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Witches, Whores, and Virgin Martyrs:  
Female Roles in Seventeenth Century Opera

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Musical Arts  
in Music

by

Terri Lynn Richter

2017

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Witches, Whores, and Virgin Martyrs:  
Female Opera Roles in Seventeenth Century Opera

by

Terri Lynn Richter

Doctor of Musical Arts in Music

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Juliana K. Gondek, Chair

The fictional women presented to the public on the opera stages and in the noble houses of Italy during the seventeenth century did not resemble the societal feminine ideal of chastity, silence, obedience, and humility; on the contrary, they were strong-willed, eloquent, powerful, and sexually sentient. This dissertation will examine a few of the principal female characters from a selected number of early seventeenth-century operas and explore what these women represented in context of the patriarchal, highly misogynistic societies in which they were constructed. Furthermore, I will consider the implications of this information for issues of modern performance practice, and for the representation of these female characters in modern reproductions of the operas. Finally, I will discuss the influences of this research on my final DMA recital, a program of seventeenth-century arias and songs which personified the female stereotypes presented in this dissertation.

The dissertation of Terri Lynn Richter is approved.

Elisabeth LeGuin

Jocelyn Ho

Lily Chen-Haftek

Juliana K. Gondek, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For Jacob and Colin,  
the two reasons I do everything

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Conductor, harpsichordist and musicologist Aaron Carpenè created the performance score and conducted the first modern production of Cavalli's opera *Veremonda, l'amazzone d'Aragona* for the Spoleto Festival in 2015. He proved to be an invaluable resource for my research, offering personal perspectives on the challenges of preparing modern performance scores from original sources, and generously sending excerpts of his newly edited score for my personal use.

Harpsichordist and musicologist Robert Blake was the musical director of a performance of *La liberazione di Ruggiero* in the Fall of 2016 at University of Southern California, and he also played keyboards quite brilliantly on my final DMA recital. Robert and I communicated at length about his experience of producing an early opera for an undergraduate opera program, a subject of particular interest to me as an educator and voice teacher, and his contributions and insights were invaluable.

Special thanks to Jennifer Pepper for lending her expertise to the compilation of 16th, 17th, and 18th century artworks for my use in both this dissertation and my final DMA recital, painstakingly obtaining permissions and constructing detailed citations. Thanks to Ryan Koons, who somehow brilliantly managed the simultaneous projection of both supertitles and art slideshows during my final concert.

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University of California Los Angeles <i>summa cum laude</i>	DMA (expected)
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Adjunct Voice Professor, Biola University Conservatory of Music	(2014-present)
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<i>Orpheus ed Euridice</i> - Euridice (Gluck)	Seattle Opera
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<i>Die Zauberflöte</i> – Papagena (Mozart)	Seattle Opera
<i>Così fan tutte</i> – Despina (Mozart)	Seattle Opera YAP
<i>I due Figaro</i> – Susanna (S. Mercadante)	UCLA Opera
<i>Combattimento di Tancredi et Clorinda</i> - Clorinda (Monteverdi)	Pacific Musicworks
<i>Ariodante</i> – Dalinda (Handel)	American Bach Soloists
<i>1610 Vespers</i> (Monteverdi) national tour	Apollo’s Fire Baroque Orchestra
Carmina Burana (Orff)	Seattle Symphony, Nashville Symphony
Symphony #4 (Mahler)	Seattle Symphony
Messiah (Handel)	Seattle Symphony, Nashville Symphony
Ayre (O. Golijov)	“Hammer Presents” Concert Series, Los Angeles
Lonh (K. Saariaho)	Center for Art of Performance, UCLA
Sparrows (J. Schwantner)	UCLA Wind Ensemble
Judas Maccabaeus (Handel)	UCLA Philharmonic

# Witches, Whores, and Virgin Martyrs: female roles in seventeenth-century opera

## Introduction

Figure 1.1



The Wise Woman (c. 1525). Anton Woensam

*Look at this figure, which signifies  
a wise woman; any woman who  
does as she instructs protects her  
honor well.*

*[Eyes]  
I see as keenly as the hawk  
And discern the honest from the  
false. I guard myself both day and  
night from one who against my  
honor plots.*

*[Ears]  
I shall not be discouraged  
From opening my ears  
So that they can hear God's word,  
which keeps the pious on their  
guard.*

*[Right hand]  
I will despise pride  
And behold myself in the mirror of  
Christ, through whom God has  
redeemed us.*

*[Mouth]  
Every hour, day and night,  
I wear a golden lock upon my lips  
So that they say no harmful words  
or wound another's honor.*

*[Breast]  
Like the turtle dove,  
I have a steadfast heart,  
Faithful to him who will be my husband. No fault of his will break my loyalty.*

*[Waist]*

*My waist is girded with serpents,  
As should that of every honest woman  
Who wants protection from the poison of scandal, from evil love, and shameful play.*

*[Left hand]*

*I shall serve the aged freely and thereby gain eternal life. No other thing that I can do will bring this end about.*

*[Feet]*

*I shall go about on horses' hoofs  
And be steadfast in honor.  
And not fall into sin, which, while sweet at first, turns bitter as gall.*

*Any woman who has such traits will maintain her honor undiminished. And surely earn from God above an eternal kingdom in heaven.<sup>1</sup>*

This allegorical portrait of 'the wise woman' was published in Vienna in about 1525, and is attributed to Anton Woensam. The complicated image of a woman dressed in contemporary clothing is surrounded by blocks of text explaining the symbolic aspects of her appearance, which are meant to serve as instructions of how woman is to behave. The popularity of this image ensured its circulation in treatises and conduct books well into the seventeenth century. In the midst of an era marked by hostility to women, where the female body was regarded as incomplete and imperfect, and where all medicine, civil and political science asserted her unreliability and unfitness for any position of importance in society, some of the strongest female characters that have ever been portrayed in popular society began to emerge on the public stages of Europe. At a time when the most cherished female character traits were purported to be silence, chastity, obedience and humility, public taste indicated a hunger for the portrayal of

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<sup>1</sup>Max Geisberg, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut: 1500-1550*, revised and edited by Walter L. Strauss. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974), 1511.

women who were markedly eloquent, dangerously disobedient, and sexually self-possessed. This dichotomy was not limited to fictional characters; even in the real world of early modern Europe, women did not always live according to the prescriptions in the behavior manuals and conduct books of the time.

Historical records have tended to underestimate the extent and variety of women's work outside the immediate family. Deborah Parker's study of women in the book trade in early modern Italy revealed that real early modern women often worked diligently but invisibly alongside fathers, brothers, and husbands in what could be called family enterprises.<sup>2</sup> There is an obvious dichotomy between the feminine ideal as presented to early modern society, and the women who actually lived and worked in that society. Certainly, the fictional women presented to the public on the opera stages of Italy during the seventeenth century did not resemble the feminine ideal; on the contrary, they are representations of resistant positions, possible alternatives to, and impossible total inversions of that ideal.

The purpose of my dissertation is to examine a few of these principal female characters from a selected number of early seventeenth century operas, and to embark upon an exploration of what these women represented in context of the patriarchal, highly misogynistic societies in which they were constructed. Furthermore, I will consider the implications of this information and its relevance to modern performances of the works. I would argue that when placed in their respective socio-historical frameworks, early operas might have served in the same capacity that cinema does in modern times. An opera is, after all, fundamentally a story –more often than not a reshaped narrative, created in the seventeenth century as it is today, to fulfill an agenda, be it

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Parker, "Women in the Book Trade in Italy, 1475-1620," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996): 509-541.

political, financial, personal or professional. The fictional characters that are presented to live audiences represent the societies that created them, and that society's thoughts, fears, treasures, desires, arguments, and daily realities.

All art, to a certain extent, is discourse, and all discourse has the capability of saying more than an author or speaker intended. All rich work articulates successfully more than its creator (perhaps even in the moment of creation) immediately understood to be their intention, argument, or task; perhaps this is the line that separates great art from mediocre. Continued development of potential meanings of a work of art is further enhanced by the perspective of more than one culture. Unique interpretive questions arise, however, for those of us who are involved in the reproduction of "old art," and none more so than those who are in the business of recreating a "live performance," – i.e. an entertainment experience which happened in front of a live audience, in a specific place and time, and of which the only records are eyewitness accounts, old pieces of manuscript paper, letters, account books, or drawings.

Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin establishes three general ways to approach the reinterpretation of old texts, which I find equally applicable to the reproduction of old dramatic and musical works: 1 – We seek to identify only those meanings the author originally had in mind or that contemporaries may have recognized. The danger of this approach, according to Bakhtin, is that we "enclose" a work within its epoch, therefore relinquishing any grasp of its larger significance and its vibrant "life" in later times. 2 – We modernize works with no regard for their historical context. The danger of this approach is that of "cultural myopia" - we risk turning them into mere markers of our own contemporary concerns and lose the opportunity to learn from them and from their different perspectives. While the first approach impoverishes the reader's potential, the second approach sacrifices that of the writer. 3 – We

carefully view creative and expressive works as “noncoincident” with themselves, as inherently capable of many different interpretations, enabling us to interpret them so as to exploit potentials which may be latent but not yet historically actualized by prior interpretations. Bakhtin places value on the surplus of potential meanings, arguing that old works, cultures, and even individuals are “unfinalizable” in the most positive sense of the word. In a sense, this allows them to continue speaking, even though interpreters in previous epochs may not have heard them, or repeated them, in quite the same way. Though Bakhtin was writing specifically about the relationship between texts and readers, I would argue that the same relationship exists between the librettists and composers of 17<sup>th</sup> century opera and its modern audiences.<sup>3</sup>

In 2013, British historian, author and professor Dr. Suzannah Lipscomb presented a keynote address called “Learning from the Past” for the Media Evolution Conference in Malmö, Sweden.<sup>4</sup> The topic of her presentation was the responsibility of historians to approach the past on its own terms, instead of bringing modern societal interpretations or personal agendas to the process. In her keynote address, Lipscomb challenged historians to acknowledge the gap between our mental and imaginative worlds and the worlds of the people in the past who are being studied. She differentiated between the tendencies of popular historians and academic historians, those of the first being to romanticize the similarities between ourselves and people of the past in order to create a false sense of connection and meaning, or perhaps even to convince ourselves of our societal progression. Less benevolent treatments involve the abuse of historical facts to advance particular political or religious agendas. Academic historians, on the other hand,

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<sup>3</sup>Deanna Shemk, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> [https://youtu.be/RUvqh\\_Qv3kI](https://youtu.be/RUvqh_Qv3kI)

approach the past with an expectation and awareness of the sometimes very large gap between the mindsets of modern culture and ancient culture. Analysis historians refer to these as “mentalité,” the mentalities of the subjects being studied. An academic historian acknowledges this gap and makes an honest attempt to (temporarily) espouse the mentality of the past, resisting the tendency to interpret or organize information in ways that are more comfortable or meaningful to our modern sensibilities.

By way of example, Dr. Lipscomb offers certain “bizarre” beliefs and behavior from her own specialty, sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. In 1547, an act of parliament was passed saying that all beggars should be whipped, and that the homeless should be branded on the chest with a hot iron in the shape of a “V” (for vagabond), for much the same reason that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s character Hester Prynne was required to display the letter “A” (for adultery) on her dress in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. In 1572, a new and supposedly more humane act was passed ordering the vagabond to be burned instead through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron one inch in diameter. These are examples of bizarre historical behaviors that require an understanding of 16<sup>th</sup> century “mentalité” in order to make sense to us now. In seventeenth century Vienna, when a criminal was publicly beheaded, it was not uncommon for an onlooker from the crowd to rush in with a jug, collect up the spurting hot blood, down it like a pint of ale, and then sprint off. This was thought to be the cure of “the falling sickness,” or epilepsy. According to the humoral system of medicine still prevalent in early modern European society, if you ingested a large dose of energy from another person’s blood, that energy would pass to you and you would be healed. Too much energy all at once, however, would create other sorts of medical difficulties, thus the need for the patient to sprint off to burn the excess energy.

Some of the most bizarre practices were rooted in early modern attitudes towards sex and religion. For fifteen hundred years, women were considered by the medical community to be anatomically incomplete versions of men. A woman's genitalia and reproductive organs were simply inversions of male genitalia; i.e., vaginas were inverted penises. If a baby was a female, it was believed that the act of reproduction which created her had merely not generated enough heat to allow her penis to drop out of her body. Pamphlets and medical journals from the time held numerous accounts of gender transference - girls leaping over fences, for instance, their genitals 'falling out,' and discovering that they were men after all. (Unsurprisingly, this potential created a great deal of anxiety, especially in men, who feared reversal of the same phenomenon!)

An application of Lipscomb's recuperation of "mentalité" model to the revivals of early opera presents some interesting questions. To what extent can those of us who are re-creators of "old art" follow in the footsteps of academic historians when faced with the challenges inherent to the process of presenting works from antiquity to modern audiences? How accurately should we portray the "mentalité" of the society that created the art work? In the case of early opera, there are abundant examples of behaviors or philosophies exhibited by the characters that do not make sense to us any longer, but which would have been already very familiar to nearly everyone in the original audiences, through the influence of visual art and literature. For the sake of example, consider the character of Giove (Jupiter, Jove) from Cavalli's *La Calisto*; a popular figure from Greek mythology, his amorous exploits would have already been familiar to seventeenth century audiences from art and literary representations, such as "*Jupiter and Callisto*" (1613) by Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. His transformation into Diana, fashioned for the purpose of seducing the unsuspecting nymph Calisto, therefore, would have been expected; it would have seemed natural.

## Storytelling as Archeology

Humans think in stories and try to make sense of the world with myths; it's the nature of the species. In her essay, "Directly from the Sources: Teaching Early Modern Women's History without the Narrative," scholar and educator Martha Howell cautions against the very thing that makes interpretation of historical spectacles, literature and art so frustrating and so fascinating to historians – the shaping and reshaping of narratives. She discusses the tendency of educators in particular to fall into the tidier and more immediately rewarding pattern of "storytelling." In her own words,

"The impulse to tell stories is so powerful, and students' hunger for narrative and for collecting those hard, little pebbles of information called 'facts' is likewise so strong that it is tempting to line up the pebbles into a path that seems to lead somewhere – to create a tale with a plot."<sup>5</sup>

Howell argues that while some tales do carry usable conclusions, educators need to resist the urge to make historical narratives sexier or more palatable by identifying the good guys and the bad guys, making potentially contradictory, slippery, and unstable facts into a more compelling but not necessarily accurate storyline. Most importantly for the purposes of my study, she advocates for increased understanding of how the evidence and facts we use in shaping narratives about the past come to us already shaped by their cultures' own narratives. In this respect, the job of a historical musicologist becomes something like that of an archeologist; as we examine musical art from the past, according to Howell, we must resist the temptation to shape the information according to our own worldviews, while at the same time realizing that the works we are examining have already been shaped and re-shaped by every society that handles,

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<sup>5</sup> Howell, Martha. "Directly from the sources: Teaching Early Modern Women's History without the Narrative." In *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women*, edited by Jane Donawerth and Adele Seeff, 22. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000.

interprets, performs, and writes about them. Just as an archeological dig might reveal several vertical layers of artifacts or remains, with each deeper layer containing evidence of an older and earlier society, so might a rich narrative have had countless manifestations throughout history, each rendition revealing marvelous things about the particular society that shaped it.

In the case of opera productions from the seventeenth century, the original source material is centuries old, and often multiple interpretations, librettos, or scores exist of the same tale. This alone could argue for the impossibility of a truly historically accurate reproduction. For the sake of example, let us regard the literary and historical figure of the lady Semiramis, or Semiramide, whom we shall examine at length later in this dissertation. While the story and achievements of Semiramis originate clearly in the realm of mythical Greek historiography, a historical Assyrian queen named Semiramis actually existed. *Shammuramat* (Semiramis) was the Assyrian wife of Shamshi-Adad V, king of Assyria and ruler of the Neo-Assyrian empire who ruled from 824-811 BC. Upon the death of her husband, Semiramis was the empire's regent for five years until her son came of age. The first account of Semiramis as legend was related by Diodorus (1<sup>st</sup> c. BC), who portrays Semiramis as being the daughter of noble parents, the result of a union between a fish-goddess (Derketo of Ascalon in Assyria) and a mortal man. According to Diodorus, Derketo, her mother, abandoned her baby at birth and drowned herself. Doves fed the child until a royal shepherd found and raised her, and her bravery and beauty wreaked havoc throughout the empire as multiple men in power fought over her. Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (4<sup>th</sup> c. AD) retells her story in *Res Gestae*, the first major historical account surviving from Antiquity, wherein he credits Semiramis as the first person to castrate a male youth of tender age into eunuch-hood. Dante (c. 1265 – 1321) writes of Semiramis in *Divine Comedy*:

*To sensual vices she was so abandoned,  
That lustful she made licit in her law,  
To remove the blame to which she had been led.*

*She is Semiramis, of whom we read  
That she succeeded Ninus, and was his spouse;  
She held the land which now the Sultan rules.”<sup>6</sup>*

Semiramis is mentioned in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1591), Voltaire’s tragedy *Semiramis* (1748), and Pedro Calderon de la Barca’s *La hija del aire* (“The Daughter of the Air,” 1653). She is the heroine of operas by Cesti (1667), Ziani/Noris (1670), Christoph von Gluck (1748), Josef Myslivecek (1760), Domenico Cimarosa (1799), Marcos Portugal (1801), Giacomo Meyerbeer (1819), and most famously, Gioachino Rossini (1823). Semiramis is a fitting example of a historical character who became a popular female heroine in legend, and whose portrayal has prevailed through the centuries even to modern times. Every portrayal is embedded in, and demonstrative of, another layer of socio-historical sediment.

If we follow historian Suzanne Lipscomb’s advice, an attempt should be made to adopt the mentalité of the librettist, composer, and audience who would have originally been involved in the creation of a work, which in the case of early opera would require a knowledge of early modern culture. While the scholars and professionals involved in actual reconstructions of early opera might have such awareness, it is doubtful that modern audiences would, or would care to. It may be that the closest we can come to giving our audiences Lipscomb’s “mentalité” would be through pre-concert lectures and program notes. If we follow Martha Howell’s advice, the reconstruction of an opera should be approached with much the same agenda as would an archeologist would use with the aim of exact preservation.

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<sup>6</sup> Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Canto V, lines 55-62.

While this approach to early music has sometimes been argued for and advocated in the so-called Early Music movement over the last fifty years, the achievement of such an aim can be considered elusive and chimerical, and the end result of such a performance can seem tedious at best. Modern audiences, in contrast to the less hurried spectators of the seventeenth century, are not happy to stay in a theatre for more than three hours (unless it happens to be Wagner). Yet to completely remove a historical work of art from its original sociohistorical context in order to impose a modern context creates an uncomfortable and sometimes jarringly dissatisfying discrepancy between the impressions of the eye and the ear. How, then, should we specialists of early opera approach the prospect of breathing life back into a historical document? How do we respect the historical document or performance tradition while keeping in mind the purpose of the original event, and at the same successfully engage a modern audience?

In 2005, Frans and Julie Muller wrote a series of articles and essays around the topic of reconstructing early opera. Tensions were mounting between advocates for academic reconstructions of historical stage practice, who sought airtight evidence, and the actual production teams and performers of the reconstructed operas who needed to put on a show and fill theater seats. The authors advised a balanced approach, reminding readers that despite the good intentions of musicologists and historians, one must accept the fact that “we cannot see, any more than we can hear, what actually happened long ago. An educated guess is as good as it gets.” The nature of the idea of musical “authenticity” was the subject of prominent debates during the 1980’s, largely led by musicologist Richard Taruskin, who effectively dismantled the ideal of “pure historical reconstruction” as impossible with the argument that various claims to authenticity were generally only serving modernist or commercial ends.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Taruskin, “On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology

It is my view that the highest potential in creating meaningful reconstructions of old works lies in trusting Bakhtin's "surplus of potential meanings." If directors and performers resist the temptation to manipulate old stories into our own "modern" versions that we think will be sexier and more palatable to audiences, if we have the courage to allow these stories to emerge in all the strangeness that a distance of three hundred years can bring (without going too far in the direction of radical historical accuracy) then perhaps we give the audience the dignity of drawing their own conclusions, thereby allowing the past to continue resonating into the present in ways we could not have possibly foreseen.

It goes without saying that the reactions of an audience to any given performance will be, and should be, varied. While some might perceive no modern relevance whatsoever, others might recognize themes of struggle for feminine identity and agency in early opera which they feel are still highly relevant in today's politically charged climate.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

The intention of the first section of this dissertation is to approach these representations of the past with an expectation and awareness of the mentalités of the ancient culture (in this case, early modern Italy) which created them. This section will focus on the attitudes and expectations around the role of women in society, as expressed in a variety of source materials. Much of my research involved the extant published treatises and guidebooks about the virtues, characteristics, and roles of women that circulated widely in European society as early as the fourteenth century. These works both demonstrated and perpetuated the notion of what women should be or should

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and Performance," *The Journal of Musicology* 1 (1982): 343.

not be, and many of them used the women of myth, history, and opera as examples, making them especially relevant to my research.

The second section of my dissertation will provide background information about the operas themselves, with an examination of the specific female roles that I have chosen as representative. In the context of the patriarchal, highly misogynistic societies in which they were constructed, I find it remarkable that the female characters represented in early modern European theatrical works were, in striking contrast, almost invariably strong and powerful, and I would like to examine the possible reasons for this apparent contradiction.

In the third and final section, I will consider the implications of my research on modern performance practice and examine its relevance to modern reproductions of the works. I will represent the opinions and perspectives of leading figures in the field who have recently produced a reconstruction of early opera, and I will relate my own personal experience of putting together a concert that coordinates with this dissertation and showcases arias from many of the operas discussed. Many of the pieces featured on my final concert had either been recently discovered by musicologists and editors and never been performed before, or were largely unfamiliar to the audience. I will discuss the challenges inherent in the process of taking excerpts from these old scores, organizing them into an engaging and coherent program, and making performance practice decisions that were representative of the women as they were portrayed in the seventeenth century.

### **“Mentalité”**

Opera developed during a period in which the position of women was under constant scrutiny. In my research, the work of Wendy Heller has been an invaluable resource, especially

her book *Emblems of Eloquence*, in which she undertook to ask many of the same questions I am asking, while focusing on the early operas of Venice. In the introduction to *Emblems of Eloquence*, she states:

Opera in Venice developed during a period in which the position of women, their rights and freedoms, their virtues and sins, their responsibility for the fall of man, their membership in the human race, and even their possession of immortal souls were under constant debate. This polemic was waged in a variety of formats – catalogs of women, biographies, and theological arguments about the relative culpability of Adam and Eve, manuals on behavior, domestic life, or the art of love, and pornographic *novelle* – all testifying to the contradictory notions about women and sexuality that characterize seventeenth-century thought.<sup>8</sup>

Opera wasn't the only place where the debate about women in society was staged, but it was a powerful one, arguably in the same way that the portrayal of women in the modern movie industry is entirely shaped by, and in turn shapes, ideals about women in modern society. Female figures represented in early modern opera embodied what was both admired and feared in the female sex. Producers of public opera began to recognize the inherent power of their commercial product to control, incite, and influence their audiences. While the operas of Venice present the most obvious and lively examples of this transference, operas in Rome, Tuscany, and Florence reflect similar statements about women, nuanced by the geographical and political climate of origin. In Venetian opera, the danger of the female body tended to be heightened and exploited; Rome's female opera characters were virtuous, incorruptible, devout and impeccably chaste. Tuscany's operatic women often embodied characteristics of regalness, powerful agency, and triumphant heroism, possibly due to the fact that a female (Archduchess Maria Maddalena) was Regent of Tuscany during the early seventeenth century. Myths could be rewritten so as to limit

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<sup>8</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 1.

a heroine's power, reduce or heighten her sexual danger, or be made to resolve in a manner more compatible with the agenda of the people presenting the opera which portrayed her.

I first became interested in seventeenth-century opera when I was asked in 2012 by my Belmont University colleague, Dr. Virginia Lamothe, to perform a newly discovered excerpt from Virgilio Mazzocchi's 1643 opera, *Sant'Eustachio*, at a musicology conference. The same year, I performed a recital of seventeenth-century repertoire with Stephen Stubbs. As we considered repertoire for the concert, he handed me a mountainous stack of seventeenth-century cantata and opera arias by composers largely unknown to me, most of which had never been recorded.

As I began to work on characterization of the women I was representing, I noticed that the types of female figures portrayed in these early vocal works, whether composed for actual female singers or castrati, tended to fall into predictable categories based on the cultural and political environment of origin. For example, the operas that came out of Rome often portrayed a "virgin martyr" – a silent, chaste, and virtuous woman who followed the rules of patriarchal society and flourished by the flawlessness of her reputation. Venetian early operas often presented the "whore" – the sexually vital woman who embraced her sensuality despite culturally ingrained fear. Other common female representations included the "witch" - the outlier or outcast, the woman who didn't fit into any category and was therefore perceived as a problem or a frightening anomaly; and the Amazon, female warrior, or queen - roles which share so many of the same characteristics that for the purposes of this work, I decided to combine them in the same category.

As previously mentioned, I have separated the female opera roles that I have chosen to examine for the purposes of this dissertation, therefore, into four categories: witches, whores,

warriors (rulers) and virgin martyrs. The witches include “Falsirena” from *La Catena d’Adone* (1626), by Ottavio Tronsarelli and Domenico Mazzocchi, and both “Alcina” and “Melissa,” the duo of sorceresses from Ferdinando Saracinelli and Francesca Caccini’s *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall’isola d’Alcina* (1625). The whores include “Calisto” from Giovanni Faustini and Francesco Cavalli’s *La Calisto* (1651); “Messalina” from Francesco Piccioli’s and Carlo Pallavicino’s *Messalina* (1679); and “Elena” from Faustini and Cavalli’s *Elena*, (1659). The warriors and rulers include “Semiramis,” from Pietro Ziani and Matteo Noris’ *La Semiramide* (1670); “Bradamante” from Giulio Rospigliosi and Luigi Rossi’s *Il palazzo incantato* (1642); and “Veremonda,” heroine of the opera *Veremonda amazzone di Aragona* by Giulio Strozzi and Francesco Cavalli, (1652). Finally, the virgin martyrs include “Agatha,” from Jacopo Cicognini’s *Il martirio di Sant’ Agata* (1622); “Theodora” from *I Santi Didimo e Theodora* (1635); which is believed to have been composed by either Stefano Landi or Virgilio Mazzocchi; and “Ursula” of Marco da Gagliano’s *La regina Sant’Orsola* (1624.)

### Querelle des Femmes

He who praises the female sex lives greatly deceived. Women have always been (I speak only of the bad ones, with no prejudice against the good ones) the corrupters of mankind and the infection of nature. Woman is the inventor of sin, and the road paved with death. She is an infernal volcano that outwardly offers snow that entices, but inside hides fire that burns. She is the devilish spring that flatters with flowers but conceals serpents. She is the unlucky comet that delights the eyes with splendor, but presages death for the mind: she is a disguised witch that under a benign appearance conceals dreadful harpies. She is a tragic theater, where, as in a majestic apparatus, one sees the death of hearts.<sup>9</sup>

In 1687, an abbot named Bonaventura Tondi published a book entitled *La femina origine d’ogni male: ovvero, Frine rimproverata*. The above quotation is the opening passage of that

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<sup>9</sup> Bonaventura Tondi, *La femina origine d’ogni male: ovvero, Frine rimproverata* (1687).

volume, and arguably one of the most virulent contributions to the debates about women published in the seventeenth century. It is indicative of the controversy about the nature and position of women that was represented by poets, librettists, artists, composers, and performers of the period in question.

### **The Misogynist Tradition**

The controversy goes back a long way. Embedded in the medical and philosophical theories of the ancient Greeks were perceptions of the female as inferior to the male in both mind and body. The structure of civil legislation that Europe inherited from the ancient Romans was biased against women, and even the views about women developed by Christian thinkers out of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament were negative and disempowering. Literary works composed in the vernacular language of ordinary people, and widely recited or read, also conveyed these negative assumptions. Women were presented as inferior to men on paper, on canvases, on stages, on frescoed walls in palaces, in poetry, and in musical representations.

As early as the fourteenth century in Western Europe, a number of published works began to emerge in the form of treatises, prescriptive conduct books, and essays that demonstrated the notion of what women should be or should not be, evidenced by notorious women of myth and history. These views were generally expressed in one of two ways, either by catalog or with a ‘composite approach.’ ‘Catalog’ authors would juxtapose a series of notorious historical women who together exemplified a view about femininity and a suitable range of possible female behavior.<sup>10</sup> These women would be described, arranged, and then presented to the public in any number of media. It was not unusual for the authorial point of view to show

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<sup>10</sup> For a list of catalogs, see Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom*.

ambiguity; the interpretation is left to the reader, based on the examples organized in the catalog. For example, the women might be categorized from “bad” to “good.” ‘Composite’ authors, instead of naming the women themselves, would cite individual qualities, deeds, or behavior of famous archetypal figures in order to support a given argument about a female vice or virtue. This type of work was meant to be instructional, and to provide readers (who were largely men, since male literacy outstripped female by about 2:1 in most urban societies at this time) with an ideal. Both types of writing furnished librettists and composers with source material, and in turn, once opera culture had created its own “catalog” of emblematic women, the heroines of opera likewise influenced subsequent authors of catalogs and behavior manuals.

The most widely influential catalog of women in the late Middle Ages and early modern period was Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, first written ca. 1361-62. It is an exceptionally important work in the formation of early modern ideas about female heroines because it was reprinted in numerous editions, in both Latin and the vernacular, well into the seventeenth century. It is also important because Boccaccio’s heroines were well represented in subsequent operas - over thirty of his 106 heroines, according to Heller.<sup>11</sup> Boccaccio’s work helped to establish traditions for female biography in Western literature, codifying the way in which certain ancient sources would be used to describe women in the early modern period. For example, Boccaccio praises Artemisia, queen of Caria, “as a lasting example of chaste widowhood and of the purest and rarest kind of love.” He praises the many brave deeds and accomplishments of the Assyrian queen Semiramis, stating that they would be marvelous even for a “vigorous male,” however, these were offset by her “unspeakable act of seduction” – her

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<sup>11</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 29.

carnal desire for and love of her son Ninyas. Both queens were judged specifically with regard to feminine chastity, a theme we shall see reflected throughout the seventeenth century on Italian opera stages.

A second highly influential work was Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della istituzion delle donne* (1545). An editor as well as an author, Dolce translated classical texts into the vernacular and composed many original works on ancient models. His writings would have understandably been a valuable resource for seventeenth-century librettists who sought the inspiration of ancient sources for their work. Dolce is a good example of the difference between the mentality of modern scholars as opposed to seventeenth-century scholars; he has been widely criticized by modern scholars for his inaccurate translations and plagiarism, accused of rewriting the ancient texts "in the light of some preconceived notion of what it ought to mean."<sup>12</sup> This very disregard for historical accuracy not only provided his contemporaries with access to ancient texts in the vernacular, but continues to offer insights to us today, due to the valuable reinterpretations of what he thought they should mean for himself and his fellow Venetians. According to Dolce, "While there were many books available to teach and familiarize one with the governing of a horse, there were few that showed how to raise, train, and educate woman."

By the end of the sixteenth century, discussions of women in Venetian writings became edgier and more contentious. By far the most popular and widely circulated misogynistic work from the early seventeenth century was Giuseppe Passi's encyclopedia of women's faults, *I donneschi difetti*. Reprinted at least four times between 1599 and 1618, its purpose was to warn young men about the numerous faults of the female sex. The work opens with a general

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<sup>12</sup> Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino" and Venetian Art History of the Cinquecento*. (New York: College Art Association of America by New York University Press, 1968),7.

discussion of women's faults, followed by a series of chapters each devoted to the examination of a particular evil or set of evils attributed to women; chapter headings included topics such as pride, avarice, treachery, lust (there was a broadly circulating idea that women have an inordinate appetite for sex), wrath, gluttony and drunkenness, envy, pride, ambition, cruelty, adultery, and impudence. Each "fault" is associated with one or more women of myth or history. Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Messalina were used to represent ambition, unchecked sexuality and desire for power. Passi's obsessions were with the dangers inherent in female sexuality, women's lack of trustworthiness and the need for men to control and prevent them from gaining power. His work was so popular that many subsequent anti-female writers modeled their works on his; but despite its success, Passi must have received some negative feedback from this first publication. His second book, *Dello stato maritale* (1602) is somewhat milder; he states his intention to write four books on the four states of womanhood: virgin, married, widowed, and cloistered. In *Dello stato maritale*, he defends the current trend of young men who wished not to marry – "many of the ancient philosophers describe it as very difficult and very unhappy...because most women are....naturally evil and wicked."<sup>13</sup>

Some seventeenth-century writers responded to the rising phenomena of women performing in public, along with the theatricality of the heroines. In his work *Le glorie immortali di trionfi et heroiche impresse d'ottocento quarantacinque donne illustri antiche, e moderne dotate di conditioni e scienze segnalate* (1609), Pietro Paolo di Ribera details the accomplishments of no fewer than 845 illustrious women, who were noted for their achievements and undertakings in the sacred scriptures, theology, prophecy, philosophy, rhetoric, grammar, medicine, astrology, civil laws, painting, music, arms, and other virtues. He

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<sup>13</sup> Passi, *Dello stato*, 1.

redefines the criteria for exceptional women by including both ancient and modern women who excelled in the sciences, arts, and humanities, but even his 845 illustrious women are listed in descending order by degree of sexual purity. Starting with virgins, he descends to martyrs, and then to mere housewives.

Such blatantly misogynistic publications, even in the early seventeenth century, provoked some defensive responses. Lucrezio Bursati's *La vittoria delle donne* (1621) is a work that argues for women's superiority over men. The opposing points of view are uniquely presented as a conversation (an argument, really) between two illustrious gentlemen – a Venetian, Alessandro Salusti, and a Veronese, Gaudenzio Mareschi. The two gentlemen are overheard debating about nearly every facet of the nature of women, including marriage, feminine beauty and love, the appropriate treatment of wives, the education of women, and women warriors.

Lucrezia Marinella published thirteen works between 1595 and 1648 in the form of sacred dramas and poems, epic poems, and pastoral dramas, yet she is best known today for her response to Passi: *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne co' difetti et mancamenti de gli huomini* (1600), a persuasive and eloquent discourse from the voice of a woman, in defense of women. Whereas Passi had devoted a chapter each to a single female defect, Marinella did the same for each of the various virtues of the female sex in the first half of *La nobiltà*; the second half of the book is devoted to an exposé of male defects. Marinella was particularly interested in exemplary women, Christian and pagan alike, who rejected personal love for spiritual or heroic reasons. Her examples were intended to prove the superiority of women on the basis of their possession of both masculine and feminine virtues. In other words, she argued that a woman has the potential to be superior to a man, because while a woman may behave properly according to the precepts of female virtue, she also has the added potential to excel in masculine realms as well. Several of

her chapters deal with women who have excelled in traditionally male realms, heralded by chapter headings such as: *Of strong and fearless women*, *Of illustrious and famous women in military arts and war*, *Of women of strong limbs and disdainful of weakness*. She praises Dido for her courage and skill as a ruler, and defends the honor of Semiramis and Cleopatra, minimizing or altogether omitting their well-known sexual crimes and indiscretions.

Francesco Agostino Della Chiesa's *Theatro delle donne letterate* (Mondovì, 1620) writes of the perfection of the female sex, providing also a few twists on the conventional anti-misogynist viewpoints; the brunt of the blame for the Trojan war, for example, is placed not on Helen but on the vices of the men who desired her. Della Chiesa is especially approving of female warriors and rulers, proposing that women surpass men primarily because of their superior purity and chastity.

By contrast, Girolamo Ercolani's *Le eroine della solitudine sacra ovvero vite d'alcune romite sacre* (1664) exemplified the heroines whom he believed condemned women's sexuality and modeled the appropriate manner of repentance, with the intention of demonstrating that "retirement and solitude" are a woman's greatest ornament. Each of his heroines finds chastity, forgiveness, or absolution in the act of seclusion, therefore each chapter of his work is prefaced by an engraving that portrays a woman in a small enclosure, such as a cave or hut, glowing with redemptive light. In *La donna di poche parole*, Paolo Botti expresses the view that silence is the ultimate female virtue; he states his intention in the preface to persuade the "female sex to talk less, although it contains many words."<sup>14</sup> The frontispiece of the book provides an interesting visual representation of his ideals concerning female speech.

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<sup>14</sup> Paolo Botti, *La donna di poche parole commendata*, (Padua, n.p. 1663), 1.

A woman stands on a proscenium, framed by curtains, accompanied by a courtier of diminutive proportions, who gallantly bows to her in a mock gesture of civility. She places a finger in front of her lips, thus hushing her female audience, but wears a dress embroidered, curiously, with eyes and ears. In this representation, women are ornaments, who might see and hear and even dwarf the courtier, but should not speak on the stage.<sup>15</sup>

Botti proceeds with an interpretation of the famous operatic and historical figure, Poppea, whom he said made her beauty more desirable by wearing across her face a veil which concealed only one of her lips. He writes of Poppea:

Poppaea Sabina, who knew how to make herself the mistress of affections in a brief time and to capture two hearts – one of Otho and the other, harder than marble, that of Nero – rarely, Tacitus said, was seen in public; perhaps because the less her beauty was seen the more it was venerated. Moreover, she usually wore a veil that covered half of her lips in order to force herself to dedicate part of her mouth to silence, reserving the other for speaking when necessity required it. In order to speak well to one such as Nero, to change his inborn cruelty to affection, Poppaea said to herself: you would be better to be silent about thousands and thousands of things and a million times, therefore cover your tongue with a veil. So that this prince so cruel will desire to hear your voice, since he cannot satiate himself by gazing at your face, you always will say to him half of what he desires; therefore, you will always keep your mouth half-covered.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, according to Botti, it is not Poppea's beauty that is the primary agent of seduction, but her silence. Numerous sixteenth and seventeenth-century treatises warned that persuasive eloquence in a woman's mouth might expose its possessor as a dangerous seductress.

It is against this backdrop and amidst these circumstances that the convention of opera developed to maturity. Writing in 1663, at a time when opera was firmly established and female opera singers were being seen and heard for the first time, it is not unreasonable to think that Botti's admonitions against women's voices might well have been offered with opera in mind. Among the fashionable female singers that began to emerge in the first half of the seventeenth

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<sup>15</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Botti, *La donna di poche parole commendata*, 63.

century were Vittoria Archilei, Adriana Basile, Anna Renzi, and even Ippolita Recupita, whose star rose right under the noses of the Barberini in the neighboring palace of Cardinal Montalto.<sup>17</sup> Female characters like Dido, Octavia, Poppea, Clorinda, Semiramide, Medea, and Messalina began to be powerfully articulated by women themselves (instead of castrati) on the stages of early Venetian opera, drawing incredulous audiences from all over Europe.<sup>18</sup>

The societal shift was heralded by the female actors of the *commedia dell'arte* in the middle of the sixteenth century, followed closely by the famed *concerto di donne* of Ferrara's Duke Alfonso d'Este at the end of the sixteenth century. Despite their unexpected popularity, they did not meet with unequivocal favor; the idea of them was predictably disturbing to nobility. It is documented that Duke Alfonso took his singing ladies with him on a visit in 1581 to the Gonzaga court in nearby Mantua to sing for His Excellency Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga. After the concert, Duke Guglielmo loudly exclaimed with sarcasm, and within hearing of all that were present, "Ladies are very impressive indeed – in fact, I would rather be an ass than a lady!"<sup>19</sup> In defiance of societal norms and fueled by controversy, public representations of women exploded into brilliant displays of feminine power, gender ambiguity, and sexuality in the first public opera houses of Venice by 1637. Anthony Newcomb states, "This easily observable change was important not only socially but also musically, for the increased participation of women in

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Newcomb, "Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>18</sup> Heller, *Chastity, Heroism, and Allure*, viii.

<sup>19</sup> Newcomb, Anthony, "Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians?" from *Women Making Music*, ed. Bowers, Jane and Judith Tick (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986), 92.

professional music-making had wide repercussions in the monuments of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century music that have come down to us.”<sup>20</sup>

By the middle of the seventeenth century Venetian opera quickly outdistanced its Italian cousins with regards to evolution into music as drama. Old stories of love, betrayal, desire, adultery, mistaken identity, and power were retold through the mostly mythological characters of Ovid, Boccaccio and Dante. In Venice, Monteverdi composed *Orfeo*, *Arianna*, and *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, followed by *L’incoronazione di Poppea* in 1643. Records indicate the successes of *La finta pazza* by Strozzi in 1641 (the debut of superstar Anna Renzi), *La Didone* by Francesco Cavalli in 1641, *Venere gelosa* in 1643 by Niccolo Enea Bartolini and Francesco Sacrati, and *La Calisto* by Francesco Cavalli in 1651. These operas showcased powerful female characters, who made even stronger statements as the trend continued into the second half of the seventeenth century. Cesti’s *Semiramide* (1667) was a cross-dressing military heroine, praised for her political skill and battlefield victories. Pallavicino’s *Messalina* (1679) was a Roman Empress, the famously and blatantly adulterous wife of the emperor Claudius. According to Wendy Heller, “If virtue was to be conceded to women based on their silence and chastity, then the opera heroine, with her newfound eloquence, presented a threat of perhaps incalculable dimensions.”<sup>21</sup> Ellen Rosand paints an interesting picture of the female sex with a quote from Caronte’s character in *La finta pazza*:

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993), 33.

Though they have angelic and divine faces, beautiful women burn to be more beautiful still. They unhook the sun to gild their hair, they paint their lips, they burnish their skin.”<sup>22</sup>

The courtesan, a decidedly real figure in Venetian life, presented a model for feminine self-expression and influenced representations of opera heroines. In 1611, Thomas Coryate noted that there were over twenty thousand courtesans in Venice, finding it “a most ungodly thing there should be tolleration of such licentious wantons in so glorious, so potent, so renowned a City.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Recurrent Themes in Early Modern Society and 17<sup>th</sup> c. opera**

### **The Problem of Chastity**

In traditional European culture, chastity was perceived as a woman’s quintessential virtue. Qualities such as courage, generosity, leadership, or rationality were viewed as being male characteristics, rather than female. Essential female inferiority was assumed, and women were viewed as imperfect, frail subjects, characterized by deceptive, fickle, coy, lascivious, and out-of-control behavior. They were distrusted because of their propensity for passion over reason, and were considered slaves to their uncontrolled passions. The requirement of uncompromising chastity kept women at home, silenced them, isolated them, and left them in ignorance; as such, it was arguably the source of all other impediments. Reinforced by the fact that female chastity ensured the continuity of the male-headed household, in Catholic Europe, the requirement of chastity was further entrenched by moral and religious imperatives. Original

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<sup>22</sup> Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth Century Venice: the Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>23</sup> Heller, *Chastity, Heroism and Allure*, xxxiv.

sin was linked with the sexual act, and virginity was seen as a heroic virtue far superior than the avoidance of idleness, or malice, or greed.

A related recurring theme of seventeenth-century opera is what I enjoy referring to as the “black widow effect” – the danger to a man inherent in female sexuality. The heroines of myth and history were important witnesses in contemporary disputes regarding women and power, and to a certain extent they represent the objectification of a male-dominated society’s fears of emasculation, of being overpowered, and of destruction by seduction. In *Le eroine della solitudine sacra: ovvero vite d’alcune romite sacre* (1628), Girolamo Ercolani refers to the flames of impurity that in women are “harbored as in the Trojan horse.” Such impurity had the potential to devour the pure spirit of a man, and “color his pen with tears.” He describes the beauty and lasciviousness of Thais, the notorious courtesan of Alexandria, stating:

O Lord! How true it is that this vain beauty is nothing other than a fishhook of the devil with which he entices and makes a prey of the soul; a net which he holds toward the heavens to impede the entrance of mortals therein; a siren that lulls one to sleep and kills; a beverage that inebriates the senses and poisons the spirit; a mortal spell of the soul, a fecund seed of complaints; a harvest abundant in horrors and errors....She (Thais) made the whole world a hospital of incurables.<sup>24</sup>

“The female question” was widely discussed during meetings and debates of the Accademia degli Incogniti. The mysterious leader and founder of the Accademia degli Incogniti, Giovanni Francesco Loredano, writes about many issues concerning the nature of women in his own writings, including a set of academic discourses published under the title *Bizzarrie accademiche*. Banal in nature, Loredano’s discourses engage a number of issues concerning women with which opera was also concerned; the ideas expressed in his writings shaped opera

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<sup>24</sup> Girolamo Ercolani, *Le eroine della solitudine sacra ovvero vite d’alcune romite sacre* (Venice: Baba, 1655), 106.

plotting, characterizations, and musical rhetoric. For example, Loredano writes of the effect of a woman's gaze on the lover: the "poison darting from the eyes of the beautiful woman that takes away the lover's life" and turns his face black. He presents the idea of prostitution as a valuable weapon whereby man may satisfy his carnal needs, but also assert his superiority over women in the face of their dangerous sexuality. When men allow themselves to be enchained in the arms of lovers, they "become inferior and lose their superiority." However, once the man has satisfied himself, slept, and paid the prostitute, a man can "return to himself" and subjugate the woman once again."<sup>25</sup> In Loredano's view, the act of sexual intercourse temporarily strips a man of his power and authority, which must then be re-attained before a proper balance can resume. In Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the character Ottone tells himself repeatedly that after taking his pleasure with Poppea, he must find a way to "torna in se stessa" (return to himself.) Early modern mentalité granted women the power to strip men of intellect and powers of reason, thus turning them into beasts.

### **The Problem of Power**

In early modern society, women were excluded from power. Only men were citizens, only men bore arms, and only men could be chiefs or lords or kings. There were exceptions that did not necessarily disprove the rule, as when wives or mothers took the place of men, awaiting their return or for the maturation of an underage male heir (as was the case with Archduchess Maria Maddalena, who acted as regent during the minority of her son, Grand Duke Ferdinando). A woman who attempted to rule in her own right was typically perceived as an anomaly, a

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<sup>25</sup> Antonio Loredano, *Bizzarrie accademiche. Parte seconda*. (Venice: Guerigli, 1654), 2:49.

monster, at once a deformed woman and an insufficient male, sexually confused and dangerous to society. Whereas male rule was seen as orderly, legitimate, and correct, female rule was considered disorderly, illegitimate, and dangerous; most female rulers had to exert considerable effort merely to legitimize their position, and often did so by promoting images which emphasized either their chastity, their maternal nature, or their androgynous nature. If the ruling female had a husband, he was generally perceived as weak and inept. Queen Elizabeth I of England, one of the few women to hold full regal authority in European history, played with the male/female dichotomy in her self-representation to her subjects. She was a prince, and manly, even though she was female; yet she was also virginal. Catherine de' Medici, who ruled France as widow and regent for her sons, chose as her royal symbol the figure of Artemisia, an androgynous ancient warrior-heroine who combined the female persona with masculine powers. The confused sexuality of the imagery of female potency was not only reserved for rulers; any woman who excelled was likely to be called an "Amazon," in reference to the self-mutilated warrior women of antiquity who repudiated all men, gave up their sons, and raised only their daughters. The very presence of excellence assumed or conferred masculinity. Notable women were often portrayed dressed in armor, and images of female warriors romp through literary epics, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberate* (1581).

### **The Problem of Gender Confusion**

Ambiguity of gender and its ramifications for the shifting balance of power between the sexes is exaggeratedly represented in seventeenth-century opera, which provided a space where the shifting grounds between biological sex and gender could be reinvented by a focus on androgyny (in which women assume male characteristics) and by transvestism. Castrati

complicated the issue, of course. While they assumed female roles in regions where women were banned from public appearance on stage, they mostly played male characters in Venetian opera. Castrati were presented as men, but could be viewed as “effeminate,” creating tensions that were part of the game of operatic theater; in fact, it could be argued that the play with gender ambiguity in sexuality was an integral part of the Venetian cultural landscape. Most of the characters played by castrati were feminized either literally, by cross-dressing, or figuratively, by falling victim to love. In *Il martirio di Sant’ Agata*, Laurinda rescued her beloved by wearing male attire and posing as Laurindo, her twin brother. In *La Calisto*, Giove dresses as his wife, the goddess Diana, even assuming her voice by suddenly changing from bass to soprano in order to seduce Calisto in a same-sex erotic encounter. In *Semiramide*, the heroine exchanges identities with her rather lazy and effeminate son in order to go to war in his place, an exchange which opens the male realm to female interference, and causes the feminization and destruction of the men who surround her. In *Veremonda*, Veremonda assumes the uniform of a soldier in order to convince Delio to escort her to the citadel walls. The examples of cross-gender experimentation are abundant. Even in the Roman saint opera *Theodora*, the heroine is rescued from a brothel by her suitor Didymus via a disguise including the exchange of gender identity, so that she can escape into the forest.

### **The Problem of Eloquence**

Just as power had a sexual dimension when it was claimed by women, so did speech. A proper, good woman spoke very little, and rhetorical eloquence was an indication of impurity. Women seduced men with the power of their words (as evidenced by the character of Eve in the Christian creation myth, who lured Adam into sin with her persuasive argument.) Accused

witches were commonly charged with having spoken abusively, irrationally, or simply way too much. Silence in a woman was associated with perfect and uncomplaining submission to her husband's will. The qualities of power, rhetorical ability and sexual virility were all interconnected in the ideal male persona, a societal norm against which the outrageous eloquence of the seventeenth-century opera heroine stands out in sharp and enigmatic contrast. In her book *Monteverdi's Unruly Women*, musicologist Bonnie Gordon addresses the problem of female eloquence through the operas of Monteverdi, arguing that when women sang in the seventeenth century, they made themselves into "unruly women: that is, women who break the rules and occupy the spaces between the lines."<sup>26</sup> There became apparent an obvious paradox between social mores in early modern society, which on the one hand demanded tacit women whose quieted voices reflected their purity and kept them at a safe distance from inappropriate eroticism, and on the other hand attended operas which regularly depended upon and displayed trained women's voices. The result was the creation of a space where women were able, through singing, to seize power.

The process of dismantling the dominant European misogynist tradition began as a part of a larger cultural movement that entailed the critical reexamination of ideas inherited from the ancient and medieval past, a reexamination which was launched by the humanists. Humanism originated in Italy in the fourteenth century and quickly became the dominant intellectual movement in Europe. It fueled the literary, scientific, and philosophical movements of the era, and laid the basis for the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It was humanism that opened the door to the eventual critique of the misogynist tradition; by calling authors, texts, and ideas into

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<sup>26</sup> Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

question, it made possible the fundamental rereading of the whole intellectual tradition that was necessary to free women from cultural prejudice and social subordination. The emerging voice of the questioning humanist has been referred to by scholars as “the other voice.”<sup>27</sup>

The nature of this power has become a subject of interest in gender studies by scholars such as Judith Brown, Anne Jacobson Schutte, and Thomas Kuehn. In a collection of essays and presentations from the international Trento conference held in October 1997 under the sponsorship of the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico and the Dipartimento di Scienze Filologiche e Storiche of the Università degli Studi di Trento, the editors asked the participants to pay attention to two particular oppositions – that between an “older” model of women’s oppression by men, and a newer model of women’s agency. Pioneers in the study of gender have stressed the analytical distinction between sex (as biology) and gender (as culture). Gender is something women can be perceived to construct themselves, or at least change. Gender had the added utility of bringing together study of male and female identities, of breaking down dichotomies, and therein lies its relevance to the study of early opera. As has already been established, gender ambiguity is one of the recurrent and obvious themes of seventeenth-century opera. The notion of agency in gender studies arose to recover a sense of women’s lives and a reason to study them in opposition to an older contention that women were merely oppressed victims of patriarchy, whose lives were marked by exclusion, vulnerability, and powerlessness. Seeking women’s

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., introduction to *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, by Lucrezia Marinella, edited and translated by Anne Dunhill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) xv-xvi.

agency rendered them both historical subjects worthy of investigation and active protagonists of change.<sup>28</sup>

Musical language of seventeenth-century opera allows for a number of techniques by which composers represented musically the traits which were considered those of commanding women: efficacy, resolve, and self-control. The opposite traits were also represented musically: immoderation, passivity, vacillation, and hysteria. Composers often used this musical contrast to separate their portrayal of characters. Kelley Harness notes the presence or absence of three categories of seventeenth-century musical conventions: 1) florid or otherwise tuneful singing; 2) expressive recitative; and 3) harmonic clarity.<sup>29</sup> Where Venetian opera celebrated florid singing, early opera elsewhere utilized it only as an icon of excess. Its appearance indicated an extravagance that was in sharp contrast to the more typical manner of delivering text in recitative.

Kelley Harness also points out that even recitative, however, can be expressive. The most expressive recitative is characterized by dissonance, chromaticism, harmonic juxtapositions, and affective use of rhythm, which typically coincide with the moments that a character possesses the least amount of self-control. This use of expressive recitative not only mirrors immoderation, says Harness, but helps to construct it. Suzanne Cusick suggests that diatonic tonality and avoidance of expressivity produce a musical rationality that allows a desexualized heroine to control her own music's sensual pleasure. The degree to which a character's vocal line

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds., introduction to *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*. (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001), viii.

<sup>29</sup> Kelley Harness, "Chaste Warriors and Virgin Martyrs," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music*, ed. Todd M. Borgerding (New York: Routledge, 2002), 94.

participates in the underlying harmonic scheme can also influence the audience's perception of that character as either possessing or lacking control and agency. Vocal lines that possess a tonal direction and reinforce a clear harmonic plan create a sense of purpose, and when used to deliver a strong text, they can import assertiveness to the character. The nature of cadential articulations can also communicate character traits in seventeenth-century opera by similar means; strong cadences were often used to depict assertiveness, while weak or thwarted cadences were used to depict helplessness or irresolution.

In short, seventeenth-century opera characters (male and female) tended to fall into one of two categories – those which exemplify emotional and musical restraint, along with an absence of excess that allows them to speak clearly and exercise their will, and those who are less self-composed and rely on musical extremes (harsh dissonances, vocal leaps, and syncopated rhythms) to express their inevitably impotent desires. The irony in this juxtaposition lies in the fact that in early opera, it is more often than not the female characters that exhibit the traditionally male characters of rationality, absence of excess, and emotional restraint, while it is the male characters that lament, rage, and pour out their frustrated desires in bursts of florid vocal pyrotechnics.

The remarkable common thread that connects these early opera heroines is that in spite of the conduct books and behavior manuals, in spite of prior centuries of misogynistic programming and ingrained models of decorum and modesty, the ladies depicted on the opera stages of Venice, Florence, and even Rome often did not resemble the docile women that were held up to society as “ideal” in the behavior manuals and treatises. They were unmistakably strong, powerful and eloquent women. Even the virgin martyrs (the most decorous of all) possessed and embodied a self-realization and an unshakable will. At the same time that a misogynistic society

put forth a weak and silent feminine ideal, it portrayed the opposite in the female characters of early opera. It is this very dichotomy that I wish to illuminate with my dissertation, and to demonstrate with my final doctoral recital.

## Chapter One: The Virgin Martyr

A discussion of the icon of the martyr must be viewed against the backdrop of the main themes of the Counter-Reformation; namely, a sense of the innate human inability to see through appearance to reality, or to decide between evidence and truth. Man, therefore, because of this inability, has the need for spiritual education in order to control his own will. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) proclaimed that art (architecture, painting, sculpture, music) had a role in conveying this ‘spiritual education’ in the form of Catholic theology. Any work that might arouse “carnal desire” was inadmissible in churches and prohibited from public view, while any depiction of Christ’s suffering and explicit agony was desirable and proper. In an era when some Protestant reformers were destroying images of saints and cathedral organs, Catholic reformers reaffirmed the importance of art in the moral instruction of man, and especially valued portrayals and images of the Virgin Mary.<sup>30</sup>

The seventeenth century was a period during which Catholicism consciously reasserted the tenets that had been most under attack by Protestantism, and celibacy was high on that list. As has already been discussed, by the seventeenth century ideals about the inherent differences in male and female nature had long been assimilated into popular culture. The Catholic Church’s position on the superiority of permanent (as opposed to pre-marital) celibacy for its elite members has remained constant even to the present day, though the political, civic, and spiritual ramifications of female virginity have changed and evolved through the intervening centuries. Because it was believed that women were less able than men to control their lust, preservation of

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<sup>30</sup> Irene Earls, *Baroque Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 76-77.

sexual integrity was a demonstration of remarkable spiritual fortitude for a woman. Literary and theatrical works from the period reinforce the notion that virginity also conferred extraordinary strength, which had become a defining attribute of the virgin martyr icon by the seventeenth century. In early modern ideology, the term “virgin” could be characterized by qualities of charity, chastity, and control over the intrinsic lasciviousness of the female nature. By rising above what was considered womanly behavior, the virgin transcended not only her traditional societal duties but also her corporeal, worldly nature, and thus became more like a man. The term “martyr” was associated with the ideas of sacrifice, weariness from struggles, and release from the pain of the world and all earthly ties, in accordance with Christian vision.

For much of the early modern period, theories of sexual difference derived from those of classical antiquity. The theory still prevailed that the universe consisted of four elements (earth, fire, air, and water), expressed in human bodies as four “humors” (black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm) considered respectively to be dry, hot, damp, and cold. In this schematization the male, sharing the principals of earth and fire, was dry and hot; the female, sharing the principles of air and water, was cold and damp. Wetness was associated with lust, and dryness with masculinity. The male was intellectual, active, and in control of his passions, while the female was softer and more docile, more apt to be despondent, querulous, and deceitful.

Virgins were described in the writings of both Saint Jerome (AD 347-420) and Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335-395), who each used metaphors of dryness to explain virginity. A female virgin, therefore, possessed a masculine dry humor that empowered her with the extraordinary agency of clear reverberation and rhetorical superiority. According to some medieval theologians, virginity also conferred upon a woman extraordinary “virile strength” and “manly vigor.”

In a paper delivered at the Center for the Study of Women Graduate Research Conference at UCLA in 1993, gender studies scholar Patricia Smith described the elements common to virgin martyr narratives, referring specifically to the experience of torture.

...a young woman who, having chosen to remain a lifelong virgin, encounters a “pagan” man who “outs” her as a Christian to the authorities, takes her captive, and asks her to reconsider, often forcing her to be exposed naked among prostitutes. When these efforts fail, she is subjected to ingenious tortures, flogging, maiming, mutilation, beating, exposure to wild beasts, suffocation in steam baths, or burning at the stake....Divine intervention often renders these torments ineffective; nevertheless the protagonist is subsequently translated into the joys of heaven, virginity intact, via the generally (but not always) fatal means of beheading or some variation thereof.<sup>31</sup>

Operatic representations of virgin martyrs first appeared in Florence during the decade of the 1620's. According to Kelley Harness, virgin martyrs exemplified the defense of the Catholic Faith as promulgated by the Counter-Reformation, but in active roles of ministry and martyrdom that were, by the seventeenth century, largely cut off from females.<sup>32</sup> Throughout most of the decade, heroines of Florentine spectacles would endeavor to thwart all enemies of chastity, giving their lives to the cause if necessary. They were also the type of spiritual and political female leaders with which the regents needed to identify themselves; the assertive female protagonist would become the most celebrated and visible dramatic symbol of the Medici court during the 1620's, and she would provide entertaining plots for visitors of state.

The most important thing about virgin martyrs, however, could be that by definition they *separated the image of woman from that of female sexuality*. One interesting juxtaposition by

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, Patricia Juliana. “Better to Burn than to Marry: The Narratives of the Virgin Martyrs.” Paper delivered at the Center for the Study of Women Graduate Research Conference. University of California, Los Angeles, May 17, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Kelley Harness, *Amazzoni di Dio; Florentine Musical Spectacle Under Maria Maddalena d'Austria and Cristina di Lorena 1620-30* (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1996), 46.

scholar Anne Jacobson Schutte presents sainthood and witchcraft as opposite ends of a continuum, in that both are best seen in the employment of ‘procedures of proof’ by rather harsh inquisitors. Female saints, according to Schutte, came from socially privileged groups, and witches from poorer and marginalized social origins, yet both gave occasion for the expression of *male distrust of female nature*.<sup>33</sup> Although the symbol of the holy virgin martyr was an ancient one in Roman Catholicism, additional inspiration was probably gleaned from two Florentine operatic spectacles of 1621 and 1622, both presented by the Archduchess Maria Maddalena specifically to promote herself as an icon of chastity and virtue.

*Cicilia Sacra* (1621) by Annibale Lomero featured one of the prototypes of Roman Christian virgins, Saint Cecilia. Cecilia, a young Roman woman dedicated to the ideals of virginity and chastity but facing the harsh reality of her upcoming wedding to Valerian, prays to God for help her to remain chaste on her wedding night. She informs her new husband that an angel of jealousy guards her virginity. Valerian is impressed, converts to Christianity himself, and the couple is executed by a Roman prefect.<sup>34</sup> Of more interest to the purposes of this dissertation, however, is the second of Archduchess Maddalena’s commissions.

*Il martirio di Santa Agata* (1622) by Jacopo Cicignini is based on a saints’ legend in which Agatha, a young Sicilian noblewoman, has also taken a vow of chastity. She is persecuted by an outspoken rejected admirer, Quintianus, who has Agatha tortured by removing both her breasts. Her outrageous martyrdom converts most of the population to Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Schutte, Anne Jacobson, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds. *Time, Space, and Women’s Lives in Early Modern Europe*, introduction.

<sup>34</sup> Harness, *Amazzoni di Dio*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Harness, *Amazzoni di Dio*, 60-61.

The significance of both these spectacles lies in the fact that both had a specific ulterior motive: to present the Archduchess Maddalena as *a symbol of spiritual virtue*. Her heroines embodied a different kind of power; they didn't rescue lovers from the lair of a Minotaur, weren't rescued from the depths of Hades by a silent lover, nor did they ride chariots pulled by dragons off into the sunset. These first Florentine operatic heroines *died for Christ*.

It is entirely likely that meanwhile, in Rome, the Barberinis would have felt the approaching threat to the ideals of the Church by the successes of Venetian operas which were not only lauding lascivious ladies, but featuring actual female singers on public opera stages. By 1632, the Holy Roman Church had premiered its first sermon spectacle – its own “saint opera.” Librettist Giulio Rospigliosi had risen to a place of prominence in the Barberini household, and the papal commissions for musical and literary works commenced. He would produce no fewer than twelve operas for the regime's various purposes between the years of 1632 and 1656. His strengths as a writer are revealed by the honesty and realism of his characters, reflecting a preoccupation with verisimilitude that was not unique to Roman opera. Rospigliosi's heroines are real men and women, tested by real problems, and expressing real human emotion. Margaret Murata describes Rospigliosi as “much more the psychologist than the aesthete.”<sup>36</sup> It could be proposed that Rospigliosi played the role of intermediary between the various aims of the Church and real human behavior. Urban VIII and his nephews commissioned stories about real people facing spiritual temptations, and using the power of their free will (Counter-Reformation propaganda, in response to the Protestant view of predestination) to choose the higher path and adhere to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Rospigliosi's characters struggle with the marvels and temptations of the world, and long for release from its illusions through Christianity.

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<sup>36</sup> Murata, *Operas for the Papal Court*, 78.

## Saint Agatha

Saint Agatha of Sicily was a Christian saint who was martyred in approximately AD 251. She is one of the most highly venerated virgin martyrs of Christian antiquity, and one of seven women (along with the Blessed Virgin Mary) who are commemorated by name in the Canon of the Mass. Jacopo Cicognini (Florence, 1577-1631) wove the legend of Saint Agatha around a more secular plot with his libretto from 1622, *Il martirio di Sant'Agata*. Some of the music was composed by Giovanni Battista da Gagliano (1594-1651).

As mentioned above, the opera was commissioned by Archduchess Maria Magdalena, and was performed by men and boys of the Compagnia di Sant'Antonio di Padova during the 1622 Carnival season, with the Archduchess herself in the audience. It received seven repeat performances between 1622 and 1624. This opera and others like it (*La regina Sant'Orsola*, for instance, which is discussed later in this dissertation) could with some degree of confidence be perceived through a lens of political propaganda, as has been widely noted by musicologists.<sup>37</sup>

Kelley Harness describes *Il martirio di Sant'Agata* as a 'spoken play' by Jacopo Cicognini with added music, much of which functions as built-in intermedii. Sadly, almost all of the music for both *Cicilia Sacra* (1621) and *Il martirio di Sant'Agata* (1622) has been lost, so one can only hypothesize as to the musical style of these early Florentine virgin martyr operas. Cicognini's characterization of the virgin martyr Agatha occurred throughout the opera only in the form of spoken text, to represent the idea that in her bodily form, she resists the temporal

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<sup>37</sup> For the following information, I rely heavily on Kelley Harness' essay "Chaste Warriors and Virgin Martyrs in Florentine Musical Spectacle," which is featured as chapter four of *Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music*, edited by Todd M. Borgerding.

pleasure of music. After her martyrdom, however, her soul is free to participate in heaven's celestial harmony, and she finally gets to sing, instead of speak.

Throughout much of the decade, heroines of Florentine spectacles would be pitted against enemies of chastity, sacrificing their own lives when necessary. Kelley refers to the "assertive female protagonist" as the most visible dramatic symbol of the Medici court during the decade of the 1620's, which coincides with a unique period of Florentine history – the only time in which women governed that city.<sup>38</sup> Maddalena commissioned the works, choosing subjects that could both reassert women's political rights and also provide a spiritual justification for that legitimization – namely, the fact that numerous exemplary women populate the Bible and hagiography, and that these women drew their power and authority directly from God. We know from surviving documents that Maddalena involved herself in all aspects of the court's theatrical presentations, ranging from choosing subject matter to auditioning singers and attending performances. Maddalena suggested singers, and even on occasion made final casting decisions.

Cicognini's *Santa Agata* featured a secondary character by the name of Laurinda, who possessed a "magnanimous and virile heart." She rescued her beloved by wearing male attire and posing as Laurindo, her twin brother. Laurindo, a secret Christian, had in an act of righteous rebellion stolen a statue of Venus while dressed as a woman. Here it can conceivably be proposed that Cicognini associated female clothing with deceit and theft, and masculine dress with strength and courage.

A common plot device in sacred opera was to pit the heroine's authoritative speech against a wildly emotional outburst of a highly volatile character, usually her would-be lover.

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<sup>38</sup> Kelley Harness, "Chaste Warriors and Virgin Martyrs in Florentine Musical Spectacle," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music*, ed. Todd M. Borgerding (New York: Routledge, 2002), 73.

Thus, gender representations are reversed and possession of power is redistributed; the heroine expresses the traditionally male characteristics of calm, logical rhetoric, while the male character is the hysterical and irrational “jilted lover.” In the case of Agatha, that young suitor is named Armidoro, and he pleads with his beloved in hopes of convincing her to return his feelings. Unmoved by Armidoro’s passionate eloquence, Agatha thanks him for his attentions, but informs him that she is unable to return his love. Agatha is chastised by her enemies for this unwomanly behavior, and castigated for being obstinate, rigid, and cruel. Nothing can persuade the young virgin, however, which prompted the lusty Aphrodisia to accuse her of gender disloyalty: “this is no longer a woman, but a cruelest monster in human disguise.” (I/9)

Agatha’s position as a Christian heroine meant that these supposed sins were, in fact, not a transgression against, but a transcendence of her weaker female gender- a valued attribute of militant Catholicism. Through her resolve, Agatha demonstrated the traditionally male qualities of resolve, boldness, and courage in the face of danger, but she also exemplified one of the themes particular to seventeenth century sacred opera, the *transcendence* of gender, which is expressed by Jerome’s often quoted commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians:

As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man.<sup>39</sup>

Composer Cicognini, following the Tuscan *sacra rappresentazione* tradition, explicitly connects the music and the dance sequences to the very type of sin Agatha vows to avoid. The lascivious Aphrodisia and her lusty daughters attempt to use the naturally-occurring link between

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<sup>39</sup> Saint Jerome, “Commentariorum in Epistolam ed Ephesios,” in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina* 26: 567. English translation in Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 43.

music and the senses to entice Agatha to follow their worldly example. Harness uncovered a portion of a *mascherata* composed by Giovanni Battista da Gagliano, originally comprised of three separate musical sections: 1) the chorus “Con dolcezza incomparabile” from the final scene of Act I, in which Aphrodisia’s daughters express their intention to awaken Agatha’s cold heart; 2) a strophic solo, “Volgi il guardo oh Giovinetta,” which calls attention to Agatha’s physical beauty; and 3) a strophic choral refrain, “Girate girate.” The following recovered portions of the lost score are only available because they appear in the composer’s *Varie musiche* of 1623.<sup>40</sup> Harness includes a portion of the strophic solo, sung by Aphrodisia’s daughter, observing that the musical setting uses the energetic rhythms of the *corrente* (a triple meter dance form), very appropriate for a seductress. An expansive, elaborate melisma can be observed on the word “giovinetta” (“youthful girl”), ms. 3-4, and the word “alletta” (“entice”), ms. 12, carries the voice to its highest point in the aria, a word whose literal meaning is also the central theme of the play - the attempted seduction of Agatha.

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<sup>40</sup>Giovanni Battista da Gagliano, *Varie musiche* (Venice: Allesandro Vincenti, 1623).



After her martyrdom, the spirit of Agatha finally sings a refrain which Cicognini's libretto indicates was composed by Francesca Caccini. Agatha first entreats her friends to rejoice in her victory rather than lament her death. Her final musical utterance is a response to the choir of angels, whose chorus "Allo sposo superno," (composed by Gagliano) features a melody an octave apart, sung by Agatha (lower octave) and her guardian angel (upper octave). The heroine of our next opera, however, differs from St. Agatha in that her characterization was achieved solely through music, not spoken text.

### **Saint Ursula**

Oh, immortal shame, a mortal woman makes perpetual  
war against me: she destroys my temples and tramples my name.  
Ursula, O king of Avernus, O companions of Tartarus,  
Ursula is this woman of royal British blood,  
she is the fierce cause of all my pain, all my injuries.<sup>41</sup>

This complaint by the demon of lust (Asmodeo) to Lucifer is found in the opening scene of Marco da Gagliano's *La regina Sant'Orsola*, one of four fully-sung operas performed at the Medici court between 1624 and 1628. *Sant'Orsola* (Ursula is Latin for "little female bear") was the second of the Florentine theatrical virgin martyr representations of the 1620's. It was commissioned for the 1622 marriage of Princess Claudia de' Medici to Federico della Rovere, Prince of Urbino. The character of Ursula seems to have been of particular significance to Archduchess Maria Maddalena, as the court twice presented this opera based on her legend. It also provided a model of the kind of strong, powerful woman necessary to the archduchess's self-fashioning. The work's librettist, court poet Andrea Salvadori, claimed that with

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<sup>41</sup> Andrea Salvadori, *La regina Sant'Orsola*, trans. Kelley Harness (Florence: Cecconcelli, 1625), 22.

*Sant'Orsola* he inaugurated a new genre – sacred opera. His portrayal of Saint Ursula's defense of Cologne against the Huns showed how the womanly virtues of honestà (honesty) and continenza (faithfulness) could be projected beyond personal concerns, inspiring a resistance to invasion that could preserve intact a Catholic state (political agenda).

According to the *Legenda aurea*, Ursula was a British princess widely recognized for her extraordinary beauty and wisdom. Saint Ursula became the heroine of a Florentine operatic collaboration between Italian poet and librettist Andrea Salvadori (Florence, 1591-1634) and composer Marco da Gagliano in 1624. *La regina Sant'Orsola* (The Queen Saint Ursula), in the form of a prologue and five acts, after its original performance in 1624, was revived in 1625. All music has been lost. The court first presented the opera in honor of state visits by the archduchess' relatives, and the archduchess herself was active in the recruitment of singers and the rehearsal process for the performances.<sup>42</sup> Not only did Salvadori's 1624 representation inaugurate the new genre of sacred opera, but Ursula is the only saint whose frescoed lunettes dominated the archduchess' audience room in the Poggio Imperiale, which is the physical space most symbolic of Maria Magdalena's political persona.

Salvadori's libretto is full of militaristic images; Ursula, along with her brigade of eleven thousand virgins, is frequently described as the military leader of an army whose epithets include "chaste warriors," a "modest army," and "amazons of god."<sup>43</sup> Ursula herself remarks on the unusual gender of her warriors, which she describes as "drawn from the unwarlike sex." Salvadori represents this struggle in an on-stage battle between the Huns and the Romans,

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<sup>42</sup> Kelley Harness. *Echoes of Women's Voices; Music, art, and Female Patronage in Early Modern Florence* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 94.

<sup>43</sup> Harness, *Echoes of Women's Voices*, 101.

reiterating traditional beliefs concerning virginity and its associated virtue of extraordinary female courage. Ursula's eventual martyrdom provides the ultimate victory; through her sacrifice she liberates Cologne, accomplishing a feat that the entire Roman army is unable to accomplish through traditional warfare.

As examined earlier, female virginity's defining characteristics are spiritual fortitude and extraordinary strength. In both Cicognini and Salvadori's works, the heroine's authoritative speech can be vividly contrasted with the wildly emotional outbursts of a highly volatile character. As stated earlier in the discussion of Saint Agatha, these overwrought figures are not female, but male - specifically, the principal male characters who mistakenly believe that the virgin heroines return their love. In both *Sant'Agata* and *Sant'Orsola*, Cicognini and Salvadori invert the gender roles typical of the baroque lament; the male character (instead of the female) weeps because his laments fail to bring about the desired result. For example, upon learning of the massacre of Ursula's virginal companions and of Gauno's lust for Queen Ursula, Ireo (who desires her) erupts into a highly emotional lament during which he selfishly complains of his own inability to win Ursula (Act 3, Scene 4):

*Whenever was seen,  
When, poor me, whenever has one heard  
a condition of fierce fortune equal to mine?  
It was not enough to deprive me, implacable destiny, of my kingdom?  
It was not enough to bind me, the royal offspring, with servile chain,  
So that to increase my pain you want me to see her, she who is my life,  
abducted from me in front of my own eyes, by the pitiless barbarian?  
O, before I see this, o heaven, o fate,  
Just the thought of such a miserable sight  
Kills my heart with sorrow.<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>44</sup> Harness, *Echoes of Women's Voices*, 102.

In both librettos, the emotionally hysterical male characters are only capable of ineffective, emotionally reactive responses, whereas the cooler-headed virgin heroines convey their wishes bluntly, directly, and powerfully. As presented in the introduction, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century treatises on the female sex warned that persuasive eloquence in a woman's mouth might expose its possessor as a dangerous seductress. In the case of the virgin martyr operas, however, the female saints embody persuasive eloquence, but without a trace of seductiveness.

From the existing libretti and score fragments, we can observe that the characters of Saint Ursula and Saint Agatha are both depictions of a strong women whose command of language is direct, rather than ornate. There are no melismatic emotional outbursts, and their speech is concise and purposeful. In keeping with early opera's concern with verisimilitude, the musical and rhetorical devices used by the composers and librettists actually resembled the very characteristics that such commanding women were believed to possess: efficacy, resolve, and self-control.

### **Theodora**

*I Santi Didimo e Theodora* was a *dramma musicale* in three acts, performed during the carnivals of 1635 and 1636 at the Palazzo Barberini alle Quattro Fontane in Rome. It is a quintessential example of the type of Roman sacred opera that became associated with the Barberini regime during the seventeenth century. The libretto was the work of Giulio Rospigliosi, and the composer is believed to be either Stefano Landi or Virgilio Mazzocchi. Rospigliosi's libretto was adapted from the Trivulzi manuscript (Barberini manuscript 3872). The score remains lost.

We know from the existing *avvisi* (public notices of performances, analogous to modern-day concert reviews) that the orchestra was comprised of three violins, lira, two lutes, theorbo, cornetto, two violini, *flautino* (high-pitched recorder), *chitarra* (guitar), harpsichord, and organ. We know that it was a serious representation, without a single humorous element, and that it incorporated machines, stage effects, poetry, dancing, and drama. The *avvisi* praised the opera “as well for the composition of the words...and for the excellence of the music as for the variety and beauty of the costumes, scene changes (24 of them) perspective sets, machines, and ballet intermedi, and in particular a most beautiful *barriera* (the joust in Act I) that the pages of the prefect of Rome perform.”<sup>45</sup>

While the opera roles in *Theodora* represent a mixture of real and allegorical characters, Theodora appears to have been an actual historical figure.<sup>46</sup> As is the usual case with the Roman saint operas, the plot of *Teodora* presents the conflict between pagan love and Christian duty, but is notable because in this particular saint opera, the protagonist is female.

In the prologue of the opera, Theodora’s foil character, Cleopatra, appears as a tormented ghost from the underworld, expressing a lament for the suffering she is experiencing as a result of having given in to the temptations and impure desires of a weak heart. In the opera proper, Theodora’s first entrance depicts her as a bold, outspoken, dedicated Christian, remaining steadfast in the face of new edicts issued in Alexandria against Christians. Theodora’s family begs her to give up her faith, but she refuses. She is desirous of the ideal of martyrdom, but also tempted by the allegorical characters of Pleasure, Riches, and Vanity, who are countered by a

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<sup>45</sup> Avviso of 10 Feb. 1635, in Murata, *Operas for the Papal Court*, 255.

<sup>46</sup> For more details, see collection by Symeon the Legothete (Symeon Mataphrastes), compiled by F. Barberini’s librarian, Leone Allici.

guardian angel. The act concludes with a joust for Theodora's hand, which is interrupted by the news that she has attacked the idols of the pagan gods. In the second act, she is imprisoned in a brothel for this outspoken act, where the male customers argue about who will be the first to rape her. She is rescued from the brothel by her suitor Didymus (via the exchange of clothing) and runs away into the forest. During an Egyptian celebration, the sky darkens and lightning strikes the statues of the gods. During Act III, Theodora is stricken by her guilty conscience and the humiliation of her own weakness in the face of death. She makes the decision to return to Alexandria to accept her fate, where she and Didymus are both martyred. From Paradise, their spirits comfort their grieving parents.

It could be argued that the character of Theodora effectively represents the ideals of the Counter-Reformation. As with all the saint operas, she is a testament to the Catholic ideal that spiritual love is a higher motivation than human attachment; her courage is tested. Expressing the Church's doctrine of free will, Theodora is faced with a difficult choice; first she flees, but then she returns to Alexandria *of her own will*, not by coercion, mirroring Rome's self-proclaimed desire to rule through love instead of force.

Though the librettos of these three operas are an invaluable source of information and perspective, very few excerpts from the scores themselves remain. In seeking to understand how the virgin martyr type was musically conveyed, we can sometimes extrapolate from surviving scores for other productions from this period and these places. The few excerpts we do have from contemporary scores show that they were largely comprised of recitative with interspersed arioso, and laden with text and dialogue, as can be observed in this recitative-like fragment of one of Teopiste's arias from *Sant'Eustachio* (1643) by Rospigliosi and Mazzocchi (Figure 1.3).

In this scene, Teopiste declares her faith and courage to her husband, Eustachio, over a consistent D harmony.

Figure 1.3



Mazzocchi, *Sant'Eustachio*, Act 3, Scene 2: Teopiste: "Oggi quà giunsi dove"

*Today I arrived here/where with you in quick step/following the footsteps of Christ/  
I will go, ready to uphold the cross.*<sup>47</sup>

The scarcity of source material makes a revival of Roman and Florentine saint operas impossible in their original form. Generally speaking, saint operas of this sort were never intended as vehicles for public spectacle, but for private entertainment in noble courts, commissioned by popes, princes, and noble patrons for the edification of high status guests and patrons. Many scholars perceive them to be very specific instruments of moral and religious propaganda by the Catholic church. Rome most certainly embraced the saint opera genre during the seventeenth century as its primary vessel of operatic expression, and the personification of the Virgin Martyr was a significant enough female emblem to warrant the attention of scholars.

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<sup>47</sup> Virginia Christy Lamothe, "*The Theater of Piety: Sacred Operas for the Barberini Family (Rome, 1632-1643)*" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009).

Because sainthood required for men and women a complete abandonment of worldly ideals, saints often found the social order of their world and their relationships with each other turned upside down. In the saint operas, one finds a lack of misogyny that would normally be expected of a seventeenth-century world where women either within the church or of the secular world were kept indoors and separate from the society of men. The female saints in these operas are shown to have the same spiritual capabilities as men, equal in strength, courage, and virtue. In fact, one could argue that gender distinctions, in this place and time, dissolved; in order to depict this type of being, hagiographers described saints as displaying behavior and characteristics of both sexes, or else they were depicted as a type of “third being” which was neither male nor female. Thus, the commission and portrayal of these operas marked a significant stage in the evolution of gender ideology in early modern society.

## Chapter Two: The Warrior and the Queen

The following chapter will focus on the representation of powerful women as they are most typically presented in Venetian opera.<sup>48</sup> As typically represented, warrior women can only be conquered by one of two things: by physical strength, or by the “force of love.” Heller emphasizes the abundance of ancient and early modern sources that reflect cases where the prerequisites for achievement of male heroism required not only the act of abandoning a lover, but also the conquering of a female warrior. By example, she offers the Greek myth of Theseus and Hippolyta; Theseus insured his heroic status by abandoning Arianna on the island of Dia, and then further affirmed his status through the conquest of the amazon Hippolyta, by marrying her. The couple are featured in one of the more obviously amoral and controversial librettos of the period, Francesco Piccoli’s *L’incostanza triomphante* (Venice: Giuliani, 1657).<sup>49</sup> The setting up of a male hero figure through the taming and conversion of warrior women such as Hippolyta and Bradamante was a common theme of sixteenth-century literary epics such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (1516).

It would be difficult to embark on a discussion of the representation of strong, exceptional women in early modern society without mentioning the legends of the amazon women. For Greek society, the amazon myth was an integral part of self-definition, because it functioned as a separation between their own civilized world and that of the barbarians. Amazons were sexually autonomous, described variously as chaste and promiscuous. They were

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<sup>48</sup> For this section, I will be relying heavily on the research of Wendy Heller and her book, *Emblems of Eloquence*.

<sup>49</sup> Glixon and Glixon, “Marco Faustini and Venetian Opera Production in the 1650’s: Recent Archival Discoveries,” *The Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992): 72-73.

rumored to kill male children and only raise the females, and the mutilations of their right breasts were typically representative of a basic denial of femininity and biological destiny. The true power of the amazon woman myth (indeed, any myth) is its malleability, allowing it to be adapted by any society to represent fears. For medieval Christians, the amazon represented the danger of the pleasures of the flesh. For societies involved in exploration and conquest, they could be viewed as the infidel population which could be socialized and Christianized. In early modern Europe, amazons were used both to argue against female rule and to express a deep well of fear about male effeminacy.

Unsurprisingly, given the debate about women in early modern Europe, the archetype of the amazon warrior became particularly popular in seventeenth-century opera as an example of strong, feminine self-expression. It can also be observed that a fierce or powerful woman's military exploits are linked to her sexual exploits, both of which cause the feminization and/or destruction of the men who surround her. It was thought that female skill in what are considered traditionally male activities leads to androgyny and transvestism, which was typically followed by seduction, incest, murder, castration, and/or anarchy.

### **Bradamante**

The female knight Bradamante captured the imaginations of readers in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in 1532. She is presented in *Furioso* as the positive alternative to the idealized but illusory femininity represented by the other primary character, Angelica. While Angelica either flees her amorous pursuers or suffers capture, Bradamante roams the French countryside in service to the king and in search of her beloved, Ruggiero. By donning armor, she conceals her gender and enjoys the free movement of a martial champion - a disguise which

allows her to appropriate both male and female roles for herself and to defer the traditional women's functions of marriage and childbearing. It also permits the poet to directly explore the foundations of custom and belief on which gender identity appears to rest.

*Il palazzo incantato (The Enchanted Palace)* or *Il Palagio d'Atlante, o vero la guerriera amante (Atlante's Palace, or The Warrior Woman in Love)* is an opera in a prologue and three acts by the Italian composer Luigi Rossi. The libretto, by Giulio Rospigliosi, is based on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and was first performed in Rome at the Teatro delle Quattro Fontane (Palazzo Barberini) on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February, 1642.

The opera is long and typically complicated, with a lengthy cast of minor characters. Each soloist has at least one aria or duet, and some sing additional recitative monologues. Ariosto's crusaders sing tenor-bass and bass-bass duets, Angelica sings in a total of three trios, and choruses of imprisoned ladies, nymphs, hunters and specters enliven five scenes in Acts 1 and 2, in addition to their closing finales. The proliferation of separated lovers makes for a long opera, with little interaction or musical connection between scenes not involving the three principals. Perhaps there were too many unhappy lovers; the earliest eyewitness reports deemed the opera "long and lachrymose," and "too serious and lacking in plot, though well sung." For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus only on the part of the plot that concerns the character of Bradamante, the warrior-maiden heroine of the opera, and the ways in which she exemplifies the warrior-queen archetype.

Bradamante, arrives at the palace in search of Ruggiero and finds her lover speaking with another woman. In a fit of jealous rage, she confronts Ruggiero, who collapses from helplessness, overpowered. Through the intervention of the secondary characters (including a

meddling house dwarf), the lovers are eventually reconciled, and the opera concludes with a celebration of love's power to overcome all obstacles.

The *argomento* (period synopsis) explained that the palace represents human life, Atlante the world, Ruggiero the human soul, and Bradamante, reason – an interesting assignment of gender attributes, though the fact that Bradamante was portrayed by a castrato raises some interesting questions. It is recorded that Rossi was criticized for giving too much music to his friend, the castrato Marc'Antonio Pasqualini, who played Bradamante, at the expense of the other roles. The original audience would have been very aware that the singer was not the “same” gender as his character, but did they perceive Bradamante as a woman, a man, or something in between?

The following is an excerpt from Bradamante's monologue scene, during which she passes through the greatest possible variety of emotions (Figure 2.1). Two verses of triple-time lament are framed and interspersed with the refrain, “Love, where do you impel me?” which leads into an impassioned recitative. I would argue that though it is a lament, Bradamante is being represented musically in this excerpt as “male” because the melodic gestures are fairly straightforward. There are no melismas or *passaggi* which would represent emotional outbursts, and the affective devices of the music seem entirely within the norms of the period. Even the key words are treated modestly - a simple trill is indicated on the key word “*sospiri*,” (I sigh), and “*languirò*” is offset by a sixteenth rest for emphasis. The chromatically rising melodic line in the recitative section, “*Per lui piangendo, e sospirando....*” could represent the mounting anger of betrayal within Bradamante, but it never reaches a level of hysteria, descending again on “*E la fiamma d'Amor diventi un ghiaccio*” (may the flame of love turn to ice).

Figure 2.1

**Bradamante**

Do - ve mi spin - gi, A - mor? do - ve, do - ve, oh! - - mè, do -  
- - ve? Do - vrò nel re - gno tuo, sen - - - za spe -  
rar mer - cè, Ser - vir chi non più su - o Ad al - tri con - sa -  
crò l'al - - - ma e la fe, ad al - tri con - sa - crò l'al - -  
- - ma e la fe. Na - ta so - lo a so - spi - -  
- ri La - sce - rò dun - que in lac - ci di mar - ti - ri, la - sce - rò dun - que in

Scanned by CamScanner

lac - ci di mar - ti - ri Sein - - - ger - mi il più D'a - -

- - spre ri - tor - - - - - te e suo - - ve.

Do - ve mi spin - gi. A - mor? do - ve, do - ve, ohi - me, do -

- - - ve?

Lan - gui - rò sem - pre, ah! las - sa, Per lui pian -

- gen - do e so - spi - ran - do in - va - no, Per lui che con - tro me fat - - to in - hu - ma - no.

Al - tri no - di, al - tre fa - ci in se - so ac - co - glie? No, no, rom - pa - si il lac - cio.

E la flam - ma d'A - mor di - ven - ti un ghiac - cio. Ma, ec - co l'in - fe - de - le.

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Rossi, *Il palazzo incantato*, Act 2, Scene 9: Bradamante: “Dove mi spingi, amor?”

*To what do you drive me, where to, love? / I must, in your realm / with no hope of mercy / serve the one who, no longer himself / now pledges his soul and faith to another / Born alone to sighs, I leave, bound by the tortures that constrain my steps / with bitter and new twists.*

*Recitative: I will languish forever / so tired / weeping and sighing for him in vain / For him who dealt me an inhuman blow / What other entanglement, what other plan is stored in his heart? No, no, may our bond be broken / and the flame of Love turn to ice!<sup>50</sup>*

## **Semiramide**

The legend of Semiramis is a conflation of various stories concerning a Semitic fertility goddess and a warlike Assyrian queen. This tale grapples with the ultimate consequences of gender instability: what happens when women turn into men and men turn into women, and the consequences of joining female vices with male virtues. There are several versions of the Semiramis myth both in dramatic and musical form, and the most popular versions of the tale portray Semiramis' duality. While brilliant and accomplished in politics and battle, she is also skillful in matters of love. She murders her husband to take over the rule of Assyria, then exchanges identities with her son after attempting an incestuous union with him.

One notable aspect of this legend is its portrayal of gender instability, and its ramifications for the shifting balance of power between genders. Semiramis' exchange of identities with her son opens the male realm to female interference, with varying consequences, depending on the version of the myth in question and which aspects of her personality are represented. While one tradition might emphasize her more positive traits (her skill in governance, for instance), another tradition might emphasize her sexual transgressions and misuse of power.

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<sup>50</sup> Translation by Marianne Weltmann

A favorite among sixteenth and seventeenth century treatise-writers mentioned earlier, Semiramis' legend and reputation was an object of much controversy to Venetians, perhaps because she embodied an inherent Venetian distrust, even horror, of women in power. Semiramis' sexual transgressions and rhetorical skills intrigued members of the Accademia degli Incogniti. Francesco Pona includes her in *La galleria delle donne celebri* as one of the four lascivious women, and she is included in Boccaccio's catalog as "exceptional" because of her accomplishments in the public realm; he praises her many deeds and accomplishments, which would be marvelous even for a "vigorous male." However, these were stained by her "unspeakable act of seduction," her carnal desire, and her love of her son, who "while she exerted herself in battle against her enemies," languished in bed like a woman "as though he had changed sex with his mother."

The myth of Semiramis was a popular choice for librettists; several versions exist. The first operatic representation of which scholars are aware is a Venetian production from 1648, *La Semiramide in India*, with music by Francesco Saccati (now lost) and libretto by Maiolino Bisaccioni (member of Accademia). Andreas Moniglia's *La Semirami* was produced at the Viennese court in 1667 to music by Antonio Cesti, and Pietro Ziani and Matteo Noris' *La Semiramide* was first performed at the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo in 1670, featuring the prima donna Giulia Masotti in the title role. It is this 1670 version that will be the focus of the following discussion. Wendy Heller refers to the opera as a "carnivalization...for Venetian consumption: a codification of the dramatic and musical conventions for the treatment of sexuality that the Venetian audiences had come to expect,"<sup>51</sup> pointing out that this kind of play with gender ambiguity, violence, and sexuality was an integral part of the Venetian cultural

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<sup>51</sup> Heller, *Emblems*, 223.

landscape. It has been proposed that *La Semiramide* was representative of the apex of Venetian libertarianism – topics like misogyny and eroticism were explored with increasing zest and decreasing self-censorship against the backdrop of mid-century shifts in Venice’s changing self-image. Ziani and Noris’ later version focused on the legend’s portrayal of gender instability – i.e., women turning into men and men turning into women, and the comingling of female vices with male virtues.

In Ziani/Noris’ 1670 operatic representation, Semiramide murders her husband to take over the rule of Assyria. In a cunning attempt to secure military fame, she exchanges identities with her rather lazy and effeminate son in order to go to war in his place, an exchange of identities which causes the feminization or destruction of the men who surround her. Her story as told by Ziani and Noris exaggerates the sexually volatile elements explicit in the legend, highlighting the effeminacy of the son Nino in sharp contrast against the aggression and erotic jealousy of his mother, the Queen. In *La Semiramide* we see an expression of the dangerous consequences of female power that is so prevalently portrayed in seventeenth-century opera; Semiramide’s skill in traditional male activities leads to androgyny and transvestism, abominable acts which are inevitably followed by seduction, castration, incest, murder, and anarchy.

Female power is already in place at the beginning of the opera, as Semiramide’s rule is threatened by a rebellious outside force, the vassal-king Creonte of Babylon.

Figure 2.2



The argomento from the 1670 production features a portrait of Semiramide sitting alone at her dressing table, decorating her hair with roses (a symbol of femininity) in anticipation of her lover's arrival, admiring herself in the mirror, bare-chested and bare-waisted. The metal shield that protects her chest and the high-topped military sandal peeping under the folds of her skirt are anything but symbols of femininity, and the juxtaposition of both are very telling of the

gender ambiguity that is such a prominent theme in Noris's version of the myth. Noris begins the opera with the single most famous episode in the Semiramis legend:

One day, when all was peaceful and she was enjoying a leisurely rest, she was combing her hair with the dexterity of her sex. Surrounded by her maids, she was plaiting it into braids according to native custom. Her hair was not yet half finished when she was told that Babylon had defected to her stepson. So distressed was Semiramis by this news that she threw aside her comb and instantly rose in anger from her womanly pursuits, took up arms, and led her troops to a siege of the powerful city. She did not finish arranging her hair until she had forced the surrender of that mighty place, weakened by a long blockade, and brought it back under her power by force of arms.<sup>52</sup>

Heller points out that Semiramide's half-combed hair symbolizes the dualism implicit in her character – female vanity juxtaposed with military aggression. The story contrasts her feminine

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<sup>52</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 41.

nature with her masculine, as the dressing-table in the opening scene is soon sacrificed for the battlefield. In Noris' 1670 version, he supplies three aria texts for the heroine at the beginning of the opera, allowing her immediately to express her rhetorical power. The first aria describes the conflict between the pleasures of peace and the mischievous Cupid, who challenges her to a different sort of war. Words such as “*ride*” (laughs) and “*guerra*” (war) are exploited for their predisposition for word painting – graceful ornamental gestures are juxtaposed with the dotted rhythms usually associated with military pursuits. The second aria hints at the sexual threat that Semiramide embodies, as she adorns her hair with roses and asks that they be “whitened by the ashes of a thousand lovers.” Roses are the flower associated with Venus herself, and the pricking of Venus' foot by the thorn was a familiar symbol of sexual deflowering in the seventeenth century.<sup>53</sup> In an interesting reversal of the usual pattern, instead of white roses turning red by the pricking of Venus' foot, Semiramide vows that the red roses (already colored by blood) will instead be whitened by the ashes of her thousand murdered lovers. As Heller points out, Noris evokes Semiramide's association with women of power by creating a ritualistic quality of an incantation by using *versi sdrucchioli* (a word with the principal accent on the antepenultimate syllable), which are usually associated with the bestial, the rustic, or the demonic.<sup>54</sup> (Or infioratemi, / le chiome *lucide*, / Rose, che a *Venere*), ms. 14-17 (see Figure 2.3).

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<sup>53</sup> Arthur Henkel, *Emblemata: Handbuck zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1967).

<sup>54</sup> Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 234.

Figure 2.3

14 [Ritornello]

Semiramide:

Or in-fio-ra-te - mi Le chio-me lu-ci - de Ro-se che a Ve-ne - re Pun-ge-ste il piè,

ro-se che a Ve-ne - re pun-ge-ste il piè.

22

Pria con la ce-ne - re Di mil-le a-

Scanned by CamScanner

Ziani, *La Semiramide*, Act 1, Scene 1: Semiramide: “Or infioratemi” ms. 14-26

*O roses / that pierced the foot / of Venus, / adorn my shining hair*

He also portrays Semiramide’s strength with elements of a tonal style that has a limited chordal vocabulary, (restricted to keys closely related to the tonic), internal and external *ritornelli* with

clear modulations, and a relatively slow harmonic rhythm. There are no melismatic passages, but there is a persistent, repeated syncopated motive which is enlivened only by occasional ornaments on suggestive words, culminating in a descending stepwise melisma at the end of the aria (ms. 33-34, *qual porto candida / nel sen la fè*), a device repeated often by Ziani to show the decisiveness and strength of the heroine:

Figure 2.4

57 Conclusion of B'

pria con la ce-ne-re di mil-le a-man-ti Sian bian-cheg-gian

41

ti Qual por-to can-di-da Nel sen la fe, qual por-to

44

can-di-da nel sen la fe.

Scanned by CamScanner

Ziani, *La Semiramide*, Act 1, Scene 1: Semiramide: “Or infioratemi” ms. 37-45

*Before they be whitened / by the ashes / of a thousand lovers / whose pure faith / I carry in my breast.*<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Translation by Wendy Heller

Before leaving the dressing table to run off to war, Semiramide must exchange identities with her son Nino. She justifies the exchange by citing Nino's youth, inexperience, effeminacy and incompetence at male pursuits. Nino's only concern is that being dressed as his mother will complicate his romantic goals, as he notes in his first aria. He laments the necessity of having to silence his heart and hide the cruel "torches" of love that make it "vibrate." (Heller suggests that the "torches" Nino has such difficulty hiding may well be that part of his male anatomy that is hidden by the wearing of his mother's skirt, a problem he refers to more than once later in the opera.) She also notes Ziani's use of musical conventions traditionally associated with effeminate or lovesick men, which were usually sung by castrati: "lamenting affect, triple meter, minor sonorities, and descending melodic lines."<sup>56</sup> The relative tonal instability of the harmonic language is illustrative of Nino's insecurity and timid nature, as compared to his mother. He not only allows his mother to assume his identity and dress him like a woman, but he is overly preoccupied with love and even has apparent difficulty establishing his own tonic. Ziani and Noris thus exaggerate Nino's effeminacy, the queen becomes king, and the king is feminized.

Nino and Semiramide spend the majority of the opera dressed in each other's clothing, deceiving other characters while simultaneously playing to an audience that knows the "truth" of their identities. The plot goes a step further by exploring the consequences of a gender exchange; i.e., what happens when men and women invade each other's territory? Usually it is the male character in early opera who is torn between love and war, but in this opera, it is the female heroine. Nino sings two more operas in Act I; the first is a conventional expression of love, and the happiness he receives from his lover's beautiful eyes. The aria itself is straightforward, but it is rather incongruously set in soprano rather than alto clef, placing it about a fourth higher than

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<sup>56</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 237.

the rest of his music. The clef change places this one aria in the same tessitura as his soprano mother – a decision which could possibly reflect a comedic attempt by the composer to have Nino imitate his mother in more ways than just putting on her clothes. The subsequent aria is comedic in its thinly veiled eroticism, as Nino complains “I don’t know how to cover up my ardor. When love becomes a giant, it can’t be hidden anymore.” And the second verse:

<i>Fiamma accesa quand’ è vorace</i>	When the lit flame is voracious
<i>Erge ad alto fiero rigor.</i>	It rises to a high fierce stiffness.
<i>Non può il seno</i>	My breast
<i>Farsi capace</i>	Cannot handle
<i>De l’incendio, che struggle ‘l cor.</i>	The fire that battles in my heart. <sup>57</sup>

Heller points out the difference in treatment of the gender exchange for the two characters: for Semiramide, the mixture of masculine and feminine gestures profoundly changes her rhetorical style, while for Nino, the comedic effect of wearing a skirt while talking about his physical endowments provides a framework for the abnormal gender configuration in this opera. Each of the cross-dressing main characters has lovers of whom the other is ignorant. Semiramide loves one of her generals (Ireo) and Nino loves the slave girl Iside (who is really the daughter of the enemy king). In the next act of the opera, the librettist plays with the various comedic consequences of mistaken identity, hinting at the possibility of same-sex encounters resulting from the disguises. In the end, Semiramide’s usurpation of her son’s birthright, identity, and gender is resolved in a manner that unambiguously resolves the “problem” of female power, even as it distorts the details of the original myth. Nino eventually rejects his mother’s imposed feminization, accepts his mantle of power, and proves his virtue by attaining the bride of his choice. He eventually informs Semiramide that he pretended to be a woman only to obey her,

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<sup>57</sup> Translation by Wendy Heller

while denying his “native courage.” He insists that from this point on, he will command, he will deal with the affairs of war, and she must give up her desired lover for a more suitable match. If she fails to comply, he threatens that he will be to her “no longer son, but king.” Order is restored, balance is re-established, and the war is ended, as all four sing together a finale of love, happiness, and the union of their kingdoms through the bonds of marriage.

### **Veremonda**

Veremonda is the heroine of the opera *Veremonda amazzone di Aragona*, by Giulio Strozzi and Francesco Cavalli, which premiered in 1652, the year after *La Calisto*. The plot of the opera takes place in the city of Gibraltar during the siege of the Moorish fort of Calpe by the Spanish army. Queen Veremonda is perplexed at the continual delay of her husband Alfonso’s assault on the enemy fortress, so she assumes military command herself, leading her own army of Amazons to encircle the fortress and conquer the enemy.

Figure 2.5



Queen Veremonda is a fierce and virtuous warrior woman who vanquishes the enemy while her husband stays home and studies astrology. By labeling his heroine an Amazon, the librettist signals to his readers the inversion of gender that characterizes the opera. Veremonda defeats the enemy, subdues a treasonous general who is

enamored of the enemy Muslim princess, and returns the kingdom in the hands of her husband, all the while retaining her virtue. The reversal of gender roles is a big theme of the opera, and is

reflected in Cavalli's music: he "feminizes" the young general Delio with a comic lament about his own beauty.

*To be handsome is a great torment  
If I were to acknowledge every lady who beckons me,  
I would show weakness of mind.  
To be handsome is a great torment.  
Great beauty is great suffering.  
To be at the service of so many ladies is indeed distressing for the lover;  
Great beauty is great suffering.*<sup>58</sup>

Once again, we observe the exchange of traditional gender roles. Veremonda is characterized as courageous, cunning, and ambitious, while the powerful men in the tale are depicted as frivolous, distracted, self-absorbed, and almost entirely lacking of agency to carry out their own will. In the dedication for the Neapolitan libretto, Balbi praises Veremonda's character, referring to her as "the Amazon of Aragon, whose great soul, generous heart, and fierce spirit will only glorify Oñate." (the Neapolitan Count to whom the libretto is dedicated). Cavalli characterizes her entrance musically with a lyrically-inclined recitative that is militaristic (ms. 53-55, "*All armi, all armi!*"), interrupted by a call to war with full instrumental support.

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<sup>58</sup> Translation by Aaron Carpenè

Figure 2.6

The image displays three systems of musical notation. The first system (measures 53-55) features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass staff. The vocal line (soprano) enters in measure 53 with the lyrics: "Don - zel - le, al - l'ar - mi, al - l'ar - mi, al - l'ar - mi, al - l'ar - mi, già la - scia - ste le". The second system (measures 56-57) continues the vocal line with lyrics: "gon - ne, già, già fat - te guer - rie - re, scor - da - te - vi gl'a - mo - ri e di es - ser". The piano accompaniment continues with a steady eighth-note pattern. The third system (measures 58-60) shows the vocal line with the lyrics "don - ne." and a final cadence. The piano accompaniment concludes with a bass line ending on a whole note G, with a fingering of 6 6 6 4 3 indicated below the staff.

Cavalli, *Veremonda*, Act 1, Scene 6: Veremonda: “All’armi”

*Maidens, to arms, to arms!/Take off your skirts/already you are warriors/  
forget your lovers and forget that you are women!*<sup>59</sup>

Act I, scene 6 ends with a duet between husband and wife, in which the identities of their respective genders are celebrated and confirmed:

<sup>59</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

Veremonda:  
*Qui nel campo di Marte  
Delle tue glorie a parte, o duce mio  
Voglio seguirti anch'io*

Alfonso:  
*O mia compagna eterna,  
O come volentier qui ti rimiro  
Propizio nume al martial assalto.  
Gradisco i cari affetti  
D'innamorata spoosa,  
Troppo sei coraggiosa!  
Ma gire in campo ostile  
Contra stulo moresco  
Non è, credilo a me, pensier donnesco.*

Veremonda:  
*Donna son, ma regina.  
No, no, son tua, sei mio,  
E dovunque n'andra  
Voglio esser teco anch'io.*

Veremonda:  
My Lord, I wish to join you  
Here on the battlefields,  
To share in your glories.

Alfonso:  
My dear eternal companion,  
How I do welcome you here,  
goddess propitious to the army attack.  
Your sentiments as an enamored wife  
are dear to me,  
indeed, too courageous you are!  
But to go about this hostile arena,  
Against the Moorish swarms  
Is not, believe me, fit for women.

Veremonda:  
I am a woman, but also queen.  
No, no, I am yours and you are mine.  
Wherever you may go,  
I shall go with you.<sup>60</sup>

By contrast, the duet between Delio and Veremonda in Act II, scene 1 is punctuated by frequent shifts between duple (ms. 38-42) and triple meter (ms. 43-46) to demonstrate the insincerity of their words in an evocation of instability and evasion – in short, a “pretend” love duet.

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<sup>60</sup>English translation by Aaron Carpenè and Stefano Vizioli

Figure 2.7

38

Stel - la o - gni fio - re, ma so - le d' o - gni fior sem - bra il tuo vol - to.

Stel - la o - gni fio - re, ma so - le d' o - gni fior sem - bra il tuo vol - to.

6 b b

43

Cavalli, *Veremonda*, Act II, Scene 1: Veremonda and Delio: “Stella ogni fiore”

*The flowers are like stars/ but your face is like the sun of every flower*<sup>61</sup>

The character of Alfonso is often described by commentators and scholars as possessing un-masculine character traits of complacency, pacifism, and studiousness, while his wife Veremonda is the instigator of most, if not all, of the military action in the drama. She expresses her desire to go out and conquer the besieged citadel, asking to become a member of her

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<sup>61</sup> Translation by Aaron Carpenè and Stefano Vizioli

husband's army, while he spends his time in his chambers immersed in scientific study and completely disinterested in matters of war. While scholars describe these aspects of Alfonso's character as effeminizing, one could argue that these very same qualities make him exceptionally wise.

The character of Veremonda is multi-faceted, representing personal ambiguities. Sometimes she verges on the hysterical in her passionate enthusiasm, which is evidenced by frequent outbursts of sixteenth notes throughout her recitatives. At the same time, she demonstrates an iron will and a bent towards taking the initiative. While her dalliance in the forest with Delio could be viewed as evidence of weak will or possession of a nature given to sexual deviance, I am more inclined to perceive Veremonda's cross-dressing episode with Delio as a very clever premeditated scheme, designed to manipulate him to lead her to the manor walls. I perceive her character as having a clear vision and a strong will, along with the intelligence and personal intuition to be able to lay a scheme for the accomplishment of her objective. She sings with a vocal virtuosity which more often than not in early baroque opera represents lasciviousness; in her case (because she only pretends to be seduced by Delio, without ever entertaining the notion of actually having a sexual encounter with him) I would be more inclined to interpret these moments of vocal virtuosity as manifestations of authority and initiative.

Figure 2.8

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a vocal and guitar piece. Each system consists of four staves: two for the vocal line (treble clef) and two for the guitar accompaniment (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 6/8. The first system starts at measure 132 and includes the lyrics "a con-tar". The second system starts at measure 135 and includes the lyrics "va - da le stel-le, ch'io fa-rò ven-det-te bel-le del gar-zon che l'ha tra-". The third system starts at measure 138 and includes the lyrics "di-to, ch'io fa-rò ven-det-te bel-le del gar-zon che l'ha tra-di-to, che l'ha tra-". The guitar accompaniment features various chordal textures and melodic lines, with some measures containing guitar-specific notation like "6" and "6 6".

Cavalli, *Veremonda*, Act I, Scene XI: Veremonda: “Vada pur”

*Go, my learned husband/go and count the stars/while I take vengeance on the young man who betrayed you.*<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Translation by Aaron Carpenè and Stefano Vizioli

Perhaps more than any other, these powerful, courageous heroines present a special opportunity for self-definition in seventeenth-century Italy, both for the women themselves and for the men that encounter them. As Heller points out, engaging in battle with a warrior woman is an important means of proving male prowess; “In grappling with the great warrior queens or the amazons, the hero’s conflict moves from the realm of Venus to that of Mars.”<sup>63</sup> The threats which physically powerful women pose to men are of a different nature than those usually represented, as the instruments of battle are different; instead of the traditional female weapons of magic and beauty, which typically draw men into their effeminate, lascivious circle of sexual desire, they engage male opponents with weaponry, physical strength, and cunning. Warrior women are more interested in hunting and other typically male pursuits than in love, and they are portrayed as craving autonomy and chastity. Once again, with the prototype of the operatic female warrior as with the virgin martyr, we see a fusion of the characteristics traditionally assigned to men and to women – the equalization of power through gender ambiguity.

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<sup>63</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 220.

### Chapter Three: The Whore Seventeenth Century Sexuality and Prostitution

Early modern beliefs and attitudes about sex in seventeenth century were epitomized in seventeenth-century manuals written about the proper attitudes spouses should adopt when contemplating or practicing sex. A cheerful and willing disposition was recommended in the act of sex, as opposed to a grudging or reluctant compliance, yet at the same time couples were warned to avoid being motivated by lust – that is, an immoderate desire to have too much intercourse. Too much sexual desire or too frequent sex was thought to undermine the stability of the marriage and promote jealousy. One of the dangers of sexual appetite was that its fire was quickly dampened, leaving in its wake disillusionment or indifference. It was also regarded as a type of idolatry, a perverse elevation of the temporal, carnal aspects of marriage over those of the spiritual and divine. Another interesting belief still professed by the medical community in the seventeenth century was that women’s sexual organs were internal replicas of men’s, a notion whose popularity and authority can be traced back at least to the time of Galen. Sixteenth century Paduan anatomist and doctor Giulio Casseri directly associated the voice and power, suggesting that a man needs the appropriate vocal tone and pitch to command domestic power.<sup>64</sup> Power and rhetorical ability and sexual virility were interconnected, making the opera heroines of which I am writing even more of a contradiction and an enigma. Early modern Italian operatic female characters defied the attempts of discursive and social systems to mold them into passive and closed-mouthed projections of patriarchal ideals. The women depicted in these operas were not

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<sup>64</sup> Giulio Casseri, “The Larynx, Organ of the Voice,” trans. Malcolm Hast and Erling Holtmark (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1969), 15.

quiet, chaste, and obedient; the very act of singing itself, as musicologist Bonnie Gordon asserts, was considered an erotic activity. The throat was a body part consistently associated with sexualized behavior and genitalia. The fast moving passaggi required of women singers required a facility with the throat, lips, and tongue – body parts that were directly linked by medical practitioners to sex.

The courtesan in early modern society is defined by Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon as “women who engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons.”<sup>65</sup> Sex was the principal domain of the courtesan, and for upper-class men of the Renaissance, it was an arena where conflicting codes of morality, sin, and ideal behavior often put their sense of honor and virtue at risk. The figure of the courtesan is significant to researchers of early modern opera because of the frequency of her representation in opera.

Most if not all patriarchal societies supported two categories of women: wives and daughters, whose chastity safeguarded a man’s bloodline and ensured the transmission of property to his own sons, and prostitutes and courtesans who offered artistic, intellectual, and sexual stimulation. Ellen Koskoff wrote in 1989, “Many have noted the links between women’s sexuality, their culturally perceived sex role, and music behavior...others have commented upon the frequent association of women’s musical activities with implied or real prostitution.”<sup>66</sup> In the female opera roles discussed in this dissertation, the “whore” referred to is the sexually aware and self-actualized woman. Perhaps she was created on paper by the minds of (sexually

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<sup>65</sup> Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds., *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>66</sup> Ellen Koskoff, “An Introduction to Women, Music, and Culture,” in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Koskoff, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 3.

fantasizing?) male librettists and composers, but she was portrayed by real, living and breathing women who were, in a sense, playing their own roles, giving testimony to an aspect of a social reality that challenged pre-Enlightenment constraints about women and sexuality.

### **Messalina**

The heroine of Francesco Piccioli's and Carlo Pallavicino's *Messalina* (Venice, 1679) is representative of the danger of totally unchecked female sexuality and lust, surpassing even Semiramide as a representation of uncontrolled female wantonness. An unabashedly sexually energized empress, she is surrounded by men who are not only morally deficient but weak and ineffectual. The unrepentantly adulterous Messalina reputedly outwits them all, but her infidelities are not discovered until she is found seducing a young woman who is disguised as a boy. She herself may not wear male attire, but she assumes the active role of seducer and, some sources report, makes love to other women with arguably greater success than do her male counterparts.

The potential of such an outrageous personality has been irresistible to artists and writers through the ages, and even in modern times to call a woman 'a Messalina' indicates a devious and sexually voracious personality.

The Venetian operas of the late 1670's and 1680's featured and exploited a particular type of heroine – the courtesan. The typical courtesan as represented in opera was a lascivious, promiscuous, and intelligent woman, usually juxtaposed with a foolish, tyrannical ruler. These women may or may not have been in political positions of power, but their primary purpose was seen as seducing men away from the paths of virtue. According to the accounts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius, Messalina's actions were more malevolent than mere adultery; she

celebrated a public illegal marriage with Gaius Silius (her husband's aide) purely for the purpose of public defiance and subterfuge; it was intended to produce children whose claims for legitimacy would certainly have threatened the imperial lineage. All the sources label this as a public act of treason, along with a discourse about the dangers of illicit sexuality and unquenchable libidinous appetite.

The first public stage appearance of a Messalina character was a dramatic treatment, *La Messalina* by Pietro Zaguri – one of two surviving plays out of a planned trilogy. Zaguri's play is based primarily on Tacitus's historical account. The opera *Messalina* was presented at the Teatro San Salvatore on 30 December 1679, with music by Carlo Pallavicino and text by Francesco Mario Piccioli. Venetian audiences had already seen the representation of blatantly lascivious, sexually dangerous women in the production of *La Semiramide*, yet the transformation of so notorious a figure as Messalina into an opera role must have been challenging. How would Messalina's character and her violent death by execution possibly be reconciled with the requirements of the opera genre – namely, a happy ending and sympathetic, lamenting women who learned their lesson in the end? Messalina was a character who would not lament.

Wendy Heller points out that the composer Carlo Pallavicino belonged to the third generation of Venetian opera composers, in whose works the switch of focus between recitative to aria is more pronounced. The characters of Pallavicino's operas express themselves almost entirely in the type of highly florid da capo arias which were to become the new medium by the close of the century. Given the age-old association of licentiousness with ornate song, Pallavicino faced the challenge of musically representing a character with Messalina's reputation for unfettered sexuality and non-lamenting inclinations, while still remaining within the boundaries of the genre. Piccioli's *argomento* is scarcely ambiguous in its descriptions:

The waves of the Tiber boast in the singularity of their parts of having washed the cradle of the most lascivious Venuses. Among these women, famous for their dissoluteness, is Messalina, who, although the wife of Claudio, emperor of Rome, commonly burned to the flame of the most licentious loves, in which the public brothels saw her spend the whole night. She loved with distinct affection Caio, her favorite, but with such crafty art she was always able to deceive the credulity of her husband, for it was not difficult to hide the deformity of her own delinquency from him under the appearance of honesty....<sup>67</sup>

Regardless of Picciolis' claims that opera can scarcely depict Messalina's debaucheries in all their glory, the wantonness of her character is explored throughout the opera mostly by innuendo and implication. This is accomplished partly by the presence of highly suggestive settings. In the opera's opening scene, we see Messalina in a candlelit room entertaining her lover Caio, surrounded by all the trappings normally associated with the Venetian courtesan: music, drinks, and gaming equipment. It is a public viewing of an adultery already in progress, witnessed not only by the audience but also by the knights and ladies of the Roman court. In her first aria, Messalina speaks of desire, and the pleasure of gazing on her lover's face. The aria is not particularly remarkable; in fact, Messalina's music is limited to a somewhat restricted palette of affects. As a woman who does not lament, she cannot express conventional female emotions like longing, hope, or mourning. As she is neither a sorceress nor a warrior, she is not permitted the kind of rhetoric given to men: frustration, vengeance, or anti-female sentiment. Her primary mode of singing and speaking is a reflection of her historical legacy as an emblem of illicit sexuality, which would have been a familiar figure to audiences from popular sixteenth-century satires about courtesans.

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<sup>67</sup> Francesco Maria Piccioli, *Messalina* (Venice: Nicolini, 1680), argomento.

Figure 3.1

Messalina:

The image shows a musical score for the character Messalina. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system is in 3/4 time and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "Non ho — mag - gior — con ten - to, Che di fis -". The second system starts with a measure rest marked with a '5' above it, followed by the lyrics: "sar - mi in te, che di fis - sar - mi in te, E sol mo - rir mi". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Pallavicino, *Messalina*, Act 1, Scene 1: Messalina: “Non ho maggior contento”

*I have no greater happiness/than to fix my gaze on you*<sup>68</sup>

In Act II, she is placed in a delightfully erotic garden rotunda, which is enriched by the addition of movable beds, thus allowing for an even more direct show of erotic intent. Later in Act II, we see the set split into two levels, with Messalina’s bedroom on the top floor, and the room used by the court ladies directly underneath, on the first floor. The next set of scenes places the secondary characters suggestively in the women’s baths and the hallways adjacent, wherein the court ladies habitually dressed. Female and male secondary characters are typically woven into the story in complicated adjacent plot lines and additional intrigues, in this case providing obstacles to Messalina’s adulterous acts, while also playing a central role in a complex discussion about sexuality. There are typical portrayals of gender instability in the guise of attempted rapes, cross-dressings, and unsatisfied illicit desires, which in the case of this opera stand out in sharp contrast to the very unambiguous nature of Messalina. More importantly, the

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<sup>68</sup> Translation by Ellen Rosand

secondary characters' relationships all resolve appropriately, thus presenting for the audiences the obligatory examples of proper moral behavior and feminine restraint, even if Messalina cannot.

## **Calisto**

The mythological character of Calisto (sometimes spelled Callisto) was the subject of a Venetian opera librettist Giovanni Faustini and composer Francesco Cavalli. The production premiered on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, 1651 at the Teatro Sant' Apollinare, Venice, with soprano Margarita da Costa in the title role; though it ran for eleven performances, it drew surprisingly limited audiences. It is one of the few seventeenth-century opera productions about which we have substantial and detailed information, thanks to the surviving account book of Marco Faustini. We know the names of the singers and the constitution of the instrumental ensemble (just two violins and continuo). We have expense records for the stage machines and scenography – even the payments for the *prima donna's* gondola. *La Calisto* was the ninth collaboration between Francesco Cavalli and librettist Giovanni Faustini, a partnership forged in 1641.

The opera features Calisto's seduction by Giove, who assumes the disguise and voice of his daughter Diana in order to seduce her. Dressed as her beloved goddess, he approaches Calisto and successfully convinces her to retire to a secluded place in the woods to “exchange kisses.” The two “women” disappear into a bower behind the stream in order to exchange kisses and achieve the only consummated sexual act in the opera. The next time we see Calisto, she is exclaiming delightedly about the physical delights she has just experienced. Coming across Diana, she unabashedly describes the encounter in intimate detail and requests another tryst in

the grove. The real Diana, of course, has no idea what Calisto is referring to; not only does she refuse to acknowledge the sexual experience that has supposedly just passed between them, but she reprimands the now pregnant Calisto harshly. Diana punishes her by denying her access to the sacred pool where the other nymphs bathe, so that she will not pollute the water. After giving birth to their son, Calisto is transformed into a bear and immortalized as a heavenly constellation.

I find it an interesting observation that Human desire was projected onto the “safer” bodies of demi-gods, immortals, mythic beasts who could explore the limits of human sexuality with much more freedom than humans. Jove’s adaptation of Diana’s identity in *La Calisto* gave him access to Arcadia’s forbidden feminine zone, allowing him to exercise his sexual virility and power. The sexuality of Calisto’s character in the unfoldment of the story elicits different kinds of responses. Anthony Hicks writes,

Callisto is a delightful creation, a child of nature deserving every sympathy for the nasty way in which she is tricked. Though she seems to be taken in much too easily by the disguised Jupiter, it is simply because she does not realize what is happening. Her little lament in 1/xi, immediately after being rejected by Diana, is very touching. Callisto may be a naïve girl, but this song is a telling reminder of how much her naivety has been presumed upon.<sup>69</sup>

While I agree with Mr. Hicks’ general impression of the initial innocence of Calisto’s nature, I don’t think there’s any denying the fact that the sexual experience was an enjoyable one for her, and that it changed her permanently. By some accounts of the myth, she was raped by Jove in the body of Diana, which begs the question – was he dressed as Diana, or did he take the actual form of Diana? If it was the second, then how could Calisto have become pregnant from the encounter? By other accounts (including that of Cavalli’s opera), she went willingly into the

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<sup>69</sup> Hicks, Anthony. “Cavalli and ‘La Calisto.’” *The Musical Times* 111 (1970): 486-489.

woods to have a sexual experience with her goddess leader. The fact that a large part of the remainder of her voice in the libretto is devoted to wistfully recounting the details of the sexual experience, in my opinion, points to the fact that it was not a rape in the modern sense of the word at all, but a powerful sexual awakening. Giovanni Francesco Loredano, the mysterious leader and founder of the Accademia degli Incogniti, considers the question in an essay, in which he questions whether it is better for a lover to steal pleasures from an unresponsive woman, or wait for them to be given freely.<sup>70</sup> Loredano justifies rape as a male prerogative, insisting that waiting for the gifts of a lover is a sign of fear and modesty, while taking those gifts by force is an act of courage, and this action rather than passivity will always enhance a man's self-esteem. A number of excerpts from the libretto reveal some very telling attitudes toward the female sex: In Act II, scene 9, Jove sings an aria in the falsetto which represents Diana's voice:

*The husband is lost who lets himself be ruled by his wife.  
Let them leave us to satisfy our desires at leisure;  
afterwards, with our severity we shall calm their cries.*<sup>71</sup>

In Act I, scene 2, we hear in Calisto's aria the aural equivalent of a familiar visual image: Calisto luxuriates in the water, declaring her freedom from the tyranny of men with syncopations and flourishes of coloratura. Her joy in hunting and freedom, however, is contradicted at the end of the verse by a shift back to duple at measure 51, which Heller describes as a "sequenced, gasping ascent over a chromatic bass" for the words "*e il dolce, il care*" (it is sweet, it is dear), ms. 103-105, possibly depicting a more visceral, physical pleasure than might be associated with

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<sup>70</sup> Antonio Loredano, *Bizzarrie accademiche. Parte prima*. (Venice: Guerigli, 1654), 1:17.

<sup>71</sup> Translation by Aaron Carpenè

either hunting or playing in the water. At the very least, it could suggest Calisto's potential as a desiring woman.

Figure 3.2

79 C3  
Di fio-ri ri-ca-ma-to mor-bi-do let-to il pra-to, mi è gra-to, mi è gra-to, mi è gra-to ci-bo il

84  
mel, be-van-da il fiu-me. Da le ca-no re-plu-me a for-mar me-lo-di-e tra i bo-schi, tra i

92  
bo-schi im-pa-ro. Vi-ver in li-ber-ta-de, vi-ver in li-ber-ta

100  
de è il dol-ce, il dol-ce, il ca-ro, il ca-ro.

Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Act I Scene 4: Calisto: “Non è maggior piacere”

*For my bed I have the downy meadow/carpeted with flowers/I feed on honey and I drink water from the river/The birds teach me/their melodies in the woods/To live in freedom is sweet and dear<sup>72</sup>*

<sup>72</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

This aria from Act I shows Calisto as she was before the interference of Jupiter. By contrast, her aria in Act III, Scene 1 portrays a very changed Calisto who has been tainted by her first sexual experience, which was evidently so powerful that nothing else in her earthly experience can compare. We find her desolate and pining in Act III, lamenting “moro, moro” (*I die*), ms. 55-66, no less than six times, each repetition of the word higher in pitch and more desperate, heightening the intensity of her sense of loss.

Figure 3.3

**Aria**  
C3

CALISTO

T'a - spet - to, t'a - spet - to e tu non vie - ni, pi - - gro e

[Continuo]

45

len - - to mio con - ten - to, m'in - tor - bi-di-j se - re - ni. A - ni-ma,

53

ben, spe-ran - za, mo - ro, mo - ro, mo - ro ne la tar -

61

- dan - za, mo - ro, mo - ro, mo - ro ne la tar - dan - za.

Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Act III, Scene 1: Calisto: “T’aspetto, e tu non vieni”

*I await you, but you do not come/you are indolent and slow/my beloved/You disturb my serenity/my soul, my hope/your looks slay me*<sup>73</sup>

## Elena

For the following section, I rely heavily on the dissertation of Kristin Kane, who co-directed a modern performance of Cavalli’s opera *Elena* in 2006 in the course of earning a DMA from Cornell University. Her work represents the first modern edition of *Elena*, which was first

<sup>73</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

performed in Venice in 1659. I also refer to the program notes from the recently released DVD of *Elena* from the new 2013 production at Festival d'Aix-en-Provence.

*Elena* is notable because it is one of the earliest and clearest examples of unabashedly comic opera that exists. Unlike many Venetian operas in which comic characters occupy a subsidiary position, this opera places the comic characters front and center, while the exalted characters are portrayed as ridiculous. The main plot of the libretto depicts the wooing of Elena (Helen of Troy) by Menelaus (Menelao), who rather ridiculously disguises himself as an Amazon female wrestler in order to secure a position as Helen's private wrestling instructor. The original production maximized the opera's shock value by casting a famous Venetian courtesan in the title role, blending the boundary between dramatic depiction and reality. The star of the 1659/60 Venetian opera season was Lucietta Gamba. Scholars know that she paid extravagantly well, but have no record of her appearing on the Venetian stage at any other point during her life; her fame and notoriety came from her services in a different arena. Giovanni Battista Busenello, the librettist of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, discussed Gamba in a collection of poems about Venetian prostitutes, in which he describes her as "quella putta che canta," or "that whore who sings."<sup>74</sup> Roman castrato Giovanni Cappello played the role of Menelao; the sexual ambiguity inherent in the castrato voice is, in a sense, what makes the comedy of *Elena* possible.

Elena (Helen) was the daughter of Jove and sister of Castor and Pollux, and most certainly a woman with a tendency to get abducted. The most famous example is her abduction

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<sup>74</sup> Busenello also depicts her as specializing in some sort of anal fetishism, and there may also be some suggestion that she suffered from a venereal disease. Two versions of the poem are reproduced in Beth Lise Glixon's "Private Lives of Public Women," *Music and Letters* 76, no. 4 (1995).

by Paris of Troy, an event that initiated the Trojan War. Before that, however, she had already been abducted once by Theseus of Athens.<sup>75</sup> Francesco Cavalli's opera from 1659 offers an account of one such abduction. Its creators fashioned a distinctly Venetian spoof on the early life of Elena, complete with gender confusion, dancing bears, and bordello allusions. One of the pervasive tropes in representations of Helen from antiquity onward, and certainly in Cavalli's opera, was that her beauty and sensuousness were a mark of moral failing, and that the desire she kindled in others was a function of her own voracious sensuality. In classical origin and earlier depictions of the story of Helen of Troy, Menelaus wins Helen in a marriage contest. In Cavalli's *Elena*, Menelao is disguised as a woman, which has already been established as a common plot device in seventeenth-century opera.

*Elena* represents another collaboration between Cavalli and librettist Giovanni Faustini, although the libretto was completed by Nicolò Minato. From her first appearance in Act I, Scene 8, Elena is portrayed as wantonly lustful in a charmingly erotic duet with her lady-in-waiting, where Elena sings of her longing to have her first sexual encounter with a man. The egregious overabundance of her sexuality expresses itself in the following scene with her obvious attraction to her 'wrestling instructor.' Elena is struck by the Amazon's fiery beauty and flirts outrageously with her new instructor, and sexual tensions increase as the two wrestle. Teseo and Peritoo arrive on the scene to abduct Elena, and as Peritoo falls in love with the disguised Menelao, they abduct him as well.

The characterization of Elena is one of the principal features that mark this opera as a comedy. As already noted, the trope of "Helen the whore" was already widely in circulation

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<sup>75</sup> In our own century, Helen served as the inspiration for the Oscar-award-winning movie *Troy*, starring Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom.

during this period, and this preconception of Elena is exploited to full comedic effect. A character's entrance aria provides composer and librettist with an ideal opportunity to establish their basic personal traits and circumstances. Elena's entrance aria, "Delitie d'amore," is a plea to the delights of love not to forsake her, but to hurry up and make their appearance. It is in the light of this abundant libido that we are to understand her attraction to the disguised Menelao.

Figure 3.4

# Act I, Scene 8

Anfiteatro fuori della Città.

*Aria* Elena. Astianassa.

[Violin I] [Violin II] [Astianassa] [Elena] [Basso Continuo]

De - li - tie d'a - mo - re, Deh più non tar -

Detailed description: This musical score is for Act I, Scene 8, set in an amphitheater outside the city. It features an aria by Elena and Astianassa. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, Astianassa (soprano), Elena (soprano), and Basso Continuo. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system shows the beginning of the piece, with Elena singing the first line of the aria: "De - li - tie d'a - mo - re, Deh più non tar -".

[Vln. I] [Vln. II] [El.] [B. C.]

-da - te A far-mi go - der;

Detailed description: This is the second system of the musical score. It continues the performance from the first system. The Violin I part has a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' above the staff. The Violin II part has a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' above the staff. The soprano part (labeled 'El.') continues the vocal line with the lyrics: "-da - te A far-mi go - der;". The Basso Continuo part provides a steady accompaniment.

6

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

El.

[B. C.]

Sul fer - vi-do co - re, Be - ni-gne, be-

9

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

El.

[B. C.]

- ni-gne ver - sa - te I vo - stri pia - cer.

15

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

El.

-da-te A far-mi go-der, à far - - -

[B. C.]

12

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

El.

De-li-tie d'a-mo-re, Deh più non tar-

[B. C.]

4-3

18 *Ritornello*

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

El.  
- mi, à far-mi go-der.

[B. C.]

Cavalli, *Elena*, Act I, Scene 8: Elena: “Delitie d’amore”

*Pleasures of love/hasten to fill me with your rapturous delights/on my burning heart/let your pleasures gently flow/I’m waiting for you/I desire you:/if you make me wait any longer, I will faint/I name you Treasures without having experienced you yet, except in thought/Please, hasten to fill me with your rapturous delights.*<sup>76</sup>

“Delitie d’amore,” is one of the special cases of accompanied arias in which the upper strings overlap with the vocal line; the rich texture of the orchestration serves to heighten the sensuality of the scene. Elena’s lady-in-waiting, Astianassa, sings a response to Elena’s plea, in which she implies that if Elena wants to know about the delights of love, she should just ask someone who has tasted them. Astianassa’s antics serve to reinforce the scene’s boudoir atmosphere, and reflect as much on Elena as on herself. As in the first aria, variations on the theme of delight and delectation feature prominently. Whereas the first aria used the verb *goder*, the second modulates to *gioir*, both verbs that would have been understood to connote sexual

<sup>76</sup> Translation by Peter Lockwood

pleasure. The two join for a duet that, in Kane's idea, "qualifies as downright musical soft-porn," remarking that it's a good idea to get married so that one can enjoy the state's various delights. Elena starts the ball rolling with "In otio sterile, le notti gelide voi non passate" ("You will not spend frozen nights in sterile leisure," mm. 175-183) and then Astianassa, following a refrain, reveals the lusty game: "In piume povere, tra brame inutili voi non penate" ("You will not suffer through useless longings in empty feather beds," mm. 184-199). The musical setting of the repeated "penate" is as vivid an imitation of sexual moaning as one might hope for in this period.

Figure 3.5

180 *Maritate à 2 da Capo*  
Ast. In piu-me  
EL. -sa - te, voi non pas - sa - te.  
[B. C.]

185  
Ast. po - ve-re, Trà bra-me i - nu - ti - li Voi non pe - na - te, voi  
[B. C.]

190  
Ast. voi, voi non pe - na - te, non pe - na -  
[B. C.]

195 *Maritate à 2 da Capo*  
Ast. te.  
[B. C.]

Cavalli, *Elena*, Act I, Scene 8: Astianassa: “In piume povere”

*Married women/you do not suffer/in a desolate bed from useless longings/married women/how happy you are!*<sup>77</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Translation by Kristin Kane

Not all of the operatic ‘whores’ represented in this dissertation are necessarily ‘whores’ in the modern sense of the word, but they are characters who possessed exceptional degrees of self-awareness, and embraced their own sexuality without guilt. The early modern misogynistic society that put forth chastity and virginity as the ideal virtue for women is the same society that prized the representation of sexually virile women in public performances. Perhaps she was created on paper by the minds of (sexually fantasizing?) male librettists and composers, but she was portrayed by real, living and breathing women (and occasionally, castrati) who were, in a sense, playing their own roles, giving testimony to an aspect of a social reality that challenged pre-Enlightenment constraints about women and sexuality.

## Chapter Four: The Witch

### Witchcraft and Sorcery in Early Modern Europe

By the time witches and sorceresses began to be represented in seventeenth-century opera, they had already undergone a long, rich, and varied history. The earliest records of the concept and practice of witchcraft can be traced to the early days of humankind when witchcraft was not perceived as a maleficent power, but a magical phenomenon to be invoked for the assurance of good fortune or protection against diseases and adversity. It was not until c. 1000 AD that we begin to see the practice of witchcraft as a malevolent force. As the medieval era progressed, the prosecution of witchcraft generally became more prominent, perhaps driven partly by the upheavals of the time – the Black Death, Hundred Years War, and a gradual cooling of the climate that modern scientists call the Little Ice Age (between about the 15th and 19th centuries), for which witches were sometimes blamed.

In 1486, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger wrote a justification of their views on witchcraft in what became arguably the most famous medieval treatises on witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>78</sup> Its main purpose was to challenge all arguments against the existence of witchcraft and to instruct magistrates on how to identify, interrogate and convict witches. In the book, Kramer and Sprenger describe the specific characteristics of the modern witch, and stated the view that witchcraft was to blame for Europe's bad weather. The book is also noted for its animus against women. Until the fifteenth century, witchcraft was not considered gender-specific; women were believed no more likely than men to be witches. Kramer and Sprenger,

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<sup>78</sup> *Malleus maleficarum*, public domain.

however, propagated the notion that the “insatiable womb” led women to “consort with devils” and practice witchcraft, whereas God had “preserved the male sex from so great a crime.” In fact, “the evils perpetrated by modern witches exceed all other sin which God has ever permitted.”<sup>79</sup> Thus redefined for the modern age, witchcraft became a specifically female practice posing an unprecedented threat to God’s holy order. Such notions led to a series of witch hunts lasting from 1435 to 1750, in which tens of thousands of European women were tried and slaughtered. Lord chief justice Anderson noted in 1602: “The land is full of witches... they abound in all places” – not as a symbol or figure of fun, but as a deadly threat to life, livelihood and divine order.

By the seventeenth century, societal concern was not with the nature of evil or even the danger of the Devil, but rather with specific harms attributed to a neighbor’s malefic powers.<sup>80</sup> Historians Sara Mendelson and Patrician Crawford have categorized these dangerous women into three groups: the “scold,” the “whore,” and the “witch.” According to Mendelson and Crawford, these three categories were the most fearsome to early modern society because they were representations or reflections of three societal fears: the “scold” represented the power of women’s tongues, the “whore” represented the fear of female unbridled sexuality, and the “witch” represented a mirror reversal of all that was deemed good in a woman.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Malleus maleficarum*, public domain.

<sup>80</sup> Bever, Edward. “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community.” *Journal of Social History* 35 (2002): 957.

<sup>81</sup> Mendelson, Sara and Patricia Crawford. *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Reiner Walz coined the phrase “community of terror” to describe the witch mentality, and defines the differentiation between a ‘village witch’ and a ‘scold.’ According to Walz, a ‘witch’ used threats and curses and even physical means, while the ‘scold’ was merely a ‘yeller.’ Each of these female identities, however, found agency in a society that didn’t leave many outlets for a woman to express her feelings and complaints.

Historians have suggested that changing social roles affected women’s legal and economic status, making some women, particularly single women from lower classes, vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. It is interesting to note, however, that the title of ‘witch’ or ‘sorceress’ wasn’t always a title that was bestowed on a woman, rather oftentimes it was a *consciously cultivated* title – a ‘brand’ that could give a disadvantaged female a powerful and revered place in a society, assuming she could keep it under control. Sigrid Brauner asserts that the early modern witch persecutions constituted a wide-ranging and multi-faceted repression of individuals exhibiting certain behavior and attitudes, basically women who exhibited strong sexual, physical, or psychological aggressiveness. The witch persecutions put into place a system of negative reinforcement for disapproved patterns of female behavior.<sup>82</sup>

### **The witch as an Operatic Device**

The operatic witch was a useful way for composers to channel their respect for what they must have dealt with every day: powerful, independent-minded and rather terrifying women. There is perhaps not so much difference between the star operatic soprano and the actual witch

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<sup>82</sup> Brauner, Sigrid, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Robert Brown (Amherst, 1995) 13.

as might be first thought. There is, clearly, an aspect of parody in the portrayal, particularly when, as is often the case, the female witch is played by a man.

Witches had extreme popularity on the English stage, and were widely represented in English broadside ballads.<sup>83</sup> As representations of the *total opposite* of concord and harmony, witches tend to be represented musically by either silence or by the presence of a noisy instrument, like a rattle, which Susan McClary refers to as “musical and acoustic excess.” McClary links excess and disorder in western music to unrestrained femininity and madness, describing it as “spillage outside the bounds of masculine, ordered harmony...characteristically dangerous and categorically feminine.”<sup>84</sup> In the operatic representations discussed in this work, witches consistently represent man’s fear of being seduced and sexually overpowered by a woman.

### **Falsirena**

One of the most widely read poems of early seventeenth century Italian culture was *L’Adone* (Adonis) of Giambattista Marino, published in Paris in 1623 and dedicated to the French king Louis XIII. Less than a year after the death of the poet Marino, the Aldobrandini family, his former patrons, had an episode from his famous poem turned into a pastoral musical drama of seduction and trial.

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<sup>83</sup> Williams, Sarah F. *Damnably Practised: Witches, Dangerous Women, and Music in Seventeenth-Century English Broadside Ballads*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 80-111).

*La Catena d'Adone* (The Chain of Adonis) was a musical drama by Ottavio Tronsarelli and the only surviving opera of Domenico Mazzocchi. It was commissioned by Cardinal Ippolito Aldobrandini and first performed at the Palazzo Conti, Rome on February 12, 1626, and is one of the first musical dramas of this sort to be given in Rome, only preceded by *La Morte d'Orfeo*, 1619, and *L'Aretusa*, 1620. Focused in plot and elaborate in presentation, it was an important step in the development of Roman opera, and the first early opera to bear the hallmarks of later musical drama in Rome. It is also unique in the circumstances of its commission; it was composed as the means for a singing contest. According to the sole surviving account, that of G.V. Rossi, the idea for the opera was sparked by an argument between two Roman noblemen concerning the relative abilities of two of the many virtuoso singers then performing in Rome. One of the was Margherita Costa (ca. 1605-after 1657), singer, poet, and courtesan. Her rival was Francesca ("La Cecca") dal Padule, so named because she lived in a low-lying section of Rome called il Padule. In order to compare the vocal prowess of these two ladies, their champions decided on a fair contest in which the singers would have equal opportunity to display their voices. At the last minute, the wife of one of the champions (Prince Aldobrandini) canceled the contest when she found out that diva Costa was also her husband's favorite mistress! It was too late to halt the performance altogether because the invitations had already gone out, so the roles of the two contestants were filled by castrati.

Domenico Mazzocchi's work represents a departure from what he called the "monotony" of Florentine recitative, with a more obvious demarcation between recitative and aria. Scholar Gretchen Finney discusses *La Catena d'Adone* as a predecessor of John Milton's later *Comus*,

claiming striking similarities between the opera and *Comus*, in plot, setting, allegory, and even staging details.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to the printed score (Venice, 1626), six editions of the libretto appeared, three Roman (all 1626) and three Venetian (1626 and 1627). Two further publications indicate that later performances took place in Bologna (1648, but heavily altered) and Piacenza (1650). *La Catena* represents the early work of librettist Tronsarelli, who turned to sacred musical works later in his career. It offers the typically complicated cast of characters, each of them allegorical representations, loosely based on popular figures from Greek mythology.

Falsirena's machinations to win Adonis were realized by the scenic designer Francesco de Cuppis. Six triangular *periaktoi*, three in a row on each side of the stage, rotated to make swift and noiseless scene changes. Vulcan's grotto formed the setting of the prologue; a horrid wood turned into an idyllic garden; this opened up into a golden palace, with a flight of endless rooms and Adonis chained in a bed; in Act 4 hell disgorged Pluto, and all was framed by a false proscenium bearing the arms of the Conti. The stage was raked, and an orchestra of 30, including two harpsichords, was seated out of view of the audience.

The nuances of Falsirena's psychological state are effectively conveyed by harmonic (and often chromatic) shifts and contrasts in and between recitatives. Mazzocchi avoids illustrating single words or musically forcing the expression. Each act has only three to four short scenes, the last always a classically derived choral response of intertwining solos, polyphony and dancing to mark each new stage in the plot. The movement through recitative to aria, or to choral and instrumental polyphony, is thoughtfully crafted and paced. Mazzocchi broke up the recitative

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<sup>85</sup> Gretchen Llundke Finney, "Comus, *Dramma per Musica*." *Studies in Philology* 37 (1940): 482-500.

with what he called *mezz'arie* - single phrases or brief passages in song style that were at the time also labelled 'in aria', 'alla battuta' or even 'ariette', and now usually 'arioso.' Nina Pirrotta introduces Mazzocchi's *mezz'arie* as the ancestors of the later introspective cavatinas.

An appendix in the libretto explains that Falsirena is the spirit which is torn between reason and sensuality. Adonis is man, who is loved by God, but who loses his way and becomes bound by chains of flesh and evil, but who is freed by Love and reunited with God. Despite the differences in Milton's *Comus* and *La Catena*, we see represented in both the figure of a female sorcerer who tries, by enchantments, to win a sexual encounter from a beautiful young person who is lost and separated from loved ones. In both works, the failure of the enchanter and the subsequent rescue and release of the captive are the main subject. The character of Falsirena is given the attribute of having an occult sense by which she feels the new presence before she sees him, like a predator senses its prey. She is given the power of magic to deceive and captivate, while her nymph followers offer a frenzied sensual dance. She is given the power of magical rites, and the power to capture and hold fast the object of her desire. Notable is the fact that the victim manifestly and consistently resists all persuasion to sin because of his steadfast love for Venus, while Falsirena's own magical powers fail. The temptation of Adonis is prefaced in *La Catena* by a song on the subject of virtue, and a section describing the orgies of Falsirena and her descent to the realms of Pluto for "backup," or reinforcement of her magical power.

Some interesting details appear in *Comus* that do not appear in Tronsarelli's libretto, but which are helpful in enriching and illuminating the character of Falsirena. In Milton's work, Falsirena and her nymphs burn sacrifices in order to invoke the power of Pluto for aid, and then the sorceress takes her "charming rod" and calls to Pluto with dissonant words, imitating the

howling of “stabl’d wolves.”<sup>86</sup> In order to steal the ring which Venus had given Adonis as a safeguard against just such malevolent powers, Falsirena convinces him to swallow an “orient liquor” in a goblet. Working quickly, the potion renders Adonis oblivious and lethargic. His protective ring is then taken away by Falsirena and he is bound in the invisible chains.

Finney offers that Tronsarelli reworked the allegorical symbol of Falsirena (the literal meaning of which is *falsa sirena*, or “false siren”) to represent a combination of good and bad, and as such, she represents the spirit of man.<sup>87</sup> I’m not sure I agree with her on this point, as in my opinion the character of Adonis is a much more obvious representation of Man, and man’s temptation to sin. I think a much more reasonable explanation of the allegorical relevance of Falsirena is that of a female who possesses supernatural power, and the frightening potential of that power to lead astray a virtuous and faithful man. I think it is also of interest that it is only after Falsirena disguises herself as Venus that she is defeated once and for all. Once again, we see females carrying the personification of lust and sexual deviance, and man the unmovable, steadfast rock of upright character...except for their lamentable tendency to become attracted to and sidetracked by powerful women.

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<sup>86</sup> Comus, 1. 534.

<sup>87</sup> Finney, “Comus, *Dramma per Musica*,” 496.

## Alcina and Melissa - The Two Sorceresses of *La liberazione*

The next witches under consideration come from an opera which Archduchess Maddalena commissioned in order to celebrate two visits – that of her brother, the Archduke Karl of Styria, during October 1624 and their nephew, Crown Prince Władisław. The visits were more political than personal, as Magdalena intended to marry her second daughter, twelve-year-old Margherita de' Medici, to young Władisław. The following information is largely based on the work of Suzanne Cusick, who published a book about Francesca Caccini and the Medici court; the large part of a chapter is devoted to *La liberazione di Ruggiero*.<sup>88</sup>

The opera *La liberazione* is based on cantos six through ten of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. Cusick refers to it as “one of recent literature's great gynophobic stories.” A young knight (Ruggiero) is rescued from a malevolent, sexually predatorial sorceress (Alcina) by a benevolent, ambiguously bi-gendered sorceress (Melissa). This opera is unique in that it offers us representations of not one witch, but two; the first a force for chaos and sexual fulfillment, the second a force for reason and control. Cusick interprets the two witches as representative of the way women were understood in relation to prevailing ideas of power and authority; she points out that the operatic roles of Alcina and Melissa are examples of the paradox expressed when women seized power - at least in early modern interpretation, they wielded it unnaturally, as tyrants.

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<sup>88</sup> Cusick, Suzanne. *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

*La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* (The Liberation of Ruggiero from the Island of Alcina) is a comic opera - the first to be composed to by a female, and considered to be the first to be performed outside Italy. I would like to examine the story of *La liberazione* as a tale of two magically powerful women, and the conflicted yet complimentary balance between them. On the most obvious level, the opera can be perceived as a story of an interchange between a man and two women with supernatural powers who disagree about what his fate and his role in society should be. Alcina could be understood to stand for everything which was dangerous in a female, an incarnation of the traditional sorceress figure well-known to early modern society, who had the capability of transforming lovers and rivals into animals, plants, or monsters. Alcina was clearly a manifestation of fear. She elicited male fear of female sexuality as the cause of their own effeminating desires, and their even deeper fear of female sexual difference as itself monstrous. Cusick points out that this core address to Ruggiero is comprised of three motivically dissimilar sections. In the first, "Ferma, ferma crudele," Alcina's every statement is built of only two rhythmic gestures, a trochee (long-short) or a dactyl (long-short-short), freely combined. Her economy of rhythm lends Alcina's words the force of direct speech. In constructing the surface of "Ferma, ferma crudele" thus, the composer ensured that she would seem to perform "one cardinal virtù of womanhood," continenza (the conservation of resources). She seems in perfect control of the way she performs what Ruggiero and the audience would expect from a woman who is lamenting – "a sonic disorder that stands for the disorder of female sexual agency beyond the control of men. Francesca's Alcina complains like a woman remarkably self-possessed."

Figure 4.1

a

Fer - ma, fer - ma cru - de - le O - ve ne vai spie - ta - to,

do - ve mi la - sci in - gra - to in pre - da'l pian - - to?

b

ve - drai la tua man - can - za, e la mia fe - de, e che, tra

pe - ne e do - glie, Quant' ha di me - sto il mon - do, i - vi s'ac - co - glie.

Scanned by CamScanner

Francesca Caccini, *La liberazione di Ruggiero*, 53-54: Alcina: “Ferma, ferma crudele”

Vs. 1 - *Stop, stop, cruel one/Where are you going, pitiless one/Where do you leave me, ingrate, [to be the] prey of weeping*

Vs. 2 - *You will see your failing and my fidelity/and [you will see] that between pain and grieving/here [in my face] it gathers as much sorrow as the world has.*<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

In the second stanza, by contrast, “O ferità di tigre,” one of Alcina’s damigelle interrupts her complaint, berating Ruggiero her Alcina’s behalf.

Figure 4.2

Francesca Caccini, *La liberazione di Ruggiero*, 53-54: First Damigella: “O ferità di tigre”

*O cruelty of a tiger/O heart of stone/to an imploring woman/to a woman lover,  
the most faithful and constant who ever scattered sighs or please/still you deny pity, and deny  
peace?*<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Translation by Suzanne Cusick

With this accusation, Alcina travels from harmonically ineffectual pleading to harmonically focused, tonally stable expressions of ire. Emboldened by the sympathy of other women, Alcina refuses to be silenced, “singing for minutes more until her extravagant vocality causes her world to burst into liberating, orgasmic, masculinizing – and hilarious – flame.”<sup>91</sup>

The “other” sorceress, Melissa, speaks to Ruggiero in a starkly contrasting manner; when she arrives onstage to liberate Ruggiero with the voice of Atlante, she speaks in a syllabic, declamatory style. Centered in the Dorian mode, his/her speech models vocal self-restraint by remaining confined to the lower fifth of the mode. Authoritative both in sound and style, the phrases of her speech seem both logical and magical at the same time; with words declaimed above a single chord, the effect is one of suspension in time, incantatory, even magical in a way meant for a child’s ears. The composer projected Melissa/Atlante’s magically compelling authority through the alto register, inextricable from the performance of masculinity.

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<sup>91</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 229.

Figure 4.3

a

At-lan-te a te se'n vie-ne Per sa-per qual fol-li-a ti sfor-za ad in-fa-

3

tri

-mar-ti in que-ste a-re-ne.

b

To-gli, fol-le che se-i, al-le brac-cia guer-rie-re et al col-lo, vi-

26

tri

tri

-ril mo-ni-lig vez-zi, la-scia l'i-ni-qua ma-ga, e

6

28

muo-vi ad af-fron-tar ne-mi-che schie-re,

29

se la bel-l'al-man-cor di Glo-ria è va-ga.

(#)

Scanned by CamScanner

Francesca Caccini, *La librazione di Ruggiero*, 35-36: Melissa: “Atlante a te se’n viene”

Vs. 1 - *Atlante comes to you/to know what folly/forces you to disgrace yourself in these parts Fool that you are, remove from your warrior arms/and your virile neck/these necklaces and charms/Leave the evil sorceress/and move to confront the enemy troops/if your fine soul still desires glory.*<sup>92</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Translation by Suzanne Cusick

I find it very interesting that at the same time Alcina evoked a dangerously exaggerated femininity, she eventually abandoned the traditionally female approaches of seducing a man with the rhetorics of song and tears in favor of a more aggressive tactic – monsters, fire, and destructive magic. Whereas the more benevolent Melissa chose to strategically disguise her identity by voluntarily assuming the appearance of a male warrior, Alcina's rage-induced frenzy was an unveiling of her true mannish nature, which had been cunningly disguised as traditionally female from the beginning of the story. As Cusick points out, this true nature of Alcina would have seemed as pure a threat to heteropatriarchy as could be imagined in female form, committed to unproductive sexual identifications (sex with Ruggiero for the sake of pleasure alone).

The prevalence of witch or sorceress characters in seventeenth-century opera and beyond bears testimony to its usefulness as a signifier of emotional states. It was utilized to represent the potential dangers of unpredictability and chaos, the disturbance of societal norms, and the total antithesis of discord or harmony. If/when a witch or sorceress was embodied in a female character, she was capable of carrying the additional functions of representing male fear of the potential of unchecked female power to upset the natural order of the universe. Operatic witches or sorceresses were inserted into the narrative when some manipulation of male characters needed to happen. As a plot device, they had the functional capability of turning the tides in unpredictable ways, and as such were invaluable tools for librettists and composers.

## Chapter Five: Applications to Modern Performance Practice: Final DMA Project

The final requirement of the DMA program at ULCA is the presentation of a concert or recital that represents the culmination of dissertation research. When I conceived of my final concert project, which was to be a program of seventeenth-century arias showcasing my four operatic stereotypes, I envisioned a staged and costumed ‘musical revue’ style production where I wove together my chosen repertoire in a coherent way which could also allow the added dimension of character expression through stage movement. As is often the case with doctoral recitals, the final version of my production proved to be quite different than my original vision. The realities of budget and time constraints, travelling professional musicians, and busy graduate student schedules persuaded me fairly early in the process that I needed to find ways to express what I wanted to express within the parameters of a more traditional, concert-style presentation.

That being said, I was able to incorporate the dimension of visual art which I had originally envisioned. In collaboration with an artist colleague, Jennifer Pepper, I selected a collection of classical art by (mostly) seventeenth-century artists which I felt was representative of the core qualities and the overall emotional affect of each piece. These images were projected on a large screen during the concert, according to very specific, carefully timed cues.<sup>93</sup> Thanks to a generous scholarship from the UCLA David and Irmgard Dobrow Fund, I was able to supplement my ensemble of graduate students with a core of professional Los Angeles-based early music specialists.

I adhered to my original vision of organizing the concert by the categorical stereotypes of the women represented – virgin martyrs, warriors and queens, witches, and whores, and included

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<sup>93</sup> Appendix A is a list of these artworks in the order they appeared.

a short intermission after the first two sets. It was my intention to represent arias or sections of arias that have either been recently discovered but never performed, or that were largely unfamiliar to the audience. These unfamiliar, newly discovered arias formed the bulk of the concert, with a handful of more familiar selections and instrumental interludes sprinkled throughout for the sake of audience appeal and variety.

Inevitably, I was faced with the challenge of organizing an engaging and coherent program out of a collection of excerpts. Compromises and decisions had to be made in the process regarding issues of how to present the music itself; in the absence of specific score instructions, I had to decide what texture best represented each aria or song, and make orchestration choices accordingly. My ensemble included the following instruments: theorbo, baroque guitar, French double harpsichord, continuo organ, viola da gamba, baroque violin, viola, soprano, alto, and tenor recorder, bass dulcian, two cornetti, tromba marina, various period percussion instruments, a hurdy-gurdy, and bagpipes (for a special appearance). We arranged the ensemble into three groups – harpsichord, theorbo/guitar, viola da gamba and myself in the middle, wind instruments on stage right, and bowed strings stage left, with percussion behind. Three duets were included in the program, for which I was joined by a countertenor colleague.

I needed to consider how to musically and emotionally express the core qualities of the women I was representing while operating within the parameters of a recital performance. I asked myself the following questions: what would it feel like inside my own body to be a virgin martyr, a warrior, a queen, a witch, or a whore? How could I express the qualities of each in the music on my concert program, and how would that expression inform my performance? I was limited to whatever my body could express while my feet stayed on a strip of orange tape stuck to the stage floor (my “mark”). Within this context, small physical gestures go a long way. For

guidance, I found myself referring often to the paintings that I had chosen for projection. The following section will explore these connections and manifestations; I will present a few examples of music from my concert that I feel are especially relevant, and relate details of my own personal experience of preparation and performance.

My final DMA concert took place on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in Popper Auditorium at the Schoenberg Music Building, University of California Los Angeles; the exact recital program is represented below:

## Program

### “Witches, Whores, and Virgin Martyrs”

(Please hold applause until the end of each set.)

Brando dicho el Melo from *Il Primo Libro* (Naples, 1650)  
(instrumental ensemble)

Andrea Falconieri  
(1586 - 1656)

Per la più vaga from *La Liberazione* (Florence, 1625)

Francesca Caccini  
(1587 - after 1641)

### Virgin Martyrs

Maria, dolce Maria - from *Primo libro delle musiche* (Florence, 1618)

Francesca Caccini

Re del Ciel - from *Sant'Eustachio* (Rome, 1643)

Virgilio Mazzocchi  
(1597 bapt. - 1646)

Alla Madonna – from *Sacri musciali affetti* (Venice, 1655)

Barbara Strozzi  
(1619 bapt. - 1677)

Brando lo Spiritillo - from *Il Primo Libro* (Naples, 1650)  
(instrumental ensemble)

A. Falconieri

### Witches

Dance of the Furies - from *Dioclesian* (London, 1690)  
(instrumental ensemble) Henry Purcell  
(1659 - 1695)

When first I saw / Ten Thousand Years Remain

But 'ere we this perform - duet from *Dido and Aeneas* (London, c. 1686) H. Purcell

Rida l'auretta amante - from *La Catena d'Adone* (Rome, 1626) Domenico Mazzocchi  
(1592 - 1665)

Battalla de Baraboso yerno de Satanas - from *Il Primo Libro* (Naples, 1650)  
(instrumental ensemble) A. Falconieri

### -Intermission-

### Whores

Non e maggior - from *La Calisto* (Venice, 1651) Francesco Cavalli  
(1602 - 1676)

Restino/T'aspetto

Passacaglia - interlude from *L'Orfeo* (Naples, c. 1660) Luigi Rossi  
(harpsichord solo) (1597 - 1653)

Mia speranza - duet from *Elena* (Venice, 1659) F. Cavalli

### Warriors and Queens

All'armi and Vada pur - from *Veremonda* (Venice, c. 1652) F. Cavalli

Corrente Italiana (Valencia, c. 1688) Juan Cabanilles  
(harpsichord and percussion) (1644 - 1712)

"Signor" and Speranza - duet from *Coronation of Poppea* (Venice, 1643) Claudio Monteverdi  
(1567 bapt. - 1643)

Quel sguardo sdegnosetto – from *Scherzi Musicale* (Venice, 1632) C. Monteverdi

Ciaccona from *Il Primo Libro* (Naples, 1650) A. Falconieri  
(instrumental ensemble)

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This program was made possible by a generous donation from the David and Irmgard Dobrow Fund  
Tonight's concert fulfills the requirements for the Doctorate of Musical Arts

Terri Richter is a student of Professor Juliana Gondek, Voice & Opera Studies,  
UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music.

### **The Instrumental Interludes**

It is not uncommon for editors of old, original opera scores to come across indications of instrumental interludes where no actual music exists; this is because in some cases, the choice of interlude was determined by the circumstances of the evening's performance; ensembles would change from town to town, for instance. In modern reproductions of this repertoire, therefore, there can be quite a degree of creative license with these interludes. For instance, in the process of preparing the original score of *Veremonda* for its debut performance at the Spoleto Festival in 2015, musicologist, conductor, and editor Aaron Carpenè describes the discovery of a scrawled note in handwriting that did not appear to be Cavalli's, inserted into the second act indicating that "a dance of the bulls" would "now commence," only there was no such music included in the score. Conductor and choreographer agreed upon Andrea Falconieri's "Il Brando dicho el melo," which could very well have been the same music that would have been heard in the 1652 production.

The fact is, "*balli*" and other interludes were, to a certain degree, interchangeable. The insertion of these instrumental "balli" in seventeenth-century opera had both a practical and an

aesthetic function: not only did these short interludes allow the performers and stagehands the time necessary to change costumes or move sets around between scenes in an opera, but they also provided much-needed textural variety.

Taking my inspiration from Aaron Carpenè, I chose to program several short, energetic dances by Andrea Falconieri between the vocal pieces of my concert program. The insertion of these dances served the same two functions as the *balli* in seventeenth-century opera: they gave me a chance to rest and take a drink of water, and they provided an effervescent energy and perhaps some much-needed textural variety to the program as well.

In addition to the three dances by Falconieri, I also chose Luigi Rossi's "Passacaglia," which is actually a harpsichord transcription of an interlude from Rossi's *L'Orfeo* (Naples, c. 1660), and the "Corrente Italiana" by Spanish composer Juan Cabanilles, (Valencia, c. 1688), to which we added percussion in order to reinforce the military theme of the set where it was placed. When choosing instrumental interludes, there was a temptation for the sake of variety to wander outside the seventeenth to neighboring centuries, but my desire for aesthetic unity influenced my decision to resist that temptation.

### **Virgin Martyr set**

Very early in the process of programming the concert, I discovered that in the case of virgin martyrs, there simply aren't enough extant opera score fragments. The music that does exist tends to be declamatory and recitative-like in style. Common sense and prior experience made me cautious to program several of these excerpts in succession, for fear of creating a set that would be tedious for my modern audience. After considering several different options, including the excerpt from *Sant'Agata* represented in Figure 1.2 (which wasn't even sung by a

virgin martyr, but by the daughter of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of sexual love – hardly appropriate for a virgin martyr set!), I finally decided for the sake of variety to program two ‘substitutes,’ cantata arias by seventeenth-century female composers - “Maria, dolce Maria” by Francesca Caccini and “Alla Madonna” by Barbara Strozzi. While seventeenth-century cantata arias are not exact representations of the primarily *recitativo* style of virgin martyr roles in that they contain much more complicated and ornate vocal lines, they were perhaps more pleasing additions to my concert from a modern audience perspective.

I did include a recently discovered excerpt from a Roman saint opera, *Sant’Eustachio* (1643) by Virgilio Mazzocchi, the last of the Barberini saint operas before the death of Urban VIII and the subsequent flight of the Barberini from Rome. This was an exciting addition to the program, as it was truly a debut performance.<sup>94</sup>

Figure 5.1

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<sup>94</sup> Musicologist Virginia Christy Lamothe discovered the score of *Sant’Eustachio* in an archive in Turin during her own doctoral research, and created a modern performance edition of portions for the purpose of presentation at a musicology conference in 2012; I was asked to make a recording of this aria, “Re del ciel,” for her presentation.

# Act I Scene 3

## Re del Ciel

Virgilio Mazzocchi

Teopiste



Re del Ciel che dal tuo seggio Con un guardo il

Continuo

T



mon-do af-fre-ni io non chieg-gio io non chieg-gio Di-mi-a vi-ta i

T



di-se-re-ni io non chieg-gio Di-mi-a vi-ta i di-se-re-ni i

T



di-se-re-ni Chie-de il cor più che la-vo-ce Tra-quest

17  
T or - ri-de pro-cel - le Che la Cro - ce Sia per me

21  
T sca - la al - le stel - le Che la

25  
T Cro - ce Sia per me sca -

29  
T la al - le stel - le.

Mazzocchi, *Sant'Eustachio*, Act 1, Scene 3: Teopiste: "Re del ciel"<sup>95</sup>

*King of Heaven / who from your throne governs the world with a glance / I do not ask / for serene days for my life / My heart rather than my voice asks / amid these horrid storms / that the Cross be for me / a staircase to the stars*<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Virginia Christy Lamothe, "The Theater of Piety: Sacred Operas for the Barberini Family (Rome, 1632-1643)" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009.)

<sup>96</sup> Translation by Virginia Christy Lamothe

Figure 5.2



As discussed previously, the core traits of the virgin martyr as expressed in the seventeenth century were efficacy, resolve, directness, and self-control. According to the contemporary doctrine of humoralism, virgin martyrs were thought to possess the traditionally masculine dry, hot temperament. This dryness of body and sentiment presumably enabled a clear reverberation and a rhetorical superiority,

qualities which were expressed in the music composed for them. I endeavored to find ways to demonstrate these qualities musically, vocally, and physically. For inspiration in the matter of physical gesture, I referred to specific works of visual art in the collection I was amassing for projection in the concert.

### Art and Physical Gesture

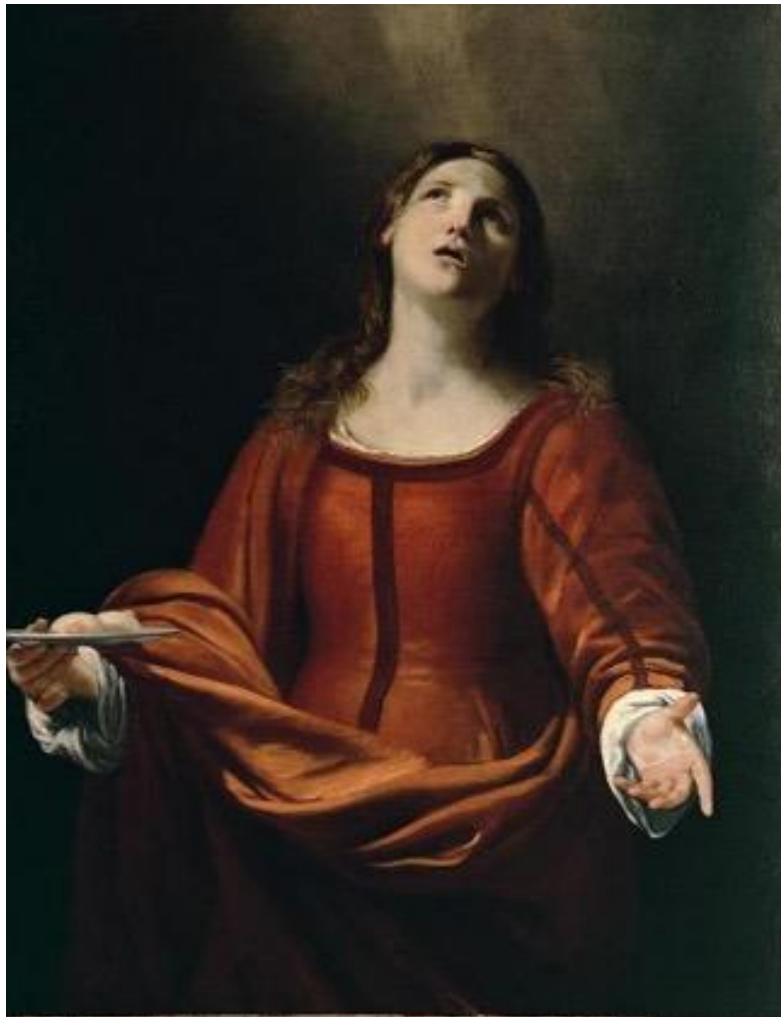
I chose five paintings by seventeenth-century artists to visually represent the physical manifestation of the virgin martyr, my favorite of which was Guido Cagnacci's *St. Agatha*, c. 1635-1640.<sup>97</sup> In the other virgin martyr paintings, her hands are always in front of her body, either folded in prayer, or clutching her dress, or crossed over her chest, but Cagnacci's *St. Agatha*'s arms are wide open, vulnerable, and expectant. There seems to be concentration in her facial expression, as if she is listening to something from Heaven. The openness of her arms and the concentrated expression of her face are both indicative of receiving, but *St. Agatha* is also

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<sup>97</sup> A complete list of works projected is available in Appendix A.

offering something in the painting; she holds her own breasts on a silver platter (according to the legend, her breasts were removed while she was being tortured). As I was delivering the songs and arias in the Virgin Martyr set, I tried to emulate these states of being – vulnerability, receptivity, and offering. I let my arms open slightly, which certainly had the effect of making me feel vulnerable, a sensation that was heightened by the austerity of the single, quiet, non-percussive continuo organ accompaniment.

Figure 5.3



Guido Cagnacci's *St. Agatha*, c. 1635-1640, (oil on canvas), Modena, Banca Popolare dell'Emilia Romagna, Italy, public domain

## Orchestration

We could have chosen any combination of orchestration for the virgin martyr set, but in order to express the core qualities of the virgin martyr, we opted for austerity. The first cantata aria, “Maria, dolce, Maria,” was accompanied by the sole timbre of the continuo organ. The quietness of the instrument was perfect for the portrayal of reverence, and the simplicity of ensemble enabled me to take more liberty with rhythms than I would have otherwise. For example, where the score calls for whole note in measure 4, I shortened it to a half note to preserve the overall arch of the entire phrase. In measures 12, 20-22, and 51-52, there are rather florid melismas in the printed score which were intended to be musical gestures rather than exact rhythmic dictation, and I approached these spots with the flexibility needed to make them sound gestural rather than literal.

For “Re del ciel,” we decided to have the keyboardist switch from continuo organ to harpsichord to brighten up the timbre, and we added the remainder of the continuo group - viola da gamba and theorbo. For Strozzi’s “O Maria,” the same combination was used, but with organ instead of harpsichord.

The only seventeenth-century vocal ornaments that I consistently used in the sacred pieces were the *trillo* (see Figure 5.2) and the *mordent*.<sup>98</sup> There are several places in the score where these trills are either specified or implied (ms. 9 of “*Maria, dolce Maria,*” for instance, or anytime there’s a whole note that fills up the entire measure before resolving to the tonic), and it is very likely that Francesca Caccini would have been trained by her father, Giulio Caccini, to deliver these ornaments impeccably. This fast repetition of the same note for the “*trillo,*” (otherwise known as the “goat trill,” see Figure 5.4) can be a difficult technique for modern

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<sup>98</sup> Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*, Florence, 1602.



composer between the short phrases—first on “*Io non chieggió*,” (I do not ask), ms. 5, 6, and 9, and again on “*che la croce, sia per me*,” (that the cross be for me), ms. 19-20 and 24-26. (See Figure 1.3)

Finally, “*Re del ciel*” personifies the qualities of the virgin martyr through its sheer simplicity. My initial reaction to this aria was lukewarm; the absence of melismatic passaggi, the relative monotony of rhythmic pattern, and the limited vocal range (it never goes higher than G5) caused me to worry that it was too plain to be of interest to an audience. The more I worked with it, the more I realized that this very simplicity of form and content is what makes it ideal as a representation of the virgin martyr prototype. As in literature, art, and cooking, simplicity and directness leave room for emotional reverberation. In the end, I decided to let the viola da gamba perform the ornamentation and to leave the vocal line unadorned, naked and vulnerable in its austerity. The piece was extremely short, so we decided to repeat each section twice, once vocally (with no ornamentation), and then instrumentally (with lavish ornamentation). The juxtaposition of the two interpretations, simple with ornate, illuminated the simplicity of the vocal line in a way that beautifully embodied the qualities of the operatic virgin martyr.

### **Warrior/Queen set**

As discussed previously, the core qualities of the seventeenth-century operatic female warrior or queen are strength, decisiveness, cunning, and authority. More than the others, this stereotype assumed traditionally masculine character traits, blending gender through transvestism, disguise, or simply by the exhibition of skill in traditionally male activities. I endeavored to find the places in my repertoire where these ideas were manifested musically, and to support them as much as possible with physical gesture and interpretive choices.

Veremonda's "*All'armi*" recitative and "*Vada pur,*" with which I opened the set, provided the perfect opportunity for the expression of authority. These two excerpts do not belong together in the original opera score, but observing that they were not only in the same key but that they expressed the same sentiment, I removed them from their original contexts and presented them together as a recitative/aria pair. The "*Donzelle, all'armi*" recitative begins at ms. 53 and ends at ms. 60 – short but powerful (see Figure 2.6, pg. 72). As is fairly typical of seventeenth-century orchestration, the original score indicated two treble lines above the vocal line, which were intended for a pair of violins. To enhance the militaristic theme of the set, I chose instead to have two cornetti play the upper two parts, which maximized its potential to function as a 'call to war.' The recitative is short, pointed, and incendiary; the vocal line outlines the same triad traced by the upper parts until the occurrence of the words "*già, già fatte guerriere,*" (already you are soldiers), ms. 57-58, when for just a moment it assumes a more conversational tone before snapping back into the militaristic horn call.

In the aria proper, Veremonda speaks in the imperative. She tells others what to do "*Vada pur, dotto marito, a contar vada le stelle*" (Go, my learned husband, go and count the stars), ms. 130-135, and she describes what she is going to do to others "*ch'io farò vendette belle del garzon che l'ha tradito,*" (I will take vengeance on the man who betrayed you), ms. 136-141. Her language is aggressive, and that aggressiveness is supported by quick and energetic responses in the upper two (cornetto) parts. The form of the aria is A/B/A/B/A,<sup>99</sup> but the sections go by so quickly that one is hardly aware of them. The last half of each verse (see Figure 5.4, ms. 136) moves into a disjointed-sounding, jaggedly ascending progression which I interpret as an

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<sup>99</sup> "A" = the verse, B = quick ritornelli

expression of Veremonda's independence and initiative; she charges off into unknown territory without waiting for a male support team. When rehearsing these sections for the first few times, this second half of the verse would always catch my ensemble by surprise. Their typical reaction was one of disbelief that the Cavalli THEY knew would have written such a strange series of choral progressions!

Figure 5.5

128 ARIA

The musical score consists of four staves. The top two staves are for a vocal line and a keyboard accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by a melodic phrase starting on a half note G4. The keyboard accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom two staves are for a figured bass line. The lyrics 'Va-da pur, dot - to ma-ri - to,' are written below the vocal line. The figured bass notation includes the numbers 6, 6, 6, and b7.

132

a con-tar

6

135

va - da le stel - le, ch'io fa - rò ven-det-te bel - le del gar-zon che l'ha tra -

6 6          6          b6 b6 4 6 3 6

138

di - to, ch'io fa - rò ven-det-te bel - le del gar-zon che l'ha tra - di - to, che l'ha tra -

b6 4 4 4 b          b          6 6

141 RITORNELLO

di - to.

4 3 6 6 4 3 6

Cavalli, *Veremonda*, Act I, Scene 11: Veremonda, “Vada pur”

*Go, my scholarly husband, go and count the stars, while I take vengeance on the man who betrayed you*<sup>100</sup>

Another warrior trait embodied by Veremonda is the use of intelligent tactic. She is, after all, a warrior but also a queen; she is cunning, and carefully considers her strategy, as evidenced by the relatively limited choral vocabulary of the aria. Despite its energetic bravado and brief harmonic scouting missions, it never strays far from its tonic home, the key of B flat major. There are no showy melismas or fiery explosions of coloratura. Veremonda knows how to operate under cover, and she doesn't draw unwarranted attention to herself so that she can achieve her clear purposes without interference. She is unmistakably in control of herself and those around her.

The same cannot be said for “Sdegno, campion audace,” although strictly speaking the aria is not sung in the opera by a warrior maiden, but instead by a soldier boy named Melisso. In contrast to Veremonda's aria, “Sdegno” is florid to the extreme. Indeed, it is musically reminiscent of an adolescent showing off in front of a group of peers – repetitive, impulsive,

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<sup>100</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

rather shallow, and superficially impressive. The same qualities that make it the perfect closing piece for a concert render it irrelevant for the purposes of this paper, except to elucidate by contrast.

Though the character of Poppea is not represented in the body of this dissertation, her characterization of queenliness justified her inclusion on my concert program, and thus deserves mention here. For the sake of harmonic variety, I chose to represent Monteverdi on my recital, and the character of Poppea was the obvious choice. Rather than presenting the familiar love duet “Pur ti miro” from the end of the opera, I chose instead an excerpt from a recitative-like exchange between Poppea and Nero which clearly demonstrates her ability to manipulate men.

Here, the gender ambiguity of the warrior/queen prototype is heightened by the fact that the role of Nero is written for a castrato. Not only is the character of Emperor Nero ‘weakened’ by effeminization, he is weakened by Poppea’s duplicity, and by his own lust (a supposedly feminine character flaw). The unpredictability and seeming instability of the melodic and harmonic progressions in this excerpt mimic Poppea’s slipperiness, particularly evident in the chromatically descending vocal line of ms. 129-135, and her words reinforce the idea of manipulation by guilt, “*non dir di partir, che di voce sì amara a un solo accento, ahi perir, ahi spirar quest’alma io sento*” (do not say you are leaving, for at the sound of that one bitter word, I feel my soul perish).

### **Art and Physical Gesture**

I was especially pleased with my choices of artistic representations for the Warrior/Queen set. For the Poppea duet I chose a painting by Peter Paul Rubens (c. 1610) entitled *Samson and Delilah*; in the painting, the naked figure of Samson lies asleep on the lap of a bare-breasted, red-

dressed Delilah, completely vulnerable to her manipulation and to the shears of the barber who removes large locks of his hair while he sleeps. This painting is a reference to a story in the Bible about Delilah's seduction of Samson in order to cut off his hair, which was the magical source of his fabled strength and power. By removing Samson's hair, she took the source of his power away, and defeated him.

Figure 5.6



Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*, c. 1609-10, oil on wood, The National Gallery, London, UK

Delilah's body in the painting speaks of her power over Samson. Her left hand rests soothingly on his naked back, and her breasts are bared as if he has fallen asleep during the act of lovemaking. She regards the sleeping man draped over her lap affectionately, but with the satisfaction of having achieved her purpose. This visual representation of Delilah mirrors the qualities of the female warrior/queen in her cunning, her agency, and her ability to manipulate.

As I delivered the arias on the warrior/queen set, I tried to embody these qualities with the assumption of a strong, quietly powerful and purposeful body posture. I stood differently in this set than I had in the others, firmly planted, poised and in control. (I wonder if perhaps this effect was heightened by the fact that all but one of my ensemble was male!)

### **Witch set**

The primary qualities of the seventeenth-century witch/sorceress which I wished to portray were unpredictability, danger, and disorder. As previously discussed, the female sorceress was an embodiment of masculine fear, a fear of domination by magical means (i.e., by forces that were beyond control). Both for the sake of sonic variety and because I found them to be exquisite musical representations of the sense of chaos and danger I was trying to portray, I allowed myself a brief departure from early modern Italy to borrow from two works of Henry Purcell.

For the duet “But ‘ere we this perform” from *Dido and Aeneas*, I was joined by a countertenor. Castrati would have very likely performed these witch roles in London in 1686, more than likely castrati borrowed from Italy, as was the popular trend for English operatic representations in the late seventeenth century. I could have chosen to sing this duet with a fellow soprano, but I thought the presence of a male singing in a soprano register would heighten the sense of chaos, danger and unpredictability that I wished to portray in the set.

### **Orchestration**

For the Handel pieces, I utilized the period bowed and plucked strings to the full extent. I wanted to portray a raw and driving energy, and felt that the driving rhythms and aggressive

vocal lines of the duet would be enhanced by the scratchy timbre of gutstrings being roughly manipulated. Keeping in mind that witches were often musically portrayed with noise, I asked the players to replace their trained sense of early baroque elegance with something more primitive, as if they themselves were the witches and were hurling curses with the sounds of their strings. This produced some delightfully unruly sounds, especially for the baroque guitarist, who used his fingernails very effectively, and the viola da gambist, who delighted in experimenting with how far he could push his sound towards *noise* without sacrificing *pitch*.

“Rida l’auretta amante” from *La Catena d’Adone* (Rome, 1626) puzzled me at first in that there seemed to be nothing aggressive about its sonority, until I realized that the aria takes place at the point in the opera where Falsirena is casting a spell over her garden in order to transform it into an entity which would seduce Ruggiero. The plants themselves would sing to him. With an awareness of this maleficent mentality, the lyrics of the aria were transformed into something dangerous, particularly Falsirena’s description of the “new world” she will create for Ruggiero. In my delivery, I tried to infuse the melisma on the word “*novo*” (new) with as much seductive intent as the melody would allow.<sup>101</sup>

“Rida l’auretta amante” was extremely short, only a little over a minute long. To extend it, we repeated it in its entirety three times, utilizing the silky, seductive timbre of the cornetto on the melody for the second repetition. For the third repetition, I sang the melody once again while the cornettist wove an improvised obligato part around the vocal line, to mesmerizing effect.

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<sup>101</sup> The only modern edition of *La Catena d’Adone* appears to be the result of a dissertation project of James Robert Bossert from the year 1965. It only exists in handwritten copy. The music for “Rida, l’auretta amante” can be found on pages 158 and 159 of this dissertation.

## Whore Set

As previously discussed, the operatic roles represented in my final DMA concert were not necessarily ‘whores’ in the modern sense of the word, but they were characters who demonstrated exceptional degrees of self-awareness, and embraced their own sexuality without guilt. According to the prevailing medical beliefs of the seventeenth century, sexually self-realized women were associated with wetness and lust. As with the other prototypes, I thought about how to express these qualities both physically and musically. I associate a “wet” sound with lushness and self-indulgence (in comparison to the austerity and self-control of the virgin martyr aria). The ways that I chose to express lushness and self-indulgence in this set were through full orchestration, the use of vibrato in both my voice and the violin, and with indulgent vocal ornamentation, which I shall discuss in fuller detail below.

I chose two arias from Cavalli’s opera *La Calisto* which I felt would present an interesting emotional and musical contrast: “*Non e maggior,*” from Act I (see Figure 3.1, pg. 87) depicts Calisto’s virginity, her independence, and her celebrated freedom from male tyranny. This pre-sexual stage in Calisto’s narrative is expressed musically by Cavalli with happily moving eighth notes on the words “*viver in libertade*” (to live in freedom), ms. 55-62 and ms. 96-103, in imitation of the sound of a stream running over stones. In measures 85-87, Calisto mimics the birds singing in the trees of the forest on the word “*canore*” (songbirds). The pre-sexual Calisto is high-spirited and vivacious, unburdened by attachment or desire; her hungers and thirsts are satisfied, and she longs for nothing. The corresponding effervescence of this first aria made it a delight to sing, and hopefully the delight that I felt while singing it helped, in turn, to inform my interpretive decisions.

Besides the addition of a couple of brief trills, I didn’t incorporate any ornamentation

until ms. 101-102, the last measure of running eighth notes, when I decided to express Calisto's vivacity with a vocal run up to a high A. With the same motivation, I also extended the vocal line up to a high B flat on the final repetition of the word "*caro*" (dear), ms. 108. Instead of the violins indicated in the original score, I chose to have a soprano and tenor recorder play the two treble lines of the ritornelli; the resulting timbre lent a pastoral atmosphere to the aria.

In the opera proper, between "*Non e maggior*" and "*Restino/T'aspetto*," from Act III, Calisto has a homoerotic encounter with a god who is disguised as a goddess, and that encounter strips her of her contentment, much the same way that Eve was stripped of her innocence by her encounter with Satan (disguised as a serpent) in the Biblical creation myth. Though the sexual encounter itself is not musically depicted in the opera, the aftermath is very explicitly represented. "*Restino imbalsamate*" begins in the key of D minor and utilizes very slow harmonic shifts, offering multiple opportunities for the vocal expression of a *state of longing*.

To reinforce the impression of sighing, I allowed my voice a downward glide in a few strategic places to a lower note, for instance, during "*si baceremo*" (our kisses), ms. 10-12. In the name of creating a "wet" sound, I allowed myself two specific moments of vocal indulgence: in measures 17-18, on the word "*soave*" (sweet), I asked a violinist to imitate my vocal line at the interval of a third below, as I filled in the downward progression with passing tones and a long, luxurious mordent between the B flat (on the syllable "a") and the cadential A (on the syllable "vi"). I also asked the violinist to echo my vocal gestures on both repetitions of the word "*eco*," ms. 20 and 21, resuming tempo again on the third repetition of "*eco*," at the end of ms. 21.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> See my pencil markings in ms. 21 of Figure 5.7, where I indicated alternate notes.

Figure 5.7

ATTO TERZO  
Scena I  
*Le fonti del Lulone.*  
CALISTO.

97

CALISTO  
Re-ti-rajm-bal-sa-ma - te re lo me-mo-rie mie... le de-li - zio pas - sa - te.

[Continuo]

6  
Fon-ti lim - pi-de e pu - re, al vo-stro gor-go - gli - o la mia di - vi - na ed i - o, cop-pia di let - ta e

10  
ca - ra, si ba - ce - re - mo, si ba - ce - re - mo, si ba - ce - re - mo a ga - ra.

14  
- e for-na-re - mo me-lo-di - e, me-lo-di - e so - a - vi qui do-ve con più

20  
vo - ci E - co, E - co, E - co ri - spon - de, u - ni - to, u - ni - to! Il suon de' ba -

27  
- ci al suon, al suon, al suon del - l'on - de.

Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Act 3, Scene 1: Calisto: “Restino, imbalsamate”

*May past delights / forever engrave themselves / upon my memory / Limpid and pure billows / to the sound of your murmurs / my Goddess and I / a cherishing couple / shall exchange our kisses to our heart's desire / and our dulcet songs / amplified by Echo / shall mingle with the murmurs of the water*<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

My representation of Calisto ended after the first verse of “T’aspetto, e tu non vieni,” as Calisto’s wistful recollections turn to desperation. The strings joined me in an effort to make the multiple repetitions of “*moro, moro*” (I die, I die), ms. 55-58 and ms. 62-65 as lush and indulgent as possible, with ample crescendo through the long-held notes. For the final ritornello, ms. 70 to the end (see Figure 5.9), the entire ensemble played.

Figure 5.8

Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Act 3, Scene 1: Calisto: “T’aspetto e tu non vieni”

*I await you, but you do not come / you are indolent and slow / my beloved / You disturb my serenity / my soul, my hope / your looks slay me / I await you, but you do not come / resplendent, indolent one / You pierce my heart with an arrow / I pray you, come, comfort me. / Your looks slay me*<sup>104</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Translation by Terri Richter

Figure 5.9



Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Act 3, Scene 1: Calisto: Final Ritornello

### Art and Physical Gesture

In researching visual representations of Calisto from the seventeenth century, I discovered Nicolaes Bercham's *Jupiter Notices Callisto* (1656). It shows the pre-sexual Calisto in the moment where the god Giove sees her frolicking in the woods, and desires her. Two details in particular stood out to me: Calisto's breasts are bare, which I believe could be interpreted as a signifier of both her pre-sexual lack of self-consciousness (Eve went naked in the Garden of Eden until her encounter with the serpent), and also of her potential for eroticism. She rests her right hand affectionately over a deer, which I believe demonstrates the absolute contentment and harmony with nature that she personified in her pre-sexual state. It was helpful to envision both these impressions as I performed "Non e maggior," "Restino imbalsamate," and

“T’aspetto e tu non vieni,” as I tried to assimilate her unashamed, relaxed body language into my physical gestures.

Figure 5.10



Nicolaes Berchem, *Jupiter Notices Calisto*, 1656, Oil on canvas, Private collection

The libidinous character of Elena (Helen of Troy) was represented on my final concert by a rich and sexually explicit duet between soprano and countertenor. Because Cavalli originally composed the role of Menelao for a high castrato voice, the vocal line lay a little high for my countertenor colleague, so we switched vocal lines for this performance – a change which I believe may have contributed to the idea of gender instability. It is the sexual ambiguity inherent in the castrato voice that makes this duet so suggestively seductive, and we played this advantage in our performance of “Mia speranza.” The similarity of our vocal timbres signified eroticism in a way that perhaps a duet between a soprano and a tenor could not have. The countertenor and I

stood side by side, touching (as close together as stage decorum would allow) for the delivery of this final duet.

The rhythm and juxtapositions of note durations in the first ritornello suggest anticipation (short/short/short/short/short/**long**), as if the melody is striving toward something (ms. 27-33) (see Figure 5.10, below). When they are not taking turns caressing each other with short, delicately-shaped phrases of four syllables each (ms. 34-36), the vocal lines of Elena and Menelao are gently undulating together in thirds (ms. 37-40).

After a brief recitativo section (ms. 103-109), the sexually suggestive harmony returns and rises to a climax (ms. 130-133). The countertenor and I approached this climactic moment at ms. 131 on the word “*stabilité*” (stability) with an out-of-time, impeccably tuned straight-tone (no vibrato) and then slowly warmed the note with an onset of vibrato and a dynamic crescendo before the resolution in ms. 133 on the word “*turbar*” (trouble). The effect of this suspension/crescendo into passionate resolution is highly evocative - not only of musical climax but also of sexual climax. After the ‘consummation,’ the two voices finally sing in unison for the first time in the opera on the final note of the duet, in ms. 50 on the last half of the word “*sarà*” (will be).

In short, this duet by Cavalli is perhaps as explicit a musical representation of a sexual encounter as can be found in seventeenth-century operatic repertoire. I include the entire duet here for two reasons: 1) I only found evidence of one performance of it in the United States, at Cornell University in 2006; as far as I know, the duet’s performance on my recital was the second, and it is simply too beautiful a duet not to share, and 2) because of its inaccessibility; as

far as I am aware, the only modern score edition available is in the dissertation of Kristin Kane from 2010.<sup>105</sup>

Figure 5.11

The image shows a musical score for Figure 5.11, starting at measure 24. The score is divided into four staves: [Vln. I], [Vln. II], El., and [B. C.]. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The tempo marking *Ritornello* is placed above the Violin I staff. The El. staff contains the lyrics: - ser A - man - te. The score features a double bar line at the end of measure 24, followed by a repeat sign. The Violin I and II parts have rests in the first measure, followed by a half note G4 in the second measure. The El. part has a half note G4 in the first measure, followed by a half note A4 in the second measure. The Bassoon part has a half note G3 in the first measure, followed by a half note A3 in the second measure. The score continues with eighth and sixteenth notes in measures 3 and 4.

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<sup>105</sup> Kristin Aviva Nelson Kane, “Francesco Cavalli’s *Elena* (1659): A Study and Edition” (DMA diss., Cornell University, 2010).

29

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

‡

34

Men. *à 2*

El.

[B. C.]

Mio Con - ten - to. Là ne' gi -

Mia spe - ran - za. Là ne' gi -

‡

39

Men.

El.

[B. C.]

- ri de le sfe - re, Cre-di à mè Che non v'è Tal di-

- ri de le sfe - re, Cre-di à mè Che non

43

Men.  let - to, tal pia - ce - re Che s'u - gua - gli à quel, à

El.  v'è Tal di - let - to, tal pia - ce - re Che s'u - gua - gli à

[B. C.] 

47

Men.  quel\_ ch'io\_ sen - to. Mio con-

El.  quel ch'io\_ sen - to. Mia spe - ran - za.

[B. C.] 

51

Men.  ten - to. Mia spe - ran - za. Mio con - ten - to.

El.  Mia spe - ran - za. Mio con - ten - to.

[B. C.] 

56 *Ritornello*

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

61

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

66 *Seconda*

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

Men.

El.

[B. C.]

Mio de-

Mia de - li - tia.

71 *à 2*

Men. *si - o. Pri - ma'l sol d'ha-ver splen-*

El. *Pri - ma'l sol d'ha-ver splen*

[B. C.]

75

Men. *do - re Ces-se - rà, La-scie - rà, Che ne l'al - ma, che nel*

El. *do - re Ces-se - rà, La-scie - rà, Che ne*

[B. C.]

79

Men. *co - re Mais'e - stin- gua'l fo - co, fo - co*

El. *l'al - ma, che nel co - re Mais'e - stin- gua'l fo - co,*

[B. C.]

83

Men. 

El. 

[B. C.] 

6

88

Men. 

El. 

[B. C.] 


b

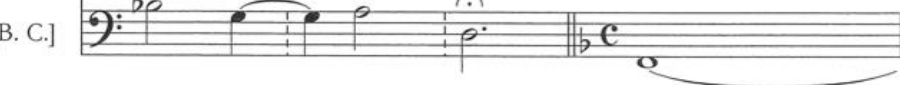
94

[B. C.] 

# #

100

Men. 

[B. C.] 

104

Men.    
 fu - ga, I - do-lo mi - o      A l'in-con-tro pri-mier d'a - mi - ca

[B. C.] 

106

Men.    
 sor - te.

El.    
 Ti se-gui-rò mio Ben, fi - no à la mor - te..

[B. C.] 

109

Men.    
 Mio Nu-me per tè,

El.    
 Per tè mia De-i-

[B. C.] 

114 à 2

Men. Lan - gui - re, Gio - i - -

El. tà, Mo - ri - re, Gio - i - -

[B. C.]

118

Men. - re, gio - i - re sa - rà. Lan - gui - re,

El. - re, gio - i - re sa - rà. Mo -

[B. C.]

122

Men. Gio - i - - re, gio - i - re sa -

El. ri - re, Gio - i - - re, gio - i - re sa -

[B. C.]

126 à 2

Men. *rà. Di Sor-ti spie-ta-te, Ma-*

El. *rà. Di - stel-le a - di-ra-te, Ma-*

[B. C.]

129

Men. *li-gno te-no-re Di que-sto mio co-re La sta - bi-le*

El. *li-gno te-no-re Di que-sto mio co-re La sta - bi-le*

[B. C.]

b

132

Men. *fè Tur - bar non po-trà. Mio nu-me per*

El. *fè Tur - bar non po-trà.*

[B. C.]

136 à 2

Men. *tè, Lan - gui-re, Gio-*

El. *Per tè mia De-i - tà, Mo - ri - re, Gio-*

[B. C.]

141

Men. *i - re, gio - i - re sa - rà. Lan-*

El. *i - re, gio - i - re sa - rà.*

[B. C.]

145

Men. *gui - re, Gio - i - - re, gio-*

El. *Mo - ri - re, Gio - i - - re, gio-*

[B. C.]

149 *Sinfonia*

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

Men.  
*i - rre sa - rà.*

El.  
*i - rre sa - rà.*

[B. C.]

153

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

157

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

159

[Vln. I]

[Vln. II]

[B. C.]

Cavalli, *Elena*, Act 3, Scene 7: Elena and Menelao: “Mia speranza”

*My hope / my happiness / There, above in the heavenly spheres / Believe me / There is no delight / or peace that is equal to this, / This that I feel. / Let us get ready to flee / my idol / at the first chance we get. / I will follow you, Love, / Until I die. / My goddess, for you / for you, my god / to languish, to die / A joy will be. / From the irritated stars / from merciless destiny / no provocation / this my faithful heart / could trouble.*<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Translation by Kristin Kane

## Conclusion

### Performing Seventeenth-Century Opera for Modern Audiences

In 1970, Raymond Leppard conducted his now famous “realization” of Cavalli’s *Ormindo* at Glyndebourne – a crucial moment for early opera. At the same time, somewhat more quietly, across the pond, musicologist and harpsichordist Alan Curtis presented Cavalli’s opera *Erismena* (in English) at the University of California, Berkeley. A manuscript of *La finta pazza* by Francesco Saccati was discovered by musicologist Lorenzo Bianconi in 1984 in the personal library of the family of Prince Borromeo. With permission of the family, a modern edition was created and premiered at Yale University in 2010 under the tutelage of musicologist and baroque opera scholar Ellen Rosand. These early experiments quickly caught the attention of the public, and the practice of reviving unknown seventeenth-century operas became a trend across the United States and Europe. Colleges and universities began to recognize that these early manuscripts provide ideal performance experiences for young, inexperienced singers, due to their relatively narrow ranges and melodic stability. Opera companies and early music ensembles seemed to recognize in them the potential for satisfying audiences with a combination of pleasing musicality, beautiful staging and costumes, and simple, direct expressions of timeless human experience.

During a symposium at the first Berkeley Festival and Exhibitions called *Music in History 1990*, critic Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* offered a more philosophical reason for the resurgence of enthusiasm for early music in general when he wrote about two universal yet opposing human needs – the need for familiarity and the need for novelty. He proposed that the music-going public is torn between a craving for novelty on the one hand, and

on the other hand the urge to flee from the music of living composers. In spite of the controversial issues surrounding the early music movement in the 90's, according to Kosman its major attraction is that it stepped into the breach by satisfying the universal hungers for both familiarity (security) and novelty (vitality).<sup>107</sup>

During a convention at Gresham College in 2008, Rosand, along with Beth Glixon and Jennifer Williams-Brown, were invited to speak on the subject of restaging early Venetian opera.<sup>108</sup> Both Rosand and Glixon delivered lectures about Cavalli's opera *La Calisto*, offering applicable and interesting perspectives on the process of assimilating early operas into modern performance. Yale Opera Project regularly presents early opera works; Cavalli's *La Didone* is on the bill for 2017, and recent seasons include Cavalli's *Erismena*, *La Calisto*, and *Scipione Affricano*, Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno D'Ulisse in Patria*, Saccati's *La finta pazza*, and Cavalli's *Giasone*. The continuing prevalence of the trend justifies important ongoing consideration of the issues involved in the reincarnation of a seventeenth-century opera work.

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<sup>107</sup> Joseph Kerman et al., "The Early Music Debate: Ancients, Moderns, Postmoderns." *The Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992): 113-130.

<sup>108</sup> Ellen Rosand, "Restoring Cavalli to the Theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Lecture presented at a conference of Gresham College, London, England, 22 September 2008.  
<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/calisto-a-le-stelle-cavalli-and-the-staging-of-venetian-opera-part-one>.

## Challenges

### Incomplete Source Material

Perhaps the most challenging issue for early opera specialists is that of the inconsistency or incomplete nature of original source material. Even when there are scores and librettos available, one cannot escape the reality of the difference between the purpose of scores today versus the purpose of scores and written material in the seventeenth century. Generally speaking, these “scores” were never meant to be preserved, but were simply records of performance. More specifically, they are often records of a particular performance. They lack information which the composer would have been expected to supply at the time of the final rehearsals for the production – details which could not have been decided until the composer became aware of the size of the theater, the available singers, and the available instruments. More often than not, two versions of a score or libretto are discovered with substantial differences, representing repeat performances of the same opera for audiences in neighboring cities.

As many historians of the era have observed, purity of transmission was never the primary goal of opera composers and librettists. After selecting an ancient myth, a librettist was unconcerned with preserving the details of the original source, but was unapologetically influenced by his city’s own special mythologies, by modern biological and behavioral norms, and by views about gender, sexuality, identity that were predominant at the time. As Wendy Heller states in her book *Emblems of Eloquence*, original sources were “filtered through a lens that was crafted by early modern thinking.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 19.

## Score Realization and Orchestration

The questions surrounding orchestration are of particular concern to conductors of early opera reconstructions. More often than not, only a single basso continuo line and a vocal line are indicated in the original scores – a paucity which gives performers and conductors a large degree of creative license, but also the added responsibility of making the most educated guesses possible.

Stephen Stubbs has proposed two theories about the basis on which early opera composers would have made decisions on the assignment of continuo instruments to specific passages: 1) that instruments would have been assigned by *role*, and 2) that they would have been assigned by *affetto*.<sup>110</sup> The concept of instrumentation by role implies that a specific instrument or group of instruments is associated with a particular character. Stubbs's theory of instrumentation by *affetto* is based on the musical aesthetics of the time, specifically the belief that the aim of music is to move the passions. Experimentation with both approaches is advised in the process of assembling and assigning instruments for an early opera reproduction.

In response to what seems to be a genuine demand for answers to these questions, Barenreiter agreed to publish usable editions of fourteen previously unpublished scores, several of which have already been released. With the sponsorship of Barenreiter and the continued involvement of renowned scholars like Beth Glixon and Ellen Rosand, a prediction can reasonably be offered that the next few decades will continue to hold a resurgence of early opera reproductions in the United States.

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<sup>110</sup> Stephen Stubbs, "L'armonia sonora: Continuo Orchestration in Monteverdi's Orfeo," *Early Music* 22 (1994): 92.

## Portraying ‘Unruly Women’ Today

As Bonnie Gordon writes, “When women sang, they made themselves into unruly women: that is, women who break the rules and occupy the spaces between the lines.”<sup>111</sup> Singing women were embodiments of unruliness; they were rebels of a subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) nature. Gordon was writing primarily about the actual women who played the roles in the seventeenth century instead of the roles themselves, but in my opinion, an equally obvious discrepancy lies in the fact that the fictional ‘unruly’ women discussed in this dissertation were *created by men*. The questions around whether the specific roles discussed were portrayed by women or by castrati have implications on my work, but they are not my primary focus. The goal of this dissertation has been to point out the chasm that existed between the *IDEAL of woman* established by the men of early modern society, and the type of women that the (mostly) male audiences actually wanted to see portrayed, which was reflected in the choices of librettists and composers. What does this obvious discrepancy say about the society that produced it? What questions are raised about the nature of man by this apparent inconsistency? What relevance, if any, do these questions have to modern reconstructions of the works?

The portrayal of ‘unruly women’ obviously looks very different today than it did in the seventeenth century, yet to refashion these female roles into modern versions in order to retain the ‘shock value’ for today’s audiences creates an entirely new set of issues. Such juxtapositions are not uncommon, especially in Europe, and the practice of resetting old operas into modern contexts (for example, *Le nozze di Figaro* set in Nazi Germany, or Don Giovanni portrayed as a street rapist and heroine addict) is still a subject of heated debate in the United States. The European trend of placing traditional operas into bizarre modern contexts has earned the

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<sup>111</sup> Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi’s Unruly Women*, 1.

affectionately derogatory label of “Eurotrash.” Audiences either love it or they hate it. Equally controversial has been the more recent experiment of placing old operas into modern, abstract settings, which supposedly allows more room for individual audience interpretation.

These considerations return us to Mikhail Bakhtin’s three approaches to the reinterpretation of old texts (which, as stated in the opening of this dissertation, I find equally applicable to the reproduction of early opera). To illustrate my point, I will briefly restate Bakhtin’s three approaches, substituting terminology more closely applicable to the issues at hand: 1 – We seek to identify only those meanings the composer originally had in mind. The danger of this approach is that we “enclose” a seventeenth-century opera within its epoch, therefore relinquishing any grasp of its larger significance and its vibrant “life” in later times. 2 – We modernize opera productions with no regard for their historical context. The danger of this approach is that of “cultural myopia” - we risk turning them into mere markers of our own contemporary concerns and lose the opportunity to learn from them and from their different perspectives. 3 – We carefully view early opera works as “noncoincident” with themselves, and therefore inherently capable of many different interpretations, allowing for a surplus of potential meanings. In a sense, this allows them to continue speaking, even though interpreters in previous epochs may not have heard them, or repeated them, in quite the same way.

It is my opinion that the third approach holds the most potential for the revival of seventeenth-century opera in general, and more specifically for the portrayal of its female characters. It is my hope that a deeper understanding of the affectual and societal context of femininity as represented by these works will inform future performances and contribute to the well-deserved acceptance of this extraordinary repertoire into the operatic canon. At the very least, it will present to the reader some wonderful old/new repertoire for consideration.

## Appendix A

### Artworks in order of projection

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Al toro y al aire dar les calle (Make Way For the Bulls and Wind)*, c. 1815-1819, Etching on paper, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Peter Paul Rubens, *Dance of Mythological Characters and Villagers*, 1630 – 1635, Painting on canvas, The Prado, Madrid, Spain Prado On-line Registry

Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Immaculate Conception*, 1767 – 1769, Oil on canvas, The Prado, Madrid, Spain, Prado On-line Registry

Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato, *The Virgin in Prayer*, (1640-1650), Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London, National Gallery Link

Guido Cagnacci, *St. Agatha*, c. 1635-1640, Oil on canvas, Modena, Banca Popolare dell'Emilia Romagna, Italy

Carlo Dolci, *The Angel of the Annunciation*, between 1653 and 1655. Oil on canvas. Louvre Museum, Paris, France

Artemisia Gentileschi, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, 1615-1616 or 1620-1625 oil on canvas, Pitti Palace, Italy

Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Wedding Dance*, 1566, oil on panel, Northern Renaissance Museum Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan

Adrianus Hubertus, From a 17th century Dutch copperplate circa 1650 (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Unknown Dutch artist, *Head of a Woman*, 17 century, oil on canvas, Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, United Kingdom

After Paris Bordone, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, probably 17th century Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Witches' Flight*, 1797-98, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Bartolomeo Veneto, *Santa Caterina D'Alessandria*, circa 1520, oil on panel, Private collection

Peter Paul Rubens, After Leonardo da Vinci. Copy of *Battle of Anghiari* by Leonardo da Vinci (Copy after a fresco in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence, executed in 1504-1505 and destroyed around 1560) C. 1603. Black chalk, pen in brown ink, brush in brown and gray ink, gray wash, heightened in white and gray-blue, Louvre Museum, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris, France

Paulo Uccello, *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino unseats Bernardino della Ciarda at the Battle of San Romano* (dating uncertain, c. 1435–1455), tempera on wood, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy

Nicolaes Bercham, *Jupiter Notices Calisto*, 1656, Oil on canvas, Private collection

François Boucher, *The Love Letter*, 1750, Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Hans Baldung, *Two Witches*, 1523, Oil on panel Städtelsche Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt, Germany

After Guido Reni, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1635-1700, Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London, UK

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1647–52, Marble, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy

Workshop of Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, about 1554, Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London

Uccello, Paulo. *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano*. c. 1438–1440, egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar, National Gallery, London

Willem van de Velde the Younger, *Surrender of Prince Royal at the Four Days' Battle*, 1666, Oil on canvas, Private collection

Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*, c. 1609-10, Oil on wood, The National Gallery, London, UK

Gherardo di Giovanni del Fora, *The Combat of Love and Chastity*, c. 1475-1500, Tempera on wood, The National Gallery, London, UK

Johann Heinrich Füssli, *Prince Arthur and the Fairy Queen*, C. 1788, Oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Germany

Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *The Wedding Dance*, 1566, oil on panel, Museum Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Judith with the head of Holofernes*, 1530, Oil on beech wood,

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1611–12, Oil on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

Giovanni Battista il Sassoferrato, *Judith*, 1630, Oil on canvas, Convent of San Pietro, Perugia, Italy

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