

**Zeitschrift:** Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel

**Herausgeber:** Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

**Band:** 33 (2009)

**Artikel:** Loving Theseus : the spectacle of feminine passions on the Munich stage (1662)

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-868895>

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# LOVING THESEUS. THE SPECTACLE OF FEMININE PASSIONS ON THE MUNICH STAGE (1662)

by WENDY HELLER

It is perhaps surprising that one of the seventeenth century's most elaborate and massive spectacles involving Italian opera should have taken place not on the Italian peninsula, but rather in Munich in 1662, as part of the celebrations for the birth of Maximilian II, the son of Elector Ferdinand Maria (1636–1679) and Henriette Adelaide of Savoy (1636–1676).<sup>1</sup> Not content to stage a single opera, the Elector and Electress presented a trilogy of three operatic-style entertainments performed over a period of eight days. The *Applausi festivi*, as it was called, included *Fedra incoronata*, a drama regio based on the Venetian model presented on September 24th, 1662 at the Elector's theatre at Salvatorplatz; *Antiopa*, a drama guerriero or tournament opera, featuring processions, floats, mock battles, and tableaux with musical interludes performed in the palace courtyard on September 26; the trilogy was concluded on 1 October with *Medea vendicativa*, a firework opera on a floating stage in the River Isar.<sup>2</sup>

The Munich entertainments were remarkable from a number of perspectives, not the least of which was the sheer extravagance of both the visual and musical experience. Although no music survives, the printed librettos penned by the Vicenza librettist and nobleman Pietro Paolo Bissari (1595–1663) with descriptions and engravings provide us more than a hint of the enormity of the undertaking.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On opera in Munich in the preceding decades, see Max Zenger, *Geschichte der Münchener Oper*, ed. by Theodor Kroyer, Munich 1923; Hubertus Bolognaro-Crevenna, *L'arpa festante. Die Müncher Oper 1651–1825 von den Anfängen bis zum „Freyschützen“*, Munich 1963, 31–35; Colin Timms, *Polymath of the Baroque. Agostino Steffani and his Music*, Oxford 2003, 10–15.

<sup>2</sup> This impressive theatrical spectacle is frequently mentioned in studies of Italian festivals and scenography in the seventeenth century. See Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Triumphal Shews. Tournaments at German Speaking Courts in their European Context 1560–1730*, Berlin 1992, 85–94; Cesare Molinari, *Le nozze degli dèi. Un saggio sul grande spettacolo italiano nel Seicento*, Rome 1968, 194–196; see also Jürgen Schläder, „Die Inszenierung des Lebens. Theater und Politik unter Kurfürst Ferdinand Maria“, in: Hans-Michael Körner and Jürgen Schläder (eds), *Münchner Theatergeschichtliches Symposium 2000*, München 2000 (= Studien zur Münchner Theatergeschichte 1), 27–39 and idem, „Das Fest als theatrale Fiktion von Wirklichkeit. Über die Bühnenästhetik der Münchner *Applausus festivi* von 1662“, *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 23, 1999, 41–58; Eberhard Straub, *Repraesentatio Maiestatis oder churbayerische Freudenfeste. Die höfischen Feste in der Müncher Residenz vom 16. bis zum Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1969 (= Miscellanea Bavarica Monacensia 14), 217–234.

<sup>3</sup> Pietro Paolo Bissari, *Fedra incoronata, Drama Regio Musicale. Attione Prima De gli Applausi fatti alla nascita Dell'Altezza Ser.ma Di Massimiliano Emanuele [...]*, Munich 1662; *Antiopa giustificata, Drama guerriero. Attione seconda De gli Aplausi fatti alla nascita Dell'Altezza Ser.ma Di Massimiliano Emanuele [...]*, Munich 1662; *Medea Vendicativa. Drama di foco. Attione Terza De gli Applausi fatti per la Nascita Dell'Altezza Ser.ma Di Massimiliano Emanuele [...]*, Munich 1662.



The performances called upon the most sophisticated skills of the team of artists, which included the engineer and designer Francesco Santurini who had worked extensively in Venice.<sup>4</sup> The dances were choreographed by Vincenzo Castiglione, and the music – now lost – was written by the court composer Johann Kaspar Kerll (1627–1693). The entire project was overseen by Bissari, who collaborated in Venice with no less a composer than Francesco Cavalli included *La Torilda* (1648) and *La Bradamante* (1650)

The goal of the directorial team seems to have been to provide the Munich audiences with a particularly novel theatrical experience. Even the most „conventional“ of the three entertainments, *Fedra incoronata*, the first of the trilogy and the only one performed at the court theater, included remarkable stage effects. Consider, for example, Bissari's account of the opening of the prologue. Santurini and Bissari did not seek merely to recreate a natural phenomenon – a storm – but rather to take the viewer beyond the ordinary world, to a supernatural universe in which the clouds not only put forth rose-scented rain, but also provide a resting place for singing gods and goddesses (fig. 1).

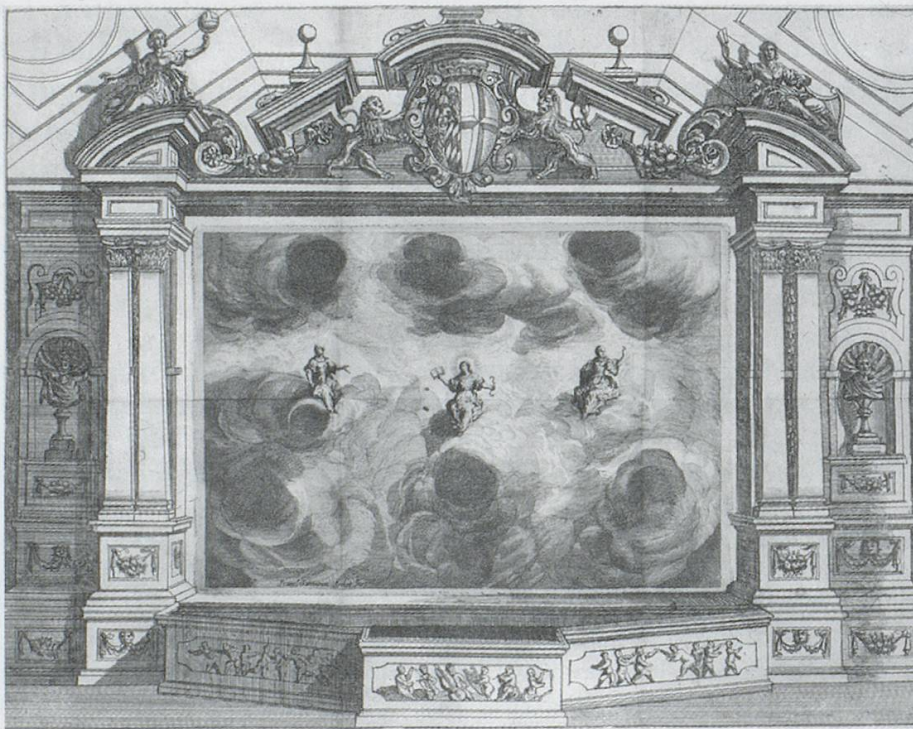


fig. 1: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Fedra incoronata*, Prologue: Iride, Hebe, and Lucinda in the clouds, set design: Francesco Santurini. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>4</sup> On Santurini, see Mercedes Viale Ferraro, „Stage and Set,“ in: Lorenzo Bianconi, Giorgio Pestelli and Kate Singleton (eds), *Opera on Stage*, Chicago 2002, 43–54.



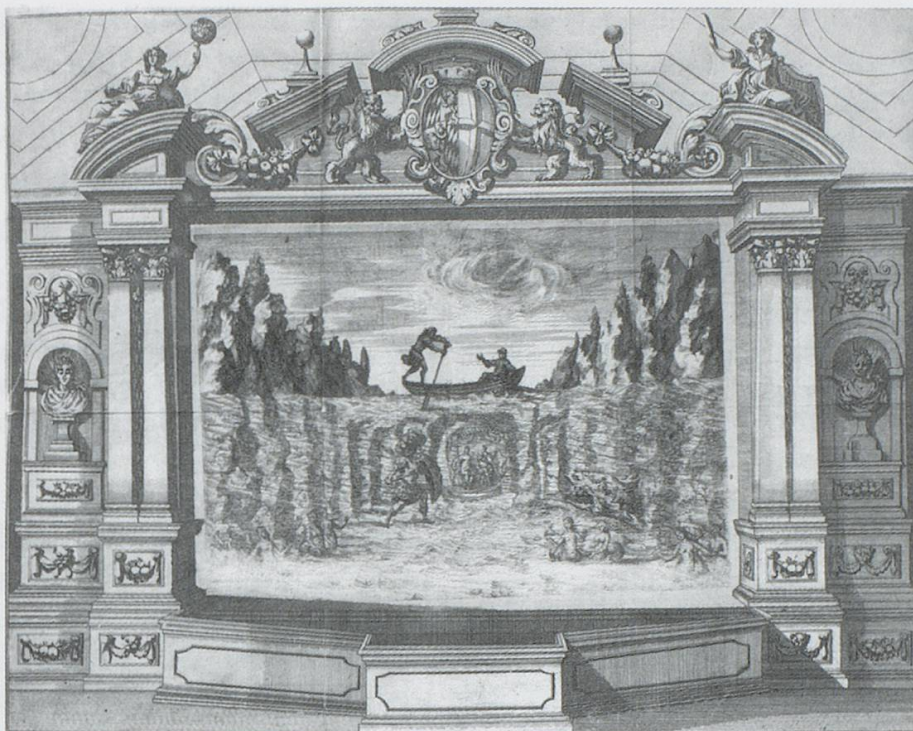


fig. 2: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Fedra incoronata*, I.16: Alico and Ferebea on a small boat above over the sea, showing the scene below, set design: Francesco Santurini. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



fig. 3: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Fedra incoronata*, II.21: Centaurs, with Theseus and Pirithous, set design: Francesco Santurini. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



At the sound of a horrid sinfonia, accompanied by booming thunder and lightening bolts, the theatre darkens, and the curtain disappears, and one sees the scene filling up with clouds moving from various directions, from which lightening flashes are visible. One of the clouds breaks off and advances towards the audience and disperses a light rain with perfumed water, ending, as the thunder crescendos, with a sweet tempest. At the lowering of the clouds, the thunder stops, and the theatre is illuminated, and shows, opening up, Iride on an arch, with Hebe and Lucinda seated separately. After a trio, Iride, with silky veils, descends to present the opera to their Highnesses, and the other two rise up on a separate cloud, joining Iride for another trio; after dispensing sonnets, they depart together. The clouds disappear completely from the scene along with them, going off in all directions and they bring into view the scene and machines for the prologue, accompanied by a warlike sinfonia.<sup>5</sup>

This introduced the various allegorical figures who dominate the heavens and seas – Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Vulcan, and Apollo (including the satirical Momus, who by the end of the prologue is knocked out of the clouds by Jupiter's thunder). The remainder of the opera is equally spectacular, calling for no fewer than twelve set changes. There are sumptuous scenes in Theseus's Athenian palace, such as the royal atrium lined with statues and the rotunda in the courtyard. There are classic seaside settings, including the rock on the island of Naxos where Theseus will abandon Ariadne and the „ritiro delizioso alla Marina“ – the delightful retreat at the marina – where Antiopa awaits Theseus' return. There is also an abundance of supernatural scenes, enlivened by special effects and *balli*. Thus, in the kingdom of Neptune at the bottom of the ocean, the audience witnesses Theseus' and Pirithous' battle with maritime monsters that emerge from the mouth of a giant fish, which are subsequently slain by Theseus. The set showed not only Neptune's underworld kingdom, but also the comic servants, Alico and Ferebea, in a boat on the water's surface. The first act ends as Alico, falling into the water, joins the Nereids and sea monsters in a *ballo* (fig. 2). Bissari also includes an obligatory trip to the underworld in the opening of Act II, where Theseus and Pirithous encounter Proserpina, fight monstrous spirits, and are then lulled to sleep by Morpheus (who appears on a tortoise shell), while Act II concludes on the island of the sirens and their *ballo* with the centaurs (fig. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Bissari, *Fedra incoronata* (see n. 3), n.p. Presentatione dell'opera: „Al suono d'un orrida sinfonia accompagnata da ribombo di tuoni, e di saete s'oscura il teatro, e sparrita la tenda, si vede occupata la scena da mobili nubi, da varie parti, delle quali si vedon lampi. Allo staccarsi di una di quelle, che s'avanza verso l'udienza, si sparge una lieve pioggia d'acqua odorosa, che, col crescimento de' tuoni, termina in una dolce tempesta. Al calar delle nube fermano i tuoni, si rischiara il teatro, e mostra, apprendosi, avere in sè Iride su l'arco, & Hebe, e Lucina sedute a parte. Dopo un terzetto cala Iride a presentare ai Seren.mi l'opera, con alcuni zendadi, et l'altre due nella separata nube vano alzandosi, sin che, a loro riunita Iride, con nuovo terzetto, e con dispensa di sonetti unitamente si partono. Spariscono con esse le nube tutte dalla scena, che a varie parti si portano aprendo alla vista, con una sinfonia guerreria, la scena del prologo, e le sue machine.“ All transl. by W. H. Orthography and punctuation have been lightly edited to reflect modern usage.



The scenographic challenges were even greater for the other two installments: the tournament opera *Antiopa giustificata* was presented in what was described as a „piazza coperta“ – a drawing of which is reproduced in the libretto (fig. 4), for which Bissari provides dimensions (360 feet long, 80 feet wide, and about 100 feet high).<sup>6</sup>

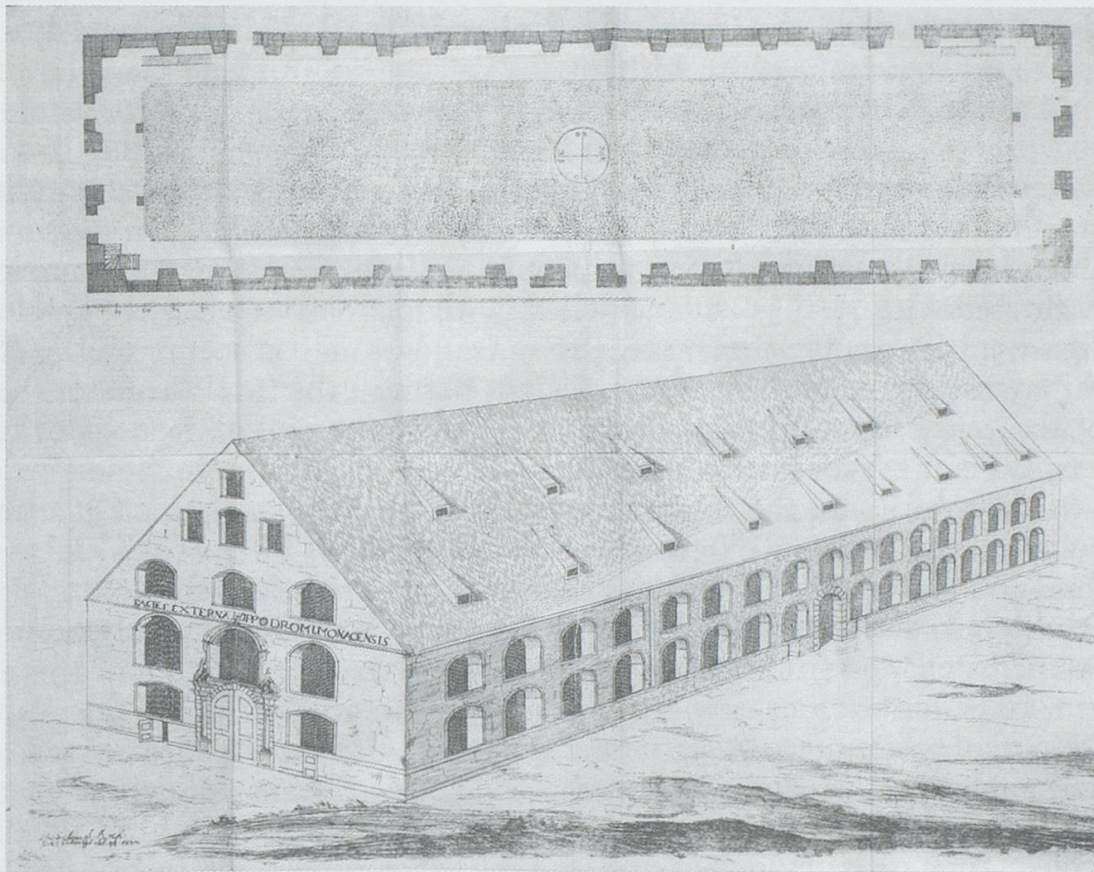


fig. 4: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Antiopa giustificata*, *Piazza Coperta*. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

The space needed to be large enough to accommodate Medea's first dramatic aerial appearance on a fire-breathing dragon accompanied by her evil spirits to the sound of another „horrid sinfonia“, not to mention the some five hundred noblemen who would participate in the subsequent nine *comparsi* or processions. According to Bissari's description, the action would commence from one of the two platform stages placed at either end of the structure, one decorated with the arms of the house of Bavaria and the other with those of the house of Savoy, each of which also had a platform at the highest point where the trumpets and drums resided. They would be put into service depending upon from which stage the procession commenced, thus creating a kind of ‚stereophonic‘ effect that matched the choreography. Lighting, too, was an important part of the experience; Bissari claims that they were able

<sup>6</sup> Bissari, *Antiopa giustificata* (see n. 3), 5.



to achieve „notte nel giorno“ – night in day – yet this was „not less clear than day,” since the illumination in so many scenes was enhanced by the torches carried by flying cupids or spirits and monkeys.<sup>7</sup>

The stage and sets for the third installment, *Medea vendicativa*, were even more elaborate. The theater, with a 360-foot circumference, was built away from the city in „open country“ where „two days ago one could see nothing but naked earth“; thus, the fireworks, mock navel battles, and ultimate destruction of the set could take place without any damage to Munich.<sup>8</sup> Here, however, we find one of Santurini's most novel inventions: the noble viewers seated closest to the action were protected from harm through the construction of moveable boxes that were brought forward so that the guests might be able to hear the singers, and then could be moved backwards in a timely fashion so as to protect them from fireworks, cannons, or spurting water fountains.<sup>9</sup> The proscenium, decorated with statues and bas-reliefs with appropriate classical emblems and figures placed on floating rafts on river Isar, was able to accommodate the eight different stage sets; there was sufficient room in the final scene for the surges of the water fountain that measured 88 feet high and 46 feet wide, leaving a vast horizon on the lake where one could see six ships, sails, canons, and other water machines for the concluding water battle.<sup>10</sup> Nor was this all: at the other end of the field – over 270 feet away – stood Medea's fortress at Colchis, 80 feet long and 60 feet high, with four grand towers in Ionic architectural style and two pyramids that – like the rest of the set – would ultimately be destroyed in the battle and fireworks in the opera's finale.

Remarkably, this entire elaborate spectacle with newly constructed theaters and noble participation was in the service of a coherent dramatic conception.<sup>11</sup> As Bissari makes explicit in the printed librettos, these three „musical actions“ – one recited, one of arms, and the other of fire – are in fact linked, each

<sup>7</sup> Bissari, *Antiopa giustificata* (see n. 3), 6: „[N]el tempo delle quali comparsi si trovò in questo luogo la notte nel giorno, mà del giorno non men' chiara, perché, oltre la ricca illuminazione del sito, ognà comparsa era arricchita di tanti lumi, che rendeano charissima quella notte“.

<sup>8</sup> Bissari, *Medea vendicativa* (see n. 3), argomento, n. p.: „Le ordinarie provisioni, e pericoli del fuoco di queste provincie, non han permesso luogo in Monaco ad un Drama di fuoco; al quale però fu assegnato, subito fuori de' bastioni della città, lontana da case, e dea' pericoli: In aperta campagna dunque, dove due giorni avanti altro non si vede, che la nuda terra.“

<sup>9</sup> Bissari, *Medea vendicativa* (see n. 3), argomento, n. p.: „se ben si portava avanti alla metà dell'Udienza per maggiormente godere la Recita Musicale, al tempo però de' fuochi, e per quante volte occurevano, facevo il Palco con tutto il suo carico, una subita ritirata.“

<sup>10</sup> Schläder, „Das Fest als theatrale Fiktion“ (see n. 2), 51–56, demonstrates how the temporary stages for both *Antiopa giustificata* and *Medea vendicativa* were designed according to the same principles as the theatre at Salvatorplatz.

<sup>11</sup> There are series of operas in the Venetian tradition that can be considered to be trilogies, though there are no other recorded instances in which three operas were performed successively. See Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas. A Venetian Trilogy*, Berkeley 2007, who argues that Monteverdi's final three operas should be considered a trilogy.



one „taking up an event from the previous one.“<sup>12</sup> Thus, in *Fedra incoronata*, Theseus abandons the Amazon Antiopa for Fedra; in *Antiopa giustificata*, the Amazon's champion and unrequited lover Solois challenges all of the other knights to defend Antiopa's name by fighting Theseus (or, more accurately, by defeating the attributes of perfidy, deception, and infidelity that Theseus' actions presumably embodied); notably this role was played by Ferdinand Maria himself. In the final firework drama the sorceress Medea seeks vengeance – not merely on behalf of Theseus, but also for the sheer pleasure of reeking havoc on virtually every mythological figure that might ever have wronged her – Jason, Creusa, Orpheus, Bunus.

This essay provides a preliminary examination of this remarkable series of entertainments. Indeed, this trilogy might well be regarded as a prototype of a ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘ as it embodies a synthesis of the arts that may well surpass any other musical theater production in the Baroque. However, I am particularly interested in exploring how the competing media created a complex dramatic entity in which the conventional heroic elements that one might expect to find in a dynastic celebration are undermined by female power, yet the ultimate result is a an unambiguous celebration of the unity of the Houses of Savoy and Bavaria. What is remarkable here is not merely the fact that the dramas were conceived of as a coherent trilogy with spectacular scenic effects. Rather, I am intrigued by the unusual trajectory of a series of music dramas that begins with the amorous and heroic exploits of the hero Theseus and ends with the uncontrolled fury of Medea – and the ultimate destruction of the entire operatic enterprise. As the spectacular elements become increasingly elaborate – and the drama expands from the confines of the theater to the *piazza coperta* and finally to a newly constructed theater on the lake – the dramatic logic becomes looser, and the distance between spectacle and spectator dissolves as the male nobility take the stage. The emphasis on the heroic feats of Theseus – ostensibly so central to Bissari's stated goal of using the hero to represent Bavarian glory – is temporarily undone as the representations of feminine power – embodied first by the destabilizing presence of Amazons and ultimately by the sorceress Medea – become predominant. In so doing, Bissari and his colleagues exploit the conventions of Venetian opera with which they are so familiar and use them to push the genre to the breaking point.

### *Venetian opera in Munich*

An important element that differentiates the Munich entertainments from operatic court festivities at some other seventeenth-century courts is the almost exclusively Venetian training of those most responsible for the shape of the trilogy – in particular, the librettist Pietro Paolo Bissari. Indeed, we might

<sup>12</sup> Bissari, *Fedra incoronata* (see n. 3), n.p., L'auttore: „Vertiscono gli Applausi in tre Musicali Attioni, una di Recita, una d'Armi, una di Fuoco, che prendendo ciascuna causa dell'altra.“



wonder what happens when a figure such as Bissari – so seeped in the libertine heterodox thinking of the Veneto academies such as Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti, and accustomed to producing operas that so suited the Republican sensibilities of the theaters in Venice and Vicenza, – ends up as the chief architect of one of the century's most elaborate dynastic celebrations. Or to put in another way – how did Bissari negotiate the space between the Venetian commercial opera world, in which noble patronage played a relatively minor role, and the world of the aristocracy as he prepared a celebration intended exclusively to glorify a royal birth?

*Bissari and the Accademia degli Incogniti*

Born into a noble family in Vicenza and trained as a lawyer, Bissari was one of a number of noblemen from the Veneto who participated in the various academies, wrote poetry, and ultimately devoted a substantial amount of energy to writing opera librettos for the public theaters.<sup>13</sup> His own life was by no means conventional – he maintained a long relationship with a married woman with whom he had several children. It is therefore not surprising that when sent to Venice by the Accademia Olimpica of Vicenza to study Venetian opera with the goal of establishing public opera theater in his home city, he would have become a regular participant in the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti. At the center of the Venetian literary world, the Incogniti, with their libertine, heterodox attitudes towards conventional morality and religion, attracted both Venetian and foreign poets and noblemen, eager to exchange ideas and publish their work free from Papal censorship.

Of particular significance for the many opera librettos penned by their members were their ambivalent views about women and the nature of female sexuality, one of their favorite topics for debate. In the writings of their founder, Giovanni Francesco Loredano, for instance, we find tension between his admiration for female beauty and condemnation of the power that women assert over men, tinged with more than a touch of misogyny.<sup>14</sup> Not only did these writings incite a series of literary debates, including a spirited response from the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, but the fact that so many of the first librettists were Incogniti members meant that this ambivalence towards women became central to the conventions of Venetian opera.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> On Bissari, see Gioachino Brognoligo, „La vita di un gentiluomo italiano del seicento: Pietro Paolo Bissari vicentino,“ in: *Studi di letteratura italiana* 8 (1980), 292–400 and 10 (1912), 16. On Bissari and *Medea vendicativa*, see also Annamaria Cecconi, „Medea vs Orfeo. Alla ricerca di un mito della potenza della musica al femminile“, in: Stefano A. E. Leoni (ed), *Orfeo, il mito, la musica. Percorsi tra musicologia e antropologia musicale*, Turin 2002, 127–144.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the philosophies of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti in relation to opera and bibliography of relevant sources, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence. Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Berkeley 2003, 48–81.

<sup>15</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence* (see n. 14), 57–68.



Bissari was deeply involved with all of the central figures in the Venetian opera industry and the contemporary polemics about women.<sup>16</sup> He collaborated with Francesco Cavalli, the most important opera composer of the day, for *La Torilda* (1648) and (possibly) *La Bradamante* (1650), the second opera of the century (after Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina*) to treat episodes from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, thus showing his original approach to adapting varied literary sources for the stage. He also corresponded with the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, who in fact lavished praise on his *Bradamante* libretto. At least one of his poems, *Chiamata a la nuova amante* was set by the Venetian composer Barbara Strozzi and published in her *Cantate, ariett, e duetti [...] Opera seconda* (1651), and Bissari included poems dedicated to the opera singer Silvia Manni in his collection *Le scorse olimpiche* (1650).<sup>17</sup>

### *Classical Precedents*

We also know a fair amount about Bissari's attitudes towards contemporary opera from some of his other writings, in particularly the lengthy preface to *La Torilda*, replete with numerous citations from Greek and Latin authorities, that sets out to demonstrate the extent to which modern theatre represents a renewal of the practices of the ancients.<sup>18</sup> Notably, Bissari is able to cite classical precedents for virtually all of the features of his operas and those of his contemporaries: the use of song, frequent scene changes, stage machinery, a preference for complex plots with multiple strands, the use of the *deus ex machina*, the Venetian preference for dance rather than choruses as a *divertissement* between the acts, and willingness to contradict the Aristotelian unities. The goal of drama, Bissari states, is to bring pleasure to the audience, which is derived from the intricacy and complexity of the drama; „the *invenzione* and *tessitura* [intricacy] of this drama [*Torilda*] are sisters, because as daughters of the same pen they are united in the goal of dressing the event in a garb that will render its appearance on the carnival stage more worthy.“<sup>19</sup> His mention of carnival is by no means coincidental; Bissari recognized the economic, social, and artistic necessity of reconfiguring the principles of the ancients to render drama acceptable to audiences during this period in the liturgical calendar.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence* (see n. 14), 61–63.

<sup>17</sup> Beth Glixon, „New Light on the Life and Career of Barbara Strozzi“, *The Musical Quarterly* 8 (1997), 311–335 and eadem, „Scenes from the Life of Silvia Galiarti Manni“, *Early Music History* 15 (1996), 97–146.

<sup>18</sup> On Bissari's preface to *La Torilda* and the implications of his views on ancient tragedy for *Fedra incoronata*, see Wendy Heller, „Phaedra's Handmaiden. Tragedy as Comedy and Spectacle in Seventeenth-Century Opera,“ in: Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek (eds), *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, Oxford 2010, 67–84.

<sup>19</sup> Pietro Paolo Bissari, *La Torilda*, Venice 1648, 3: „L'invention, e tessitura di questo Dramma saran sorelle, perché figlie di una sol penna concorrono unite a mascherar un successo di quell'habito, che sù d'un Carnovale possi render più riguardevole la sua comparsa.“



### Visual Spectacle

All of these elements, not surprisingly, would also be useful in Munich, regardless of the rather different circumstances. By the time the coach of the Elector Ferdinand Maria arrived unexpectedly from Bavaria at Bissari's home in Vicenza, commanding him to take charge of the 1662 entertainments, the Munich court was already quite familiar with Italian-style opera since 1651, when it had been part of the wedding celebrations of Ferdinand Maria and Henriette Adelaide's marriage by proxy.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, upon Henriette's arrival in Munich, she brought in an Italian to serve as Kapellmeister, Giovanni Giacomo Porro, who was succeeded in 1656 by the Italian-trained Johann Kaspar Kerll (1627–1693). The Munich court also had available the services of the Italian stage designer Francesco Santurini (1627–1688), who formally entered the service of the Munich court in 1662. Santurini had worked in Venice with Gasparo Mauro on such productions as Pietro Ziani's *L'incostanza trionfante* (1658) and had also been the designer for two important Munich productions that preceded *Fedra incoronata*, and were performed at the theatre at Salvatorplatz: *Oronte* (1657) and *Erinto* (1658) with music by Kerll and – in the case of the latter with words by Bissari.

What Bissari brought to the project – besides a noble birth that also made his participation in the entertainments socially acceptable – was a remarkably flexible and original vision of how to use the various elements of stagecraft – sets, stage machinery, dances, chorus, costumes – in the service of a vibrant and somewhat eclectic vision of the ancient world. The Munich commission allowed Bissari to go far beyond what would have been possible in the commercial opera world of Venice in terms of the scale of production, the number of performers, the sonic and coloristic variety of the orchestra, the size of the chorus, and the use of the natural environment in the service of the drama. He was likely provided with a budget that was large enough to create more than the illusion of luxury in sets and costumes. In this instance, the enhancement of the visual and sonic elements went hand in hand with a reduction in the importance of language. The libretto is far less densely written than would have been typical for an Italian audience; there is a minimal amount of recitative and the variety in poetic styles suggests that Kerll's music for the differing characters was sufficiently distinctive to convey the substance of drama and characterization, regardless of the linguistic skills of the listeners. (We might imagine as well that the acoustics could not have been ideal, and that the sounds of the machines, the special effects, and the movements of some 500 participants might well have made intelligibility a problem).

<sup>20</sup> Bissari, *Fedra incoronata* (see n. 3), A3. „Io frà tanto honorato di veder improvvisa una Carozza di questa Serenissima Elletore Altezza alla mia Casa di Vicenza in Italia, e da quella condotto a ricevere il commando della compositione, ordine, e direzione di tutte le cose.“ (I was in the meanwhile honored to see suddenly the carriage of this Most Serene Highest Elector at my House in Vicenza in Italy, and from whom the command was conveyed for the composition, ordering, and direction of everything.)



At the same time, Bissari retains much of his uniquely Venetian perspective. He does not abandon the ambivalent attitude towards women or the ironic, carnivalesque perspective nurtured in the carnival culture of the Most Serene Republic. Instead, he and his colleagues exaggerate those elements still further to suit the larger canvas, providing Munich audiences with an overripe journey through a host of operatic conventions – somewhat miraculously – seemed an appropriate means of honoring the birth of a much-desired male heir.

### *Intertextual Games*

One of Bissari's most important skills, which he discussed some twelve years earlier in the preface to *La Torilda*, is the masterful control and melding of ancient sources. Indeed, we might observe here that Bissari not only united differing modes of expression – architecture, music, poetry and dance – but also references to a host of literary and theatrical genres – history, myth, the tragedies of Seneca and Euripides, Renaissance epic, and canzonetta poetry.

The story of Theseus, as Bissari notes in his preface, was „transmitted by Plutarch among the most distinguished histories, from the true type of poetic drama, that is to represent history under the guise of fable.“<sup>21</sup> Plutarch certainly provided numerous elements of the plot, particularly for *Fedra incoronata*, which begins after Theseus has defeated the Minotaur as he returns home to Athens with both Phaedra and Ariadne in tow. Bissari derived several elements of the plot from Plutarch: Theseus' journey with Ariadne and Phaedra and the abandonment of Ariadne on Naxos; the war with the Amazons that led to the capture of Antiopa (who in Act I, scene 1 of *Fedra incoronata* waits patiently for Theseus's return); the character of Solois, who is in love with Antiopa – in Plutarch he kills himself for love of the Amazon, but in the Munich entertainments Solois serves as her protector and defender; his friendship with Pirithous and their abduction of the young Helen; and Pirithous' passion for Persephone which leads to an unsuccessful trip to the underworld.<sup>22</sup>

But Bissari inflects the Plutarchan narrative with disconcerting echoes of the Senecan and Euripidean tragic traditions. It is not coincidental, for example, that the drama borrows elements from ancient tragedies that feature two of the most notorious of all ancient women associated with Theseus – Phaedra and Medea. Though Bissari omits the most damning episodes (such as Medea's infanticide and Phaedra's attempt to seduce her stepson Hippolytus),

<sup>21</sup> Bissari, *Fedra incoronata* (see n. 3), n.p. Argomento del Primo Drama: „Gli accidenti favoleggiati in Teseo Rè d'Athene, portati da Plutarco tra le più degne historie, formano il vero tipo del Drama Poetico, ch'è di rappresentare l'historia sott'habito favoloso.“ In choosing Plutarch, Bissari may well have been emulating a familiar Venetian opera: Francesco Piccioli's *L'incostante trionfante, ovvero Theseo* (Venice, 1658), set by Pietro Andrea Ziani, likely seen by Bissari, for which Santurini served as an engineer. Unusually, the printed libretto includes the relevant passages drawn directly from Plutarch in both Latin and Italian – one of most purposeful demonstrations of classical erudition in a Venetian libretto.

<sup>22</sup> On the sources for *Fedra incoronata*, see Heller, „Phaedra's Handmaiden“ (see n. 18), 77–78. On the role of Medea, see Cecconi „Medea vs Orfeo“ (see n. 13), 129–135.



as we shall see, there are sufficient reminders of the tragic discourse for a knowledgeable audience.<sup>23</sup>

Consider, for example, how Bissari represents Phaedra's tragic love for her stepson Hippolytus, mentioned only in passing by Plutarch, but well known in early modern Europe in translations and adaptations of both Seneca's *Phaedra* and Euripides' *Hippolytus*.<sup>24</sup> Phaedra's fate would also have been familiar to viewers through her characterization in Ovid's *Heroides*, which had in turn influenced the construction of numerous women in early opera, including Arianna and Medea (both of whom play a role in the Munich festivities). In *Fedra incoronata* it is not the heroine herself who attempts to seduce the chaste Hippolytus, sworn to chastity in the service of Diana (as in Euripides); instead it is her servant Ferebea who disguised herself as Phaedra, just like Dalinda in the Ariodante episode of *Orlando furioso* (Canto 5.26), which Bissari had used as the basis of *La Bradamante*. Similar to Ginevra in *Orlando furioso*, Phaedra is held responsible for the act of adultery committed by her servant in disguise, is sent to prison, and bemoans her fate in a classic operatic lament in *versi sdrucchioli*.<sup>25</sup> Given the debates in early modern Italy about the relative merits of tragedy and epic, Bissari's conflation of these two narratives is not a careless gesture, but rather a masterful statement about genre in the modern theater, since it allows for Phaedra to be simultaneously lauded as a virtuous heroine and criticized for her infamous reputation. The persistent presence of the Amazons provides yet another destabilizing feminine influence.

Bissari's adroit intertextual references, however, include not only literary genres but also opera itself. All three entertainments, in fact, are saturated with operatic conventions that were already well established by the midseventeenth century, particularly in the Venetian repertory. These include, for instance, a host of lamenting women in *Fedra incoronata*: Antiopa, Phaedra, and Arianna all express their love of Theseus, and even the servant Ferebea parodies the Ovidian tradition in the *Heroides* by writing a love letter to Hippolytus (II.12).

There are also numerous references to one of the most popular and widely disseminated operas of the century – Cavalli's and Cicognini's *Giasone*, including allusions to the famous scene in which Medea invokes the furies from the underworld.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, even the spirit of Orpheus hovers over these operas. He appears for the first time in *Antiope giustificata* playing a lyre on his Argonaut ship in the eighth *comparsa*, the procession dedicated to Jason and the argonauts (fig. 5). However, he is a major figure in *Medea vendicativa*,

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note, for example, that Giacino Cicognini's libretto for Cavalli's *Giasone* (1649) pointedly avoids any reference to Medea's most dreadful deeds, while the first act of Bissari's *Medea vendicativa* invokes the Euripidean tragedy explicitly by introducing Creusa and her marriage to Jason.

<sup>24</sup> Heller, „Phaedra's Handmaiden“ (see n. 18), 81–82.

<sup>25</sup> Bissari wrote two librettos inspired by *Orlando furioso*: *La Bradamante* (Venice 1650) and *Angelica in India* (Vicenza 1656).

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice. The Creation of a Genre*, Berkeley etc. 1991, 344.



where he tries yet again to rescue his beloved Euridice from the underworld with his musical skills. In fact, Medea actually functions as the anti-Orpheus in this imaginative operatic universe, as Annamaria Cecconi has shown in her perceptive article on *Medea vendicativa*.<sup>27</sup> In an extraordinary send up of opera convention and Ovidian myth, it is Medea – not Orpheus – who crosses the river Styx with Charon (I.7). Medea even claims to have contrived for Euridice to be bitten by the poisonous snake (I.8), and demonstrates her power by persuading Pluto and the other figures of the underworld to show pity on the heartbroken musician. The Orpheus myth ends in the usual fashion, with the bard's defeat – albeit with more pyrotechnics than in Monteverdi's version: after the underworld spirits snatch Euridice, the underworld explodes into seething flames that frighten Orpheus away, and then twelve „desperate souls“ perform a *ballo* of tormented and tortured beings (I.10), of the sort made famous in Monteverdi's *Ballo delle ingrate*.<sup>28</sup>



fig. 5: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Antiopa giustificata*, Eighth procession, Jason and the Argonauts. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>27</sup> Cecconi, „Medea vs. Orfeo“ (see n. 13), 129–135.

<sup>28</sup> Bissari, *Medea vendicativa* (see n. 3), 12.



### *Opera Destroys Itself*

Myth may well be flexible in Seicento opera; yet librettists more often than not softened rather than exaggerated the evils of their female protagonists, usually contriving for them to be contained in a happy ending.<sup>29</sup> Not in this case, however, where Medea's fury is given full display. In fact, in a certain sense, it is not Medea who is punished for her lack of restraint and self-control, but rather opera itself. From the outset of *Medea vendicativa*, the remarkable predominance of fire as a scenic element seems to show the genre on the verge of self-destruction: At the end of Act I, scene 6, for instance, the palace where Creusa plans to be wed is destroyed by a fire that emerges from a small coffin from which Jason, Creusa, and Medea's confidant barely escape. In Act II scene 5, Phateon's burning chariot falls into the river, as the flames from the wheels ignite the houses and trees in the countryside; lest the audience feel that they have had enough fire by this time, Act II, scene 6 presents Medea in a valley surrounded by mountains shooting forth flames. The most elaborate scenic design, however, is saved for the finale. It begins with a naval battle between Medea and Bunus, who (as the mythographer Natalis Conte recounts) had been bequeathed Corinth by Medea's father Aeetes.<sup>30</sup> This battle, commencing with the canons and the monstrous fish with fire-shooting eyes that sets Bunus' ships afire, is described in vivid detail in the final pages of the libretto.

The spectacle playfully combines symbols of victory with those of destruction. Thus, for instance, we have the appearance of a flame-spewing eagle atop the imperial globe that is supported by two lions. This globe, as Bissari describes, suddenly opens up, and Victory emerges from inside of the globe with a torch in each hand. She then flies to the opposite side of the theater and sets fire to Bunus' towers, and finally to Medea's fortress. In the midst of this annihilation, the audience would not have despaired, since they subsequently saw illuminated an „M“ and an „E“, the initials of the newly-born elector Maximilian Emanuel, followed by the appearance of an arch upon which was shown the Latin phrase „Laetemur in unum“ (fig. 6). Destruction and the defeat of Medea are thus followed by an unmistakable demonstration of the unity of the Houses of Savoy and Bavaria.

### *The Triumph of Theseus*

The result is both a marvelous affirmation of Bavarian powers and a curious indictment of opera itself, for the celebration of the birth of Max Emanuel reached its climax only as opera itself disintegrated in front of the audience's eyes. The triumph of Bavarian power is underscored here by the defeat not

<sup>29</sup> On the reformation of Dido in Cavalli's *La Didone*, see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence* (see n. 14), 112–135.

<sup>30</sup> Natale Conti is the only other writer that Bissari specifically credits in the *argomento* to *Medea vendicativa*: „[C]ome habbia dal Natal Conte la consegna dello Scettra fatta dal Padre di Medea à Bruno“, see Natale Conti, *Natalis Comitum Mythologie, sive explicationis fabularum*, Geneva 1656, 569.



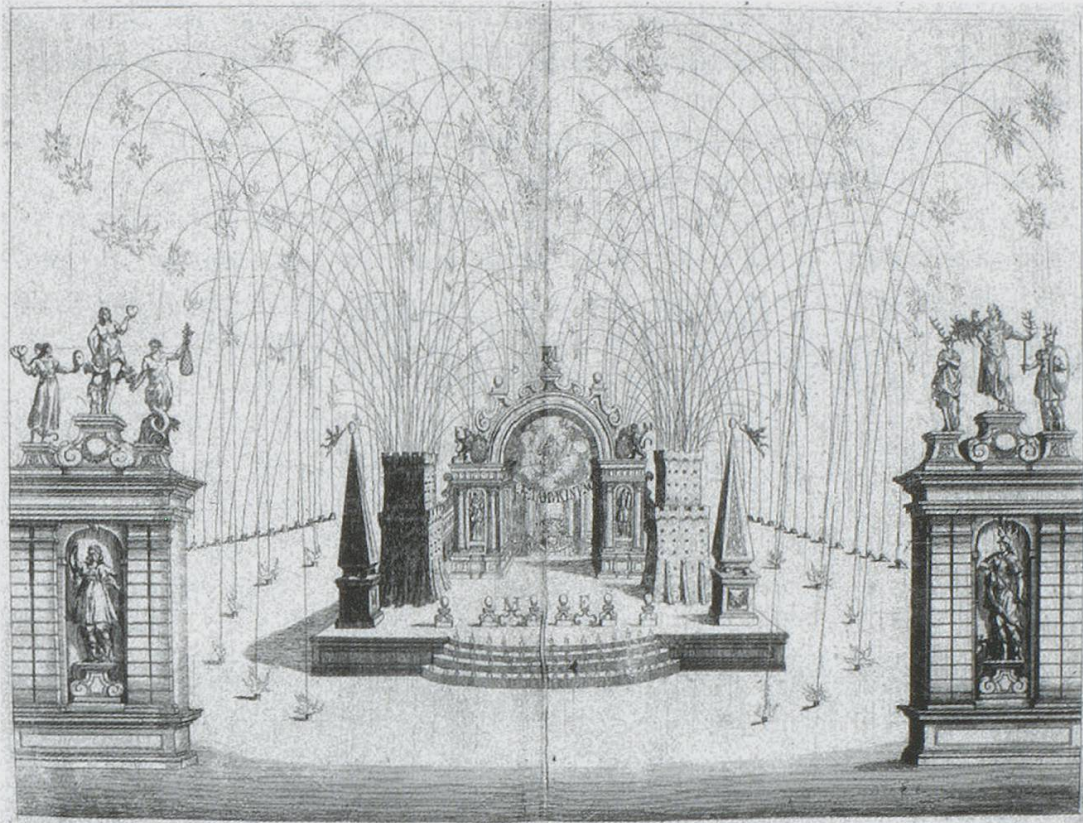


fig. 6: Melchior Küsel after Caspar Amort, etching for *Antiopa giustificata*, Medea's fortress in flames. Courtesy of Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

only of Medea, but the ultimate erasing of the mythological women brought to the stage – Ariadne, Phaedra, Euridice, and the Amazon Antiopa – all of whom were seen in opposition to the hero Theseus, who may well have served as an allegorical representation of Bavarian power.

But perhaps what is most remarkable is that this was the result of another union – between the aesthetics associated with court entertainments and commercial opera – what is essentially a marriage between the ephemeral style of musical theater usually described as *festa teatrale* with the conventions of Venetian public opera. By enlisting Venetian veterans Bissari and Santurini, the Bavarian court gained not only the technical expertise in stagecraft that would allow for a truly spectacular performance, but also insured – for better or worse – that the festivities would incorporate the musical and dramatic conventions associated with Venetian opera, in particular the ambivalent mixture of praise and blame that marked the treatment of historical and mythological women that Bissari knew so well from his encounters with the Venetian *Accademia degli Incogniti*.<sup>31</sup> With the full financial backing of the Munich court, Bissari and Santurini thus created opera that went beyond opera – a theatrical experience in which the genre spilled out of the theater into the

<sup>31</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence* (see n. 14), 18–24.



city, and in so doing managed not only to gently parody itself, but to explode under the weight of its own conventions. Indeed, even the most spectacular court celebrations that followed – such as the production of Antonio Cesti's *Il pomo d'oro* in Vienna in 1668 – never reached the level of sheer excess apparent in the Munich *Applausi festivi* of 1662.

Finally, we might note that for the nobles who attended the performance, what might have been most memorable was not necessarily the professional singing and dancing or even the elaborate stage illusions and fireworks, but rather the opportunity to take part in the tournament opera *Antiopa giustificata*. It is by no means accidental that while *Antiopa giustificata* begins with Medea's spectacular entrance on a fire-breathing dragon, the subsequent nine processions, with their eclectic mix of beasts, heroes, and amazons were performed exclusively by the male noble guests, dutifully listed in the libretto. We can only imagine the pleasure that the guests took in dressing up in costumes and claiming new transgressive identities in a manner not unlike their Venetian counterparts during carnival. In so doing, they claimed Munich as an exclusively male sphere – a world in which the power of women was mere illusion, reserved for the highly volatile and fragile world of opera.