Donizetti and the Music of Mental Derangement: *Anna Bolena, Lucia di Lammermoor*, and the Composer’s Neurobiological Illness

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The composer Gaetano Donizetti, who died in a state of mental derangement due to neurosyphilis, created some of opera’s greatest scenes of psychosis. His letters reveal the clinical progression of his neurobiological illness, which was confirmed by autopsy. One can hypothesize that the composer’s brain disease, which led to his psychosis and death, may have had an influence on his ability to create the powerful and unforgettable scenes of psychosis in his operas.

In *Anna Bolena*, he captured in musical and dramatic terms Anne Boleyn’s historically corroborated mental disorder during her imprisonment in the Tower of London. Sixteen years after having composed *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti himself would be locked up, against his will, in a mental institution. In *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Donizetti portrayed a girl given to hallucinations who, in her unforgettable “mad” scene, comes on stage, a pathetic embodiment of a human being in the throes of psychosis. Thirteen years after *Lucia’s* première, Donizetti would die, psychotic and paralyzed, of untreated neurosyphilis. Studying Donizetti’s neurosyphilis and the portrayals of psychosis in his operas can help one to appreciate the pain of human beings trapped in the prison of a brain subjected to the devastation of mental derangement.

Because music penetrates deeper into the psyche than words alone, music melded to words in opera can convey a particularly powerful sense of mental derangement, with its minglings of pain and flights of fantasy, reality and delusions, horror and pathos. “Mad” scenes, frequently of the coloratura variety, flourished in nineteenth-century Romantic opera. For example, some celebrated scenes of psychosis in opera occur in Bellini’s *Il Pirata* (1827) and *I Puritani* (1835), Verdi’s *Nabucco* (1842), Meyerbeer’s *Dinorah* (1859), and Ambroise Thomas’s *Hamlet* (1868).

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), who died in a state of psychosis due to neurosyphilis, created some of opera’s most powerful scenes of psychosis in *Anna Bolena* (1830) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835). He also created haunting depictions of mental derangement in at least four more of his 65 operas: *L’esule di Roma* (1828), *Il furioso all’isola di San Domingo* (1833), *Maria Padilla* (1841), and *Linda di Chamounix* (1842). Knowing Donizetti’s medical history prompts us to probe some possible relationships between his brain disease and the immortal scenes of mental disorder that he created in his operas. We begin with a brief description of the composer’s neurobiological illness.

**Abbreviation:** CNS: central nervous system

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THE MEDICAL COURSE OF DONIZETTI'S NEUROSYPHILIS

Modern antibiotics, which can successfully treat syphilis, did not exist in Donizetti's day. If untreated, the disease progresses through a primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary stage. In the primary stage, two to four weeks after infection, an ulcer appears at the site of infection. During the secondary stage, two to four weeks after the primary stage, the patient develops multiple skin eruptions, fever, malaise, and enlarged lymph nodes. In the latent stage, which may last for many years, a patient is often asymptomatic. In the tertiary stage, many years after the primary infection, the patient develops serious complications from the disease. About 2–8 percent (like Donizetti) suffer from serious, irreversible, central nervous system (CNS) disease [1].

Tertiary syphilis involving the CNS was one of the most feared and destructive forms of the disease in the nineteenth century. Although invasion of the CNS occurred very early in the course of the disease, CNS symptoms generally began 5–35 years after infection. Clinical symptoms characteristic of untreated CNS tertiary syphilis can wax and wane or can be permanent and slowly progressive [2].

Although one can never know exactly when Donizetti contracted syphilis, some scholars think it may have been shortly before his marriage on June 1, 1828, to Virginia Vasselli [3: p. 57]. She would die nine years later, at age 28, after having given birth to three premature infants who lived between one hour and 13 days [3: pp. 55–56, 107, 121]. The first, a boy born at seven months on July 29, 1828, was deformed ("a very broad vein ... ran from one ear to the other across the top of his skull") and suffered from convulsions [4: letter 51, p. 269].

Up to the time of his success with Lucia di Lammermoor in 1835, Donizetti had described suffering from fevers, severe headaches, convulsions, and gastrointestinal problems, all of which are symptoms of CNS syphilis [1,2]. For example, in 1829, he wrote: "I have been very ill with convulsions and bile and ... internal hemorrhoids" [4: May 7, 1829, to his father, letter 45, p. 264].

In Donizetti's letters after Lucia, we see the insidious, inexorable progression of his brain disease. Increasingly he talked about fierce headaches, neck pain, convulsions, high debilitating fevers, nervous complaints, mental disorientation, and personality change.2 "Melancholy seized me. ... I have changed in all ways. ... My nerves are so angry/morose [adirati] that I fall from bed at night and it seems to me that the bed turns over on top of me. I don't know if I'm still alive, because I fall head first without helping myself with my hands, as if strangled" [4: October 2, 1845, to Teodoro Ghezzi, letter 652, p. 825].

By 1845, due to his illness, Donizetti had to turn down lucrative offers to compose operas. "I'm not well ... rheumatism in the head that produces a kind of hammer that beats continually on my brain and stuns me [mi stordisce]" [4: January 12, 1845, to Guglielmo Cottrau, letter 608, p. 787].

1See Donizetti's letters in Zavadini [4]: August 11, 1826, to Mario Aspa, letter 30, p. 249; June 24, 1830, to his father, letter 51, p. 269; November 13, 1832, to Jacopo Ferretti, letter 86 bis, p. 301.

2See Donizetti's letters in Zavadini [4]: October 17, 1835, to Ricordi, letter 178, p. 386; August 9, 1839, to Tommaso Persico, letter 326, pp. 500–501; October 26, 1845, to Antonio Dolci, letter 656, p. 828; August 27, 1842, to Antonio Vasselli, letter 440, p. 626; February 4, 1843, to Tommaso Persico, letter 471, pp. 653–654; late November 1843, to Antonio Vasselli, letter 527, p. 710; January 22, 1844, to Giuseppina Appiani, letter 534, p. 719; July 30, 1844, to Augusto Thomas, letter 575, p. 759; October 7, 1845, to Tommaso Persico, letter 653, pp. 825–826.
In August 1845, his deterioration was pathetically evident in the disjointed letter he sent to his brother-in-law, Antonio Vasselli. There, like the deranged Anne Boleyn in his opera *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti darted horrifyingly back and forth between reality and bizarre ideations. “I’ve always had trouble with my lungs . . .; now it’s a deadly sickness. . . . My head (in truth) was very heavy. . . . Now I move it and it’s a result of the climate because I did it already before the medicines. . . . I’m nervous . . . 5 operas!!!—One alone would overwhelm me completely; one must expect this when one is a Christian. . . . But an imperceptible secret of the doctors tells me that I have nothing, unless it be that I could fall back into the same blood sickness in the head, which then would congeal. . . . But don’t let all this reach anyone’s ears, as I must avoid sorrows and feelings” [4: August 11, 1845, to Antonio Vasselli, letter 646, pp. 820–821].

By January 1846, Donizetti’s deterioration was so great that his nephew, Andrea Donizetti, had three Parisian specialists in mental diseases examine him: the American-born Philippe Ricord (1800–1889), the foremost specialist in venereal diseases of his time, who had proved that gonorrhea and syphilis were different diseases (see his *Traité pratique des maladies vénériennes*, Paris, 1838); Juste-Louis-Florent Calmeil (1798–1895), physician of the Maison Royale de Charenton; and Jean Mitvié (1796–1871), physician of the Salpetrière. On January 28, 1846, the triumvirate summed up Donizetti’s medical history and their opinions: “M. Donizetti’s malady has followed a slow, insidious march . . . [leading to] the derangement at present existing in his brain. . . . Each time that he has devoted himself to composition, it has seemed to him that only one hemisphere has taken part in the conception and that a sort of partition has separated the two halves of his brain. One evening in 1843, M. Donizetti complained of feeling an extraordinary sensation in his head . . . [:] it seemed to him that lightning had just crossed his brain. . . . In . . . August 1845, . . . for moments at a time, his memory left him . . . ; a more and more marked change came over M. Donizetti’s habits, his tastes, his manner of life. . . . Often during the night when M. Donizetti abandoned the horizontal position to make some movement of his arms, a sort of commotion operating in the interior of the cranial box caused him painful terror. . . . On the morning after one such shock, M. Donizetti was found stretched out on the floor. . . . Today . . . not only are his memory and other intellectual faculties marked by lack of capacity and understanding, but also, false, unreasonable ideas have become mixed into the sick man’s reasoning, so that he imagines that he is being robbed. . . . His character has become either irritable or taciturn; the excitement of his genital organs no longer allows M. Donizetti to resist the impulse of his desires. . . . [T]he undersigned . . . think that M. Donizetti is the victim of a chronic infection of the great nervous centers, that this infection occupies principally some points in the pia mater and the surface matter of the brain, that it has been complicated by moments of congestion of the blood capillaries, complicated by serous infiltration of the cellular plexus of the meninges, and that, finally, it tends to diminish the stability of the nervous pulp. . . . They believe that M. Donizetti no longer is capable of calculating sanely the significance of his decisions . . . Summing up, they believe that M. Donizetti should be placed for the present in an establishment designed for the treatment of mental alienations” [5: pp. 244–247]. They recommended the clinic owned by Dr. Mitvié in Ivry, which was run by Dr. Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours (1808–1884).
By one of those cruel tricks that well-meaning but misguided people sometimes use when they think they are “helping” someone whose mental status is compromised, Dr. Ricord, Donizetti’s nephew Andrea, and Donizetti’s manservant did not tell the composer that they were taking him to a mental institution. Instead, they made him think that they were accompanying him to Vienna, where he was due in mid-January as a court composer. When they reached the mental clinic in Ivry, they lied. They told Donizetti that his carriage had broken down and that they had to stay in a hotel while it was being repaired. Then they locked him up [5: p. 247].

When Donizetti could no longer be duped into believing that his carriage had broken down, Dr. Moreau de Tours, the asylum’s director, told him that his manservant had been involved in a robbery and that it was being investigated by the police. Becoming more confused and realizing that he was locked up, Donizetti thought that he himself was under arrest. At this time he wrote some distressful—and distressing—letters. For, although the composer was clearly incapacitated by his neurobiological disease, still—like Anna Bolena in his opera—he was also pathetically and intermittently aware of what was going on around him. His letters speak tragically for themselves: “Pity; pity! They’ve arrested me; why?—My servant, it seems . . . was a thief. . . . It’s a mistake! . . . I ought to be in Vienna before the middle of this month. . . . I’m innocent! . . . Make my tears stop . . . I seem close to death! . . . Oh! make me get out. . . . I don’t understand!” [4: February 5, 1846, to Countess Appony, letter 661, pp. 831–832]. “They arrested me . . . and I’m alone! . . . I beg you: my health is poor, but I’m not stupid.—I’m weeping” [4: undated, probably to Madame de Coussy, letter 663, p. 833]. “Madame, come to Ivry . . . ! I’m also arrested. . . . I’m weeping and I’m weak! . . . I never did that . . . oh! I’m dying . . . Cursed be the one who lies: . . . No one’s protecting me: Locked up worse than a dog! . . . Do you think I’d steal my things?—they’re mine . . . Me arrested? Oh! my God my God!” [4: February 7, 1846, to Countess Appony, letter 666, pp. 834–835].

During Donizetti’s incarceration in the mental asylum in Ivry, his mental and physical condition deteriorated. On April 7, 1846, two doctors declared him “in a state of insanity . . . and general paralysis” [5: p. 251]. Finally, he was discharged in June 1847, after having been confined almost 17 months. He was taken to Paris and, finally, to Bergamo, Italy, where he was cared for, at a villa owned by Countess Rosa Basoni, from October 6, 1847, until his death on April 8, 1848. For a long time the composer had been psychotic, paralyzed, speechless, emaciated, and unable to swallow; he had also suffered from fevers, profuse sweats, incontinence, muscle contractions, and convulsions. Here is a brief summary of the autopsy report of April 11, 1848, performed in Bergamo. The composer’s head revealed that the lateral and fourth ventricles were dilated by a serous effusion; there was about one ounce of liquid in the hollow of the arachnoid and a diffuse venous infusion of the meninges; the pia mater was deeply infiltrated and adherent to the substance of the brain. The spinal cord was infiltrated with blood; the spinal cavity showed an internal infiltration of the dura mater from the fifth dorsal vertebra to the second lumbar; and the dura mater in this portion appeared faintly reddish [5: pp. 288–289].

One can hypothesize that Donizetti’s neurobiological illness, which led to his psychosis and death, may have had an influence on his ability to create the powerful and unforgettable scenes of psychosis in his operas.
ANNA BOLENA AND THE HISTORICAL ANNE BOLEYN

Inspired by the life of Anne Boleyn, Anna Bolena was Donizetti's twenty-ninth opera and his first to achieve international acclaim. The Queen of England's mad scene has some historical basis.

No one knows exactly when Henry VIII became enamored of Anne Boleyn (1507?–1536), but it is known that, before she became Henry VIII's second wife, she had been romantically involved with Henry Percy (1501?–1537), the earl of Northumberland's oldest son. Their liaison had been broken up by their fathers and the king [6,7,8].

On January 25, 1533, when Anne Boleyn was already pregnant with the future Queen Elizabeth I, she was married to Henry VIII. Some three years later, after having failed to produce a male heir, she would be beheaded at her husband's order.

On May 2, 1536, Anne Boleyn was taken to the Tower of London and charged with treason and "illicit intercourse" with her brother George, Lord Rochford; Mark Smeton, a "groom of the privy chamber," an organist and "singer"; and three other men [6: number 876, p. 362, number 947, p. 395]. According to Eustace Chapuys, the Imperial Ambassador, Henry VIII had wanted to be rid of Anne because "there were witnesses testifying that . . . [nine years before] a marriage . . . had been made and fully consummated between her and [Henry Percy, now] earl of Northumberland" [6: to Emperor Charles V, May 3, 1536, number 782, p. 330].

Letters from Sir William Kingston, constable of the Tower, to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief secretary, described Anne's mental disequilibrium during her 17-day incarceration. On May 4, he reported, she abruptly switched from one subject or mood to a contrary one. She wept, laughed, desired the sacrament, defended her innocence, suddenly opened up her gown, asked if she would have justice, and laughed when she heard the constable's doctrinaire reply [6: May 4, 1536, number 793, p. 334].

On May 15, a group of 26 peers judged Anne, pronounced her "guilty," and condemned her "to be burned or beheaded as shall please the King" [6: number 876, p. 363]. Among those peers was her former lover, "Hen. earl of Northumberland" [6: number 876, p. 361].

The day after her sentencing, Anne said that she would go to a "nunnery" and was "in hope of life" [6: number 890, p. 371]. The following day, May 17, she had to witness her brother's beheading by axe.

On May 19, the morning of her decapitation by sword, Anne told her jailor she was "very sorry" that she would not be dead before noon and "past . . . her pain." Even the constable, who had spent time with other people condemned to death, found Anne's mental state and bizarre behavior rather unsettling. He wrote that she took communion, defended her "innocence," then spoke about the executioner and her little neck, laughing heartily. "'I . . . heard say the executioner was very good, [she said,] and I have a little neck,' and put her hand about it, laughing heartily" [6: number 910, p. 381].

Felice Romani's libretto for the opera Anna Bolena takes liberties with facts: for instance, it calls Henry Percy "Riccardo Percy," makes him still enamored of Anne, and condemned to death with her. The Donizetti-Romani collaboration, however, created a powerful mad scene for Anne Boleyn in the Tower of London that echoes the pathetically disordered state of the real queen's mind.
In Donizetti’s opera, Enrico (Henry VIII) wishes to be rid of Anne (Anna) so that he can make his mistress Jane Seymour (Giovanna) his queen. He has accused Anne of adultery with Riccardo Percy and the groom Smeton, and has sent them to prison with Anne’s brother, Lord Rochford. All are condemned to die.

The opera’s poignant, passionate closing, in which Anne wavers into and out of psychosis, takes place in the Tower of London. We first learn about Anne’s aberrant behavior from her ladies-in-waiting, who sympathetically describe her abruptly altering states reflecting “her delirium” and “her pain”3 [9: pp. 279–282].

The moment that Anne Boleyn comes on stage, it is evident that she is psychotic. So detached from reality are her opening words that they evoke pity, pathos, and a sense of horror. For, although she is waiting to be beheaded, she asks her ladies-in-waiting why they are weeping because, she says, this is her “wedding day” and the king is “waiting for” her.

Suddenly, a terrified Anne hallucinates Percy’s presence, but her mood alters when she thinks that he is smiling. Thereupon, gliding into lyrical recollections of how Percy and she had once promised to love one another, she sings a mellifluous song about her past (“Al dolce guidami”). Her lilting lyricism here masks the horror of her real situation, as well as the fact that she is hallucinating.

Guide me to the pleasant
castle where I was born,
to the verdant plane trees,
to the quiet rivulet
that keeps murmuring yet
our long-drawn sighs. . . .
Ah! there I forget
my past troubles and fears,
give me back one day
of my early years;
give me back one day of
our love [9: pp. 288–289].

All at once, jolted by the sounds of a drum from her lovelorn remembrances and ravings, Anne sees Percy, her brother, and Smeton ushered in by guards. Her terrified exclamation: “Oh! what a time / to reawaken me / from my delirium, O Heaven! . . . / And to what. . . .?” [9: pp. 290–291] reveals that she is aware of the irony: she has regained her mind only to grasp the horror of her real situation.

Anne’s bitter burst of sanity does not endure, for soon she asks Smeton who broke his harp’s strings: Smeton’s harp, however, is present only in her demented mind. Thus, she continues to waver between reality and unreality, snatches of sanity and of psychosis.

These real and unreal thoughts lead Anne to a wrenchingly beautiful lyric, “Cielo, a’ miei lunghi spasimi,” which is all the more poignant because its melody is a variation of “Home, Sweet Home”:

3All translations of Donizetti’s operas and letters used in this article are by Enid Peschel.
Heaven, from my long agonies  
let me at last be released,  
and let these final heartbeats  
be filled with hope at least [9: pp. 294–295].

All at once, at the sound of cannon and bells, Anne is jolted to bitter consciousness again. When she asks what is happening, she is told that crowds are acclaiming their new queen. Searingly lucid, she proclaims: “To complete the crime, the only thing missing / is Anne’s blood, / and it will be spilled” [9: pp. 299–300].

Anne’s closing cabaletta, “Coppia iniqua” (“Wicked couple”)—sung “with intensity” (con forza)—is her willed attempt to pardon her husband and his third wife, Jane Seymour. Yet this breathtaking cabaletta is also Anne’s ambivalent, passionate, pitiful—and angry—plea for vengeance.

Wicked couple,  
I’m, no, I’m  
not invoking the utmost vengeance  
at this dreadful time:  
into the open grave awaiting me,  
with lips uttering a pardon, let one descend;  
may that gain me favor and clemency  
in the presence of a God of mercy,  
favor, mercy,  
yes, clemency and mercy. . . .  
Wicked couple,  
I’m, no, I’m  
not invoking the utmost vengeance  
at this dreadful time. . . .  
Wicked couple,  
I’m not invoking vengeance, no, no [9: pp. 301–306].

Here, Anne is at once forgiving and unforgiving, desperate and hopeful, irrational and rational. Although she claims that she is “not invoking the utmost vengeance” on the “wicked couple,” she is clearly attacking Henry VIII and Jane Seymour when she calls them “Wicked couple.” In fact, she is turning Henry VIII’s language against him because she uses the same epithet—“Coppia iniqua!”—that Henry had used for Percy and herself, when Percy had told Henry VIII that he and Anne had been married (“Sposi”) before she had become queen [9: pp. 226–227, 236]. Furthermore, Anne’s use of the word “vengeance” three times in the closing moments of the opera reveals that she is thinking about it, passionately. Thus, throughout “Coppia iniqua,” Anne’s ambivalent words and fiery music with its ascending, spiraling trills and vocal pyrotechnics dramatize her anger, agitation, longing—and inability—to suppress her rage. As Philip Gossett has noted: Anne’s “words tell us that she will not cry for revenge in the hour of her death; her music . . . with its melodic line soaring and swooping from one register to another . . . belies them” [10: p. 32].

Wavering between the fantasies of her deranged brain and bursts of insight, Anne Boleyn exemplifies the fragility of the human mind: now shattered, now imbued with scorching insights, and, sometimes, both psychotic and insightful simultaneously.
In Anna Bolena, Donizetti has created a compelling musical dramatization of a mind fragmented by mental derangement. Some 16 years after this opera, with its unnerving prison mad scene, Donizetti would be floundering in a similarly unbalanced state when he was locked up against his will—not in jail—but in a mental institution in Ivry, France.

**LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR**

Composed five years and 16 operas after Anna Bolena, Lucia di Lammermoor—inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s novel, The Bride of Lammermoor—established Donizetti “as the most eagerly sought-for living Italian [opera composer]... for the rest of his active life” [5: p. 111]. The principals of Lucia are the vulnerable, romantic Lucia Ashton, who is given to hallucinations, and the proud, impoverished Edgardo, Master of Ravenswood. The other important characters are Enrico, Lucia’s self-serving brother, and Raimondo Bide-the-Bent, the chaplain who convinces Lucia to break her secret engagement to Edgardo and to marry Arturo Bucklaw, the man her brother has selected for political reasons.

The audience first sees the strange, impassioned Lucia at the fountain in the woods, where Edgardo has asked her to meet him. A rippling harp solo creates the eerie atmosphere. When Lucia enters, her chaperon Alisa asks her why she is so “terrified” [11: p. 31]. Lucia now reveals that she hallucinates: at this fountain, she once saw the “ghost” of the girl slain by a Lord of Ravenswood [11: p. 32]. In “Regnava nel silenzio,” she describes her visual and auditory hallucinations, evoking fear, blood, pain, and the ghost:

> Darkness reigned in silence
> at the dead of night,
> a moonbeam struck the fountain
> with a pallid, dismal light,
> when a low moaning
> became audible in the breeze,
> and here, here, on the brink you see,
> the ghost appeared to me,
> Ah!
> I saw the ghost moving its lips
> like someone who is speaking, and,
> with its inanimate hand,
> it seemed to beckon me.
> It stood motionless for a moment,
> then vanished rapidly,
> and the water that had been so clear before
> turned red and bloody [11: pp. 32–35].

Trying to bring Lucia back to reality, Alisa begs her to give up her “tremendous/dreadful” (tremendo) love [11: pp. 35–36] for another member of the Ravenswood family. But declaring that Edgardo is the sole comfort in her dreary life, and as though oblivious to the terrors and blood-tinged hallucinations she has just described, Lucia bursts into a rapturous song (“Quando rapito in estasi”) that describes the “ecstasy” she feels whenever Edgardo is near [11: pp. 36–38]. Alisa again advises her to stop meeting Edgardo. Blithely interrupting, Lucia repeats her ecstatic
"Quando rapito in estasi," embroidering it now with extra trills and thrilling vocal embellishments. Nothing, it seems, can stop her.

Soon afterward, Edgardo arrives, tells Lucia that he must leave Scotland before dawn, and asks her to "swear" to be his ever-faithful wife. They exchange rings, pronounce "I am your husband," "I am your wife," and fervently call on "love" and "heaven" to witness their sacred vows [11: pp. 49–51].

This scene at the fountain, Lucia’s first in the opera, is a prelude to—and a preparation for—her more famous "mad" scene, which is her last. We have already noted her tendency to hallucinate and to confuse fantasy with reality. In her final scene, she will hallucinate continually. At the fountain, Lucia and Edgardo say that they are man and wife; in the "mad" scene, a psychotic Lucia will enact the marriage rite with an invisible Edgardo.

When Act II opens, Enrico has invited guests to his castle to celebrate Lucia’s marriage to Arturo Bucklaw, even though Lucia has not consented to that union. To force her to comply, Enrico had showed her a forged letter that made her believe that Edgardo loves another woman. Enrico had also threatened that, if she did not marry Arturo, whose political alliance he needs, the executioner’s axe would fall on his neck and he would haunt her as an "angry menacing ghost" [11: p. 76]. To Lucia, who had hallucinated the girl’s ghost bloodying the fountain waters, Enrico’s words are potent weapons. Enrico had also used the chaplain Raimondo to convince Lucia to marry the man her brother had chosen.

In the castle’s great hall, Enrico forces Lucia to sign the deed of marriage to Arturo. An instant later, Edgardo bursts in. Lucia says that heaven and earth have betrayed her, yet she cannot even weep. Hurt and enraged, Arturo is forced to leave.

Lucia’s stunning "mad" scene (Act III, Scene 2) is the climax of the opera. Before Lucia appears, a pale, frightened Raimondo announces that "a grave event" has taken place and, in a bass voice, describes what he has witnessed in her rooms.

From the rooms . . .
a groan escaped, a cry
as from a man about to die!
I ran to those chambers hurriedly—
alas! what a terrible calamity!
Arturo, lying sprawled on the floor,
was mute and cold and covered with gore!
And Lucia was tightly hugging the sword
that had been the murdered man’s heretofore.
She fixed her eyes on me—
‘My husband, where is he?’ she said to me,
and on her ashen face
a smile flashed suddenly!
Unhappy girl! she had completely
lost her sanity! [11: pp. 179–182].

After Raimondo’s ominous words, Lucia, a dreadful, pathetic embodiment of a human being in the throes of psychosis, comes on stage in her blood-splattered nightgown. Musically, emotionally, dramatically, the entire performance has been building up to this moment. The instant that Lucia begins to sing about the "sweet sound" of Edgardo’s voice, the audience realizes that she neither knows where she is
nor that she has just murdered her husband. Hallucinating, she tells an invisible Edgardo that she has fled from his enemies, then wavers back and forth between terrifying feelings, hallucinations of the phantasma at the fountain, and joyous visions of enacting the marriage ceremony with Edgardo. Her delirious words and coloratura warblings mark a cruel contrast to her piteous, demented state.

The sweet sound
of his voice struck me!
Ah! that voice fell here into my heart’s core!
Edgardo! I am yours once more. . . .
I have fled from your enemies. . . .
Through my breast an icy chill is snaking!
My foot is faltering! My every fiber’s quaking!
Come sit with me near the fountain for a while. . . .
Alas! the dreadful phantasma is rising
and separating us! Alas!
alas! . . .
Let’s take refuge, Edgardo, here,
at the foot of the altar.
With roses it is strewn!
Tell me, don’t you hear a heavenly tune?
Ah! they’re playing the wedding hymn! . . .
Oh, joy that I feel,
oh, joy that I feel, and that words cannot reveal! . . .
Here’s the minister!
Give me your right hand!
Oh, happy day! oh, happy!
At last I am yours, at last you are mine,
you are given to me,
you are given to me by a Deity [11: pp. 190–196].

When an irate Enrico storms in, Lucia remains oblivious, conversing with her hallucination of Edgardo. Suddenly, thinking that Edgardo is cursing her, she begs him not to be angry; after all, she says, she only signed the marriage deed because she was the “victim of a brother’s cruelty” [11: pp. 201–203]. Although most of what Lucia has said in this scene is detached from reality, her words about her brother’s cruelty are absolutely true.

All at once, Lucia bursts into a dazzling song to an invisible Edgardo (“Spargi d’amaro pianto”). In this, her last utterance of the opera, she expresses her desire to join him in heaven:

With bitter tears, strew
my earthly covering, while I,
up in the sky,
will be praying, praying for you.
Only when you arrive there
will heaven be beautiful for me! . . .
Ah! let me expire near you, . . .
close to you, to you! [11: pp. 206–216].
Lucia faints, and this overwhelming scene ends. In the next scene, which is the opera’s last, Edgardo learns that Lucia has died and he commits suicide.

In Lucia’s “mad” scene, as in the gripping scene of mental derangement in Anna Bolena, Donizetti has made his indelible mark in the history of opera by portraying in musical, physical, psychological, biological, and dramatic terms the devastating effects of psychosis on a human being.

CONCLUSION

In Anna Bolena and Lucia di Lammermoor, Donizetti has created two of the most powerful scenes of mental derangement in all opera. Through his melodies and drama, he allows us to see, hear, and, as it were, enter for a while into the tormented body and mind of a human being devasted by psychosis. In these masterworks, he portrays the manner in which a person whose brain is malfunctioning may at moments exhibit searing bursts of insight, which neither endure nor bring the person fully back to reality. Thus, Donizetti’s operas dramatize the discontinuity experienced by one who is in the throes of psychosis. Perhaps because of the composer’s sensitivities and his own neurobiological illness, he may have been particularly attuned to know, understand, and translate into melody the disorganization, delirium, and torment of severe mental illness.

For physicians and humanists, knowing about Donizetti’s brain disease can add a deeper dimension to the pain and reality of mental disorder that he portrayed in his operas—and to the pain and reality of mental derangement that we can see in life, if we choose to look. So often, however, even highly educated and otherwise sensitive members of our society shun, are frightened by, oblivious to, or scornful and mocking of, our fellow human beings afflicted with severe mental derangement. A glance at the homeless mentally ill testifies to how little our society understands, or cares about, people suffering from psychosis due to serious chronic brain diseases, including schizophrenia, bipolar and unipolar disorders, and the like.

Thinking about Donizetti’s CNS disease in relation to his operatic depictions of psychosis can help us to comprehend the real pain and suffering of human beings trapped in the prison of a brain subjected to the devastation of psychosis. Perhaps nothing summarizes this state better than the words from Anna Bolena uttered by Anne Boleyn’s ladies-in-waiting commenting on “her delirium” and “her pain”:

Who can see her,  
and not weep,  
so great is her anguish,  
her grief so deep;  
who would not feel,  
ah! . . .  
who would not feel  
your heart breaking? [9: pp. 279–282].

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