L'ELISIR D'AMORE
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Why do we find self-confidence attractive? Why do we find self-assurance, in a potential romantic partner, sexy? Why does timid, cloying Nemorino, hero of Gaetano Donizetti's *L'Elisir D'Amore*, fail to win over wealthy, fickle Adina until he stops smothering her with adoration and adopts a strategy of feigned disinterest? What is it about human psychology that makes us, in the initial stages of a relationship -- all else being equal -- more likely to prefer an admirer capable of evincing some indifference toward us than one who follows us around like a sad puppy?

When we say indifference, we're really talking about autonomy, self-sufficiency, which assure us that our potential romantic partner isn't going to be a liability. A project. Surely some women *are* attracted to a project – a man to rescue, nurture, improve. Others, like Adina, prefer a man who has other prospects in life – other hopes and dreams – besides herself, thus insuring that he won't get overly attached to her, weigh her down, restrict her freedom. Nemorino's challenge is to convince Adina that he's not dependent on her alone for happiness. The fact that he can't do so without drinking a potion tells us how difficult and unnatural it is to appear detached when you're consumed by love and scared of rejection.

The most famous love potion legend is that of Tristan and Isolde, which the German composer Wagner would make into an opera. The legend has many sources and many variations. At the beginning of *L'Elisir D'Amore*, Adina is reading a version in which Tristan buys a phial of magic potion to make Isolde, who has a hard heart, fall in love with him. Tristan drinks the potion, and a transformation occurs in Isolde: her heart softens toward him. In *L'Elisir D'Amore*, when Nemorino drinks the potion -- which is actually just red wine, an intoxicant -- *he's* the one who is transformed. The particular effects of this transformation, and Adina's reaction, are what save *L'Elisir* from being

just another *opera buffa* romp – scheming characters, clever plot, pretty music -- and make it an illuminating study of the dynamics of courtship.

We should look closely at the way Nemorino and Adina interact before, and then after, Nemorino drinks the "elixir." When Nemorino approaches Adina in Act I, she's just been hit on by the swaggering, self-enchanted sergeant Belcore, who arrived in town with his platoon and said to Adina, in essence, *Hey babe, you're hot, I'm incredible, let's get together*. Adina chides him for his conceitedness and tells him she'll have to think about it. Nemorino watches from the sidelines, intimidated by Belcore's bravado, envious of his courage. How will Nemorino respond to the competition? He approaches Adina and asks to speak with her. "The usual nuisance! The same old sighs!" she says. He's pestered her before. She tells him he's a good, modest guy, but that he doesn't inspire her with love, and never will. She calls Nemorino's exclusive love for her "madness" and advises him to do as she does: "take a new lover every day." "One nail drives out another, so love dislodges love," she says. Nemorino insists that she can never be driven from his heart. Adina shoos him away.

The elixir, which Nemorino buys from the traveling swindler/apothecary Dulcamara, has a placebo effect even before Nemorino drinks it. Just having the elixir in his possession works magic. "Dear elixir! You're mine! …How powerful your strength must be if, without having drunk any yet, you fill my breast with so much joy!" He takes a sip, then another. "Oh, what a pleasant warmth thrills through my veins!" He wonders if Adina will "begin to feel the same fire." Dulcamara has told Nemorino that the elixir won't take effect for 24 hours, which isn't true: though Nemorino is mostly unaware of it, the elixir is already working, getting him drunk, relaxing him, boosting his ego. This, combined with his belief in the elixir's power, gives him confidence, and he sings cheerfully as he eats some fruit. Adina hardly recognizes him. "So cheerful. Why?" she wonders. Nemorino nearly approaches her but decides to keep his distance, to play hard to get. "Tomorrow that pitiless heart will have to adore me," he says.

The word *pitiless* means everything here: has Adina really been pitiless to him in the past, or has his strategy to win her by making her pity him been a poor one? Adina is alarmed that he's paying no attention to her. Clearly part of her enjoyed his servile adoration. She wonders if he's pretending not to care about her, which is a kind of

defense mechanism against the possibility that he might *not* be pretending – that he might, in fact, be in love with someone else. She approaches Nemorino and makes a joke about him "profiting from the lesson," meaning her advice to play the field, to take a new lover every day, and Nemorino says he is indeed giving it a try. "So your former suffering?" Adina asks. "I hope to forget it," Nemorino answers. She asks, "The old fire?" and he says, "Will soon be extinguished."

So it's not an elixir of love. It's an elixir of confidence. If Nemorino were alive today, he might not buy a potion, but opt to go on-line to so.suave.com or datebeautifulwomen.com or one of many other sites that promise to improve men's self-assurance and self-esteem – their "inner game." Nemorino would learn how to approach Adina without nervousness or fear, how to come off as cocky and funny, how to give Adina that "I have to have you" feeling, how to stay out of the "friends zone," the 6 dead giveaways that he's needy and insecure. Nemorino might shell out and buy a book or a DVD. He might attend a seminar at the local Sheraton. If he were in a big city, he might go to a "live workshop" in a bar or nightclub taught by one of the many "seduction gurus" plying their trade across the dating landscape. Poor Nemorino wouldn't realize that these gurus are better at seducing desperate, gullible men than beautiful women.

Now that Nemorino is self-assured and detached, thanks to the elixir, he's a challenge, and Adina becomes obsessed. Earlier in the opera, she told Belcore that she would not be easily conquered; clearly she's tantalized by a similar invulnerability in the opposite sex. Is Adina simply interested in the chase, the hunt, and when she gets her man, the triumph? Is she a thrill-seeker? A love-surfer? She was until now. On the other hand, in pursuing someone with whom we don't initially have a lot of currency, a person who has other interests and opportunities and accomplishments, we aspire to be loved on par with, or in excess of, those other valuables, which will in turn be a measure of our self-worth. This might mean we have healthy self-esteem and want to be valued for what we are, or that we have low self-esteem and need an impressive catch on our arm to make us look good, to contradict our low opinion of ourselves.

In either case, we aspire to feel good about ourselves, and to have others feel good about us. Is this why we're so eager to become more attractive and desirable? Is this why we're often willing to cross the fuzzy border between using drugs and injections and

surgical procedures to improve our health and using them to make our skin look less wrinkled, our bodies slimmer and/or more muscular, our hair thicker and more lustrous? We want to look sexy. We want to look young. We don't want to age and die. We'll fight it tooth and nail, by hook or by crook. *L'Elisir D'Amore* suggests that we have always been like this. Look at Dulcamara, who advertises "specifics" for "apoplectics, asthmatics, asphitics, hysterics, diabetics" as well as "innumerable marvels" to rejuvenate arthritic bones, erase wrinkles, increase sexual potency. It's hard to hear Dulcamara's cocky, rapid-patter spiel and not think of all the advertisements on TV today urging us to ask our doctors about contemporary remedies – many effective, others dubious – for arthritis, high cholesterol, obesity, depression, anxiety, shyness, insomnia, erectile dysfunction, heartburn and indigestion, acne and cellulite and facial wrinkles and hair loss. Some of these are health conditions, others related to beauty. Others are somewhere in between. The advertisers purposefully make it difficult to distinguish. Like Dulcamara, they want us to consider all conditions worthy of medicating. And we're often eager for the green light.

How does *L'Elisir D'Amore* manage to explore so many complicated questions and issues when it was written in under a month? The librettist, Felice Romani, was able to draw heavily on a libretto written by Eugene Scribe for Auber's opera *Le Philtre*, which was in turn derived from an Italian text, *Il filtro*, by Silvio Malaperta. Romani took what was clearly an old story of mythological stature, refined and chiseled over centuries by successive writers, and refined it further, making the language more elegant, cutting superfluous material, adding scenes. Donizetti's score is gorgeous and variegated, robust and brilliant, tender and sweet. He's capable of swiftly, seamlessly changing tone from light to dark, from comedy to longing; he'll be skimming along a bright, flickery surface and dive suddenly into sorrowful depths. He paints with a rich palette, and his brush strokes are alternately brisk and lively, languid and lustrous. Now and then we hear Verdi in Donizetti – the darkness, the turbulence, the romantic intensity. Verdi was a great admirer of Donizetti, and vice versa. "My heyday is over," Donizetti wrote in 1844, "and another must take my place…I am happy to give mine to people of talent like Verdi."

Whether he knew it or not, Donizetti was referring to more than just a torch passing between two great composers. Not only was the age of *bel canto* drawing to a

close – that movement in Italian opera led by Bellini and Rossini and Donizetti in which the vocal line, more than the orchestra, communicated the emotions of the characters – but so was the age of *opera buffa*, which had reached cruising altitude in the 1790's with Mozart and was piloted into the nineteenth century by Rossini and Donizetti. By 1832, when *L'Elisir* premiered in Milan, Romantic opera, with its emphasis on emotional intensity, the beauty and terror of nature, and the supernatural, had begun to compete with *opera buffa* for the public's affection. Donizetti had composed a great Italian Romantic opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Bellini – pale, hypersensitive, tormented – lived and died (young) like a Romantic. But the gold medal for nineteenth century Romantic opera would go to the Germans: Beethoven, Hoffmann, Spohr, von Weber, and above all, Wagner. The silver would go to Verdi. The bronze to Gounod, in France.

Donizetti died in 1848, at the age of 51, physically and mentally paralyzed, in Bergamo, Italy, the town of his birth. He'd spend the previous few years at a mental institution in Paris, suffering from dementia brought on by syphilis. Perhaps he wished, in his last lucid days, that Dulcamara's miraculous remedies existed in the real world -- that there was an elixir capable of alleviating his own suffering. Let's hope Donizetti was comforted by the knowledge that with *L'Elisir D'Amore*, he had accomplished what every great artist strives for: to create a work – a novel, a painting or sculpture, a building, a symphony – that will act as an elixir on its audience, causing us to fall in love with the work, and with its creator, for eternity.