, which was an international success.⁹ Immediately after this novel, Andersen started planning *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen*. The relationship between the operetta and Manzoni’s text is clarified already on the cover of the first published edition where it is specified that: “Stoffet er taget af nogle Capitler i Manzoni’s Roman: *I promessi sposi*”.¹⁰ Various theories exist explaining how Andersen became familiar with this Italian novel: Andersen could have seen it performed in Italy as an opera, read it in Danish translation or even – only partially – in Italian.¹¹

The adaptation from a long novel to an opera libretto clearly involved a process of “subtraction or contraction”.¹² Interestingly Andersen was immediately praised for his ability to adapt the novel into an operetta. In a review published in *Fædrelandet* in 1849 it is in fact stated that:

Texten til dette musikalske Værk, hvis Sujet er hentet fra Manzoni’s berømte Roman: “*I promessi sposi*”, er skrevet i lette og flydende Vers, har mange lyriske Skjønheder og frembyder pikante dramatiske Situationer, hvorhos den, mere end Digterens tidligere efter Romaner bearbejdede Operatexter, er fri for forstyrrende Epigoner [...].¹³

But in terms of the plot, what are the elements that make *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* a good operetta?

Although various forms of light operas referred to as *opera buffa* or *opéra-comique* existed throughout the seventeenth century, the operetta genre originated in France in the mid-nineteenth century. Literally meaning ‘little opera’, the operetta is a light musical dramatic production often including spoken dialogue and dramatic scenes and characterised by a romantic plot.¹⁴ Although strictly speaking *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* pre-exists the operetta tradition, it very much corresponds to the definition of operetta. The story of Renzo and Lucia, whose marriage is opposed by the local lord Roderigo, comes to a happy ending after the couple’s attempt to get married

secretly by simply declaring themselves married before a priest and in the presence of two witnesses. Andersen's three-act operetta ends more or less at Chapter 8 out of the total 38 chapters of Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. In the operetta Renzo and Lucia manage in fact to defeat Roderigo after the failed attempt of the surprise marriage, an event which in the novel instead is only the start of the couple's tribulations. Essentially in the operetta the story of Renzo and Lucia is reduced to the typical plot of the *commedia dell'arte*: the union of the lovers – Renzo and Lucia – is hindered by the interference of an elderly character – the local tyrant Roderigo – who threatens the parish priest Abondio and forces him not to celebrate the marriage. The intervention of other helpers, such as Agnese, Lucia's mother, of the two peasants Tonio and Gervasio and of Pater Christophorus is required before a happy ending can be achieved.

The centre of the operetta is therefore the love story. None of the other topics for which Manzoni's novel has become so well-known in European literature – such as the value of history and the function of Providence – are included in this short operetta. In addition the operetta is completely stripped of the historical dimension which is so important in the novel. As the first historical novel ever published in Italy, *I promessi sposi* is set in seventeenth-century Lombardy and issues such as the Spanish domination of the region and the devastating consequences of the plague in Milan are amply treated in Manzoni's text. On the other hand, in *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* the story of Renzo and Lucia becomes almost timeless with only a few hints at the situation of Andersen's contemporary Lombardy.¹⁵

While Andersen was responsible for the first level of adaptation from the telling to the showing mode, namely from *I promessi sposi* to the libretto of *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen*, he then required the cooperation of two more people to transform the libretto into a musical performance, namely of the Bohemian composer Franz Gläser and of the choreographer and ballet master August Bournonville. Having worked in Vienna and Berlin, Franz Gläser was offered a position at Det Kongelige Teater in Copenhagen in 1842. Today his name is not remembered for any particular composition.¹⁶ Yet, immediately after the first performance of the operetta, his music was met with approval.

In the above-mentioned review which appeared in *Fædrelandet*, the music was defined as being appealing to the general audience, light, lively and dramatically expressive.¹⁷ According to the format of the operetta, in *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* spoken dialogues alternate with songs and light music. Unfortunately there is no recording of the musical parts but the orchestral scores have been digitalised and are available from

the website of Det Kongelige Bibliotek.¹⁸ In total there are ten short pieces, which are not evenly distributed throughout the three acts of the operetta. There are in fact six songs in Act I, three in Act II and only one in Act III. On the whole, music disappears as the plot thickens. In Act I the songs are almost used as a mean to get to know the main characters. Through Lucia's sweet love song we familiarise ourselves with her gentle character. This contrasts with Renzo's personality; as we realise from his "Friheds sang" that he is passionate about his ideals and impulsive. Also very interesting is Abondio's song where the life philosophy of the parish priest is given space to emerge: Abondio clearly prefers to keep his head down in order to avoid conflict. As in Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, Abondio is represented in *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* as an ironic character, one that – using Manzoni's words – has the constant feeling of being "an earthenware jar compelled to travel in the company of many iron pots".¹⁹ In Act II the music has the function of lively intermezzos as the plot of the operetta comes closer to its climax: two of the pieces express Renzo's feelings while the third one is a lullaby. In Act III where the plot of the surprise wedding unfolds there seems to be no time for music. The action suddenly speeds up as Renzo and Lucia try to get married in secret and finally manage to defeat Roderigo. The only musical section is a humorous song by Don Abondio's servant Perpetua who, despite being a spinster, boasts to have had pursuers from all countries. This light song is placed just before the dramatic climax and the end of the operetta.

Once libretto and music were completed, August Bournonville finally took care of putting on the operetta at Det Kongelige Teater. As a ballet master and choreographer Bournonville created during his career a number of settings for performances in many countries ranging from Denmark to Italy, from Spain to Russia. Bournonville was well known for his attention to detail, for creating settings that conveyed an idea of local colour. His style and ideals are somehow similar to those of the Danish Golden Age painters. As Bech and Andersen have observed, Bournonville's representations were realistic enough, but his farmers had no earth under their nails and the poor people knew how to place themselves on the stage in a decorative way.²⁰ The mise-en-scène of *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen* was arranged by putting together all the elements that the audience would have immediately associated with Italy.

Andersen provided Bournonville with fairly detailed stage directions, specifying how to represent his village on Lake Como:

Udkanten af en Landsby. Til Venstre AGNESES Huus med Blomsterpotter paa den murede Altan: mere i Forgrunden sprudler en Kilde i en colossal Muslingskal; til Høire et Osterie og ABONDIOS Huus, en høi Steentrappe fører til Indgangen tæt ved Huset, i Forbindelse med samme er et gammelt Klokketaarn. Midt paa Scenen udbreder sig en Platan, i hvis Stamme er anbragt et Madonnabilled, og rundt om dette hænge smaa Votivtavler, Kors, Hjerter og Hænder af Sølv, samt store Silkesløifer indviede Madonna. Baggrunden taber sig i en smal Gyde, indsluttet af hvide Mure, bag hvilke Viinhaver og Bjerge hæve sig.²¹

Thanks to Bournonville's sketch of the ground plan we can today reconstruct how the stage would have looked like when Andersen's operetta was put on.²² In order to re-create the setting of Lake Como described by Andersen, Bournonville combined a few newly designed pieces with background elements and stage props employed in the staging of previous plays and operas. To make settings and props was in fact both time-consuming and costly. For this reason these were usually reused and adapted. In the background Bournonville placed the rocky coast made for the play *Gioacchino* (1844) by Hans Peter Holst (1811–1893), which was set in Naples. By hiding those elements that were originally meant to give an impression of the Neapolitan coast, this piece was supposed to recreate the shores of Lake Como.²³ In front of the rocky coast, there were a series of walls at different angles which gave the idea of an alley. The front wall covered with grape vines was a borrowing from the Spanish setting of *Toreadoren* (1840). On the left side of the stage there were a house and a wall. The house, a rustic building in southern character, was Agnese's house, a building used for a previous play with a new front.²⁴ On the right side of the stage there were three buildings and a tower. Upstage there was a house, a borrowing from *Festen i Albano*, with stairs and a sandstone bench. This building was the inn, where Renzo, Lucia and their family and friends as well as Roderigo's henchmen entertain themselves at the beginning of Act III. The house downstage, on the other hand, was the house of the parish priest Don Abondio, the setting of Renzo and Lucia's attempted surprise wedding.

The village on Lake Como where the operetta is set was thus represented adapting elements that had previously been used to represent the Italian South or even Spain. Regional distinctions between Northern and Southern Italy do not appear to be of vital importance in the representation of this village as long as the elements put together are able to convey the impression of a general Italian rural location. In addition some aspects even give the setting and choreography of the operetta a Southern rather than a Northern character. One of the

new set-pieces created specifically for this operetta was placed in the middle of the stage.²⁵ This was a large plane-tree with a picture of the Madonna hanging from it. Interestingly this particular set piece was the cause of disagreement between Andersen and Bournonville: in a letter to Andersen dated 29 January 1849 – the same day of the premier of Andersen’s operetta – Bournonville explains that in his arrangement of the scene he had to reduce the number of votive offerings hanging from the tree. According to Bournonville these offerings, which were not traditionally hung on trees but on altars or in chapels, were detrimental to the harmony of the scene.²⁶ The image of the votive tree, which as Zuliani points out, was probably inspired by one of Andersen’s memories from his journey to Italy recorded in his diary: between Bologna and Ferrara Andersen saw in fact a tree with Madonna pictures hanging from it.²⁷ However, in the operetta Andersen enriches the tree with votive offerings of various shapes and forms referring to a tradition that was widespread in the whole of Italy and, for that matter, in the whole of Southern Europe. In the operetta, Lucia herself shows the audience the principle behind this tradition: when she enters the stage for the first time while praying the Madonna to protect her and Renzo’s love she “gaaer hen foran Madonnabilledet, hvor hun hefter to Sølvhjerter, som ere forbundne med en Piil”.²⁸ If votive offerings were a widespread Italian tradition, the folk dance performed by Renzo and Lucia outside the inn in Act III originated in Southern Italy. Renzo and Lucia dance the *saltarello*, which – as Andersen himself was also aware of – was a folk dance typically performed in Rome.²⁹ The scene, described by Gläser in his autographed orchestral score, is somehow reminiscent of some famous Danish Golden Age paintings such as Wilhelm Marstrand’s (1810–1873) *Romerske borgere forsamlede til lystighed i et osteri* (1838): Renzo and Lucia are dancing the *saltarello* while Agnese plays the tambourine and Tonio and Gervasius watch the performance. Finally, according to the costume list, Renzo and the other peasants were dressed in the so-called nineteenth-century Napoli style. According to this style, which was launched with Bournonville’s famous ballet *Napoli*, Italian peasants should essentially wear a ribbon around the neck, a white shirt and knee-length shorts.³⁰ On the stage, there were thus elements that – besides being functional to the plot – were essential to create an exotic Italian village, but not necessarily a village on Lake Como.

In order to adapt the material taken from *I promessi sposi* into an operetta, Andersen clearly has to undertake a labour of simplification, not only of the plot but also of what is often referred to as the “intellectual content” of the novel.³¹ While in *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen*

Renzo and Lucia manage to defeat Roderigo within a day, in the novel it takes them three years to free themselves from their enemy, as they have to go through a series of difficult challenges. The complex historical, philosophical and religious dimensions present in the novel also have to be sacrificed in favour of the love story, which is transformed into a romantic light plot suitable for reciting, singing and dancing.

But why did then Andersen choose to adapt such a complex Italian novel into an operetta if he then had to deprive the plot of its most characteristic features? Even stripped of its most complex issues and events, the narrative of the first chapters of Manzoni's novel still gives an original twist to the typical operetta format, especially thanks to the lively and original story of the surprise marriage. Moreover, the choice of transforming some of Manzoni's novel into an operetta should be seen, in my opinion, in terms of what Hutcheon calls a "safe bet". The practice of adapting novels into operas was already quite established among nineteenth-century Italian composers. By adapting something that was already "tried and tested" they were hoping to reduce the risk of a fiasco and increase the chances of success.³² Specifying so clearly that the operetta was based on Manzoni's novel, Andersen knew that he was associating his work with that of one of the greatest Italian writers of the nineteenth century.

Although Andersen might well be considered the primary adapter, the one working directly with the adapted text in order to create a new one, it should be remembered that Renzo and Lucia would never have reached the stage of Det Kongelige Teater without the work of Gläser and Bournonville. The process of adaptation from novel to performance is a collective one. As the British playwright Nicholas Wright (1940 –) once said: "Playwrights like to think that they're the sole author of everything that happens on stage", but in reality they share "the driver's compartment with many others".³³ Gläser composed the essential ingredient of the operetta, the music, which was supposed to liven up the plot with playful intermezzos but also to direct the audience's interpretation of the different characters. Yet it has to be said that, as most reviews testify, if this operetta was successful at its time it was mostly thanks to the choreography and scenography by Bournonville who was able to make the most out of Andersen's stage directions and to represent visually the exotic Italy full of local colour and folklore that the Danish audience wanted to see.

Notes

- ¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, New York & Abingdon 2006, p. 38.
- ² B. Donald Grose & O. Franklin Kenworthy, *A Mirror to Life: a History of Western Theatre*, Holt, Rinehart, Wiston, New York 1985, pp. 138–45.
- ³ Viben Bech & Ellen Andersen, *Kostumer og mode dragter fra Det kgl Teaters herregarderobe*, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen 1979, p. 20.
- ⁴ Frederick Marker & Lise-Lone Marker, *The Scandinavian Theatre: A Short History*, Blackwell, Oxford 1975, pp. 46, 75.
- ⁵ Folke H. Törnblom, *Operans historia*, Bonnierfakta, Stockholm 1984, pp. 424–425.
- ⁶ Erik Aschengreen, “Når lidenskaberne tøjles. August Bournonville og det sydlandske”, *Vindue mod den romanske verden*, Gunver Skytte *et alii* (ed.), Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Copenhagen 1994, pp. 14, 17–21.
- ⁷ Klaus Neiiendam, “Italien og dansk teater”, *Dialogo Italia Danmark 1968. Periodico dell’Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Danimarca*, Det Italienske Kulturinstitut, Copenhagen 1968, pp. 109–130.
- ⁸ *Corsaren: 90*, Det danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab; C. A. Reitzels Boghandel A-S, Copenhagen 1842, p. 214.
- ⁹ Sven Hakon Rossel, “Hans Christian Andersen: The Great European Writer” *Hans Christian Andersen: Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, Sven Hakon Rossel (ed.), Rodopi, Amsterdam & Atlanta 1996, p. 26.
- ¹⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, *Brylluppet ved Como-Søen*, C. A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen 1849.
- ¹¹ Federico Zuliani, “Manzoni in Danimarca, Norvegia e Islanda. *Il Matrimonio sul Lago di Como di Andersen*”, *Annali manzoniani*: 6, Nuova Serie, Milano 2005, pp. 190–192.
- ¹² Hutcheon 2006, p. 19.
- ¹³ Knud Arne Jürgensen (ed.), *Digterens & Balletmesterens luner: H. C. Andersen og August Bournonvilles brevveksling*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 2005, p. 18.
- ¹⁴ Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, Routledge, New York 2003 (1983), pp. 1–3.
- ¹⁵ Zuliani 2005: 210–211.
- ¹⁶ Gerhard Schepelern, *Operaens historie i Danmark 1634–1975*, Munksgaard/Rosinante, Copenhagen 1985, pp. 70–72.
- ¹⁷ Jürgensen 2005, p. 18.
- ¹⁸ <http://img.kb.dk/ma/teater/glaeser-bryl-como.pdf> (Accessed: 08/10/2010).
- ¹⁹ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, Bruce Penman (tr.), Penguin, London *et alia* 1972, p. 38.

- ²⁰ Bech & Andersen 1979, p. 88.
- ²¹ Hans Christian Andersen, “Brylluppet ved Como-Søen”, *H. C. Andersens samlede værker. Skuespil III 1844–1849*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 2005, p. 369.
- ²² Frederick J. Marker, *Hans Christian Andersen and the Romantic Theatre*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1971, p. 108.
- ²³ Marker 1971, pp. 108-109.
- ²⁴ Marker 1971, p. 109.
- ²⁵ Marker 1971, p. 108.
- ²⁶ Jürgensen 2005, p. 66.
- ²⁷ Zuliani 2005, p. 215.
- ²⁸ Andersen 2005, p. 369.
- ²⁹ Ole Nørlyng, “The Finishing Touch: The saltarello as a pictorial motif”, *Of Another World: Dancing between Dream and Reality. Festschrift presented to Professor Emeritus Erik Aschengreen*, Inger Damsholt & Monna Dithmer (eds.), Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen 2002, pp. 100-106.
- ³⁰ Marker 1971, pp. 164–165.
- ³¹ Hutcheon 2006, p. 1.
- ³² Hutcheon 2006, p. 5.
- ³³ Hutcheon 2006, p. 79.