



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

AN EXAMINATION OF MISOGYNY IN NINETEENTH-  
CENTURY BEL CANTO OPERA WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE  
TO THE “MAD SCENE” OF *DONIZETTI'S LUCIA DI  
LAMMERMOOR* AND BELLINI'S *I PURITANI*.

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This project will seek to examine misogyny and insanity in nineteenth-century bel canto opera with reference to two renowned mad scenes and consider whether these scenes are inherently misogynistic. The operas that will be discussed are Donizetti's renowned *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and Bellini's *I Puritani* (1834). Society at the time of these opera's premieres will be examined to further question if these scenes are a by-product of a macabre interest, or a device of female oppression.

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Since the inception of opera, composers have revelled in the drama that madness can play in their works. The term “bel canto”, translating literally to “beautiful singing” is often also noted as a sub-genre of opera to denote a specific form of composition and singing in the early nineteenth century. It is in this world of beautiful singing in which we find a sinister obsession with mad scenes. Typically, finales in bel canto opera test the female lead vocalist to their utmost, with incredibly difficult coloratura, legato, and staccato lines all being tackled in just one aria. With some of the most inspiring languid singing in operatic history, a question must be asked to why there is such a fascination in the nineteenth century with closing operas with depictions of madness, with its connotations of hysteria, violence, and anger?

The nineteenth century has long been considered an era of expression, Gothicism, and the macabre. With psychology still in its infancy, but developing at great pace, society was in an optimum position to attribute to women all manner of afflictions – most notably: “hysteria”. Psychology and fascination with the macabre could have catalysed the inevitability of women in opera on stage in fits of uncontrolled “madness”. One must therefore ask, are these scenes influenced by a misogynistic society due to the extreme demands on the female vocalists, in addition to the subject matter, or a mere by-product of an intriguing allure of the mind? In this essay, women and society in the nineteenth century must be discussed in order to gain an appreciation of how oppression came in many subtle ways. Advances in psychology and interest in the romantic nature of the macabre and gothic will also be considered in order to provide an answer to whether the mad scene was – and is – a tool of misogyny or a mere consequence of popular interest in the aforementioned areas. The bel canto mad scene – especially the arguably greatest pillar of bel canto opera: *Lucia di Lammermoor* – will be discussed to highlight if, and how, misogynistic values in society at the time were transferred onto the stage.

## **CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

When one thinks of female oppression in history, the nineteenth century is one of the more apparent eras in which we can clearly see evidence of misogyny. Women were still in a domesticated state in the nineteenth century, and this came with certain emotional expectations as Shields notes in her examination of gendered emotion:

The definition of women's ideal emotion evolved contemporaneously with the identification of women as the centre of the household. This domestic image of woman featured emotional temperance and equanimity as its defining themes. Emotionally, the successful household manager was portrayed as expressing calm mother-love and unruffled housewifeliness.<sup>1</sup>

While a typical woman's place remained in the home, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of what one now refers to as "first-wave feminism". The first-wave feminist campaigned for equal rights in law, but also fought for a cultural right. The right to pursue one's own interests, without any concern of gendered stigma.<sup>2</sup> This challenge to society's norms is therefore enough to question the innocence of the many bel canto mad scene finales in opera as, while feminism at the turn of the nineteenth century was still in its relative infancy compared to modern day feminism, the discussion of it alone and its formation from concept to a genuine movement most definitely would have become public knowledge.

Despite debates of rights for women, the lack of any upward mobility for working women meant many still had to rely on marriage for any financial support. Working class women were looked down upon but it was the middle-class women, of whom had more

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<sup>1</sup> Shields, A, Stephanie. "Passionate Men, Emotional Women: Psychology Constructs Gender Difference in the Late 19th Century", *History of Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2007, pg. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Heilmann, Ann. "First-Wave Feminist Engagements with History: Introduction." *Victorian Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1–4. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27793561](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793561).

opportunity to find a respectable husband, were seen as unusual for going against social norms. Furthermore, low wages and abysmal working conditions meant that those determined to make their own path for themselves realised that the only way to survive would be to live a life of domestic servitude.<sup>3</sup> Protests for access to higher education and better social welfare schemes were difficult to be passionate about when one's morale had been beaten down by male employers in addition to having little energy due to long hours and tough working conditions in factories.

Fighting for social reform was even further inhibited when many women of all classes were indoctrinated to be a "True Woman". Women were reminded of their task to be a good and loyal wife, in addition to a dutiful mother in order to do their part for the progress of a civilised society.

Patriarchal propaganda was clearly in great abundance in the nineteenth century. If a young girl growing up at home, she would be groomed to accept her eventual place as a dutiful housewife. If a working in a factory, one would be looked upon with disdain and coaxed into finding a husband and raising a family. At church, one would find lectures of fulfilling a woman's obligation to God: to have children and to be loyal to one's husband.<sup>4</sup> This concept of the True Woman was not without its misogynistic faults as Cruea notes: "Ironically, while a True Woman was assumed to be a pillar of moral strength and virtue, she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, one can see the struggles of women in the nineteenth century as a woman's livelihood was shaped from a duty to a patriarchal society. A woman who sought to break from this way of life and find work – most likely – in a factory was unfeminine and unnatural. We

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<sup>3</sup> Cruea, Susan M., "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement". General Studies Writing Faculty Publications, Paper 1, 2005, pg. 187

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 188

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 189

can also women were gently persuaded into continuing and aiding a misogynistic society as it was taught to them directly from birth and patriarchal values continued to be hammered into women at home, church, and even the workplace. Motherhood and the role of the wife was a pivotal task given to women by God and it is no surprise as to why many ended up as housewives whether one wanted to or not. For many, it had been passed down to them from their own mothers. For most, it was the only way to survive and have the energy to quietly protest in women's salons.

## **CHAPTER TWO: ADVANCES IN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE IMPACT ON WOMEN**

The women that spoke out against the very much male tailored society, as mentioned earlier, were looked upon with much disregard and seen as selfish. Feminism was a reckless rejection of God's plan for women, and a self-interested hinderance of society's progression in both the minds of men and many women – who knew little else than to agree with their husbands. Medically speaking, women had been regarded as the weaker sex due to their reproductive organs and functions, and with the growing interest in psychology, it was only a matter of time before faults were found in the minds of women in addition to bodies.

When observing insanity, we see that Shakespeare's 'Ophelia' paved the way for a fascination with mentally ill women as a plot device in this advancing era of psychiatry. Her pleasantness and pliant nature being of interest to men as Sigurðardóttir notes:

'The Ophelia' became a popular subject for painters in the nineteenth century, and female inmates of English asylums were often made to mirror her appearance; wearing white, keeping their hair unbound and unruly, and wearing wreaths of flowers and branches on their heads.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sigurðardóttir, Elisabet Rakel. "Women and Madness in the 19th Century: The effects of Oppression on Women's Mental Health", (Master's Thesis), *University of Iceland*, 2013, pg. 5.

The idea of women being obedient and of a gentle disposition in a patriarchal society fits only too well within the societal etiquette of the nineteenth century. Following on from the concept of a 'True Woman' as women were meant to uphold their moral duties to have children and care for the home while also being passive and submissive. From this, one can predict where this intrigue with mentally ill women would go and it was only a matter of time before the idea found its way to the stage.

Following on from earlier discussion, the relatively new idea of examining the mind had already become polluted with a misogynistic ideology by dressing female patients in the uniform of 'the Ophelia'. Clad in white nightdresses and wearing flowers, it did not help matters much that women far outnumbered men in these new psychiatric hospitals; bringing forth a growing consensus that women's minds were delicate and at greater risk of succumbing to mental illness: "'The medical warnings against any activity that might change women's domestic status, seen as a fact of God and nature, were deafening" (Appignanesi, 120)"<sup>7</sup> One also forgets that new ideas are often met with contention and rejection, the development of feminist ideals were further evidence in a patriarchal society that these women who sought to challenge their society's norms were mentally ill and must be committed to asylum.<sup>8</sup>

Discussing the case of Edith Lancaster in 1885, Fauvel notes:

Henry Lanchester learned that his daughter Edith had fallen in love with a man who was not only poor [...] Lanchester turned to the psychiatrist George Fielding Blandford, who decreed that Edith's "free love" was tantamount to "social suicide" and that his daughter could now be viewed as a "monomaniac" whose brain had been "turned by socialism".

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 6.

A classic case of a woman trying to express her own feelings and assert her own free will being rebuked by the male figurehead in her family and consequently locked up in an asylum without any evidence of mental illness. Such is the problem of this patriarchal society of the nineteenth century; women who were pushing the were seen as insane and the male practitioners of this new medicine agreed. Men deliberately turning to psychiatric services in order to extinguish feministic rebellion is yet another advantage men had over the women in their society. Interestingly, here we can see the ‘scientific’ leap between unnatural women in God’s eyes – wanting to work for themselves and not marry – to the accusation that these unnatural women were mentally unstable. Men had essentially conjured up the ability to imprison women under the reasoning that the women in question were ill, and we are quite able to see that the diagnoses of these illnesses could stem from almost anything the male declared.

Sigurðardóttir further notes an interesting point about the character of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*:

[...] Bertha symbolizes the rage and madness that Jane herself was shown to be capable of at the beginning of the book, but unlike Bertha, Jane has managed to contain her anger. [...] Bertha is a very notable symbol of the Victorian woman who has gone – or is going – insane due to her imprisonment and restrictions.<sup>9</sup>

This bears striking resemblance to the character of Lucia in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* that I shall be discussing in greater depth later. Donizetti’s Lucia is forced to marry a man she does not love and, as a result, is driven into a mad frenzy and stabs her new husband until he is dead. Here one notes the comparisons one can draw between real life society in the nineteenth century and the renowned operas of the bel canto. Two characters, both driven

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 18

mad due to the circumstances in which they are forced into and the tragedies that ensue from their inevitable mental collapse.

The birth of psychiatry and rise of the asylum thus help to shed light on the misogyny of nineteenth century society. Institutions for the sole purpose of helping to ‘correct’ those that had strayed from the path of the ‘True Woman’. One also can highlight the concerning relationship between the fascination of madness in the theatre of Shakespeare and the impact on psychology which would later resurge in bel canto mad scenes.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE BEL CANTO MAD SCENE – LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR** **(1835)**

In 1835, Donizetti created what could be considered the quintessential bel canto opera: *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The opera is based on Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Interestingly Donizetti made some changes in his adaption, most notably: the change from Lady Ashwood being the antagonist the book, whereas in his opera, Donizetti gives this role to Lord Ashwood, Lucia’s father. A common feature in nineteenth century society: the male figurehead of the family being the master of the house.

The aria ‘Regnava nel silenzio’ is Lucia’s entrance aria in which she remembers the night when the ghost of a woman killed at the fountain warned her that her romance with Edgardo would end in blood. Her maid then tells her she must abandon any love for this man and follow the wishes of her family. In this scene we have a woman wishing to break with tradition and her maid trying to make Lucia see reason. This is not dissimilar to a mother-daughter relationship as mentioned earlier in educating daughters to follow the traditional path. However, Lucia remains fervent and the remainder of the opera appears almost as a commentary to what happens to one when one refuses to listen to patriarchal reason.

The opera's mad scene is a culmination of dramatic events; the greatest of which being Lucia's forced marriage to Enrico. Clement argues that this mad scene is a moment of freedom for Lucia, noting:

Pretty feeble-minded everyone says. But no, they are hard-headed, bent on holding on to their desire even when everything gets in the way. The madwomen who sing are stubborn and determined in their song, and their intertwining voices scale the walls of reason, reaching higher than what is sensible, far higher than reality.<sup>10</sup>

Clement gives fresh opinions on Donizetti's mad scene as one can see from the passage above. An argument that suggests that the men around her are mad, while Lucia is in fact the only sane person in the room, clinging dearly to her love for Edgardo, clinging dearly to her voice, and expressing it again and again at greater volume, at higher pitch. While many women were abandoned in asylums for disregarding the rules of society, that is not to say many women did succumb to mental illness under such patriarchal dictatorship. Lucia may have found some freedom within her dream, but this is at the cost of her mental wellbeing: "The curtain falls on Lucia's jubilation, set free and rising still."<sup>11</sup> Uniquely, this could be an argument both for and against the labelling of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* as misogynistic. Clement's Lucia rejects the confines of a real-life mentality and instead embraces her madness. However, this also makes one reflect on the unfortunate reality that Lucia has ostracised herself from the real world, from society, and had she not died at the end of the opera, one most likely would have found her too locked away like so many women before her.

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<sup>10</sup> Clément, Catherine. *Opera: The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. pg. 88

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* ^ pg. 90

While Smart agrees with this sentiment to an extent, the view that the bel canto mad scene – particularly for Lucia – could be declared as a liberation for women, she also expresses some disagreements. Smart further expands on the evolving perception of Lucia’s supposed madness; the traditionally favoured “sepulchral”<sup>12</sup> nature of Lucia’s mental collapse and the beginnings of what some argue as a feminist victory, a positive moment of liberation that we are seeing in recent feminist literature. Noting the difference between Scott’s original and Donizetti’s adaption, Smart writes:

While Scott’s Lucy is inarticulate and frightening, more animal than human, the operatic Lucia seems detached from reality but disarmingly voluble, expressing pretty sentiments in gracious, highly stylised language. In other words, compared to the alarming realism of Lucy’s breakdown, Lucia is anesthetised, celebrated with tuneful music and an appealing visual portrayal.<sup>13</sup>

While Lucia’s apparent vocal freedom in Donizetti’s scene could be interpreted as the character finding relinquishment from patriarchal society in her own madness, Lucia’s freedom remains bound by harmonic, and formal conventions. The significance of the language Lucia is given compared to the original Lucy must also be addressed; these are not the wild ramblings of a crazed woman. Lucia instead of aware, focused, and quite lucid compared to the almost animalistic Lucy of Scott’s novel.

Comparing with Clement’s argument that these mad scenes are a “leap into space” – a metaphor for attempting to find freedom within the madness – Smart disagrees by noting the irony of assuming there is any other space for a woman to leap into. Whether it be the coloratura notes in the vocal line that must be adhered to, or the very plot itself which will always result

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<sup>12</sup> Smart, Ann Mary. “The Silencing of Lucia.” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol 4, No. 2, p.119, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* ^ p.124

in Lucia's death, one must remember she is bound in a misogynistic tomb, regardless of how pretty and freeing the music may make it seem.<sup>14</sup>

Again, one can see a connection between the stage and life outside of the opera house when looking at working class women. Many women had work to survive but there were those who tried to support themselves as a means of protesting the social norms of the era. However, one commonly finds that there would always be a reminder of oppression for women no matter where they were: if they were in the home they would be bound to the whim of their husbands, if they were in church one would hear arguments of the virtues of a dutiful wife. In Donizetti's mad scene, while some claim Lucia has found freedom, one cannot help but note that Lucia is, and will always be, oppressed due to her gender. The denial of her free will to marry the man she loves in the plot that drives her to madness, or the notes the composer gives her to sing, Lucia's fate is sealed.

Furthermore, the fetishization of something so simple as Lucia's physical appearance provides a reminder of the misogynistic society this opera was created in. A common feature of many productions even today is the image of Lucia being "clad in a white nightdress, with dishevelled hair, [...]"<sup>15</sup> Smart further notes the judgement Lucia faces for simply looking back at her observers:

The formation of the chorus thus creates a literal frame around Lucia, submitting her not only to their gaze, but by extension to that of the audience. [...] Raimondo's description suggests that the very fact of returning the male gaze with such fixity is itself a symptom. [...] Returning the gaze is, it seems, a transgression restricted to women on the margins of society, such as prostitutes and the insane.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 125

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 125

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 127

In addition to simply looking back at her observers as she walks around in clothes one would only see inside the bedroom, Lucia's voice as well as her body is also a vehicle for oppression, one could argue, in the mad scene aria. The many trills and high notes Lucia sings suggest psychosis and hysteria, but it is important to notice that coloratura in and of itself does not necessarily equate to madness. Coloratura has long been a prominent feature of bel canto opera with the cabaletta aria. What is important to examine here is the false sense of security the cadenza like moments in the mad scene Donizetti writes for her provide. At the end of a phrase, Lucia is allowed almost a sense of formlessness as she leaps into an exorbitant register and concludes her phrases with many embellishment melismas. Lucia is allowed to feel like she is in control, but these melismas always end with a cadence, highlighting that she is indeed not in control. While coloratura may allow her to prolong her freedom, ultimately, she is bound to the cadence, and the longer she prolongs these harmonic moments, the more she only strengthens them when they finally occur.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to be the case that Donizetti's coloratura writing for Lucia is most definitely carefully considered; mellisma, roulades, and trills are littered throughout the opera. However, in Lucia's moment of madness, the coloratura writing for Lucia almost becomes unbearable and one loses any sense of meaning as in order to execute coloratura, words must be repeated, vowels must be dragged out. Donizetti has clearly manipulated the written coloratura so that when adding her own embellishments, Lucia is only reaffirming her deranged mind state with each new trill she adds, much to the titillation of her male voyeurs.

Lucia's oppression can be found through the form – or lack thereof – in the musical structure. While the representations coloratura may have are subjective, one cannot deny the break in tradition found in the score. Solita forma, also known as the double aria, is commonly

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 129

mentioned when referencing music from the bel canto operas. This usually takes the form of four main sections: the recitativo, the slow cavatina, an interlude known as the tempo di mezzo, then concluded by the lively cabaletta during which the singer can show off one's skill. This is distorted during the mad scene of *Lucia*, time seems to stand still and a huge musical landscape instead seems to take over any sense of form. There is an example of this in the transition between the scena and the cavatina, highlighting her loss of control and departure from the conventional solita forma structure. Lucia is freed from the aria's usual structure as, instead of moving on as the orchestra does with the modulation to F major and the introduction of the flutes, Lucia continues her recitative. She is almost unaware of the reality around her, instead hallucinating her wedding to Edgardo.

Lucia's words are jarring against the traditional solita forma and it does create a sense of suspended time. One does not know where Lucia is going to go as the orchestra and her are no longer in harmony. This could be declared yet another symptom of her madness, it could also be a deliberate attempt at rejecting societal norms, a moment of freedom.<sup>18</sup> A subtle method through which one could break from patriarchal rules put in place. Unfortunately, it is unclear that Donizetti intended this lack of structure to be feminist by any means. It is most likely a deliberate but subtle attempt at further highlighting Lucia's madness. Regular audiences would be familiar with the popular structure of bel canto arias and this only serves as another example of a foolish young girl being unruly and unnatural in the eyes of a society run by men.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: I PURITANI AND MADNESS AS PLOT DEVICE**

Bellini's mad scene for *I Puritani* highlights how trivial the concept of a mentally ill person was in the nineteenth century. The second act mad scene is a lengthy double aria, much

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 131.

like Lucia's but much more traditional in structure. The cavatina evokes a dreamlike state, with Elvira lamenting the assumed betrayal of Arturo. The cabaletta completely flips the atmosphere and Elvira now blissfully sings to her Arturo, telling him to hurry and return to her. Elvira's mind can collapse in a matter of moments, suggesting that her mental capacity hinges on a whether her beloved male companion is with her. Elvira's almost robotic dependence on a man further reflects the nineteenth century notion that a woman could not survive without a husband.

Furthermore, in looking at Bellini's characterisation of Elvira, one cannot help but think of Rousseau, the antifeminist philosopher.<sup>19</sup> Elvira lacks the mental strength to cope without Arturo and appears to become inconsolable upon learning of Arturo's appeared betrayal. The inability to think for oneself and consider the abundant reasons why Arturo – a royalist – would be fleeing with a deposed queen makes Elvira come across as deeply naive. This portrayal of a weak, unthinking woman, unable to exist without a man to love recalls Rousseau's concerning beliefs about women. Especially after the Enlightenment era, a time of social progress, these beliefs feel deeply out of place in the nineteenth century.

The fickle nature of madness in Bellini's *I Puritani* also reaffirms the notion described earlier that women could go mad at any time, for any number of reasons. As mentioned, Bellini writes three mad scenes for Elvira. The first being when she finds out that Arturo has fled, the second being her main scene as she imagines her marriage to Arturo, and her third occurring after being told Arturo has been arrested. It is important to note here that after the famous second mad scene; Elvira is finally told the true story and seemingly comes to her senses again. Her descent into madness a third time is absurd, as if one can just switch psychosis on and off.

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<sup>19</sup> Weiss, Penny A. "Rousseau, Antifeminism, and Woman's Nature." *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1987, pp. 81. ACCESSED ONLINE: JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/191721](http://www.jstor.org/stable/191721). 4<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

What Bellini really seems to be depicting here is hysteria, a common – and misogynistic – affliction amongst women in the nineteenth century as Sigurdoardottir notes:

New diagnosis included hysteria, anorexia nervosa and neurasthenia, almost all exclusively attributed to women. [...]. Nervosa anorexia was seen as a self-sacrificing and a very feminine disease while hysteria was often deemed selfish and destructive, a rebellion of which doctors did not approve.<sup>20</sup>

Another argument against Elvira's three mad scenes can be found in comparing how the first and third scenes occur. Elvira believes Arturo has left her which causes a breakdown. After hearing the true story behind his intentions, she regains her sanity before plummeting again after being informed of his arrest. This reflects the belief that women in the nineteenth century did not have the mental capacity to absorb much information. Clarke in his 1875 book *Sex and Education; or, a Fair Chance for Girls* notes how while women were becoming more educated like their male counterparts, these women were also more likely to suffer from diseases and instabilities of the nervous system. One of these including the archaic illness: hysteria<sup>21</sup>.

Unlike Donizetti's Lucia, Elvira's madness comes out of nowhere and reappears when it is convenient to drive the plot. Bellini waters down the character and woman of Elvira to a mere plot device, using oppressive beliefs against her. Elvira becomes unbelievable, her erratic mental state is both tragic and laughable. This is all made worse when one remembers the second mad scene has Elvira in a white wedding regalia as she floats and dances along the stage in many productions. The common trope of the Ophelia as an ironic, crude joke atop the rest of the problematic embodiments of misogyny one finds in Elvira.

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<sup>20</sup> Sigurdoardottir, Ibid. ^ pg. 3

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. ^ pg. 7

## CONCLUSION

Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* immortalises the attitudes towards women in the nineteenth century as seen through her costume – deeply inspired by fascination with the famous Shakespearean Ophelia which served as an archetype of madness to many in the nineteenth century to the point that asylum uniforms began to adopt her appearance. Lucia's twisted sense of freedom she is given through her coloratura and the manipulation of structure is also a commentary on the cruel reality of lives for many women in the nineteenth century; those that tried desperately not to rely on a husband. Those that were tricked into thinking one could support oneself and be a free woman yet ultimately being forced into marriage or face death due to starvation or homelessness from lack of a living wage. The dichotomy between Lucy and Lucia, Scott's original novel and Donizetti's adaption is quite evident that mental illness in women was something to be dramatized, trivialised, and sexualised. A woman of whom her male audience can look upon with lust and romance.

Donizetti's Lucy is no longer a human, but property of man and a representation of man's expectations of the women in their lives. To be judged harshly and swiftly upon any sign of resistance; all recognisable facets of regular contemporary life which ultimately prove that the mad scene, inherently, is indeed an ode to misogyny. At best Lucia is a spectacle for the male gaze, forced to present fiendishly difficult coloratura to a standard of utter perfection in nothing but a sheer nightdress, at worst she is a tragic embodiment of the struggle of real-life women transferred into the opera house and illuminated by stage lights. This oppression is reaffirmed when examining Bellini's Elvira and her mad scenes, littered with the same issues in addition to diluting a lead character down to a tragic means of driving the plot.

This essay's examination of real-life society and the oppression of women in the nineteenth century highlights the misogyny of the bel canto mad scene and acknowledges the importance of looking beyond the stage. By drawing parallels between the struggles of real women, and how these struggles are referenced on the stage, one can ultimately scrutinise the opera in greater detail, and with broader scope.

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