

A FICKLE POWER-CRAZED SEDUCTRESS:



Misogyny and Republicanism in Late Seventeenth-century Venetian Representation of Sophonisba¹

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Sophonisba was a sort of cult figure in sixteenth-century Venetian literature since the publication of Trissino's tragedy, in which she appears a heroine of liberty, ready to sacrifice everything in order to be kept in Rome as a slave. The long afterlife of Trissino's Sofonisba undergoes a drastic change in the second half of the seventeenth-century Venice, when theatric plays and novels began to shape her as a very different character: in that framework the Carthaginian noblewoman suddenly becomes a fickle seductress and a power-crazed woman. This article addresses the political and aesthetical reasons that lie behind this upheaval.

The *Fortleben* of the myth of Sophonisba in Renaissance Venice, and in Italy more generally, is closely linked to Gian Giorgio Trissino's first regular tragedy, *Sofonisba*. Conceived between 1514 and 1515 by Trissino—a humanist born in Vicenza, on the mainland of the Venetian Republic—and published in July 1524 and reprinted more than twenty times in the subsequent century, *Sofonisba* pivoted upon the story of the Carthaginian noblewoman. The tragedy saw great success in the entire Venetian domain, despite being originally published in Rome and devoted to the Pope Leone X. Between 1529 and 1609 four editions of the tragedy appeared in Vicenza,² with twelve reprints in Venice during the same time.³ Testifying to the work's appeal in sixteenth-century Venice, these figures also help explain why the

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² They were published in 1529 by the publisher Ianiculo; in 1585 by Brescia; in 1606 again by Brescia; and by Lori and Cescato in 1609.

³ The Venetian editions were published in 1549 by Bindoni; in 1553, 1562, 1585, 1586 by Giolito; in 1562 by Rampazetto; in 1569 by Maggio and Salicato; in 1576 by Guglielmo; in 1582 by Salicato; in 1585 and 1587 by Cavalcalupo; and in 1595 by Bonibelli.

image of Sophonisba it outlined—a heroic virago embodying an inflexible *libido libertatis*—suddenly became the prototypical, iconic depiction in Renaissance Venetian literature. Indeed, the heroic veneer Trissino assigned his heroine perfectly suited the cultural and political agenda of the Serenissima Republic. In contrast to Livy’s historical account, in which Sophonisba figures as a minor character and spoil of war over which Syphax, Massinissa and the Romans contended, and to the fourteenth-century versions of the characters created by Boccaccio, who depicts her as a symbol of feminine strength,⁴ and Petrarch, who depicted her as an archetype of the troubled lover,⁵ Trissino’s protagonist conveyed a political message ideally aligned with one of the cornerstones of Venetian propaganda. Indeed, Trissino’s heroine, a brave woman represented as ready to do whatever it takes, even committing suicide to defend her liberty and avoid being taken to Rome as a slave, stands out as one of the most celebrated symbols of the Republic, which considered liberty its principal key-value. Yet, Sophonisba was ready to sacrifice everything *but* her liberty, embodying a cornerstone of the Venetian ideology, based on the defense of political liberty and independency at all costs.⁶

Something drastically changed between 1620 and 1723: Trissino’s *Sophonisba* stopped being reprinted, the tragedy was no longer staged,⁷ and the protagonist of Livy’s tale saw a sudden metamorphosis, taking on a gloomier shade in the Venetian context, for instance, in Gaudenzio Brunacci’s successful 1661 novel *Sophonisba, o vero le vicende del fato* [Sophonisba, or rather the events of Fate]⁸, where the Carthaginian heroine appears as a fickle, lustful, power-crazed seductress. What shifted Sophonisba away from the center of the Venetian literary pantheon? What motivated this complete

⁴ Chapter 68 of Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* (1361) is devoted to “Sophonisba, queen of Numidia”. On Boccaccio’s Sophonisba as a heroine of liberty and model for the humanistic woman, see Filosa 2012, 168-172; González Rolán 2014. On the *Fortleben* of this genre of depictions of illustrious women in the Medieval and Renaissance Italian literary tradition, see Caputo 2008.

⁵ Petrarch introduced Sophonisba in three of his major works: in the fifth book of the epic poem in Latin *Africa*, written between 1337 and 1343; in the Latin treatise *De viris illustribus*, finished in 1351, and in his *Trionfi*, an Italian poem in *terzine*, modeled on Dante’s *Commedia*, written between 1356 and 1374. On the relevance of Sophonisba in Petrarch’s poetry, see Bartuschat 2000.

⁶ On the myth of original liberty, on which Venice’s republican power was established in the Medieval and early modern period, see Bouwsma 1968; Venturi 1978; Zanetto 1991; Infelise 2002.

⁷ Trissino’s tragedy was represented at the Castle of Blois in 1556, in Vicenza in 1562 and then in 1710, at the Teatro San Luca in Venice by Luigi Riccoboni’s theatric company; on this point see Castorina 2016, 133-134.

⁸ All the translations of Italian texts into English here published are mine.

revision of a character which, until the end of the sixteenth century, had fully embodied the struggle for liberty characterizing the political self-representation of the Republic?

My essay addresses precisely these questions by investigating the reasons for this radical change in the image of Sophonisba in seventeenth-century Venice, when Syphax's wife was transformed from the emblem of republicanism to a symbol of the fragility of power—evidence that even the rich and powerful can become impoverished slaves—of the inconstancy of women, and of the divine punishment for immoderate political ambition.

Sophonisba in seventeenth-century Venice

Few texts in seventeenth-century Italian literature are devoted to the story of Sophonisba. Those that do address this figure belong mostly to the theater and were all published in the second half of the century, mainly in Venice and Rome. The first, and probably the most original among them, is the above-mentioned novel by Brunacci, *Sofonisba, o vero le vicende del Fato*, which was published in Venice in 1661. Brunacci was born in Monte Nuovo in the Marche in 1631 and studied medicine at the Università la Sapienza in Rome. As a physician he moved to Venice in 1660 and became the friend of several scholars and poets belonging to the local academy, the Accademia degli Incogniti. It was probably thanks to the encouragement of these new Venetian friends, and in particular of the prince—that is to say the leader—of the Accademia, Giovan Francesco Loredan, that Brunacci wrote his first novel, which centered on the story of Sophonisba as depicted by Livy.

From its foundation, the Accademia degli Incogniti was characterized by particular interest in the genre of the novel, which it conceived as a perfect tool for appealing to contemporary literary taste while also offering readers moral teachings.⁹ If this aim of *miscere utile dulci* had been taken up in the past by the Aristotelian genre of tragedy, or more generally by classicist literature—such as the epic or heroic poetry, which were relaunched in sixteenth-century Italy¹⁰—the *Incogniti* considered the *romanzo*, written in prose and without any restrictions in the choice of the topic, more suited to this task. Authors such as Maiolino Bisaccioni, Girolamo Brusoni and

⁹ On the relaunch of the genre of the novel by the Academy of the Incogniti, see Mancini 1982; Lattarico 2012, 121-152.

¹⁰ The classicist epic tradition was re-established in sixteenth-century Italy, by Trissino himself – who authored the epic poem *L'Italia liberata dai Goti* (1547) – but mainly by Torquato Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata* (1575-1581), which adapted classicist tensions to the mannerist taste of his time. On the Renaissance Italian epic, see Javitch 1999; Jossa 2002.

Loredan himself not only wrote original novels but also translated contemporary novels by French and Spanish authors.¹¹

These novels, based on the Bible or on ancient or contemporary history,¹² put ethics at the heart of fiction. Before the outbreak of the War of Candia (1645-1669), during which the Turks conquered the rich Venetian settlement on the Mediterranean, the academy's novels had been characterized by the breaking of moral rules: plots were full of erotic episodes demonstrating a philosophy of libertinism and a strong, political anti-papalism. At that time the Republic of Venice was a leading force in the Mediterranean and in Europe too, but when the Turks started to attack the Venetian possessions in the Greek sea—besieging Cyprus and the city of Candia, that were part of the Venetian dominion—to become the only policy able to control the commerce in the Mediterranean, Venice faced a slow decline, ending with the fall of the Republic in 1797. Venice's strength and richness was based mainly on its commercial expansion in the Mediterranean, and the war that led to the loss of Candia, conquered in 1669 by the Turks, was catastrophic for the republican economy, and downsized the political ambitions of the Serenissima.

With the advent of war even the cultural framework rapidly changed. Venetian authors were asked to be more engaged in that conflict, conceived also as a religious clash, and Loredan and his colleagues started publishing novels very different to the past, inspired by a rigidly sententious moralism, condemning any transgression of the ethic and religious tradition.¹³ Brunacci's work stands out within this period, which has been brilliantly defined, in a label that underlines the intrinsic ambiguity of the Accademia's cultural program, as the penitential phase [*fase penitenziale*¹⁴] of the

¹¹ Maiolino Bisaccioni translated several French contemporary novels by Madeleine de Scudéry, Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, and Gauthier de La Calprenède whereas Loredan translated novels by Jean-Pierre Camus and Jean Le Maire.

¹² For instance, Loredan's celebrated novel *Adamo* (1640), focused on the story of the first man as depicted in the book of *Genesis*, but the same author also published novels centered on early modern and contemporary history, including the epistolary work *Ribellione e morte del Volestain* (1634) and an account of the military leader Albrecht von Wallenstein, who had died a few months earlier. On the connection between history and the novel in the seventeenth-century Italian literature, see Carminati – Nider 2007, and Lattarico 2012, 79-120.

¹³ Matteo Casini describes this period, going from the war of Cyprus in 1570 to the war of Morea (1699), passing from the conflict of Candia, as a time in which took place “vast and complex forms of exaltation and autocelebration of the Most Serene Republic and her men, through public festivals, prints, paintings, booklets, poems and architecture”, Casini 2010, 177. Indeed, in the years of Candia literature and theater were particularly encouraged by the Venetian politics to establish a new representation of the Republic, aimed to be displayed not only to the Venetian citizens but also outside of the republican borders.

¹⁴ Metlica 2011, 8.

Incogniti. Modeled on the moral novels belonging to Loredan's late work, *Sophonisba* was originally devoted to the prince of the Incogniti, but when he died suddenly, a few months before the publication of the book, Brunacci chose to dedicate his volume to the nobleman Giuseppe Ganassa. In his *Avviso al lettore* [Notice to the reader] Brunacci argues that his novel is more remarkable for the moral lesson it offers than for its style, since the author was more interested in the reader's good than his pleasure.¹⁵

Though in the preface of the novel Brunacci considers Sophonisba a heroic character who proves that some women can manifest bravery,¹⁶ since she chooses suicide at the end of the story, the female protagonist of the work is often described negatively: indeed, Brunacci's heroine becomes associated with the opposite of the renowned virago celebrated by Trissino's tragedy. Endowed with outstanding beauty, Sophonisba—who is described in detail with the author pausing not only on her face but also on her breasts¹⁷ with the typical erotic allusions employed by the Incogniti—is presented as a Carthaginian Helen of Troy: all the citizens of Africa are enamored with her, and people fall in love even just looking at her portrait.¹⁸ Both Syphax and Massinissa, two of the most powerful African kings, are strongly charmed by her: the latter, after having seen her portrait, moved to Carthage to meet her and once their eyes met, the two fell in love.

Here Brunacci introduces the first twist in the story: contrarily to what happened in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, in his account Sophonisba was already engaged to the Carthaginian nobleman Hanno, and when she met Massinissa, she leaves Hanno without compunction, choosing the new suitor due to her ambition to become queen of the great Numidian kingdom. Sophonisba's

¹⁵ “Non tutti scrivono per mostrare l'altezza de' concetti e la singolarità del suo stile. Non si può dilettere e avvertire. Ho più preteso, Lettore, che il tuo gusto, il tuo bene. Non si possono preparare gli antidoti per genio della gola, e per salute del Corpo” [Not every author writes to show the heights of his ideas and the originality of his style. It is impossible to amuse and teach at the same time. Dear reader, I looked more to your good, than to your taste. It is impossible to prepare medicines which are as tasty as they are healthy] Brunacci 1661, 12.

¹⁶ “Fu anch'ella un'Heroe, a cui si diè l'esser di virile la magnanimità, e la constanza. Ad onta della natura, che formolla femina, mostrò che anche in un petto di donna regnano le risoluzioni di huomo. La delicatezza delle membra, e il lusso barbarico, non poterono renderla sì effeminata che temesse la morte” [She was a hero too, since she had the typical masculine magnanimity and constancy. In spite of Nature, which created her as a woman, she proved to the world that even in a feminine breast can be found a virile bravery. The delicacy of her limbs did not forbid her from being brave enough not to fear death] Brunacci 1661, 13.

¹⁷ Brunacci 1661, 22.

¹⁸ This is a typical Baroque literary feature, that leads the author to prove his rhetorical competence through the use of ekphrasis. On the literary exploitation of the ekphrasis in the seventeenth-century Italian literature, see Daskas 2019, 51-52; De Min 2021.

inconstancy and the unreliability of women in general, is condemned by Brunacci for hundreds of pages. Indeed, as soon as Syphax arrives in Carthage, displaying his exceptional riches to win the heart of the beautiful lady, Sophonisba seems prone to switch yet again to a new lover. In Brunacci's story, both Syphax and Massinissa are victims of Sophonisba's fickleness and ambition: just like Helen in Troy, she causes conflicts and betrayals that lead the various African governments into ruin.

Brunacci's novel thus refocuses the type of attention given to Sophonisba and inspired several rewritings in subsequent years. Though it is not clear whether Pierre Corneille read Brunacci's novel while writing his play, in which Sophonisba appears with several of the negative features already introduced by *Sophonisba*, it is more certain that other Venetian texts took Brunacci's work as a primary source of inspiration. For instance, in 1664 Nicolò Minato, the famous author of *drammi per musica* who debuted on the Venetian stage in 1650 with the play *Orimonte*, wrote a play entitled *Scipione Africano*, set to music by Francesco Cavalli. In this *dramma*, Minato celebrated not only the virtue of Scipio, who appears the prototype of the perfect ruler, able to overcome his personal feelings for the good of the community, but also introduced Sophonisba as the protagonist of a secondary subplot. Here, after Syphax, conquered by Massinissa's army, is abducted and jailed in a high tower, the Carthaginian noblewoman, though still in love with Syphax, agrees to live as a concubine of Massinissa in exchange for protection from the fury of the Romans. Minato's version presents Sophonisba less negatively than Brunacci, but in his play she is far less heroic than in Trissino's tragedy. In order to avoid falling into the hands of Scipio, she is ready to forget her husband and accept the dishonorable condition of concubine: she is not brave enough to commit suicide—Minato's happy ending, due to the theatrical convention of the genre, made this action unnecessary—and does not even express a strong desire for liberty. Once she understands that Syphax is still alive, she is so happy that she agrees to relinquish her freedom and go to Rome as a slave together with her husband.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Mentre vivo ti trovo amato sposo / al vincitor romano / cedo la libertà, nulla resisto, / che perdita non fò, ma dolce acquisto" [Finally I found you still alive, my beloved husband! Now I can give up my freedom to the Roman winner, I won't resist, since with you this is not a loss, but a sweet recovery], Minato 1664, 72. For a literary and musicologist interpretation of Minato's play and of his plays based on Roman history, see Stangalino 2019; now the text can be read also in a recent new edition: Cavalli – Minato 2022. A political interpretation of Minato's play is given by Schulze 2008, according to whom Minato re-uses the Roman heritage to boost the republican identity of baroque Venice. His considerations about Venetian dramaturgy as programmatically anti-monarchical seem less convincing: there is not, in seventeenth-century Europe, a strong ideological opposition between monarchical and republican politics, see on this point Zucchi 2022.

A third Venetian rewriting of the story appeared in 1708: Francesco Silvani, a Venetian dramatist who published more than forty *libretti* between 1682 and 1718, published a play version of *Sophonisba* set to music by Antonio Caldara which was performed in the renowned Teatro Grimani. Silvani's text blended elements drawn from Brunacci's novel with others taken from Minato's *dramma per musica*. Here Sophonisba is still considered a temptress, a Carthaginian Helen who caused the ruin first of Syphax and then of Massinissa, driving them in a hopeless conflict with the far more powerful Roman army. Still, as in Minato's play, there is a happy ending: Sophonisba does not commit suicide, and Scipio displays his great clemency and generosity, and the Roman consul splits the African kingdom in two, making Massinissa and Syphax kings of the two governments provided they swear allegiance to the Roman Senate.²⁰ At the conclusion of Silvani's play, Sophonisba turns out to be a secondary character, even if the play is titled *Sophonisba*: both Syphax and Massinissa are highly rewarded by Scipio, whereas the female protagonist obtains nothing from Scipio's liberality, nor does the author clarify whether she stays with Massinissa or returns to Syphax.

Brunacci's novel thus emerges as the real driving force that allowed Venetian culture to reclaim the character of Sophonisba, relaunching a female literary myth that had been disregarded for over a century. Yet, adaptation of the figure of Sophonisba to the cultural program of the Incogniti entailed a totally different conceptualization of the African heroine, which was introduced to symbolize the inconstancy of women, teach the reader that everything in the world is precarious—even great queens can suddenly lose all their possessions—demonstrate that following political ambition without limits can be dangerous.

Venetian musical theater fully exploited the figure of Sophonisba relaunched by Brunacci, and examining the plays, it is clear that they were looking to the seventeenth-century novel and not to Trissino's celebrated tragedy. Though these theatrical renderings of the heroine are not as negative as Brunacci's text, she still loses both her heroic bravery and her passion for liberty that characterized the sixteenth-century version of the story. The plays, following the policy that governed Venetian musical theater at the time and staying within the rigid conventions of the genre, eschewed any gloomy allusion to suicide or political rebellion, making Sophonisba a secondary character, the protagonist of an erotic subplot, and organizing the plot around the character of Scipio. These Venetian rewritings of Sophonisba's narrative suggest that in the late seventeenth-century the Carthaginian noblewoman

²⁰ Silvani 1708, 69-70.

figured as only a background figure in the story of the great Roman general, who becomes the only positive character in both Brunacci's novel and theatrical plays. Compared to her previous Italian version, somehow this later Sophonisba has lost her identity, since her thirst for liberty and bravery has disappeared. Yet she has lost also her relevance: even when her name appears in the title of these texts, in fact she is only the protagonist of an erotic subplot.

Sophonisba beyond Venice

In the last decades of the seventeenth century, Italian literary works migrated the recently refashioned character of Sophonisba beyond Venice: still the Venetian models—and in particular those from Brunacci's novel and Minato's play—had a strong impact on the following plays published in other areas of Northern Italy and in Rome. Vibrant proof of the success of Venetian literature on Sophonisba is the 1671 publication of a libretto in Rome, devoted to Queen Christina of Sweden—the most influential theater patron in Rome at the time—which fully reproduced Minato's text, though the author of the Venetian play is never mentioned.²¹

Although Brunacci's and Minato's works are the models for the rewritings of Livy's story published outside Venice, not all the plays centered on Sophonisba merely replicate that Venetian literature. On the contrary, two plays published between 1674 and 1677 attempt to undermine the negative, or at least ambiguous representation of Sophonisba offered by Brunacci and Minato: Ettore Bonacossi's libretto *Il Massinissa*, which appeared in Ferrara in 1674, and Father Valcerca's *Gli sventurati sposi*, a tragedy in prose printed in Brescia in 1677. These literary works, authored by two minor authors—Bonacossi published two librettos in Ferrara, and Valcerca was a little-known priest whose only published work was this tragedy, aimed to restore the image of Sophonisba challenging the Venetian rewriting of the story. It was Petrarch's account, both in the Latin epic poem *Africa* and in the Italian *terzine* of the *Trionfi*, that drove this reaction against the representation of the Carthaginian noblewoman as an opportunistic seductress. So, it seems that also privileging certain sources rather than other, Petrarch in lieu of Livy, bears some clear differences in the representation of Sophonisba's character.

Once again, seventeenth-century authors seem to have ignored Trissino's tragedy. Indeed, unlike in the pages of Livy and Trissino, in Bonacossi's and in Valcerca's dramatic works Sophonisba is not represented as the wife of Syphax, forced by Fate to marry Massinissa against her will, but as the

²¹ The libretto, titled *Scipione Affricano*, was published by the editor Mascardi. On the theater patronage of Christina of Sweden, see Morelli 1997; Zucchi 2017; Zucchi 2020.

miserable lover of Massinissa, compelled to marry Syphax to comply with the *raison d'état*.

Already in her first appearance on stage in Bonacossi's *Massinissa*, Sophonisba pleads that she is victim of the state, in that her father Asdrubal is obliging her to marry Syphax—even though she is still married to her beloved Massinissa—in order to break up the Masaesyli's alliance with the Romans.

De la Patria a politici interessi
per mantener Cartago è dunque d'uopo
ch'io sia lassa lo scopo?
Per quai falli commessi,
per qual severa legge, e non più udità,
Donna ammogliata ancora
ad un nuovo amator si rimarita?²²

So, to preserve Carthage, it is necessary that I sacrifice myself, pandering to the political interests of my homeland? Which fault have I committed to deserve such a rigid punishment? Which law so strict and inconceivable compels a still married woman to re-marry with another man?

In Bonacossi's play *Massinissa* and *Sophonisba* are true lovers: *Massinissa* refuses to marry Syphax's sister in compensation for his loss, and *Sophonisba* does not accept her new husband, to the frustration of Syphax. The Carthaginian noblewoman often vents her anger toward her father and her homeland, considering herself as an object of trade in strategic alliances or for men attempting to ingratiate themselves with their enemies. When she asks for *Massinissa*'s pardon, after having explained that her father forced her to re-marry Syphax, *Sophonisba* argues that she has been raped by her homeland:

Massinissa a tuoi piedi ecco colei,
che da contraria sorte
rea fatta vien, non dagli errori suoi,
rimproverar mi puoi,
che tua pria stata sia, doppo d'altrui;
ma qual colpa è la mia
se da la patria violentata fui?²³

Massinissa, after an unfavorable Fate and not my actions, made me guilty, I am here at your feet. You can reproach me, because I have been first yours, and then of someone else: but where is my fault, if I have

²² Bonacossi 1674, 10-11.

²³ Bonacossi 1674, 31.

been raped by my homeland and obliged to behave in such a mistaken way?

Unlike Minato's play, Bonacossi's ending is not happy at all. After Massinissa has defeated Syphax and reconquered his wife, Scipio demands Massinissa leave Sophonisba, arguing that he should not surrender to his passions and that love cannot be an obstacle for those looking for everlasting glory. Thus, the Numidian king sends a vial of poison to Sophonisba, who bravely commits suicide to avoid being taken to Rome as a slave. Here, contrary to Trissino's tragedy, Sophonisba's leading characteristic is not the struggle for liberty but her disappointment with her homeland. The freedom she claims is not that of eschewing servitude to the Roman senate but her personal liberty; the injustice is that of being forced to re-marry against her will.

Valcerca's tragedy *Gli sventurati sposi* also depicts true love between Massinissa and Sophonisba, a love that Asdrubal, the father of the noblewoman, is happy to endorse by giving Massinissa his daughter's hand. The major virtue which the author associates with the character of Sophonisba is her modesty: clearly alluding to Brunacci's novel, where the heroine is described as an African Helen, Valcerca instead fashions Sophonisba as an anti-Helen. When she hesitates and complains to her father and the Senate because they have forced her to marry Syphax, Asdrubal reproaches Sophonisba her modesty as exaggerated, trying to persuade her to sacrifice her body to the state:

Vorrete voi dunque qual nuova Elena essere la ruina della vostra Patria?
Quella perché troppo lasciva, voi perché troppo casta?²⁴

So, do you want to cause the ruin of our homeland, like a new Helen?
She destroyed Troy because she was much too lustful, whereas you are
much too modest!

Sophonisba refuses any compromise and is ready to go to war alongside Massinissa in order to be remembered as a model of feminine loyalty,²⁵ but her braveness cannot circumvent the tragic conclusion of the story: Massinissa, who wins the conflict and is an ally of the Romans, sends her a vial of poison, after learning that the Romans would never accept their marriage. Sophonisba, therefore, kills herself without fear.

What lies behind this second shift in the reception of Sophonisba? Certainly, far from Venice and from the influence of the Incogniti, these authors are not susceptible to its cultural agenda, which was underpinned not

²⁴ Valcerca 1677, 103.

²⁵ Valcerca 1677, 118.

only by misogyny but also by the search for originality. In line with the general features of Baroque poetics, the Incogniti academy, operating at the heart of the Italian Baroque period, strategically aimed to amaze and displace the reader. At the time, a conflict was arising between ancient and modern literature, especially in Italy,²⁶ and Brunacci's novel intended to overturn classical history by converting Sophonisba into a lustful woman.²⁷

On the contrary, in the last quarter of the century, such poetics seemed outdated: Italian culture was moving toward the Arcadian age, establishing a new basis for a different literature inspired by Petrarch and the Renaissance *petrarchisti* and characterized by a much more classicist attitude.²⁸ In this sense, we can read Bonacossi and Valcerca as using Petrarch—and in particular the *Trionfi* version of the story of Sophonisba—to redeem the Carthaginian noblewoman from the unjustified inference of Brunacci, who was considered insolent and hostile towards Petrarch.

However, what is most striking in this survey of Italian late-seventeenth century rewritings of the story of Sophonisba, is the fact that there is not a coherent representation of the heroine. Turning to the last play of the century devoted to this subject we in fact find a text much more aligned with the story told by Brunacci than with the other non-Venetian works. This anonymous libretto titled *La Sofonisba* was published in Rome in 1681 for theatrical representation at the Collegio Clementino, an elite school established by Pope Clement VIII in 1595 for the young children of the Roman aristocracy which had a long tradition of putting on tragedies and musical plays written by teachers and performed by students, who learnt moral lessons from the staging of these works. This perhaps makes it less surprising that this *Sofonisba* staged at the Collegio Clementino contains several links to the Incogniti's novel, which also stressed moral attitudes.²⁹ The misogynic component of Incogniti culture also seems to have resonated in the context of that religious school for male only students.

²⁶ On the quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns in Italy, in addition to the classical book of Fumaroli 2001, see Salvatore 1987.

²⁷ Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* memorably portrays this literary tendency to revise history in its 35th canto, when Saint John argues that writers always betray historical truth in their fiction, since the war of Troy was actually won by the Trojans and Penelope was a prostitute and not a loyal wife: "E se tu vuoi che 'l ver non ti sia ascoso, / tutta al contrario l'istoria converti: / che i Greci rotti, e che Troia vittrice, / e che Penelopea fu meretrice" *Orlando Furioso* XXXV 27, 5-8 [If you want the truth, turn the story around: actually Greeks were defeated, and the Trojans won the war, and Penelope was in fact a whore].

²⁸ On Italian poetics at that time, see Quondam 1973; Viola 2001; Zucchi 2019.

²⁹ On the theatrical productions of the Collegio Clementino in the late seventeenth-century Rome, see Andreotti 2001.

In this play, Sophonisba is married to Syphax but accepts another marriage with Massinissa, in order to avoid being carried to Rome as a spoil of war. When Syphax comes back as a defeated king to Carthage, Sophonisba refuses to talk to him, informing him that he is unwelcome at her court. Syphax reproaches her for her inconstancy, but she gets angry, demanding more deference, since she is now a queen and he has been defeated.³⁰ The anonymous author describes Sophonisba as a mean seductress, an opportunistic woman driven only by ambition for the throne who easily forgets her first husband to marry another man more powerful than the first. Her words are exactly the opposite of those pronounced by Bonacossi's or Valcerca's Sophonisba: she is not a victim of the reason of state but rather exploits state power without regret.³¹ Inspired by a Theodicean dramatic project, in the end of the play, Sophonisba, a Machiavellian character, is sentenced. She in fact remains the only truly negative character: after having ingested the poison, she falls dead on stage, whereas Syphax and Massinissa, understanding that they behaved unfairly to one another, make truce and hug in front of Sophonisba's cadaver.

Leaving aside the bizarreness of the conclusion, it is clear that the author of the Roman play was fascinated by Brunacci's version of the story and chose to reproduce the plot of the novel, finding it suitable instruction for young Roman students on the dangers of excessive ambition—which is always punished by God in the end—and as a cautionary tale about the female faithlessness and their shameful power of seduction.

Fate, Misogyny and Political Ambition: the reasons behind the seventeenth-century rewriting of Sophonisba

The survey conducted so far has demonstrated that there was room in the second half of the seventeenth century in Italy for a complete re-negotiation of the symbolical meaning of Sophonisba's story. This rewriting of the Carthaginian noblewoman in novels and the theater of the time was not guided by a single focus. Yet, after being forgotten for almost a century, the African heroine moved to the center of a wide debate which yielded multiple representations of Sophonisba in Venice and Rome as a seductress driven by exaggerated ambition, elsewhere in Northern Italy as a victim of the state forced by her homeland away from the man she loves.

While these two literary traditions differ greatly, all the seventeenth-century rewritings of Livy's tale have two things in common. The first is that

³⁰ Clementino 1681, 49.

³¹ "Ragion di stato mi consigliò a farmi, e del Trono e del Talamo consorte di Massinissa" [The Reason of State recommended me to marry Massinissa and to become queen], Clementino 1681, 85.

they repudiate the text that deeply influenced the Italian *Fortleben* of the myth of Sophonisba, Trissino's tragedy. Trissino's play is never mentioned by any of these authors nor is its details reproduced. The second common element is that Sophonisba is no longer described as a *mulier illustris*, as in the Medieval tradition. According to Boccaccio she represented the perfect example of feminine virtue, able to demonstrate to his patriarchal society that women were able to behave as nobly and honestly as men. Against the radically sexist attitudes of the Christian Church, which considered Eve's descendants the archetype of human evil—vicious seductresses, too weak to resist the world's temptations—Boccaccio created a pantheon of noble women taken from classical history and literature who demonstrated precisely the opposite. However, seventeenth-century literature about Sophonisba rarely stresses this point of feminine virtue; more often, especially in Venice, the Carthaginian woman is staged as an example of female depravation. Yet, if seventeenth-century authors disregarded the category of the *mulier claris*, they all agreed that Sophonisba embodied another Medieval type: that of *casibus virorum illustrium*, the fallen nobleman.

This image recurs in Brunacci's novel, especially in the last section, which takes on a pedagogical tone in its description of the heroine's ruin. In opening this final section, the author pauses on Sophonisba as a case of the impact on human life of Fate's inclination to change the status of the great, warning readers with an ancient adage: "Saglia sopra di un trono chi vuol contemplare l'altezze maggiori delle cadute",³² or, the more one ascends the social hierarchy, even if obtaining a throne, the more painful and noisy the downfall. Commenting on Sophonisba's misfortunes Brunacci, in his role as omniscient narrator, frames his heroine as a full embodiment of that Medieval axiom: "Ora scorgo che non per altro sei stata fatta regina, che per provare su' l colmo delle felicità l'ultimo grado dell'infelicità"³³ [Now I see that you [Sophonisba] have been made queen for no other reason than that of making you feel at the height of human happiness the worst degrees of unhappiness].

The supranatural entity guiding human events and distributing prizes and punishments, according to Brunacci, drew upon Sophonisba's life to show that wealth and power are only transitory values that can be taken away at any time. Such a moral was certainly in line with orthodox Christian views, but it also had a strong political content: the ambition of rising through the social ranks to obtain wealth and political privilege was highly risky and dangerous. Brunacci thus makes a clearly conservative statement representing the keystone of republican—and not only of the absolutist—

³² Brunacci 1661, 131.

³³ Brunacci 1661, 142.

propaganda: the political *status quo ante* must be preserved at all costs.³⁴ Sophonisba's spectacular fall in this sense functions as a didactic tool. Brunacci's final words in the novel still focus on this point, reiterating the moral lesson for readers:

Così passano in un punto le grandezze mortali, che solo ritrovano quiete ne' suoi moti. Così l'umana superbia è fatta ludibrio della fortuna, e gioco del tempo.³⁵

Thus, human heights, which are temporary and never solid, wear out in a moment. Thus, human arrogance is mocked by Fate and by the work of Time.

This moralistic warning, introduced by Brunacci in his version of Sophonisba's tale, is also used by Minato, whose play reproduces this sermonic sentiment. Minato's heroine complains twice that she is a victim of Fate, falling from the rank of queen to the humble status of servant: first in her initial appearance on stage and secondly in her monologue in the second act where she recalls her downward descent for the audience with a didactic aim.

Tanto rigida
sorte perfida
contro me!
Già regina, e adorata
fui la gioia del mio Re.
Hor cattiva e disprezzata
calco nemico suol con servo piè.³⁶

Oh, how stiff and wicked was Fate against me! I was a beloved queen, the joy of my king; now I am a despised prisoner, who lives in a hostile land as a slave.

This stress on the transience of wealth and luck appears not only in Venetian literature about Sophonisba but also in plays that represented the African heroine in a radically different way. For instance, in Valcerca's *Gli sposi sventurati* Sophonisba is well aware of the precariousness of her wealth, and her first line underscores this consciousness: "Ricordati, Sofonisba," she exhorts herself, "se hor festeggi e canti, che son d'ogni piacer il fine i pianti"³⁷ [Remember, Sophonisba, that even if you are now partying and singing, every

³⁴ On the pursuit of a conservative politics based on maintenance of the *status quo ante* within the seventeenth-century republican agenda in Venice, Genoa and the Dutch Republic, see Zucchi 2022.

³⁵ Brunacci 1661, 187.

³⁶ Minato 1664, 6.

³⁷ Valcerca 1677, 27.

pleasure ends in tears]. This connection between Valcerca's play and the moral lesson offered by the Venetian authors is probably premised in Valcerca's religious background; still, in the seventeenth century this emphasis on the precariousness of Fate becomes a common, evocative feature of the story of Sophonisba. In fact, this refrain appears not only in Italian authors but also in other European plays on the subject: for instance, the Dutch tragedy *Sophonisba*, published in 1626 by Guillaume van Nieuwelandt, also centers on this sentence.³⁸

However, if we look at the other two thematic points raised in the seventeenth-century rewriting of Sophonisba, love and politics, we find a much less homologous framework. As mentioned above, two opposing traditions of portraying the Carthaginian noblewoman emerge, both entwining love and politics despite their divergent representations. In the Venetian works (and also in Rome), Sophonisba is considered a *femme fatale*, who employs her exceptional beauty to obtain political advantages and is driven by her ambition to become queen; on the other hand, in Bonacossi and Valcerca, both inspired by Petrarch's *Trionfi*, she is a desperate lover betrayed by her government, used a mere political bargaining chip against her will.

Framing Sophonisba as a negative character in seventeenth-century Venice was not only an anti-classic choice also made by Corneille in his theatrical play on the subject. Indeed, conferring the qualities of fickle seductress and self-interested social climber on a female protagonist was fully in line with the misogynist cultural milieu of the Incogniti.³⁹ Several novels almost coeval with the publication of Brunacci's *Sofonisba* introduced not only wicked female characters but also depictions underscoring the heartlessness of women. Francesco Loredan's 1640 novel *Adamo*, for instance, offering a radically secular version of the story of the first Biblical couple Adam and Eve, assigned full blame to Eve for the human fall from earthly paradise. When Adam forbids Eve to eat the apples of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she immediately feels the desire to transgress that order, since "il proibire alle donne è un destar in loro maggiormente l'appetito"⁴⁰ [to prohibit women from something means to amplify their natural wish for transgression]. Introducing a major change to the Biblical tale, Loredan then portrays Eve persuading the Devil to tempt her:⁴¹ in this misogynic version

³⁸ On this point, see Gruijters 2013, 244.

³⁹ On the widespread misogyny in the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti, see Beniscelli 2012, 380-390; Cosentino 2016, 47-48; Favaro 2017.

⁴⁰ Loredan 1640, 27.

⁴¹ In the Italian text, Eve "persuade il demonio a tentarla", Loredan 1640, 27.

of the *Genesis* story it is Eve, and not the Devil, who constitutes the origin of human pain.⁴²

Brunacci surely had in mind this representation authored by his master Loredan when writing *Sophonisba*, and in fact he intended to dedicate the work to him. Loredan was moreover not the only writer in this circle to introduce such representations of the feminine in his novels. Antonio Lupis, another figure in the world of the Incogniti who was very close to Brunacci—in fact, in the preface of *Sophonisba* Brunacci admits that Lupis encouraged him to write his novel⁴³—also admirer of Loredan,⁴⁴ published a novel in 1660 entitled *Faustina*, devoted to the life of the daughter of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius. In this work, Lupis describes the shadowy love stories of the feminine protagonist, driven by lust, starting the novel with this misogynist claim:

Le donne sono state sempre un veleno della Natura. Non è gloria nel Mondo che fraposta in questa nube non habbia perduto il suo splendore. [...] I loro trofei si restringono ne' capricci di un ago e pende solo la loro grandezza da un filo. [...] Una beltà è bastante a corrompere i più floridi Senati e gl'innesti più illustri del Campidoglio.⁴⁵

Women have always been a poison of Nature. Every glorious thing in the World that has been infected by the feminine cloud has lost its splendor. Women's trophies are only in the whims of a needle, and their greatness depends only on a strand. A single feminine beauty is enough to corrupt the most prosperous Senates and the most illustrious delegates of the Capitol.

Thus, it is not surprising that Brunacci, who clearly looked to Lupis's novel in his own adaptation to contemporary Venetian culture of a subject taken from Latin sources, portrayed Sophonisba similarly to other female characters in the Incogniti's novels. Sentences like the one opening *Faustina* above are common also in Brunacci's *Sophonisba*, where the actions of the heroine are commented upon by the author in asides like this:

L'ambizione è propria delle Donne. Dall'adorazione degl'amanti maggiormente presumono nella propria bellezza, e divengono più altiere nella loro superbia. [...] Nel regno d'Amore, in somma, è la prima massima il tradimento. La ragione non di stato, ma il moto delle

⁴² On the overturning of the Biblical text in Loredan's novel, see Ardissino 2012.

⁴³ Brunacci 1661, 14.

⁴⁴ Lupis, together with Brunacci, was one of the first biographers of the Prince of the Incogniti. Two biographies of Loredan were published shortly after his death: the first one, authored by Brunacci, in 1662, and the second one, written by Lupis, in 1663. On this point see Spera 2014.

⁴⁵ Lupis 1676, 11.

Donne, è come quella di Atalanta, cioè a dire inarrivabile. [...] La vera Alchimia si pratica dalle Donne. Addottrinate più di ogni altro in sì fatta scienza con un'infinità di crocciuoli alterando un mondo d'imbrogli, pongono in alembicco gl'amori per cavarne un astratto di eternità.⁴⁶

Ambition belongs to women. From the adoration of lovers, they come to rely more on their own beauty, and become more arrogant in their pride. [...] In brief, betrayal is the first general law in the kingdom of Love. Worse than the reason of state, the inconstancy of women is as unattainable as the goddess Atalanta. [...] The true alchemy is practiced by women. Learned in such a science with plenty of stockpots, they create a world of frauds, putting love in alembic to extract from it the essence of eternity.

The foil of this portrayal of Sophonisba as a lustful seductress—a new Helen, as portrayed in Minato and in the Roman play on this subject—was a positive protagonist, the Roman Captain Scipio Africanus, who, already in Brunacci's novel but even more so in Minato's play, embodied precisely the opposite values: the epitome of constancy and self-restraint. Indeed, in Minato's *dramma per musica* Scipio is tempted by the beauty of another Carthaginian noblewoman, Ericlea, but in the end, thanks also to the advice of Cato, Scipio manages to overcome his passions and do what is best for Rome and the Roman army. Neglecting his own feelings, Scipio, who is celebrated for his "heroic continence",⁴⁷ blesses the wedding between Ericlea and his beloved friend Polinio, arguing in the final lines of the play that self-restraint is much more difficult than being a brave and victorious soldier:

Stringete omai le destre, e veggia il mondo
che trofeo glorioso
una provincia doma, un Re depresso
ma vittoria maggior vincer se stesso.⁴⁸

[To Polinio and Ericlea] And now shake hands, so the world can see that to restrain a rebellious province and to win over a king is a glorious trophy, but the biggest victory is to win over ourselves.

The Venetian authors not only overturn history in these baroque accounts, they also introduce a male character to outshine Sophonisba in virtue. Of course, revision of history was one of the poetic aims of both Brunacci's and Minato's works, which contrary not only to Livy, but also to Petrarch and to Donato Acciaiuoli's addition to the Latin corpus of translations of Plutarch's

⁴⁶ Brunacci 1661, 31; 41; 44.

⁴⁷ Minato 1664, 4.

⁴⁸ Minato 1664, 74.

Lives,⁴⁹ represent Sophonisba rather than Massinissa as lustful. Yet, establishing a clear contrast between Sophonisba's inconstancy and Scipio's firmness allows the authors to not only compare male and feminine morality, but also to consent to stage a clear-cut divergence between the African and the Romans.

As was typical in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian theater, attention to the sexual behaviors of royalty not only created entertaining erotic subplots but also bore allegorical meaning.⁵⁰ A modest governor, who sacrifices his own feelings in favor of the good of the community represented the prototype of the perfect sovereign, whereas a king who surrendered to love clearly manifested an inclination to privilege personal interest over the state's wealth. Sophonisba and Scipio thus also functioned as symbols of bad and good government. First, they represented a racialized difference in attitude between Carthaginian and Roman policy: whereas in Africa kings and noblewomen were driven by their passions, sacrificing the good of their subjects to their base instincts—as Sophonisba pushes Syphax and Massinissa to wage war in order to appease their jealousy—the Romans were able to renounce love in order to pursue the glory of Rome.

Secondly, the historical account retold through Sophonisba also symbolized the contemporary one between Venice and the Turks. In the years of the publication of both Brunacci's and Minato's works, Venice was carrying out the War of Candia against the Turks in a desperate bid to preserve its rich Greek territories.

That conflict, crucial for granting Venice royal status and allowing it to preserve its rights in the diplomatic order, matter not only of ceremonials, but also of state power's representation⁵¹ was infused with substantial ideological content: presenting itself as a bastion of Catholic Europe, Venice tried to depict the War of Candia as a conflict between Christians and Muslims in order to prevent a Turkish incursion on the continent. Unfortunately, they were not able to manage to persuade other governments to help them preserve their territories in the Mediterranean, and they lost possession of the isle of Crete in 1669.⁵²

⁴⁹ While translating Plutarch's *Lives* Acciaoli added the *Life of Scipio*, which was lost. On the reception of Plutarch in early modern European culture see Desideri 2012, 281-350.

⁵⁰ On this allegorization of royal sexual behaviour in early modern Italian theater, see Zucchi 2016.

⁵¹ For an introduction to the early modern diplomatic ceremonials and to the conflict for precedence, see Roosen 1980. On the Venetian diplomacy, see Levin 2005, 13-42; Alonge 2019.

⁵² On the political reasons for the conflict of Candia, as well as its representation inside and outside Venice, see Candiani 1998.

In this political framework, staging the conflict between Rome and the African army as a clash of civilizations between two opposing realms driven by very different values was a clear strategy for alluding to the coeval war between Venice and the Turks, one offering other Catholic polities the opportunity to support the republic in this conflict. This identification of Venice with Scipio and of Carthage with the Turks becomes even clearer in a novel published by Brunacci shortly after *Sophonisba*, which was fully devoted to the Roman captain: he dedicated *L'Heroe, overo Scipione l'Africano* (1668) to Ghiron Villa, the general of the Venetian fleet in the conflict of Candia.⁵³ Comparing Villa to Scipio and evoking the contemporary War of Candia through the Punic war, Brunacci acknowledges using Roman history to discuss the present and recalls that clash of civilizations already represented in *Sophonisba*:

Finalmente Scipione fu l'Achille fatale dell'Ettore della Libia e della seconda guerra punica [...] e fra supremi degl'incliti pregi di Vostra Eccellenza è il conseguito commando dell'Armi della sempre invitta, e Serenissima Republica Veneta, vero Propugnacolo della Fede Cattolica, nel quale ha havuto per Avversario un primo Visir della Tracia, per Campo Candia, per ispettatore il Mondo, che già viene scorso dalla Fama, che con Tromba d'Oro fa risuonare da per tutto Candia difesa da Vostra Eccellenza.⁵⁴

Finally, Scipio was the lethal Achilles of the Lybia's Hector and the winner of the Second Punic War. Similarly, you, who among other great recognitions were appointed commander of the army of the invincible and Most Serene Republic of Venice, the true guardian of the Catholic Faith, had as opponent the Vizier of Thrace, Candia as battlefield, the World as spectator. And all around the World is spread by golden trumpets the Fame that you were the true defender of Candia.

It is in this light that we should read Brunacci's frequent allusions to republican and absolutist government, which are often compared to show the superiority of the republic; indeed, in celebrating the perfection of the Roman constitution, Brunacci is celebrating the Venetian Republic, whereas when he attacks the moral weakness of Massinissa and Syphax, he is criticizing the Ottoman Empire. It is easy to decode this allegory in the following pages, where Brunacci exploits a typical absolutist discourse on the body politic,⁵⁵ arguing that a head, i.e. a state, with a multitude of eyes and glasses is far

⁵³ On Ghiron Villa, see Raviola 2020.

⁵⁴ Brunacci 1668, a5v.

⁵⁵ On the use of the body politics' metaphor in early modern absolutist political writings, see Archimbault 1967; on republican mobilization of this rhetoric in the seventeenth-century Dutch republic, see Helmers 2015.

more efficient than a government, guided by a single man, and consequently by only two eyes:

La più avveduta politica è quella delle Repubbliche. Più occhi che d'Argo vegliano a suoi interessi. Formate di Senatori d'ogni età hanno occhiali d'ogni vista. Si servono dei vetri del Galileo, con i quali mirano in lontananza le mosche elefanti. Fin nel sole sanno scorgere le macchie.⁵⁶

The best form of government is that of Republics. More eyes than those of the many-eyed giant Argus watch over its interests. Constituted by Senators of all ages, they have glasses for all eyes. They use Galileo's glasses, through which they are able to see the elephant flies from afar. They can even see the spots on the sun.

All these elements help contextualize the resurrection of the story of Sophonisba in seventeenth-century Venice, clarifying the overturning of the classical configuration of the heroine as part of a precise political strategy aligned with the cultural agenda of the republic at the time of the War of Candia. Moreover, the political message of Brunacci's *Sophonisba* addresses not only the Christian world, which is invited to take part in the Greek conflict alongside the republic; it also seems to implicitly allude to the internal debate within Venice in those years.

Continuing the conflict in Candia over the years was indeed a political choice which did not obtain unanimous consent in Venice, since several republican delegates thought that keeping the fleet in the Mediterranean was an unjustified waste of public money; supporting the War in Candia was actually very expensive for the republic and the territory of Crete was judged not politically or commercially relevant enough for that expense. In those years the pro-war party, led by the Doge Giovanni Pesari, won the debate, persuading the Senate to finance the war to preserve the Mediterranean kingdom, which, as mentioned above, had not only symbolical meaning but also a diplomatic one. Still, the opposition to Pesari's interventionism was strong in Venice, and one of the key strategies used by the Doge and his political partners was that of using literature to underscore the need to defend Candia to protect the Catholic world. Several theatrical plays and historiographic treatises, such as Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato's *Scena d'huomini illustri* (1659), tackle the issue of the Candian conflict in these terms, celebrating

⁵⁶ Brunacci 1661, 77. Conversely, monarchy is described as the government wherein the king makes laws based on his personal desires: "Anche le Follie de' Prencipi sono da sudditi applaudite. [...] Mentecagine de' Grandi, che facendo legge la propria volontà pretendono le sia lecito ciò che vogliono" [The subjects applaud even the king's madness. The foolishness of sovereigns, who make laws of their desires, claims that everything they want is allowed], Brunacci 1661, 149.

Pesari and the Venetian *capitani da mar* for their participation in the clash of civilizations between the Christian and Muslim world.⁵⁷

It is very interesting to situate Sophonisba's political observations in Brunacci's novel within this framework. In the novel, she appears as the emblem of individual ambition that turn its back on its homeland for self-interest: Pesari's opponents were likewise represented at that time in Venice as men driven by personal interest and not by the aim of protecting the republic and the common good of the Christian world from the Turkish threat. Brunacci distances himself from the words of the heroine, when she claims to be the victim of the state. Whereas Sophonisba, born a citizen of the Carthaginian republic, interprets her disobedience to her father's and the Senate's order to marry Massinissa as a reaction against the *raison d'état*, Brunacci describes her actions as pure betrayal, driven by her ambition to become queen.⁵⁸ The author's words used to portray Sophonisba's final attempt to escape from Roman slavery, marrying Massinissa even if she was already married to Syphax, are severe, defining the Carthaginian noblewoman as a sort of prostitute in matters of both love and politics:

La Donna quando vuol prostituirsi a nuovo Amante, comincia con i parlamenti a far meretrice la fede. Somiglia una Rocca che quando si vuol rendere, manda gli araldi a parlamentare. La dogliosa rimembranza de' passati contenti, la speme di future dolcezze, e la tema di commutare i regi monili in catene, oprarono nel suo cuore, che con l'esborso della propria bellezza, quasi a prezzo d'ineestimabil valore, ricomprasse lo stabile del perduto suo regno.⁵⁹

When a woman wants to prostitute herself to a new lover, she begins with words to offer her faith. She looks like a fortress when it wants to surrender, sending the heralds to negotiate. The painful remembrance of past happiness, the hope of future sweetness, and the fear of switching royal jewels with chains, worked in Sophonisba's heart to push her to use her beauty, of an almost inestimable value, to buy again another realm, after having lost the first.

Examining the political allegory behind Brunacci's words, we cannot help but see that, in condemning the capitulation as a sort of prostitution, he is also condemning the idea of surrendering to the Turks in Candia.

⁵⁷ The allusion is introduced in Gualdo Priorato 1659, 4r-4v; the same political emphasis on the Candian conflict as a clash of civilizations is contained in several plays of the time, such as Dario Varotari's *Il Cesare amante* (1651), Minato's *Artemisia* (1656) and *Antioco* (1658), or Giacomo Castoreo's *Il pazzo politico* (1659).

⁵⁸ Brunacci 1661, 136-137.

⁵⁹ Brunacci 1661, 146.

Outside of Venice things are less contaminated with this political agenda; Bonacossi and Valcerca did not fully understand the refashioning of Sophonisba's story, which they saw simply as a Baroque reaction against classical sources. In light of this interpretation of Brunacci's and Minato's works, they instead try to re-establish the ancient version of Petrarch's story of Sophonisba in a classicist way emphasizing the traditional virtues of modesty and bravery. However, considering the Carthaginian noblewoman a desperate lover raped by the logic of the state minimized the political content of the story, projecting the tale onto an anachronistic political view connected to sixteenth-century, anti-Machiavellian polemics about the limits of state reason. On the other hand, the allegorical meaning Brunacci and Minato infused in the story of Sophonisba relaunched Livy's tale in a contemporary optic that mapped the history of the conflict between Rome and Carthage onto the current War of Candia and the battle between the republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire.

Conclusion

A survey of the seventeenth-century *Fortleben* of the story of Sophonisba in Italian literature reveals a turn away from Gian Giorgio Trissino's celebrated sixteenth-century tragedy, the work which relaunched the character of the Carthaginian noblewoman in early modern Europe. If, in the first half of the century, the story of Sophonisba no longer seemed to attract Italian authors, works focused on this topic gained traction starting from 1661 and overturned earlier representations of the heroine, radically upsetting the classic (Livy) and Medieval (Petrarch) versions of the tale and neglecting Trissino's completely. Unlike the brave, masculine *Sofonisba*, seventeenth-century works published in Venice portrayed the character as a beautiful seductress who exploited her beauty to satisfy her desire to become queen.

The reasons for the reshaping of Trissino's character are various: even if appreciated as the first regular tragedy of the early modern period, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars generally disliked this *Sofonisba*, considering the work too naïve in style since it meant to emulate the rhetoric of Greek tragic poets. Torquato Tasso diminished the exemplarity of Trissino's work, condemning its *sermo pedestris*,⁶⁰ whereas the scholar Ortensio Lando considered the style of this *Sofonisba* comic.⁶¹ This negative judgment persisted in seventeenth and eighteenth-century literary

⁶⁰ Tasso's judgement on the earlier *Sofonisba* is published in Tasso 1884. On this stylistic criticism of Trissino's tragedy, see Cremante 2015.

⁶¹ See Flora 1940, 338.

historiography⁶² and probably conditioned authors' choices to pursue another approach to the character. Moreover, the Baroque spirit behind the relaunch of the genre of the novel, especially in Venice, at the Academy of the Incogniti, was based on an attempt to shock the reader. By reversing the classic representation of Sophonisba, Venetian authors managed above all to achieve a major objective of their poetics.

A decade later, outside of Venice, where the late traces of Baroque poetics no longer conditioned literature, this resounding overturning of the plot of Sophonisba was not understood. The Sophonisba plays that emerged in Ferrara and Brescia attempted to revive Petrarch's version of the tale, refusing the misogynic elements of the Venetian rewriting and restoring the outline of a heroine who is a desperate lover unjustly oppressed by the Carthaginian state. Still, the Roman play on this topic, written in 1681 for the pupils of the Collegio Clementino, drew upon the representation of the heroine in the Venetian works: here strict religious moralism met Baroque inventiveness but this is the exception, rather than the rule.

However, the seventeenth-century renegotiation of the character of Sophonisba pertained not only to the erotic aspects of the story and the portrayal of the heroine as a lustful or faithful woman; it also had strong political implications. In Venice, staging the Carthaginian noblewoman as an ambitious social climber aspiring to seduce a king in order to gain personal privilege, who stood in opposition to the modest Roman captain Scipio Africanus, was part of an allegory that alluded to the contemporary War of Candia. The conflict between the Carthaginians—presented as licentious and driven by personal ambition—and the modest Romans, who were able to sacrifice individual passions in favor of the common good, clearly aimed to mirror the war between the Turks and Venice for the isle of Crete, which Venetian authors framed as a clash of civilizations between Muslims and Catholics. In an extremely difficult and worrying situation, on the verge of losing its Mediterranean kingdom, Venice tried to revive its Roman heritage—representing its republic as the modern heir to the Roman one—in an attempt to persuade other Italian and European states to take part in the conflict against the Turks. Scipio, the exemplar of republicanism in the literature of the seventeenth century—celebrated, for instance, in the Republic of Genoa by Ansaldo Cebà for his modesty and inclination to sacrifice personal interest for the community⁶³—becomes the symbol of the

⁶² For instance, in the famous treatise by Pietro Calepio *Paragone della poesia tragica d'Italia con quella di Francia*, which was published in Bergamo in 1732; see Calepio 2019, 73-76.

⁶³ I am alluding to Ansaldo Cebà's *Le Gemelle Capovane*, published in Genoa in 1623.

Venetian republic: its war against the Ottoman Empire was a battle not only for its own interests, but also for the entire Christian world.

This was the propaganda that the Doge Pesari and his party carried out with the help of several novelists, dramatists, and historiographers in a desperate attempt to safeguard not only the commercial but also the diplomatic interests of the republic, whose survival was at risk in a Europe of rising absolute monarchies. Representing Sophonisba as a modern Helen of Troy, and opposing her to the modest Scipio, Brunacci's and Minato's works reflect not only the sexist legacy of the Incogniti, which contrasted female sensuality with male rationalism. Indeed, overturning the representation of Sophonisba as the perfect republican hero of Trissino's tragedy, who was motivated by an extreme thirst for liberty,⁶⁴ was not only a Baroque caprice: it was also perfectly coherent with the seventeenth-century political agenda of Venice, and the radical change of emphasis on key values.

This upheaval in the representation of the character of Sophonisba also mirrored the disruption of Venetian republican politics. At the turn of the century, republican values had completely changed: if in sixteenth-century Venice the Carthaginian noblewoman was a perfect symbol of the cornerstone of republican ideology, liberty, the value to defend at all costs, during the War of Candia Sophonisba becomes the Other, the radically different. In a changed world, in which Venice had lost most of its political relevance and was battling to uphold its royal status in a Europe where monarchies triumphed, Sophonisba personified not Venice but its enemy. Dangerous, ambitious, and disloyal the African heroine, symbolizing the Turkish nemesis, is now evoked to plead for help against the Ottoman threat. Still, what really counted in Venetian politics at the time was not to be considered a polity without a crown, and the overturning in Sophonisba's literary portrait was only one instrument in this desperate, but ultimately failing attempt of reassessing the representation of the republic in that troubling time.

⁶⁴ See on this point Skinner 1998.

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