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Amazons, Astrology, and the House of Aragon: Veremonda *tra Venezia e Napoli*[1]

Francesco Cavalli's V*eremonda Amazzone di Aragona* (1652/3) is one of the most intriguing of Cavalli's operas to have been presented on the Neapolitan stage. The last of the Venetian operas to be produced at the Palazzo Reale under the auspices of the Spanish Viceroy of Naples (1648-1653), Inigo Velez de Guevara y Tassis, Count Oñate and Villamediana, *Veremonda* was by all accounts a spectacular production, brought forth by no less an artistic force than the impresario, choreographer, and scenographer, Giovanni Battista Balbi[2]. Notably, the historical importance of *Veremonda* is not a result of any widespread knowledge and familiarity with its music, but rather because of its pivotal role in Thomas Walker's and Lorenzo Bianconi's path breaking 1975 article, *Dalla 'Finta pazza' alla Veremonda: Storie di Febiarmonici*[3]. Their study provides a tantalizing glimpse into an opera (and libretto) with a rich and complicated compositional history, one in which there are still many uncertainties regarding attribution, chronology, and interpretation. These raise fundamental questions concerning the expression of political ideology on the operatic stage and the seeming incompatibility of Venetian and Neapolitan sensibilities in the middle of the seventeenth century. What happens when an opera, composed in one place and performed in another, is presented in the context of opposing political realities? To what extent can this multi-media genre assume more than one ideological positions, and how readily

[1] I would like to thank Beth Glixon, Jon Glixon, Ellen Rosand, and Dinko Fabris for an enlightening breakfast discussion in Naples on the thorny problems regarding *Veremonda Amazzone di Aragona*. I am grateful to Mauro Calcagno for his invaluable assistance with the Naples libretto. I would also like to thank Louise Stein for her many insights and suggestions, only some of which could be incorporated into this essay.

[2] VEREMONDA / L'AMAZZONE / D'ARAGONA / *DRAMA* / Ridotto in nuova forma / DA LUIGI ZORZISTO / *Posto in Musica* / *DA FRANCESCO CAVALLI* / Et adornato / Con l'Apparenze di Scene, Machine, et / Balli / *DI GIO: BATTISTA BALBI,* / ALL'ECC.^{MO} SIG. / CONTE DI OGNATTE, / VILLAMEDIANA, / ET TASSIS, / *Vicerè, Luogotenente, e Cap. Generale* / del Regno di Napoli, etc. / IN NAPOLI, Per Roberto Mollo 1652 / Con Licenza de' Superiori.

[3] Lorenzo Bianconi-Thomas Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza' alla 'Veremonda': Storie di Febiarmonici*, «Rivista italiana di musicologia», X (1975), pp. 379-454.

apparent might those positions have been for diverse audiences? Has our interest in art works as expressions of ideology caused us to ignore other parameters that are perhaps more critical in the performance or reception process? More specifically, how could *Veremonda Amazzone di Aragona* have so successfully accommodated the artistic and ideological needs of the Neapolitans, or in particular Conte Oñate in the years following the Masaniello rebellion, while at the same time reflecting political and philosophical positions compatible with Venetian – even Incogniti – thought? [4]

Let us re-examine some of the contradictions associated with this opera. First there are the circumstances surrounding the opera's premier. Both the Venice and Naples libretti are dated 1652 [5]. While the Naples performance took place in December of 1652, the only evidence about the date of the Venetian performance is Balbi's dedication in the Venetian libretto of January 28, 1652 [6]. This would imply that the Venetian premier took place 11 months before the Naples production. However, if as Bianconi and Walker suggest, we assume that the date was written in *more veneto* – as January 28, 1653 – then it would appear that the Venetian premier could certainly have taken place a month *after* the Naples performance [7]. In addition, there has been some confusion over the libretto's author. Cristoforo Ivanovich had attributed the libretto to Maiolino

[4] In addition to the extensive bibliography on the Accademia degli Incogniti cited by Bianconi and Walker, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, chapter 2.

[5] The title page for the Venetian libretto reads as follows: VEREMONDA / L'AMAZZONE / DI ARAGONA / DRAMA / Ridotto in nuova forma / del Signor / Luigi Zorzisto, / *Per esser honorato di Musica / dal Signor* / FRANCESCO CAVALLI / DEDICATO / All'Illustriss. Sig. Cav.re / IL SIGNOR / DI GREMONVILLE / IN VENETIA, MDCLII / Per il Giuliani / Vendesi da Giacomo Batti Libraio / in Frezzaria / Con Licenza e Privilegio. The score (I-Vnm, It. IV, 407 [=9931]) matches the Venice libretto for the most part, and contains numerous additions and corrections in Cavalli's hand. See Peter Jeffery, *The Autograph Manuscripts of Francesco Cavalli*, Ph.D dissertation, Princeton University, 1980, pp. 176-177.

[6] Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza'*, pp. 382-3.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 394n. Bianconi and Walker state their preference for this date for several reasons: it would fit better within the chronology at the Teatro San Giovanni e Paolo; the asterisks in the Venetian libretto indicate additions from an original exemplar (although the corrections in the score suggest that there are other (perhaps earlier) missing sources; they also suggest that the later date could explain the dedication of a 'Spanish libretto' to the French ambassador to Venice, Nichole Brétel de Gremonville. Gremonville's first son was born in January of 1653, and the dedication of the opera might have been in honor of this important event.

Bisaccioni[8]. Bianconi and Walker, however, were the first to point out that the name given on the title page of both editions – Luigi Zorzisto – is actually an anagram for Giulio Strozzi[9]. Strozzi, however, died in March of 1652, thus making it probable that the Neapolitan performance and perhaps even the Venice premier took place after the death of the librettist if indeed Strozzi did write the libretto[10].

The dedications of the two libretti are also somewhat provocative. Both are signed by Balbi – rather than the printer or Strozzi himself – who had likely passed away by this point. Balbi dedicates the Neapolitan libretto to Conte Oñate. He makes no specific mention of the opera's subject, other than to praise the opera's heroine, the Amazon of Aragon, whose great soul, generous, heart, and fierce spirit will only glorify Oñate: «ella, come humilissima serva la mirarà in quest'Opera Teatrale prostrata a' piedi di V.E. vedendola, come Atlante robustissimo, e giusto Mantenitore del Cielo Ibero, ove a caratteri di lucidissime Stelle registra le gloriose Imprese di V.E. e divenuta Fama, gonfia la tromba a decantar le glorie delle grandezze sue, che ne arrichisce, colmo di meraviglie, il Mondo»[11]. Balbi concludes with conventional, modest apologies for the machines and the necessity of fitting them in a narrow space. The Venetian libretto is dedicated to Bretel Nicole de Gremonville, the French ambassador to Venice. In this instance, Balbi does deals with the subject of the opera and its political implications directly. Without mentioning that the opera had already been presented in Naples (if indeed it had been at the time of the Venetian dedication) and referring only to the glorious performance it will receive in Venice, Balbi brings the Spanish nature of the opera to the fore. He alludes to *Veremonda's* past life on the Arno (a point to which we will return later), apologizes for his impudence in dedicating a Spanish opera to a French Cavalier, and reminds de Gremonville of his many years of service to the French court; he also does not fail to note that the Ottomans are an enemy shared by both the French and the Spanish. With these gestures, Balbi manages to

[8] Cristoforo Ivanovich, *Memorie teatrali di Venezia,* Venice, 1687; repr. Lucca, 1993. On errors in Ivanovich's attributions, see Thomas Walker, *Gli errori di* Minerva al tavolino, Maria Teresa Muraro (ed.), in *Venezia e il melodrama nel seicento*, Florence, Olschki, 1976, pp. 7-20.

[9] Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza',* p. 449.

[10] Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza',* p. 449n. They note that the Venetian libretto may well be read as a memorial tribute to Strozzi, citing in particular the *antiporta figurata* in the exemplar at I-Vnm, with the figure of the swan, the inscription «mutandis mutandi», as well as references to Strozzi's 1639 libretto *La Delia*.

[11] *Veremonda Amazzone di Aragona*, Naples, Mollo, 1652, pp. 3-4.

display his awareness of the French-Spanish tensions that were felt throughout Italy during this period, a high degree of political astuteness, and an ability to maintain some sort of equilibrium between these opposing forces – what Aurelio Musi describes as «la politica barocca»[12]. Nonetheless, the choice of the dedicatee is surprising. It could certainly mean, as Bianconi and Walker have suggested, that Balbi decided to dedicate *Veremonda* to Gremonville in honor of the birth of the Frenchman's son in 1653[13]. But why would he choose an opera with a Spanish topic, likely written for Naples in celebration of a Spanish victory? Furthermore, how could a libretto that was suitable for a dedication to the French ambassador to Venice, also serve Oñate's political purposes in Naples?

A close look at the opera itself only complicates the matter. On the one hand, *Veremonda* is one of the very few Venetian opera to deal with a specifically Spanish topic, a feature that makes it anomalous in the Venetian repertoire, but seemingly more appropriate for performance in Naples. As Bianconi and Walker have suggested, the Spanish characters and subject – the reference to the house of Aragon, a plot dealing with a victory in Gibralter and the conversion of Muslim Princess Zelemina – were highly appropriate to celebrate events associated with the Spanish rule in Naples, such as the recent Spanish victory in Barcelona and the Queen's birthday[14]. The prominent use of the name Alfonso in particular, might well be a reference to Alfonso the Magnanimous, 1395-1458, who, after a series of defeats, solidified the Spanish position in Naples in the mid-fifteenth century[15]. Here, a consideration of the political situation in mid-seventeenth Naples is useful. Viceroy Conte Oñate, formerly the Spanish ambassador to Rome, had done much to reestablish order in Naples after the Masaniello revolt and the tumultuous events of 1647, not the least through his finely-honed political gifts and his ability to foil any remaining French ambitions in Naples. Five years after the revolt, Alfonso the Magnanimous might

[12] Aurelio Musi, *La rivolta di Masaniello*, Naples, Guida, 1989, pp. 41-67. Musi describes this as follows: «Al conflitto principale tra Francia e Spagna gli Stati italiana partecipiano col ribaltamento continuo di alleanze, con piccole guerre che turbano il sonno dei Principi d'Italia, con la consapevolezza dell'intreccio fra politica interna e politica estera. Certo quegli Stati diventano teatro di guerra fra clan, gruppi familiari, "partiti": ma sono queste le forme proprie della politica barocca» (p. 44).

[13] Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza'*, p. 394n.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 392.

[15] On Alfonso the Magnanimous, see Vittorio Gleijeses, *La storia di Napoli dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Naples, Edizioni Alfonso D'Aragona, 1996, II: pp. 669-712.

well have seemed an ideal hero for an opera: a reflection of the city's new found stability and a return to the benevolent Spain of Naples's golden age [16].

On the other hand, the genesis of the libretto sheds light on many of the unique features of *Veremonda*. As Bianconi and Walker discussed, the libretto of *Veremonda Amazzone di Aragona* has a close relationship with a pair of Spanish-influenced works by the librettist and playwright Giacinto Cicognini written for Florence: a prose play entitled *Don Gastone*, and its sequel, the opera *Celio* [17]. Both deal with quintessentially Spanish issues concerning conquest, conversion, faith, honor, loyalty, and betrayal. In Cicognini's play, the Spanish King Pietro has attempted to violate Don Gastone's wife; the nobleman is thus torn between his loyalty to the King and his honor as husband. In the opera *Celio*, upon which *Veremonda* was closely based, the conflict plays itself out in the succeeding generation. Pietro's son, Iacomo VII of Aragon (Alfonso in *Veremonda*) is now the ruler, married to Isabella (*Veremonda*). Don Gastone (Don Roldano in *Veremonda*), now elderly, is his counselor. Don Gastone's son Celio (in *Veremonda Delio*), the hero for whom the opera was named, is in command of the siege of the city of Calpa in Gibralter, which is defended by the Muslim Queen Zoraida (Zelemina), with whom Celio is in love.

In the prologue to *Celio*, Vengeance, Fury, Rebellion, and Love incite the young Celio to avenge the wrong done to his mother by punishing King Iacomo for his father Pietro's transgression. It is Love who determines the mode of revenge: Celio is to seek justice by committing a similar act upon Isabella, the wife of the young King. Isabella, attended by a group of Aragonese ladies, complicates matters by deciding to go to war with her husband, thus exposing herself to Celio's machinations. The work deals with the various complexities involving Celio's attempted seduction of Isabella, his treasonous relationship with the enemy Queen, and the

[16] Giuseppe Galasso, *Napoli spagnola dopo Masaniello. Politica, cultura, società,* Naples, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1972; Musi, *La rivolta di Masaniello*; Rosario Villari, *The Revolt of Naples,* transl. by James Newell, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993; Camillo Tutini-Marino Verde, *Racconto della sollevatione di Napoli accadute nell'anno MDCXLVII*, ed. by Pietro Messina, Rome, Istituto Storico Italiano, 1997.

[17] On the sources for the Cicognini antecedents to *Veremonda*, see Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza'*, pp. 445-450. Bianconi and Walker cite the 1646 exemplar of *Celio* at the I-Rsc, printed in 1646; see also *Celio*, Rome, Dragondella, 1664. Cicognini's *Don Gastone*, presented in Florence in 1641, was published posthumously. See *Il D. Gastone, overo, La più costante tra le maritate,* Roma, Corvo e Lupardi, 1675.

inevitable conflict that this causes in his relationships with his father and the King. The opera culminates in the conquest of the enemy, the capture of Celio, and the conversion of the Muslim Queen to Christianity. The underlying themes are far from obscure: love of father, God, and country triumphs; honor is restored to all, virtue is rewarded, vice is punished, and the goals of the Inquisition are met – the Infidels are converted.

Most features of the plot remained the same as in *Celio*, but a close comparison of *Veremonda* with Cicognini's libretto reveals the influence of the Venetian reviser, in particular an apparent infusion of those ideologies and perspectives associated with Venice and the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti that seem incompatible with an unambiguously pro-Spanish message [18]. The skepticism towards religion and cynicism about the Inquisition, the use of anti-monarchical satire, and a parody of Spanish nobility are all presented within the context of the play with gender and sexuality that typified the Venetian libretto of the period. The deliberateness and playfulness with which these revisions were undertaken are impossible to miss. Although many of the scenes were closely modeled upon Cicognini's original libretto, they were altered, paraphrased, or abbreviated so as to distort the meaning of the original by means of subtle reversals in the representation of class, relative virtue, or gender. In particular, the women emerge as heroic and virtuous while the male characters are weak, morally deficient, or ineffectual. This extends both to primary and secondary characters. In Act II scene 1 of the Cicognini libretto, for example, a servant named Despina plays the role of the courtesan, promising to love the servant Alarco if he gives her money. Despina, renamed Vespina in the Venetian libretto (and Callida in the Naples libretto), gains virtue and heroism in the revision: she rejects prostitution, and the male servant insists upon money in exchange for his favors in the parallel version in Act I scene 7. As in so many Venetian libretti in which the minor characters mirror the behaviors or dilemmas of their noble masters, the rehabilitation of Vespina reflects the more drastic reconfiguring of the main characters. The personality of the young Celio, for example, whose honor and heroism are challenged by profound inner conflicts, contrasts strikingly with that of the decidedly ineffectual Delio. Moreover, the details of characterization are not limited to the textual level, but are in

[18] This point is made in Bianconi and Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza'*, p. 450. For a detailed comparison of the two libretti in terms of gender ideology, see Wendy Heller, *Chastity Heroism and Allure: Women in the Opera of Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1995, pp. 302-363.

fact clearly audible in Cavalli's score. For example, in the feigned love duet between Veremonda and Delio in Act II scene 1, Cavalli uses shifting meters to demonstrate the insincerity of their words – a parody of the conventional love duet [19].

Veremonda's most startling alteration from the original is the metamorphosis of Queen Isabella into the Amazonian Veremonda and the concomitant anti-heroic treatment of King, transformed from warrior into astrologer. It is Alfonso, I would suggest, who is at the crux of opera's ideological concerns. As the King, he is the representative not only of the concept of monarchy, but is also the symbol of Spanish rule in Naples. We meet the King in Act I scene 5, before Veremonda herself has yet appeared on the stage. Members of both audiences would have known that this was not a conventional ruler, although the Venice audience would have had the most information about the King and the other characters. The unusually detailed list of *personaggi* in the Venetian libretto describes him as «Il Re di Aragono D. Alfonso l'Astrologo, più intento agli studii ch'all armi», whereas in the Naples libretto he is simply listed as "Il rè Alfonso astrologo». Both audiences might have wondered precisely which Alfonso was being invoked. Was it the fifteenth century Alfonso of Aragon the Magnanimous noted above, or perhaps this was a reference to Alfonso the Learned, the twelfth-century Spanish king who wrote poetry as well as an astrology manual and, notably, was said to be more interested in his studies than ruling Spain [20]. The latter might have been more familiar to an audience that was versed in history and aware of Alfonso's astrological interests. He could even have been regarded as a tribute to Philip IV of Spain, who was interested in poetry and learning, as well as the stars [21]. The title of the work might also have implied something about Alfonso's secondary status. Unlike *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, which was retitled *Il Nerone* for its Naples performance, *Veremonda* is not only named for a woman (and a fictional character at that), but an Amazon – those perennially fascinating warrior women who fought more fiercely then men, and whose strength usually signaled male weakness in early modern writings [22].

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 330-333.

[20] On Alfonso X, see Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *The Learned King: The Reign of Alfonso X of Castille,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, 142-3.

[21] Jonathan Brown and John H. Elliott, *A Place for the King: The Buen Retiro and the Court of Philip IV,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980. I am grateful to Louise Stein for pointing this out to me.

[22] Abby Wettan Kleinbaum, *The War Against the Amazons*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1983; Alison Taufer, *The Only Good Amazon Is a Converted Amazon: The Woman Warrior and Christianity in the Amadis*

Because Amazons were usually associated with eastern or exotic subjects, the fact that Queen Veremonda is the wife of a Western monarch is striking, particularly as this is a libretto that pits east against the west. At this point in the opera, the audience has yet to see or hear the Amazon of Aragon, but the title of the work has already set the agenda, placing the king in a provocative subsidiary role.

Both audiences would also have learned something about Alfonso from the stage setting in which he appeared. Indeed, in this instance a minor difference in the two libretti is suggestive. The Venetian production made Alfonso's preference for study rather than war that much more explicit. While the Neapolitan libretto retains the set of the opera's opening «Città di Calpe assediata dall'armate maritime, e terrestre del Rè d'Aragona» – with a non-specific allusion to Alfonso's setting – the Venice libretto places the central scenes of Act I involving the King specifically in the «Quartieri di Aragona». Thus, the Venetians saw Alfonso in an unambiguously private rather than public space, alone in his study, far from the battle. Despite this notable difference, the actual texts of the Venetian and Neapolitan libretti were nearly identical in this scene. The audiences would have had the opportunity to reflect upon the King's unusual opening meditation on the responsibilities of a ruler:

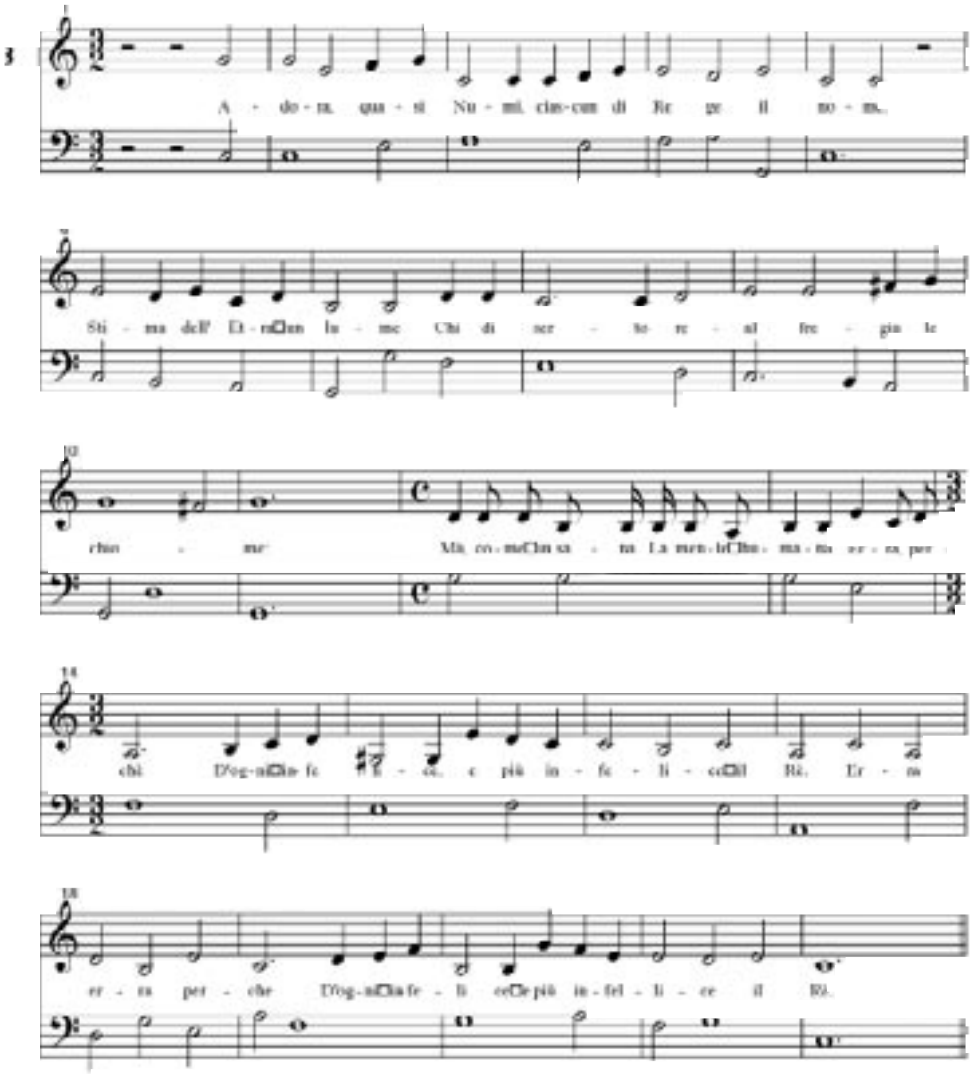
Adora, quasi, Nume,
Ciascun di Rege il nome.
Stima dell'Etra un Lume
Chi di Serto Real fregia le chiome:
Ma come insana
La mente umana
Erra, perché
D'ogn'infelice, e più infelice il Re.

Son degli eroi le cure
Son de grandi i pensieri,
Son dei Rè le premure
Vincer i Regni, e debellar gl'Imperi
Così la Pace
Sempre ha fugace
Volo, perché
D'ogni infelice, e più infelice il Re.

Cycle, in Jean R. Brink, Maryanne C. Horowitz, and Allison P. Coudert (ed.), *Playing with Gender: A Renaissance Pursuit*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1991, pp. 35-51.

In this first appearance, Alfonso tells the audience that their expectations about the qualities that make a king – divine inspiration, royal garlands, and God-like wisdom – are mere illusions, an insanity of human nature. Kings, he proclaims, are most unhappy of all because they are men of war rather than peace, aggressors who must subdue other kingdoms to expand their realm. Where the audience might have expected to see a powerful ruler with the will to overcome the moral weakness of his general (in this case Delio who is making love to the Moorish princess rather than winning the seige), we instead have a king with no interest in war, who criticizes the imperial project, and who indulges in introspection, depression, and self-doubt.

If the text of the aria emphasizes the king's anti-heroic tendencies, Cavalli's music makes that point all the more evident. (See example 1). This is certainly not one of Cavalli's most developed lyrical moments, but I would suggest that it is an apt and skillful musical characterization of our depressive, somewhat impotent monarch. A conventional view of royalty is expressed in the opening verses, with their unpretentious triple meter, diatonic and syllabic writing with balanced quasi-symmetrical phrases that arrive in a straightforward fashion on a G-major sonority in m. 11. Alfonso's own notions about monarchy – the insanity of those who revere kings (strophe 1) or those who desire to conquer kingdoms (strophe 2) – catapult him abruptly into recitative. Such astute commentary on the human condition apparently required a more direct and clear exposition of text. Alfonso returns to aria style (m. 14) with the sardonic twist of the refrain, introducing a brief note of depression with the low tessitura and an awkward cadence on the a-minor sonority in m. 17. The somewhat incoherent succession of affects – the bland C-major statement of conventional wisdom, the brief moment of self-revelation in the recitative, the depressive fall into the minor key, and the rapid dissipation of the gloomy affect for the final cadence – paints a musical portrait of an overly introspective, ineffectual, and somewhat monotonous hero, who – perhaps with a bit of comedy – seems to justify his own poor opinion of rulers.



Example 1: Francesco Cavalli, *Veremonda l'amazzone di Aragona* (1652/3), Act I scene 5 Don Alfonso:«Adora quasi Nume» (I-Vnm. It. IV, 407 [=9931], 19v)

Notably, the subsequent events in the scene do little to alter our view of the King. When Don Roldano announces the siege of Gibralter, Alfonso's response has a bit more verve and fervor, but this is short-lived. He somewhat surprisingly tells Roldano to carry out the perilous war without him, while he pursues his studies. Alfonso's next aria («Reformar a voglia mia») further demonstrates his discontent and discomfort with reality – he pro-

poses that he would rearrange the universe if he had the power to do so, while others go to war. Alfonso thus substitutes study for war, dreaming for action, and simple song for heroic declamation, much to the dismay of Roldano who will sing a somewhat more elaborate aria that criticizes the King for his idle and foolish thoughts.

These idiosyncratic features of King Alfonso's representation are all the more apparent when we compare it with the original version in *Celio*. In Cicognini's libretto, Act I scene 5 takes place at the war camp rather than in the study. Don Gastone and Iacomo each sing lengthy monologues emphasizing their readiness for war and affirming their determination to win the battle in order to prove the superior strength of the Christians. (See table 1). Strozzi apparently borrowed a portion of Iacomo's recitative and assigned it to Alfonso, however he adds the passage in which the King passes the responsibility of war on to his general, and muses about the stars. Unlike Alfonso, Iacomo was given no aria texts, no moments of introspection, and certainly no mention of astrology or study. Only the image of the «lunata corona», a symbol of Islam, is used for the aria «Vibra pur tu la spada».

With the appearance of Veremonda herself in the subsequent scene (Act I, scene 6), the disparity between the astrologer husband and Amazonian wife is further accentuated. Again borrowing quite heavily from the recitative given to Isabella in the parallel scene in *Celio* (Act I, scene 7), Veremonda appears before her husband announces her desire to take her Amazons to the battlefield while he stays home to study the stars. Cavalli underscores Veremonda's militaristic tendency, providing her with a lyrically-inclined recitative that is interrupted by a call to war with full instrumental support. Lest there be ambiguity about the role switching between this studious King and warrior Queen, the scene ends with a duet between the two, in which the difference in the representation of their respective genders is celebrated and confirmed in a love duet:

Re:	Son l'arti, che seguo,
Veremonda:	Son l'armi, che cingo,
A 2:	Si dure, si gravi,
	Se teco mi stringo,
	Fatiche soavi.
	Andiam Nuova Bellona/Novello Alcide.
Re:	Tu della Guerra, io degli studi amante.

Veremonda: Tu reggi il Ciel, per te respira Atlante.

A 2: Son' opre si grave,
Se teco mi stringo,
Fatiche soavi [23].

But herein lies the crux of our problem. What were the political benefits or liabilities of presenting this studious, but passive Spanish King on the stage either in Naples or Venice? Our comparison of *Celio* and *Veremonda* shows the ironic, even parodic nature of the revision, but was it perceived as such in Naples? Perhaps the mere fact that the audience could laugh at Alfonso was an indication of Oñate's confidence, a demonstration of his success in quelling any left over revolutionary fervor. After having produced several more explicitly Venetian imports in Naples (such as *La Didone* and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*), a new Cavalli opera based on a Spanish topic might well have been a political and artistic coup for Oñate, regardless of the details of text and musical characterization. Or, perhaps this was simply another instance of Bakhtinian carnavalesque inversion, in which a comically passive king and aggressive warrior woman merely reinforced existing power structures in the context of a particularly lively Neapolitan carnival.

In Venice, however, where *Veremonda* was presumably written, (if not premiered), the opera must have had a different significance. Certainly those

[23] Of note is the fact that while the duet appears in its proper place in the Naples libretto, at the end of Act I scene 6, it seems to have been added somewhat late in the compositional process for the Venice production. It is printed at the conclusion of the Venice libretto (p. 92) with the following comment: «Questo duetto trà il Re Alfonso Astrologo, e la Regina Veremonda Amazzone, lasciato fuori, si riponga in fine della scene sesta dell'atto primo». The score also shows signs that the duet was inserted later between the end of scene six and beginning of scene seven (see f. 27r-29r) and was likely one of several changes to the conclusion of scene that predated both the Venetian and Neapolitan versions of the libretto. Much of the conclusion of scene six is written in Cavalli's hand; he crosses out two indications for scene seven before having set the remainder of the text from scene six (without the duet) as it appears in the Venice libretto. The other copyist then apparently began scene seven for the third time, including the first strophe of Vespina's aria that opens scene 7. It is also crossed out and the duet "Son l'arti/son l'armi" is copied onto the next page. The real indication for scene seven – and the first strophe of Vespina's aria that had been crossed out – is written in Cavalli's hand following the duet on f. 29r. While this could suggest that the Naples production, in which the Act 1 scene 6 duet had been integrated, had in fact followed a 1652 Venetian performance, it could equally well point to any number of missing earlier sources and Cavalli's desire to adjust an earlier version to suit changes that might have been made during the Naples performance.

involved in the production would have been aware of the ideological implications of the revisions to *Celio*; Balbi made no secret of this in his dedication to Gremonville, with its vague references to the opera's earlier life on the Arno. The opera has no shortage of the qualities found in so many libretti penned by members of the Accademia degli Incogniti: a skepticism towards morality and religion, a disdainful view of monarchy, and a certain amount of play with gender and sexuality. Incompetent monarchs and less than subtle condemnations of empire can be found in numerous Venetian operas, although Imperial Rome was a more favored source [24]. But Spanish Naples however, was not an ancient or fictional realm. It was a real force in seventeenth-century Venice, a city whose upheaval had attracted international attention. To what extent might the Venetian rendering of *Veremonda* for Naples have incorporated its own views about Spanish Naples in the aftermath of the 1647 revolt? Notably, the revolt was a topic that proved fascinating to any number of historically minded writers both in and outside of Italy in the mid-Seicento, particularly engaging the political imaginations of those interested in Republican ideologies [25]. It was also deemed a worthy topic for the theater and opera. The trials of Masaniello, the lament of his wife, the worthy efforts of the fishermen and soldiers had a certain dramatic potential which was exploited almost immediately after the events occurred and which continued to fascinate audiences well into the nineteenth century [26]. In fact, one of the most important and widely written histories of the Naples revolt was published by a gentleman associated both with the opera industry and the Accademia degli Incogniti. Maiolino Bisaccioni's *Istoria delle guerre civili di Napoli* was published in Venice in 1652, the same year that *Veremonda* was performed in Naples [27]. Bisaccioni was the author of several libretti, including *Ercole in Lidia* (1645), *Semiramide in India* (1647), *Orithia* (1650), and was credited with suggesting the subject of *Il Cesare amante* (1651). As the translator of several novels by Madame de Scudery, Bisaccioni also

[24] Wendy Heller, *Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», LII (1999), pp. 39-96.

[25] On the historiographical traditions concerning the revolt, including the numerous near contemporary reports, see Aurelio Musi, *La rivolta di Masaniello*, pp. 21-42; Rosario Villari, *The Revolt of Naples*. trad.. James Newell, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, pp. 153-70.

[26] Roberto de Simone, *Masaniello nella drammaturgia europea e nella iconografia del suo secolo*, Naples, G. Macchiaroli, 1998.

[27] Maiolino Bisaccioni, *Istoria delle guerre civili di Napoli*, edited by Monica Miato, Florence, Centro editoriale toscano, 1991.

maintained a strong connection with the French libertine writers[28]. It is also Bisaccioni, as we recall, whom Ivanovich had credited with the writing of *Veremonda*, a claim that Bianconi and Walker dismiss in part because of the strong anti-Spanish bias of the *Istorie delle guerre civili di Napoli*[29].
There is little question that Bisaccioni's history of the civil war is somewhat unsympathetic to Spain, or at least was perceived as such by at least one contemporary commentator[30]. Bisaccioni places much of the blame on the unreasonable tariffs imposed by the Spanish viceroy and the lack of understanding between certain segments of the population; but his sympathy for Masaniello fades as the revolutionary become increasingly out of control, and his description of the events leaves the reader with the illusion of objectivity. While Masaniello is not depicted as a hero, there is a sense of failure and regret for the Republic *manqué*, as well as an underlying insistence on Venice's political superiority. But what is curious – and if it is a coincidence it is a remarkable one indeed – is that Bisaccioni's presumably straightforward history of the revolt interrupted by three digressions that deal with two themes developed in *Veremonda*: amazons, and astrology.
The mention of amazons comes at an auspicious moment. At the height of Masaniello's triumph, as he is being received on the steps of the Palazzo by the Viceroy Duca D'Arcos, Bisaccioni includes the following strange reminiscence:

> Tra le cose strane e degne di memoria insieme che si videro particolamente quel giorno, una fu di una squadra di donne armate di alabarde con la Bandiera loro e tamburi, in abito succinto, che formarono, quasi tante Amazzoni, il loro squadroncino avanti la porta del Palazzo[31].

What is the source of Bisaccioni's curious image of armed women, "quasi tante Amazzoni", fighting on behalf of Masaniello? Notably, this is a point to which Bisaccioni never returns; nor have I been able to locate it in any other of the many descriptions or iconographical representations of the

[28] Bisaccioni's translations of French novels include several important works by Madeline de Scudéry in which the pro-feminist theme was rather striking, such as *Le Grand Cyrus*, published by Bisaccioni as *L'Artamene overo Ciro il Grande,* Venice Storti, 1651; and *Clélie*, published as *La Clelia*, Venice, Storti, 1655.
[29] Bianconi-Walker, *Dalla 'Finta pazza'*, p. 395.
[30] Monica Miato, "Introduzione" to *Istoria della guerre civili di Napoli,* notes Carlo Grosso's response to Bisaccioni (*Apologia political contra el conde Bayolni Bizanzon escritor de las guerras civiles que padecio el Regyno de Naples el año 1647*) which criticizes Bisaccioni's irony and pro-French position (p. v).
[31] Bisaccioni, *Istoria delle Guerre Civili Di Napoli*, p. 453.

revolt. Perhaps it is too fanciful to assume that this brief paragraph would have inspired the transformation of Cicognini's Isabella into Veremonda the Amazon of Aragon. Nonetheless, it is provocative that this mention of a band of female warriors comes at what is arguably the climax of the first part of the revolt, as Masaniello, destined to be killed, is at his most heroic. Did this really happen, or did Bisaccioni, like so many other historians before him, invent a digression with an allegorical meaning? The duplicity of the Duke, the inevitability of Masaniello's failure, and the impossibility of the success of the revolt, is foreshadowed by the incongruous presence of the Amazonian women whose very existence implies an inversion of conventional values.

Bisaccioni also shows an interest in Alfonso's favorite occupation-astrology. Certainly astrology was influential both in Italy and Spain throughout this period. We have already noted, for example, Philip IV's interest in astrology and study of the stars. That is not to say that there were no negative connotations to the practice. Only twenty years before, Morandi had made the fatal error of predicting the death of Urban VIII (which failed to happen on schedule), and while the Pope might have embraced astrology himself, he strictly forbade others from reading the stars on his behalf[32]. Clearly, rulers and astrology could be a dangerous combination in the seventeenth century. But what are we to think of this operatic Spanish King who indulges in astrological musings and studies the stars? Bisaccioni, notably, embeds another clue in his history of the Naples revolt:

> Se delle predizioni degli Astrologi si registrassero egualmente le false che le vere queste restarebbono suffocate da quelle, ma parmi di vedere che dell'Astrologia si fa come del Meretricio, che si notano solo quelle che hanno grande applauso e fanno ricchezze, ma dell'altre, che muorono all'ospidale, che mendicano o si riducono a vile servvaggio, che sono l'universalità, non se ne parla, così la meretrice Astrologia che un tempo fu coltivata da' Regi, e oggi è poco meno che prostituta ad ogni sorte di gente, se talora più a caso che a ragione, dice qualche cosa che incontri nel vero, perchè delle cose meravigliose solamente si deve tenere la memoria, né meravigliosa cosa è più che si incontri il vero per accidente in quello che si professa di dire per scienza[33].

Bisaccioni is concerned about a specific astrological prediction that called for the death of some well known person on June 8, 1647, a prophecy that

[32] Brendan Maurice Dooley, *Morandi's Last Prophecy and the End of Renaissance Politics*, Princeton, N.J., Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2002.

[33] Bisaccioni, *Istoria delle Guerre Civili di Napoli*, p. 459.

some was realized in the death of the nobleman Don Giuseppe Carafa[34]. What offends Bisaccioni is that astrologers, while they convey much wisdom, only offer predictions about the rich and famous – the princes and rulers – ignoring the misfortunes and deaths of ordinary people who die every day in hospitals. According to Bisaccioni, astrology, cultivated by Kings, had become a prostitute, pandering to the rich and ignoring the ordinary. Notably, this link between astrological predictions of doom and the revolt is echoed a year later in another Venetian publication, Birago Avogadro's *Delle historie memoriabili che contiene le sollevationi di stato dei nostri tempi* (1653), which Aurelio Musi sees as part of a mass diffusion of astrological superstition that surrounded the reports on the events in Naples[35]. While there are other passages Bisaccioni's history that deal more directly with the superiority of Republicanism to monarchy, it is suggestive that Bisaccioni should call upon astrology as a means of expressing his fervent Republican sentiments. The allegorical implications could not be more suggestive or useful for a contemporary opera intended for Naples. What better way to distance Alfonso from his people and emphasize his inability to rule than to make him an astrologer, dwarfed by an Amazonian wife? The limitations of monarchy and the superiority of Republican ideals could not be better represented.

Bisaccioni's unexpected mention of amazons and astrology might well be coincidence morely a sign of the potency of these symbols in the seventeenth century. But it could also be evidence of his influence on the opera intended for Naples, or even his involvement in the project. Certainly, as Bianconi and Walker have proposed, there is much evidence to suggest that Giulio Strozzi was the reviser of Cicognini's *Celio*. But given the date of Giulio Strozzi's death, Ivanovich's attribution to Bisaccioni, and the French dedication, we might also speculate that Bisaccioni had a hand in the libretto after all. Perhaps he merely suggested the subject, as was the case with *Il Cesare amante* (1651), another libretto in which the author's name (Dario Varotari) is presented as an anagram (Ardio Rivarota). Or, Bisaccioni might have altered the libretto after Strozzi's death, making the changes in the text that are reflected in Cavalli's many corrections in the score. We might even imagine that the attribution

[34] For an engraving depicting the death of Carafa, see *Masaniello nella drammaturgia europea*, p. 91.
[35] Cited by Aurelio Musi, *La rivolta di Masaniello*. Notably, Musi links this to a propagandistic battle that linked the French with «sin, heresy, super, adultery, and anti-clerical thought» (pp. 279-80).

to Strozzi was necessary to mask Bisaccioni's involvement in the project and render the work acceptable to Oñate. This, of course, is mere speculation; the dating of the premier and the precise nature of Strozzi's involvement may never be resolved. Regardless, Balbi, who dedicated one version to the Spanish viceroy and another to the French ambassador, might have been the most accomplished artist of all, excelling in «la politica barocca»: the astute management of French and Spanish loyalties as practiced by the most experienced Italian Princes and diplomats in the mid-seventeenth century.

We are thus left with a still unresolved tale of two cities, three countries, and numerous protagonists. Alfonso, the comic anti-hero, embodies a carnivalesque notion of a not too distant Spanish ruler who might well have shown Neapolitans the extent to which the restoration had succeeded: our learned King, content to leave war to others, is bolstered by a string of arias, a heroic Queen, and a reassuring victory over the Ottomans. What could be more heartening to Oñate than the conversion of the Muslim princess and the parody of an acknowledged enemy, all neatly wrapped in the popular Venetian-style package, albeit with a distinctive Spanish twist? But in Venice, there were undoubtedly those who saw the seriousness behind the jokes, who heard and understood the nature of the anti-Spanish parody in the context of Bisaccioni's history of the Neapolitan uprising, and felt that familiar *frisson* of pleasure that accompanied each Venetian flirtation with the forbidden. The French ambassador de Gremonville might have viewed the opera as yet another diplomatic act, a laudable effort to mitigate the perennial differences between Spain and France. Or perhaps, for those who were in the audience in both Venice and Naples, it was all about spectacle – the stupendous dance, the sets, the costumes, the machines and, of course, the sheer sensuous pleasure of Cavalli's music. For Balbi and Cavalli, architects of both productions, had apparently discovered the secret of serving both the French and Spanish patrons, of fitting Venetian operas for foreign eyes and ears. This, after all, is the miracle of opera.

Table 1: Comparison of *Celio* and *Veremonda*, Act I scene 5

Celio	*Veremonda*
Iacomo Re: A qual de i laghi stighi Nume orrendo, e profane Con sacrilega mano Porge la Mora Infida Incensi, e suffumigi? Che tanto ancor si affida Entro ài chiusi ripari, E con fuga plebea Pensa sotrarsi al brando Della Christian Aragonese Astrea. Dovrebbe pur le strage Di Valenza sconfitta, Di Cartago soggesto, Di Maiorica doma, Mostrare all'empia setta Del perverso Maoma, Ch'io fulminar non soglio Per lo ciel d'Aragona, Che per fiaccar l'orgoglio **Di Lunata Corona.**	**Alfonso Re**: A qual de i laghi stighi Nume orrendo, e profane Con sacrilega mano Porge la Mora Infida Incensi, e suffumigi? Che tanto ancor si affida Entro ài chiusi ripari, Econ fuga plebea Pensa sotrarsi al brando Della Christian Aragonese Astrea.
	Omitted in *Veremonda*; Alfonso continues as below
(No parallel in *Celio*)	Seguite voi la la perigliosa guerra, Che i mei voglio seguire arditi studi; Mentre in lor vuol, ch'io sudi Un demone (cred'io) ch'in mè si serra.
(No parallel in *Celio*)	**Aria**: Riformar a voglia mia, S'io potessi la Natura Presto, presto si vedria Il mar, la Terra, e'l Ciel d'altra figura. [Roldano response] Vibra pur tù la Spada A dilatar la fede, E fà, ch'in terra cada Su'l crine di Aragona **La Lunata Corona.**