WRATH OF VENUS

Evaluating Themes and Morality in Monteverdi and Busenello's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* from the Ideological Lens of the *Accademia degli Incogniti*

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L'Incoronazione di Poppea, Claudio Monteverdi's last opera, premiered in Venice in 1643 as part of the city's *Carnaval*. Its libretto, written by Giovanni Busenello, portrays a modified dramatization of real historical events, contemporarily documented by Tacitus: the seduction of ancient Roman emperor Nero by the courtesan Poppaea, resulting in her becoming empress. Over the millennia since Tacitus's original account, numerous authors have written dramatizations and fictionalizations of the story, establishing a tradition of impregnating Tacitus's historical scaffolding with contemporary meaning, messaging, and convention. Some examples of this trend are Malipiero and Pallavicino's novelle on Agrippina, the latter of which emphasizes Poppaea's manipulative ability as a woman, [1] and the ancient play *Octavia*, often misattributed to Seneca, which crystalizes storytelling tropes and techniques from Greek tragedy into a new model for Roman tragedy.

Busenello's version in the libretto to *L'Incoronazione* proceeds as follows: the statesman Ottone (Otho) discovers that his wife, Poppea (Poppaea), has been laying with emperor Nerone (Nero), who neglects his relationship with empress Ottavia (Octavia). The philosopher Seneca, Nerone's tutor, attempts to advise the characters toward reconciliation and critiques Nerone, prompting the cruel emperor to command his suicide. Shocked by these events, Ottone, Ottavia, and Ottone's newfound mistress Drusilla, plot to murder Poppea as revenge on the illegitimate couple, but their plan is thwarted when Love descends from the heavens to protect Poppea. The conspiring trio are exiled, allowing Poppea to be crowned empress and rule Rome alongside Nerone. In this paper I argue for a reading of *L'Incoronazione* as a cautionary tale on the dangers

[1] Wendy Heller, "The Veil, the Mask, and the Eunuch: Sight, Sound, and Imperial Erotics in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea,*" in *Word, Image, and Song*, edited by Beth L. Glixon and Nathan Link (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 150.

of female sexuality, and the responsibilities of males to mitigate the urges of women around them.

Busenello and Monteverdi's adaptation of the classic tale has been the subject of much recent musicological intrigue. The opera's complex narrative, rife with erotic subtext fitting for Venice's *Carnaval* environment, renders it an enlightening window into Renaissance Venetian society. Bizarre circumstances surrounding the opera's conception only enhance its allure. *L'Incoronazione* was commissioned by the mysterious *Accademia degli Incogniti,* a political secret society of republican libertines, of which Busenello himself was a member. Given this ideologically charged origin, it is even more surprising that several scholars, including Ellen Rosand, Tim Carter, Susan McClary, and Wendy Heller, have grappled with deciphering the opera's message to no avail. *L'Incoronazione* lacks any concrete moral orientation, a story wherein the antagonistic actions of Poppea and Nerone go unpunished and even supported by divine intervention against the comparatively sympathetic portrayal of the protagonists (Ottone, Ottavia, and Drusilla). This moral "polyvalence," as Carter puts it, has resulted in myriad readings of the work, including Rosand's portrayal of *L'Incoronazione* as a multifaceted critique of decadence,[2] and Carter's outright dismissal of moral orientation in the opera,[3] painting its intricacies as no more than "a simple pleasure in rhetorical play."[4]

Heller, over several excellent essays, provides an alternative reading. In contrast with Carter's rejection of a consistent moralistic intent and Rosand's paradigmatic approach, Heller

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[2] Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas: A Venetian Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 330.

[3] Tim Carter, *Understanding Italian Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

[4] Tim Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 297.

does perceive a consistent thematic thread uniting the narrative: the emphasizing of seduction and sexual forces underlying character dynamics. These sexual undercurrents revolve around the titular character, whose behavior in the opera comprises a "systematic seduction of Nerone." Poppea is empowered by her beauty and sexual appeal, qualities which govern the success of rhetoric and define the scope of a character's influence within the opera. Accordingly, the failures of Ottone, Seneca, and Ottavia in achieving their respective goals stem from sexual impotency, captured by the less outwardly seductive music and more rigid poetic forms Monteverdi and Busenello deploy in their characterization. *L'Incoronazione*, then, becomes a detailed, intersectional exploration of sexuality and rhetoric, its demonstrative intent justifying the lack of outright moral orientation. Indeed, Heller perceives Busenello as softening the protagonistic and antagonistic archetypes in the story, deliberately decentering, compromising, and weakening our heroes to paint Nerone and Poppea's actions as comparatively "less reprehensible."[5]

Heller's narrative, however, appears incomplete, or even contradictory. Besides internal concerns, such as the ambiguous nature of Seneca's involvement and the generally sympathetic portrayal of protagonists adherent to contemporary standards (see for instance, Ottavia's archetypal lament in act I scene 5), we may ascertain several poignant inconsistencies between Heller's reading and the contemporary circumstances surrounding the opera. If the failure of our protagonists truly originates from a lack of sexual fluency, that is, their lack of seductive capabilities (comparatively to prodigious Poppea) motivates the plot's tragic impetus, then seduction, by virtue of our protagonists' mixed genders, must be an intersex virtue. If only Seneca, Ottone, and Ottavia were able to undergird their rhetoric with sexual allure, their demise

[5] Heller, "The Veil," 146-147.

would be ultimately subverted. If Poppea's sexual control prompts her ascendency to the throne, then Virtue and Fortune must be complementary to Love, spiting the conclusions of the prologue. And, if Ottavia's supposed frigidity comprises a personal failing, then her exile becomes not an oppressive act of our antagonists and misaligned godly intentions, but a comeuppance, an act of divine justice. For Busenello and Monteverdi to have written such a work extolling sexuality's ability to empower individuals irrespective of gender, they, along with their commissioners in the *Accademia degli Incogniti*, must have been staunch premodern proto-feminists. However, despite their libertine orientation, any examination of the *Incogniti'*s ideology evidences their reprehensibly anti-female orientation, and resulting blanket villainization of female sexuality, insofar as discouraging any theatrical portrayal of feminine heroism.[6]

My reading, therefore, stands as an alternative aiming to resolve these issues. Therein, rather than being empowered as a sexual prodigy, Poppea is but a vessel for the corrupting influence of female sexuality, powerless to resist its control without the safeguards of strong masculine influences. Through this lens, *L'Incoronazione* becomes a watertight cautionary tale on the responsibilities of men to repress and control women lest they be effeminized themselves, their reprehensibility signaled by participation in much maligned Roman monarchic court. I will demonstrate how this vantage eliminates many of *L'Incoronazione*'s moral ambiguities and contextualizes much of Busenello's libretto in correspondence with Monteverdi's musical setting.

[6] Jean-François Lattarico, "Un Livre du Courtisan au féminin: notes sur la *Ginipedia* de Vincenzo Nolfi, dramaturge vénitien," *Études Épistémè* 42 (2022).

Venus and the *Incogniti*

The prologue of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* portrays a conversation between personified representations of Love, Virtue, and Fortune.They conclude, unanimously, that Love's influence trumps that of any other force, mortal or divine: "'Gainst love in vain both men and gods endeavour."[7] The remainder of the story is framed as Love's demonstration of its omnipotence in the face of Fortune and Virtue, tauntingly announcing: "Harken! You shall see a contest / Which reveals all your boasts as empty and hollow: / The world of mankind as I direct must follow." Understanding the prologue and requisitely characterizing Love is therefore essential to understanding the events of *L'Incoronazione*.

This deific-yet-corporeal Love in the opera manifests through Cupid, the mythological child of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. Traditional portrayals of Cupid portray his actions either as mischievous meddling in human affairs, what would alone render Love a negative force in the plot, or as acting through the behest of Venus as an emissary.[8] While the goddess was not actively seeking to misguide humans, Venus too was often negatively regarded in Renaissance discourse, and certainly among the *Incogniti*. In an extensive and profoundly misogynistic treatise on femininity,[9] Giovanni Loredano, the founder of the *Incogniti*'s philosophical doctrine, equates feminine beauty with unchastity. Heller summarizes Loredano's argument as follows: "Women are doubly damned: if chaste, they fail to move because they are not beautiful; if beautiful, they fail because they cannot possibly be chaste."[10] Venus, then, according to

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[7] All extracts from Busenello's libretto and their respective translations are sourced from Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, trans. Arthur Jacobs (London: Novello, 1976).

[8] Janine Ungvarsky, "Cupid (Mythology)," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, January 1, 2023. EBSCOhost.

[9] Giovanni Francesco Loredano, *Bizzarrie Academiche* (Venice: Guerigli, 1654), 1: 141.

[10] Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 55.

Loredano, cannot be chaste by virtue of being "the fairest of all goddesses." Her unchastity prevents her from deifying the virtuous, masculine impetus for emotional love, rendering her an exclusive representation of the corrupting and immoral sexual attractiveness of females and its resultant lust.[11] Women, in Loredano's eyes, do not willingly submit to Venus's influence. In his play *La forza d'amore*, the protagonist Ardemia explains that women are compelled to love and unchastity by "harsh and fatal necessity." Put otherwise, women are unable to resist the influence of Venus if they are beautiful, and cannot but become objects of lust and unchastity.[12] In the eyes of contemporary society, and especially the *Incogniti*, a man entranced by feminine beauty, thusly rendered sensual and submissive, loses his masculine humors to become effeminized.[13] The unchaste woman enchains the men around her in sin, rendering them effeminate by virtue of their arousal. We may perceive the presence of this corruption in the characterization of Nerone throughout *L'Incoronazione*, which, as Heller cogently analyzes, both Busenello and Monteverdi paint as resigning to Poppea's advances.[14] The accumulation of these beliefs suggests only one model for the dangerous immorality of femininity: women themselves are not dangerous, but rather their vulnerability to the whims of Venus and Cupid, through which they may effeminize and disempower men around them.

Love's adversaries in the prologue, Fortune and Virtue, should also be understood within the frame of *Incogniti* ideology. For the *Incogniti*, whose doctrine centers the philosophies of

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[11] Ibid., 55.

[12] Ibid., 80.

[13] Roger Freitas, "The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato," *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (2003): 206.

[14] Heller, "The Veil," 146.

Niccolò Machiavelli, Aristotle, and Seneca, virtue and fortune are loaded terms.[15] In his dialogic text *De Tranquillitate Animi*, Seneca faces his interlocutor, a politician named Serenus, who complains that despite attempts to distract himself with state affairs, he cannot help but feel dissatisfied with his life, complaining of boredom, a lack of creativity, and envy of more prosperous citizens.[16] Seneca's lengthy response attends to Serenus's various concerns with stoic doctrine. When addressing Serenus's envy, Seneca advises he make peace with Fortune as a deity. Appealing to Serenus's masculinity as an authoritative statesman, Seneca leverages explicitly masculine metaphor to illustrate the ideal dynamic between man and Fortune: "Men's bodies are better fitted for warfare if they can be compressed into their armor than if they bulge out of it and by their bulk are exposed on every side to wounds," and characterizes Fortune itself as wielding weapons.[17] Seneca therefore concretely positions Fortune within an exclusively masculine dialectic, intimately wound with governance, war, and material possession, all perceived as irrelevant to the female sex. Where Fortune aligns with masculine existence, Virtue circumscribes another core value of the *Incogniti*, republicanism. Machiavelli concludes his famous treatise on governance, *The Prince*, with "an appeal to conquer Italy and free it from foreign occupation."[18] There, he expresses a desire to establish a singular Italian government under a republican ruler, a great man who will redefine Italian society with "the new laws and institutions he introduces."[19] The book ends with a call to action excerpted from a poem of

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[15] Letizia Panizza, "Incogniti, Accademia degli.," in *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, edited by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 302.

[16] Seneca, C. D. N. Costa, ed., *Four Dialogues* (Warminster: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 55-59.

[17] Ibid., 77.

[18] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Penguin Random House, 2009), 139.

[19] Ibid., 141.

Petrarch: “Virtue against fury / Shall take up arms; and the fight be short; For ancient valour / Is not dead in Italian hearts.”[20] Machiavelli positions fury as the political fragmentation and foreign occupation of Italy, and Virtue as the republican impetus to unify and reestablish the glory of republican Italy – a chief political concern of the *Incogniti*.

By contextualizing the associations behind Love, Fortune, and Virtue, we gain new insight on Love’s claims to superiority in the prologue. The triumph of Love over Fortune and Virtue may appear a positive affirmation of emotional union, especially when viewed with modern sensibilities. However, personifying these concepts in accordance with *Incogniti* doctrine unveils the more insidious intent behind Love’s challenge: through the events of *L’Incoronazione*, female unchastity will demonstrate its ability to defeat both masculine order and republicanism. Love, then, be it Cupid or Venus, is the opera’s most villainous force, announcing from the outset how it shall bring ruin to all the *Incogniti* hold dear.

Poppea Unleashed: The Failures of Ottone and Nerone

Our first meeting with Poppea and Nerone occurs in act I scene 3, with scenes 1 and 2 serving mostly to develop characterizations of the couple. In scene 1, Ottone is shocked when he sees for the first time Nerone laying with Poppea. Despite Ottone being the sole speaker in the scene, his monologue endeavors almost entirely to characterize Poppea. Busenello leaves Ottone’s personality comparatively obscured: the monologue provides no information on Ottone himself save for illustrating his intense attraction to Poppea, and his shock at her betrayal: “Where now are all the vows, the sweet endearments / By which you swore to me?” Notably, Ottone’s description of his relationship with Poppea implies an utmost submission to her, what,

[20] Ibid., 144.

as previously established, would render him effeminate. See, for instance, Ottone's lament that his heart is "bowed down in supplication," and his later rhetorical query: "For was not my life ruled by your command, by your request?"

In scene 2, Ottone overhears Nerone's guards converse about the emperor, of whom they are ruthlessly critical. They accuse Nerone of having become an ineffectual military leader: "Armenia is in turmoil, / But Nero takes no action. / And Pannonia's rebellion he greets with amusement, / So, thanks to our master, / The Roman Empire splinters faster and faster." Their detraction of Nerone's inefficacy is curiously paired with accusations of nepotism: "our lord the Emperor robs the people / To reward those who serve him." As such, Busenello vividly characterizes both Poppea and Nerone before the audience first encounters them, respectively as an unchaste beautiful woman and an ineffective, nepotistic emperor.

In scene 3, Busenello establishes a causal relationship between Poppea's unchastity and Nerone's incompetent leadership. When Nerone attempts to depart from Poppea's side, she begs him in utter desperation: "Do not go, do not go / My lord, pray do not leave me." While Heller reads Poppea's urgency as a deliberate act of manipulation wherein Poppea leverages her promiscuity to ensnare Nerone,[21] I instead argue her desperation is genuine, signaling to the audience her complete submission to the whims of Love. Poppea employs bawdy, melodramatic expressions grossly exceeding the gravity of the situation: "Oh, say not you must part, / At the sound of that word with all its anguish, / Ah, my soul, ah, my soul must faint and languish." She fixates on certain phrases, uttering them repetitively, what is also reflected in Monteverdi's musical setting: see, for example, repeated motifs and declamations on "non posso" and "Tornerai?" in act I scene 3. Verbatim repetition and bawdy, illogical behavior were hallmarks of

[21] Heller, "The Veil," 152-154.

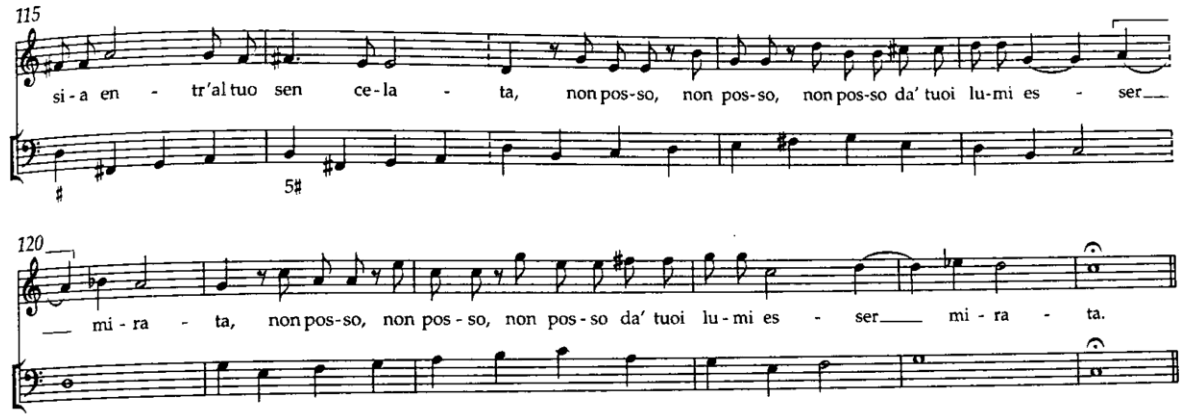

Figure 1: Poppea repeating the words “non posso” in act I scene 3.

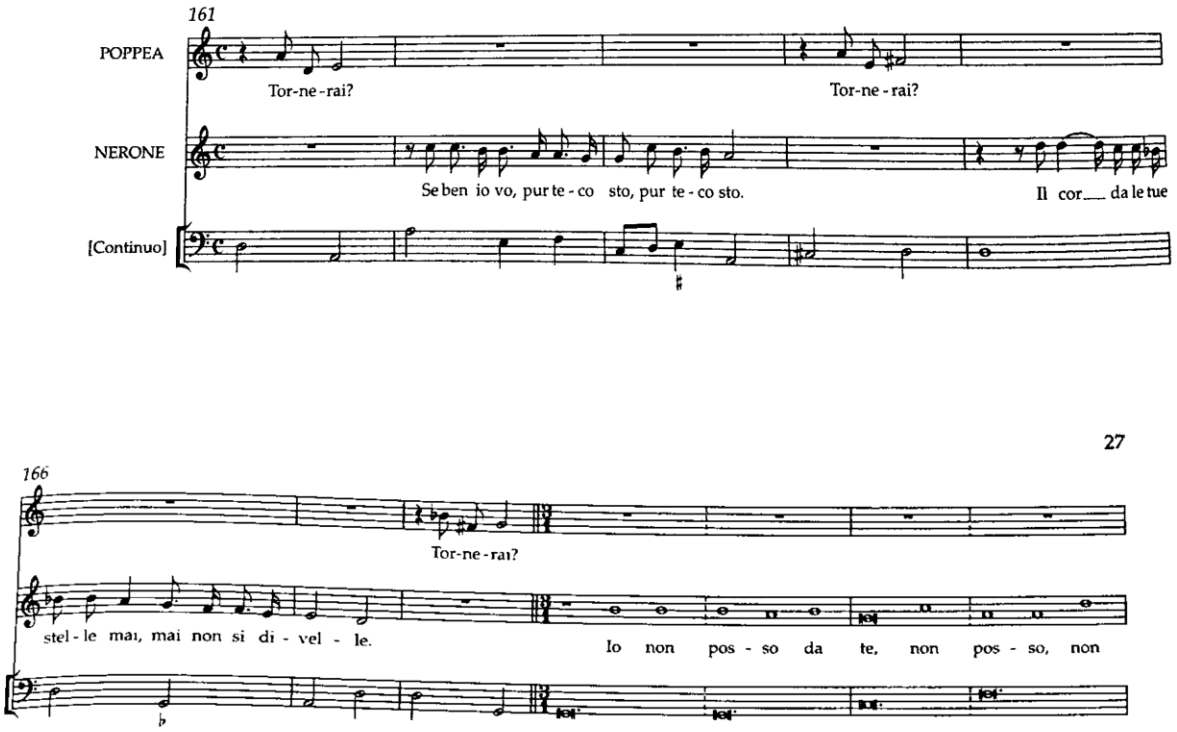

Figure 2: Poppea repeatedly asking Nerone “Tonerai” in act I scene 3.

contemporary portrayals of lovesickness, a state of female melancholy indicating complete submission to the whims of Love.[22] Poppea does not cease displaying signs of lovesickness in later scenes, such as in act I scene 4, when, she recurrently announces her unfounded confidence in the protection of Love using a recurrent melodic motif ("No, no, non temo, no, di noia alcuna" / "No, no, I fear no harm that may betide me"), or in act II scene 10, where her intent to sleep in the garden despite court unrest is even met with astonishment from her confidante, Arnalta, who exclaims: "How madly folk are driven by the fire of ambition!" Heller correctly notes that Busenello and Monteverdi portray physical attraction as the driving forces behind Nerone's devotion to Poppea, what, as we established, would render him effeminate.[23] By implication, then, Nerone's current demeanor must result from Love's corrupting influence for which lovesick Poppea is but a vessel.

In these first three scenes the audience comes to understand Nerone as ineffective, nepotistic, and effeminate. This characterization is notable in the context of the *Incogniti*, as it aligns near perfectly with Machiavelli's characterization of an impotent leader in *The Prince*: "what most leads to a ruler being hated is seizing and stealing his subjects' property and women; that he must not do. … You'll be held in contempt … if you're seen as changeable, superficial, effeminate, fearful, or indecisive."[24] Nerone has indeed stolen a subject's woman (Ottone's Poppea), practices nepotistic cession of property (if we are to believe his soldiers), is effeminized by Poppea and rendered changeable by her influence, and behaves cowardly or with indecisive

[22] Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 63-113.

[23] Heller, "The Veil," 151.

[24] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 97.

indifference as to the state of his empire even when faced with urgent military matters. Poppea's unbridled femininity has unleashed Love's influence upon Nerone, transforming him into a terrible leader and hence endangering the whole of the Roman Empire.

How has Poppea come to be so drastically consumed by Love? Busenello casts the fault on the men around her, specifically Ottone and Nerone. Treatment of women generally in renaissance Venice (but especially among the *Incogniti*) indeed assumed them unable to regulate their behavior. The onus of restraining the love-driven woman rested, therefore, on men, bound to women by sexual contracts, such as marriage. Adultery was hence construed as a failure of the husband and the power structures he represents to control his woman,[25] failing to meet the masculine imperative of restraint. We have already noted Ottone's effeminacy in his submission to Poppea through his monologue in act I, scene 1, a quality Heller finds a plethora of further evidence for throughout the opera.[26] I argue the effeminacy of Ottone illustrates and aligns with the failure of his masculine duty to restrict Poppea. Another plausible source of contractual boundaries arises from Poppea's status as a courtesan: prostitution provides another contractual bond by which a woman's sexual behavior is restricted through requiring payment.[27] Notably, however, Nerone does not compensate Poppea for their sexual encounters, leaving her unchained from all possible contracts to masculine figures. Like Ottone, Nero's effeminized portrayal reflects this failure. Together, these men bear the fault for Poppea's uncontrollable lovesickness and unchaste behavior, what ultimately tears the Roman court apart.

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[25] Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice* (London: Routledge, 2004), 201-204.

[26] Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 137.

[27] Ibid., 54.

Male and Female Rhetoric: The Role of Seneca

No aspect of *L'Incoronazione* has sprouted as much debate as Busenello's weaving of the philosopher Seneca into the plot of the opera as a central character. His inclusion, as Carter illustrates, conflicts with historical sources, given Seneca's death occurred several years past the rule of Nero.[28] While Busenello's deliberate skewing of historical timeframes would suggest Seneca's inclusion to serve a significant structural role in the plot and its themes, Seneca appears to have no direct effect on the plot of *L'Incoronazione*. His attempts to sway Ottavia and Nerone toward morality prove ineffective, and in the former case he is rhetorically outdone by a mere page (the Valletto) in act I, scene 6. In her analysis of *L'Incoronazione*, Susan McClary groups Seneca with the other failed masculine figures of the opera, Nerone and Ottone, describing them collectively as "profoundly passive and impotent," with Monteverdi's melodic rendering of Seneca's utterances amounting to no more than "silly madrigalisms."[29] Ellen Rosand, despite noting several characters' mention of Seneca's death as enabling their immoral actions (specifically via recurrent use of the phrase "Hor che Seneca è morto" / "now that Seneca is dead"), cannot escape the conclusion that "even Seneca's most heroic act, his suicide, is tainted by ambivalence," his legacy succeeded only by followers so incompetent they swiftly neglect stoicist teachings when faced with their master's suicide ("Non morir, Seneca" / "don't die, Seneca" in act II scene 3).[30] The *Famigliari*'s (followers') pleas are even orchestrated to evoke

[28] Tim Carter, "Re-Reading 'Poppea': Some Thoughts on Music and Meaning in Monteverdi's Last Opera," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 233, no. 2 (1997), 180.

[29] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 48-49.

[30] Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas*, 330-332.

the *giustiniana*, a comic genre common in Venetian *Carnaval*,[31] assuring the audience that unlike their master, the *Famigliari* "would not do the same. … life is too sweet, there is nothing worth dying for."[32] The positioning of Seneca's death in the middle of the central act does, however, render it a likely candidate for the thematic turning point of the opera, past which court morality is undone.

Heller analyzes the musical material Monteverdi assigns to Seneca to find many inappropriately placed melismas and unsubtle text-painting devices bordering on the obscene and satirical.[33] Combined with Seneca's seeming inability to transcend the stagnancy of duple meters into triple meters, which Heller associates with Poppea's sexual charisma,[34] she concludes Seneca's inefficacy arises from his lack of seductive ability, in Heller's words: "Seneca is oblivious to the nature of beauty."[35]

I would like to argue instead that it is precisely Seneca's obliviousness, or perhaps imperviousness, to feminine trappings such as beauty, which renders him important to the opera's thematic structure. Busenello positions Seneca as the symbolic opposite of Nerone and Poppea's Love-fueled immorality. He emphasizes this dichotomy through the introduction of another historical incongruity into the plot in the character of Lucano, a stand-in for the historical philosopher Lucian, an outspoken ideological enemy and detractor of Seneca. In Lucano's singular appearance in act II scene 5, he, along with Nerone, celebrates the death of Seneca. His

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[31] Carter, "Re-Reading 'Poppea'," 194.

[32] Rosand *Monteverdi's Last Operas*, 332.

[33] Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*,169.

[34] Heller, "The Veil," 156.

[35] Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 169.

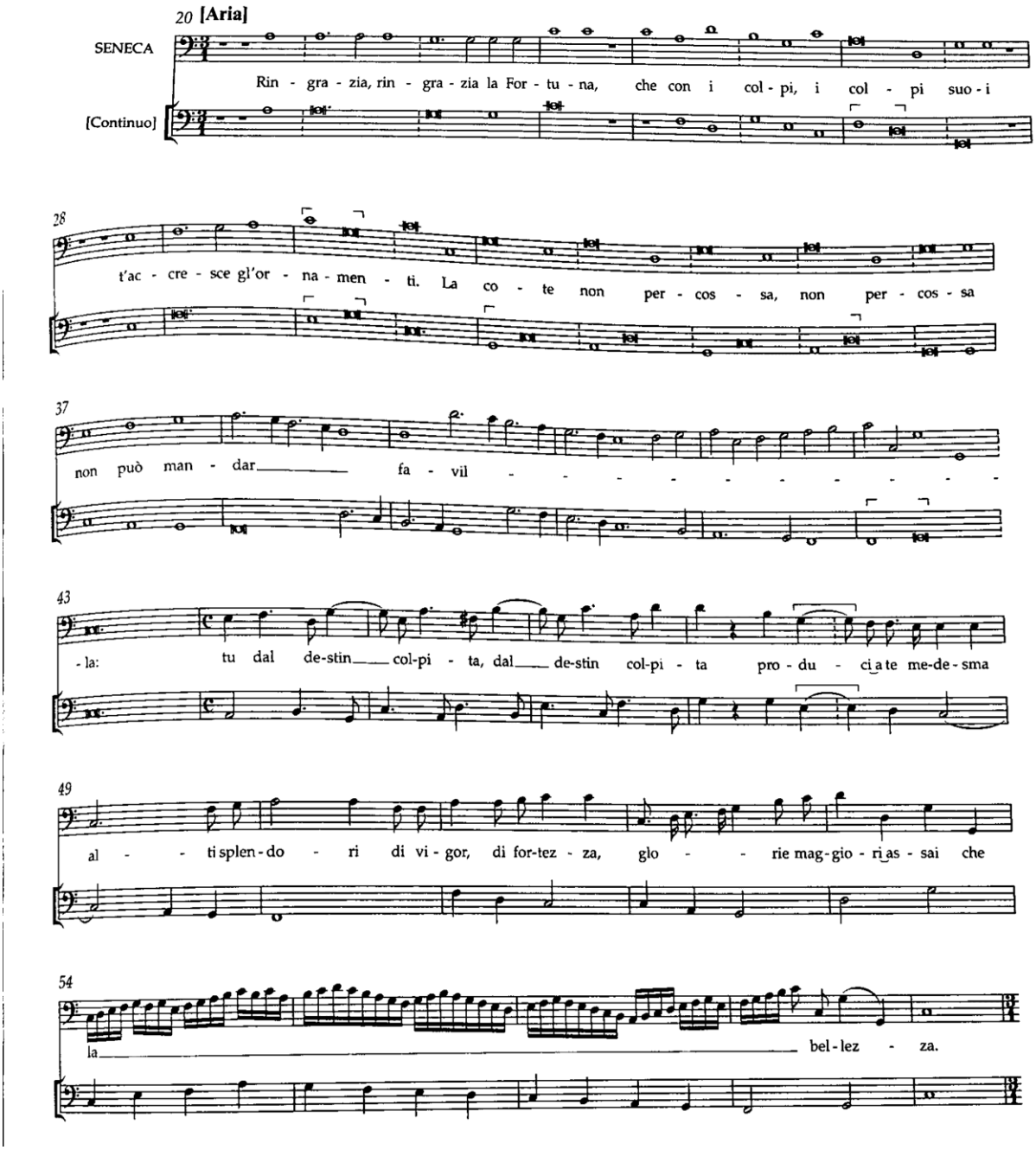

Figure 3: Despite Seneca's aria in act I scene 6 beginning in triple meter, rhythmic obfuscations quickly steer the material back to common time, screeching to a halt at the final cadence following a grossly superfluous melisma on "la."

final utterance firmly allies him with Love's villainy: "To you, my lord, is the promise of delight in love's embrace, / With no tears save the tears of love, passionate and tender / When to joy you surrender." If Lucano, Seneca's enemy, allies with Nerone, Poppea, and Love, then Seneca, impervious to feminine beauty and Love's corruption, becomes the sole oppositional embodiment of masculine morality and restraint in Nero's court. Seneca's rank as Nerone's tutor, mentioned by the soldiers in act I, scene 2, provides him leverage over court dynamics, a masculine influence to combat Poppea's perversion.

While *Incogniti* perspectives on Seneca varied drastically among members,[36] Busenello and his circle greatly admired Seneca's works,[37] and contemporary views in northern Italy's academic circles were generally positive, as evidenced by the employment of a full-time "professor of Seneca" at Piacenza University.[38] Seneca's writings also align with the *Incogniti*'s descriptions of masculinity. In *Di Tranquilitate Animi*, Seneca positions sexual activity as a necessary biological function,[39] but warns of its pleasurable aspects and their corrupting influence in language evocative of Loredano's critique of femininity: "we shall choose those who are as far as possible free from strong desires; for vices spread insidiously, and those nearest to hand are assailed and damaged by contact with them."[40]

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[36] Tim Carter, "Re-Reading 'Poppea'," 178-179.

[37] Roger Covell, "Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*: The Musical and Dramatic Structure" (Ph.D. diss., University of New South Wales, 1976), 133-135.

[38] Richard Mott Gummere, *Seneca the Philosopher and his Modern Message* (New York: Cooper Square, 1963), 97-100.

[39] Seneca, *Four Dialogues*, 77.

[40] Ibid., 73.

In Seneca's first appearance in act I, scene 6, he provides advice to the dejected Ottavia, mourning Poppea's supplication of her position at Nerone's side. In act I, scene 9, Nerone justifies his neglect of Ottavia, describing the empress as "frigid and unfertile," alluding to her menopause. Seneca recognizes menopause as the cause for Ottavia's distress, noting that: "For all beauty of feature, / All grace of form which serves to adorn mankind, / So fair to behold and with such pride paraded, / Within a single passing day has faded." This ascription is significant given that contemporary one-sex models of gender argued post-menopausal women, by virtue of waning sexual potency and drive, skew more toward masculine identity.[41] Recognizing power in Ottavia's attainment of noble masculinity, Seneca accordingly advises the empress to reorient her desires around male ideals and goals, explicitly mentioning, besides duty and purpose, fortune ("be grateful now to fortune, / Who at a stroke has brought you / A diadem of glory.") and virtue ("Now let your constant virtue / Strengthen your noble purpose.").

Seneca's advice to Ottavia contrasts directly with the Nutrice's (Nurse's) advice in the preceding scene. Unlike Seneca, the Nutrice believes female worth stems exclusively from their sexuality. In act II scene 8, a seemingly insignificant comedic scene between Nutrice, Valletto, and Drusilla, the Nutrice laments the loss of her own worth as an aging woman: "How brief the female span, / Brief is our time of joy, our noon of bliss, / Then as the evening descends, / Our whole attraction ends." As a result, the Nutrice blatantly attempts to reacquire her worth vicariously through the sexual exploits of others. She expresses how she envies Drusilla's newfound relationship with Ottone:

> **Valletto:** Now Nurse, tell me truly, say what payment would you offer
> For one single day of joy and youth such as Drusilla's?
> **Nutrice:** Millions, I'd give millions, all of the gold in all the empire.

[41] Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 161.

She also urges the Valletto to pursue his sexuality sooner rather than later: “Follow when love calls ‘hither’; / Don’t wait for sweaty summer – too soon you’ll wither.”

Consequently, the Nutrice advises Ottavia in act I scene 5 to cling onto her sexual potency as long as possible, even at the cost of committing adultery: “If your lord should now ignore you / For Poppea’s wanton kissing, / Then seek out, then seek out someone else who will restore you / All the pleasures you are missing.” Ottavia’s initially negative reaction (“Such dishonorable counsel / Never to my ears my nurse has offered!”) causes the Nutrice to switch gears toward advocating that Ottavia take revenge on Nerone: “Though if I tell you truly / Not even this can bring you proper vengeance; / He injured you with pain and deprivation / But you can only wound his reputation.” Heller observes that Monteverdi scores the Nutrice’s advice with the same triple-meter dance rhythms that characterize Poppea’s sexual potency, concluding that the Nutrice leverages in her advice “a highly explicit mode of female rhetoric.”[42] Despite Seneca’s later attempts, Ottavia ultimately follows the Nutrice’s advice, teaming up with Ottone and Drusilla to plot Poppea’s murder, what ultimately leads to the conspiring trio’s exile. Female rhetoric, then, reliant on Love and sexuality, triumph here over Seneca’s masculine advice reliant on Virtue and Fortune, recreating the circumstances of the prologue. The triumph of feminine Love over masculinity once again motivates the tragic conclusion of the opera and brings exile to its protagonists.

Such negative characterization of female rhetoric additionally aligns with general distaste among the *Incogniti* for feminine involvement in discourse, deemed restrictively masculine domain.[43] Busenello’s chastising of feminine rhetorical participation, according with his

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[42] Ibid., 162.

[43] Ibid., 75-76.

Incogniti involvement, occurs again later in the opera. In act II, scene 11, Ottone confronts Poppea with a final appeal to restore their marriage, what could subvert the proceeding tragedies of the plot. Poppea responds: "The man not blest by fortune can reproach but himself and must not blame others." Her language is strikingly evocative of, and perhaps directly appropriated from, Seneca's own words in *Di Tranquilitate Animi*: "[Let us] aim to acquire our riches from ourselves rather than from Fortune."[44] Poppea inverts the language of Seneca to advocate for immorality, corrupting the role of rhetoric in the opera past Seneca's passing. Perhaps Seneca's rhetoric is ineffective in swaying the court's dynamics not due to any personal failures, but rather because through Poppea's and the Nutrice's female appropriations and weaponizations of rhetoric, Love has corrupted the reason of other characters past the point of no return.

Conclusion

The tragic events in the remainder of the opera may therefore be credited to feminine influence. With the sole masculine authority of Seneca dispatched, sustained only by seemingly incompetent followers, Ottavia and Ottone's revenge plot, spurred by the Nutrice's female rhetoric, results in the exile of any resistance to Nerone and Poppea's consummation. By portraying the mighty Roman empire as undone by femininity in *L'Incoronazione*, the *Incogniti* manifest their bifocal ideological agenda within this cautionary tale: the demonization of women in favor of homoerotic sexual libertinism and the slandering of Roman monarchic rule in support of Italian republican unification.

The decadent duet which ends the work, the famous "Pur ti miro," has indeed been the cause of some scholarly confusion, seemingly directing audience sympathy to our antagonists,

[44] Seneca, *Four Dialogues*, 77.

callous to their committed atrocities.[45] Yet by adopting the lens of villainous, unchaste Love unleashed by effeminized men's failure to contain Poppea's femininity, we glimpse upon a much darker reality. Our protagonists, by succumbing to feminine corruption and rhetoric, have failed their duty and brought tragedy upon themselves. Our antagonists, a crazed, lovesick adulterer, and a once mighty emperor paralyzed in Venus's clutches, embrace in celebration of hedonistic pursuits, as all the while the glory of Rome crumbles to dust.

[45] Heller, "The Veil," 162.

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