

Norma

The plot

Act I

The high priest of the Druids, Oroveso, leads a group of Gallic warriors and priests to the sacred oak of Irminsul. When the moon appears, his daughter Norma, herself a priestess, will make a prophecy; everyone awaits a signal from her for the revolt against the Roman oppressors.

When the Gauls leave, the Roman Pro-consul Pollione arrives. He is accompanied by his friend Flavio, to whom he confides that his passion for Norma has been extinguished by his love for the young Adalgisa, another priestess of Irminsul; despite a disturbing premonitory dream, he plans to take her with him to Rome and marry her. The two Roman officials leave when they hear the Gauls returning to gather under the sacred oak. The Gauls are impatient to receive from Norma the prophecy favoring an uprising against the oppressor, but she dissuades them from their bellicose intentions: the moment for the revolt has not yet arrived. While the priestesses collect sacred mistletoe, Norma invokes the moon. After the ritual, Adalgisa remains behind; Pollione joins her and convinces her to run off with him the next day.

Later, Norma is in her home, troubled by the sight of her children, the offspring of her sinful relationship with the Pro-consul. She confides her anxiety to Clotilde, and asks her to hide the children in a safe place. Adalgisa enters, and confesses to Norma to be in love, asking for her advice. Norma releases her from her vows, but when Pollione arrives and the situation is clear, Adalgisa is disturbed by the realization that Norma was seduced by the Roman, and Norma is furious to learn of Pollione's betrayal.

Act II

Norma is devastated, and considers killing her children, but her maternal instinct prevails and she decides to entrust them with Adalgisa if she takes them with her to Rome. Adalgisa is moved, and offers to leave Pollione and to convince him to reunite himself with Norma.

In the forest of the Druids, the priests are anxious to begin the revolt, but Oroveso persuades them to continue to be patient and wait for Norma's message.

Later, at the temple of Irminsul, Norma learns that Pollione intends to abduct Adalgisa in order to take her to Rome. Without hesitation, she sounds the sacred shield, summoning the warriors and inciting them to kill the invaders. Oroveso urges Norma to perform the propitiatory rite and designate the human victim to sacrifice to God, but at that moment, Pollione is brought before them; he was caught in the quarters of the consecrated virgins while trying to reach Adalgisa. Norma therefore summons the warriors and priests and orders that a pyre be prepared: the sacrificial victim will be a perjured and sacrilegious priestess. Pollione implores her to save Adalgisa, but to everyone's amazement, Norma reveals that she herself will be the victim. She confesses her guilt to Oroveso and entrusts him with her children. Her sacred insignia removed, and covered with a black veil, she receives the priests' anathema. Pollione, shaken by remorse and moved by the greatness of Norma's soul, asks to die with her; the two lovers, reunited in extreme sacrifice, go together to the stake.