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FINDING THE SHAKESPEARE IN AMBROISE THOMAS’S HAMLET: A
COMPARISON OF PLOT AND CHARACTER IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLISH PLAY AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH OPERA

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ABSTRACT

Finding the Shakespeare in Ambroise Thomas’s *Hamlet*: A Comparison of Plot and Character in the Seventeenth-century English Play and the Nineteenth-century French Opera

By

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Although the 17th century play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare was originally performed in English, its popularity grew throughout Europe, entering France’s robust theatre tradition around the turn of the 19th century. Multiple versions of the translated play became available and the story began to take on French characteristics as it was adapted for French audiences. By the time *Hamlet* was set by librettists Michel Carré and Jules Barbier and composer Ambroise Thomas, the story had morphed somewhat from the original Shakespeare. Much of the story was condensed and the ending was significantly changed. Originally successful after its 1868 premiere, the opera fell out of favor with English speaking audiences after criticisms of its story and music. The opera has been recently revived in the repertoire. The goal of this document is to create a comparison of character and plot in the opera and the play and to examine the performance history of the opera outside of France. The research involved supports my translation project in which I provided a new English libretto for the Thomas opera, inspired by the original Shakespearean text.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document and project would not be possible without the many people who have aided in my discovery of this subject matter: Dr. Linda Lister and my esteemed committee, Dr. Lezlie Cross for allowing me to explore Shakespearean literature at a deeper level, my family and friends for graciously allowing for my disappearance during the writing process, and the cast and crew who helped make the premiere performance of *Hamlet* possible.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 DEFENDING THE OPERA

Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* has captured the minds of actors, directors, philosophers, artists, psychologists, novelists, and composers since its conception around 1600. Sigmund Freud compared *Hamlet* to Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* and used Hamlet as a frequent example in psychoanalysis.¹ It is Shakespeare’s longest and wordiest play, and while its allusions in every area of the arts and popular culture have not waned since its first performance, it has not had the attention in the music world that many other Shakespearean plays have enjoyed.

French composer Charles Louis Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896) took on the task and, along with librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, premiered his take on the “melancholy Dane” in 1868 in Paris. This was a French Hamlet, based on a French theatrical adaptation of the Shakespearean work, composed by Frenchmen for a French audience. And while much of the basic plot of Shakespeare’s play was kept, and even much of its language, albeit translated, Hamlet was no longer the Englishman that Shakespearean audiences expected.

The 18th century saw the spread of Shakespearean plays in translation throughout Europe. There have been many successful operatic adaptations of the bard’s work, mostly from the 19th century forward, and often the most successful operas have been in foreign languages. Giuseppe Verdi’s *Macbeth* and *Falstaff*, as well as Otto Nicolai’s *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) are staples of operatic literature.

Perhaps this is because they were written for audiences who were already accustomed to the necessity of translation, and did not feel so attached to the exacting language of Shakespeare as the English scholars who felt ownership over the plays. It has seemed a sport of English critics to criticize any changes in how the plays were presented, scoffing at performances that pushed boundaries or played to contemporary thought. In the 21st century, a very well-respected and knowledgeable professor very matter-of-factly claimed that it was blasphemy to present any interpretation of Shakespeare set outside of the exact date of which it was written. (He was responding to an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet.*) He presented this idea as if it were a common consensus among academics, although there is no proof. While anecdotal, the point is that there have been English language purists who seek to protect the works of Shakespeare from any alteration, thus leaving room for great criticism of any interpretation that does not adhere exactingly to the storyline.

Although Ambroise Thomas’s 1868 opera *Hamlet* has recently seen a resurgence in popularity, it was underperformed in English speaking countries for most of the twentieth-century. It was popular in France after its premiere, and has enjoyed a respectable number of performances in the French-speaking world since. It also received some attention in the few years after its debut in London and Leipzig in 1869— some positive, some negative—and received a few performances in the United States, but between the early twentieth-century and the new millenium was rarely performed. In fact, after a smattering of performances between 1894 and 1897, *Hamlet* was absent from the Metropolitan Opera in New York until its 2010 season.²

Perhaps the changing attitude towards adaptations has opened the door for exploration of a French Hamlet, one whose ending is quite different from the bard’s, but whose philosophy is just as interesting. This document explores the reasons for the decline in interest in Thomas’s opera by discussing its performance history. I have outlined the differences in the plot and character. By outlining these differences and examining the performance history, I was able to then create a solution to bring this opera to smaller venues such as universities and smaller companies who do not have the resources to produce a lengthy French grand opera with large orchestra, chorus, and cast. I have created a singable English libretto for an abridged and reduced version of Thomas’s opera. For my libretto, I have tried to incorporate as much of the original Shakespearean text as possible.

1.2 HAMLET GOES TO THE OPERA

The story of Hamlet is, of course, most known today as belonging to the genius of William Shakespeare. The tragedy of the Danish prince was not always quite so tragic. The first known Hamlet story comes from Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish writer from the 12th century. The story may very well be even older. Grammaticus’s prince shared many of the same plot points as in Shakespeare’s play; however, this early Hamlet survives to become king. In the 1580s, an English play emerged based on Grammaticus’s story

bearing the same name as Shakespeare’s play. The lost play, possibly by Thomas Kyd, is thought to be the basis for Shakespeare’s work.³

Despite its popularity in England, Hamlet took some time to reach France where Shakespeare was virtually unknown in his lifetime. In 1745, Antoine de la Place translated sections of ten Shakespearean plays into French, including Hamlet. These were not meant to be acted, but rather read and discussed in salons as the stories were deemed too risqué for classical French theatre.⁴ Hamlet caught the attention of literary figures in France, as it was quite a different form of storytelling than the French were used to. The first full-length French play based on Hamlet was from 1769 by Jean-François Ducis, who admittedly did not speak English and used de la Place’s translations to write his own drama. Due to his lack of translation skills and the conventions of classical French theatre that did not allow sword-fighting on stage, the play, however popular, became a courtly and “polite” version that would be accepted by the Académie française.⁵ Despite Ducis’s efforts to fit Hamlet into the classical mold, his work is credited with inspiring the new style of bourgeois drama.⁶ Ducis’s version became the basis for translation of the play into Italian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Dutch in the 1770s and remained in the repertoire of the Comédie Française through 1851.⁷

In the 1820s, touring English-speaking troupes began to present Shakespearean plays throughout France. Corresponding with the beginning of the Romantic movement

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⁶ Heylen, 28.
⁷ Ibid., 29.
as well as a great literary debate about style, doors were opening for different translations of *Hamlet* to be presented in the French theatres. Translations began to take on lives of their own as France’s literary elite tackled converting ideas from the English language meant for English audiences into French for a uniquely French audience in many different writing styles. Paul Meurice and Alexandre Dumas (père), who were quite familiar with the Ducis *Hamlet*, successfully presented their own updated version in 1847 at the Théâtre Historique. While their goal was to remain faithful to the Shakespeare, they changed many aspects of the plot, including leaving Hamlet alive at the end of the play and eliminating the character of Fortinbras. Critics of the change in ending prompted Meurice to present his own revision against the wishes of Dumas, who wrote an article arguing that his ending was better than the original Shakespeare. This was also the ending that librettists Michel Carré and Jules Barbier would choose for their collaboration with Ambroise Thomas.

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8 Ibid., 45.
9 Ibid., 49.
10 Ibid., 56.
CHAPTER 2: PERFORMANCE HISTORY AND CRITICISM

Ambroise Thomas’s 1868 operatic telling of Hamlet premiered on March 9, 1868 at the Paris Opera where it enjoyed 384 performances between its premiere and 1938, breaking record sales in its first month.\(^\text{11}\) Thomas is known today mostly for this work and for his 1866 opera Mignon, based on Wilhelm Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, as well as succeeding Daniel Auber as head of the Paris Conservatoire. Librettists Michel Carré and Jules Barbier were familiar with adapting works of great literature, having been responsible for the libretti of Charles Gounod’s Roméo et Juliette and Faust, as well as Thomas’s Mignon. Hamlet was played by baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure, for whom the role was written, as was the role of Ophélie written for Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson. Originally, Thomas conceived of his leading man as a tenor, but changed his mind when Faure became interested in the role.\(^\text{12}\) Critic Paul Bernard was present at the opera’s Paris premiere, commenting that Hamlet “captured the play’s passion...only the philosophical element is less developed as was bound to be the case. One cannot conduct a discussion with melodies.”\(^\text{13}\)

On June 8, 1869, the Royal Italian Opera House in London (later called Covent Garden) produced the international premier of Hamlet in an Italian translation, starring superstar soprano Christine Nilsson, who would perform the role around the world.\(^\text{14}\) Anticipating the possibility of backlash against the changed ending, Thomas provided an


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 316.

alternative ending in which Hamlet dies. This was not performed in Thomas’s lifetime and *Hamlet* in its operatic form was not performed at Covent Garden again until 2003.\(^\text{15}\) This same production was brought to the Metropolitan Opera in 2010, ending a 113-year run without a *Hamlet*, though this production made a compromise between Thomas’s original happy ending and the “Covent Garden” ending he wrote later.\(^\text{16}\) That leaves a total of three possible published endings to use for a production of *Hamlet*.

In his 2010 dissertation “The Afterlife of Shakespeare's Plays: A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptations into Opera and Film,” Suddhaseel Sen gives an in-depth look at Shakespeare’s reception in France and focuses on Barbier, Carré, and Thomas’s 1868 operatic version in chapter one of his dissertation.\(^\text{17}\) Sen asserts that the main problem with Barbier, Carré, and Thomas’s operatic setting was that it was partially overshadowed by the newer styles of through-composed operas by Wagner and the Italian operas of Verdi, whose styles gained international popularity.\(^\text{18}\) Sen also points out that Thomas’s *Hamlet* attained a modest popularity until around the World War I, then fell out of favor until around the 1980s when it began to receive a few performances again. He argues that this reflects a trend in attitudes towards certain styles of adaptations, not a weakness in the music itself.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed we can read in the review of the first American production of *Hamlet* that the reviewer does seem to hold a bias toward Wagnerian techniques.

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\(^\text{17}\) Suddhaseel Sen, “The Afterlife of Shakespeare's Plays: A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptations into Opera and Film” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2010).

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 58.
Such a subject might have been developed by Wagner, whose music purports to be an adequate examination of the text depending upon a regular thematic development for effect, and never upon solo singing, but Ambroise Thomas has such an admixture of the Italian and French methods in his style of composition, that in 'Hamlet' he has failed to give his musical forms an individual character and complexion.\textsuperscript{20}

The unnamed reviewer from Cincinnati went on to describe many positive attributes and effective moments in the opera. Giuseppe Verdi himself weighed in on Thomas’s opera remarking in response to the inclusion of the obligatory Act IV ballet, “Hamlet and dance tunes!! What a cacophony! Poor Shakespeare!”\textsuperscript{21} Verdi did praise the Act III scene between Hamlet and his mother. Gary Schmidgall points out that,

What Verdi must have approved of was the fact that this duet was not conceived as a big “decoration” with a conventional slow-and-fast-section structure, but rather as an asymmetrical, rhythmically supple vehicle for displaying the mother’s and son’s roller-coaster emotions (there are twelve tempo changes). The scene is a tantalizing indication that Messrs. Thomas, Carré, and Barbier might have produced something considerably more Shakespearean, if they had not been so weighed down by the excess baggage of grand-opera convention.\textsuperscript{22}

An earlier dissertation on French lyric opera by Morton Achter claims that only the slight change in Act V would have offended twentieth-century audiences, as the work itself follows the outline of Shakespeare’s plot.\textsuperscript{23} His analysis leads him to conclude that the opera is the pinnacle of Thomas and his contemporaries’ opéra-lyrique style. While Achter does not address the opera’s reception in as great a detail as Sen, he acknowledges the background of criticism of the work. In order to make clear the literary changes that may have offended audiences, I will compare dramatic structures, actions, and characters


\textsuperscript{21} Gary Schmidgall, Shakespeare and Opera, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 317.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 320.

\textsuperscript{23} Morton Jay Achter, “Félicien David, Ambroise Thomas, and French Opéra Lyrique, 1850-1870” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1972), 312.
of the original Shakespearean *Hamlet* to that of Barbier, Carré, and Thomas’s 1868 operatic version in chapters 4 and 5 of this document.

These authors bring to light the possible reasons for the opera’s disappearance from and then re-emergence into the repertoire. Poor reviews and a taste for new styles of music outside the conventions of Grand Opera led to the decline of Thomas’s *Hamlet*. There also may have been some bias against Thomas himself, as shortly following the premiere of *Hamlet* he was appointed director of the Paris Conservatoire. He famously protested César Franck’s music due to his newer style of composition leading to Thomas being seen as old-fashioned and passé all the way into the twentieth-century.²⁴ While through the twentieth-century Thomas’s *Hamlet* was mostly known for a few arias used in competitions or concert settings such as Ophélie’s Mad Scene or Hamlet’s Drinking Song, modern day performances have focused on the nuance of the lead character. The modern-day revivals seem to center around baritones who wish for a showcase role, such as Sherrill Milnes, Thomas Hampson, and Simon Keenlyside who have helped to revive the work in production and recordings.

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CHAPTER 3: PLOT COMPARISON

3.1 WORDS, WORDS, WORDS…

As the aforementioned criticisms seemed to stem from a distaste for the libretto, Pyotr Tchaikovsky took the criticism one step further. He attended a performance of Thomas’s Hamlet at the Bolshoi Theatre in December, 1872 starring Christine Nilsson as Ophélie. His unfavorable review appeared later that month in the Moscow Journal, Russian Register, criticizing every aspect of production and performance. Tchaikovsky presented a scene-by-scene description of the opera, describing its music; some of which he praised a “skillfully crafted,” and some he described as “banal.” He particularly praised the orchestration as “colorful and truly artistic.” However, much of his problem with the topic seemed to be that the whole idea of Hamlet is impossible to tackle in music, and that the Frenchmen are too “lightminded…to dwell on the finer points of Hamlet’s psychology.” His biggest criticism of the libretto was the altered ending. Much of his review hinged on his personal opinion that it was good enough for French men because they could do no better. I cannot help but think that much of his dislike stemmed from this prejudice.

One may argue that paring down play scripts for opera libretti is necessary, particularly considering that Hamlet is Shakespeare’s wordiest play. Librettists Carré and Barbier were tasked with telling a complete story within the framework of the five-act opera. To do this, they must have felt it necessary to cut characters and subplots. If we

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
look at the opera and play scene by scene, we can see that the overall structure is there, and that many of the changes made the plot more active rather than passive. Much of the play is descriptive, whereas in the operatic telling, many of these ideas are realized rather than simply described.

By paring down the play, the librettists made the choice to leave out much of the political subplots such as the treaties between Denmark and Norway, between England and Denmark, and the Norwegian invasion of Poland and subsequent takeover of Denmark. This leaves out many of the smaller roles such as Voltimand and Cornelius who deliver messages for the King to Poland, and of course, Fortinbras himself.

For my own comparison of plot and character, I refer to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as “the play” and Barbier, Carré, and Thomas’s version as “the opera.” I describe the outline of the play and where these scenes correlate to the operatic telling, if at all.

3.2 ACT I COMPARISON

Act I: i of the play opens with Barnardo and Francisco guarding the ramparts of Elsinore castle. Horatio and Marcellus join them and they all discuss having seen the same ghost. Horatio gets in quite a bit of philosophizing and describes the old rivalry between Norway and Denmark, setting up a parallel between the two countries politically, foreshadowing the two very different fates of Fortinbras and Hamlet. The ghost appears to them and does not speak, and Horatio wishes to tell Hamlet what they have seen since the ghost looks like his father, the recently deceased King Hamlet.

Act I of the play has three scenes on the ramparts, I: i, I: iv, and I: v. All three of these scenes are practically reduced and combined for the opera encompassing much of
Act I of the opera. This includes No. 4 of the first tableau, which begins with a soldier chorus (replacing Barnardo and Francisco) and Marcellus and Horatio searching for Hamlet. It also includes the prelude to the second tableau, and No. 5, when Horatio and Marcellus describe the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet’s invocation and appearance of the ghost.

In the opera, Horatio and Marcellus enter the area of the ramparts in the evening while a feast is heard in the background at the castle. They briefly describe to a chorus of soldiers that they are looking for Hamlet to tell him of the ghost. After the soldiers leave to attend the feast celebrating Claudius’s coronation, the two friends run into Hamlet, who happens to be sulking outside the castle after refusing to attend the feast. They recount the tale of the ghost, who then appears, describes his murder at the hands of Claudius, and convinces Hamlet to avenge his death.

Act I: ii of the play begins with Claudius recounting his marriage and how they are moving on from King Hamlet’s death to an audience of Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius and Laertes. Hamlet lurks disdainfully to the side, still in mourning for his father. Claudius moves on to business with Norway and sends Voltimand and Cornelius to deliver messages to the King of Norway. Laertes wishes to return to France. Gertrude and Claudius ask Hamlet to stop mourning and he requests to return to Wittenberg University. They leave Hamlet alone for his first soliloquy, in which he expresses his disgust for his mother’s new marriage. Horatio and Marcellus enter and tell him of the ghost and they make plans to look for it that evening. The opera turns Claudius’s introduction into a Grand Opera coronation scene. He briefly proclaims that the kingdom should mourn the loss of the old king but celebrate his new marriage and move on. Gertrude points out
Hamlet’s absence from this celebration and there is no mention of politics. The grand opera-style choral opening makes the scene a much more splendid event than the play and makes it clear that Claudius is supported by the public and perhaps no one but Hamlet is suspicious of the new king.

Act I: iii of the play is an introduction to Ophelia, her brother Laertes, and their father, Polonius. Laertes warns Ophelia not to spend time with Hamlet as his intentions are probably not honorable. Laertes says his goodbyes to his sister since the king has given him permission in the previous scene to return France on diplomatic duties. Polonius enters and lectures both his children: Laertes on how to behave abroad, and Ophelia on how to behave around Hamlet. She is to tell her father if he approaches her. Ophelia seems willing to comply.

These characters are each introduced in a much different manner in the opera. We first see Ophelia in Act I, No. 2 as she walks in on Hamlet who has been alone onstage describing his disappointment in his mother. Ophelia begs him to stay and he calms her fears about their relationship as they sing a love duet, “Doute la lumière.” This duet is based on a love letter from Hamlet to Ophelia in Act II: ii of the play. Thomas presents it not as a letter, but as an actual shared moment between the two that is charming and shows their love in a positive light, whereas in the play Polonius uses it to show Hamlet as a problem for Ophelia. At the end of the duet, Laertes enters and tells the couple of his deployment to Norway. This is the only mention of Norway in the opera, and in the play Laertes is actually sent to France. In No. 3, Laertes’s cavatine and trio, he asks Hamlet to keep his sister safe in his absence and praises their love—the opposite of his wariness in the play. Hamlet displays a genuine affection for both Ophelia and Laertes in this scene.
Polonius is absent from this scene, and there is never a mention in the opera of his feelings toward Hamlet.

The events of Act I: iv and I: v of the play center around Marcellus, Horatio, and Hamlet searching for the ghost. Just as in the opera, these two scenes blend seamlessly together, as Hamlet is left alone with the ghost in Act I: v. Hamlet of the play questions the ghost’s motives and instructs Horatio and Marcellus to keep the encounter a secret. The opera ends the scene without these expressed doubts, only Hamlet swearing to avenge his father’s death.

3.3 ACT II COMPARISON

Act II: i features Polonius instructing his servant Reynaldo on how to spy on Laertes in Paris. As Reynaldo goes on his way, Ophelia enters, telling an upsetting story about how Hamlet came to her looking wild and disheveled, acting aggressively. Polonius is concerned for her safety, believing that Hamlet’s madness is because of his daughter. None of this scene is included in the opera, however Ophelia’s opening aria, Act II, No. 6, she describes how Hamlet has been acting strangely unaffectionate toward her. He appears in the scene but leaves without speaking to her, confirming her suspicions that he no longer loves her. This aria captures the sentiment of Hamlet’s first change of attitude toward Ophelia.

Gertrude and Claudius welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court in Act II: ii. The two school chums of Hamlet are told to spy on Hamlet and report back to the king and queen. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave to find Hamlet, Polonius enters with a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia. They all agree that it is possible Hamlet’s moping
and strange behavior could be because of his love for Ophelia. They plan to send Ophelia to him and they will all spy on him from behind a tapestry. As the royal couple exits, Hamlet enters reading a book. He and Polonius have an exchange where Hamlet insults Polonius. They are interrupted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet cleverly avoids their questions and lets them know he is on to their spying. The pair turns the conversation to the theatre troupe that is coming to the castle. The troupe enters with Polonius and performs a bit of their show for Hamlet, who critiques them and has the idea to use the play to test the king’s reaction and gauge his guilt.

The opera replaces Gertrude and Claudius’s request to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a recitative and aria, No. 7, by Gertrude alone to Ophelia. The sentiment is the same, in that she wishes for Ophelia to visit her son and let her know the reason for his sadness. The queen sends Ophelia away and expresses her fear that they will be discovered to her husband in No. 8. Hamlet enters and proceeds to insult Claudius and Gertrude in the following recitative as he insulted Polonius in II: ii of the play. At the end of the scene he announces the players. Claudius and Gertrude see this as a needed distraction for the prince and they leave satisfied that he does not know of their crimes. In No. 9, the recitative and chorus of comedians, Hamlet explains his plan to the actors, and sings a drinking song. This does not correlate to the play, but continues into scene in which Hamlet narrates the play-within-a-play to observe the King’s reaction.

3.4 ACT III COMPARISON

As with the rampart scenes of Act I, the librettists condensed the scenes with the players. In the play, Hamlet gives these directions to the players later in Act III: ii. The
play within a play scene is planned by Hamlet so that the players will reenact a murder similar to the way Claudius supposedly murdered his father. In the opera, Hamlet narrates a pantomime version of the play, No. 12, whereas in the play, this is spoken dialogue amongst the players. In both the play and the opera, Claudius reacts with guilt, however, in the play Claudius simply stands and leaves, causing the play to end and everyone else to leave except for Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Polonius returns, telling Hamlet to visit his mother. In the opera, Claudius stands to send the actors away. This is enough for Hamlet, who accuses him of treason. The chorus and all characters are outraged. Hamlet reprises his drinking song, hoping that acting drunk will be excuse enough to spare himself from their chastisement, thus ending Act II.

Act III: i of the play opens with Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius interrogating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who can, of course, tell them nothing. Claudius and Polonius hide behind a curtain and listen to Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be,” speech while they wait for Ophelia to interact with him so they can eavesdrop. Hamlet berates Ophelia in every way he knows how, telling her, “get thee to a nunnery.” Ophelia is shaken to the core and Polonius and Claudius are convinced that Ophelia is the cause of the prince’s madness. Act III: ii is the play within a play scene, discussed above. Act III: iii shows the King explaining to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern how they must accompany Hamlet on a diplomatic mission to England in order to keep Hamlet from causing trouble at court. Polonius then offers to hide behind a tapestry to spy on Hamlet’s impending conversation with Gertrude.

Act III of the opera opens with a much reduced aria version of “To be or not to be,” No. 13, and is even marked in the score as “monologue.” Instead of being
interrupted by Ophelia, he is interrupted by the king who admits his guilt as Hamlet eavesdrops in No. 14, recitative and air. (This happens in the play in III: iii, just after the play within a play and Hamlet does not overhear his confession.) As he stands, he catches a glimpse of Hamlet’s shadow and in his guilt mistakes it for the ghost of his dead brother. He calls to Polonius who rushes to his aid and admits to his part in the murder; this the character’s only solo appearance in the opera. He does not make any such admission in the play, nor is he ever implicated.

It is the queen who brings Ophelia to Hamlet after Claudius and Polonius exit. The Queen’s involvement in this scene is akin to the eavesdropping that Claudius and Polonius do in the play. Hamlet’s chastising of Ophelia is turned into a trio, No. 15, including the Queen. Ophelia runs off, hurt, and Gertrude and Hamlet are left to argue in No. 16, closely following Act III: iv from the play (minus the murder of Polonius). The argument in the play is mostly Hamlet showing his frustration that his mother has married such an awful person, insulting her a great deal in the process. He sees that someone is hiding behind the tapestry and strikes his sword through it thinking it is Claudius. They discover that it is actually Polonius, and the ghost appears to Hamlet once more. Gertrude is unable to see the ghost and is convinced of Hamlet’s insanity. Other than killing Polonius and the mention of his trip to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, this scene in the opera follows the spirit of the argument between mother and son.

3.5 ACT IV COMPARISON

Act IV of the play is comprised of seven scenes. In IV: i Gertrude and Claudius are frightened of Hamlet’s madness that led him to kill Polonius and order Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England. The brief scene IV: ii shows Hamlet burying the body of Polonius and speaking nonsensically to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who have come to collect him. In scene IV: iii Claudius sends the trio off to England then admits in a soliloquy that he has sent a letter to England instructing the assassination of Hamlet. Scene IV: iv opens with the Prince of Norway, Fortinbras announcing his arrival in Denmark and wishes to bring troops through the kingdom toward Poland where they hope to win land in a battle. Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn of this strategy. In his moments alone he compares his own inaction to Fortinbras’s ambition and vows to finally complete his revenge. None of these scenes from Act IV are included in the opera due to the excision of subplots by the librettists.

Act IV: v brings us back to the palace where a courtier warns Gertrude of Ophelia’s crazed state. She babbles back and forth between song and speech, none of which makes much sense but always seems to refer to death and spurned love. Claudius enters and expresses guilt over the death of her father. A messenger announces the return of Laertes who apparently has been gaining political support from the officers who want him to be king. Laertes enters insulting the king, angry over his father’s death and the secret circumstances surrounding his funeral. Claudius is about to place the blame on Hamlet when Ophelia enters again spewing madness and upsetting Laertes even more.

Act IV: vi jumps to Horatio who receives a letter from Hamlet saying he has deserted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and is doubling back to Denmark. He has included letters for Claudius and requests that Horatio meet him. Claudius receives the letter in Act IV: vii which is from Hamlet, cryptically saying he has returned and asks his pardon. Claudius sways Laertes to believe that Hamlet is completely responsible for
every bad thing that has happened to his family which is only emphasized when Gertrude announces Ophelia’s drowning.

So much of this act is either left out, altered, or implied in the opera. Any bits about Hamlet’s banishment and return are removed. What is left out of the opera in Act IV is a long series of happy ballets and a chorus of villagers. This is followed by the entrance of Ophelia who, in the spirit of the scene from the play is babbling, only this time it is with added fioratura. Describing sirens and lost lovers in the ballad portion of her aria implies her drowning. The fiery coloratura aria is followed by another short ballet and then a coda to her aria in which the chorus hums her melody as she slowly disappears.

3.6 ACT V COMPARISON

While Act IV is a much reduced and condensed sentiment of Ophelia’s madness, Act V is actually the biggest change between the two stories. Act V: i of the play begins in a graveyard as two men are preparing Ophelia’s grave. We know it is her grave because they reference the drowning as they have quite a philosophical conversation about death. Hamlet and Horatio enter as they are singing and Hamlet gives his own musings on death. Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and a priest enter as a small funeral party. The priest is hesitant to perform burial rites due to suspicions that Ophelia committed suicide. Hamlet makes himself known to the group, curious as to whose funeral is taking place. He quarrels with Laertes and for the first time in the play he declares some kind of affection for Ophelia, although within the context of the struggle with her brother, it could be construed as simply a way to one up Laertes. Gertrude and Claudius chalk this
behavior up to his insanity and ask Horatio to look after him.

Act V: i of the opera begins in a similar manner with the two gravediggers. These gravediggers are more interested in the philosophy of wine than the mystery of death. Hamlet, alone sans Horatio, has only a brief encounter with them which prompts him to sing a short aria about Ophelia’s beauty. In his recitative he briefly summarizes that the king has banished him from the castle and he has been wandering for two days to escape assassins. He is quickly discovered by Laertes, without the rest of the funeral procession as in the play. Hamlet insults Laertes by not shaking his hand. Laertes grows enraged asking about his sister. They begin to fight but are interrupted by the entrance of a full chorus singing a funeral march while bringing in Ophelia’s coffin. The funeral party consists of the entire cast and chorus unlike the small private funeral in the play. No mention is made of suicide causing any religious conflicts.

Here is where the largest divergence of plots occurs: Act V of the play goes on to have a second scene. Horatio and Hamlet are back at the castle. Hamlet describes without remorse how he tricked the English ambassador into killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of himself. Osric enters with a request from the king that Hamlet duel Laertes. Hamlet accepts and they all go down to the hall for the duel. Just before the duel Hamlet and Laertes make peace with each other and Laertes begins to feel guilty for being given a poison-tipped foil by Claudius. Claudius has placed poison in a goblet and expects that Hamlet will drink during a break. Hamlet refuses the drink and Gertrude drinks by mistake and she dies. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned foil, they accidentally switch foils and Hamlet strikes Laertes. They are both poisoned. As they are dying, Laertes tells Hamlet of the king’s plot. Hamlet strikes the king and forces him to
drink from the poisoned goblet. Horatio makes to drink the poison wine to kill himself. Hamlet stops him and dies. Horatio is left to welcome the English ambassador and Fortinbras who claims the kingdom.

The opera skips the duel and the large number of dead bodies by following the Dumas/Meurice ending which brings in the ghost one last time to remind Hamlet of his revenge duties. The ghost is now visible to everyone and the king and queen fall to their knees. Hamlet kills Claudius and is crowned king of Denmark in a much less complicated, less bloody ending.
4.1 THE SMALLER ROLES

Reducing the plot meant that some of the characters who only appeared in subplots, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Hamlet’s schoolmates who willingly spy on him and are assassinated when Hamlet is sent to England), are not necessary in the opera. Overall, the cast of characters is whittled from in the twenties down to eleven, not including any extras such as courtiers or players or chorus members in the opera. Left out of the opera are many smaller characters such as Voltemand and Cornelius (who were messengers between the King and Norway), Osric (the King’s messenger to Hamlet), Reynaldo (Polonius’s servant), Bernardo and Francisco (castle guards), and the priest who declares Ophelia’s suicide unworthy of religious rites. Most notably missing are Fortinbras, the nephew of the king of Norway, and the aforementioned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Most of these characters are not necessary in the opera because the subplots in which they are involved are not included in the opera. Osric, a stuttering, sycophantic page who Hamlet mocks and tricks, is not necessary because his job is to deliver a message from the King about the arranged duel with Laertes. In the operatic ending, the duel is never arranged, since it was combined with the graveyard scene, also without the poison-tipped swords and poisoned goblets. The opera omits the priest who begrudgingly (due to her death by suicide) gives burial rites to Ophelia, leaving Hamlet and Laertes to meet alone in the graveyard before the funeral procession brings in the remainder of the characters for the finale. Fortinbras and the entire subplot of conflict between Norway and Denmark are omitted. The very first meeting on the ramparts of the castle is cut to
only Marcellus and Horatio, leaving out Bernardo and Francisco. The characters of Bernardo and Francisco are covered in the opera by a soldier chorus with whom Horatio and Marcellus interact in the corresponding scene on the rampart. Using the soldier chorus as guards on the rampart, replacing these two minor characters of Bernardo and Francisco, is one way that Thomas and his librettists were able to employ the stylistically appropriate grand opera chorus into a play that does not often have large group scenes.

FIGURE 1. HAMLET ACT I, NO. 4, MM. 55-61. 29

4.2 LAERTES, POLONIUS, HORATIO, MARCELLUS

Of the eleven characters left in the opera, significant changes are made to each. Polonius, Horatio, and Claudius are reduced while Ophelia and Gertrude have more to say in the opera. Laertes role is slightly smaller and his entire character changes from disapproving of Hamlet and Ophelia to approving of their love in the opera. In Act I of the opera, Laertes sings a cavatine entrusting his sister to him.

FIGURE 2. HAMLET, ACT I, NO. 3, MM. 21-38.  

This cavatine is sung to Hamlet, rather than as a warning to Ophelia in the play. Laertes leaves for Norway (rather than France in the play) unsuspecting of any future troubles.

Shakespeare’s Laertes arrives from France angry about the death of his father and witnesses his sister’s madness, making it easy for Claudius to manipulate him into thinking that Hamlet is the enemy. This sets up a complicated plot point in which Laertes

Thomas, Hamlet, 39.
is to duel Hamlet with a poison-tipped sword. Instead, Thomas designates the meeting in the graveyard as their final confrontation, and Laertes only expresses anger at Ophelia’s death since Polonius lives.

In the play Polonius’s verbose nature in the play is proven ironic, particularly through his famous proclamation, after having already spewed several lengthy monologues, “brevity is the soul of wit.” Polonius seems to dislike Hamlet from the beginning and advises his daughter, Ophelia, to stay away from the Prince. He is willing to spy on Hamlet for the King and Queen and is stabbed by Hamlet in Act III when Hamlet sees him hiding behind a curtain and mistakes him for the king. However, in the opera, Polonius’s character is kept ironically brief having no solo lines until Act III, when the King admits to the murder of his brother in an aria; then, in his guilt, mistakes Hamlet’s shadow for his dead brother’s ghost. He calls for Polonius, who then suggests that they should not let their guilt be heard. This change in the opera to imply Polonius’s guilt serves as the impetus for Hamlet to vent his anger on Ophelia.

Horatio is Hamlet’s schoolmate and closest companion in the play. He stays with Hamlet even in his exile and is the rational foil to Hamlet’s raving philosophies. His love for Hamlet is shown in the final scene of the play, when he is willing to drink the poison rather than let Hamlet die alone. Hamlet convinces Horatio to live, who then eulogizes one of the most famous lines in the play, “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

In the opera, Horatio is never given the chance to show his rationality and intelligence. His purpose is to help his friend Hamlet find the ghost of his father. After

32 Ibid., V, ii, 3849-3850.
that, he actually joins the crowd mentality in Acts II and V when the chorus proclaims Hamlet mad. Horatio does not accompany Hamlet to the graveyard for the famous “Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio.”

Marcellus also receives similar treatment in the opera. His character in the play is not quite as verbose as Horatio’s and he only appears in the two scenes in Act I on the ramparts. In the opera Marcellus joins the chorus in Acts II and V and seems to be wherever Horatio is. The following example from Act II shows Marcellus and Horatio as outraged as the rest of the chorus and King and Queen over Hamlet’s drunken, treasonous behavior.

33 Ibid., V, i, 3373-3374.
4.3 GERTRUDE, CLAUDIUS, GHOST OF KING HAMLET

Gertrude’s role is more clearly defined in the opera than in the play.

Shakespeare’s Gertrude never admits to any involvement in the murder of King Hamlet.

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34 Thomas, Hamlet, 154.
Her only crime seems to be that in Hamlet’s eyes she has made a mistake in marrying Claudius. However, in the opera, she is deeply involved in manipulative schemes. Similar to the way that Claudius and Gertrude manipulate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in Act II of the opera the Queen manipulates Ophelia into staying around to appease her son. The following example is from the end of Gertrude’s aria, in which she tries to convince Ophelia to stay at the castle simply to distract Hamlet from his sorrows.

FIGURE 4. *HAMLET*, ACT II, NO. 7, MM. 41-46.\(^\text{35}\)

In Act III of the opera, Gertrude tries one last time to thrust Ophelia on her son. This leads to a trio between the three characters in which Hamlet pushes Ophelia over the edge of madness with his insults and has a final confrontation with his mother. At the

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\(^{35}\) Thomas, *Hamlet*, 106.
beginning of the trio, Gertrude, with Ophelia in tow, admits in an aside that she is using this confrontation to read Hamlet’s reactions.

FIGURE 5. *HAMLET*, ACT III, NO. 15, MM. 7-12.\(^\text{36}\)

While Gertrude does not outright admit to aiding in the murder of her husband, she expresses a level of guilt in the opera that is not shown in the play. In Act II she meets with Claudius and admits her manifestations of fear as visions of the ghost of her former husband. Singing louder and louder that they are damned, Claudius asks for her silence, saying they will both be found out and implying they are both complicit in the murder.

\(^{36}\) Thomas, *Hamlet*, 203.
Gertrude has told Claudius of her guilt. He begs her for silence and says “You will lose us both!” while she proclaims “We are both damned.” This, coupled with her admittance of guilt in the subsequent duet with Claudius, makes her a very different character than in the play. While she does not explicitly admit to aiding in the murder, she is definitely aware of the murder and actively trying to keep Hamlet from finding out any information.

37 Ibid., 117.
Whether she participated directly or is simply covering for the king, Gertrude expresses guilt in the opera that is never shown in the play.

The character of Claudius remains similarly “smarmy” in the opera. He seems to genuinely love his wife and he loves being king. Although we do not see him fall apart, caught up in his own manipulation of Laertes, in the opera we do see him try to pray, admitting his overwhelmingly guilty conscience in Act III.

The ghost of King Hamlet, the protagonist’s father, appears to Hamlet on the ramparts asking for revenge in both the play and the opera, and again in the scene where Hamlet confronts his mother. In both the play and the opera, the ghost’s objectives are clear—avenge his death and expose his brother Claudius’s crime. In the following example, you can see that Thomas chose to have the ghost intone rather than sing melodically for an other-worldly effect, almost as if the repeated notes symbolize his inability to move on until his murder is avenged.
In Thomas’s opera, the ghost appears to Hamlet in the finale and finally convinces him to kill Claudius. The ghost demands that Gertrude enter a cloister and Hamlet must do his duty as the new King of Denmark. Unlike the play, the ghost reveals himself to the entire cast in this final scene, who look on in terror. After Claudius dies the ghost of King Hamlet is shown in this musical figure to be avenged through his very first and only melodic line in the opera.

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38 Thomas, *Hamlet*, 77.
Hamlet is often pictured in my memory as the Hamlet of his soliloquies. Alone onstage, he plunges the depths of existential philosophy. These are great moments in literature and serve to redeem the character to his audience who watch him struggle with indecision and rash choices. Hints of the soliloquies are included in the opera, but they are never fully realized. Perhaps it is this lack of philosophical ponderance that is the

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largest difference between the Hamlet of the play and the Hamlet of the opera.

Hamlet’s entrances are often accompanied by a melancholy theme. His first entrance in Act I is just after he has skipped his mother’s wedding and coronation. The following example is the end of No. 1 after the coronation scene, in the transition to No. 2.

FIGURE 9. *HAMLET*, ACT I, NO. 1, MM. 216-227.\(^{40}\)

The first time Hamlet appears in the opera, he gives a short recitative derived from his Act I soliloquy in which he proclaims, “Frailty: thy name is woman,” spoken specifically about his mother. This is followed by a duet with Ophelia and a trio with

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Laertes and Ophelia in which Hamlet shows true love and admiration for the brother and sister. His dedication to his deceased father’s spirit is pure and noble in the Act I finale. These relationships and the audience’s hope of seeing them persist are what makes Hamlet likeable to the audience in the opera in lieu of the memorable soliloquies of the play.

In Act II of the opera we begin to see Hamlet fall apart as he first alienates Ophelia, then his mother and Claudius in the next scene. His entrance in Act II, before his encounter his Gertrude and Claudius, is also accompanied by the same theme as in Act I.
His interpolated drinking song “O vin dissipe la tristesse” shows a very different Hamlet than in the play. This drinking song would be uncharacteristic for the Hamlet of the play, as he shows his disdain for the King’s drinking habits in Act I: iv. However, Hamlet of the opera cleverly uses this drunkenness as an excuse for his outburst of accusations after the play within a play. By the finale of Act II, he has alienated every character of the opera through his outburst of accusations toward Claudius.

Act III includes a very small section of his “To be or not to be” speech. The most
famous words of the play are reduced to a two-page arietta in the opera, interrupted by the King whom he overhears admitting his guilt in a prayer.

FIGURE 11. HAMLET, ACT III, NO. 13, MM. 38-43.\textsuperscript{42}

This aria is the most philosophy we get from the Hamlet of the opera: Hamlet is a lover and a drinker rather than a philosopher.

4.5 OPHELIA

The first comment we hear about the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia in the play is that her family begs her not to talk to him. Sure enough, in the next scene, she describes Hamlet’s aggressive, unhinged visit to her room, confirming what her father

\textsuperscript{42} Thomas, Hamlet, 190.
and brother warned her about. Hamlet uses her to show his feigned madness in the nunnery scene. He only proclaims his love for her in the graveyard scene in a show of “machismo” when he says “I loved her more” to Laertes. She is mourned most greatly by her brother and then completely forgotten by Hamlet in the rest of the play.

In the opera we first meet Ophelia during the Act I love duet. A theme that returns in her Act IV aria is played underscoring her entrance into the scene.

FIGURE 12. HAMLET, ACT I, NO. 2, MM. 22-26.43

The duet is a realization of the letter that Hamlet gave to Ophelia in the play. The letter that Polonius reads to Gertrude is an attempt by Hamlet to write a poem for Ophelia. In the opera he is able to spontaneously come up with the beautiful phrases that convince Ophelia of his love.

43 Thomas, Hamlet, 26.
Unlike the play, this Ophelia is easily persuaded that Hamlet will be faithful to her and joins him in making poetry. However, the next time we see her in Act II, she describes how Hamlet has gradually been pulling away. She is reading a book and observing Hamlet’s actions. Underscoring his entrance, the melody from the duet reminds Ophelia of their happiness and she is beginning to become distrustful of Hamlet.

As soon as she has made up her mind in the second part of the aria that Hamlet is no longer in love with her, she is bombarded by the Queen who wants to use her to spy on Hamlet. In the play, Ophelia is spared this abuse from the queen, but is still used as a pawn by Claudius and Polonius who purposefully send her to Hamlet so they can

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45 Ibid., 89.
eavesdrop. In the opera Ophelia wishes to leave the court but is persuaded to stay by the Queen. Later in Act III the Queen thrusts her on Hamlet who then sings a version of “get thee to a nunnery,” insulting her and officially ending their relationship. In the opera she is spared the loss of her father, but the pressure of the Queen and the loss of Hamlet’s love are enough to launch her into the mad scene of Act IV.

Act IV is a solo tour de force combining all of the moments of gibberish Ophelia spouts in the play. These are interspersed with comments from the king and queen and her brother in the play. In the opera she sings to a chorus of villagers who recognize her. Her entrance is preceded by the same musical theme as when she first encounters Hamlet for the love duet in Act I.

FIGURE 15. HAMLET, ACT IV, NO. 18, MM. 6-7.46

In the recitative portion of the scene, she asks the villagers to play games with her and then insists that Hamlet is her husband.

46 Thomas, Hamlet, 285.
She then sings a waltz with impressive coloratura sections, followed by a somber ballade describing water nymphs and sirens—an allusion to drowning. In the coda to the scene, she is accompanied by a humming chorus and reprises parts of her ballade, as well as a portion of the love duet from Act I. The Ophelia of the opera is treated as a musical centerpiece rather than a minor annoyance to Hamlet as in the play. Her exit is exciting and interesting rather than simply a mention by another character.

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FIGURE 17. *HAMLET*, ACT IV, NO. 20, MM. 46-48.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{48}\) Thomas, *Hamlet*, 310.
CHAPTER 5: THE LIBRETTO

5.1 PURPOSE

I originally conceived the idea to create a new libretto for Ambroise Thomas’s *Hamlet* when I directed a trio of undergraduate students in a scene from Act II. While performing background research to share with the students, I discovered that none of the students involved had read the play. I was disappointed at first, however I soon realized that this would be a great teaching opportunity. The second challenge was that the opera’s libretto is in French, which while a common operatic singing language, proved difficult for the young students involved.

The next challenge was finding a translation for the students to work with. I came across no singable English translations and very few translations of the libretto readily available. For the impending performance I made my own translations for supertitles. Aware that the scene I was directing did not appear in the Shakespeare play, I became curious as to the differences between the opera and the play, which spurred my research for this document.

Upon re-reading the Shakespearean *Hamlet* and translating the opera, I concluded that despite a few interpolated moments, much of the opera followed the Shakespeare, however condensed. Thus, my idea was born to create a singable English libretto based on the Shakespearean text. Beyond pure entertainment value, this could be used as a tool for directors in collegiate or small-budget settings who would like to introduce students and audiences to this work without the size and language restrictions, while also allowing for an interdepartmental education in dramatic literature.

Even though the story is accessible and popular, and the music is enchanting, an
actual performance of Thomas’s *Hamlet* presents a multitude of challenges for a university or a small opera company. In its original form, the opera requires a large orchestra, has multiple ballets, and few female roles. In hopes of attracting more performances of *Hamlet* and a possibility of a performance at my own institution, I began seeking ways to reduce the forces necessary to produce this work. I made cuts to the opera bringing the running time from approximately three hours in its full form to approximately two hours. This was done in consultation with a composer/arranger who agreed that it was possible to create an orchestral chamber reduction. For performance in our educational setting we are happily using the piano reduction. The ballets are cut to reduce time and while they are musically lovely, they are not necessary to the story line.

The number of male roles exceeded our department’s resources as well, so I determined that several roles could indeed be sung by female voices, either as a pants role in the case of Polonius and Marcellus, or, as in the case of the two gravediggers, I allowed them to be played by a soprano and mezzo-soprano—gender seemed unimportant. The Grand Opera-sized choruses were also pared down as much as possible or cut altogether.
5.2 THE PROCESS

First, I made a literal translation so as to compare the play structure and the operatic structure. I matched the sections of the play to the opera in order to determine what the librettists kept and changed. In most cases, scenes in the opera were much shorter than the play, making it necessary to decide which lines to keep. Some scenes, although condensed, were rather obviously taken closely from the play, such as the “To be or not to be” speech. For some scenes, which were interpolated, such as the Queen’s recitative and aria in Act II, No. 7, I used a combination of scenes from the play. In this example, I chose to use some of Claudius’s lines from the play. In Act I: ii and Act IV: i of the play, Claudius and Gertrude persuade Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. This scene serves a similar purpose in the opera, as Gertrude alone tries to use Ophelia to gain information about Hamlet. The following example shows the combination of Claudius’s line from Act IV: i,49 and a line from Act II: ii.50

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50 Ibid, II, ii, 1068.
Interpolated scenes such as the Hamlet and Ophelia’s Act I duet and moments Ophelia’s Act IV mad scene became realizations of moments in the play that were talked about but not necessarily acted out. The Act I love duet between Hamlet and Ophelia was taken from the letter that a concerned Polonius reads to Claudius and Gertrude.

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Within the duet, I worked in a reference about how Polonius disapproves of their love, which Hamlet then disputes using lines from the letter as dialogue.

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52 Ibid., 31.
Ophelia’s mad scene in Act IV became an amalgamation of her Act IV ravings from the play as well as a small portion of Gertrude’s description of her death. In the play, she sings sections of songs to the other characters that seem nonsensical but which describe her feelings of desertion by Hamlet and the pain of her father’s death. Since her father, Polonius, does not die in the opera, I chose her texts about spurned love, such as in the following example. The text comes from Act IV: v, lines 2966-70, in which the stage directions indicate she is to sing to the King and Queen.

FIGURE 20. HAMLET, ACT IV, NO. 18, MM. 38-43.\(^{53}\)

In the ballade section of the mad scene, Ophelia describes a fantastic underwater world

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 288.
where the heroine is seduced underneath by sirens. There is no equivalent to this in the play, so I chose to use Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death. Ophelia speaks the lines describing the location and occasion of her drowning. I chose to keep some of the libretto’s lines about sirens to symbolize her desire to die.

FIGURE 21. HAMLET, ACT IV, NO. 18, MM. 187-195. 54

The Act II drinking song given to Hamlet in the opera became a looming question for me as there really was no equivalent in the play. I handled this by staying with the basic translation of the drinking song for the A section, and for the introspective B section, I assigned some of Hamlet’s dark banter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

54 Ibid., 296.
from Act II: ii. He is proclaiming his disgust with the human race amidst Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s thinly veiled attempts to extract information from him.

FIGURE 22. HAMLET, ACT II, NO.10. MM. 49-60.  

Thomas’s interpretation of the soliloquy from Act III is an example of a piece that came directly from the play and was easily adapted back into English. Although this is an extremely shortened version, it is the only example in the opera of an aria being based

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55 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 1391-1397.
solely on one of Hamlet’s soliloquies. The following example is half of the piece with the second half being a refrain of the important lines, “To be, or not to be.”
My second greatest challenge was how to deal with the ending. I had the choice to

Ibid., 190.
leave Hamlet alive as in the libretto, or somehow work in his death. I felt compelled to kill my Hamlet as it seemed like Hamlet is not Hamlet without a tragic ending. I also did not care for the fact that everyone sees the ghost at the end. My solution was to have Laertes announce his poison-tipped sword in the Act V graveyard scene. Hamlet slowly feels the effects of the poison. The ghost still appears, but only Hamlet can see him. Hamlet persuades Claudius to admit his guilt, and in one final desperate act, Hamlet stabs him. He dies just as the people proclaim him king. The music remained the same while careful libretto changes facilitated the tragedy.

FIGURE 24. HAMLET, ACT V, NO. 24. MM. 54-56.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 350.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Thomas, Carré, and Barbier portrayed their specific vision of Hamlet through the operatic stage. Their success was sporadic, enjoying acclaim during its premiere, and criticisms due to its libretto, as well as bias against French styles as we saw in the case of Tchaikovsky’s review, and stylistic bias in the case of Verdi’s review. Thomas also may have inadvertently created some of the bias against his own works, due to his rejection of newer styles of music while director of the Paris Conservatoire. His protests of composers such as César Franck may have led to Thomas being seen as old-fashioned and passé all the way into the twentieth-century.59 As these old biases die, and the artists of the new millennium seek fresh operatic works to explore, Thomas has re-emerged as a composer who conscientiously sought to set great literature within the musical framework of his time and place.

In an effort to breathe new life into a piece of French grand opera as well as provide a teaching tool for colleges and small budget companies, I have created this new singable translation for Hamlet. My intention was never to dissuade anyone from singing the French version or performing the full version if within the means of their company, but rather to allow for more people to gain exposure to this music. As the arts continue to be defunded in American culture, we need cost effective alternatives to provide performance opportunities in a variety of styles.

Bibliography


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