

BUSENELLO'S SECRET HISTORY:



An allegorical reading of *L'incoronazione di Poppea**

By Magnus Tassing Schneider

The 1623 publication of Procopius' Secret History shocked the scholarly world. The ancient historian's rejection of his official account of the reign of Justinian I forced humanists to reflect on the general reliability of historical sources. The article suggests that Giovan Francesco Busenello's libretto L'incoronazione di Poppea (1643) reflects the challenge posed by Procopius' book. Though its portrayal of historical figures adheres to Tacitus' Annals, it plays with the possibility that even Tacitus himself was deceived by Machiavellian rulers. Did he, for example, condemn Nero and Poppaea while praising Octavia because this was the truth, or because Octavia was, in fact, a superior politician who had managed to craft a favourable epitaph for herself?

Nerone innamorato di Poppea, ch'era moglie di Ottone, lo mandò sotto pretesto d'ambasciaria in Lusitania per godersi la cara diletta, così rappresenta Cornelio Tacito. Ma qui si rappresenta il fatto diverso. Ottone, disperato nel vedersi privo di Poppea, dà nei deliri e nelle esclamazioni. Ottavia, moglie di Nerone, ordina ad Ottone che sveni Poppea. Ottone promette farlo; ma non bastandogli l'animo di levar la vita all'adorata Poppea, si traveste con l'abito di Drusilla ch'era innamorata di lui. Così travestito entra nel giardino di Poppea. Amore disturba e impedisce quella morte. Nerone ripudia Ottavia, nonostante i consigli di Seneca, e prende per moglie Poppea. Seneca more, e Ottavia vien discacciata da Roma.¹

Nero, in love with Poppaea, Otho's wife, sent the latter to Lusitania under the pretext of an ambassadorship in order to enjoy his dearly beloved. This is how Cornelius Tacitus represents the facts, but here

* Some of the points made in this article have already been presented in the program article for my 2011 production of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* at Københavns Musikteater (Schneider 2011). I would like to thank the anonymous reader from *Renæssanceforum* for several valuable suggestions, and Prof. Ellen Rosand for checking my English.

¹ Giovan Francesco Busenello: *L'incoronazione di Poppea, opera musicale*, "Argomento". Quotations from the libretto are taken from Busenello 2016. Translations from Italian are the author's unless otherwise stated.

they are represented differently. Desperate at being deprived of Poppaea, Otho bursts into ravings and exclamations. Octavia, Nero's wife, orders Otho to kill Poppaea. Otho promises to do so, but lacking the courage to take the life of his adored Poppaea, he disguises himself with the clothes of Drusilla who had been in love with him. Thus disguised, he enters Poppaea's garden. Cupid disturbs him and prevents her death. Despite Seneca's advice, Nero repudiates Octavia and marries Poppaea. Seneca dies, and Octavia is expelled from Rome.

This is how Giovan Francesco Busenello, the librettist of Claudio Monteverdi's opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, summarized its action when publishing his complete dramas in 1656, long after its premiere in Venice in 1643.² Not surprisingly, several commentators have noted the overt liberty with which he reorganized the historical events: in fact, Otho became governor of Lusitania four years before Poppaea's coronation; he and Octavia were never involved in an attempt to murder her; and Seneca died three years after the coronation and Octavia's expulsion and execution. In the present article I will argue, however, that Busenello's explicit irreverence towards the main source of his plot – the *Annals* of the second-century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus – was not merely a defence of poetic license. By telling his readers that “the facts” are “represented differently” in Tacitus and in the opera, he jokingly suggests that the two types of text hold similar claims to accuracy, as if both of them reflect a free adaptation of historical events. With this provocation, the poet directs our attention to a central theme of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*: the essential unreliability of historical narratives, especially when written by historians describing their own times. The drama suggests that the chroniclers of history might deliberately have deceived their readers for political reasons. Or they might have been deceived themselves by rulers or politicians who skilfully managed to manipulate their public image.

Procopius and Theodora's mantle

Two decades before the premiere of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, the scholarly world was shaken by a publication that ignited an intense debate about the relation between power and historical truth. In the early 1620s, Nicolò Alemanni, custodian to the Vatican Library, had discovered a manuscript of the long-lost *Anekdotia* (Unpublished Writings) by the sixth-century Greek historian Procopius of Caesarea in the papal collections. Procopius was well-known for his *Wars of Justinian*, an eight-volume account of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I's wars against Persians, Vandals and Goths, and for his

² *L'incoronazione di Poppea* is sometimes described as the first opera based on a historical subject, though this distinction belongs to *Il Sant'Alessio* by Giulio Rospigliosi and Stefano Landi, which premiered in Rome in 1631.

Buildings of Justinian, a panegyric about the same emperor's building projects. But the relatively positive image of Justinian and his empress Theodora, which Procopius presented in these official accounts, was undermined by the devastating attack on the couple in his unofficial account, which Alemanni published with a parallel Latin translation in Lyon in 1623 as the *Arcana historia* (Secret History). As Procopius states in the preface, "it was not possible, as long as the actors were still alive, for these things to be recorded in the way they should have been", but in the unpublished version he intended to disclose, "not only those things which have hitherto remained undivulged, but also the causes of those occurrences which have already been described."³ Although Alemanni omitted the most shockingly graphic accounts of Justinian's and Theodora's sexual excesses in his edition, the book still emerged as a violation of the mystical aura of absolute kingship. Indeed, Procopius' book has been described as the seventeenth century's "most vexed and discussed work in late-Roman literature."⁴ For example, the English lawyer Thomas Ryves – a staunch supporter of the Stuart dynasty – objected in 1626 that the *Secret History* "did not seem to pertain to the infamy of this emperor more than to the injury of all kings and leaders", for which reason Justinian's misdeeds had better remain covered by a "veil of silence".⁵

The rending of this veil especially affected the image of Theodora, a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In *The Wars of Justinian*, hers is largely an image of imperious majesty, as appears from the inflammatory speech to her courtiers during the Nika revolt of 532:

May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress. [...] as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud.⁶

To seventeenth-century Italians, this heroic image might even be said to have its visual counterpart in one of the famous mosaic panels from 547 that adorn the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (little more than a hundred kilometres south of Venice): surrounded by court ladies and eunuchs, a golden-haloed Theodora, carrying a chalice, dazzles like a religious icon in her lavishly bejewelled crown and purple mantle (see Fig. 1).

³ Procopius 1935/1998, i.

⁴ Mazzarino 1959/1966, 103.

⁵ *Imperatoris Iustiniani defensio adversus Alemannum*, London, "Argumentum" (non-paginated), 8; quoted from Bullard 2009, 26, 27. The first English translation of the *Anekdotia*, *The Secret History of the Court of the Emperor Justinian*, which appeared in London in 1674, became a model for the critique of the absolutist ambitions of the Stuarts, inspiring multiple 'secret histories' during the following decades.

⁶ Procopius 1914, vol. 1, I.xxiv.

In the *Secret History*, however, Procopius claimed that Theodora had been a courtesan and actress before her marriage to Justinian, and that she had committed a number of repulsive crimes after ascending the throne. One of the most conspicuous was plotting the murder of Queen Amalasantha of the Ostrogoths in 534. In *The Wars of Justinian*, Procopius had related how Amalasantha, who was held captive on an island in Lake Bolsena by her co-ruler Theodatus, had secretly asked for Justinian's help, offering to put the whole of Italy into his hands in return for an exile in Byzantium. Intending to grant her wish, the emperor sent as ambassador to Italy a certain Peter "who was one of the trained speakers in Byzantium, a discreet and gentle person withal and fitted by nature to persuade men",⁷ but when he arrived, Amalasantha had been killed on the orders of Theodatus. In the *Secret History*, however, the facts were 'represented differently':

At the time when Amalasantha, desiring to leave the company of the Goths, decided to transform her life and to take the road to Byzantium, as has been stated in the previous narrative, Theodora, considering that the woman was of noble birth and a queen, and very comely to look upon and exceedingly quick at contriving ways and means for whatever she wanted, but feeling suspicious of her magnificent bearing and exceptionally virile manner, and at the same time fearing the fickleness of her husband Justinian, expressed her jealousy in no trivial way, but she schemed to lie in wait for the woman even unto her death. Straightway, then, she persuaded her husband to send Peter, unaccompanied by others, to be his ambassador to Italy. And as he was setting out, the Emperor gave him such instructions as have been set forth in the appropriate passage, where, however, it was impossible for me, through fear of the Empress, to reveal the truth of what took place. She herself, however, gave him one command only, namely, to put the woman out of the world as quickly as possible, causing the man to be carried away by the hope of great rewards if he should execute her commands. So as soon as he arrived in Italy – and indeed man's nature knows not how to proceed in a hesitant, shrinking way to a foul murder when some office, perhaps, or a large sum of money is to be hoped for – persuaded Theodatus, by what kind of exhortation I do not know, to destroy Amalasantha. And as a reward for this he attained the rank of Magister, and acquired great power and a hatred surpassed by none.⁸

Is it possible that this account of Theodora's secret ordering of the murder of Amalasantha inspired Ottavia's secret ordering of the murder of Poppea in Busenello's libretto? It certainly seems significant that both narratives deal

⁷ Procopius 1919, vol. 3, V.iv.

⁸ Procopius 1935/1998, xvi.

with a Roman empress who has gone down in history as a blameless icon of fortitude but whose purple mantle, shockingly, turns out to conceal corruption: doubting the emperor's character, and fearing for her own position, she goes behind his back and orders an outwardly virtuous subject to murder her rival. While there is no direct evidence that Busenello had read the *Secret History*, there is some evidence that it was known to his fellow poet Giulio Strozzi, likewise a member of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti, and author of the libretto for *La finta savia*, which opera preceded *L'incoronazione di Poppea* on the stage of the Teatro dei SS. Giovanni e Paolo in the 1643 carnival. In 1644, Strozzi published a collection of eulogies to the famous singer-actress Anna Renzi who had created the role of Ottavia the year before, opening his introductory essay with the following comparison of Renzi to Theodora:

Poi che il Mondo non hà più di quei Cesari, che portino le Teodore dalle scene al Trono, e dal Teatro al Talamo Imperiale, non è manchevole al meno di conoscitori del merito di Anna Renzi, mentre tanti belli ingegni si sforzano di consacrar alla Gloria il nome d lei nel Tempio dell'Eternità.⁹

While the world no longer possesses those Caesars who bring the Theodoras from the stage to the throne, and from the theatre to the imperial marriage bed, at least it does not lack connoisseurs of Anna Renzi's merit, since so many *beaux esprits* strive to anoint her name with glory in the Temple of Eternity.

Since it was in the *Secret History* that Procopius revealed that Theodora had been an actress before her marriage to the emperor, we must conclude that Strozzi was familiar with at least some of the leaks of the seditious book, and hence Busenello is likely to have been so as well. Strozzi's employment of that quintessentially Baroque metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is potentially rich in allegorical meanings, furthermore. Like Renzi, Theodora could be described as an actress with a formidable ability to deceive beholders, but she used this talent for political ends, successfully forging a virtuous epitaph for herself in spite of her crimes.¹⁰ The connection drawn between Renzi's and Theodora's artistry has further allegorical implications: if the heroes and heroines of history turn out to be mere roles performed for a credulous posterity, then historical accounts have no more claim to authenticity than history plays, which at least make no secret of their illusoriness. Especially considering that Busenello raised a question mark above Tacitus'

⁹ "Anna Renzi romana, elogio di Giulio Strozzi, tratto dal libro secondo de' suoi Elogii delle donne virtuose del nostro secolo", in Strozzi 1644, 5.

¹⁰ For my analysis of Anna Renzi's theatrical persona, see Schneider 2012, 269–91.

representation of historical facts, it is remarkable, furthermore, that it was the actress of Ottavia whom Strozzi compared to Theodora. Was it perhaps Renzi's portrayal of the former empress that brought the latter empress to his mind? This would certainly agree with the way the operatic Ottavia arguably embodies the principle of historical revisionism, Busenello playfully presenting his libretto as the 'secret history' of Tacitus' *Annals*. To further understand the presence of both Tacitus and Procopius in his work, however, we must first look at how Tacitus was read in Venice in the period.

Tacitus and the political spectacles

The complex reception of Tacitus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has long been recognized as an important context for understanding *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.¹¹ In 1528 the attitude towards the Roman historian among Renaissance humanists was summarized as follows by the Florentine statesman Francesco Guicciardini, a friend of Niccolò Machiavelli: "Se vuoi conoscere quali sono e [sic] pensieri de' tiranni, leggi Cornelio Tacito"¹² (If you want to know the thoughts of tyrants, read Cornelius Tacitus). After the fall of the Florentine Republic two years later, however, he revised his statement:

Insegna molto bene Cornelio Tacito a chi vive sotto e tiranni il modo di vivere e governarsi prudentemente, così come insegna a' tiranni e modi di fondare la tirannide.¹³

Cornelius Tacitus is very good at teaching those who live under tyrants how to live and conduct themselves prudently, just as he teaches tyrants ways to establish their tyranny.

In other words, Tacitus was, like Machiavelli, the potential teacher of tyrants as well as of their subjects. His role as a teacher of the former was strengthened after 1559, when Machiavelli's most important historical-political works – the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* and his notorious treatise *Il principe* (both published posthumously in the 1530s) – were placed on the papal index of prohibited books. From now on, it was no longer possible to refer to Machiavelli in other than damning terms, but since rulers and courtiers still employed Machiavellian ideas about political manipulation and the ends justifying the means, they simply replaced him

¹¹ On the influence of Tacitism on the opera, see Fenlon & Miller 1992, 11–20; Holzer 1993, 81–84; Heller 1999, 51–62; Heller 2003, 145–52; Moretti 2010, 164–209. The close connection between Tacitism and Machiavellianism has not received much attention from these scholars, however (excepting Moretti). On the general reception of Tacitus in the period, see Stackelberg 1960; Etter 1966; Schellhase 1976.

¹² Guicciardini 1857, maxim CCC, 171; see Schellhase 1976, 95.

¹³ Guicciardini 1857, maxim XVIII, 87; see Schellhase 1976, 96.

with Tacitus, from whom they managed to extract many useful precepts. This explains why Renaissance ‘Machiavellianism’ was replaced by the ‘Tacitism’ that dominated European political thinking from around 1580 until the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁴

The conflation of Machiavelli’s and Tacitus’ thinking under the single heading *ragion di stato* (Reason of State) occurred in Giovanni Botero’s influential *Della ragion di stato*, which was published in Venice in 1589. Having visited various European courts, Botero had been highly amazed, he wrote,

il sentire tutto il di mentovare Ragione di Stato, et in cotal materia citare hora Nicolò Machiavelli, hora Cornelio Tacito; quello, perche dà precetti appartenenti al governo, & al reggimento de’ popoli; questo, perche esprime vivamente l’arti usate da Tiberio Cesare, e per conseguire, e per conservarsi nell’Imperio di Roma.¹⁵

to hear the Reason of State mentioned all day long, and to hear Niccolò Machiavelli and Cornelius Tacitus quoted on this subject: the former for offering precepts regarding the government and control of the people, and the latter for describing so vividly the arts employed by Emperor Tiberius in both obtaining and keeping his domination of the Roman Empire.

Not only was *ragion di stato* evil, Botero maintained, but it simply did not work in practice, since the stability of any reign depends on a certain amount of mutual trust between the ruler and the people, and hence he attacked Tacitus as well as Machiavelli for offering dangerous advice to princes and for corrupting political life. The ancient historian had suddenly become a controversial figure.

The principles of Tacitism – here understood as the Machiavellian reading of Tacitus with the aim of providing rulers with practical precepts – was established in the *Discorsi sopra Cornelio Tacito* from 1594 by Scipione Ammirato, court historian to the Tuscan grand duke. As a good Catholic, Ammirato never mentions Machiavelli by name, though his book is, in fact, an apology for the Machiavellian rules, which are attributed to Tacitus. Ammirato’s rhetorical move consists in subjecting the *ragion di stato* to religion, but since the two are incompatible, he virtually encourages princes to practise religious hypocrisy.¹⁶ That Tacitus is mainly used to slip Machiavelli in by the back door is implied in Ammirato’s title, which echoes the title of the former’s book on Livy. It has been pointed out that the tendency among absolutist advisers to call their studies of Tacitus *discorsi* (discourses)

¹⁴ Etter 1966, 1, 15; Schellhase 1976, 151.

¹⁵ Botero 1589, dedication (unpaginated).

¹⁶ Stackelberg 1960, 127.

in itself betrays their dependency on Machiavelli who had founded the genre of historical-political commentary.¹⁷

An alternative view of Tacitus and Machiavelli was introduced by the anti-absolutist writer Traiano Boccalini in his satire *De' ragguagli di Parnaso* (1612–13) as well as in his massive *Comentari sopra Cornelio Tacito*, on which he worked from around 1590 until his mysterious death in 1613. Boccalini agreed with Botero that princes' study of Tacitus was harmful, and he claimed, speaking out against Ammirato, that *ragion di stato* was “una legge utile a gli Stati, ma in tutto contraria alla legge d'Iddio, e de gli huomini” (a law useful for the states, but in every respect contrary to the law of God and of men).¹⁸ However, since princes had become Tacitists (or Machiavellians) anyway, Boccalini found it better to teach their subjects to see through their deceits by providing them with Tacitus' “occhiali Politici” (political spectacles),¹⁹ in effect using the princes' own weapon against them. Towards the end of his commentary, Boccalini issued this emphatic warning:

Guardatevi dunque voi, che negotiate con i Principi da i concetti malitiosi, e dall'empiastrò di morbide parole, perche quando dolcemente cantano, all'hora crudelmente incantano. L'interesse, la lingua loro muove, non la giustitia, ne l'amore del ben publico.

Pochi arrivano ad intendergli, però che parlano in cifra. Guai à chi si ferma sù la superficie delle loro espressioni lavorate al torno, per ingannare i semplici, e per erudire i saputi. Chi ben misura il genio del Principe con il di lui interesse, non troverà molto difficile ad indovinare, quali sono i suoi fini & i disegni benche mascherati fra gli enigmi di speciose parole!²⁰

You who negotiate with princes: beware of their wily conceits and of the plaster of their smooth words, for their sweet song is a cruel allurement. Their speech is driven by self-interest, not by justice and not by love of the public good.

Few people get to understand what they say, for they speak in ciphers. Woe to him who stops at the surface of their utterances, which are adapted to deceive the simple and to instruct the knowledgeable by turn. The man who knows how to gauge the spirit and self-interest of the prince will not find it difficult to guess what his ends and plans are, although they are masked behind the enigmas of specious words!

Unlike Botero and Ammirato, Boccalini did not regard Tacitus (or, by implication, Machiavelli) exclusively as an adviser to rulers. He was “il vero

¹⁷ Stackelberg 1960, 81, 83.

¹⁸ Boccalini 1613, vol. 2, “*Ragguaglio LXXXVII*”, 401.

¹⁹ Boccalini 1613, vol. 2, “*Ragguaglio LXXX*”, 341.

²⁰ Boccalini 1677, vol. 1, 93.

maestro degli huomini accorti” (the true teacher of shrewd men), whose lessons could be used in a cynical and evil way by princes and in a critical and healthy way by their subjects.²¹ In the eyes of the Church, however, even this anti-authoritarian reading of Tacitus was essentially heretical, and Boccalini faced great dangers towards the end of his life. In 1611, therefore, he moved to Venice, also preferring the aristocratic republicanism of the Adriatic state to the absolutist monarchies found everywhere else on the peninsula. Here, too, it was impossible for him to get his controversial Tacitus commentary published, however, the Senate arguing – along the lines of Botero – that

veramente della dottrina di Cornelio Tacito è stato rampollo il Macchiavelli et altri cattivi autori destruttori d’ogni politica virtù, i quali da quest’autore, come nelle semenze è la cagione degli arbori, et delle piante, hanno havuto la sua origine et il nascimento [...].²²

Machiavelli and other evil authors who have destroyed every political virtue are truly the descendants of the doctrine of Cornelius Tacitus, and they found their origin and birth in this author, just as the seeds are the cause of the trees and plants [...].

Boccalini died in 1613, apparently poisoned by assassins sent from Rome. But though his commentaries did not appear in print before 1677 – in a clandestine and heavily abridged edition published in Geneva – he created the specifically Venetian brand of Tacitist historiography, with its emphasis on scepticism and the critique of power.²³ As Peter N. Miller says, *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, too, is “written the way the best history was written in the Venice of the first half of the seventeenth century, and, as a result, it needs to be read as a Tacitist text.”²⁴ This does not mean that the opera slavishly follows Tacitus’ account in the *Annals*, nor that it is a piece of propaganda.²⁵ I will argue, however, that the aim of Busenello’s drama was essentially the same as that of Boccalini’s writings, i.e. to train the critical faculty of the public by encouraging them to behold the world through political spectacles, theatrical illusion serving as a metaphor for political deception.

In fact, the opera features no less than three Tacitist counsellors who all conspire against each other, striving to promote the interests of the competing parties. Arnalta, Poppea’s nurse, echoes Boccalini in her insistence that

²¹ Boccalini, *Ragguagli*, vol. 3, 207, quoted from Stackelberg 1960, 133.

²² Quoted from Stackelberg 1960, 91.

²³ Fenlon & Miller 1992, 12–14. See also Holzer 1993, 82–83.

²⁴ Fenlon & Miller 1992, 20. See also Heller 1999, 55.

²⁵ Cf. the objection to this claim in Holzer 1993, 79–80, 83.

Poppea should mistrust the words of Nerone and his courtiers, and anticipate the vengeance of Ottavia. Ottavia's Nutrice, on the other hand, echoes Ammirato and similar absolutist advisers when insisting that the empress should secretly revenge herself on her faithless husband by taking a lover. Busenello subtly points to this connection by letting her allude both to the standard title of the princely manuals in Tacitism and to the Latin title of Procopius' *Secret History*, suggesting that a queen's 'secret history' will remain such.²⁶ "fa riflesso al mio *discorso*, / ch'ogni duol ti sarà gioia" (reflect on my discourse, and every sorrow will turn to joy) (288–89), she sings, later adding that her mistress needs to learn "della vendetta il principale *arcano*" (the chief secret of revenge) (307). It is worth considering the allegorical implications of the fact that the two nurses probably were sung by the same singer in 1643.²⁷ This might not only suggest that their two branches of Tacitism ultimately represent a single perspective, but also that the two characters share a secret history of their own: the spectators might ponder whether they are, in fact, one person, secretly supporting both teams and not taking sides before it is certain who will be Nerone's empress.

Seneca, too, echoes the absolutist advisers, his scene with Nerone featuring another reference to the Tacitist manuals when the emperor orders him to shut up: "Lascia i *discorsi* io voglio a modo mio" (Drop your discourses: I want it my way) (423). While Iain Fenlon and Peter N. Miller construed this scene as a struggle between brute force and Neostoic reason, Wendy Heller pointed out that Seneca's ideological frame of reference is actually *ragion di stato* here.²⁸ The ambiguity seems deliberate on the poet's part: the smooth-tongued courtier uses the word *ragione* four times in the scene (412, 430, 438, 459), glibly conflating the Tacitist and the Neostoic concepts of reason.²⁹ This semantic mobility probably implies a parody of Ammirato who indulged in a similar play on the different connotations of the word *ragione* in his attempts to invent moral alibis for an essentially amoral political practice.³⁰

While Poppea, Ottavia and Nerone are all offered Tacitist advice by their various counsellors, they react differently, and they are partly characterized through the difference in their responses. Troubled by the notorious depravity of the dramatic action, scholars have long discussed which character, if any,

²⁶ Cf. Schneider 2012, 291.

²⁷ See Schneider 2012, 265–66.

²⁸ Fenlon & Miller 1992, 68–70. Heller 1999, 71–73. See also Rosand 1985, 58–64; Moretti 2010, 200–5.

²⁹ For a thorough discussion of Neostoic philosophy as a context for understanding *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, see Fenlon & Miller 1992, 21–31. However, their discussion lacks a clear distinction between the very different concepts of Neostoic reason and Tacitist *ragion di stato*.

³⁰ Stackelberg 1960, 125.

represents its voice of virtue, or at least the viewpoint of the audience; but perhaps a satisfactory answer has not been found because the question is not the right one. Perhaps we should not search for the most *virtuous* character, but for the most *skilful* character, i.e. for the one who best manages to project a virtuous image with the help of the joint principles of Tacitist statecraft and illusionistic stagecraft. By introducing the subversive perspective of the *Secret History* into the historical narrative of the *Annals*, Busenello suggests that even the most perspicacious sceptic among historians, i.e. Tacitus himself, might have been duped by appearances fabricated by crafty political minds. “What if,” the opera seems to ask, “Nero and Poppaea were not quite as despicable in real life as Tacitus thought? Perhaps they were just less skilful politicians than Octavia, who has gone down in history as a paragon of virtue...”

The perspective of Boccacini's political spectacles might also affect our interpretation of the final scene, furthermore, in which Poppea is crowned as empress by the Consoli and Tribuni, and as the terrestrial Venus by Venere and Amore. Traditionally, scholars have pleaded either for a *moralistic* or for a *carnavalesque* reading. Supporters of the former suggest that the original audience was fully aware of the destiny of the historical lovers: the pregnant Poppaea died three years after her coronation when Nero allegedly kicked her belly in a fit of anger, and the emperor himself committed suicide another three years later when he was overthrown after alienating the Roman elite.³¹ Supporters of the latter theory suggest that the ending should rather be regarded as a paradoxical encomium, or a comic reversal of the moral order, in the festive and playful spirit of the carnival season.³² There is no reason to refute either of these interpretations, both of which are made possible by the allegorical structure of the drama, but it should be stressed that *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, despite frequent claims to the contrary, is not really an opera about the struggle between vice and virtue. Its central theme is the writing of history as a lesson in politics; and in the historiographical perspective Nero and Poppaea did not lose because they died violently but because they are remembered as some of the worst villains to have trod the earth. The opera suggests that the reason they are remembered this way is less their wicked actions than their unwillingness to conceal their real motives through the application of *ragion di stato*. After all, their actions in the drama are not more abominable than those of Ottone, Ottavia and Drusilla who also

³¹ This interpretation was apparently introduced by Nino Pirrotta in “*Monteverdi's Poetic Choices*” (1968), in Pirrotta 1984, 316. It is also defended in Rosand 1985, 34–35; and Fenlon & Miller 1992, 92; but see Holzer 1993, 88.

³² Interpretations along these lines are found in Carter 1997, 180–83; Ketterer 1998, 394–95; Muir 2007, 113–18.

plot the death of a rival for the sake of their self-interest. But because Seneca's death sentence is pronounced in public, whereas the assassination of Poppea is planned in private – as was, according to Procopius' *Secret History*, the assassination of Amalasantha by Theodora – Nerone will go down in history as an emblem of villainy, whereas Ottavia will be remembered as an emblem of offended innocence.

Significantly, the operatic empress does not owe this triumph to her statecraft alone, i.e. to her skill at manipulating the other characters, but also to her stagecraft, i.e. to her skill at manipulating the audience by means of acting and singing. Yet her success is only potential, since sceptics among the spectators might remember Boccacini's admonition to remain mindful of the motives of princes and courtiers in order to perceive what lies beyond the "sweet song" of their cunning conceits. Ottavia scornfully refuses when the Nutrice encourages her to take a lover, and when Seneca encourages her to rejoice in her misfortune, since this will, posthumously, adorn her with the eternal lustre of virtue. But are her refusals sincere? In the 1643 production, arguably, the opera suggested that the real reason the epitaph of the historical Octavia was more virtuous than Nero's might be that she, 'in fact', did heed Seneca's advice, but without telling anyone. She concealed her emotions in the manner of a true Tacitist, "in *taciturne angoscie*" (taciturn anguish) (272). In order to explain this point, however, we must turn to the portrayal of the role by Anna Renzi.

The serpent, the mirror and the woman with two faces

In an earlier article about the 1643 production of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, I first proposed that the characters of Virtù, Ottavia and Drusilla most likely were performed as a triple role by Anna Renzi who is known to have portrayed Ottavia. My arguments can be summarized as follows:³³

- a. During the first thirty years of Venetian opera (1637–68), productions apparently featured up to thirteen singers, including up to four women. However, the first production known to have featured more than two women was mounted in 1648, whereas *L'incoronazione di Poppea* features three characters that would seem to call for a female performer: Poppea, Ottavia and Drusilla. The remaining female characters (nurses, goddesses, minor characters) could have been performed by castratos.
- b. As the leading female singer of the time, Anna Renzi would probably have required to be at least as much on stage as Anna di Valerio who sang Poppea. However, Ottavia's role is not only considerably smaller

³³ For the extended argument, see Schneider 2012.

than Poppea's; it is half the size of the twelve other roles Renzi is known to have sung during her career.

- c. Renzi was known as an operatic quick-change artist, her other roles involving violent contrasts in dramatic mood, mainly playing on contrasts between shrewdness and simplicity, and between tragedy and comedy (occasioned by feigned madness, disguises, or other kinds of deception); this corresponds to extreme contrasts in musical style and vocal tessitura. Furthermore, her other characters were invariably united with one of the male leads in the end, which would fit the doubling of Ottavia and Drusilla.³⁴
- d. A number of lines in the libretto are best explained as hidden references to the doubling, often in the form of internal jokes.
- e. Some of the poems describing Renzi's performance in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* refer to characteristics of her role that are incompatible with Ottavia's character but would fit that of Drusilla.
- f. The expansion of Ottavia's role in the 1651 Naples production suggests that the role was too small for a leading singer originally. Furthermore, the inserted music blurs the original difference between Ottavia's and Drusilla's musical styles, suggesting that an emphatic contrast between the two characters was no longer deemed necessary.³⁵

In 1643, the judicious among the spectators might have seen the doubling not merely as an occasion for virtuoso acting in contrasting roles, though it was certainly also that; they could have seen Drusilla as being the empress in disguise. I will discuss this possibility in depth in what follows. I have previously described the quick-change act in Act Two – when Anna Renzi would have left the stage as Ottavia only to re-enter as Drusilla ten measures later – as probably the supreme feat of her double performance.³⁶ But the transformation would only have been possible if Renzi wore Ottavia's costume on top of Drusilla's. If we keep this in mind, it emerges that the text contains a number of references to the costume of the empress. In the morning after Nerone has left Poppea's palace, she sings that hope is “il genio lusingando, / e mi circondi in tanto / di regio sì, ma imaginario manto” (flattering my spirit while shrouding me in a royal yet imaginary mantle) (196–99). In some lines that were only set to music in the Naples version she

³⁴ Heller has also noted the curious absence, in Ottavia's case, of “the pairing with an appropriate man that was the birthright of every Venetian operatic heroine” (Heller 2003, 138).

³⁵ Heller has also drawn attention to Ottavia's “chaste and austere musical representation – an assiduous avoidance of sonorous singing – that contrasts strikingly with [...] the florid melodiousness that characterizes the exuberant Drusilla” (Heller 2003, 139).

³⁶ Schneider 2012, 279–80.

adds: “S’ a tue promesse io credo, / già in capo ho le corone” (if I believe your promises, the crown is already on my head) (202–3). Reference to the empress’ mantle and crown recurs in Seneca’s first soliloquy, in which he reflects that

Le porpore³⁷ regali e imperatrici,
d’acute spine e triboli conteste
sotto forma di veste,
sono il martirio a’ prencipi infelici;
le corone eminenti
servono solo a indiademar tormenti.
Delle regie grandezze
Si veggono le pompe e gli splendori,
ma stan sempre invisibili i dolori.

The royal and imperial mantles, woven with sharp thorns and caltrop thistles, are the affliction of unhappy princes in the shape of clothes; the eminent crowns serve merely to adorn torments. People see the pomp and splendour of royal greatness, but the pains always remain invisible. (387–95)

In the allegorical world of the seventeenth-century stage, the tangible and the abstract were closely linked, so Ottavia probably wore a purple mantle and a crown, both of which the Consoli and Tribuni would then bestow on Poppea in the coronation scene. The hopes of the new empress then finally materialized as she, in one sense, assumed the iconic identity of her predecessor. While Seneca believes that Ottavia’s mantle and crown conceal invisible pains, Ottavia herself, repenting of her impious demand that Jupiter strike Nerone with lightning, implies in a similar way, hinting at the layered nature of her identity, that “errò la superficie, il fondo è pio, / innocente fu il cor, peccò la lingua” (my surface erred, but my depth is pious; my heart was innocent, but my tongue sinned) (275–76). Whether Ottavia’s surface conceals piety, pain or something else on a moral level, on the theatrical level it conceals Drusilla.

In what follows, I will develop this interpretation by centring on the allegorical combination of three key metaphors that connect the two characters: the serpent, the mirror and the woman with two faces. The combination of exactly these metaphors, which may serve as a key to Renzi’s triple character, is found in Cesare Ripa’s influential emblem book *Iconologia*, published in seven editions between 1593 and 1630. Ripa suggests the following depiction of the virtue of Prudence (*Prudenza*):

³⁷ According to Florio 1611, one of the meanings of *pórpóra* is “a Kings coronation, robe [sic] or mantle.”

DONNA, con due faccie, & che si specchi, tenendo un Serpe avvolto ad un braccio.

Le due Faccie, significano, che la Prudenza è una cognitione vera, & certa, la quale ordina ciò che si deve fare, & nasce dalla consideratione delle cose passate, & delle future insieme.

L'eccellenza di questa virtù è tanto importante, che per essa si rammentano le cose passate, si ordinano le presenti, & si prevedono le future. Onde l'huomo, che n'è senza, non sà racquistare quello, che hà perduto; nè conservare quello, che possiede; nè cercare quello che aspetta.

Lo Specchiarsi, significa la cognitione di se medesimo, non potendo alcuno regolare le sue attioni, se i proprii difetti non conosce.

Il Serpe, quando è combattuto, oppone tutto il corpo alle percosse, armandosi la testa con molti giri: & ci dà ad intendere, che per la virtù, che è quasi il nostro capo, & la nostra perfettione, dobbiamo opporre à' colpi di Fortuna tutte l'altre nostre cose, quantunque care: & questa è la vera prudenza. Però si dice nella Sacra Scrittura: *Estote prudentes sicut Serpentes*.³⁸

A woman with two faces, who looks in a mirror while holding a serpent wrapped around one arm.

The two faces imply that Prudence is a true and certain knowledge, which prescribes what is to be done and is born out of a joint consideration of past and future things.

It is most important to excel in this virtue, for it is thus that past things are remembered, present things are directed, and future things anticipated. Therefore, the man who has none cannot recover what he has lost, nor preserve what he possesses, nor find what he waits for.

Looking in a mirror implies knowledge of oneself, for nobody can control his actions if he does not know his own flaws.

A struggling serpent opposes blows with its whole body, arming its head with many turns, and lets us understand that we must oppose the strokes of Fortune with all that which we possess, however dear to us it may be, since this virtue is almost our head and our perfection: this is indeed true Prudence. Therefore, it says in the Holy Scriptures: "Be wise as serpents".

In his theatricalization of Ripa's allegory, Busenello retained the concrete images but gave each of them a slightly different meaning, which points to theatre as illusion and deception. Thus, while Ripa used the two faces of Prudence to suggest that the prudent person simultaneously remembers the past and anticipates the future, Busenello uses the image to suggest that the prudent person is 'two-faced' (*a due facce*), in the sense of double-dealing –

³⁸ Ripa 1593, 224.

or doubling. The two-faced woman is the actress who plays both the tragic character of Ottavia and the comic character of Drusilla, but it might also refer to Ottavia disguising herself as Drusilla.

Secondly, while Ripa uses the serpent to suggest that the prudent person twists and bends to avoid the blows of fortune, Busenello uses the image to suggest that the prudent person 'sloughs of her skin', in the sense of changing her identity, literally by pulling off her clothes, or her costume (*spogliarsi*). The serpent is Drusilla who sloughs off her dress when Ottone turns into her, but it might also refer to Ottavia sloughing off her costume when she turns into Drusilla. This duplicitous conception of the serpent is barely implied by Ripa who quotes the passage in the Gospel of Matthew where Christ teaches his disciples how to act in adversity:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.³⁹

In the Vulgate translation, the wise serpents are *prudentes*, and the harmless doves *simplices*, a combination possibly parodied in that of the prudent Ottavia and the seemingly simple Drusilla who indeed delivers an inspired testimony when brought before her king for the sake of her love, successfully uniting the qualities of the serpent and the dove. In Busenello's libretto, the image of the serpent (*serpente* or *serpe*) occurs three times in the text. It is introduced by Arnalta at the beginning of the opera: "Mira, mira Poppea, / dove il prato è più ameno e diletto, / stassi il serpente ascoso" (Look, look, Poppaea: where the meadow is most pleasant and delightful, the serpent lies in wait) (231–33). Poppea, however, fails to take account of this advice and of the possibility that Drusilla, one of her *confidenti* (trusty friends) (1195) – rather than Ottavia – might be the innocent-looking meadow in which she least expects an attack. A similar lack of precaution is displayed by Ottone in his soliloquy at the end of the act when he first considers killing Poppea in order to forestall his own elimination: "Vo' prevenir costei / col ferro o col veleno. / Non mi vuo' più nutrire il serpe in seno" (I will prevent her from doing it, with my sword or with venom; I will no longer nourish a serpent in my bosom) (620–22). Ottone identifies Poppea with the venomous serpent, but he fails, like Poppea herself, to take account of the possibility that the

³⁹ *King James Bible* 1611, Matthew X.16–20.

innocent-looking Drusilla, who now makes her first entrance, might be the serpent, i.e. Ottavia having sloughed off her purple mantle and crown. The last occurrence of the metaphor is when Ottone enters Poppea's garden, wearing Drusilla's dress and holding a sword:

Eccomi trasformato
d'Ottone in Drusilla,
no, non d'Ottone in Drusilla,
ma d'uomo in serpe, al cui veleno e rabbia
non vide il mondo e non vedrà simile.

Look at me, transformed from Otho into Drusilla; no, not from Otho into Drusilla but from a man into a serpent the like of whose venom and rage the world has neither seen nor ever will see. (1235–38)

The word *trasformato* contains a deep theatrical truth, for if Drusilla is merely a costume, has Ottone donning that costume not indeed been transformed into Drusilla, just as Poppea donning Ottavia's mantle and crown is later transformed into the empress? Monteverdi has completed the transformation by letting Ottone 'don' Drusilla's musical style as well at the beginning of his soliloquy; his first two lines are set as one of her typical dance-like and melismatic airs, before he drops into his own tormented and wavering recitative style, as he comes close to realizing that he has now himself become the serpent he thought Poppea was, and that she thought Ottavia was, but who was always the sweet and tender Drusilla.

Let us now turn to the last of the three images, the mirror (*specchio*), or the act of mirroring (*specchiare*). While Ripa uses this image to suggest that the prudent person knows himself, Busenello uses it to suggest that the prudent person is a reflective surface (*superficie*) that mirrors the gaze of the onlookers, or spectators, in the sense of manipulating their visual-emotional perception, by letting them see what she wants them to see. The image occurs twice in the text. In Act One, Ottavia is tormented by the thought of Nerone nestling in Poppea's arms, observing that

il frequente cader de' pianti miei
pur va quasi formando
un diluvio di specchi in cui tu miri
dentro alle tue delizie i miei martiri.

the frequent dropping of my tears will form, as it were, a flood of mirrors, in which you may behold my afflictions within your delights.
(260–63)

And in Act Three Drusilla addresses these words to the audience before confessing to the attempted murder of Poppea: "O voi ch'al mondo vi chiamate amici, / deh specchiatevi in me: / questi del vero amico son gli

uffici” (O you who call yourselves friends in this world: ah, mirror yourselves in me! These are the duties of the true friend) (1349–51). The mirror is the reflecting surface that projects the image of Ottavia, the tragically wronged wife, and that of Drusilla, the tragically wronged friend, into the mind of the dewy-eyed onlooker; but it might also refer to the act of theatrical playing itself, mirroring the vices and virtues of the spectator rather than those of the imagined characters. Since neither the mirror image nor the dramatic character has any identity of its own, they can deceive us, and so Ottavia and Drusilla might deceive the spectators in the auditorium, just as they arguably manage to deceive Nerone, the onstage spectator.

The emblematic identification of Anna Renzi’s triple role with the virtue of Prudence serves as a hint as to which virtue exactly is represented by the figure of Virtù in the prologue, which character Anna Renzi probably also portrayed. The virtue of Prudence itself is only referred to once, and negatively, viz. when Virtù calls Fortuna “rea chimera delle genti, / fatta dea degli’imprudenti” (blameful chimaera of mankind, made a goddess by the imprudent) (26–27). In the libretto, however, the concept ‘caution’ (*cautela*) is used synonymously with ‘prudence’, specifically in relation to the assassination plot. “Discorro il modo / più cauto e più sicuro / d’una impresa sì grande” (I am considering the most cautious and safe procedure for such a great enterprise) (1033–35), Ottone explains to Ottavia when she tells him to kill Poppea, the verb *discorrere* echoing the standard titles of the Tacitist *discorsi* in political prudence. Like a mirror image, Drusilla reflects his concern two scenes later when he confides in her about Ottavia’s order: “ma circospetto va, cauto procedi” (but be circumspect; proceed cautiously) (1151), she tells him. Yet in stark and significant contrast to her own call for caution in Act Two, Drusilla maintains after her capture by Arnalta and the Littori in Act Three that “credula troppo e troppo incauta fui” (I was too credulous and too incautious) (1324). As spectators, we may not be convinced by Drusilla’s profession of incautious (imprudent) credulity; but it convinces Nerone, which is ultimately what matters to her.

Like the cardinal virtue of Prudence, that of Fortitude (*fortezza*) is sometimes associated with Drusilla in the libretto; but this association, too, abounds in ambiguity. The latter virtue is referred to three times and always in conjunction with the ideal of ‘constancy’ (*costanza*), Busenello apparently implying that these concepts are to be regarded as synonymous within the drama, just as ‘prudence’ and ‘caution’ are synonyms. In Act One, Seneca tells Ottavia that

Tu, dal destin colpita
produci a te medesima alti splendori
di vigor, di fortezza,

glorie maggiori assai che la bellezza.
[...]
Ma la virtù costante
usa a bravar le stelle, il fato e'l caso,
giamai non vede occaso.

Struck by destiny, you yourself create splendid displays of strength and fortitude, glories far greater than beauty. [...] But the sun never sets on constant virtue, wont to outplay the stars, fate and chance. (337–40, 345–47).

Shortly after he has given his advice to the seemingly sceptical empress, Seneca learns of his imminent death from Pallade and envisions his own splendid display of virtue in the face of adversity: “Venga la morte pur: costante e forte / vincerò gli accidenti e le paure” (Let death come: with constancy and fortitude I shall triumph over chance and fears) (400–1). Finally, when Drusilla – having silently followed the advice Seneca gave Ottavia in Act One – has impressed the gullible Nerone with what he thinks are her “salutifere bugie” (salutary lies) (1414) in Act Three, the emperor pardons her with a final praise of the virtue:

vivi alla fama della mia clemenza,
vivi alla gloria della tua fortezza,
e sia del sesso tuo nel secol nostro
la tua costanza un adorabil mostro.

live in the fame of my clemency, live in the glory of your fortitude, and may your constancy serve as a revered example for your sex throughout our age. (1415–18)

The noun *mostro* occurs twice in the drama, both times to describe Drusilla: Nerone uses the word in the sense of ‘example’, whereas Arnalta chasing the supposed Drusilla out of Poppea’s garden uses it in the sense of ‘monster’ (1288). Given the two-faced nature of Anna Renzi’s role, Nerone’s praise of Drusilla as “un adorato mostro” of constancy emerges as no less ironical than her own avowal of incaution.⁴⁰

Neostoicism versus Machiavellianism

In Busenello’s libretto, the above-mentioned mirrors of Ottavia and Drusilla also refer to two very different literary works, both of which belong to the didactic genre known as the ‘mirrors for princes’ (*specula principum*). The first of these is Seneca’s essay *On Mercy* (c. 55–56), in which the dedication to Nero opens with Seneca’s stated intent “modo speculi vice fungerer et te

⁴⁰ On the perception of courtiers as ‘two-faced’ among Venetian intellectuals, see Heller 1999, 62.

tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium” (to serve in a way the purpose of a mirror, and thus reveal you to yourself as one destined to attain to the greatest of all pleasures).⁴¹ Seneca’s moral essays were an important inspiration for the Neostoic movement founded by the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius in the late sixteenth century, which gave special prominence to the virtue of Fortitude, or constancy, as implied by the title of Lipsius’ influential philosophical work *On Constancy, Especially in Times of Public Evils* (1583–84). Combining Senecan Stoicism with Christian ethics, Lipsius advocated freedom from the emotions, submission to the will of God and patience when fortune strikes.

The second ‘mirror for princes’ was Machiavelli’s *Il principe*, along with the treatises of his Tacitist followers. “Ne luogo alcuno è, dove più manifestamente si scorga la perfezione, ò mancamento di chi governa, che nello specchio dell’istoria” (Nor can the perfection or failings of rulers anywhere be descried more manifestly than in the mirror of history), as Scipione Ammirato wrote in the introduction to his *Discorsi sopra Cornelio Tacito*.⁴² In contrast to Seneca and the Neostoics, Machiavelli and the Tacitists favoured the virtue of Prudence, divesting the word *virtù* entirely of its moral content and using it in the sense of ‘skill’ or ‘ability’. Machiavelli was of the opinion that fortune only governs half of the world, leaving the other half to be governed by our free will.⁴³ The prince who relies entirely on fortune is lost when it changes, so in order to constrain its ravages, he needs two things: virtue, i.e. ability or prudence, and opportunity, success depending on his ability to use opportunities to his advantage.⁴⁴ It is therefore inaccurate to describe Poppea as a Machiavellian character, as some scholars have done.⁴⁵ In fact, her actions are invariably imprudent: she believes in the unchanging benevolence of fortune; she relies on the passions of the unpredictable Nerone; she fails to heed the sound advice given by Arnalta;

⁴¹ Seneca, “*De clementia*”, in Seneca 1928, 356–57.

⁴² Ammirato 1598, “*Proemio*” (unpaginated).

⁴³ Machiavelli 1962, 121.

⁴⁴ Machiavelli 1962, 27.

⁴⁵ Holzer 1993, 88; Moretti 2010, 205–9. In fact, the latter’s persuasive suggestion that Ottavia’s and Ottone’s conspiracy draws inspiration from Machiavelli’s analysis of Tacitus’ account of the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero in the *Discorsi sopra la deca di Tito Livio* – including the advice that the prudent conspirator communicates with no one – might have suggested to him that the truly Machiavellian character in the opera is Ottavia, not Poppea; see Moretti 2010, 190–94. Others have observed, too, that Poppea, “who trusted her future to appearances, was indeed putting herself at the mercy of Fortune and circumstances” (Fenlon & Miller 1992, 53). Carter’s assertion that “Fortuna does not do badly in the opera”, whereas “Virtù certainly takes a fall”, which hardly fits with the submission of *both* goddesses to Amore in the prologue (Carter 2002, 272–73), relies on the premise that the imperial crown, and not secret revenge or a virtuous reputation, is Ottavia’s objective.

she dangerously alienates the spurned Ottone; and she trusts the unreliable Drusilla to visit her when she is most vulnerable. Significantly, even Amore describes her as “l’incauta” (the incautious one) (1212), Busenello setting her imprudence off against the prudence of her enemies. If we see Drusilla and Ottavia as one joint character, they publicly suffer the outrages of fortune by projecting an image of fortitude and constancy while they secretly take arms against them by acting with prudence and caution. In this way, the two-faced woman emerges as a theatricalized, allegorical mirror for princes, conflating the didactic mirrors of Stoics and Machiavellians along with their key virtues.

Let us now go through the opera while we adopt the viewpoint that Virtù, Ottavia and Drusilla are not three separate characters, but one, appearing under various guises. In the prologue, Fortuna says to Virtù: “Già regina, or plebea, che per comprarti / gl'alimenti e le vesti / i privilegi e i titoli vendesti” (Formerly a queen, now a plebeian, you sold your privileges and titles to buy your nourishment and clothes) (10–12). The lost royal privileges and titles are those of the deposed empress, which Ottavia exchanges for the clothes (*vesti*) of Drusilla and for the nourishment (*alimenti*) of revenge. Notably, Ottavia adopts the noun *alimento* in Act Two in a speech that was only set to music in the Naples version:

la vendetta è un cibo
che col sangue inimico si condisce.
Della spenta Poppea su 'l monumento
quasi a felice mensa
prenderò così nobile *alimento*.

revenge is a sustenance that one sauces with the blood of one's enemy.
As if at a heavenly banquet, I shall consume this noble nourishment on
the tomb of the deceased Poppaea. (1066–70)

After the prologue, Virtù becomes Ottavia who first listens to the advice of the Nutrice (the Tacitist mirror for princes) who suggests that the best way of taking revenge on the unfaithful Nerone is to take a lover. Next, she listens to the advice of Seneca (the Neostoic mirror for princes) who suggests that the admiration aroused by the display of fortitude in adversity compensates for suffering. Sloughing off her imperial mantle and thus transforming herself into Drusilla, Ottavia then chooses Ottone as the tool of her revenge. Prudently, ‘Drusilla’ makes her move in the exact moment he has been spurned by Poppea and therefore is most likely to let himself be used and shaped according to her self-interest. “A te di quanto son, / bellissima donzella, / or fo libero don” (I hereby make a free gift to you of everything that I am, fairest maiden) (636–38), Ottone promises, and this is exactly what Ottavia (here as Drusilla) wants to hear.

In Act Two, Ottone repents of his murderous thoughts, however: “Cambiatemi quest’anima deforme, / datemi un altro spirto meno impuro” (Change this deformed soul of mine; give me another spirit less impure) (996–97), he prays to the gods. Now it is Ottavia herself who makes her calculated entrance at the right moment. She exacts from him a promise to kill Poppea and suggests that he change not his soul for a purer one, but his clothes for those of a woman.⁴⁶ Sloughing off her mantle once more, Ottavia then re-enters as Drusilla a moment later, offering him “l’anima in pegno e la mia fede” (my soul and my faith) (1133), and assuring him that “E le vesti e le vene / ti darò volontieri” (I will willingly give you my clothes and my blood) (1149–50). Here she alludes to his change of clothes as indeed a change of souls, though not necessarily to a purer one, as Ottone apparently hoped. Assuming that Drusilla is helping him when offering him her clothes and her identity, he is unaware that it is, in fact, *he* who is forced to keep the promise he made to her in Act One when offering to make a “free gift” to her of “everything that I am”. At the same, time Drusilla helps him keep the promise he made to Ottavia in the previous scene when he agreed to remove Poppea: Ottone’s two promises are reflections of each other, like the women to which they are made.

At the end of the opera, after Drusilla and Ottone have tricked Nerone into pardoning them for their attempted murder of his beloved,⁴⁷ the two-faced woman makes two final exits from the stage. First she makes her Machiavellian-Tacitist exit, as Drusilla, following the advice of the Nutrice, prudently taking revenge on her husband when receiving his solemn permission to go into a laughter-filled exile with her lover.⁴⁸ Then she makes

⁴⁶ Ottavia’s decision to order the assassination of Poppea – after her apparent rejection of the Nutrice’s and Seneca’s advice in Act One – has puzzled scholars. According to Carter, “Ottavia’s sudden shift may be necessary for the resolution of the plot, but it does leave us nonplussed” (Carter 2002, 291). Heller refers to Ottavia’s “seemingly inexplicable shift from victim to villainess as she uncharacteristically (and ahistorically) persuades Ottone to murder Poppea” (Heller 2003, 170). If we accept that Drusilla is Ottavia in disguise, however, the empress’ order emerges as a logical consequence of intervening events.

⁴⁷ Fenlon’s view of Drusilla as “the female counterpart of Seneca” and as “the counterweight to the inconstancy of both Poppea and Ottavia” (Fenlon & Miller 1992, 87) has been rejected by several scholars. As Carter notes, Drusilla is clearly lying when describing herself as innocent in the attempted murder of Poppea (Carter 1997, 178). However, his description of Nerone’s clemency as “a surprising exemplar of (good) royal behaviour” (Carter 2002, 274) misses the point that the emperor is fooled by Ottone and Drusilla when accepting the former’s claim that a remorse-ridden life is worse than death, and the latter’s claim that she had no hand in the attempted murder.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, though Heller believes that Ottavia fails to learn the lesson of the Nutrice “precisely as intended”, she notes that her adoption of the Nutrice’s key (D) in her initial response to her proposal “would seem to indicate that she briefly considers the advice”; and

her Senecan-Neostoic exit, as Ottavia, following the advice of Seneca, creating an appropriate epitaph for herself through her display of fortitude as she claims to go into a tear-filled exile.⁴⁹ According to the 1643 scenario, Ottavia appeared “deposto l’habito Imperiale” (divested of her imperial attire) in this scene.⁵⁰ But if she was no longer wearing Drusilla’s costume beneath the purple mantle, what was she then wearing after having sloughed off her skin one last time? We cannot know, but Benedetto Ferrari seems to refer to the ambiguity of the character Anna Renzi was representing in this moment when he wrote, picking up an image used to describe Drusilla earlier in the drama:

Non è Ottavia, che lagrime diffonde
Esule, esposta à le spumose arene;
È un *mostro*, che con note alte, e profonde
Acrescer va lo stuol de le Sirene.

It is not Octavia who sheds her tears, exiled, exposed on foamy sands;
it is a *monster* which, with notes high and deep, enhances the Sirens’
flock.⁵¹

Alternative facts

With his publication of Procopius’ *Secret History*, Nicolò Alemanni had suggested to Italian readers that the purple mantle of the saintly Empress Theodora apparently concealed licentious and murderous intentions that nobody had suspected. In his dramatic adaptation of Tacitus’ *Annals*, Busenello then suggested that the purple mantle of the equally saintly Empress Octavia might potentially have concealed similar corruption. This

“while she rejects the Nutrice’s teachings on sexual pleasure, the lesson on revenge may well have found its mark” (Heller 2003, 167–68).

⁴⁹ On the juxtaposition of the two ‘exiles’, see Schneider 2012, 283–84. Notably, Holzer observes that Ottavia’s speech echoes Seneca’s *Consolatio ad Helviam*, written during his own exile (Holzer 1993, 91). In Heller’s opinion, however, Ottavia “will die at the hands of Nerone”, and despite Busenello’s poetic licences, “history ultimately wins” (Heller 2003, 153). Here, it is taken for granted that the spectators will project their awareness of the execution of the historical Octavia onto the opera, though neither the libretto itself nor the poems written in response to the 1643 production support such a reading. Notably, while Heller assumes that Ottavia rejects Seneca’s advice just as she rejects the Nutrice’s, this “seems particularly ironic when read against the backdrop of history: the historical Octavia, after all, did precisely what Seneca advised” (Heller 2003, 168). In my reading of the opera, I argue that Ottavia indeed follows Seneca’s advice. However, I would agree when Heller observes that Ottavia’s final lament – in contrast to the standard laments of operatic heroines – “is in some respects a public utterance” (Heller 2003, 173).

⁵⁰ “*Scenario*”, in Rosand 2007, 396.

⁵¹ Benedetto Ferrari, “*Per la Signora Anna Renzi romana insigne cantatrice rappresentante Ottavia ripudiata, e comessa all’onde entr’uno schifo*”, in Strozzi 1644, 28. Translation quoted from Schneider 2012, 249.

‘secret history’, however, would only be visible to the spectators who beheld the stage through political spectacles, i.e. to those who know “how to gauge the spirit and self-interest of the prince”. The natural inference to be made from the fact that Ottavia is unhappy as Nerone’s empress is that she is perfectly willing to leave her crown to Poppea if her historical reputation remains spotless.

While this is the concrete secret history of Busenello’s and Monteverdi’s opera, its general theme is not the relative viciousness of the historical figures who populate it. *L’incoronazione di Poppea* is an operatic history drama about the very unreliability of political narratives, in which ancient history serves as a mirror for contemporary politics. Rulers who manipulate facts in order to achieve their personal ends are not only a modern phenomenon. Awareness of the necessity of distinguishing between seeming and being in political communication goes back at least to Machiavelli who maintained that, although a prince does not need to possess the qualities of piety, honesty, humanity, integrity and religion, “è bene necessario parere di averle” (it is most necessary that he seems to possess them).⁵² Renaissance writers were aware that the ruler’s successful maintenance of this pretence depended on his control of propaganda. The same year that saw the publication of *Il principe*, 1532, also saw the publication of Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, and the following lines may well have served as one of the inspirations for Busenello’s treatment of Nero:

Nessun sapria se Neron fosse ingiusto,
Né sua fama saria forse men buona,
Avesse avuto e terra e ciel nimici,
Se gli scrittor sapea tenersi amici.⁵³

No one would know if Nero was unjust, nor would his reputation perhaps be less good, and nor would earth and heaven have been his enemies if he had understood how to stay friends with writers.

Unlike Nero, Octavia stayed friends with Seneca, the celebrated writer who was thought to have immortalized her in the historical tragedy *Octavia*, one of the main literary sources of the libretto.⁵⁴ This might be the reason why she saved her reputation, the libretto playfully suggests, though her virtuousness might well have been illusory. To the seventeenth century, no medium or art form was considered better suited to communicate and disclose political illusionism than the theatre, which epitomizes the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of distinguishing between being and seeming. As Jan Kott

⁵² Machiavelli 1962, 87.

⁵³ Ariosto 1913, XXXV.26.

⁵⁴ Cf. Schneider 2012, 285–88.

observed, “real tears and feigned emotions are the very nature of acting”,⁵⁵ hence there is no way of telling where the actor (the tears) stops and the character (the emotions) begins, which is particularly evident when the actor performs more than one character within the same show. As operagoers, we want to be moved and seduced; we are naturally inclined to see our own emotions reflected in those of the operatic character. But *L'incoronazione di Poppea* repeatedly reminds us that the character on stage is but an image, a disguise, an illusion, which has been created with the sole purpose of moving, seducing, manipulating us. This process of manipulation is analogous to the way we are being manipulated by rulers and politicians beyond the safe confines of the theatrical space – and for more sinister reasons. The real tears of the feigned character mirror the emotions of the spectator; but by subtly reminding us that what we behold is a mere reflection, and by allowing us to see ourselves being manipulated emotionally, the spectacle offers instruction to the mind, encouraging us to always think critically.

⁵⁵ Kott 1984, 212.

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Fig. 1

Empress Theodora, mosaic panel in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna (547), Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.