

## THE THERIOMORPHIC AND DIONYSIAN IN SILVIO BENCO'S LIBRETTO *LA FALENA* FOR ANTONIO SMAREGLIA

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UDK / UDC: 782.1:792.026Benco, S.+Smareglia, A.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21857/m8vqrtq0w9>

Izvorni znanstveni rad / Research Paper

Primljeno / Received: 14. 5. 2021.

Prihvaćeno / Accepted: 27. 9. 2021.

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### *Abstract*

The Benco – Smareglia cooperation has been thoroughly investigated from the point of view and with the scientific tools of musicology, so the idea behind this paper was to examine the libretto of *La Falena*, the first of the three libretti, written in 1897, and look for the numerous intertextual connections deriving from the demonic, inhuman, or rather superhuman features of the female protagonist. While the dualism typical of the *Scapigliatura* is translated into antithetic constructions in the antinomian creation of characters, in the plot structure and in the semantic coupling of love

and folly, the reuse of gothic and legend-derived elements is functional to the erotic-monstrous connotations of Benco's *femme fatale*. The perturbing dimension of female eros presented by Benco is also ascribable to Nietzsche's theory of the Dionysian disorder.

**Keywords:** Silvio Benco; Antonio Smareglia; Falena; theriomorphic femininity; Dionysian principle

**Ključne riječi:** Silvio Benco; Antonio Smareglia; Falena; teriomorfno; dionizijsko

The cooperation between the writer Silvio Benco and the composer Antonio Smareglia is little known, if at all, to the majority of present operatic audiences, except to a small circle of scholars and opera enthusiasts from the regions of Istria and Italy. Benco contributed to the literary and political history of Trieste as one of its most important journalists, essayists and intellectual irredentists at the turn of the 20th century, while Smareglia did not achieve long-term success during his lifetime, but seems to be regaining experts' and performers' interest in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> A native of Pula (Croatia), Smareglia studied at the famous Milan Conservatory, which enabled him to live at first-hand the *Scapigliatura* movement and to develop the Wagnerian orientation of his compositional style.<sup>2</sup> His Vienna years, from 1887 to 1893, mark the beginning of his international productions, as the operas *Il Vassallo di Szigeth* (The Vassal of Szigeth) and *Cornill Schut*<sup>3</sup> were staged in Vienna, Prague and Dresden, and the former at the New York Metropolitan as well.

When he returned to Istria, Smareglia began working on his most famous opera, *Le nozze istriane* (Istrian Wedding), which to this day remains his work with the largest overall number of stagings.<sup>4</sup> The veristic libretto for this opera, which

<sup>1</sup> In 1999 an international musicological congress was organized in Novigrad (Croatia) on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Smareglia's death which resulted in a volume of proceedings published in 2000. Musicologist Juliana Ličinić van Walstijn dedicated her doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh to Smareglia's works. In November 2003 there were two performances of *Oceana* in Pula and in Zagreb, conducted by Zoran Jurančić. In 2009 Ličinić van Walstijn's research was published and it remains the most important and thorough work on Smareglia to date. In 2015 the Društvo Smaregliana (Smaregliana Society) was reactivated after an eighty-year interruption. In April 2016 a staging of *La Falena* premiered at the Staatstheater Braunschweig. In 2017 a concert performance of *La Falena* was given in Bergamo and in Milan. It was recorded and released as an initiative within the musicological congress *Conoscere Antonio Smareglia* held in Milan in November of the same year. In 2018 the National Theatre of Pula produced a staging of Smareglia's early work *Caccia lontana*. See Ivana Paula GORTAN-CARLIN – Bruno DOBRIĆ: *Revitalizacija i revalorizacija djela Antonija Smareglie u Istri od 1990. do danas*, in: Denia Mazzola Gavazzeni (ed.): *Upoznati Antonija Smareglia*, Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile, 2019, 51-60.

<sup>2</sup> The movement developed during the 1870s and 1880s as an artistic, primary literary, rebellion against the preceding poetics of romanticism intertwined with the Risorgimento, the revolutionary war that brought to the unification of the peninsula in 1861. As far as music is concerned, it was characterized by the innovative influence of Wagnerism. On the role of Wagnerism in Smareglia's formative years see: Edoardo PERPICH: *Il teatro musicale di Antonio Smareglia*, Trieste – Rovigno: UIIF-UPT, 1990, 25; Ivano CAVALLINI: *La frontiera interiore di Antonio Smareglia*, in: Paolo Ziller – Marino Budicin (eds.): *Atti, Volume XXV*, Trieste – Rovigno: UIIF-UPT, 1995, 243-247.

<sup>3</sup> Better known as *Pittori fiamminghi* (Flemish Painters), the new title adopted for the 1928 remake staged in Trieste. For a thorough analysis of these operas, along with the subsequent *Le nozze istriane*, see I. CAVALLINI: *La frontiera interiore*, 241-264.

<sup>4</sup> In 1894 the young Austrian military officer Franz Lehár (who was to become the most prominent operetta composer of the empire a decade later) was appointed *Marinekappelmeister* in Pula. He befriended Smareglia and after leaving his post in Pula and building his musical career in Vienna, Lehár provided for a staging of *Le nozze istriane* in Vienna in 1908. See Lada DURAKOVIĆ: *Franz Lehár – kapelnik carske i kraljevske mornarice u Puli (1894-1896)*, Pula: Povijesni i pomorski muzej Istre, 2020, 33-43; Juliana LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: *'Teatro di poesia' in the Opera House. The Collaboration of Antonio Smareglia and Silvio Benco*, Zagreb: HMD, 2009, 48-49; Marzio PIERI: *Diceria per un untore*. Die Fall Smareglia

premiered in Trieste in 1895, was written by one of the greatest librettists of the epoch, Luigi Illica.<sup>5</sup> According to Perpich, this is the opera in which Smareglia »[...] leaves the reality of things, with a smile, and enters the realm of the unreal, of the fantastic, of the obscure.«<sup>6</sup> It is also the period when the Istrian composer met the poet and journalist Silvio Benco, twenty year his junior and, unfortunately, the period when the first symptoms of Smareglia's blindness started. In cooperation with Benco he inaugurated the last operatic phase of his career within the cultural environment of Austro-Hungarian rule and in a peculiar mixture of three languages and cultures: the Austrian, the Italian and the Slavic (Croatian and Slovenian).<sup>7</sup> It must be pointed out that Benco began his writing career in a very dynamic time in Trieste's culture and became one of the epoch's protagonists, alongside renowned authors such as Italo Svevo, James Joyce, Umberto Saba and Gabriele D'Annunzio. That was Benco's background when he started working on the first of the three libretti for Smareglia, namely *La Falena*. Even before this enterprise, Benco had declared himself a supporter of Wagner's type of opera. In his essay collection *Scritti musicali di Silvio Benco* (Musical Writings by Silvio Benco) the articles on Wagner outnumbered all the other topics.<sup>8</sup> It is the reason why he chose to imitate the Wagnerian model of libretti based on Germanic legends, and to create a fantastic libretto, a »legend«, as he himself defined it. However, unlike the majority of the librettistic production derived from a preexistent literary or theatrical work,<sup>9</sup> Benco's plot was an original. *La Falena* premiered at the Teatro Rossini in Venice in 1897 and Benco's libretto became the center of criticism and controversy,<sup>10</sup> so much so that Benco felt he had to publish an article entitled *Le origini della »Falena«* in the Triestine newspaper *L'Indipendente* in 1899, on the eve of the opera's restaging, in order to explain his creative process and his poetic intentions.<sup>11</sup>

glia, in: Silvio Benco: *La morte dell'usignolo e gli altri libretti per Smareglia*, ed. Marzio Pieri, Trento: La Finestra, 2003, lxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Author, among others, of the libretti for Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*.

<sup>6</sup> »Con le *Nozze istriane* l'artista si allontanava sorridendo dalla realtà delle cose per inoltrarsi nel regno dell'irreale, del fantastico, dell'oscuro.« E. PERPICH: *Il teatro musicale di Antonio Smareglia*, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Benco's Trieste, as Marzio Pieri states in his essays, »was expecting Italy, [...] and was calling for it, offering a great gift [...] : a theatre of opera and poetry that would answer entirely, heroically, to the non-negotiable esthetic requirements and would not be preoccupied with petty interests.« See: M. PIERI: *Diceria per un untore*, lix-lx, translation K. R.-P. Aside from the quotation, Pieri underlines the anti-verismo tendencies predominant in Trieste and Benco's »frank dislike of Pietro Mascagni, both the person and his work.« *Ibid.*, p. lx.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> If we consider the most famous operatic titles of the epoch, they are almost all of them derived from existent literary sources: *Otello*, *Falstaff*, *Werther*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Andrea Chenier*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Queen of Spades*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> J. LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: 'Teatro di poesia' in *The Opera House*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> See S. BENCO: *Le origini della »Falena«*, *L'Indipendente*, Trieste, XXIII (24 February 1899), n. 7660.

Before getting into the detailed analysis of the libretto, we will briefly summarize the follow-up on Smareglia and Benco's collaboration. Notwithstanding the composer's total blindness which affected him from 1900,<sup>12</sup> by 1903 they produced together the second of their operas entitled *Oceana*, which premiered at La Scala in Milan, with Arturo Toscanini conducting. From Smareglia's letters<sup>13</sup> it is clear that both the composer and the librettist consulted Arrigo Boito<sup>14</sup> in the production of this work. It was defined as a »fantastic comedy« and was again an original product of Silvio Benco's prodigious fantasy,<sup>15</sup> inspired by Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), by Goethe (*Iphigenia in Tauris*) and by the paintings of the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901).<sup>16</sup> Some fifty years ago, a manuscript was found in the rich music library of the eminent Triestine composer and musicologist Vito Levi, of another libretto by Silvio Benco dated 1901 by the title of *La morte dell'usignolo* (Death of the Nightingale), destined also for Smareglia's music but never actually composed.<sup>17</sup> In 1906 Benco wrote for Smareglia the last of his libretti for the opera *Abisso* (Abyss), which premiered only in 1914, and was quite successful.<sup>18</sup> The critics highlighted the erotic aspects of this libretto, interpreting them as echoes of D'Annunzian sensuality, and found analogies with Wilde's *Salomé* as well as with the *Falena* libretto, because of the violent and destructive forces that permeate both libretti. In this period Benco wrote two out of three of his novels, *La fiamma fredda* (Cold Flame, 1903) and *Il castello dei desideri* (The castle of desires, 1906).<sup>19</sup> Aside from Smareglia, Benco had another, less fortunate operatic experience in the first decades of the 20th century with composer Gian Francesco Malipiero. For Malipiero he wrote two libretti, *Elen and Fuldano* in 1907-1909, composed but never staged, and the one-act *Canossa* in 1911, staged once in Rome in

<sup>12</sup> *La Falena* was the last score that Smareglia wrote by himself before total blindness affected him. See S. BENCO: *Ricordi di Antonio Smareglia*, Duino: Edizioni Umana, 1968, 49.

<sup>13</sup> J. LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: 'Teatro di poesia' in *the Opera House*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> One of the most important Scapigliati poets, composer and librettist for Verdi's Shakespearean masterpieces *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

<sup>15</sup> According to the only critical monograph that examines Benco's theatrical works extensively. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>16</sup> See S. BENCO: *Ricordi di Antonio Smareglia*, 82. A similar theme, but one that derives from mythology, had been set to music by another Wagnerian of the Milanese school, Alfredo Catalani, first with the title of *Elda* (1880), later known as *Loreley* (1890), based on Heinrich Heine's poem by the same title.

<sup>17</sup> See Gianni GORI: *L'usignolo non nato*. Premessa a un manoscritto, in: Silvio Benco: *La morte dell'usignolo e gli altri libretti per Smareglia*, ed. Marzio Pieri, Trento: La Finestra, 2003, ix-xv.

<sup>18</sup> As far as Smareglia's musical score is concerned, *Abisso* is closer to *Oceana* for its flourishing and very rich symphonism that some of the critics at the time deemed to be exaggerated and tiresome, »so much as to generate an almost wrongful suspicion that he had added words to a previously composed instrumental work«. G. B. Nappi in *La Perseveranza*, 11 February 1914, quoted in: J. LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: 'Teatro di poesia' in *the Opera House*, 232.

<sup>19</sup> The third novel *Nell'atmosfera del sole* (Within the sun's atmosphere) was written in 1921. According to Ličinić van Walstijn, the novels have a lot in common with the libretti, most of all »the deliberate absence of real, dramatic fibre [...]«. See *Ibid.*, 89-92.

January 1914 with a disastrous outcome. In his memoirs Malipiero states that he had found the scores in 1923 and destroyed them both, along with some other musical pieces.<sup>20</sup> For the rest of his writing career Benco was dedicated to journalism,<sup>21</sup> essays<sup>22</sup> and history and did not write any more opera libretti.<sup>23</sup> After the trilogy with Benco, Smareglia staged only a remake of *Cornill Schut* with a new title (*Pittori fiamminghi*), and never gained the appreciation and approval that so many illustrious friends predicted for him. One of the plausible explanations lay in his conflict with the major music publisher of the epoch, Giulio Ricordi.<sup>24</sup>

The three operas produced by Benco and Smareglia are examples of what is called *teatro di poesia* – poetic theatre,<sup>25</sup> a symbiosis of poetry and music that transcends the limits of the traditional dramaturgical text set into predetermined musical numbers within the audience's expectations. It implied taking their professed Wagnerism and mythological themes and reinterpreting them in the key of symbolism, by means of the supernatural and the unconscious. Benco relied on Smareglia's music to fill the libretto in with not only the atmosphere but the characterization, the psychological and philosophical backgrounds as well.<sup>26</sup> The analysis that follows will illustrate how this poetic program is achieved in the libretto of *La Falena*.

Formally, the libretto is articulated in three acts and provided with stage directions, but has no subdivision into scenes or identifiable metrical rules. The plot narrates the love story between Stellio, a young, magnanimous king, and Albina, a kind and pure girl. The outcome is tragic due to the involvement of Falena (literally a moth), a tempting sorceress who »by means of dark spells makes men sin.«<sup>27</sup> She

<sup>20</sup> See Francesco FECONDO: Il finto Arlecchino. Il teatro sintetico-melodrammatico di Gian Francesco Malipiero, *Rivista italiana di Musicologia*, (2017) 52, 152, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26617916>> (24 April 2021); See Emerico GIACHERY: Benco, Enea Silvio, *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 1966, <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/enea-silvio-benco\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/enea-silvio-benco_(Dizionario-Biografico))>, (24 April 2021).

<sup>21</sup> He was considered one of the most cultured journalists of the epoch and wrote around five thousand articles concerning politics, history, theatre, literature, art and music criticism. See *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> He wrote a seminal essay on Goethe in 1932, and essays on Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Baudelaire, Poe, Ibsen, Kafka and many others. He was a friend of James Joyce and the first promotor of *Ulysses* in Italy. See *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> In the aforementioned essay, Gori quotes a letter by composer Gastone Zucconi's son from March 1975 stating that in 1920 Benco had written a single-act libretto entitled *Il lago* (The lake), also never set to music, which manuscript he possessed. See G. GORI: *L'usignolo non nato*, x-xi.

<sup>24</sup> S. BENCO: *Ricordi di Antonio Smareglia*, 22-24.

<sup>25</sup> The volume '*Teatro di poesia*' in the *Opera House. The Collaboration of Antonio Smareglia and Silvio Benco* is focused on the analysis of the elements of this 'poetic theatre' in the three operas *La Falena*, *Oceana* and *Abisso*. It also offers a systematic insight into Benco's literary affinities within the context of Italian and European literature and into his unique vision of opera and its purpose. See J. LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: '*Teatro di poesia*' in the *Opera House*, 73-94.

<sup>26</sup> As Perpich suggested: »in them [the libretti] the indefiniteness of the situations gave the musician the greatest freedom and it was music itself that determined the dramatic unrolling and explained the sentimental meanings.« See E. PERPICH: *Il teatro musicale di Antonio Smareglia*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> »Fa gli uomini peccare con malefici oscuri«. Silvio BENCO: *La Falena*, in: S. Benco: *La morte dell'usignolo e gli altri libretti per Smareglia*, ed. Marzio Pieri, Trento: La Finestra, 2003, 58.

is a supernatural being who enchants the young king, inebriates his senses and induces him to kill his future father-in-law. When the moth-sorceress vanishes at dawn, the murderous king returns to his people, in time for him to be forgiven by Albina who then dies at his feet.

The action covers a brief period of one night, from dusk till dawn, and the historic time of the action is defined in the stage directions as »the early Christian times, on a European coast of the Atlantic«. It is important to notice that the marine scenery of the first and last acts, together with the centrality of a female protagonist, created by hybridization of human and animal, evoke the fluvial-marine ambiance of the various Nordic undines like the Wagnerian Rhinemaidens or the mermaid from Catalani's *Loreley*. The libretto opens with Albina, the female character who represents (within the strongly antinomic or dualistic structure of the drama) the positive pole of the Christian ideological system, and the young king Stellio, whose initial characterization is that of a man so magnanimous and merciful as to be compared to Jesus. However, Albina's chaste and pious figure of the »pure, angelic virgin« is incriminated by the addition of a clearly romantic-decadent vice which denotes a certain distant, if not even satiric, attitude of the author towards the character.<sup>28</sup> The vice lies in the character's melancholic and languid attitude manifested as her openness towards sacrifice (»soffro tanto bene! / I suffer so well!«, Albina declares in the moment of biggest joy – a moment before the apparition of Falena), as well as her sadness, bordering on morbid sentimentalism, observed in the opening scene when she deals with a simple jasmine flower and transmutes it into a »dying little flower/a child in agony«, an image with strong reminiscences of Pascoli's symbolist poetry:

»ALBINA:

Stringo sul seno il fiore:  
è nato appena, è piccoletto e bianco  
e domani morrà!  
Un fiorellin morente,  
un bimbo in agonia,  
una foglia cadente  
d'autunno, un cuor di vergine  
d'amore afflitto e stanco:  
dentro l'anima mia  
è tutto una pietà...

I hold a flower in my bosom  
it's just born, it's tiny and white  
and it will die tomorrow!  
A dying little flower,  
a child in agony,  
a falling autumn leaf,  
a virgin's heart  
an afflicted and tired love:  
inside my soul  
it's all pity...«<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> »This is the reason why Albina's character is so badly shaped, so anemic and sentimental, with her melancholies of an abandoned little seamstress, longing for love. Reading the libretto, it is more than obvious that the author has never really felt this character and that he would have never written a work entirely focused on her«. See Enrico ELIA: *La Falena. Leggenda in tre atti di Antonio Smareglia su libretto di Silvio Benco*, ed. Elvinio Guagnini, Trieste: EUT, 2015, 51, translation K. R.-P.

<sup>29</sup> S. BENCO: *La Falena*, 9. As stated earlier in the paper, Benco's libretto consists of three acts which are not subdivided into scenes, therefore it is not possible to give the usual act-scene reference for each quotation. Instead, we provide the pages in which the quotations appear in the published libretto.

By developing two elements of the first scene – Albina's melancholy compared with Our Lady of Sorrows and her premonitory dream in which an odd woman appears to her – the first act culminates with the appearance of this anonymous being, a creature »unknown and savage, a woman dressed in a foggy and wavy cape, dark-haired like a daughter of darkness«,<sup>30</sup> who comes to stir the future couple's and the people's harmony.<sup>31</sup> This is the self-portrait with which this mysterious woman presents herself to Stelio:

»THE ANONYMOUS: [...] I hunt the beast in its lair / I hunt men, / love and hatred are the bow and the arrow: / and a multitude / of dead ones, loved and hated / fills my abode with blood!

[...]

THE ANONYMOUS: Because I possess a bow and an arrow: / because if I hate, everybody is in fear, / if I love, everybody trembles, / because my will / is the crave of the abyss / which attracts, which devours and gurgles...«<sup>32</sup>

The anonymous woman<sup>33</sup> seems to be a relative of the Amazons or of the Wagnerian Valkyries, but, as we can see in the following verses, her battling femininity is contaminated by traits typical of the *dame sans merci*, with late nineteenth-century values:

»THE ANONYMOUS, (to Stelio): Don't you see the lightning of the beast's eye / burning your senses? / Don't you feel the confusing smells and the incenses / of my dark

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> After the appearance of Falena, who enchants Stelio and brings him to a cataleptic state, the first act ends with the people's prayer, asking God to protect them from the spirits and demons of the night. This final prayer, together with the initial love song by the village girls, symmetrically rounds up the first act.

<sup>32</sup> L'IGNOTA: [...] Caccio la belva ne la sua tana / caccio gli uomini, / amore ed odio son l'arco e la freccia: / ed una moltitudine / di morti amati e odiati / m'insanguina il manier! [...] L'IGNOTA: Perché ho la freccia e l'arco: / perché se odio, tutti ne temono, / perché se amo, tutti ne tremano, / perché la mia voglia / è brama d'abisso / che attira, che inghiotte e gorgoglia... S. BENCO: *La Falena*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to point out the many different denominations of the female protagonist throughout the libretto. The first act identifies her as *L'ignota* – the anonymous woman (whose generic name seems to imitate external focalization when she first appears in the libretto) and it is only at the beginning of the second act that we find her title-name and animalistic definition of *la Falena* – the Moth. To complicate this naming process further, approximately in the middle of Act II, when Stelio asks for a name to call her, the Moth-woman names herself *Redana*, an unusual name (*Strana musica del nome tuo* – Strange is the music of your name, states Stelio) but without connotations that we could point out aside from the indirect rhyming with the concepts of *fata Morgana* (a known character in Italian literature, synonym of mirage) and *Satana* in reference to her. The name *Redana* is used just two more times in the libretto, in Act III, in the scenes when the Moth-woman disappears at dawn and Stelio calls out for her, and in her very last line when she asks for his help and bids him farewell. Such anthroponymic diversity certainly underlines further the protagonist's theriomorphic-metamorphic features.

hair? / Look at me: am I not the beautiful, the strong / the one who kills the force of  
kisses with kisses / who drowns her rapacious hands in bosoms / and ruins hearts?<sup>34</sup>

[...]

THE ANONYMOUS: Tonight, I shall call / your soul from your sleep / the sleep I  
bestow upon you / with my black wings!

[...]

THE ANONYMOUS: The night is mine. / And when I impose unrelenting sleep / to  
human eyes, they do not wake up / but run madly through the darkness / to search for  
my arms: and Stellio is mine!<sup>35</sup>

The first act of the legend offers very precise clues as to the monstrous nature of the anonymous woman (magic powers, cruelty and sexual desire), at the same time pointing out its liaison to the semantic field of nighttime. A network of nocturnal connotations creates an antithesis between the anonymous woman and the chaste Albina, whose statement, expressed when facing a yet incomprehensible and mysterious menace, confirms this perfect effect of antithetic symmetry by rhyming with her own name (*rovina*-Albina): »O, black night, impiety and ruin!«.<sup>36</sup> In this context, the metaphor of the black wings of sleep being laid upon Stellio, the object of her desire, whom she puts into catalepsy as the first step of his moral and psychological loss, becomes significant as an indication of the subtle correspondences with Falena's theriomorphic identity which will be revealed in the second act. During the second act all of these clues merge into the isotopy of the central character, Falena, a nocturnal version of the mythological sylphides, who celebrates the intoxication of the senses in the night scenery of her rocky abode and satisfies her craving for love and blood by means of Stellio murdering Uberto, Albina's father.

»LA FALENA: You... you... I desire / Your youth... / Your love... / Your lust... / I crave  
your crown... / I spied on you yesterday / the voice and the caress... I have never had  
love / I have called lovers to their death...

[...]

LA FALENA: You do not know / the sweet nights, you do not know that dawns / filled  
with aromas / hide swarms of desires, / that love flies in every zephyr... / And you

<sup>34</sup> L'IGNOTA, (sempre a Stellio): Non vedi ne'l lampo de l'occhio di fiera / bruciare i tuoi sensi? / Non senti confusi gli aromi e gli incensi / di mia chioma nera? / Mi guarda: non sembra la bella, la forte / che l'impeto uccide dei baci con baci / e immerse nei petti le mani rapaci / fa strazio dei cuor? *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> L'IGNOTA: Stanotte l'anima / tua chiamerò dal sonno / dal sonno che su te / con l'ali nere stendo! [...] L'IGNOTA: La notte è mia / E quando impongo un sonno inesorabile / sul ciglio degli umani, ei non si destano / se non per correr folli tra le tenebre / a cercar le mie braccia: e Stellio è mio! *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> »Oh, nera notte, impietà e rovina!« *Ibid.*, 24.



resist on your own / this lovely nocturnal balsam? / Drink, my lord!... Can't you hear?  
Love passes flying by! / It builds a veil between lashes / it oozes honey between lips!«<sup>37</sup>

Due to her desire and violence, as well as her destructive effect within the world of good Christians, the Moth-woman has already been compared to characters such as Mila, the protagonist of D'Annunzio's *La figlia di Iorio*,<sup>38</sup> victim of folk superstitions,<sup>39</sup> or to Wilde's Salomé.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Benco's anonymous woman is less related to the Salomé of Flaubert's *Hérodias*, than she is to the protagonist in Wilde's work by the same title, published first in French in 1892, raising a great stir, and then in English in 1894,<sup>41</sup> with the famous illustrations by Beardsley. The vampire connotations of the passionate kiss that Salomé bestows on John the Baptist's severed head<sup>42</sup> have their counterpart in *La Falena*, in the protagonist's blood thirst and in her unfastening her black hair and offering Stellio to clean his bloody hands with it.<sup>43</sup> A deeper bond with the biblical character is to be found, furthermore, in the element of dancing. In an article published in the Triestine newspaper *L'Indipendente* a few years after the opera's staging, Benco himself declared that:

»My intent was to give form to ideal movements, to harmonize them with the rhythms. Action during sleep. That was what moved me from within and what I tried to transpose with my feeble forces of an inexperienced but honest twenty-year-old man. I did not choose the legend – or more precisely the German *Märchen* – for the legend's sake, but for Falena – the moth. It was a vision in my mind, musically fit for some restless and bizarre music. A vision that entered the drama and became a pictorial symbol of the Night and of its perturbing action performed on simple and exalted human beings by stimulating their sense of the unknown and of anguish. I was under the impression

<sup>37</sup> LA FALENA: Te... te ... voglio... / Di te la giovinezza... / Di te l'amore... Di te la voluttà... / Bramo la tua corona... / T'ho iersera spiato / la voce e la carezza... Amor non ebbi mai / Gli amanti a la morte ho chiamato... [...] LA FALENA: Tu non conosci / le dolci notti, non sai che l'aure / pregne d'aromi / sciami nascondono di desideri, / che in ogni zeffiro volano amori... / E al carezzevole notturno balsamo / resisti solo? / Bevi, mio sire!... Non senti? passano / gli amori a volo! / Tra ciglio e ciglio / tendono un vel, / tra labbro e labbro stillano il miel! *Ibid.*, 33-35.

<sup>38</sup> J. LIČINIĆ VAN WALSTIJN: 'Teatro di poesia' in *the Opera House*, 117-118.

<sup>39</sup> Her characterization is dominated by destructive traits of a temptress which also remind us of the vampire-like connotations of Verga's *Lupa*, the protagonist of the short story and drama by the same title.

<sup>40</sup> Gianni GORI: La tesina di Enrico Elia sull'opera di Smareglia. Una Falena fra Rubens e Böcklin, in: E. ELIA: *La Falena. Leggenda in tre atti di Antonio Smareglia su libretto di Silvio Benco*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Meaning that it is possible that Benco may have been acquainted with Wilde's play.

<sup>42</sup> Oscar WILDE: *Salomé: a tragedy in one act*, transl. by Oscar Wilde, ill. by Aubrey Beardsley, Boston: Branden Publishing Company, 1996, 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Falena's words used to seduce Stellio, victim of her enchantment – whose resistance arises thanks to a reminder of Albina, the incarnation of innocence and faith – seem to echo, although in a much more synthetic form, functional to the musical requirements, the lyric eroticism of Salomé's words, which are a sinister and morbid reminder of the *Song of Songs*, thus creating a doubly subversive contrast with the biblical speech by Iokanaan, the object of her erotic desire.

that this image, floating in the fluid amplitude of its veils<sup>44</sup> soaked in darkness, applied to the plastic of the scene and inspired by continuous stimuli without intellectual limits, could provide for a series of new lines, of curious and exuberant attitudes, of lively gestures corresponding to a variety of musical movements, almost like elements of a dramatic dance.<sup>45</sup>

The character of Falena was chosen not just for her nocturnal features, which made her a suitable symbol of the night, of the unknown and of anguish, but also for the fact that her look corresponded to the scenic movement Benco described as »dramatic dance«, in which we may recognize an echo of Salomé's famous dance of the seven veils. But the demonological connotations and the supernatural features proven by their prodigious effects, raise additional questions, as we can read in this description:

»MORIO: She is not a woman... / she is a thirsty ghost that dwells in the darkness / and fades in the light of dawn: she is a Moth... / Moths enjoy evil and death / through obscure spells they make men sin... / A demon assumes beautiful shapes / and drives intoxicated lovers to impure sacrifices... / God save us from those who lead into hell.«<sup>46</sup>

It clearly makes Falena a relative of several female characters from German, English and French romanticism.<sup>47</sup> A list, even a selection of vampire-women, sirens,

<sup>44</sup> We must not exclude the possibility that Benco may have written these words bearing in mind the dance esthetics of the American dancer Louise Fuller (1862-1928), who performed an impressive and dramatic act using silk veils and a particular lighting, and conquered with her performance first New York in 1892, and then Paris as well, where she inspired Toulouse-Lautrec and Rodin. See <<https://www.victorian-cinema.net/fuller>> or <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Loie-Fuller>> (24 April 2021).

<sup>45</sup> »Dare un disegno ai movimenti ideali, che armonizzassero ai ritmi, è stato il mio intento. Azione in sogno è stato ciò che mi si mosse dentro e che io cercai di tradurre con le mie deboli forze dei venti anni inesperti, ma sinceri. Non ho scelto la leggenda – o più precisamente il *Märchen* tedesco – per la leggenda; ma per la Falena. Era una visione che mi passava in mente, musicalissima per una musica irrequieta e bizzarra: visione che, entrando nel dramma, vi divenne come un simbolo pittorico della Notte e della sua azione perturbatrice – mediante il senso dell'ignoto e dell'angoscia – sulle semplici ed esaltate creature umane. Mi parve che, applicata alla plastica della scena, quest'immagine svolazzante nella fluida ampiezza dei suoi veli intrisi di tenebre, sotto l'ispirazione continua di stimoli senza freno d'intelletto potesse fornire una serie di linee nuove, di atteggiamenti curiosi ed esuberanti, di vivacità del gesto corrispondente a varietà di massa musicale, quasi elementi d'una sorta di drammatica danza«. See S. BENCO: *Le origini della »Falena«*.

<sup>46</sup> MORIO: Colei non è una donna... / è un'assetata larva che vaga per le tenebre / e che si sfalda al lume de l'alba: è una Falena... / le Falene gioiscono del male e de la morte / fan gli uomini peccare con malefici oscuri... / Un demonio si veste forme leggiadre e mena / gl'inebbriati amanti a sacrifici impuri... / Dio ci guardi da loro che guidano a l'inferno. S. BENCO: *La Falena*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Beginning with the character destined to become an archetype of dangerous femininity, the vampire lady, represented in several short stories by Theodor A. HOFFMANN (*Vampirismus*, 1821 – *Vampirismo*, trad. it. di Carlo Pinelli, Genova: Nuovo Melangolo, 2011), to Théophile GAUTIER's character of Clarimonde, the vampire-woman, in: *La Morte amoureuse*, 1836. Théophile GAUTIER: *La morta innamorata*, trad. it. di Elina Klercy Imberciadori, in: *Racconti fantastici*, Milano: Garzanti, 1993, 54-84).

sylphides, evil spirits or other forms of monstrous femininity would be too much of a burden for this essay, but it seems necessary within this context to mention Charles Nodier's fantastic novella *Smarra, ou les Démons de la Nuit* (1821). In this story, based among other things on the Apuleian *Golden Ass*, we find the character of a nocturnal demon, inspired, it seems, by an episode from Alberto Fortis's *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (A Journey to Dalmatia, 1776), in which he narrated of a priest attacked by a witch on the Dalmatian coast.<sup>48</sup> We must also take into consideration the model of the dangerous charm of the feminine proposed by Edgar Allan Poe, exemplified in the vampirical connotations of female desire in *Berenice*, or in the admiration combined with horror inspired by the female protagonists (all dead lovers) in short stories such as *Ligeia*, *Morella* and *Eleonora*. Much like Benco chooses to depict the power of Falena's look, the one with which she enchants, tortures and annihilates Stellio, as the look of »iron and fire«,<sup>49</sup> in *Ligeia*, Poe dedicates a whole page to create a particularly incisive description of the intense and indecipherable look of this »the beauty of the fabulous Hourri of the Turk«. <sup>50</sup> In his incapacity to discover the source of this superior beauty that permeates his spirit, the autodiegetic narrator resorts to a series of comparisons with different life forms, from the micro to the macrocosm, among which we find a moth, a butterfly and a chrysalis.

»I mean to say that, [...] I derived, from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such as I felt always around, within me, by her large and luminous orbs. Yet not the more could I define that sentiment, or analyze, or even steadily view it. I recognized it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean—in the falling of a meteor. I have felt it in the glances of unusually aged people. And there are one or two stars in heaven (one especially, a star of the sixth magnitude, double and changeable, to be found near the large star in Lyra) in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the feeling.«<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding her intelligence, superior to all things imaginable, Ligeia is also »the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion«,<sup>52</sup> a passion that in her *post mortem* persistence terrifies the male protagonist most of all.

This model of femininity as a »sublime inspiration of ethereal art and primal origin of demonic deliria«<sup>53</sup> is present throughout the short stories by Ugo Tarchetti

<sup>48</sup> Smarra, the demon character's name, may have come from the Croatian *mora* – nightmare. See <<https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=41858>>, (24 April 2021).

<sup>49</sup> The character of Albina describes it with these words, in S. BENCO: *La Falena*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Edgar Allan POE: *Ligeia*, in: E. A. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, New York: Penguin, 1986, 112.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>53</sup> »Ispirazione sublime dell'arte eterea e origine prima di deliri demoniaci«. See Giovanna ROSA: *La narrativa degli Scapigliati*, Roma – Bari: Laterza, 1987, 141.

(for example, in *Riccardo Waitzen*, in the union between musical inspiration and the woman's malevolent power), but also in other authors of the *Scapigliatura* literary movement. In their works we often detect a morbid and macabre fiction alongside zoological elements of demonic and abominable in which moths, larvae and worms are found and the female eros is represented in its antinomic values.<sup>54</sup> In the schematic dualism established not only between Benco's antagonists – to begin with the etymology of their names linked to the semantic fields of good (Albina = dawn, pureness, daylight, innocence, faith) and evil (Falena = moth, night, moon, sin) – but also between Falena and all the other characters in the libretto, the dialectic of dualism has clearly been employed, as explained in Arrigo Boito's poem-manifesto *Dualismo*. In this poem Boito defines the human condition as a perpetual fluctuation »between a dream of sin / and a dream of virtue«. <sup>55</sup> In the numerous antithetic images symmetrically arranged in Boito's verses, such as virtue/sin, light/shadow, cherub/demon, angelic butterfly/dirty worm, the holy dreams are opposed to the dream of the magical Circe and her retinue, whereas the ethereal art finds its opposite in »The damned Art / That diverts my thought / Behind the base images / of a Truth lying to the Truth«. <sup>56</sup> If the dualism of the characters, besides being inspired by the *Scapigliati* poetics, is well adjusted to the requirements of theatre and libretto writing, Benco's explicit predilection for the passionate and violent figure of Falena as »the pictorial symbol of the Night and of its disturbing action through the sense of the unknown and anguish«<sup>57</sup> can also be interpreted, in our opinion, as an echo of the rethinking of the »Dionysian« proposed by Nietzsche – symbolic of drunkenness, of music, of the orgiastic frenzy that accompanies Dionysus's feasts – as well as of his critique of Socratic rationalism. The rationalistic excess derived from the Socratic breakdown of the harmonious dispute between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in ancient times substitutes (the acceptance of) chaos and the irrationality of the Dionysian. In Nietzsche's view, this brings us to the degeneration of society and of its relation towards consciousness and life. Thus, the »Dionysian« corresponds to the awareness of the »terrors of individual existence«<sup>58</sup> and at the same time of the »immeasurable, primordial delight in existence«. <sup>59</sup> Dionysian art, as Nietzsche points out, teaches

<sup>54</sup> »They give voice and 'sense' to the disturbing tensions of the female eros, source of erotic vitality and of feral contamination, sublime inspiration of the ethereal art and primal origin of demonic deliria.« See *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>55</sup> »fra un sogno di peccato / e un sogno di virtù«. See Arrigo BOITO: *Il libro dei versi*, Torino: F. Casanova Editore, 1902, 10.

<sup>56</sup> »Un'Arte reprobata / Che smaga il mio pensiero / Dietro le basse immagini / D'un ver che mente al Vero«. See *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> »Simbolo pittorico della Notte e della sua azione perturbatrice mediante il senso dell'ignoto e dell'angoscia«. See S. BENCO: *Le origini della »Falena«*.

<sup>58</sup> See Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, transl. by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 80.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

us that »the eternal lust and delight of existence«<sup>60</sup> must be sought beyond appearances, and that painful destruction, agony and struggle are an immanent part of it, as well. It seems that within this »metaphysical consolation« which »tears us momentarily out of the hustle and bustle of changing forms«<sup>61</sup> we could grasp the significance of that »excess of life« that Benco attributes to the Falena character:

»And the excess of life overflows (this is what I wanted; have I succeeded?) from Falena. In this image of a violent and provocative woman luxuriating in the night who inverts even colors if she wants to, even the appearances of the world, who envies all the different turbulent desires of the beasts that inhabit the woods, I wanted to evoke a force of nature, one of those indistinctive fatalities that elevates a person to a state beyond reason, to a particularly tragic state of a vacillating willpower, eventually precipitating him to the bottom of the Dionysian frenzy of the Bacchanalia where one loves and destroys with equally disarrayed feelings. This disarray of inhibited desire and intoxication which alters and reconnects all of Stelio's feelings has been as completely disregarded by the early critics of this work, as much as I have been eager to conceive it.«<sup>62</sup>

It is exactly this elevation of the person above his own reason and above the principle of individuation that Nietzsche longs for while rebelling against the scientific optimism of his epoch<sup>63</sup> and advocating for the tragical symbolism of Dionysian art best embodied in music<sup>64</sup> as the manifestation of the metaphysical, the abstract, and the universal. The same concept is also what Benco was aiming to achieve with his vision of Dionysian ecstasy and intoxication embodied in the character of Falena. She invites us to eternal intoxication of senses, and through her sublime rhetoric of dreams, passions and death<sup>65</sup> she prominently depicts the duality of life's unbridled lust and destruction, while at the same time thrusting

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> »E l'eccesso della vita rigurgita (così volli; riuscii?) dalla Falena. In quest'immagine di donna violenta e procace che lussureggia nella notte e con la fantasia accesa inverte a suo capriccio gli stessi colori, le stesse apparenze del mondo e invidia con l'animo tutte le varie e tempestose bramosie delle fiere vedute viver nei boschi, ho voluto evocare una forza della natura, una di quelle fatalità indistinte che ingrandiscono l'uomo oltre la sua ragione e lo portano allo stato particolarmente tragico della volontà vacillante finché si ritrovi precipitato in fondo alla frenesia dionisiaca delle bacchanali, dove si ama e si sbrana con lo stesso disordine d'affetti. Il qual disordine del desiderio inibito e dell'ebbrezza che altera e accozza tutti i sentimenti di Stelio, è stato tanto poco considerato dai primi critici del lavoro quanto vagheggiato da me nell'idearlo«. See S. BENCO: *Le origini della »Falena«*.

<sup>63</sup> F. NIETZSCHE: *The Birth of Tragedy*, 87-88.

<sup>64</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy* concludes with the hope of a renewing of the German spirit through the rebirth of the Dionysian spirit in German culture, most of all in Wagner's music.

<sup>65</sup> »Inebriante musica« – intoxicating music, as Stelio describes her enchanting call. See S. BENCO: *La Falena*, 41.

the elements of righteousness and morality in Benco's libretto into the background, thus overcoming them.

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### Sažetak

#### TERIOMORFNO I DIONIZIJSKO U LIBRETU *LA FALENA* SILVIJA BENCA ZA OPERU ANTONIJA SMAREGLIE

Uzimajući u obzir muzikološke osvrte o suradnji Silvia Benca i Antonia Smareglie te relativno skroman opus kritičkih tekstova na temu Bencovih libreta, rad se fokusira na prvi od triju libreta koje je Benco napisao već 1897. pod naslovom *La Falena*, a koji je uglazbio istarski skladatelj Antonio Smareglia. Pritom se istražuju brojne intertekstualne poveznice što se dadu iščitati iz čudovišnog, neljudskog, odnosno nadljudskog karaktera naslovna ženskog lika. Usporediva s vagnerijanskim valkirama ili sa silfidama iz germanske mitologije, ali i s biblijskom Salomom, pogotovo onom iz Wildeove obrade iz 1892, Falena također priziva brojne figure koje su proizašle iz romantičkoga toposa *dame sans merci*, poput sublimno-vampirskih likova Poeove Ligeie i Morelle ili ženskih likova u novelistici talijanskog *scapigliata* Iginija Uga Tarchettija. Dualizam kao poetička odrednica talijanske *Scapigliature* vidljiva je i u Bencovom libretu, pogotovo u antinomijskoj razradi i podjeli likova: čestita Albina i čudovišna Falena postavljene su u antitetički suodnos kao vrlina i grijeh, dobro i zlo. Unatoč raspletu, iz samog je teksta, kao i iz autorovih autokritičkih komentara, razvidna Bencova naklonost naslovnoj protagonistici, koju je – slijedom Nietzscheova zalaganja za novu umjetnost »metafizičke utjehe« sklonu čudovišnom, odnosno za obnovu dionizijskoga načela cjelovita i puna življenja – izgradio kao snažan i živ primjer dvojnosti neobuzdane životne požude i uništenja.