

# *Verdi's Disciplined Subjects:* **Radamès, Amneris, and the Power of the Panopticon**

**Christopher R. Gauthier and Jennifer McFarlane-Harris**

*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

---

cgauthie@umich.edu • jfmcfarl@umich.edu

When, on Christmas Eve of 1871, the audience at the Cairo Opera House first watched Radamès unflinchingly sing “Sacerdote, io resto a te” [Priest, I am in your hands]<sup>1</sup> at the end of Act 3 of Verdi’s *Aida*, they were, in effect, witness to a subtle form of power in action. In terms of the opera, turning himself over to Ramfis represents a radical departure from his decision to pursue the path to eternal freedom and love with Aida that he had just moments before decided to embrace. If Act 3 serves to illustrate the turmoil and anguish that both Radamès and Aida experience in making the decision to flee Egypt, it also presents a vivid picture of Radamès as self-disciplined—as his own captor.

What should be made of Radamès’ decision to surrender to the priests? Why, after making the difficult decision to flee Egypt with Aida, would Radamès simply give up? To answer these questions we must consider the nature of discipline. Clearly, discipline can come in the form of oppression from an outside force; an outside force can bend the will and control the body by threat of pain or duress. However, there is no more powerful or insidious form of discipline than that which has been internalized, taking on the form of discipline from within: self-discipline.

In order to make sense of Radamès’ behavior at the end of Act 3, we must consider the physical space of the Cairo Opera House as a site through which power relationships are contested—as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 103). In fact, as the 1871 audience first watched Radamès discipline himself at the end of Act 3, they were viewing a kind of panopticon in action, an extraordinary kind of power-manipulating structure.

Jeremy Bentham, the nineteenth-century English criminologist, theorist, and penal architect, considered the benefits of self-discipline to be great, and was among the first to attempt to employ physical space in the reformation and rehabilitation of criminals. The panopticon, an invention of Bentham’s, was one such physical space. What made Bentham’s proposed design for the panopticon (translated from Greek as “all seeing”) so revolutionary both psychologically and architecturally was that, ultimately, prisoners would not know if they were being observed or not. As a result, they would assume that surveillance was constant, and would therefore modify and discipline their behavior at all times. It was believed that, given enough time in the panopticon, the prisoner would become a fully self-regulating and self-disciplined being.

French theorist Michel Foucault thought Bentham’s design for the panopticon was far more sinister than the English criminologist had likely anticipated. In Foucault’s history of punishment and prisons, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he posits that the panopticon was not a tool of correction, but instead a weapon used by the state

---

1. English translation of Italian text taken from the libretto that accompanies Riccardo Muti’s 1974 EMI Classics recording of *Aida*. Translation by Dale McAdoo, © Capitol Records Inc. 1951. Hereafter, text from this libretto will be parenthetically referenced: (McAdoo, page number).

to manipulate and control its subjects. As Stephen Pfohl has pointed out,

[Foucault believed that] the penitentiary enabled the state to isolate, observe, and then, based upon observation, manipulate and change the offender into a person whose calculated rationality and improved ‘self-control’ would better fit with the inner-discipline demanded by ... modern society. (Pfohl, 15)

For Foucault, time in the panopticon was not just rehabilitation, but a reprogramming of the self—a coerced realignment of priority. By forcing prisoners to discipline and enslave their desires in favor of those deemed more suitable for modern society, they were thoroughly broken and controlled.

To achieve such control over an individual, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power,” it is necessary to “arrange things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201). Foucault explains the ramifications of the construction and illumination present within the panopticon quite clearly in *Discipline and Punish*, and we will quote Foucault at length, here, because it is important to understand the precise workings of the panopticon, an “architectural apparatus [that] should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” (201), so that we may understand the peculiar position of Radamès on stage.

All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many *small theaters*, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panopti mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.... Visibility is a trap. (emphasis added, 200)

Thinking about Radamès on stage, then, we must return to the opera house in Cairo. Much has been made of the geographical position of the Cairo Opera House; standing in the middle of the Nile, it divides the city in half. As Edward Said writes, “the opera house built by Ismail [Khedive of Egypt] for Verdi sat right at the center of the north-south axis, in the middle of the a spacious square, facing the European city which stretched westward to the banks of the Nile.... Behind the opera house lay the teeming quarters...held back by the Opera House’s imposing size and European authority” (*Culture and Imperialism* 128-9). In this way, one can think of the stage of the Cairo Opera House as a panopticon opening towards the watchful surveillance of the European city. On stage, Radamès has become representative of the ultimate colonial subject in Act 3, and therefore stands as a figurehead, or representation, of all the colonial subjects in the “teeming quarters” behind the opera house who were, through Radamès, metaphorically staged before the eye of the European city that Christmas Eve night in 1871. Daring to consider joining Aida, Radamès is not only caught by Amneris, Ramfis, and the European gaze at large; most importantly, he catches himself, and before he can flee—indeed, before he even tries to—he enslaves his desires and exhibits unwavering self-control. Radamès, on the stage at the Cairo Opera House, standing with the colonized subjects at his back and facing the modern, industrial European city before him, became fully Orientalized at this moment. Although the 1871 audience may not have been completely aware of it at the time, by showing such self-discipline, Radamès implicitly assured the Europeans of the docility of the colonized Egyptian subject whose spirit has been broken through a brief, undisciplined association with the Oriental, exoticized “Other” (Aida). His near-immediate command of himself assures continued compliance to European will and an aversion to escaping to the past. In Foucauldian terms, Radamès becomes “caught up in a power situation” of which he is himself one of the “bearers” (*Discipline and Punish* 201).

Yet how do we make sense of Radamès’ relationship to the Oriental “Other” in this particular context? And how does Orientalism contribute to the relations of power so clearly illustrated by the panopticon? On the face of it, *Aida*, which was written by an Italian about two African countries, is at once an obvious and intricate place to search for evidence of Orientalism. Unlike other works of art or music that contain a clear juxtaposition between Europe and the exoticized Other, *Aida* is replete with representations that do not conform so easily to this binary opposition. There is no overt European presence in *Aida* with which to offset the representations of the African nations. Attempts such as Edward Said’s to interrogate *Aida* based solely on the representations of an exoticized Egypt leave Ethiopia’s role unexamined and unclear.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, trying to excuse *Aida* as a not Orientalist, as Paul Robinson does,<sup>2</sup> ignores the very

1. For Said’s discussion of *Aida* as cultural production, see “The Empire at Work: Verdi’s *Aida*,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

process through which it became possible for Verdi to construct a tale about two African countries he had never visited. In short, the power relations implicit in Orientalism are not immediately clear in the case of *Aida*.

In his ground-breaking 1978 work *Orientalism*, Edward Said has comprehensively illustrated just how complex power is. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Said sets forth a critique of power that focuses on culture and the interplay of knowledge and representation. According to Said, when considering power, one must be mindful of the imaginative and purposeful process of knowledge creation. In *Orientalism*, Said brilliantly describes the origins of the binary opposition between Orient and Occident and shows how Western texts and representations of the “Oriental Other”—which Said contends were in no way analogous to “Oriental” reality—were ultimately codified as truth and used to dominate and control the East while simultaneously justifying the cultural, social and scientific hegemony of the West. As Said writes, “in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on...flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (emphasis in original, *Orientalism* 7). What then becomes essential in cultural analysis that seeks to identify Orientalism is a critical eye towards representation, the most important questions being: who is being represented? Who is doing the representing? And, what is the content of the representation?

Katherine Bergeron, in her article “Verdi’s Egyptian spectacle: On the colonial subject of *Aida*,” provides an ingenious, demystifying interpretation of representations in *Aida*. In her view, the depictions of actors in *Aida* and what they signify must be realigned. The Egyptians, instead of representing the Egyptians at the time of the Pharaohs, represent the Egyptians as nineteenth-century colonial subjects. The Ethiopians are not Ethiopians, but rather represent the Egyptians pre-colonization; more abstractly, they represent the romanticized past. By reconfiguring representations, Bergeron opens *Aida* for interpretation on a different level than is put forth by Said or Robinson. In her configuration, *Aida* is properly appreciated as a tale about the disciplined and ordered colonial subject contending with the temptation to return to an undisciplined, pre-colonized past. This opposition between disciplined and undisciplined, colonized and pre-colonized, will form the basis of the remainder of this inquiry and will guide our analysis of specific musical, visual, and textual representations of Verdi’s *Aida*.

Before we begin an in-depth explication of scenes, however, it is necessary to add one more concept to the series of binaries that direct our discussion of *Aida*. In addition to Occident (West)/Orient (East), colonial (present)/pre-colonial (past), and disciplined/undisciplined, we must include familiar/exotic. Jonathan Bellman reminds us in his introduction to *The Exotic in Western Music* that the word “exotic” does not simply connote distance or difference. Rather, “exoticism...is about drama, effect, and evocation. The listener is intrigued, hears something new and savory, but is not aurally destabilized enough to feel uncomfortable” (Bellman xiii). Nevertheless, musical exoticism involves “implicit comparison and judgment” between the culture rendered exotic and the Western standard (Bellman xii). Musically, as we shall see, the sounds of the West and those colonized by the West are quite different from those of the exoticized pre-colonial. In order to observe a particular instance of the operations of these multiple binaries, we shall turn to Act 1, Scene 2—the so-called “Consecration Scene.” By closely examining this scene and the one following it, we can consider the effects of the exoticized sound of the pre-colonial past in conjunction with the disciplined colonial present. The framework we establish will allow us to return to that pivotal moment in Act 3 where Radamès clearly disciplines himself, and will give us the tools to evaluate the maneuvers of another important character in *Aida* who struggles with the role of the self-disciplined subject: Amneris.

Musically, *Aida* contains a number of exotic elements that illustrate the dichotomy between disciplined and undisciplined. Act 1, Scene 2 provides an instructive example of this opposition. Radamès, having been selected by the goddess Isis to lead Egypt in battle against Ethiopia, is blessed and sent away via religious consecration in the Temple of the Vulcan. As the ceremony begins, a priestess from offstage invokes the god Fthà, accompanied by the insistent strumming of a harp. Soon after, a chorus of priestesses<sup>1</sup> (also offstage) joins her in this otherworldly invocation as the solo soprano’s near-wail gives way to eerie harmonies. The unseen priestesses are answered by a parallel invocation from the priests, clearly visible on stage. The priests, however, sing in a style that sounds markedly different from that of the priestesses; their solemn, diatonic, monk-like chant contrasts with the repeated, flattened melodic intervals of the priestesses and short grace notes of the high priestess.

As Robinson notes, throughout *Aida*, Verdi “typically sets the music for Ramfis and the Egyptian priests within a

---

2. “Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?” *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 5, no. 2 (July 1993): 133-140.

1. Verdi seems to have made a typical move by representing the Orient without regard for correspondence to a “real” original (Said, *Orientalism* 21): despite documented evidence to the contrary (only priests were mentioned in the materials provided for Verdi to consult), Verdi decided to employ priestesses in *Aida*’s religious scenes, “following the conventional European practice of making Oriental women central to any exotic practice” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 121).

contrapuntal texture, thereby linking them musically with one of the oldest, most traditional, and most European of musical procedures, associated above all... with the religious music of Johann Sebastian Bach” (136). Distinct from the Westernized sounds on stage, the priestesses sound far away and ethereal. This contrast between the exotic-sounding priestesses and the sober-sounding priests is intensified by the fact that the priests sing without instrumental accompaniment. By the conclusion of this first finale, the voices on stage seem to triumph over the voices offstage, as Radamès sings the major third above Ramfis, *fortissimo*, in the penultimate chord, followed by the tremendous global invocation ending the scene: “Immenso Fthà!” [Great Phtha!] (McAdoo 72-3)

The musical dialogue and visual elements in this Consecration Scene combine to create a contrast between disciplined and undisciplined. The priestesses’ voices, filled with strange chromatic intervals (to the Western ear), beckon from offstage as if they are tempting the loyal colonial Egyptian subjects on stage (it should be noted that there are priestesses on stage, but they do not sing). Instead of joining with the enchanting voices, the disciplined subjects on stage respond with gravity and control, using their voices alone to counteract and neutralize the aural invitation that seems to drift in from offstage. Here the contrast between disciplined and undisciplined does not involve the Ethiopians, but is instead conveyed through the contrast between visible/Western and invisible/exotic to represent Egypt’s colonial present (embodied by Radamès, Ramfis, the priests and the silent priestesses on stage) and the pre-colonial past (heard through the harp and the disembodied voices of the priestesses offstage).

Although Amneris is not present during the Consecration Scene (the finale of Act 1), the familiar strumming of the harp at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 1 directly links Amneris in her chamber to the priestesses, offstage, at the Temple of the Vulcan. Significantly, the chorus of slave girls in Amneris’ chamber invoke their hero (Radamès) using words similar to those employed by the priestesses to invoke Fthà. Whereas the priestesses call for the “uncreated, eternal flame, which sparked the sun,” the slave girls ask for Radamès to be “set forth on the flight to glory, like some god of terror, blazing like the sun” (McAdoo 75); this diction prefigures Radamès’ homecoming in the Triumphal Scene (Act 2, Scene 2), and strengthens the exoticized connection between the priestesses and the slave girls. Effectively, the musical dialogue between the priestesses and the priests now becomes an encounter between the slave girls and Amneris. Much like the priests in the Consecration Scene, Amneris—whose solo lines are not accompanied by the familiar sound of the harp, and have no trace of the “flattening of the hypertonic” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 122)—provides a solemn counterpoint that seems to neutralize the exoticized song of the slave girls. In this exchange, the dichotomy between the exotic, undisciplined, pre-colonial subject and the disciplined colonial subject is once again reinforced. Furthermore, the pre-colonial subject is presented as fully under the control of and literally enslaved by the colonized Amneris. In this way, the apartment scene can be interpreted as representing the tension within the colonial subject who, under the watchful gaze of the West, must surrender and enslave her desires for pre-colonial freedom as her slaves surrender their bodies, and their freedom, to her.

However, even the most disciplined colonial subject must occasionally allow herself to indulge in gazing backward and dreaming about the past, as long as this dream is undertaken with no expectation of realization. The dance of the Moorish slaves, which abruptly breaks into Act 2, Scene 1 after Amneris finishes her serious singing, represents a moment of such reverie. Not only does the faster tempo and lighter feel of the music seem undisciplined following Amneris’ controlled, reflective singing, but the slaves’ dance appears visually undisciplined as well. According to the production book by Giulio Ricordi for the February, 1872 La Scala production of *Aida* (the first production Verdi attended), the dance of the Moorish slaves was intended to have this undisciplined effect. “The dance of the little Moorish slaves must be very lively and rather *grotesque*, without many complicated steps which could not be executed considering the speed of the music” (emphasis added, Busch 574). Indeed, children performing movements that resemble something more akin to careless calisthenics than dance have been cast as the Moorish slaves, apparently to enhance the visual sense of the undisciplined.<sup>1</sup>

In any case, in terms of the logic of the scene, the uncontrolled bodies of the Moorish slaves and quick pace of their music serve as entertainment for a reserved Amneris in her apartment. A contrast is set up between the restrained colonial subject who allows herself to gaze at the undisciplined, pre-colonial “Other” and the bodies of that “Other,” presented as childish, uninhibited, and exotic. This situation gives the impression of acceptability because Amneris is a slave keeper who ultimately controls and contains the seemingly unrestrained bodies and songs of the slaves. For Amneris, the slaves represent nothing more than a reminiscence of a dead age that cannot be rejoined to the present. Respecting her role as disciplined colonial subject, she makes no attempt to adopt their singing style, nor does she rise from her bed and join in their dance.

---

1. August 9, 1966 production at Arena di Verona on DVD video.

Despite the fact that Amneris controls all the slaves in the first part of Act 2, Scene 1, and can silence them with a wave of her hand (as she does when Aida enters), it is her vocal rivalry with Aida that problematizes her role as disciplined and disciplining colonial subject. The duet begins as Amneris sings over Aida's theme, which the orchestra plays as Aida enters. For the audience, Amneris reveals her desire to expose Aida's secret love for Radamès as an aside, and Aida kneels before her, waiting for her to speak.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, then, it is clear who is the colonial power: Amneris is in charge of Aida's body and has the upper hand in the struggle that ensues between them. Amneris feigns compassion for Aida's plight—Aida doesn't know the fate of her Ethiopian brothers or father, let alone her love (Radamès). Amneris tenderly sings, "Poor Aida! Your heart's grief I share with you. I am your friend" (McAdoo 77). Although Amneris here seems to align herself with Aida, a representative of the pre-colonial past, she really has another motivation: she wants to trick Aida into revealing her love for Radamès. Amneris lies to Aida, intimating that Radamès, "our fearless leader" (McAdoo 81), died on the battlefield. Understandably, Aida is overcome with grief, at which point Amneris knows that she has trapped her. At this moment, Amneris sings a *fortissimo* "Trema!" [Tremble!] from a high E-flat to that same note an octave below, musically disciplining Aida and reminding her of her slave status. By vocalizing this fateful word, Amneris realizes her desire to control Aida, first articulated as an aside in Act 1, Scene 1: "Tremble, evil slave, tremble!" (McAdoo 53). By obtaining incriminating knowledge about Aida, Amneris retains what Said calls "flexible *positional* superiority," exercising her authority as colonial subject over the Orientalized pre-colonial "without ever losing...the relative upper hand" (*Orientalism* 7).

The duet between Amneris and Aida is not yet over, though. Upon hearing that Radamès is actually alive, Aida's high A soars in thanks to the gods. Amneris is not pleased by Aida's lack of discipline, here; she announces, "I am your rival, I, daughter of the Pharaohs!" (McAdoo 83). Asserting her colonial authority, Amneris thinks she has won the argument. Aida is not finished with her, however, and rises up to equate herself with Amneris. "My rival! Then so be it, for I too am—" (McAdoo 83); but here, Aida checks herself. Realizing that she lacks the power to enforce her superciliousness, Aida chooses to continue to define herself as a slave, maintaining the boundary between colonial and pre-colonial.

Amneris seems to revel in Aida's defeat as Act 2, Scene 1 draws to a close. When music from the Triumphal Scene (Act 2, Scene 2) breaks in prematurely from outside Amneris' chambers,<sup>2</sup> Amneris sing lines that compliment the chorus in tone and tempo. Amneris' reminders to Aida that her insurrection could have severe consequences parallel the words of the chorus, "death to the invader!" (McAdoo 85). Like the martial Egyptian chorus consisting of colonial subjects celebrating the triumph over Ethiopia and the pre-colonial, Amneris celebrates her triumph over Aida as the "master of [her] fate" (McAdoo 83).

The rivalry duet between Amneris and Aida is significant in terms of discipline because Amneris has successfully separated herself from the pre-colonial, exoticized "Other." This separation becomes crucial for Amneris if she is to maintain her role as disciplined colonial subject. The danger of the musical link between the priestesses in the Consecration Scene and the chorus of slave girls immediately following in Amneris' chambers involves the potential for exoticization to "rub off" onto Amneris by association. The relationship between her Westernized vocal lines, opposite the slave-girl chorus, and a near-twinning with her slave, Aida, (both are daughters of kings, as Aida nearly points out in her rivalry duet with Amneris), almost blur the lines between colonial/pre-colonial and master/slave. Amneris does not succumb to the dream of the undisciplined via the dance of the Moorish slaves, nor does she interact with her slave girls by adopting their manner of singing. Finally, by enforcing the boundary between herself and Aida, reminding Aida that she is not to tempt the major representative of the colonial subject, Radamès, with exotic love, Amneris preserves her own self-discipline and her ability to discipline the "Other."

Act 3, as discussed in the first portion of this article, contains the essence of the dichotomy between disciplined and undisciplined that the duet between Amneris and Aida brought to the fore. In this act, we find Aida situated on the banks of the Nile River, lamenting her love for Radamès and for her Ethiopian homeland (which she presciently fears she will not see again). Aida's "O patria mia" is introduced and embellished by an oboe that chromatically meanders through her vocal lines. In this aria, she describes Ethiopia as a land of, "...blue skies, soft breezes...grassy hills...[and] fragrant streams..." (McAdoo 113). Aida's position next to the Nile, her exotic-sounding aria, and her bucolic description of her homeland serve to transport the opera from Egypt—which is portrayed in chiseled rock and rigid wall—to a softer, more natural, romanticized Ethiopia. This comparison further solidifies the opposition between the undisciplined pre-colonial past, which is portrayed as beautiful, natural and free (like the Nile which figuratively

---

1. 1988 Metropolitan Opera production on DVD video.

2. Trumpets signal this new development musically.

runs through the stage set and literally runs through Ethiopia and Egypt), and the disciplined colonial present which is symbolized by the hard, cold, man-made and seemingly immovable Egyptian landscape. As Fabrizio Della Seta writes, "...Aida [has] nostalgia for a distant homeland... a place where individual human aspirations can be realized... a heaven under which 'a freer love would be granted.' This future would contrast sharply with the here and now of Egypt" (53).

When Radamès enters Act 3, after Aida has been inveigled into deceiving him by her father, King Amonasro, he is thrust into conflict with the temptation of the undisciplined past that Aida represents. Their duet begins, and Radamès sings confidently of his love for Aida, and continues to sing boldly with swift melodic lines until Aida confronts him with the option to flee to Ethiopia. Once Radamès sings "Fuggire!" [to flee!] (McAdoo 127), there is a distinct break in the music, as if he has realized that he is moving beyond thinking of his love for Aida in abstract terms and is truly considering realizing and embracing that love by fleeing. In effect, Radamès is entertaining the idea of stepping out of the role of the disciplined colonial subject. At this point the oboes re-enter the music with twisting exotic lines as Aida once again begins to describe her homeland as sensuous and natural: "There, in the virgin forests, fragrant with sweet flowers, we shall forget the world in blessed joy" (McAdoo 127). Radamès, experiencing the final pangs of guilt and indecision, responds to Aida's entreaties with a more sober-sounding melody accompanied by droning, sorrowful string lines: "You asked me to flee with you to a foreign land? To abandon my fatherland and the altars of our gods?" (McAdoo 129).

Finally, Radamès gives in to temptation by agreeing to flee with Aida; in the process of doing so, he divulges the Egyptian armies' plans to Amonasro. This represents a sort of double treason. Not only has Radamès betrayed Egypt, but he has also betrayed his role as the colonial subject. Aida, who is positioned musically in opposition to the disciplined Egyptian subject, has proved too enticing to Radamès, musically, geographically, and visually.<sup>1</sup> He has dared to move beyond dreaming of Aida—gazing at her as representative of the past—and has attempted to give in to her and what she represents. However, in the trajectory of the opera, Radamès will have to wait until he has escaped the panopticon to finally join with Aida and realize his pre-colonial desires.

At the end of Act 3, Amneris and Ramfis discover Radamès' disloyalty. Aida flees, but Radamès does not. Instead, this powerful leader of the Egyptian army and prisoner to the panopticon hands himself over to Ramfis without a struggle, singing the resolute line, "Sacerdote, io resto te" [Priest, I am in your hands] with powerful and unflinching conviction (McAdoo 139). The 1988 Metropolitan Opera production of this scene is particularly powerful at this moment of self-discipline: Radamès turns himself over to Ramfis in a supremely symbolic manner, kneeling before him to give up his sword, that tool of colonial power previously consecrated for his use against Ethiopia in the finale of Act 1.<sup>2</sup> Radamès here recognizes that he must surrender his own instrument of power, as well as his body, in order to be properly disciplined, and Amneris seems to agree with his assessment—her final line at the end of Act 3 is "Traitor!" (McAdoo 139).

Just as Aida finds herself to be conflicted at the end of Act 1, Scene 1, wondering whether to pray for the success of her love, Radamès, or his enemy (her father, Amonasro), Amneris is conflicted in Act 4, Scene 1. Aida's words to herself, "Wretched girl, what have I said?" (McAdoo 63) return in the mouth of Amneris: "Oh, what am I saying?" (McAdoo 141). Amneris' inner conflict is slightly different, however; rather than deciding whether to support father or lover, Amneris must decide between her role as self-disciplined colonial subject and her love, Radamès, who just aligned himself with the pre-colonial by agreeing to flee with Aida and betraying the Egyptian armies. Only too willing to brand Radamès a "Traitor!" at the end of Act 3, Amneris shows her conflicted state by inverting this word at the beginning of Act 4, defending Radamès against the accusations of Ramfis and the priests.

Wanting to save him, Amneris first summons Radamès to her, telling him that she will save his life if only he will promise to never again see Aida. Of course, Radamès is not willing to renounce his blessed Aida, and would rather face the fatal consequences of treason than deny her. By "accepting the moral consequences, Radamès becomes a perfect representation of the colonial subject" (Bergeron 153). He is self-disciplined and loyal to both his public responsibilities (as traitorous military commander) and the private sphere (loving Aida). What is problematic for Amneris in terms of any proposed transaction with Radamès at this point involves her conditions on Radamès' freedom: Amneris will agree to help Radamès only if he will sever his connections to the exoticized pre-colonial subject, Aida. Amneris has already dealt with the dangers of exoticization-by-association in her chambers (Act 2, Scene 1), and has no desire

---

1. In Giulio Ricordi's production book for the 1872 production of *Aida* at La Scala, he indicates that Aida should be presented on stage as having "olive, dark reddish skin," setting her off as visually distinct from the Egyptians, whose skin color was not specified (Busch 558).

2. 1988 Metropolitan Opera production on DVD video.

to test the boundaries between herself as a disciplined colonial subject and Radamès as a subject who has proved treasonous.

Nevertheless, Amneris continues to be emotionally conflicted and precariously close to the exotic as she listens to Ramfis and the priests pronounce judgment on Radamès in Act 4. Significantly, Amneris commands the stage alone at this point, overhearing the priests, who are offstage. In a kind of inversion of the Consecration Scene, male voices are heard from within, while only a female presence remains onstage. It is possible to connect the inversion of the Consecration Scene in Act 4, Scene 1 to the sparse staging of Act 3, as well. Fabrizio Della Seta describes the staging of Act 3, the Nile setting, as a “nostalgic otherworld, the opposite pole to [the] Egyptian present... defined negatively, as visual absence (which enhances its nature as a utopia or ‘non-place’), thus leaving to the more evocative powers of poetic language and music the task of giving it an ideal presence” (54). Amneris is defined in Act 4, Scene 1 by this same absence, creating negative stage space that threatens to render her exotic (in a non-place). Perhaps more than an exoticized space of absence, however, the bare stage on which Amneris stands may remind the reader of a cell in the panopticon, that insidious tool of visibility that places the individual under the impression that he or she is being constantly surveyed. Alone on the stage, negotiating the space between disciplined and undisciplined, Amneris futilely speaks for Radamès, who refuses to defend himself against the charges listed by Ramfis, offstage. Although Amneris seems to have the last word against the priests as she calls down a curse on their heads, ending on a high A (“Impious brood! My curse upon you! Heaven’s vengeance will strike you!” McAdoo 157), Amneris cannot control the outcome of the judgment of the priests. Refusing to use her power as Pharaoh’s daughter unless Radamès will renounce the undisciplined (Aida), Amneris stalwartly maintains her role as self-disciplined subject, but she does so at a price: she gives up her own potential happiness in love, and symbolically copes with the danger of being rendered exotic by association as she stands alone on stage.

In the finale of *Aida* (Act 4, Scene 2), we find Radamès back in the Temple of the Vulcan. However, unlike in the Consecration Scene in which he is anointed in sacred preparation for battle on Egypt’s behalf, in this instance he is doomed to die for treason against Egypt. In this infamous split-level scene, Radamès is shown encased below the floor of the temple in a shadowy stone vault. Above his dark tomb, standing solemnly on the stone that has sealed Radamès’ fate, appears Amneris.

As the scene begins, a despairing Radamès sings, “The fatal stone has closed above me. This is my tomb. Never again shall I see the light of day, nor see Aida” (McAdoo 159). As he sings, Radamès is startled by what he first mistakes as a ghost emerging from the darkness and shadows of the tomb. It is Aida. Upon seeing her and hearing her intentions to die in the burial chamber, Radamès, formerly resigned to his own death, suffers the urge to liberate Aida from the vault, singing, “No, you shall not die! I have loved you too much, you are too lovely to die!” (McAdoo 161). But Aida seems focused on the afterlife as she sings (as if in a trance), “Above us heaven is opening. There, every sorrow ends, and there joy begins, the joy of immortal love” (McAdoo 161). Aida’s sweet, flowing melody line rises and falls ethereally as she sings, reaching as high as a B-flat that seems directed skyward, beyond the walls of the tomb.

As Aida’s melody returns to earth by culminating on the tonic D-flat, the familiar chromatic incantation of the priestesses, which begin in D-flat one octave above where Aida resolved, are once again heard from offstage. As in the Consecration Scene, the exotic-sounding song of the priestesses, accompanied only by the harp, seems to emanate from the pre-colonial, undisciplined past. Already representative of this past herself and associated with death when Radamès mistakes her for a ghost, Aida, upon hearing this summons, tells Radamès that the priestesses are singing their funeral hymn. In doing so she creates the link between death and the exotic, undisciplined, pre-colonial past. Instead of solemnly singing in response to the priestesses to display his self-discipline, Radamès, still intent on escaping, gives the stone vault one final unsuccessful push. Aida, assisted by the sinuous sounds of flutes that play a chromatic melody reminiscent of Act 3, then implores Radamès to stop trying to free them from the vault and accept their shared fate in death, singing, “It is useless! On earth, all is finished for us” (McAdoo 163). Here again, through the winding sound of the flute, Aida links the exotic and undisciplined to the afterlife as Radamès finally acknowledges that they are destined to die in the tomb.

In this instance, the possibility of escape to the pre-colonial past appears before Radamès not in the prospect of fleeing to Ethiopia with Aida, as it was presented in Act 3, but instead in the specter of death. In other words, what it means to be free has taken on new meaning. The vault, which at first glance seems to enclose and thoroughly contain Radamès for his pre-colonial indiscretions, becomes the mechanism through which he is finally able to escape the colonized present. Through death, which is coupled with the exotic songs of the priestesses and Aida herself, he will realize the dream of the undisciplined past. The vault that will cause his demise will simultaneously carry him back in time.

The entombing of Radamès in Act 4, Scene 2 not only facilitates his escape; it also releases him from the panopticon. By using the split-level stage with Amneris placed in plain view above in the light of the Temple of Vulcan and Radamès entombed below, Verdi allowed his tenor the opportunity to be symbolically hidden from the gaze of the colonizing West, if only for one scene. By placing Radamès in a dark, shadowy, hidden location, Verdi paradoxically allows him to benefit from a freedom that is not afforded to bodies exposed on the stage above. In this way, Act 4, Scene 2 displays two very different forms of disciplinary technologies: the panopticon and the dungeon.

The dungeon, an antecedent to the panopticon, dispenses discipline by rendering the subject invisible. While an effective tool in physically containing and controlling the subject, the dungeon remains a subversive place. Given its location in a space outside the disciplinary gaze and hidden in the shadows and darkness, the criminal is free to indulge in whatever actions, behaviors, thoughts, and fantasies are possible within its confines without fear of reprimand. As Foucault explains, the panopticon, by contrast, “reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected” (*Discipline and Punish* 200). Because Radamès is placed in a dungeon and therefore freed from the corrective gaze, he is able to step out of his role as the disciplined colonized subject and finally join with Aida, therefore indulging his desire to escape to the pre-colonial past. Amneris on the other hand, is left exposed and therefore thoroughly disciplined, still subject to scrutiny in the panopticon of the stage above, doomed to live with the threat of association with the exotic while continuously trying to separate herself from it. As the opera draws to a close, Amneris stands alone on top of the vault that contains Aida and Radamès. Musically, this scene powerfully conveys Radamès’ ultimate liberation through death in the dungeon and Amneris’ continued discipline through her exposure on stage in the panopticon.

As Aida and Radamès sing the delicate soaring melody to “O terra addio,” they sing in unison. Although their melody is decidedly devoid of exotic elements, it is distinctly disengaged from the enticing chromatic melody of the priestesses, above and offstage. The priestesses continue to sing, but Radamès, joined in blissful melody with Aida, makes no attempt to neutralize their exotic incantations through sober chanting as he did in the Consecration Scene. Now well hidden and contained in the tomb, Radamès is instead in full rapture, indulging in anticipation of death by joining with Aida in song while supporting her in his arms. Far from attempting to contain the priestesses’ song, Radamès and Aida instead allow their voices to fly beyond the tomb walls into the heavens with two high B flats, the second of which is sung before Aida collapses into Radamès’ arms in death. Amneris, however, still rendered visible on the floor of the temple, is forced to continue to play the role of the self-disciplined colonial subject as she begs for peace. Unlike Radamès and Aida, whose elated melody sung from the shadows prefigures their freedom in death, Amneris’ requests for peace are sung suffocated with emotion, *voce soffocata*, through the chant-like repetition of the dominant D-flat which acts to inoculate the song of priestesses and restore some semblance of order, similar to the Consecration Scene. As the music reaches the final measure, Radamès has escaped and Amneris, dispirited, but displaying thorough self-discipline nonetheless, beats back the final temptations of the exotic, ending the opera by once again somberly singing D-flat, the fifth of the G-flat major triad that is completed by the chorus of priests and the orchestra.

The end of *Aida* can be looked at as an allegory for the colonizing West. Far from advocating physical containment out of the view of the colonizer (a situation which ultimately allowed Radamès to escape to the pre-colonial past), *Aida* seems to strongly suggest that the most potent means with which to control colonial subjects is to render them inescapably visible. In fact, domination of the East by the West generally depends on the West’s ability to generate knowledge and discourse about the Orient, or exotic “Other.” As Said points out, “The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny....[To have] knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it” (*Orientalism* 32). To be visible, then, allows one to be known, and to be known is to be controlled. As a “disciplinary” reading of *Aida* shows, by keeping colonized subjects visible, they are more easily scrutinized, and “knowledge” about them is therefore more easily generated. Consequently, disciplinary power (which derives from that knowledge) can be effortlessly exercised. As a result of exposure there is little need for the colonizer to employ overt acts of discipline. Indeed, with the threat of a constant gaze, the colonized, thoroughly revealed and known to their oppressor, learn to discipline themselves.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellman, Jonathan. "Introduction." *The Exotic in Western Music*. Ed. Jonathan Bellman. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998. ix-xiii.
- Bergeron, Katherine. "Verdi's Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*." *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 14, nos. 1 & 2 (2002): 149-159.
- Busch, Hans. *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978.
- Della Seta, Fabrizio. "'O cieli azzurri': Exoticism and Dramatic Discourse in *Aida*." Trans. Arthur Groos. *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1991): 49-62.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. 1975. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Pfohl, Stephen. *Image of Deviance and Social Control*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994.
- Robinson, Paul. "Is *Aida* an Orientalist Opera?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* vol. 5, no. 2 (July 1993): 133-140.
- Said, Edward W. "The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*." *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993. 111-132, 344-345 (notes).
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979 [1978].
- Verdi, Giuseppe. *Aida*. Arena di Verona. 9 Agosto 1966. DVD video HDC 4010. Hardy Classics, Hardy Trading Co., 2003.
- Verdi, Giuseppe. *Aida*. Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and New Philharmonia Orchestra. Riccardo Muti. Perf. Montserrat Caballé, Plácido Domingo, Fiorenza Cossotto, Niccolai Ghiaurov, Piero Cappuccilli, 1974 recording. EMI Classics compact disc 7243 5 67618 2. Digitally remastered, 2001.
- Verdi, Giuseppe. *Aida*. Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra. James Levine. Perf. Aprile Millo, Plácido Domingo, Dolora Zajick, Sherrill Milnes, Paata Burchuladze, and Dimitri Kavrakos, 1988. DVD video 440 073 001-9. Hamburg: Deutsche Grammaphon GmbH, 1991/2000.
- Verdi, Giuseppe. *Aida: In Full Score*. New York: Dover, 1989.
- Verdi, Giuseppe. *Aida: Opera Score (Vocal)*. New York: G. Schirmer, 1963.