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Poppea's Legacy: The Julio-Claudians on the

Venetian Stage Claudio Monteverdi's final opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, has long inhabited a privileged place both in the musicological literature and on the stage. Although many consider his *L'Orfeo* (Mantua, 1607), taught to virtually every music appreciation student, to be the "first great opera," *L'incoronazione di Poppea* has become one of the most frequently performed and recorded seventeenth-century operas, as well as a work that has proved endlessly fascinating to generations of scholars. Despite (or perhaps because of) the controversies concerning its authenticity and an ending that has been long regarded as morally ambivalent, *Poppea* has been burdened—arguably overburdened—with a myriad of interpretative approaches that almost invariably pay tribute to its exceptional nature.¹

But how different is Monteverdi's final opera from those of his contemporaries? Opera may have been born in the rarefied atmosphere of the Northern Italian courts as a sort of sophisticated aesthetic experiment, nurtured by the humanistic leanings of its idealistic creators and well-suited to celebrate dynastic marriages and other major events. But by the time the elder Monteverdi had

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1 Among the many interpretive studies of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, see Ellen Rosand, "Seneca and the Interpretation of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, XXXVIII (1985), 34–71. Responses include Tim Carter, "Re-Reading *Poppea*: Some Thoughts on Music and Meaning in Monteverdi's Last Opera," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, CXXII (1997), 173–204; Robert C. Ketterer, "Neoplatonic Light and Dramatic Genre in Busenello's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and Noris's *Il ripudio d'Ottavia*," *Music & Letters*, LXXX (1999), 1–22; Iain Fenlon and Peter Miller, *The Song of the Soul: Understanding Poppea* (London, 1992); Heller, "'O delle donne miserabil sesso': Tarabotti, Ottavia, and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Il sagggiatore musicale*, VII (2000), 5–46; *idem*, "Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, LII (1999), 39–96. See also, *idem*, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, 2003), 136–178. On the authenticity problems, see Alan Curtis, "La Poppea Impasticciata or Who Wrote the Music to *L'incoronazione Di Poppea* [1643]?" *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, XLII (1989), 22–54.

penned *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1643, the genre had become a well-established commercial enterprise in the Republic of Venice. When the first opera theater opened there in 1637, opera became—for better or worse—a uniquely Venetian phenomenon, inextricably linked not only with carnival pleasures and their associated license, but also with the Republic's expression of its own special mythology. For all of Monteverdi's unmatched skill as a composer, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* was one of dozens of Venetian operas that were used in a dynamic game of competition and repetition, in which literary, musical, and ideological concerns regularly intersected with, and accommodated, market forces.²

This is precisely the issue that led Walker, for example, to question interpretive efforts with regard to any Venetian opera: "Any attempt to demonstrate the peculiar characteristics of a seventeenth-century Venetian opera risks going against the grain of history. The nature of the repertory does not encourage us to think that individuality of the artistic product was a main, consciously desired aim: like replaces like, though always with a difference. How can we be sure that by placing in relief what seem to us the peculiarities of a work (that is the interesting elements which we discover there and not elsewhere) we reveal those aspects which determined its success or failure, its relative acceptance or rejection?"³

But *Poppea* has attracted special attention for other reasons—in particular its undeniably brilliant music, the idiosyncratic treatment of its subject matter, and the unusual literary climate in which the libretto was written. *Poppea* is one of a number of Venetian operas written in the middle of the century linked to the infamous Accademia degli Incogniti, Venice's pre-eminent literary society, associated with libertine causes and heterodox beliefs—and an oddly conservative devotion to patriotic causes. Moreover, the opera's subject—imperial Rome and the deeds (or

2 Among the standard writings on early opera and humanism, see Barbara Russano Hanning, *Of Poetry and Music's Power: Humanism and the Creation of Opera Studies in Musicology* (Ann Arbor, 1980), XIII. On the critical role of Venice in the development of opera as an genre, and its relationship to Venetian self-representation, see Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, 1991).

3 Thomas Walker, "'Ubi Lucius': Thoughts on Reading *Medoro*," in Aurelio Aureli and Francesco Lucio (ed. Giovanni Morelli and Thomas Walker), *Il Medoro: Partitura dell'opera in facsimile, edizione del libretto, saggio introduttivo* (Milan, 1984), cxlvii.

misdeeds) of the Julio-Claudians—seems particularly well suited to a variety of hermeneutic strategies that emphasize the opera's significance in contemporary Venice.⁴

Indeed, the nature of *Poppea*'s source material distinguished it from many contemporary works. For one thing, it can justly be regarded as the first historical opera. It presents a world in which politics—rather than the whims of gods—control destiny, in which man assumes ultimate responsibility for his deeds or misdeeds. While both myth and epic rely upon the supernatural to explain the natural world (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) or to justify the divine destiny of a people (Vergil's *Aeneid*), *L'incoronazione di Poppea* presents a series of events controlled almost exclusively by the desires, ambitions, and powers of mortal man.⁵

In this regard, the comparison with the earlier court operas and their use of ancient sources is striking. The somewhat sanitized myths of Orpheus and Euridice or Daphne and Apollo were suitable scripts for dynastic weddings, comfortably accommodating the Northern Italian courts' habitual desire for Neoplatonic expression. But the gentle marriage between Ovidian myth and pastoral drama that characterized Monteverdi's first opera *L'Orfeo* contrasts profoundly with the arguably lurid and morally ambivalent reinvention of imperial Roman history that propels the plot in *Poppea*. With *Poppea*, opera relinquished its dependence upon myth and the supersensible world. It discovered the vast canvas of history, in which the narrative structure—the beginning, middle, and end of the drama—is not definitively circumscribed in the sources, and in which the patently unrealistic practice of sung drama seems to have unexpected power to convey complex notions of reality. In *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the librettist Giovanni Francesco Busenello ended the action with the marriage of the Emperor Nero to his mistress Poppea—a historical moment in which vice apparently triumphs over virtue—and thus discomfited countless scholars and inspired a level of scrutiny far surpassing that of any other Venetian opera.

Also of importance is the peculiar nature of the primary historical source in question—the writings of the influential first cen-

4 For an extensive discussion of the Accademia degli Incogniti and its literary and political interests, see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 48–81; Rosand, "Seneca."

5 Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 49.

tury historian, Cornelius Tacitus. The opera's connection to Tacitus has been a particularly rich point of departure for interpreters because of his overwhelming popularity during the early modern period as a moral and political advisor. *Poppea* is only one of several mid-seventeenth-century publications to explore the virtues and vices of the Julio-Claudians that form a persistent and coherent statement about imperial excess—and dangers of female power—that was well understood in the context of Republican values and compatible with the philosophical leanings of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti.⁶

But even beyond the subject matter and its political significance in mid-seventeenth century Venice, there is something incongruous about this particular marriage between history and opera that may well be of significance to understanding other operas inspired by Tacitus. The point is not merely that the abundance of historical detail resists easy collapsing into a three-act opera. The other primary authorities for the period—Suetonius and Dio Cassius—seem more interested in telling a good tale than does Tacitus, and they provide many more of the sensational events that he omitted or glossed. But Tacitus' much-lauded brevity, his concise rhetoric, and his detached and often-ironic attitude toward his historical subjects—qualities admired and even emulated by some Venetian writers—seem antithetical to the lyricism and sensuality of Monteverdi's music, or any music for that matter. At times, the opera seems almost an advertisement for, or demonstration of, the very ills against which Tacitus warned, or it threatens to dislodge the ironic distance from, or marked disapproval of, the historical subjects that marks his writing. The seductive lyricism of Monteverdi's music sometimes champions and even empowers immoral characters; at other times, however, Monteverdi endowed the virtuous with the musical upper hand.

This sort of ambivalence has confounded, for example, attempts to understand Monteverdi's characterization of the philosopher Seneca, whom his opera arguably both praises and scorns. Just as Monteverdi's parodic settings of Seneca's philosophical musings proclaim the futility of the Stoic cause, the eloquence of the philosopher's death scene in the center of the opera resets the

6 This notion is explored in detail in Heller, "Tacitus Incognito." See also, *idem*, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 139–152.

moral compass in a far more reassuring fashion. Music thus has the power simultaneously to strengthen and weaken a given point of view, not unlike Tacitus' often-equivocal treatment of his historical subjects.⁷

This essay explores one facet of the complex encounter between Venetian opera and Tacitus that began with *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and a number of nonoperatic treatments of Tacitus published by Venetian authors in the mid-seventeenth century, and that continued in such subsequent works as George F. Handel's *Agrippina* (1709). The focus is on a historical episode that proved to be extraordinarily popular in contemporary Venetian writings—a sort of prequel to the action depicted in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*—the rise of Agrippina the Younger and the adoption of her son Nero in the opera *Claudio Cesare* (1672), by the librettist Aurelio Aureli and the composer Giovanni Boretti.

A comparison of *Poppea* and *Claudio Cesare* highlights the profound changes in opera over these three decades. By the 1670s, Venetian opera was being shaped by a number of conventional musical and dramatic devices, some of which are only nascent in *Poppea*. These include love triangles and plots driven by cross dressing, disguise, and mistaken identity, all expressed through an increasing number of short arias that, as many librettists lament in their prefaces, audiences had come to expect. But comparing *Poppea* with *Claudio Cesare* also provides answers to a number of intriguing questions. How anomalous is Busenello and Monteverdi's use of Tacitus in *Poppea*? What are the lessons of Roman history that continued to fascinate Venetians in the seventeenth century? What role did music play in their expression? How might close readings of *Poppea* inform interpretations of lesser-known works that have not been subjected to the same degree of hermeneutic pressure? In short, in the post-*Poppea* encounters with Roman history, did operatic convention—the abundance of arias, the use of familiar plot devices, and increased uniformity of music-dramatic structure—overrule every sincere engagement with the historical sources? Indeed, *Claudio Cesare* shows that even mid-seventeenth-century operas—produced in a climate in which, to paraphrase Walker, individuality was not the desired artistic aim—

7 On the power of Seneca's music, see Rosand, "Seneca." My own emphasis on Seneca's lack of rhetorical power focuses exclusively on his musico-dramatic representation in Act I.

could indeed become an eloquent means of expressing complex historical notions.⁸

TACITUS, *POPPEA*, AND *CLAUDIO CESARE* Although separated by thirty years, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Claudio Cesare* share a number of striking features. The librettists of both operas carved a drama out of history that culminates in a morally ambivalent *lieto fine*. This feature is undoubtedly more overt in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. As noted above, a number of interpretive approaches have been brought to bear on the opera's seemingly unmatched privileging of vice over virtue: the search for a moral center (Seneca, in Rosand's classic interpretation of 1978), a virtuous heroine (Drusilla, in Fenlon and Miller's reading), Neoplatonism (Ketterer), and the centrality of the poet Lucan as an icon of republicanism and artistic freedom (Heller). These inquiries have focused on two primary bodies of material—the writings of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti with which the librettist Busenello was associated, and the ancient historical sources (Suetonius' life of the Caesars, Dio Cassius' third-century Greek history of the Romans, the pseudo-Seneca play *The Octavia*, and, in particular, *The Annals* of Tacitus).⁹

In the *argomento* or explanation of the plot that appears at the beginning of the printed libretto, Busenello cites only a single incident from Tacitus as the inspiration for his libretto: Nero's decision to send Otho to Lusitania. Then, with a deft sleight of hand, he explains that his libretto presents “il fatto diverso”—a different event. Readers familiar with Tacitus would certainly have been aware of the discrepancies between history and Busenello's imaginative plan for his opera. Otho “deprived of Poppaea” *might* have succumbed to delirium (although Tacitus reports nothing of the kind); Nero did repudiate and banish Octavia (ultimately murdering her), and Seneca committed suicide, although certainly not in the order prescribed in the *argomento* or libretto. Otho's attempt to murder Poppea while disguised as Drusilla is entirely fictional, however Busenello likely borrowed the name from the Emperor Caligula's sister and favorite incestuous playmate. In addition to drastically manipulating the chronology, the opera offers several

8 For an important comparison of *Poppea* with a later seventeenth-century opera on the same subject, see Ketterer, “Neoplatonic Light and Dramatic Genre.”

9 See note 1 for the various interpretive approaches.

other striking challenges to the historical record, the most notable being the distortion of Octavia's character—who, unlike her innocent and silent historical model—wields imperial politics with a practiced hand, plotting Poppaea's murder by intimidating and threatening Otho.¹⁰

Nonetheless, substantial evidence suggests that *Poppea* borrowed notions about Tacitus and imperial politics that were current in operatic and nonoperatic circles in mid-seventeenth-century Venice. Throughout the early modern period, poets, politicians, and novelists mined Tacitus for aphorisms and wise advice concerning monarchs. He provided invaluable advice for monarchs while painting highly cynical portraits of them that proved useful to the supporters of both imperial and republican causes in early Renaissance Italy. Tacitus also reminded his readers that appearances were illusory—that corruption might well lurk beneath the most glorious displays of imperial power.¹¹

This emphasis on the deceptive nature of empire was particularly appealing in early modern Venice. Long viewing itself as the true inheritor of Rome's glory, Venice drew considerable strength and wisdom from Tacitus. Whereas the glorious Roman republic had succumbed to the temptations of empire, Venice's longevity depended upon its ability to avoid the ills that had plagued the Roman Empire. Moreover, certain political machinations that earned Tacitus' disapproval—in particular notions about “ragione di stato,” or reason of state (the notion that the preservation of the state was more important than any moral considerations), explored earlier in the seventeenth century by such commentators as Giovanni Botero and Traiolino Boccalini—retained their relevance for subsequent generations. For several of Busenello's contemporaries, who explored this generation of Julio-Claudians in a series of nonoperatic publications, the most important message was about the dangers of female power in the context of empire. The primary negative model was Agrippina the younger, the mother of Nero (although Messalina's debaucheries provided les-

10 Busenello, *Delle hore ociose* (Venice, 1656). Busenello's most drastic manipulation of the chronology involved moving the death of Seneca from the year 65 A.D. to 62 A.D., prior to the death of Octavia. See *idem*, “Tacitus Incognito,” 86. On Monteverdi and Busenello's changes to the historical Octavia, see *idem*, “O delle donne miserabil sesso.”

11 Of the many sources on Tacitus in the early modern period, see Ronald Mellor, *Tacitus* (London, 1993); Peter Burke, “Tacitism,” in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Tacitus* (London, 1969), 149–172.

sons of a different sort). The writings of Pallavicino, Pona, Malipiero (members of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti), as well as two plays by Zaguri plays that post-date *Poppea*, all provided a telling gloss on Tacitus that vividly demonstrated the dire consequences of female rule.¹²

Of note in all of these writings is the tendency to blame Agrippina for Nero's ills—a strategy that is markedly different from the one employed in the tragic play *The Octavia*, long mistakenly attributed to Seneca, which Sullivan describes as a “diatribe against Nero.” But whereas *The Octavia* emphasized Nero's evils, even constructing a sympathetic, guilt-ridden Poppaea, Venetian writers followed Tacitus by favoring a less than complementary view of Agrippina, weaving their stories into a forbidding narrative that only applauded the superior virtue of the masculine Venetian Republic.¹³

But what makes all of these Venetian treatments of Tacitus so compelling in the context of opera is their emphasis on Agrippina's sins and their relative comfort with Nero's presumed descent into tyranny. In the *novelle* of Malipiero and Pallavicino, poor mothering emerges as the cause of Nero's crimes and misdemeanors; both authors cite Tacitus' innuendos about the incestuous relationship between mother and son. (In his *L'imperatrice ambiziosa*, Malipiero even goes so far as to declare that matricide was perhaps an appropriate response to Agrippina's crimes.) The Zaguri plays, on the other hand, focus on Agrippina's willingness to manipulate others to achieve her political goals and introduce important figures not used in Busenello's libretto—the freedmen Callistus, Pallas, and Narcissus, all pawns or victims of Agrippina's ambitions. As all of these writers emphasized, Agrippina's primary motivation was the desire to see her son become emperor, and her deft control of politics—her understanding of “ragione di stato”—allowed her to achieve this goal, much to the detriment of the Roman Empire.¹⁴

12 These writings include Francesco Pona, *La Messalina* (Venice, 1628); Fedirico Malipiero, *L'imperatrice ambiziosa* (Venice, 1642); Ferrante Pallavicino, *Le due Agrippinae* (Venice, 1642); Pietro Angelo Zaguri, *La Messalina* (Venice, 1656) and *Le gelosie politiche, & amorose* (Venice, 1657). For a more detailed treatment of the Venetian uses of Tacitus from which this discussion derives, see Heller, “Tacitus Incognito,” 51–62.

13 J.P. Sullivan, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (Ithaca, 1985), 72

14 On the details of Agrippina's many crimes, see Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven, 1996). Heller, “Tacitus Incognito,” 57–59. In

This background is of primary importance in understanding the uses of Tacitus in *Poppea*, as well as some of the opera's oft-noted peculiarities. Agrippina does not appear in the opera, but Ottavia adopts some of her mother-in-law's penchant for blackmail and political intrigue. Music plays no small role in the retelling of history; for example, *Poppea*'s lush duetting with Nerone and Ottavia's lack of lyrical skill have much to say about the pleasures and dangers of female power. Monteverdi's musical setting also portrays Seneca as both an object of mockery for his adherence to Stoicism and as a noble and admirable martyr to the cause of virtue in his lushly chromatic suicide scene. Even the freedoms associated with the vanished republic find unexpected expression in the suggestive duet between Nerone and Lucano (Act II, scene 6), in which the emperor is mesmerized—even sexually aroused—by the singing Lucan, the author of *Pharsalia*, who was associated with republican causes. The actions and words of the characters present one perspective of the historical discourse, and the music another.¹⁵

AGRIPPINA AND *CLAUDIO CESARE* *Claudio Cesare*, written in 1672, was Aureli's sixteenth drama. It was dedicated to Duke Johann Friedrich of Braunschweig and Lunenburg, brother to Ernst August and Georg Wilhelm. All three of the Hannoverian dukes were well known for their patronage of Venetian opera. Aureli had dedicated several librettos to them in the past, and they undoubtedly brought to Venice their own views about imperial destinies. Ernst August would become the father of George I, although at this point the dukes seem to have been more attentive to the pleasures of carnival and their Venetian mistresses.¹⁶

Aureli's letter to the reader at the outset of the libretto provides clues to his attitudes about his own poetic efforts. Assuming a conventionally self-deprecating stance, he observes that *Claudio Cesare* contains more arias and ariettas than "accidenti." But, he

L'imperatrice ambiziosa, Malipiero writes of Agrippina, "Cursed ambition to reign induces this most dishonest mother to offer herself to her son as a concubine" (131).

15 Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 137–154; Rosand, "Seneca"; Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 73–91.

16 Aureli, *Claudio Cesare* (Venice, 1672); Vassilis Vavoulis, "A Venetian World in Letters: The Massi Correspondence at the Hauptstaatsarchiv in Hannover," *Notes*, LIX (2003), 556–609.

laments, such is the nature of *dramma per musica*. He then passes the blame to the capricious nature of Venetian audiences. He describes the composer—Giovanni Antonio Boretti—as “the Apollo who has animated this drama.” Their collaboration was undoubtedly comfortable; the two had already worked together on *Eliogabalo*, first set by Francesco Cavalli, as well as on the revised version of *Ercole in Tebe*.¹⁷

Despite his apologies—and his ostensible disdain for his audience—Aureli supplies a detailed *argomento* for *Claudio Cesare*. Of note are the striking differences in both style and substance between this *argomento* and Busenello’s concise one for *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, in which he blended one historical fact with a series of verisimilar suppositions that he subjected to drastic chronological manipulations. In 1672, Aureli followed what had become standard practice during the second half of the century; his *argomento* clearly delineates two distinct parts. The first outlines the materials borrowed from ancient sources (in this case Tacitus), and the second explains the libretto’s entirely fictional events, which were nonetheless plausible in the context of operatic convention.

Not only did Aureli include a far more detailed recitation of major events derived directly from Tacitus’ *Annals* than Busenello did; he was also far more attentive to chronology. All of the events recounted in the opera can be safely associated with the years 49 to 50 A.D., culminating with the adoption of Nero on February 25, 50 A.D. (see Table 1). Moreover, with the exception of the Nurse Drusa and the servant Niso—stock operatic figures—all of the characters are drawn from Tacitus.

In the first portion of the libretto, Aureli deals with the historical material that comprises the central portion of the opera’s plot—Claudius’ adoption of Nero as his heir because of the influence of Agrippina and her lover Pallas. He includes an abbreviated discussion of the preamble to Claudius’ marriage to his niece Agrippina from the opening of Book 12 of the *Annals*. Rather than discussing the freedmen Narcissus and Callistus, who played a vital role in Claudius’ court (each championing different women to be Claudius’ new wife), Aureli mentions only Pallas

17 See Mauro Calcagno, “Censoring *Eliogabalo* in Seventeenth-Century Venice” in this volume.

(Pallante), recounting as well Tacitus' claim that Pallas had been Agrippina's lover (*Annals* 12.25): "Bound to Agrippina, first as the promoter of her marriage and then her lover, he still urged Claudius to think of the interests of State." He then describes how Pallas persuaded Claudius that Agrippina was the better choice, since she would bring Germanicus' grandson Nero to the family, who was worthy of imperial rank. Aureli's brief mention of Pallas' Arcadian ancestry (*Annals* 12.53), though of no importance in the opera, demonstrates the care with which he ladled historical information into his *argomento*.¹⁸

A second point discussed in the first portion of the *argomento* concerns the earthquake and strange portents that presumably sent Claudio to the Temple of Diana to make sacrifices. As *Annals* 12.43 reports, "several prodigies occurred that year: Birds of evil omen perched on the Capital, houses were leveled by frequent shocks of earthquake, and panic spread, all the work were trodden down in the hurry and confusion of the crowd. Scanty crops too, and consequent famine." Of no small importance in the actual opera, however, is Aureli's interpretation of the facts. He presents the earthquake as a consequence of the adoption of Nero, a point not made explicitly by Tacitus.¹⁹

The same sleight of hand is evident in the mention of Claudius' sacrifices in the Temple of Diana, which are dramatized in the opening of the opera as a celebration of a peace treaty. Tacitus also describes these sacrifices, albeit in an entirely different and much darker context: In order to insure that Nero would marry Claudius' daughter Octavia, Agrippina contrived a false accusation against Octavia's betrothed, Lucius Silanus. On the day of Nero and Octavia's wedding, Silanus commits suicide. Claudius then decides to make sacrifices in the Temple of Diana in order to ward off evil. What Aureli has done, however, is to cull two events

18 Aureli's *argomento* omits any mention of Vitellius, the censor, who actually spoke to the senate and persuaded them to change the law regarding marriage between a niece and uncle (*Annals*, 12. 4). In 1642, Malipiero, *L'Imperatrice Ambiziosa* (Venice, 1642), provided an illuminating expansion of this passage, which Aureli might well have known. Not only does it present a distinctly Venetian point of view on the liabilities of imperial politics (and the consequences of Pallas' collusion with Agrippina), but an explanation, however indignant, of why Claudius might have preferred Nero to his own son.

19 *Annals* 12.64 also mentions other events from that year, including various auguries, such as "soldiers' standards and tents set in a blaze by lightening, swarm of bees settling on the summit of the capitol; birth of monsters, half-man and beasts, which prefigure the death of Claudius."

Table 1 Use of Tacitus in *Claudio Cesare* (1672).

TACITUS	HISTORICAL EVENT	USE IN ARGOMENTO	SIGNIFICANCE IN OPERA
<i>Annals</i> 3:66–69	Gaius Silanus, pro-consul of Asia, is accused of extortion, banished.	Giunio Silano, consul of Rome and father of Giunia, accused of violating the sanctity of Augusto and disdaining the majesty of Tiberio, is banished.	Giunio Silano comes to Rome with Mitradate to see his long-lost daughter Giunia.
<i>Annals</i> 12.1.3, 2.3	Callistus, Narcissus, and Pallas all recommend different candidates to marry Claudius.	Claudio Cesare, after the death of Messalina, marries Agrippina through the efforts of Pallante.	Antefatto—occurred before beginning of opera.
<i>Annals</i> 12:15–20	Mithridates, after rebellion and defeat, arrives in Rome, not as captive but with more arrogance than appropriate.	Mitradate rebels against Rome, is defeated “by the power that a thunderbolt against the enemies of the Tiber,” goes penitent to Eunone, travels to Rome, and is forgiven every offense.	Antefatto; the opera begins with the arrival of Mitradate.
<i>Annals</i> 12.25.1	Agrippina secures the adoption of Nero with the help of her lover Pallas.	Agrippina persuades Claudio “with blandishments” to adopt Nerone as his son. Pallante is described as Agrippina’s paramour.	Pallante and Agrippina are lovers and co-conspirators. Claudio adopts Nerone to prove his loyalty to Agrippina after his presumed dalliance with Giunia.
<i>Annals</i> 12.26.1	Agrippina receives the title of Augusta.	Agrippina becomes Augusta with the marriage, not the adoption.	Opera assumes that Agrippina is Augusta (empress).

Table 1 (continued)

TACITUS	HISTORICAL EVENT	USE IN ARGOMENTO	SIGNIFICANCE IN OPERA
<i>Annals</i> 12.4.3	Earthquake and strange portents occur.	The portents are a result of the adoption of Nerone.	Earthquake in Act I of opera coincides with Agrippina's show of power—before the adoption of Nerone.
<i>Annals</i> 12.5.3	Mention of Pallas' descent from Arcadian kings occurs as praise for his loyalty to Rome.	The descent is briefly mentioned.	Irrelevant
<i>Annals</i> 12.7.3	Senate validates the marriage of Claudius and Agrippina, primarily through the efforts of Tigellennus.	“In order to render these new nuptials more honest, he (Pallante) persuaded the senate to establish a law that made it legal for an uncle to marry his niece.”	Antefatto
<i>Annals</i> 12.8.1	Lucius Junius Silantus commits suicide; Claudius ordains rituals, ceremonies at the Grove of Diana.	Claudio goes to the Temple of Diana to make sacrifices in the aftermath of the earthquake.	Claudio and Mitradate make peace in the Temple of Diana Act I scene I.

from Tacitus—the earthquake and Claudius’ need to make sacrifices in Diana’s Temple—that were unambiguously associated with Agrippina’s plots and misdeeds.

The historical portion of the *argomento* also introduces the opera’s secondary plot, concerning King Mithridates of Bosphorus, to whom Tacitus also devotes considerable attention in Book 12 of the *Annals*. Mithridates, who had previously been exiled from his kingdom for rebelling against the Romans (and whose young brother was now king), gathered an army to re-take Bosphorous, but was eventually defeated by the Romans. As Aureli notes in the *argomento*, Mithridates then threw himself on the mercy of King Eunones, who had previously assisted Claudius in quelling the rebellion. Tacitus recounts how Eunones persuaded Claudius to pardon Mithridates, who was brought to Rome, though not as a captive. Tacitus wryly notes that Mithridates “showed more spirit than the situation warranted.” Mithradates’ arrival in Rome is the event with which Aureli begins his opera. The introduction of a foreign, eastern monarch into a Venetian opera is by no means unusual; it was a plot line used in any number of operas. But Aureli’s pains to locate a historically plausible monarch who fits perfectly and conveniently into the chronology is noteworthy.

Finally, the *argomento* harkens back to a more distant historical incident, the reign of Tiberius, during which Junius Silanus, Consul of Rome, had been banished, for, according to Aureli, “violating the divinity of Augustus.” The Junius family was one of the most important and distinguished in Rome, producing no fewer than three consuls (including one whose daughter married Caligula). *Annals* 3.66–69 reports that Consul Gaius Junius Silanus was accused of extortion in Asia and—in words quoted almost verbatim in Aureli’s *argomento*—was “charged with offences against the divinity of Augustus and the imperial majesty of Tiberius.” Aureli seems to have been in need of a character that was fully pedigreed in the historical sources. Tacitus also mentions a number of women named Junia Silana, any of whom could have served Aureli’s purpose in the opera, but Aureli’s Junia Silana (possibly the banished Gaius’ daughter) was the one described by Tacitus as “the equal of Agrippina in family distinction, beauty, and immorality.” At one time Agrippina’s ally, Junia plotted against the empress and was eventually exiled. Thus, even Giunia,

Agrippina's enemy and competition in the opera, had a valid historical model.²⁰

Only one other character omitted in the *argomento* but included in the opera had a genuine role in history, Lepido—listed only as a “Duce Romano”—referring to Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, who also had had an affair with Agrippina—presumably motivated (like Pallas) by political ambition. The characters missing from Aureli's libretto—Seneca, who had been recalled from exile should have been in Rome at this time and Claudius' children Octavia and Britannicus—are in fact the more virtuous of the Romans, alerting us to a missing “moral center”—arguably not the case in *Poppea*. In other words, in Aureli's libretto, the imperial Roman characters who might have restrained Agrippina or asserted some moral influence are nowhere to be found.²¹

The second part of the *argomento* deals with imagined events, or what Aureli terms “*accidenti verisimili*” (realistic accidents). In this operatic fantasy, an innocent Silano (perhaps unfairly banished) conveniently finds himself in the court of Mitradata, ideally situated to travel with Mitradata and Eunone to seek out his long-lost daughter hidden in Rome and raised—in perfect operatic tradition—by a benevolent nurse. The Temple of Diana—in contradiction to both the historical record and the *argomento*—becomes the setting for the formalization of the peace treaty (and an appropriately elaborate spectacle for the opera's opening scene).

Other events present even more playful expansions on the facts recounted in the *argomento*. The emperor Claudio, husband to Agrippina, falls in love with Giunia, the daughter of Silano, and threatens to have his wife repudiated (another echo of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*). Meanwhile, the newly arrived Mitradata also falls in love Giunia (who loves him in return). Unlike *Poppea*, in which Nerone succeeds in repudiating his wife and marries “the wrong woman,” *Claudio Cesare* follows the rules of comedy perfectly: The two couples are properly reunited at the end of the opera—Mitradata marrying Giunia and Claudio returning to

20 Marcus Junius, consul of 19 A.D., was the father of Lucius Junius Silanus, the unfortunate ex-fiancé of Octavia who committed suicide and inspired Claudius' sacrifices to Diana. Gaius Junius Silanus was originally banished to Gyarus, and then given the opportunity to retire to Cythnos, which Aureli calls Citerea (islands in the Aegean).

21 See Jean Racine, *Britannicus* (1639), in which Nero's villainy is given explicit treatment.

Agrippina (informed readers would have known that Agrippina will later poison Claudius).

The opera also abounds in other well-worn, if nonetheless ingenious, plot devices, such as disguise. Giunio Silano appears in court incognito as Osmino, and Agrippina exchanges clothes with Pallante to escape from jail—a marvelous precursor of *Fidelio*. Aureli also uses one of his favorite theatrical devices: Nerone sings and makes love to a portrait of Giunia (much to his mother's disgust), finally discarding it (and his infatuation) as a demonstration of his loyalty and masculine virtues.²²

But beyond these familiar plot devices and conventions is the central plot, drawn from history, which focuses on Agrippina's ambition and the adoption of Nerone. Although Aureli borrowed numerous characters from history, Nerone and Agrippina are the most "marked" in terms of historical reputation, engaging in the Tacitist discourse that fascinated Venetians in the middle of the century. This nod to Tacitus was accomplished not through disregard of opera's usual mechanisms but through their canny implementation, with the aid of a composer who also had a complete understanding of how the genre worked. Boretti's musical setting has the power not only to reflect the capricious nature of the plot and aspects of characterization but also to convey truths only implicit in the *argomento* and actual text of the opera.

Much of the opera's political message is expressed through the dramatic and musical representation of Agrippina. As the lover of Pallante, mother of Nerone, and wife of Claudio, Agrippina displays an unusual combination of erotic appeal, feminine wiles, and fierce ambition. Our first glimpse of her in Act I, scene 5, brings these elements to the forefront. Whereas the first few scenes are set in Diana's Temple so that Claudio can establish peace with Mitradate (and become enamored with the young Giunia), Agrippina is shown in command of a private, inaccessible, and distinctly feminine realm—a *Loco delitie nel Monte celio*—her pleasure garden on Montecelio, one of Rome's outlying hills.

After Agrippina's initial aria, her lover and co-conspirator Pallante arrives. The libretto is most explicit about her duplicity. The emperor may be her Adone, she sings, but she is content to enjoy herself with Pallante. She and Pallante do not actually sing a

22 On the portrait convention in Aureli's libretto, see Heller, "The Beloved's Image: Handel's Admeto and the Statue of Alcestis," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (forthcoming).

love duet; their situation is far more voyeuristic. Agrippina prepares for a brief rest with a luxuriously seductive aria, “Soavissimo oblio,” while Pallante watches. She falls asleep in the garden, requesting that no one—except Nerone—be permitted to disturb her. Pallante sings her a love song as she sleeps (presumably withdrawing afterward), and Nerone arrives in the following scene, Act I, scene 7, and sings to his sleeping mother.

Nerone's aria is suggestive on several levels. Aureli's text reveals the impatience of the young prince, eager to fulfill his mother's well-known ambitions and become emperor. Typically, a scene such as this one might feature an opening passage of recitative before the aria. Instead, in Boretti's setting, the young man enters his mother's private garden singing uninhibitedly: His impetuosity and impatience are immediately transformed into song, as if this was a regular occurrence between mother and son (see Appendix for the score of the aria).

In the first portion of the aria, Nerone complains of how slowly time flies—how long he must wait for consolation. Boretti set the first four lines with a lamenting affect—an expansive eight-measure phrase in G minor that quickly expands into the upper register before the gentle flourish on the word “volo”—a playful sigh that descends with unexpected rapidity on the first beat. Boretti's tonal strategy—the move to what in modern terms would be considered a minor dominant (m. 5)—which was favored by Boretti's contemporaries for lamenting or even effeminate characters, highlights Nerone's ineffectuality (whereas the major dominant has a strong relationship to the tonic key, the minor is far less definitive, thus virtually emasculating Nerone) (see Appendix, Example 1a). The second portion of the aria reveals why Nerone is lamenting: He cannot wait for the day when he will receive the crown, and the beautiful name of “Caesar,” and have his hopes fulfilled. For the *seconda parte* (m.25), Boretti switched to a $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature—notating what is essentially a livelier tempo (see Appendix, Example 1b). At this point, Nerone's emerging sense of self calls forth an instrumental accompaniment—perhaps hinting at the future tyrant's own musical prowess—and a dance-like energy that would undoubtedly have disturbed his mother's sleep.²³

23 The musical treatment of Nerone by Boretti is not dissimilar to a contemporary treatment of another famous son with an incestuous subtext—Semiramide's son Nino, who changes identities with his mother so that he can go to war and she can stay at home in his

This is Nerone the singer who luxuriates in the upper reaches of his soprano voice, who plays the lyre, and who celebrates with a pronounced capriciousness the day upon which he will be crowned as Caesar, albeit without the *gravitas* expected from the future emperor of Rome. Even more suggestive is the abbreviated return of the *prima parte*, which emerges almost too abruptly from the conclusion of the *seconda parte* (see Appendix, Example 1c). This final plea is now accompanied by a sensuous halo of strings not heard in the aria's opening, as if to endow his words with special significance. This single gesture both confirms that his ambitions will be realized and provides a sensual lullaby for his mother.

As a monologue, this aria would be an elegant and revealing glimpse of the young would-be emperor. But what is particularly interesting is that Aureli and Boretti contrived for Nerone to sing this lyrical mixture of boyish ambition and sensual longing to the sleeping Agrippina in the privacy of her pleasure garden—a dramatic situation that would have certainly reminded the audience of the persistent charge of incest between the two. But the sense of intimacy is heightened in what follows. The sleeping Agrippina calls out in her sleep to her son “Neron figlio,” declaring that he will be happy and that he will become Caesar. He listens in startled disbelief—(“I’ll be happy, and [be] Caesar? The shadows delude you, my royal mother”). The stage directions then indicate that she awakens from her dream and, seeing Nerone, moves toward him. She tells him that she had seen an oracle from the heavens in her dreams. The way would now seem clear for the two to achieve their goals. Nerone’s lyric display and Agrippina’s dream in the midst of Agrippina’s pleasure garden are thus part of the story of a too intimate relationship between mother and son, in which the hint of unhealthy sexuality colors the overtly political ambitions of the protagonists.

Agrippina’s danger and power, however, are given more explicit representation in Act I, scene 9. Learning from her servant Niso about Claudio’s desire to marry the young Giunia, Agrippina challenges fate, declaring it to be under her control. “Fierce destiny, I do not fear your blows; if I am Empress of the Tiber, if in my scepter every power is joined, I will nail down the wheel of

place in Pietro Ziani’s *La Semiramide* (1670)—although, arguably, Boretti was a much more skilled composer. See Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 237–239.

Fortune.” Boretti’s setting of the passage provides a vocal demonstration of her power. The simple recitative suddenly breaks into florid arioso as she describes the effect of power on fortune’s wheel. This show of strength might seem unremarkable in itself, but, as the stage directions indicate, an earthquake—one actually documented by Tacitus as having occurred in 49 A.D.—follows her bold declaration. The earthquake operates on the level of metaphor, reflecting the ruinous politics with which the Venetians associated Agrippina.²⁴

In the next scene, Claudio discusses the prospect of making Giunia his wife with his counselor Lepido. Their conversation, however, takes place in the same room that, according to the stage directions, has been destroyed by the earthquake. Notably, neither man comments about the apparent destruction that surrounds them, as if the political situation has degenerated so far that even the effects of this natural disaster merit no comment. Claudio, a mere victim of Agrippina’s will, can only attempt to complete his business amid the ruin that she initiated. Agrippina’s defiance of fate and fortune—the power that Tacitus and subsequent commentators feared—could even cause the earth to move.

That Agrippina realizes her goals is not surprising. Indeed, one of the oddities of seventeenth-century historical opera is the extent to which the librettists and composers could create a happy ending either by rewriting history (as in Busenello’s and Cavalli’s *La Didone*, in which the Queen of Carthage lives happily ever after) or, as in the conclusion of *Poppea*, by whitewashing the insincerity or immorality in the historical record. In this instance, Aureli manages both. At the end of the opera, when Giunia and Mitradata and Agrippina and Claudio reunite in their “proper configuration,” Claudio not only swears eternal love to Agrippina, but he also gives Agrippina another gift, his adoption of Nerone. This is a stunning moment. Agrippina’s dream is proven to be valid; not even an earthquake could diminish her powers or mollify the imperial will. After a brief lyric exclamation of joy from Nerone, in which song provides a mask for the corruption that will ultimately follow, the opera ends with the happy duets of the four lovers—seemingly no different from every other Venetian opera. Aureli provides a plausible, if ahistorical ending, and in the

24 Aureli, *Claudio Cesare*, Act I, scene 9.

final moments of the opera, the pull of convention—the indomitable spirit of the happy ending—seems to submerge historical concerns.

The opera, however, does recount a significant historical event—the adoption of Nero by Claudius through the influence of Agrippina, displaying as well the unhealthy relationship between mother and son. Tacitist politics and notions about women and empire are inextricably wedded to the *lieto fine* in which imperial triumphs are, as with *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, fraught with historical consequences (not the least of which are Claudius' death at the hands of Agrippina, the murder of Britannicus, the matricide of Agrippina by Nero, and Nero's kicking to death of his pregnant wife Poppea). Moreover, as in *Poppea*, in *Claudio Cesare*, lyricism became the tool for imparting the lessons of history, telling of Nero's ambition, vulnerability, and his unsuitability to reign, as well as of Agrippina's ability to combine political acumen with the manipulative power born of a strong sexual appeal.

That this story is pleasurable to the ear makes the message that much more powerful. Like Agrippina's pleasure garden, full of sensual delights, song provides a sonic veil under which darker truth might still exist. The ability of music to deceive as well as to persuade—something that Handel will explore with considerable delight and skill in his *Agrippina*—is one of the most tangible results of the encounter between Tacitus and the genre of opera. And lest we forget, Aureli has provided a detailed lesson in the *argomento*, a document that traces the path between history and operatic convention, about how events in the past can be made to sing and speak on the stage. We may never know how closely seventeenth-century audiences listened to operas or read librettos, but the clues to a deeper meaning were certainly there, should they have chosen to follow them.

APPENDIX: NERONE'S ARIA

Example 1a

Nerone

Quan - to tar - da - - te o quan - to pi - gri mo - men - ti a dis - pie -

gar - - - - - lo lo vi so

Example 1b

[violins]

quan - do il bel no - me di Ce - sa-re hav - rò?

Example 1c

[violins]

lo, Quan - to tar - dat - - - - te, o quan - to pi - gri mo - men - ti a spie -

gar - - - - - ti - - - - - vo - lo - - - - -