Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*

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With Monteverdi’s and Busenello’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, opera embarked upon a new project: the telling of history. This was a novel enterprise for the young genre, which until then had drawn its inspiration primarily from mythological realms. Singing had been acceptable in worlds populated by nymphs and shepherds, demigods and goddesses, allegorical figures, and even the pseudo-historical Homeric and Virgilian epic heroes—worlds in which the will of the deities determined man’s fate. History, however, was the realm of earthly men and women, for whom song was less readily justified. It may well have been the allure of representing the past that persuaded composers and librettists to relax the strictures of verismilitude and to shift their focus from the immortals—for whom singing was merely another divine endowment—to the mortal heroes of Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Lucan, and Tacitus.\(^1\) Moreover, history had the power to bring opera directly into the realm of politics, where the fear of tyranny, the claims of republicanism, the ambitions of imperialism, and the glory of absolutism were fair topics for operatic exploitation. From the shores

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1. On operatic verismilitude, see Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 40–45. The question of verismilitude is particularly important in understanding fundamental generic differences between epic and history and their significance for opera. In *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, love, jealousy, vengeance, and pity—and the consequences thereof—are, despite the interference of Amor, a result of human emotions and desires. In the earlier operas based on the epics of Virgil (*Didone*, 1641) and Homer (*Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, 1641), however, the gods and goddesses play a far more central role in generating human emotions and destiny.

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of the Adriatic, to the Habsburg court, to the Parisian Académie royale de musique, men and women of power—who may have sought to represent themselves on the stage—adeptly manipulated emerging operatic conventions to promote desired ideologies.

This essay will consider opera’s use of a particular history in mid-seventeenth-century Venice: the Annals by the first-century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, as transformed in Monteverdi’s and Busenello’s L’in-coronazione di Poppea. Tacitus’s Annals, which deals with the reigns of the Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (albeit with some gaps), contains the earliest surviving and most detailed exposition of the historical events recounted in L’in-coronazione di Poppea: Nero’s affair with Poppaea Sabina (A.D. 58), his repudiation and eventual murder of his wife Octavia (A.D. 62), and the suicide of Seneca (A.D. 65). Busenello was also evidently familiar with later historical accounts of the episode, which likely drew upon the same sources as did Tacitus: Dio Cassius’s history of the Roman Empire and Suetonius’s biography of Nero from his Lives of the Caesars (De vita Caesarum) as well as the tragic play the Octavia, long attributed to Seneca. Nonetheless, it is only Tacitus—an author whose writings profoundly influenced historical, political, and moral thinking in early modern Europe—whom Busenello both cites in the argomento to the libretto (“all this according to Cornelius Tacitus”) and contradicts (“but here we represent things differently”), thus announcing his intention to reinvent history.

My point of departure is arguably the most important source of inspiration for Busenello’s interest in Tacitus and reinvention of the historical record in L’in-coronazione di Poppea: the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti, that notorious and influential society of Venetian patricians and authors—including Busenello—whose links to the Venetian opera industry have been well documented, and whose philosophies have been invoked to explain the slippery moral universe in which this opera resides. My reassessment of the Incogniti

2. Ronald Mellor observes that “Tacitus goes beyond this common source of detail to provide a level of clarity and a lucidity of political perception that is unique to his version. . . . [H]is result is so different that we must attribute the final product to his own craft and intelligence rather than to his raw material” (Tacitus [London: Routledge, 1993], 33).

3. Giovanni Francesco Busenello, Delle sore oiose (Venice: Giuliani, 1656). The argomento begins as follows: “Nerone innamorato di Poppea, ch’era moglie di Ottone, lo mandò sotto pretesto d’Ambasciari in Lusitania per godersi la cara dileta, così rappresenta Cornelio Tacito. Ma qui si rappresenta il fatto diverso.”

influence on L'incoronazione di Poppea, however, does not reveal covert endorsements of conventional morality, conjugal love, or even Stoic philosophy in the operatic representation of Seneca's suicide and Nero and Poppea's love. In contrast with recent hypotheses linking the Incogniti, Tacitus, and Poppea to Neostoicism, I propose that the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti used Tacitus's history of imperial Rome in a highly specialized manner that went far beyond mere anti-Roman propaganda, expressing Venetian concerns with political pragmatism rather than moral censure, with civic virtue rather than withdrawal and solitude, and with the fulfillment of natural instincts rather than their suppression. After considering Incogniti philosophies in the context of republican political ideals in mid-seventeenth-century Venice and the influence of Tacitus on historical thought in early modern Europe, I will demonstrate that L'incoronazione di Poppea is only one manifestation of a fascination with Tacitus and the workings of the Roman Empire shared by several of Busenello's colleagues associated with the Accademia degli Incogniti and explored by them in a series of Tacitist travesties based on the same historical narratives. In all of these works, as well as in L'incoronazione di Poppea, imperial Rome and the erotic and political intrigues of the Julio-Claudians participate in a complex discourse on empire, reason of state, and a broad assortment of republican freedoms that concerned even the most licentious Incogniti writers.


5. Ellen Rosand was the first to consider the moral implications of Seneca's prominence in the opera as a key to the work's meaning by associating the amoral behavior of the other characters with anti-Roman sentiment. Notably, however, Rosand sees a split between Monteverdi's sympathetic rendering of Seneca and Busenello's more cynical treatment, which reflects the influence of the Accademia degli Incogniti (“Seneca”). The focus on Seneca is carried much further by Fenlon and Miller, who, noting the link between Tacitus and Seneca in the early modern period, identify the Incogniti as covert Neostoics and propose an interpretation of Poppea as a "strict Tacitist text" that condemns the emphasis on physical beauty, appearances, and sensual love celebrated by Nero and Poppea, and extols the virtues associated with Neostoicism: true friendship, constancy, withdrawal, and restraint (Song of the Soul). For an opposing view ➔ Robert R. Holzer, review of The Song of the Soul: Understanding “Poppea,” by Iain Fenlon and Peter Miller, Cambridge Opera Journal 5 (1993): 79–92. On the question of Seneca's representation in the opera and for an insightful reconsideration of the readings provided by both Rosand and Fenlon and Miller: ➔ Tim Carter, “Re-Reading Poppea: Some Thoughts on Music and Meaning in Monteverdi's Last Opera,” Journal of the Royal Musical Association 122 (1997): 173–204; see ➔ Robert C. Ketterer, "Neoplatonic Light and Dramatic Genre in Busenello's L'incoronazione di Poppea and Noris's Il ripudio d' Ottavia," Music and Letters 80 (1999): 1–22.

6. These include three novelle: La Messalina by Francesco Pona (Venice: n.p., 1628), Le due Agrippine by Ferrante Pallavicino (Venice: Guerigli, 1642), and L'imperatrice ambiziosa by Federico Malipiero (Venice: Surian, 1642); as well as two plays by Pietro Angelo Zaguri: La Messalina (Venice: Guerigli, 1656) and Le gelosie politiche, ò amorose (Venice: Pinelli, 1657).
More specifically, this uniquely Venetian perspective on Roman history plays itself out in one of *Poppea’s* most revealing distortions of the past, the decidedly ahistorical treatment of two eminent figures active in the political and literary life at Nero’s court: Seneca Lucius Annaeus, the philosopher, playwright, and imperial tutor whose death at the center of the opera precedes much of the subsequent amoral behavior, and, especially, Seneca’s lesser-known nephew, the poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan), whose intimate singing with Nero in celebration of his uncle’s death and Poppaea’s charms inspired some of Monteverdi’s most sensual music. Monteverdi’s discordant representations of these two renowned Roman writers reveal much about the political concerns underlying the apparent inversion of morality in *L’incoronazione di Poppea* and the ways in which Tacitus, the quintessential historian of empire, was manipulated to satisfy republican desires in mid-seventeenth-century Venice.

On a broader level, however, this essay also explores the ways in which the genre of opera functioned as a medium for the telling of history. As the first historical opera, *L’incoronazione di Poppea* emerges just decades after a period of intense historiographical and political activity, centered in the Veneto, in which the historical writings of Tacitus played a prominent role. In *Poppea*, the serious historiographical debates that had preoccupied Church and university authorities during the Counter Reformation and the aftermath of the papal interdict of 1606–7 collided with the capricious worlds of carnival and *commedia dell’arte*. This was a realm in which reality was elusive, appearances deceptive, power structures inverted, and genders exchanged. Seemingly antithetical to either the science or the art of history, opera provided a mode of recounting the past that was more capricious and more compelling than conventional historians might have imagined. Through the power of music and the flexible conventions of early opera, the acknowledged historical “truths” concerning the emperor Nero, the philosopher Seneca, and the poet Lucan were entirely reconfigured, disguising Tacitus’s unique brand of historiography with a peculiar Incogniti mask. In *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, infused with the seductive power of Monteverdi’s music and the civic-mindedness of Seicento Venice, morality plays second fiddle to politics, and even Tacitus travels “incognito.”

**The Politics of Pleasure: The Accademia degli Incogniti**

The relationship between politics and morality was of primary importance in mid-seventeenth-century Venice, and of particular concern to the members of

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the Accademia degli Incogniti. Founded in 1630 by the writer and Venetian nobleman Giovanni Francesco Loredano, the Incogniti included many of the prominent intellectual patricians of Venice, as well as a substantial number of non-Venetians who were to play an active role in this vibrant literary-intellectual world. The members of the Accademia degli Incogniti dominated literary life in Venice in the middle part of the century, publishing numerous histories, poems, letters, plays, novelle, and travesties of the classics that ranged from the serious to the seemingly frivolous. At the same time, they played a prominent role in Venetian political life. Regardless of their often controversial literary works—many of which ended up on the Index librorum prohibitorum—the Incogniti were ardent patriots, active in Venetian government and strongly committed to the preservation of the state and perpetuation of Venetian mythology. Opera and opera librettos were among their hobbies as well, and they quickly recognized the power of this new genre to influence audiences and express Venetian propaganda.

The uses to which the Incogniti put Tacitus and imperial Rome in their expression of Venetian mythology should be understood first of all in the context of Venice’s gradually declining power, both economically and politically, which resulted in an essentially conservative public policy throughout the century. In an effort to protect the status quo at all costs, the government emphasized preservation rather than innovation, seeking to safeguard not only Venice herself, but also the Republic’s reputation as an upholder of political truths. The dissemination of numerous Venetian political and historical writings in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by such writers as Giovanni Botero, Paolo Paruta, Traiano Boccalini, and Paolo Sarpi (and the latter’s brilliant management of the interdict) had earned this most famous European republic acclaim for her special political wisdom, her disdain of tyranny, her impenetrability, and above all, her pragmatism. By the mid Seicento, Venice’s authority in matters political had begun to fade, although her superior government and unique beauty continued to be lauded with vivid and suggestive imagery. Venice was the unconquerable maiden—impregnable and invincible, withstanding all attempts to deflower her. Busenello himself refers to his native city as the “Vergine regnatrix,” and his vision is echoed by such foreign visitors as the Englishman James Howell, who declared that Venice was a “Maiden City,” both Christian and independent, “whereof She


Glorieth, and that not undeservedly, above all other States or Kingdomes.10
Ironically, much of this maiden’s purity was attributed to the virtue and patriotism of her male citizens, who exclusively dominated this elegantly structured, aristocratic oligarchy. Howell, for example, observes that while individual Venetian men contributed greatly to their nation’s civic superiority, their true power was in their concerted efforts:

Now, ther[e] are few or none who are greater Patriots than the Venetian Gentlemen, their prime study is public good and glory of their Countrey, and civil prudence is their principall trade whereunto they arrive in a high mesure;
Yet as it may be easily observed, though these Gentlemen are extraordinary wise when they are conjunct, take them single they are but as other Men.11

Venice might truly be a woman, but the wonder of her accomplishments, as many commentators implicitly suggested, was in her political system, which, unlike nearly every other government in Europe, banned women from even symbolic exhibitions of power.

The inherent supremacy of this political system, moreover, was manifest in relation not only to the other nations of Europe, but also to ones long since vanished. It is in this context that the history of the ancients, especially that of Tacitus’s Rome as featured in L’inconrnonazione di Poppea, played such an important role in Venetian self-promotion. Venetian mythology had long designated The Most Serene Republic as the true heir of Rome’s considerable glory—“un’altra Roma all’acque,” as Busenello himself once described.12 Yet Rome could also be invoked to proclaim another truth: that Venice, glorified by her unique form of government and thus immune to the many ills that had befallen her revered predecessor, was not merely Rome’s equal but her superior; she was a bridge between the ancients and the moderns, displaying virtues associated only with the most noble elements of the Roman legacy. As William Bouwsma writes, Venice, “the embodiment of political reason,” was proof positive to all of Europe that “ancient political virtue could find effective expression in the modern world.”13

But Venice had another reputation with which the Incogniti and all Venetian patriots had to contend as well. Foreign visitors such as Howell and Thomas Coryat may have praised the political Venice as an impenetrable virgin, an ideal state within an increasingly secularized Europe, yet the Republic whose maidenhead had remained intact was also renowned for her lack

thereof. Venice the Maid was lauded as the goddess Venus as well, a seductive siren born of the sea. She was the city of carnival, of prostitution, and of gaming, a veritable amusement park for Europe. Thus, although she remained impervious to foreign occupation, tyranny, and absolutism, like the many courtesans for which she was so famous, Venice was applauded for her accessibility: she was the ultimate destination for the pleasure seeker, as well as a haven for those whose libertine thinking placed them at odds with the Inquisition. Yet this Janus-faced image—Venice-Venus/maiden-courtesan—was essential to the preservation of Venice’s political structure and social stability: a seemingly contradictory icon that was readily manipulated for a variety of propagandistic and practical purposes. On the one hand, the maiden Venice kept a strong check on its female population. It was in the name of economic conservatism and pragmatism that women were excluded from public life, wives kept to their houses, and noble marriages limited. Female sexuality was not so much suppressed as controlled, with two venerable institutions—monacalization and prostitution—operating as safety valves for the overflow. On the other hand, Venice’s political wisdom was also apparent in the unmatched personal liberties and opportunities for sexual license she bestowed on her male citizens and visitors; her moral permissiveness was even justified as an expedient to control the population.

For the management of this delicate balance between politics and sexuality, the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti did not look directly to either Seneca or Tacitus, but rather to Aristotle and the last of the great line of Aristotelians at the University of Padua, Cesare Cremonini. Like his predecessors, Cremonini subscribed to a naturalistic brand of Aristotelianism that paid little heed to Christian theological precepts concerning the creation of the world or the power of divine providence. The critical issue—the one that nearly sealed his doom with the Inquisition—had to do with the mortality of the soul. In Cremonini’s view, not only were the sensations of the body necessary for the functions of the soul, but the soul was intrinsically tied to the body and could not exist without it as an individual entity. Physical urges were something to be satisfied, not suppressed, an essential part of the combined

14. See, for example, Thomas Coryat, Coryat’s Crudities Hastily Gobbled Up in Five Months Travels in France, Savoy, Italy (London: W. S., 1611), 264: “A most ungodly thing without doubt that there should be so much toleration of such licentious wantons in so glorious, so potent, so renowned a city.”


17. Giorgio Spini emphasizes the broad influence of Cremonini’s philosophies on this entire generation of Venetians (Ricerca dei libertin, 155).

workings of mind and body. And since the soul would perish along with the body, there was no need to fear divine retribution for the sins of the flesh. This approach to sensuality, as we shall see, is fundamentally incompatible with the precepts of Stoicism preached by Seneca and early modern adherents to Neostoicism, whereby the immortality of man exists in his reason, and the sensations of the body are to be controlled by the rational mind.\(^{19}\)

It is no coincidence that Cremonini became the guiding star for an entire generation of Venetian noblemen, for his teachings provided the ruling classes with a philosophy that justified their views regarding political and sexual matters: a selective indifference to the Church and license to explore one’s own sexual predilections, all in the context of an intellectual tradition that had long rationalized misogyny. Cremonini’s former students in the Accademia degli Incogniti did not necessarily pursue rigorous intellectual inquiries, nor did they contribute substantially to the body of political writings for which the preceding generation had been so renowned. Rather, Incogniti writers such as poet-librettist Giulio Strozzi, author of the epic poem *Venetia edificata* (1624), moved seamlessly from the patriotic to the erotic, and without sacrificing either integrity or credibility.\(^{20}\) This flexible blend of hedonism and nationalism is certainly apparent in the writings of the lawyer Giovanni Francesco Busenello, whose life and works were selected by Arthur Livingston as the ideal representative of “la vita veneziana” of the era.\(^{21}\) In addition to writing five opera librettos, which embroider plots drawn from Ovid, Virgil, Lucan, Plutarch, and Tacitus, Busenello crafted poems of praise for his native city and extolled her military triumphs in *La prospettiva del navale trionfo riportato dalla repubblica* (1656). Numerous poems also expressed the same unambiguous interest in eroticism and disdain for hypocritical moralizing that is evident in both Cremonini’s philosophies and the more erotically charged moments of *L’incoronazione di Poppea*.\(^{22}\) In Busenello’s poem *La secondità*, for example,


\(^{22}\) Busenello’s erotic poems were certainly inspired by his contact with and support of the works of Giambattista Marino; see Degrada, “Gian Francesco Busenello.” For a more negative view of Busenello’s and Monteverdi’s adherence to Marinist aesthetics in Monteverdi’s final operas, see Gary Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).
Jealousy, Incest, and Sodomy appear as defendants in the court of Venus, who sits in judgment concerning the various causes of injustice in the kingdom of love. La fecondità (Fertility) complains about the ways in which illicit love and unnatural pleasures have blocked natural reproduction. Venus, however, rules in favor of man’s inherent right to sexual gratification, with or without the goal of procreation, and she notes that such activities have existed in all times, with the approval of both history and scripture. Busenello’s colleague Ferrante Pallavicino, author of one of the Tacitist travesties discussed below, expressed this philosophy with particular frankness. Anticipating the libertine philosophy and sexual appetite of Da Ponte’s Don Giovanni (“son necessarie più del pan che mangio”), Pallavicino compared the poisonous consequences of retaining sperm to other basic physical deprivations such as hunger and thirst.

This celebration of carnality in poetry, prose, and opera in mid-seventeenth-century Venice thus reconciled politics and sexuality: it allowed for sensual self-expression, while affirming the most conservative tenets of republican government. In this particular version of the myth of Venice, the public and private, the sensual and the political coexisted in an elegant balance. The repeated celebration of the full range of pleasures available to the Venetian was not a sign of corruption or political vulnerability (as might be said of imperial Rome); rather, it served to heighten the Republic’s reputation for unmatched freedom and political wisdom. For the outside world, the Accademia degli Incogniti provided a vivid demonstration of Venice’s relative autonomy from such absolute authorities as Church and Inquisition. The exploration of the erotic that characterized so many of their writings was an open declaration of man’s inherent right to the pleasures of the flesh, for these works—produced by and for men—boldly rejected religious hypocrisy and Stoic deprivation. The domination of the Venetian printing presses by Loredano and the Incogniti, and their frequent flirtations with the Inquisition, were a highly visible advertisement of the many liberties, sexual and otherwise, enjoyed by men fortunate enough to live under this unique form of government. On a more private level, too, the academy created for its members an ideal space for sensual and philosophical self-exploration: a homosocial environment that insisted upon male primacy in private as well as public life. And while such societies existed throughout Italy, only in Venice—ruled exclusively by a male oligarchy rather than a court system—could such an organization reflect so closely the body politic. This was the Venetian Republic in miniature: an

23. I-Vmc, MSS Correr 1083, fols. 886–901. See also Livingston, La vita veneziana, 224–25.
24. Ferrante Pallavicino, La retorica delle puttane, ed. Laura Coci (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo/Guanda editore, 1992). Pallavicino’s most explicit statement concerning man’s right to sexual pleasure is included in the author’s confession at the conclusion of the work (pp. 117–30, esp. 120–21). Don Giovanni’s comment on his sexual appetite is made to Leporello in act 2, scene 1.
exclusively male sphere, a meeting place in which women were rarely admitted, yet one in which, as the surviving debates attest, the vices, liabilities, and dangerous attractions of women were among the most popular topics for discussion.25

In such a climate, women were assigned a contradictory role. They were objects of desire, a focus for some—but not all—erotic fantasies. Yet their sexuality was also a distraction for the patriotic Venetian, a threat to male autonomy; and their participation in public life or academy activities was anathema to the very principles upon which the Republic was founded. This is apparent in the treatment accorded those few women who managed to penetrate Incogniti circles. The singer-composer Barbara Strozzi, “adopted” daughter of Giulio Strozzi, attended and even sang at occasional meetings of an Incogniti subgroup, the Accademia degli Unisoni. Though praised for her beauty and talent, she was also the subject of brutal anti-female satire.26 Controversy and anti-female polemics likewise marked the literary career of the protofeminist nun Arcangela Tarabotti, who relied on Incogniti support in order to publish her works, but who was often sharply criticized by academicians. Female speech, song, and other forms of self-expression may have been a source of fascination and allure, but they were ultimately regarded with deep suspicion, even inspiring misogynic diatribes. This anti-female discourse, it must be emphasized, should not be mistaken for a moralistic inhibition toward illicit activities, motivated by Neostoic virtues. Rather it reflects Venice’s heightened anxiety about women’s sexuality and physical beauty, as well as their rhetorical and even potential political power, all of which were perceived as threats to this Republic constructed as a male entity.27

In the context of this pervasive anti-female sentiment, desire for male exclusivity, and disdain for conventional moral strictures, Incogniti writers touched

25. See Discorsi academici de’ Signori Incogniti (Venice: Sarzina, 1635); and Giovanni Francesco Loredano, Bizzarrie Academiche (Venice: ad’istanza dell’Accademia, 1643).
27. It is this underlying contradiction that Fenlon and Miller have interpreted as “the conflicting demands between private and public life” (Song of the Soul, 34). This presumably caused the Incogniti to back away from patriarchal involvement and embrace Neostoicism, as reflected in their yearnings for the inner beauty of the soul as opposed to the outward trappings of physical beauty. Such a hypothesis, however, not only ignores the repeated expression of patriotism on the part of Incogniti members but also overlooks an essential part of early modern thinking on gender and sexuality that was particularly important within the highly masculinized Venetian Republic (i.e., a clear differentiation between male and female virtues that forbade women the kind of sexual license permitted men). Indeed, this disdain of women, originating in the Aristotelian tradition and reinforced by Venetian political structures, coexisted quite comfortably with a heightened interest in the erotic. See Paula Findlen, “Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy,” in The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 49–108.
upon another avenue for sexual fulfillment: the homoerotic, a theme which can be identified in the encounter between Nero (Nerone) and Lucan (Lucano) in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as will be discussed below, in the last section of the essay. In several of Busenello’s erotic poems, for example, desire between men appears in the hypothetical realm of the deities and allegorical figures as an idealized form of sexual self-expression, unmediated by female interference. Sodomy, as noted above, played a prominent role in *La fecondità* as one of the chief defendants in Fertility’s charges concerning the displacement of procreative forms of lovemaking. Busenello returns to this subject in such poems as *Il rapimento di Ganimede*, where Jove’s attraction for the young Ganymede inspires intense jealousy in a shrewishly constructed Juno, whose wifely demands were deemed incompatible with Jove’s exercise of power and right to pleasure. In the infamous novel *Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, a work actually cited by Busenello in *La fecondità*, academy member Antonio Rocco carries this interest in physical pleasure, religious skepticism, and misogyny to the only possible conclusion: the Greek tutor Filotomo, using a virtuosic display of logic and rhetoric, persuades his young student Alcibiade that sodomy is the most ideal form of sexual congress, as it not only produces unmatched pleasure for both partners, but also saves young men from the falseness of female virtue and the horrors of the female body. Rocco is particularly resouerful in adapting this pseudo-platonic version of male love to suit Venetian concerns, exploiting all of Cremonini’s speculations about the mortality of the soul and the political uses of religion, and brilliantly justifying even sodomy within a Christian context. The condemnation of

28. On the use of twentieth-century terminology concerning sexual relations between men in the early modern period, see Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10–16. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of “homoerotic desire” is particularly useful in describing the ways in which homosocial relationships, ranging between “ideological homophobia” and “ideological homosexuality,” function to maintain and solidify patriarchal societies such as Venice’s Accademia degli Incogniti (see Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], 25–26). Surviving letters and poems attest to the close relationships maintained by Incogniti members; nonetheless the interest in same-sex eroticism apparent in Busenello’s writings and those of his colleagues seems somewhat closer to Sedgwick’s “ideological homosexuality.”


30. Antonio Rocco, *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (Orange: Juann Vvat, 1652 [fict. publ.]), edited with an introduction by Laura Coci (Rome: Salerno, 1988). Alcibiades (born ca. 450 B.C.) was known for both his remarkable beauty and his dissolute behavior. His life is discussed by Thucydides, Plutarch, and Nepos. Rocco’s portrayal of Alcibiade and Filotomo is a reversal of that found in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the former fails in his efforts to lure Socrates into a physical relationship.

31. On Antonio Rocco, see Laura Coci’s introduction to *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, 7–34; and Spini, *Ricerca dei libertini*, 161–66. Rocco, a student of Cremonini and a priest and lecturer in philosophy at San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, published several essays in Incogniti collections, including *Discorsi academici* and the *Veglia prima de’ Signori academici Unioni*. Coci (p. 31) and Spini (p. 164) cite the substantial file from the *Santo Uffizio* (1-Vas, Santo Uffizio Processi, 103)
Sodom and Gomorrah, Filotomo argues, was motivated by political experience rather than any absolute sense of morality. Because men often prefer boys to women, it has been necessary to pass legislation against these acts so as to ensure the continuation of the species. But consensual sex should never be prohibited. Since free will is a gift of God, why would God keep us from enjoying the activities that we desire? Filotomo is quite clear about the political significance of his instructions for the proper training of the young man. The proposed carnal relationship is an essential part of the way in which the tutor—older, wiser, and with full virile capacities—prepares the young man to assume his adult role as a citizen of the Republic. At the same time, Filotomo has something to teach his readers—and, incidentally, the audience for L’incoronazione di Poppea—about the nature of seduction, the power of the human voice, and the vulnerability of the ear, whether in the context of a natural or unnatural act. The tutor insists that his attraction to Alcibiade is based not only on the young man’s beauty, but on the incomparable charm of his melodious voice, which “in the guise of a siren enchanted the souls with sweetness, not to deprive them of life but to torment them, alive, with love.” This is a power that Filotomo (and Antonio Rocco) clearly understood, for it is this ability to penetrate Alcibiade’s ear with a compelling and powerful rhetoric that eventually gained Filotomo access to yet another orifice.

In Filotomo’s seduction of the young Alcibiade, Antonio Rocco uses some of the most inflammatory and graphic language to be found in the Incogniti literature, but the lessons reiterate a familiar message that is surprisingly compatible with even the most conservative Venetian goals. Sexual fulfillment, even if experienced only abstractly through eye or ear, was desirable at all costs. Yet the suppression of women in public life and the appropriate channeling of sexuality were political rather than moral imperatives, essential for the proper functioning of this unique and carefully structured government, dominated exclusively by men who guarded jealously all of the privileges, pleasures, and responsibilities that republican liberty offered.

denouncing Rocco not only for his writings on the mortality of the soul, but also for his controversial views regarding the necessity of sexual pleasure (whether obtained in a “natural” or “unnatural manner”) for receiving God’s grace.

32. On homosexual activity in Venice, see Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros; Patricia Labalme, “Sodomy and Venetian Justice in the Renaissance,” Legal History Review 52 (1984): 217–54; and Gabriele Martini, Il “vizio nefando” nella Venezia del Seicento: Aspetti sociali e repressione di giustizia (Rome: Jouvence, 1989). Sexual relationships involving “active” adult males and “passive” adolescents were also the most widely practiced—or prosecuted—form of sodomy in early modern Italy; see also Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 89–111.

33. “Ma la gioia inestimabile di questo tesor era l’angelo della favella . . . che a guisa di sirena incantava gli’animi di dolcezza, non per privarli di vita, ma per tormentarli, vivendo, d’amore” (Rocco, L’Alcibiade, 41). Filotomo could also be referring to the potential of Alcibiade’s mouth to provide another kind of delight.
Tacitisms: The Accademia degli Incogniti and the Uses of Tacitus

In the context of this vision of republican libertas, Tacitus and his view of imperial Rome provided a unique appeal for the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti. That they would have been drawn to him in the first place is certainly not surprising, for his writings were inordinately popular in much of Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet, it must be emphasized, this popularity by no means implies that there was any single pan-European view of Tacitus and his applications to the understanding of history and the present. The writings of Tacitus, more than those of any other ancient historian, were given a multiplicity of meanings and uses by a variety of populations. His prose was praised for its brevity and eloquence, and was particularly admired by those who opposed the dogmatic approach and rhetorical excess of the Ciceronians. Tacitean maxims on countless topics were a hallmark of his style; they were published in collections and served as the basis for commentaries. As a historian, Tacitus was applauded (and criticized) for his "interests in causes and motives." He reported not only the events themselves but their underlying explanations, exploring (as Girolamo Canini noted) "not only the outward actions . . . but also the most secret of thoughts." It was this, no doubt, that earned the Roman historian his reputation for skepticism and distrust of appearances—a valuable prerequisite for any historian of empire where, in the words of Ronald Syme, "a veil descends, and the truth about many matters of high policy, more or less disguised at the time, became impenetrable to posterity." Tacitus's view of history as an examination of hidden motives provided a model for numerous seventeenth-century

34. Peter Burke records over 110 authors who published commentaries on Tacitus in the seventeenth century alone, with more than half of them appearing in the first fifty years of the century. "A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians, 1450–1700," History and Theory 5 (1966), 149.

35. This point was made by Robert Holzer in his review of Song of the Soul, where he noted quite correctly that in the early modern period Tacitism might more accurately be understood as "tacitisms." My thinking on this topic has benefited in countless ways from Holzer's insights, for which I am grateful.


37. Cited in Burke, "Tacitism," 154. Girolamo Canini (d. 1626) translated Tacitus from Spanish into Italian; numerous editions of Canini's translations were published in Venice throughout the first half of the seventeenth century.

historians, most notably Venice’s own Paolo Sarpi, whom Peter Burke aptly named the “Tacitus of the Papal-Court.”

Of particular relevance for interpretations (and misinterpretations) of L’incoronazione di Poppea, however, is Tacitus’s dual role in the early modern period as moralist and politician. As a moralist, he did not refrain from passing often arbitrary judgment on the conduct of his historical subjects. A number of his most quotable maxims dealt with morality, particularly with the vices of imperial Rome’s most memorable women and their impact on men of insufficient strength. Nonetheless, Tacitus’s fame as a moral philosopher in the early modern period rests primarily on his association with one of his most articulate historical subjects: the Stoic philosopher and imperial tutor Seneca, who plays such a central role in L’incoronazione di Poppea. The moral teachings of Stoicism—the pursuit of virtue, the power of reason over the body and passions, and the necessity of accepting those things beyond one’s control with constancy and patience—offered guidance in times of distress and was a welcome balm for those experiencing the religious and civil strife north of the Alps. Reconciling Senecan Stoicism with Christian precepts, Justus Lipsius, and later Montaigne, codified “Neo-Stoicism,” and in so doing elevated the importance of Tacitus and Seneca for their political and ethical writings, respectively. Lipsius utilized both Seneca and Tacitus to create a coherent system for the management of public and private life in war-torn northern Europe. Seneca provided the moral substance of Neostoicism, emphasizing the necessity for fortitude, virtue, withdrawal, sublimation of bodily needs, and inner peace in the face of all strife. Tacitus, on the other hand, as Lipsius himself noted in his final years, was an invaluable guide for anyone in the busi-


41. On Neostoicism and Lipsius, see Mark Morford, “Tacitean Prudentia and the Doctrine of Justus Lipsius,” in Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition, ed. T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 129–51; and Gerhard Oestreich, Neostoicism and the Early Modern State, ed. Brigitta Oestrech and H. G. Koenigsberger, trans. David McIntock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Oestreich describes precisely the kind of comfort that Lipsius provided to his contemporaries in northern Europe: “In the triad constantia, patientia, firmitas (steadfastness, patience, firmness), Lipsius gave to his age, an age of bloody religious strife, the watchword for resistance against the external ills of the world” (p. 13). Montaigne, similarly, found Tacitus’s description of the moral failings and trials of imperial Rome to be curiously appropriate for seventeenth-century France, as it seemed “more suited to a disturbed and sick state, as ours is at present; you would often say that it is us he is describing and decrying” (Michel de Montaigne, Essays, 3.8; cited in Mellor, Tacitus, 146–47).
ness of government and had much to teach the private citizen about ways of coping with political upheaval:

[Tacitus] is a great writer who is especially appropriate for great persons, that is, those who hold the tiller of the state or those who give advice and counsel to the helmsman. What part of civil and military prudence, and what emotions of men (even concealed), what fortunes or events does he not openly reveal or show under a veil? . . . There is none among the Greeks or Romans, and I will confidently assert, there will never be any, who can be compared with Tacitus in the glory earned by his prudence of every sort.42

In Italy, however, Tacitus had always been regarded primarily as an authority on politics, a persistent figure in an Italian political discourse, but one that had little to do with Stoic philosophy or moral authority. In the fifteenth century, for example, such early political theorists as Leonardo Bruni and even Machiavelli himself were attracted by Tacitus’s antimonarchical observations and pragmatic approach to politics.43 In the aftermath of the sack of Rome in 1527 and the apparent defeat of republicanism, Tacitus experienced a new popularity as the ultimate advisor for those compelled to live under monarchy.44 His vivid description of the inner political workings of imperial Rome was seen to provide valuable instruction for those operating anywhere in the chain of command, regardless of their claims to virtue or vice, and to encourage deception by both ruler and subject. This ambivalent position was neatly summarized in the sixteenth century by Francesco Guicciardini, who noted that “Cornelius Tacitus is very good at teaching subjects how to live and act prudently, just as he teaches tyrants how to establish tyranny.”45 Tacitus could thus be viewed as a threat to the status quo—papal authority or Spanish rule—at the same time that he was condemned for providing instructions to despot by those who opposed these regimes.46

As Republican Venice replaced Florence as the epicenter for Italian political and historical theorizing in the late sixteenth century, Tacitus came to be

43. Mellor, Tacitus, 139–45. While there is some controversy over the extent to which Machiavelli himself used Tacitus (Livy was his preferred historian), the two authors were linked in the minds of later commentators such as Giovanni Botero.
44. Such contradictions among early modern political commentators are undoubtedly a reflection of Tacitus’s own ambivalence toward the Roman Empire. For example, Joshel notes: “When Tacitus recounts the history of the earliest generations of the Principate under Augustus’s successors in the Annals, he does so from the complex point of view of a senator, a member of the ruling class whose actions and speech were constrained by the power of the princeps, and of a provincial whose very position as a senator depended on the institution of the Principate” (“Female Desire,” 53).
associated not just with the machinations of empire, but with all that was political, and in particular with the controversial politics of *ragione di stato* (reason of state), whereby any action is deemed justifiable as long as it furthers the preservation or expansion of the state.47 Giovanni Botero, for example, used numerous citations from Tacitus in his influential treatise *Dalla ragione di stato* (1589), in which he defends the historian—and the political lessons of his writings—from critics who feared that even the most gifted politicians working for the good of the state would be tempted by absolutist ideals. Tacitus, Botero claimed, had merely “described the arts that Tiberius employed to attain and preserve his empire.” The “knowledge of the means appropriate to establish, maintain, and enlarge a state,” he argued, could safely be left in the hands of a virtuous prince, who possesses justice, liberality, and prudence, who recognizes the power of self-interest as the motivation for men’s actions, and who, above all, maintains his own reputation and that of the realm.48

For Traiano Boccalini (dubbed by William Bouwsma the “Art Buchwald of the Renaissance”), the Tacitean link with *ragione di stato* was highly suspect and worthy of satire.49 In his infamous *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (Venice, 1613), cast in the form of news accounts from the height of Parnassus, Tacitus and Seneca appear frequently along with numerous famous ancients and moderns, neither earning much credit from the omniscient Apollo. Boccalini’s praise for Tacitus’s politics is draped in irony: he “represents the pure politician, who by nature is compelled to seek absolute power and measures all things by the standards of reason of state.”50 The fallacy of Tacitus’s brand of politics is amply demonstrated when he is called down from Parnassus to assume a new role as the prince of Lesbos.51 Tacitus models his own government on those of the greatest tyrants, and under his rule, the secrets of politics can only be learned by princes. He devises entertainments—comedies and the like—to distract citizens from the workings of politics and encourage them to ignore their civic duty.52 Eventually, Tacitus is driven from Lesbos by a conspiracy and returns


52. Boccalini, “Ragguaglio XXIX,” 92: “In order to eradicate all virtue from the minds of his subjects, he had magnificent, expensive theaters constructed in the city, where games, comedies,
dejected to Parnassus, forced to admit his own vulnerability to the allure of power. Boccalini is particularly clear about the implications of Tacitus’s historical writings. Apollo and his Censor decide to ban the *Annals* and *Histories* from mortals, for they are “spectacles” (*occhiali*) that reveal to ordinary citizens the true nature of princes and their politics. If citizens could truly see what questionable means a prince employs to ensure the well-being of his state, the state itself would undoubtedly be threatened by sedition.53

A generation later, the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti readily adapted Boccalini’s cynical view of the political Tacitus to accommodate the peculiar mix of libertinism, conservatism, and self-interest that characterized Venetian public policy at midcentury. In some respects, this was a natural alliance. Tacitus’s association with serious political theorizing and conflicting points of view lent any appropriation of his writings an air of respectability and a certain elusiveness that was consistent with Venice’s reputation for both political wisdom and chameleon-like pragmatism. Moreover, his often negative pronouncements on imperial women resonated strongly with the Incogniti treatment of other women of myth and history, who were often cited in support of one or another anti-female position. Nonetheless, their use of Tacitus differed considerably from that of their Italian predecessors or northern European neighbors. Incogniti authors showed little interest in publishing translations of or commentaries on Tacitus. Unlike Botero, they did not mine him for political theories, and unlike Boccalini, they did not serve him up as the object of satire. Nor were they inspired to commend his exemplary men, such as Germanicus or the doomed Britannicus, the hero of a near-contemporary play by Jean Racine.54 Instead, they praised republican rule by focusing their Tacitus-like spectacles on the mechanisms of *ragione di stato*, as exemplified in a Tacitean narrative involving two of Rome’s most notorious women, Messalina and Agrippina the Younger. Beginning in the year A.D. 49 and concluding around A.D. 59, this history also included the earlier portions of the Nero-Poppaea affair (see Table 1).55

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55. For the various sources on Agrippina the Younger, see Anthony A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).
Table 1  Chronology of Significant Roman Events (A.D. 41–65) with Incogniti Treatments of Tacitus (1627–57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Novelle</th>
<th>Plays</th>
<th>Opera</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Exile of Seneca</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Nero and Agrippina arrive in Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius, celebrates public marriage with Gaius Silius and is put to death</td>
<td>Zaguri, La Messalina (1656)</td>
<td>Pona, La Messalina (1627)</td>
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<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Claudius marries Agrippina the Younger; Seneca is recalled from exile to tutor Nero</td>
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<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Agrippina named “Augusta”; Nero adopted by Claudius</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Nero marries Octavia, daughter of Messalina and Claudius</td>
<td>Zaguri, Le gelosie politiche, &amp; amorose (1657)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Death of Claudius (possibly poisoned by Agrippina); Nero ascends to the throne</td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Poppaea becomes mistress of Nero; birth of Tacitus</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Death of Agrippina, possibly after attempted incest with Nero</td>
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<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Lucan begins Pharsalia</td>
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<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Seneca retires; Octavia exiled, killed; Nero marries Poppaea</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Lucan banned from speaking publicly or publishing his works</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Lucan completesPharsalia</td>
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<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Pisonian conspiracy; death of Seneca and Lucan</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

(See items in boldface.)
Francesco Pona’s *La Messalina*, dedicated to the founder of the Incogniti, Loredano, initiated the process of linking bad empire with female sexuality. Pona follows Tacitus’s version of the story, in which the bumbling and inept Claudius is unaware of Messalina’s many infidelities. Yet he also plumbs the other historical sources—Juvenal, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius—for more lurid details and integrates graphic depictions of Messalina’s sexual adventures with clear warnings regarding her political liabilities. While Pona’s fascination with the erotic was likely intended to arouse more than indignation in his readers, he is nonetheless unequivocal about the political consequence of Messalina’s most horrific deed: her unconscionable public marriage to Gaius Silius while still wed to the emperor Claudius, an act that threatened the stability of government and society.

The dire consequences of female interference in government, however, could be more expediently demonstrated by a Roman woman universally acknowledged as a master politician. In 1642, just prior to the premiere of *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, Ferrante Pallavicino and Federico Malipiero each followed Pona’s example by publishing a *novella* on the exploits of Claudius’s subsequent wife, Agrippina the Younger, the mother of Nero. Their strategy was simple: using Tacitus as their primary source, they described the entire history of Agrippina’s rise to power and eventual murder by her son Nero (including the early portions of the Nero-Poppaea tale), emphasizing and exaggerating her crimes through adroit interpolations, while minimizing and even omitting the nefarious deeds of other members of the court.

Agrippina’s most fundamental sins, both authors point out, were her ambition and lust for power—qualities as dangerous in women as they are admirable in men. Both authors describe an emasculated Claudius with a “completely feminized heart,” little suited to governance, and the victim of a powerful sensual appetite that left him utterly vulnerable to the “thundering rays of her feminine beauty.” Yet, once married to Claudius, Malipiero tells

56. On Pona, see Giorgio Fulco, “Introduzione,” in *La Lucerna*, by Francesco Pona (Rome: Salerno, 1973). A Veronese doctor and reputedly a “strict disciple” of Cesar Cremonini, Pona gained enormous notoriety in Venice (and popularity among the writers who would eventually define themselves as the Accademia degli Incogniti) after the publication of his *La Lucerna* (Venice, 1628). While he spent much of his later life distancing himself from *La Lucerna*, his immediate reaction to his new-found fame was to dedicate his next work, *La Messalina*, to Loredano and to declare publicly his devotion to Christianity and the Church. On Pona’s *Messalina* and her subsequent construction as an opera heroine, see Heller, “Chastity, Heroism, and Allure,” 424–62.

57. On Ferrante Pallavicino, see Spini, *Ricerca dei libertinis*; and Laura Coci, “Introduzione,” in *La retorica delle puttane*, by Pallavicino. The latter includes an extensive bibliography (pp. cxi–cxix). Ellen Rosand was the first to note the similarities between the subject matter of Malipiero’s *novelle* and Monteverdi’s final operas (“Seneca”).

us, Agrippina "left off her feminine weakness, and dressed her soul with masculine and virile thoughts." 59 In this charge their guide was Tacitus, who himself had constructed Agrippina as masculine, thus distinguishing her from the more sexually voracious Messalina. 60 Malipiero, however, is far more explicit about the political consequences of Agrippina's politics and policies:

But in the end things done illicitly serve no purpose except to ruin equality and to corrupt the best habits of the Republic, because one who has used an indirect road to the throne cannot rule justly. Thus, with the mantle of marriage covering every one of Agrippina's libidinous acts, she made herself an Iole to Claudius, depositing him (one could say) among the maidservants with the distaff; and, taking the scepter away from him, with the first wielding, she demonstrated for Rome a new form of governing. She regulated all things, all matters of state, but not with the goal of lasciviousness, as with Messalina (who disdained the Roman Empire in order to live in decadence), but transformed feminine habits into masculine ones with an ambitious severity, holding dominion not only over public concerns, but rigidly ruled the servants [freedmen] of the home, and proudly allowed herself to be seen in the Forn, being in all other areas of her life an example of chastity, not ever making use of truly lascivious actions unless she found it necessary in order to dominate. 61

The unexpected and (perhaps) unconscious reference to republic in this passage ostensibly concerned with empire reveals something of Malipiero's real concerns. In Venice, individual power was carefully guarded and regulated through the structure of the republic, and any appropriation of it was perceived as a threat to the proper workings of government. 62 Yet, in a society so


60. Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.7; translations from Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (London: Penguin, 1956): "From this moment the country was transformed. Complete obedience was accorded to a woman—and not a woman like Messalina who toyed with national affairs to satisfy her appetites. This was a rigorous, almost masculine despotism. In public, Agrippina was austere and often arrogant. Her private life was chaste—unless power was to be gained."

61. "Ma in fine le cose illecitamente fatte non servono, che a rovina dell'equità, e a corruzione degli'otti costumi delle Repubbliche perche non può giustamente dominare, chi per vie indirette ascende al trono. Così dunque coperta co'il manto di matrimonio ogni libidine d'Agrippina, fattasi ella una Iole sopra Claudio, lo consignò (per così dire) tra le ancelle con la connocchia, ed'essa prendendone lo scettro, di primo lancio fece provar a Roma una novella forma di governo. Costei tutte le cose regeva tutte le materie di stato ordinava non già con fine di lascivia come fece Messalina; che sprezzò (per lussureggiare) l'impero Romano, ma con una severità ambiziosa mutati li donneschi costumi in virili, teneva'l dominio non solo sopra le publice cure, ma rigidamente imperava a Liberti di casa, e spese volte superbamente lasciavasi vedere ne' Fori, essendo nelle altre cose della vita sua un'esememplo di castità, non avvalendosi mai di tratto veruno lascivo, se non quanto le era ispediente per dominare" (Malipiero, *L'imperatrice ambiziosa*, 52–53).

62. Venice regarded herself as invulnerable to the ills that beset ancient Rome, in part because she had a political system designed to prevent any individual from attaining excessive power
accustomed to the complete exclusion of women from political life, what was most outrageous about Agrippina’s *novella forma di governo* was the mutation of “feminine customs into masculine ones.” Agrippina ruled both in public and in the home, dressing herself in the clothes of the emperor and sitting next to him at court. 63 In “all things imperial, soul, clothing, and domination,” she presented herself as the equal of the emperor. 64 At the same time, it was Agrippina’s superior political acumen—regardless of her gender—that placed her in the midst of the same contentious Venetian discourse on Tacitus and *ragione di stato* that had so engaged Boccalini’s wit. Malipiero, for example, praises her as “the most exquisite politician of her age,” yet he claims that her fame was won “in the guise of a siren.” 65 That she should also have been blamed for an incestuous relationship with Nero—likely intended to distract him from Poppaea—only magnified her political and sexual danger. Indeed, Nero’s full recognition of Agrippina’s evils was praised by Incogniti writers, despite the fact that this led him to the even more heinous crime of matricide. Agrippina’s death on Nero’s orders—by a blow to the womb—was a particularly vivid means of wrenching empire out from under female control and an acknowledgment that Agrippina bore full responsibility for Nero’s sins as well as her own. 66

In the decade following the publications of the Pallavicino and Malipiero *novelle* and the first performances of *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, the association of this generation of Julio-Claudians with *ragione di stato* is made still more explicit in a set of two plays by Pietro Angelo Zaguri. The first of these, *La Messalina* (1656), like Pona’s *Messalina*, is dedicated to the founder of the Incogniti, Loredano. It focuses primarily on Messalina’s adultery and illegal

through improper channels. In Boccalini, a gentleman argues before the personification of Venetian Liberty that Venice’s superiority to Rome could be found in her system of conferring nobility, not by “skips and leaps” but by gradations, and that anyone aspiring to high office must begin in youth from the lowest of positions (“Centuria Prima: Ragguglio V: La contesa nata tra molti letterati, quale nella floridissima repubblica di Viniesia sia la più preclara legge politica . . .,” in his *Raggugli di Parnaso*, 21–31).

63. “Appena ella entrò nel palagio di Cesare, che la prima notte, che si coricò nel letto nuziale (per dire secondo'l proverbio) si vesti con gl’abiti dell’Imperadore” (Malipiero, *L'imperatrice ambiziosa*, 31).

64. “Basta però, ch’Agrippina affiatata di superbia in tutte le cose più imperiali, d’animo, di vestimenti, e di dominio” (ibid., 87).

65. Ibid., 56 (“Ella era la più isquisita politica del suo secolo”) and 64 (“che guisa di sirena”).

66. While Tacitus is reluctant to trust the various reports on Agrippina’s incestuous activities, not dismissing the possibility of Nero’s guilt (Annals, 14.2), Malipiero and Pallavicino not only blame Agrippina exclusively, but praise the young emperor for his rejection and (implicitly) eventual murder of his mother. Malipiero, for example, attributes the following remarks to Nero: “Io hò una Madre terribile in ogni azione, e falsa in’ogni trattamento, Madre che per oggetto d’ogni sua azione hà il solo proprio interesse, e che per dominare distruggerebbe la stessa figliuolanza” (*L'imperatrice ambiziosa*, 131–32). In this, Malipiero notes, Nero demonstrates “great sense and sensibility.”
“marriage” to Gaius Silius, and concludes tragically with her death. The second, *Le gelosie politiche, & amorose* (1657), begins after the death of Messalina and the marriage of Claudius to Agrippina. It deals with the anticipated marriage of Octavia and Nero, and the various political machinations enacted either to prevent or to encourage the union. As Zaguri indicates in the preface to *Le gelosie*, these plays were intended to form part of a trilogy, with the final play focusing on some aspect of Nero’s cruelties and his love for Poppaea. Regrettably, this third play was never published, and perhaps it was never even written.67

The two surviving Zaguri plays nonetheless represent an important final stage in the encounter between the Accademia degli Incogniti and Tacitus, forming something of a hybrid between *L’incoronazione di Poppea* and the Tacistist travesties of Pona, Malipiero, and Pallavicino, in which the Incogniti political ideologies could be explored without the constraints of continuous music, yet with the selective appropriation of history justified by operatic convention. Undoubtedly, these plays are closely related to operatic entertainments. Indistinguishable from librettos in terms of their printed format, they are among the relatively few prose plays to have survived in the nearly complete collections of Venetian librettos at the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice and the University of California at Los Angeles.68 Like librettos, they are organized in three acts, and though written primarily in prose, they do contain prologues in *versi sciolti* and occasional *canzonette* texts that were likely sung.69 Zaguri, who had also tried his hand at libretto composition, was far less hesitant than either Pallavicino or Malipiero to embroider history for the sake of his drama. He not only exaggerated the crimes of his women, but created Tacitean-like subplots that exploited many of opera’s already ubiquitous conventions: eavesdropping characters, intercepted love letters, sleep scenes, laments, and comic servants.

Zaguri’s plays present the most unremittingly cynical vision of Tacitean court politics, where the scepter is wielded by the least competent, where power is up for grabs by the most ruthless, where one man’s *ragione di stato* is another man’s treason, and where women (in this case, Agrippina) are the chief political operatives. The numerous subplots, deceptions, and manipulations inserted by Zaguri into the Tacitean outline vividly demonstrate the mechanisms of *ragione di stato* whereby Agrippina can ensure the death of Messalina, secure the marriage between Nero and Octavia, and deny the virtuous Britannicus (who himself plots Nero’s murder) his rightful position as heir to the throne. (All of this has unfortunate repercussions for the courtiers who,

67. “Attendi di vedere con il proseguito dell’Historia la crudeltà di Nerone per gl’Amori di Pop[e]a in un Drama secondo il tuo genio” (Zaguri, “A chi legge,” in *Le gelosie* [pp. 7–8]).
69. *Le gelosie politiche, & amorose*, in particular, seems to have been elaborately produced. The libretto calls for *intermedi* and *balli*, and even mentions a set designer, despite the fact that the work was apparently produced at a private theater, the Casa Sanduo.
like Ottone in Busenello’s libretto, are often placed in the uncomfortable position of being asked to commit one or another murder.) Agrippina, listed in the cast of characters as “aspirante all’Impero,” becomes the chief political philosopher. In a series of speeches scattered throughout the two plays, Agrippina adapts Tacitean as well as Machiavellian commonplaces in order to justify various murders as political necessities in the context of monarchical rule. The first scene of La Messalina, for example, begins with Agrippina’s unambiguous pronouncements concerning absolutist power: “Be bold, my heart, since the security of a government will waver if it fears the laws of conscience. The Prince recognizes no one but himself. His authority appears mutilated if his force does not break the barriers that would restrain his own satisfactions.”

In Le gelose politiche, & amorose, Agrippina goes on to redefine the volatile nature of justice for the absolute ruler. The oft-cited Tacitean “suspicion of appearances” is acknowledged here as a weapon to deceive guileless courtiers—a stunning defeat for republican government:

The actions of Princes do not succumb to the judgment of subjects who, for the most part, remain fooled by appearances. Justice holds the balance in her left hand, easy to waver; in her right hand she brandishes the sword. She holds force in greater esteem than the deliberation of justice. . . . The Prince knows no superior except caprice, and his desire is law.

Prior to ordering another murder, Agrippina argues for punishment rather than compassion. Once again, politics are called upon as a means of creating illusions for courtiers, and even “reason” itself is placed in opposition to “reason of state”:

Unpunished sins stir up new errors. The greater crime is often committed through absolution rather than punishment. And even when the sentence appears unjust, one calls upon politics in order not to appear overly compassionate and thus inexpert. The art of ruling should not be trapped in the grids of reason. All of the lines of a well-stabilized empire can be reduced to this sole reason.

70. “Ardire, mio Cuore, che vacilla la sicurezza di quel governo, che teme le leggi della Coscienza. Il Principe non riconosce, che se stesso. Darebbe indito di mutilata autorità, se le sue forze non rompessero gli argini, che trattengono le proprie compiacenze” (Zaguri, La Messalina, act 1, sc. 1 [p. 2]).

71. “L’attioni de Principi non soccombano al giudizio de sudditi, che per lo più restano delusi dall’apparenze. La Giustizia tiene le Bilancie nella sinistra facile a vacillare, nella destra imbrandisce il ferro. Fà più stima della forza, che della ponderatione dell’Equità. . . . Il Principe non riconosce per superiore che il capriccio, e il suo desiderio per legge” (Zaguri, Le gelose, act 1, sc. 3 [pp. 27–28]).

72. “I Peccati impuniti fomentano nuovi errori. Maggior delitto si commette tal volta nell’assoluzione che nel castigo. E quando anche la sentenza apparisca ingiusta, per non publicarsi appassionato, ò inesperto così, richiede la Politica. L’Arte di regnare non s’inviluppa trà puntigli della ragione. Tutte le linee d’un ben stabilito impero si riducono a questo solo punto” (ibid., act 2, sc. 5 [p. 64]).
There is but one dissenting voice that falls completely outside Agrippina’s influence. As in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, where the pageboy provides the most explicit rejection of Seneca’s philosophies, the servant Nino is the only character endowed with those Tacitist “spectacles” that allow him to discern the truth about empire and political machinations, as he adroitly puns on the double meanings of the words *corte* and *cortegiano*.

In conclusion, he who compared the court to the sea because of its instability is not mistaken; he who calls it a scene from a play that easily changes perspective tells the truth. I, however, believe court to be an asylum for all the major evils, where one studies nothing in particular except throwing truth down from the throne in order to crown deception and adulation as their legitimate kings. One considers in this regard the name of *Cortegiano*, and sees that it contains within itself *Giano* [Janus], which means that to succeed in court you must be double-faced and double-hearted; and he who wishes to live only a few [corte] hours and have little [corte] tranquillity, let him come to court [corte], where it is not necessary to have short [corte] legs, and where all things are short [corte] except for hope.73

An overwhelming sense of the inevitability of historical destiny pervades the Zaguri plays. Driven by a political machinery and guided by fate, Agrippina will succeed and Nero will become emperor. Only a dramatic convention familiar from contemporary opera has the power to freeze the progress of history: the concluding love scene. In clear contradiction to Tacitus and history, and with a striking bow to *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, the play concludes with the happy marriage between Nero and Octavia that will eventually be destroyed by Nero’s murderous impulses. Just as Busenello and Monteverdi conclude their opera with the Poppea-Nerone love duet, Zaguri ends *Le gelosie* with a disquieting *lieto fine*, permissible in the world of drama, but doomed in real life, where the story ends with the exile and murder of Octavia.

**Agrippina, Seneca, and *L’incoronazione di Poppea***

Unfortunately, Pietro Zaguri appears not to have fulfilled his promise to write a third play dealing with Nero’s love for Poppea, and we will never know how he conceived of this final episode in the trilogy. Perhaps, emulating...

73. “In somma chi paragonò la Corte ad’un mare per la sua instabilità, non prese errore; Chi la chiamò una Scena, che facilmente muta prospetto, disse il vero. Io però stimo, che si un asilo di tutte le maggiori sceleratezze, dove particolarmente ad’altro non si studia, che à precipitar dal solio la verità per incoronarvi, come loro legittimi Rè, l’inganno, e l’adulazione. S’osservi in gratia il nome di Cortegiano, e vedasi, che rinchiude in sé quello di Giano, per dinotarci che per riuscir in Corte vi vuol doppia faccia, e doppio cuore; E chi brama viver di sua quiete, e di sua vita l’hora corte, venghi in Corte, dove non bisogna haver le gambe corte; E dove tutte le cose sono corte fuor che le speranze” (Zaguri, *La Messalina*, act 2, sc. 9 [pp. 65–66]).
Busenello’s libretto, this play also would have ended happily with Nero in the arms of Poppaea. Or, as in *La Messalina*, Zaguri might have envisioned this final episode as tragedy, concluding his trilogy with the death of Octavia, Agrippina, or even Poppaea. But even without a concluding episode, the Zaguri plays (along with the other Incogniti travesties of Tacitus) reveal much about the historian’s role in seventeenth-century Venice, and the intellectual and social circle that produced *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. In their recasting of the rise and fall of Agrippina and the events leading up to the Nero-Poppaea affair, the Venetians demonstrated the ways in which Tacitus’s vision of empire united all that was contrary to republican values: the threat of female rule, men’s susceptibility to feminine beauty, the gaining of power through improper channels, and the controversial politics of *ragione di stato*, where self-interest and self-promotion were the basic tools of an absolutist ruler.

While Agrippina herself never appears in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, she remains an indispensable element in its background. As a well-known symbol in Venetian political discourse on Tacitus, she is of primary importance for understanding the complex relationship between sexuality and politics that the opera explores. On the most basic level, Agrippina provided the model for one important transformation of history enacted by the Incogniti: the highly critical representation of female power, ambition, and sexuality that is characteristic of nearly all the women in the opera. Ottavia, unlike her innocent historical model, was readily adapted so as to inherit Agrippina’s knack for vengeance and manipulation. Drusilla, with her hearty sexual appetite and her eagerness to conspire in the murder of Poppaea, also demonstrates familial traits. Even Poppaea’s nurse, Arnalta, provides at the opera’s climax a stunningly satirical commentary on female ambition.

Most striking, of course, is the characterization of Poppaea herself. As described by Tacitus and reconstructed by Incogniti writers, she was the embodiment of negative views about women, combining Agrippina’s ambition with Messalina’s disruptive sexual appeal. Ferrante Pallavicino, for example, had described her in his novella *Le due Agrippine* as a woman who possessed no genuine virtue, who “lived according to the most fundamental laws of the

74. Fenlon and Miller suggest that Drusilla was inspired by a character of the same name in Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, a woman who was particularly renowned for her constancy (*Song of the Soul*, 42–43). This is, in fact, a central element of their thesis postulating Drusilla as the true heroine of the opera due to her adherence to the Neostico virtue of *constanza*, which was presumably endorsed by the Incogniti. Drusilla, however, was also the daughter of Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus, and sister of Agrippina the Younger (mother of Nero) as well a favorite incestuous playmate of the emperor Caligula. This connection surely would have been obvious to those familiar with the Roman sources (Suetonius, *Life of Caligula*, 4.24).

75. Arnalta sings the following in act 3, scene 7, directly before Poppaea’s coronation: “Today Poppaea will be Empress of Rome. I who am her nurse will rise to the highest ranks. No no, I will not degrade myself among the common people” (“Hoggi sarà Poppea / di Roma Imperatrice. / Io che son sua nutrice, / ascenderò delle grandezze i gradi: / Nò nò col volgo, io non m’abbasso più”).
prostitutes,” never loving unless it could satisfy some greed.76 His characterization of her here might well have been the blueprint for her subsequent representation in L’incoronazione di Poppea:

She was lascivious but with such art that by presenting the luster of purity she made her wantonness seemingly less abominable. She lived in a retiring way; and if sometimes she went out in public she suppressed her dissoluteness from those who saw her by keeping her face half-covered, with apparent modesty. In this way, by not permitting lovers’ glances to gain satisfaction, she incited their appetite to search her out where they could enjoy seeing her more freely. The lovely scene that was her face was greatly enhanced by that curtain, and the curiosity of the spectators gave them the hope of viewing the beginning of that delightful comedy once the full perspective was revealed to them.77

And he concludes this description of Poppaea’s physical charms by praising the power of her speech:

She did not open her mouth without having established with alluring appearance either a most gracious smile or the diction of most amorous words. In short, from the doors of the senses, she did not allow anything—gestures, speech, or charms—to escape that would not ensure the capture of Nero’s soul.78

In Pallavicino’s transformation of Tacitus, Poppaea’s face is the stage, and the veil is the curtain that hides the proscenium, arousing, in the best Baroque fashion, both curiosity and wonder. Her veil conceals—and makes tempting—not only her face, but also her mouth, the source of female speech and male pleasure. Like Pallavicino, Monteverdi and Busenello present a new version of the equation between woman and bad empire, for the political and sexual power wielded by Agrippina are, in this formulation, transferred to Poppaea and embodied in her gestures, her manner, and, most significantly, her voice.

Less obvious for the understanding of this particular Incogniti transformation of Tacitus, however, is the way in which Agrippina’s ghost hovers over Seneca, revealing much about the philosopher’s dubious claims to moral authority. This conflation of Agrippina and Seneca is made possible by one of Busenello’s most significant manipulations of history: the rearrangement and

76. Pallavicino, Le due Agrippine, 420 (“le più fondate leggi delle meretrice”).
77. “Fu lassiva, ma con tal’arte, che dimostrando in apparenza il lustro della pudicitia, faceva meno abominevoli le sue libidini. Viveva ritirata, e se tal’hora usciva in publico, tenendo il volto mezo coperto, sospendeva con apparente modestia la dissolutezza di chi la vagheggiava. Col non permettere in tal guisa che si sattassero gli sguardi de gli amanti, promuoveva l’appetito al cercarla, ove più libero fosse il governe la vista. La vaga scena di quel viso, accreditavasi maggiormente con quella cortina, e tormentando la curiosità de gli spettatori, dava loro speranza d’havere il principio d’un dilettevole commedia, quando fosse loro concesso di mirare la prospettiva” (ibid., 418).
78. “Non aprivasi la bocca, che con lusinghiero apparato già non havesse stabilito qual fosse la forma d’una più graciosio sorriso, o quale la dettatura di più amorosa parola. Dalle porte insomma de’ sensi, non facca sortita alcuna, con gesti, con parole, o con vezzi, che non s’assicurasse di captivare l’anima di Nerone” (ibid., 424).
compression of the chronology. By reordering a series of disparate events from the years 58–65, so that they occur in close proximity, he is able to eliminate Agrippina completely from his libretto. In this retelling of history, Agrippina and her objections to the proposed marriage between Nero and Poppaea have no significance, and the difficult issue of matricide is completely avoided. Instead, Seneca assumes the role as the sole obstacle to the marriage, and it is his suicide—a full three years earlier than provided for by history—that allows Nero to fulfill his desires (see Table 2).

Busenello may well have decided to confer this particular role on Seneca in order to differentiate his libretto from the writings of his Incogniti colleagues in 1642, or even to limit the weight already accorded the anti-female discourse in this work. Nonetheless, the importance of this particular transformation of history cannot be overestimated, for it lies at the heart of the apparent amorality long associated with L'incoronazione di Poppea. The central issue has to do with the relative lack of moral authority with which both Agrippina and Seneca oppose Nero and Poppaea, and the extent to which their objections are based almost exclusively on political considerations. Tacitus's Agrippina did not object to the Nero-Poppaea affair out of any concern for Nero's virtue; indeed, it was her jealousy of Poppaea's growing political power that (presumably) drove her to far more dubious behavior: the attempted seduction of Nero. (Malipiero and Pallavicino, we recall, certainly preferred Nero to his mother, regardless of his many failings.) At the same time, the historical reports provide only marginal evidence for Seneca's superior claims to morality. Dio Cassius offers the most critical view of Seneca, accusing him of hypocrisy, greed, and various sexual indiscretions, and commenting that "while denouncing tyranny, he was making himself the teacher of the tyrant." He even accuses Seneca of having a taste for "boys past their prime, a practice which he also taught Nero to follow," and hints at a possible affair between Seneca and Agrippina.79 Tacitus, while somewhat less vehement in his criticisms of Seneca, nonetheless leaves no doubt that Seneca's few objections to Nero's sexual exploits, including the relationship with Poppaea, were based on political rather

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than moral considerations. Indeed, it was Seneca’s personal charisma that allowed him to maintain close ties with such emperors as Caligula and Nero, and to behave in a manner that often seemed to contradict his teachings.  

Modern commentators, eager to justify the opera’s seemingly amoral conclusion, have regarded the expansion of Seneca’s role as evidence of the philosopher’s superior virtue or of Venetian adherence to some form of Stoic philosophy in the context of early modern Christianity. Yet our examination of the Incogniti writings, and particularly the travesties of Tacitus, suggests a rather different conclusion. As noted earlier, the Incogniti views on the primacy of natural instinct, the mortality of the soul, and man’s right to sexual gratification stand in direct opposition to Stoic and Neostoic philosophies. Notably, no editions of Seneca are linked to the group, despite the widespread involvement of the Incogniti in publishing, and no commentaries on or translations of the essays on morality or politics were published in Venice prior to 1643. Yet the most striking evidence of the attitude toward Seneca can be found in the opera itself. Monteverdi and Busenello provide a vivid demonstration of the insufficiencies of Seneca’s brand of philosophy: with a remarkable show of insensitivity and lack of perception, Seneca urges the rejected Ottavia to embrace her misfortune and thank heaven for the blows that will only serve to increase her purity, nobility, and virtue (act 1, scene 6):

Ringrazia la Fortuna, Give thanks to fortune,  
Che con i colpi suoi That with her blows  
Ti cresce gl’ornamenti. Increases your ornaments.  
La cote non percossa The flint that is not stricken  
Non può mandar faville; Cannot produce sparks of fire;  
Tu dal destin colpita But you, wounded by destiny,  
Producì a te medesima alti splendori Yourself produce the highest virtues  
Di vigor, di forza, Of strength, of vigor,  
Glorie maggiori assai, che la bellezza. Glories more prized than beauty.


81. Fenlon and Miller note the many criticisms of Seneca offered in the historical sources, but argue that “the actual operatic character is the embodiment of neo stoic philosophy, whose words and deeds are completely consonant” (*Song of the Soul*, 47). This interpretation differs significantly from that offered by Rosand, who sees a disjunction between Busenello’s ironic tone, associated with Incogniti thought, and Monteverdi’s more empathetic setting of Seneca’s death (“Seneca”).

82. Francesco Baba’s 1643 Latin edition of Seneca was preceded in seventeenth-century Venice only by a publication of Seneca’s tragedies. I-Vas, *Arti, busta* 166, fol. 31r contains Baba’s application for the privilege to publish the works of Seneca and Tacitus in October of 1641 to compensate for their lack of availability. Baba’s claims would appear to have some merit. A survey of publications of Seneca between the years 1600 and 1640 reveals editions published in Antwerp, Lyons, Geneva, London, Paris, Madrid, Bailleune, and Rouen, while only the Venetian publication of any Seneca during that period was of the tragedies. I am grateful to Robert Holzer for sharing this document with me.
This, it must be emphasized, is Seneca’s only opportunity within the opera to demonstrate the efficacy of Stoicism for the alleviation of suffering, and—as the pageboy trenchantly remarks—he fails utterly. We have already noted the extent to which Stoicism conflicted with Incogniti views on sensuality. Monteverdi makes that point still clearer. Seneca fails to persuade or comfort Ottavia not only because of the apparent futility of his arguments, but also by his utter inability to muster his famed rhetorical powers in the service of a coherent oration (see Ex. 1). Such blatant contrivances as the melisma on the word “faville” (mm. 39–43), the syncopations on “colpita” (mm. 44–47), and the ascent illustrating “Glorie” (m. 52) seem more like academic exercises in madrigalesque imitation. This catalog of musical devices dissuades rather than persuades, distracting the listener from the intention of the speech as a whole and raising suspicions not only about Seneca’s oratory but also about the validity of his philosophical stance. The meaninglessness and inappropriateness of such gestures is particularly apparent in the absurdly long melisma in measures 54–57, placed on the article “la” rather than on the noun “bellezza.” Seneca, oblivious to the nature of beauty, is an incompetent rhetorician and musician. Unable to coordinate word and sound, he is thus an unlikely hero for an opera by Monteverdi.83

83. Susan McClary links Seneca’s impotence and passivity in the opera with these “silly madrigalisms” that “destroy the rhetorical effect of most of his statements” (“Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi’s Dramatic Music,” in her Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality [Minnesota and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991], 49). Indeed, Monteverdi’s setting of this passage (as well as the pageboy’s subsequent comments about Seneca’s “golden maxims” as “mere inventions”) is strikingly similar to Quintilian’s criticisms of the “corrupt style” in the Institutiones oratoriae (12.10.73) associated with Seneca: “[It] exults in the license of words or runs riot with childish epigrams . . . or swells with unrestrained pomposity or rages with empty commonplaces or glitters with ornamentation that will fall to the ground if lightly shaken, or regards extravagance as sublimity or raves under the pretext of free speech” (cited and translated by William J. Dominik in “The Style Is the Man: Seneca, Tacitus and Quintilian’s Canon,” in Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature, ed. William J. Dominik [London and New York: Routledge, 1997], 55). Notably, Quintilian’s comments are also reminiscent of Tomlinson’s criticisms of the “fragmentary” musical speech typical of Monteverdi’s late style: “a discourse in which individual words and images tend to be singled out by abrupt changes of style in the music setting them” as opposed to the “seamless emotional evolution characteristic of Ariadne’s lament” (Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance, 218–19). In this instance, however, I would suggest that Monteverdi understood precisely how to translate this “corrupt” rhetorical style into music in order to demonstrate Seneca’s apparent inability to persuade his followers or feel any genuine empathy for Ottavia. Fenlon and Miller, on the other hand, interpret Seneca’s problems with self-expression as evidence of Ottavia’s lack of philosophical sophistication: “In this context Seneca’s long virtuosic melisma on the word ‘bellezza’ is not merely an adaption of a madrigalesque convention, but is also deeply ironic. That irony consists of the fact that while the concept of beauty is dramatically illustrated through a form of direct representation, namely sudden elaborate vocal ornamentation delivered in a largely syllabic ambiance, it actually comes from the mouth of Seneca who is busily engaged in attacking its significance. For Seneca, as with the Incogniti, the beauty of the soul is one with the entire body and with the purpose of beauty, a condition that is clearly not met by Ottavia” (Song of the Soul, 64–65). The curiosity here, however, has to do with Seneca’s inappropriate placement of the melisma on the article “la.” It is indeed hard to fathom precisely how Seneca’s inept rhetoric reflects negatively on Ottavia.
Example 1 Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (I-Vnm, It. IV 439 [= 9963]), act 1, scene 6, mm. 20–58 (fols. 28r–29v)

Seneca

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20

Rin-grazia, rin-grazia la Fortuna,
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24

Che con col-pi i col-pi suoi Ti
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29

cresce gl'ornamenti. La co-te non per-cos-sa,
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35

non per-cos-sa, Non può man-dar, non può man-dar
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39

fa-vil-
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42

-le. tu dal des-tin col-pi-ta, dal
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An important clue as to the political bond uniting Seneca and Agrippina in L’incoronazione di Poppea can be found in yet another dramatic treatment of imperial Rome: the Octavia, a tragedy long attributed to Seneca himself, and certainly Busenello’s model for a dramatic rendition of the Nero-Poppaea story.84 Believed to have been written by another member of Nero’s literary circle in the aftermath of his death, the Octavia presents a view of imperial Rome that predates Tacitus and is thus outside his direct influence. The play features little of the chronological manipulation of Busenello’s libretto, for it deals with events securely associated with the year A.D. 62: the marriage of

84. On the relationship between L’incoronazione di Poppea and the Octavia, see Rosand, “Seneca,” 43. Busenello’s most overt borrowing from the Octavia is the scene between Nero and Seneca, in which the tutor tries to dissuade Nero from banishing Octavia and marrying Poppaea. Fenlon and Miller dismiss the relationship between these works due to the “one-dimensional” characterizations of Octavia and Poppaea that “make it inconceivable that Busenello could have relied on it for his descriptions of these central characters” (Song of the Soul, 10). For an opposing view, see Holzer’s review of Song of the Soul, 80.
Nero and Poppaea, opposed by Seneca, and the divorce and eventual murder of Octavia. The author also expands or invents elements not found in Tacitus or Busenello, including the monologues of a guilt-ridden Poppaea and the ghost of Agrippina (d. 59), who condemns Nero for his many crimes against Rome. Not only was the author apparently an admirer of Seneca, modeling his own play after Seneca’s tragedies, but he made Seneca both a central character and the primary adversary to the fulfillment of Nero’s desires. This not only made for a tidy dramatic structure (a fact that likely did not escape Busenello’s notice), it also had political implications. Octavia’s tragedy provided the backdrop for a brutal condemnation of empire far less ambiguous than that provided by Tacitus himself.85 As J. P. Sullivan notes in his study of the literature of Nero’s court, the Octavia is be understood as a “political document,” specifically “a diatribe against Nero” that “risks dramatic implausibility and even tedium in cataloguing his crimes of cruelty, tyranny, vengeance, and sexual passion, however dispersed the narration is among the different actors in the drama.”86 Thus, the confrontation between Nero and Seneca, which Busenello later emulated in his opera (act 1, scene 7), is presented as the conflict between empire and republic, with Seneca taking on the role of the Roman people and senate against the power of the principate. (This was scarcely a role that could have been undertaken by Agrippina, who had worked assiduously during her reign to weaken the senate and consolidate imperial power.) Seneca’s opposition to Nero’s relationship with Poppaea also had to do with his concern with the sanctity of marriage and Octavia’s wifely virtues (“A wife's fidelity, honor, purity and goodness should be all her husband’s joy”). Most important, however, Seneca argued that Nero should relinquish his illicit bond with Poppaea because it was an offense to the Roman people and their law:

Seneca: The scruples and abhorrence of the people
Will give that bond no countenance;
Nor does the law of sanctity permit it.
Nero: Am I forbidden to do what all may do?
Seneca: From high rank high example is expected. (Octavia, 572–75)

The anxiety about female power that was to become so central in the Incogniti travesties receives relatively little mention in the Octavia. Because of the necessity of vilifying Nero, the anonymous author treats Poppaea, Octavia, and even the deceased Messalina with considerably more charity than they receive in Monteverdi’s opera or in any of the Incogniti travesties. Octavia is entirely sympathetic, attempting no vengeful acts on her own behalf. Even Poppaea has support from the people, and her conscience is far more active

86. Ibid., 71.
than it is in Tacitus or Busenello’s libretto. Agrippina is relegated to ghostly monologues that, although they refer to her many villainies, primarily focus on Nero’s crimes and the day when he will “pay with his poisoned life” and “bow his head beneath his enemy’s sword.”

*L’incoronazione di Poppea* certainly borrows elements of its dramatic structure from the *Octavia*. Their political messages, however, are entirely different. In *Poppea*, the treatment of women and empire is completely consistent with that in other Incogniti adaptations of Tacitus. Nero is scarcely the opera’s sole villain. He faces serious competition from Poppea and at least some challenge from Ottavia, Drusilla, and Ottone, all of whom indulge in various amorous and political machinations to achieve their respective goals. Indeed, Nerone’s generous behavior toward Ottone and Drusilla reflects rather more on his virtue than theirs.87 Surprisingly, this Nerone is endowed with some sense of princely magnanimity and justice.

More important, the operatic Seneca is scarcely a stalwart defender of either republicanism or wisely virtue. While Busenello may have imitated the dialogue between Nero and Seneca in the *Octavia*, the ideological implications of this encounter are profoundly different.88 Busenello’s Seneca begins somewhat conventionally, arguing for reason over passion: “Emotion is an evil advisor that despises laws and disdains reason” (“Consiglier scellerato il sentimento / Ch’odio le leggi e la ragion disprezza”). Yet, unlike his counterpart, he is completely silent on the subject of Ottavia: he makes no mention of her name, offers no defense of her virtue, and shows no concern about the sanctity of marriage. Nor can Seneca’s warning to Nerone that he may “annoy the senate and the people” be construed as any but the feeblest gesture toward republicanism. Indeed, this Seneca’s true politics are clarified in his penultimate speech to Nerone (act 1, scene 9):

Siano innocenti i Regi, \(\rightarrow\)  Rulers should be guiltless
O s’aggravino sol di colpe illustri; \(\rightarrow\)  Or guilty only of illustrious wrongs;
S’innocenza si perde, \(\rightarrow\)  Innocence should be impaired
Perdasi sol per guadagnare i Regni, \(\rightarrow\)  Only for conquering realms,
Che il peccato commesso \(\rightarrow\)  For the sin committed
Per aggrandir l’Impero \(\rightarrow\)  To extend an empire
Si assolve da se stesso; \(\rightarrow\)  Absolves itself;

87. Fenlon and Miller use Nerone’s magnanimity in order to present Drusilla as a representative of Neostoic *constantia* and thus establish her as the opera’s heroine (*Song of the Soul*). Drusilla, however, is scarcely an unambiguous representative of virtue: she conspires in a plot to kill Poppea and openly enjoys physical pleasure with Ottone (despite the fact that he is married to another.) Moreover, Nerone’s commendation of Drusilla’s “costanza” to Ottone has an important qualifier—she is to be an example to her sex (emphasis added). Given the clear differentiation between male and female virtues in Incogniti writings, it is highly improbable that Drusilla would have been held up as a model of behavior for the virtuous male.

88. See Rosand, “Seneca.”
The view of empire suggested here is no less than an endorsement of **ra-gione di stato**. Seneca’s position could not be clearer: guilt or innocence, right or wrong is determined not by the nature of the crime itself, but rather by its political consequences. Any sin committed in the name of empire is thus justified, and had Nerone ignored the senate and banished or killed Ottavia to benefit Rome, there would have been no objections offered. But Nerone’s sin is much greater, as Seneca’s final words to him indicate. For by using the derogatory “feminella”—scarcely a dignified choice for so famous an orator—Seneca condemns Nerone for a cardinal sin that necessarily cripples empire: vulnerability to the power of a woman. It scarcely matters that Busenello uses Seneca rather than Agrippina in this scene, for the message about women, empire, and **ragione di stato** is reiterated throughout the Incogniti travesties of Tacitus. In this context, Monteverdi’s idiosyncratic setting of Seneca’s advice to Ottavia seems all the more appropriate: the political necessity of ensuring that she will accept her lot with nobility and silence is in no small part based on her gender—as is her lack of willingness to do so. When Nerone dismisses Seneca only to lose himself in the admiration of Poppea’s breasts in the following scene, it is apparent that Seneca’s philosophical teachings falter in the face of eroticism and pleasure. Indeed, it is not surprising that at his most heroic moment—his death—Seneca is first mourned movingly by followers who, like the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti, repeatedly reject his philosophy of withdrawal and abstinence with joyful song. In this construction of

89. On Seneca’s politics as represented in the opera, see also John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 32–40.

90. For complementary readings of Seneca’s representation in the opera, see Carter, “Re-Reading *Poppea*”; Ketterer, “Neoplatonic Light”; and Robert Ketterer, “Militat omnis amans: Ovidian Elegy in L’inconomazione di Poppea,” *Journal of the International Society for the Classical Tradition* 4 (1998): 381–95. Both Carter and Ketterer invoke differing aspects of the classical tradition to support a nonserious view of Seneca. Carter questions the “emotional veracity” of “Non morir, Seneca,” comparing it to the somewhat frivolous “madrigale amoroso” in Monteverdi’s *Eighth Book of Madrigals,* “Non partir, ritroseta.” Carter’s invocation of Lucien and the paradoxical encomia as a source of the opera’s ironic tone is certainly compatible with the Incogniti perspective. Ketterer finds irony in the inversion of Neoplatonic imagery and the influence of the Ovidian elegy. Rosand notes the ambiguity in the music of Seneca’s followers: “Seneca’s suicide had very special resonance, particularly in the context of his earlier characterization as an ambiguous mixture of the lascivious, mercenary, pedantic sophist and the ascetic, moral proponent of reason against passion. It is an ambiguity intensified by the ambivalent reaction of Seneca’s followers to the prospect of his death—their lamentation all too soon giving way to dissociation from the act and renunciation of the tenets of stoicism, “Iro and the Interpretation of Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria,” *Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989): 159).
the political Seneca, there is little persuasive endorsement of the Neostoic moral program, as argued by Fenlon and Miller, or support of the republican cause that one finds in the Octavia.

"Hor che Seneca è morto": Lucan, the Republic, and the Art of Song

With the death of Seneca and the apparent defeat of Senecan morality and politics, the final episode of the Tacitist narrative explored in the other Incogniti writings is set in motion: Nerone, free to fulfill his desires, banishes (and eventually murders) Ottavia; and Poppea, protected by love and empowered by her voice, realizes her Agrippinian ambition and becomes empress. As in the other Incogniti treatments of Tacitus, bad empire and imperial politics are linked to female sexuality. Only the troubling moral void of imperial Rome, with its scarcity of worthy heroes and heroines, appears to remain.

It is into this ethical vacuum—the immediate aftermath of Seneca’s death—that Busenello and Monteverdi choose to place what is perhaps this opera’s boldest and most scandalous distortion of history: a scene that unites all of the most important themes explored in the writings of the Accademia degli Incogniti and, at the same time, demonstrates the power of music to contradict the historical record and construct alternative moral and ethical lessons of the past. Nerone appears with another court writer, Lucano (the poet Lucan), a hedonistic counterpart to his uncle Seneca. Notably, his rhetoric has a far greater influence on the young emperor. The two men rejoice in Seneca’s death, exulting in Nerone’s desire and Poppea’s beauty, and transgressing the hazy boundaries of operatic verisimilitude with actual song. These are the first twenty-two lines of act 2, scene 6 as they appear in the 1656 libretto.91

91. This discussion is based on the music and text as they appear in the Venice score (I-Vnm, It. IV 439 [= 9963]) and Busenello’s libretto printed in Delle hore ociose (1656); the version transmitted in the Naples score (I-Nc, Rar 6.4.1) contains, in a different hand, additional music and text for two other members of Nero’s court, Tigellinus and Petronius. While this extra music was likely not composed by Monteverdi, Busenello did include the dialogue involving Tigellinus and Petronius in the only printed version of the libretto published under his own supervision as part of Delle hore ociose. For a modern edition that collates the Naples and Venetian manuscripts, and for a discussion of the authenticity issues, see Monteverdi, L’incoronazione di Poppea, ed. Alan Curtis (London: Novello, 1990); → Curtis, “La Poppea Impasticciata or, Who Wrote the Music to L’incoronazione di Poppea (1643)?” this Journal 43 (1989): 23–54. On tonal allgor and authenticity in Poppea, see Eric Chafe, Monteverdi’s Tonal Language (New York: Schirmer, 1992), 289–308. On the various versions of the libretto, see → Paolo Fabbi, “New Sources for Poppea,” Music and Letters 74 (1993): 16–23. It would appear that the “earliest” versions of the scene included only Lucan and Nero. Petronius and Tigellinus are not mentioned in the printed scenario of the opera (Venice: Pinelli, 1643), nor do they appear in the newly discovered Udine libretto (La coronazione di Poppea, Udine, Biblioteca Comunale, 55), which Fabbi suggests may have been copied from a score (p. 23), as opposed to the “literary tradition” transmitted by Busenello’s published text in the 1656 Venetian libretto and the other surviving manuscript librettos.
Nerone:
Hor che Seneca è morto
Cantiam, cantiam Lucano
Amorose canzoni
In lode d’un bel viso,
Chi di sua mano amor nel cor m’ha inciso.

Lucano:
Cantiam, Signor, cantiamo
Di quel viso ride, 
Che spira glorie, & influisce amori, 
Di quel viso beato
In cui l’Idea miglior se stessa pose,
E seppè sì le nevi
Con nova maraviglia,
Animar, incarnar la granatiglia.

Nerone:
Cantiam di quella bocca,
A cui l’India, e l’Arabia
Le perle consacrò, donò gli odori.

Lucano:
Let us sing, Sir, let us sing
Of that laughing face,
That inspires glory and causes loves;
In which the best idea alights,
And colors the snowy whiteness
With new glory,
To animate and embody the passion flower.

Nerone:
Bocca, ahi destin, che se ragiona, o ride,
Con invisibil arme punge, e all’alma
Donna felicità, mentre l’uccide.

Lucano:
Mouth, ah destiny, that if speaking and laughing,
Wounds with invisible weapons,
And gives joy to the soul while killing it.

Nerone:
Bocca, che se mi porge
Lasciveggiando il tenero rubino
M’inebria il cor di nettare Divino.

Nero:
Let us sing of that mouth
To which India and Arabia
Bestowed their pearls and gave their perfumes.

Nero:
Mouth, that when it seductively offers me
Its tender redness
Inebriates with divine nectar.

Despite the repeated mention of singing, Busenello organizes his text in three discrete speeches and casts them in straightforward versi sciolti, the standard poetry for speech, with no specific indications to the composer for lyric expansion or duetting. First, Nerone reports the death of Seneca, invites Lucano to sing with him, and supplies the subject: Poppea’s beauty and allure. Second, Lucano echoes Nerone’s praise of Poppea’s beauty. And third, Nerone elaborates on this idea. After lauding Poppea’s face, he then—involving a familiar trope on Poppea explored by Pallavicino in the passage cited above—comments on the danger of Poppea’s mouth, which both pleasures and kills the soul (see Ex. 2).

This is the most shocking scene of the entire opera. The finality of the philosopher’s death is acknowledged by a celebration of sensuality manifest in the act of singing. Yet, while Busenello’s text is suggestive, it is Monteverdi who exploits the latent eroticism in the dialogue between Lucano and
Example 2  Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, act 2, scene 5, mm. 1–33 (fols. 62r–63r)

Nerone

Lucano

**Tiam Lucano, cantiam, cantiam, cantiam,**

**Or che Seneca morto, Cantiam, can-tiam, can-tiam,**

**Can-tiam, can-tiam, can-tiam,**

**Can-tiam Lu-cano Amoro-se can- zo-ni In lo-de d'un bel vi-so, Che di sua ma-no A-**
Example 2 continued

12

\[\text{mor nel cor, nel cor, nel cor, nel cor}\]

15

\[\text{m'ha in-ci so. Cantiam, cantiam,}\]

Lucano

\[\text{Cantiam, cantiam, signore,}\]

18

\[\text{can tia}\]

\[\text{can tia}\]

20

\[\text{-mo Di quel viso ridente, riden}\]

\[\text{-mo Di quel viso ridente, riden}\]

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Example 2 continued

22

\[ \text{Che spira glorie, glorie, ed influ-} \]

24

\[ \text{glo-} \]

26

\[ \text{glo-} \]

28

\[ \text{glo-} \]
Nerone, altering the text (as he does so often in this and other works) almost beyond recognition. In Monteverdi’s recomposition of Busenello’s libretto, Lucano must bear the responsibility for the most salacious elements of the scene; he is transformed by the composer from a perfect courtier—a flattering yes-man who jovially mimics imperial heterosexual desire—into a veritable source of erotic stimuli. From the outset, Monteverdi contrives for Nerone and Lucano to share far more than their pleasure in Poppea; they also trade off much of the text that Busenello had assigned individually. The imperative “cantiamo,” with which each speech begins, is transformed into a sort of refrain around which the entire passage is organized and given literal representation in the form of the duet between the two young men. Although Nerone is the first to sing, it is Lucano who more often than not leads the emperor, even supplying the burst of coloratura illustrating the word “cantiamo” that Nerone eagerly adapts in his solo exaltation of Poppea’s charms. In mea-

92. See, for example, Rosand, “Iro and the Interpretation,” 141–64. Notably, all of the surviving librettos feature this same distribution of the Nerone-Lucano speeches, except for the aforementioned Udine libretto, which follows the organization in the score.
sure 16, Lucano joins in, and singing their way through Lucano’s entire text as well as the first three lines of Nerone’s second speech, the two companions imitate each other closely, echoing cadences at the fifth, coming together for genuine parallel duetting, matching each other’s increasing intensity with athletic vigor, and acknowledging the twin pleasures of song and sexuality.

With the cadence at measure 73 (see Ex. 3), the boyish enthusiasm and unqualified praise of Poppea come to an abrupt halt, as do all vestiges of conventional virtuosic display. Always the instigator, Lucano establishes a new, slower pace and deftly aims Nerone’s attention at the image of Poppea’s mouth. Mesmerized, the young emperor is aroused almost to the point of speechlessness, as he repeats the word “bocca” hypnotically over a descending tetrachord between C and G (mm. 78–81). Thus stranded in midphrase, Nerone is left in agonies of anticipated pleasure, as Lucano not only takes over the entire speech originally designated for Nerone, but also commandeers the tetrachord, compelling it to move between G and D, the dominant (mm. 81–84). Here, the insistent motion of the tetrachord, with its inherent lack of resolution, surely serves as a musical equivalent for erotic stimulation.93 Lucano encourages Nerone in the pursuit of pleasure, alerting him to the dangers of the female mouth, all the while demonstrating his considerable rhetorical skill as he progresses from largely syllabic singing to increasingly extravagant and florid vocalism. Throughout this passage (mm. 81–122), Nerone is completely in Lucano’s power, still frozen, punctuating each repetition of the tetrachord with a high-pitched, syncopated moan on d’ and the cry “ahi destino” that ascends stepwise to g’ before resolving down stepwise on f# to coincide with the arrival of the bass on D (mm. 92, 100, 112, 122). The destiny to which Nerone refers is surely not only that determined by history or the will of the gods. Lucano’s acceleration to quarter notes and final ascent to the high g’ (mm. 113–15) seem to propel Nerone to still greater excitement: for these final two statements of the tetrachord (mm. 113–22), Nerone’s cries occur with greater regularity, marking the tetrachord’s midpoint as well as its descent (mm. 114, 118). As Lucano reaches the goal of the speech—the inebriating power of the “divine nectar”—he ceases abruptly in the midst of the penultimate note of the tetrachord, an E now expanded to fill three measures (mm. 119–21). Thus stimulated by Lucano, Nerone is left to finish by

93. On Monteverdi’s use of the minor descending tetrachord for laments. Ellen Rosand, “The Descending Tetrachord: Emblem of Lament,” Musical Quarterly 65 (1979): 346–58. Rosand observes the ways in which “frustration of expectation” and the resulting “heightening of tension” served Monteverdi and others so well in the crafting of laments (p. 349); this was no doubt equally suitable for the representation of sexual arousal, perhaps another form of lamentation. See also Reinhard Müller, “Basso ostinato und die ‘imitazione del Parlare’ in Monteverdi’s Incoronazione di Poppea,” Archiv für Musikwissenschaft 40 (1983), 17–18. Müller argues that the ostinato serves as a “rhythmically neutral basis” over which Monteverdi can then create speech appropriate for drunken characters. This interpretation, however, takes no account of the highly controlled and calculated manner in which Lucano directs Nerone toward the climax.
Example 3  Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, act 2, scene 5, mm. 66–122 (fols. 64r–65r)

Nerone

Lucano

66

68

70

72

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Example 3 continued

78

boc- ca, boc- ca boc- ca boc- ca

boc- ca, boc- ca, che

83

Ahi

se ra- gio- na se ra- gio- na o ri

88

Ahi Ahi ahi des- tin
de, Con in- vi- si- bil ar- me pun- ge, e- all’ al-

94

Ahi

ma Do- na fe- li- ci- tà men-
Example 3 continued

Ahi destino

tre lucecide. Bocca bocca, che semimi

Ahi

porge Lascievigian

Ahi
dodil

Ahi destino
tenero tenero rubino M'i
himself, and with one final drawn-out series of cries—“ahi, ahi, ahi destino,” gasping and pulsating on the upper G—he finally arrives at the cadence. 94

This is no ordinary treatment of a ground bass. Monteverdi’s unexpected prolongation of the dominant for the penultimate note of the tetrachord supporting Nerone’s feverish, syncopated cries creates an unmistakable effect: anticipating modern musical procedures, Monteverdi has provided Nerone and Lucano with the musical representation of a sexual climax. Moreover, this is

94. Eric Chafe calls attention to the peculiarity of this passage, noting that this scene is “in my opinion the most erotic composition in Monteverdi’s oeuvre.” He also observes that Lucano’s sudden turn to D minor in the subsequent passage (rather than a return to G major) has the effect of “cooling” Nerone’s passion (Monteverdi’s Tonal Language, 304–5). Indeed, by this point Nerone seems to have no need for further stimulation.
the only instance in the opera where a systematic intensification of tension is thus followed by an ecstatic release. The love duets between Nerone and Poppea or Damigella and Valetto, laden as they are with remembered or anticipated erotic pleasure, feature no such gradual buildup to a point of arrival suggestive of actual sexual gratification. Monteverdi has marked the death of Seneca with a unique demonstration of male intimacy, in which he celebrates the sensual in a homosocial—if not blatantly homoerotic—world while simultaneously providing subtle warnings about the danger of female sexuality.

For members of the Accademia degli Incogniti, already familiar with such eroticized classics as Pona’s *Messalina*, this scene would have been a provocative improvisation on various strands of the historical tradition. The treatment of Nero is particularly justified by the sources, allowing Monteverdi and Busenello to demonstrate their sensitivity to the problems of operatic verisimilitude and at the same time to thumb their noses at Tacitus’s own moral code. Nero, who sings so beautifully in his duet with Lucan, was himself a singer, a fact that won him little praise from Tacitus or other contemporary chroniclers. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius all make frequent mention of Nero’s patronage of and participation in literary, artistic, and musical events, but they link these endeavors to sexual depravities and inattention to empire. Suetonius, who includes Nero’s musical studies under the category of “follies and crimes,” provides the most detail about his training and obsession with singing: the enemas and emetics that he used to keep his weight down, his relatively weak voice, and the various roles—both male and female—that he undertook in his own often interminable theatrical productions:

Music formed part of his childhood curriculum, and he early developed a taste for it. Soon after his accession, he summoned Terpnus, the greatest lyre-player of the day, to sing to him when dinner had ended, for several nights in succession, until very late. Then, little by little, he began to study and practice himself, and conscientiously undertook all the usual exercises for strengthening and developing the voice. . . . His first stage appearance was at Neapolis where, disregarding an earthquake which shook the theater, he sang his piece through to the end.95

In Dio Cassius’s description of Nero’s presumably undistinguished vocal performances, the emperor is cheered by both Burrus and Seneca, who stood beside him, prompting him and “waving their arms and togas at every utterance of his and leading others to do the same.”96

Tacitus also associates Nero’s musical interests with the “wildest improprieties,” many of which he had at least controlled while his mother, Agrippina, was alive. He condemns the “effeminate gestures and songs,” the presence of prominent women in “indecent parts,” and the construction of taverns and

96. Dio, *Roman History*, 61.20.3.
places of assignation that went hand in hand with theater, where even good people were unable to behave with modesty. Tacitus deplored all of Nero’s nonimperial pastimes, including chariot racing as well as playing the lyre and singing. These activities also had an unsavory influence on the imperial troops and were associated by Tacitus with Nero’s tendency to surround himself with admiring young men:

Here every form of immorality competed for attention, and no chastity, modesty, or vestige of decency could survive. The climax was the emperor’s stage debut. Meticulously tuning his lyre, he struck practice notes to the trainers beside him. A battalion attended with its officers. . . . Now, too, was formed the corps of Roman knights known as the Augustiani. These powerful young men, impudent by nature or ambition, maintained a din of applause day and night, showering divine epithets on Nero’s beauty and voice.

Moreover, Nero’s singing was, for Tacitus, the natural conduit for unnatural sexual acts:

At nightfall the woods and houses nearby echoed with singing and blazed with lights. Nero was already corrupted by every lust, natural and unnatural. But he now refuted any surmises that no further degradation was possible for him. For a few days later he went through a formal wedding ceremony with one of the perverted gang [the Augustiani] called Pythagoras. The emperor, in the presence of witnesses, put on the bridal veil. Dowry, marriage bed, wedding torches, all were there. Indeed everything was public which even in a natural union is veiled by night.

Tacitus’s outrage at Nero’s participation in such activities could not be more evident. The art of singing, demonstrated so vividly in the duet with Lucano, was associated with the practice of sodomy, a historical detail that certainly would not have escaped Busenello and his colleagues as they experienced Monteverdi’s realization of this scene. Following so directly on the heels of Seneca’s death, the implications of the Nerone-Lucano duet—from a strict “Tacitist” point of view—seem relatively straightforward. With the elimination of Seneca, all restraints upon Nerone appear to have been removed. Reason yields to passion, which leads to the repudiation and murder of Ottavia and the coronation of Poppea; Nerone’s duet with Lucano merely hints at the numerous other imperial debaucheries of which Tacitus so strongly disapproved. The improper behavior of the two young men, their sheer delight in singing, and their embrace of hedonism reflect their wholesale repudiation of Stoic restraint.

Yet it is precisely this link between song and eroticism that demonstrates the utter incompatibility of such moralizing with Incogniti philosophies and Venice’s self-image as a sanctuary of erotic delights. Are we to believe that

97. Tacitus, Annals, 14.15.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid., 15.37.
both composer and librettist, emulating Tacitus’s moral stance and preaching some Venetian variety of Stoicism, wished so vehemently to condemn Nerone for moral laxity that they would also condemn the art of singing with which that sensuality was associated? This scene, so often interpreted and staged as a bit of naughty frat-house horseplay, commemorates not only Seneca’s death but—more important—the moment in which Nerone’s heterosexual desire for Poppea is most graphically fulfilled, notably in the context of a homosocial bond. It is the unmatched eroticism of Monteverdi’s music that magically transforms a moment of lyric reflection between two courtiers into an almost perfect musical realization of the sensualist desires, patriarchal politics, and misogynic warnings repeatedly invoked in the writings of the Accademia degli Incogniti. As in the seduction of the young Alcibiade, the ear proves to be the most direct route to the pleasures of the flesh.

Nero and his erotic pastimes, however, are but one factor in this unseemly equation. The audience of L’incoronazione di Poppea would also have known the complex historical significance of Nero’s partner in vice, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, who holds within his identity and reputation the final clues as to the full range of Venetian ideals evoked in this operatic distortion of Tacitist history. Born in Cordoba, Spain in A.D. 39, Lucan was brought to Rome at an early age. Known as a brilliant student, he was in a particularly advantageous position when his uncle Seneca was called back from exile by Agrippina the Younger to be tutor to her son Nero. Given the proximity in age of the two boys, it was only natural that they would be thrown together, with Lucan benefiting from Seneca’s prominent position at court. While precise details of their relationship are unknown, it is evident that Lucan held Nero’s favor and was likely his close friend throughout the early sixties. An active participant in the social and literary circles that Nero cultivated in the early years of his reign, he sang the emperor’s praises publicly and was rewarded by political appointments unusual for a man so young, all the while producing poetry and literature at a rapid rate.

100. Nerone and Lucano’s shared desire for Poppea can also be viewed as a reflection of Nerone’s attraction to Ottone’s wife Poppea (a fundamental impetus for the plot), as stated by Busenello in the argomento. In both cases, the result is what Sedgwick would describe as an “erotic triangle”—i.e., a close bond between two men expressed through the desire of the same woman (Between Men, 21–27).

101. This points out a fundamental flaw in Fenlon and Miller’s logic. As Tim Carter notes perceptively, “Fenlon and Miller never quite come to terms with a major problem of ‘their reliance upon the musicality of the human voice to ascertain the true disposition of the soul’” that is deceived by false love (“Re-Reading Poppea,” 186). If, as Fenlon and Miller argue, it is only “song that cannot mislead” (p. 40)—a point surprisingly compatible with aspects of Antonio Rocco’s views—then one cannot ignore the explicit endorsement of eroticism (and rejection of Stoicism) manifest in Monteverdi’s setting of the duet between Nerone and Lucano.

There are, nonetheless, several unsettling undercurrents to this idyllic vision of male bonding that highlight the political implications of Lucan’s presence in this highly sensual scene. First, the audience would have recognized that Lucan’s intimacy with Nero was destined to be short-lived: he fell out of Nero’s favor in the year A.D. 64, was banned from publishing his own works or speaking in public, and finally, like his uncle, was forced to commit suicide in the aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy in which he likely played a primary role. Second, the use of Lucan in this scene with Nero is a striking distortion of Tacitus. Though Tacitus himself was clearly no fan of Lucan’s, expressing little respect for the young man’s talent or courage, he presents Lucan only as Nero’s enemy, never linking him with any decadent activities. With less violence to history, Busenello could have chosen or invented any number of characters to join Nero in debauchery and rejoice in Seneca’s death. In fact, his addition of Petronius and Tigellinus to the second part of this scene in the 1656 edition of the libretto was closer to Tacitus’s version of the story. Petronius, in particular, was a more likely candidate for Nero’s partner in sensual excess.

This, however, was no casual historical miscalculation. For unlike Seneca, the eternal monarchist and stand-in for Agrippina in this opera, Lucan was the arch republican and a declared enemy of absolutism, whose politics were intrinsically linked to his poetry, and who, as a result, was to suffer the harshest sort of repression. Lucan’s most famous surviving work, Pharsalia (an epic poem on Caesar’s defeat of Pompey at Pharsalus), depicts the “death of the Roman Republic.” It is a document that has been described as “subversive,” written from the standpoint of an “emotional Republican” whose increasingly anti-imperialist tone certainly cost Lucan his freedom of speech and perhaps his life as well. Indeed, the difference in the politics of Lucan and Seneca would scarcely have been lost on the Venetians. Seneca, as J. P. Sullivan notes, wielded his influence within established institutions and believed (at least theoretically) that imperial power could be tempered by “mercy, compassion, and moderation.” Lucan, however, suffering under Nero’s persecutions, “projected in the Pharsalia a return to the oligarchic role of the upper

104. Ahl, *Lucan*, 37–38; on Nero’s ban of Lucan, see also pp. 333–53. Tacitus tells us, for example, that Lucan willingly betrayed his mother along with the other co-conspirators, yet he also admits with grudging admiration that in his final moments Lucan recited poetry for posterity (*Annals*, 15.56–57 and 15.70.1).
105. Tigellinus, one of the commanders of the guard, rose to prominence after the death of his predecessor, Burrus, in A.D. 62 and is condemned by Tacitus for leading Nero into further evil (*Annals*, 14.57). Petronius, who is credited with the authorship of the earliest surviving Latin novel, Satyricon, is noted by Tacitus for hedonism and, in particular, his role in Nero’s circle of intimates as the “Arbiter of Taste,” instructing Nero on all that was smart and elegant, and achieving fame through laziness rather than energy. Petronius was eventually denounced by a jealous Tigellinus (*Annals*, 16.18–19).
classes.”\textsuperscript{107} Identifying himself with the senatorial class and opposed to the principate, Lucan was the one figure in this opera whose political stance was most compatible with Venetian sensibilities.

For Monteverdi and Busenello’s contemporaries, Lucan, whose name was synonymous with the triumph of republic over empire, invoked far more unambiguously patriotic sentiments than Tacitus or Seneca.\textsuperscript{108} He also appealed to writers in the Accademia degli Incogniti; a contemporary translation of Lucan’s \textit{Pharsalia} by Alberto Campani (1640) is even dedicated to the founder of the Incogniti, Giovanni Francesco Loredano. Yet members of the Accademia degli Incogniti do not repeatedly subject Lucan’s writings to travesty and exaggeration, as they did the works of Tacitus. Campani’s translation of \textit{Pharsalia} is consecrated to the Republic of Venice, with effusive praise for her perpetual peace, tranquillity, and invincibility.\textsuperscript{109} Campani emphasizes Lucan’s importance as a political force in Nero’s court and describes him as the ideal instructor for all those committed to the preservation of the Venetian Republic. For Venetian readers who may have known the details of Lucan’s life only through Tacitus’s limited and unenthusiastic discussion, Campani includes a brief biographical sketch of the poet based on Suetonius’s \textit{Life of Lucan}, Statius’s \textit{Silvae}, and Vacca’s \textit{Life of Lucan}, describing Nero’s jealousy of Lucan and the young poet’s superiority to the emperor both as orator and as poet.\textsuperscript{110} Indeed, if Campani was fortunate enough actually to attend a per-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[107.] Ibid., 119. In \textit{Dissidence and Literature under Nero}, Vasily Rudich presents an elegant formulation of the differences between Seneca and Lucan: Seneca is the “immoral moralist” (chap. 2), Lucan the “moral immoralist” (chap. 3).
\item[108.] Latin editions of Lucan’s \textit{Pharsalia} were published in Venice beginning in the late fifteenth century, including \textit{Anni Lucani Bellorum civilium scriptoris accuratissimi Pharsalia autea temporum iniuria difficilis} (1511) and \textit{Anni Lucani Bellorum civilium scriptoris accuratissimi Pharsalia: Antea temporum iniuria difficilis et mendoza, nouissime autem expolita} (1520). Italian translations appear in Venice beginning with Alberto Campani’s \textit{Farsaglia poema heroico di Lucano Di M. Anneo Lucano} (Venice: Sarzina, 1640). Campani’s edition was followed in 1668 by Paolo Abriani’s \textit{La guerra civile, overo Farsaglia di M. Anneo Lucano} (Venice: Hertz, 1668).
\item[109.] The title page to Campani’s edition reads as follows: “FARSAGLIA / Poema Heroico / DI M. ANNEO LUCANO / di Corduba / Divisa in Libri Dieci. / Trasportata in Lingua Toscana / in verso sciolto / DA ALBERTO CAMPANI / Fiorentino Let. Pub. di Padova / Con la Vita di esso Lucano raccolta da diversi, / e con un breve Discorso dell’Eccellenza / sua comparato à Virgilio, e di / questo suo Poema. / All’Illustrissimo, Sig. il Signor / FRANCESCO LOREDANO / Nobile Veneto. [device] IN VENETIA, M DC XL. / [rule] Presso il Sarzina / Con licenza de’ Superiori, e Privilegi.” Campani includes the following consecration to Venice: “L’AUTORE / APPENDE, E CONSCACRA DIVOTO, / QUESTA SUA OPERA, / AL TEMPIO DELLA PERPETUA CONCORDIA, / E TRANQUILLA ETERNITÀ, / DELLA REPUBLICA VENETA; / INVITTISSIMA, POTENTISSIMA, SERENISSIMA. / PER SEGNO / DI DOVUTA SERVITU; / PER TESTIMONIO / DI RIVERENTE OSSERVANZA; / E PER APPLAUSO, DI PERPETUA FELICITÀ.” The edition includes numerous poems of praise for Campani by several Incogniti members, including Giulio Strozzi.
\item[110.] Campani tells us, for example, that it was Lucan’s recitation of his poem \textit{Orpheus} that incited Nero’s jealousy: On the sources for Lucan’s biography and the controversies concerning the dating of Vacca’s biography, see Ahl, \textit{Lucan}, 333–53. As Ahl notes, Tacitus scarcely makes any
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
formance of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, he likely would not have been surprised by Lucan’s virtuosity in the opera, for he considered Lucan to be an exemplary rhetorician, his “splendid, sumptuous, and vehement” style a complement to the “rich magnificence” of Virgil. For Campani, Lucan was, as both poet and orator, a “maestro di eloquenza” whose memorable style was instructive for all those involved in Venetian government:

Wherefore one can easily deduce that Lucan certainly has the conceits, the amplifications, and the affects of Orators, thus one can call him an Orator; but he has expressed them in verse, in phrases, and with episodes and poetic digressions; thus one can call him Poet. And thus for Senators, Lucan can be the master of eloquence with this advantage: that his maxims, models, and figures of speech can be all the better impressed upon the memory, because the mind retains poetry much more easily than prose. . . . For, because of the useful things that senators can learn from Lucan, he certainly, in my opinion, deserves to be called the Senatorial Poet.\(^\text{111}\)

Campani went on to define unequivocally Lucan’s importance as a political advisor for Venice and Venetians. In his translator’s note to the reader, Campani explains that he was driven to publish an Italian edition of Lucan because “of the particular usefulness that the intelligence of Lucan can bring to free republics,” among which Venice herself was foremost.

Lucan’s intention in this poem . . . is to restrain the dignitaries of the city from the civil war with the example of Caesar and Pompey which so agitated the senate and the Roman people with discord and fury that they destroyed the foundations of that Republic. And one could say that this work [*Pharsalia*] flows from that part of philosophy called politics, where it acts almost as a perpetual invective against the desire to dominate that gives birth to sacrileges, assassinations, rapes, fires, destruction, and other innumerable evils.\(^\text{112}\)

Busenello evidently admired Lucan for his republican views, for he was later to use Lucan’s *Pharsalia* as the primary source for his most blatantly
anti-imperialist libretto, *La prosperità infelice di Giulio Cesare dittatore.* The reference to Caesar as dictator reveals the opera’s political program: a staunch support of republicanism on the eve of the birth of empire, in which Pompey is the worthy hero and Caesar’s killer, Brutus, is elevated to the heavens for ridding Rome of her dictator. The connection between republican nostalgia and Venetian patriotism is made explicit in the epilogue, in which Libertà (Liberty) and Nettuno (Neptune) praise the invincible and unconquerable Venice.

Thus, in *L’incoronazione di Poppea,* Lucano’s republicanism stands for Venice’s own, a fact that lends his voice an oratorical advantage granted no other character in the opera. Lucano is not only an accomplished singer and Nerone’s tutor on the pleasures and dangers of the female mouth (surpassing Seneca’s pedantry and Poppea’s considerable skill at both virtuosic singing and sexual stimulation); he also carries his history with him: that of a dissenting political voice silenced by a tyrant, a covert champion of republican *libertas* in the midst of a corrupt empire. His personal and public history thus provide a strident counterpoint to Tacitus himself. With the duet of Nerone and Lucano, the sexual and the political briefly merge in a single orgiastic encounter and are linked unforgettably by Monteverdi to the art of singing. We should not be surprised that only Seneca’s death permits this complete sensual and artistic fulfillment. As even the most Stoic commentators must concede, the pleasurable sensations generated in the ear by Lucano’s shameless arousal of Nerone were intended for the listener’s enjoyment, regardless of Seneca’s ineffective interference or the apparent lack of an appropriate moral frame. That Nerone achieves a climax unmatched elsewhere in the opera certainly more than hints at the Incogniti interest in the homoerotic as an alternative to the dangers of the female mouth. Indeed, the complete absence of a woman from the scene seems to have allowed a certain purity of expression—a brief respite from the consequences of female power. As in *Alcibiade fanciullo a scola,* this is the most plausible solution to the Venetian dilemma: both desire and song without the danger of the female voice or body. Yet Lucano’s appearance in this scene reminds us that the Venetians still regarded Tacitus as a political advisor, and it is in this curious mesh of politics and sexuality that we see the consequences of history’s first encounter with opera. In the context of this operatic discourse on woman and empire, Nerone and Lucano construct, albeit only momentarily, an alternative society, not unlike the Incogniti themselves: a male republic, devoted to artistry and sensual pleasure, dedicated to freedom of expression and patriotic service, and committed to the exclusion of women—however desirable or dangerous.

113. Busenello, *Delle hore ocios.* Giulio Cesare was probably written after Poppea, for the 1646 season at the Teatro Grimani, but it was not published until 1656, when Busenello brought it out in *Delle hore ocios.* It is unlikely that it was performed, as the Venetian theaters were closed in 1646. See Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice,* 136n.

Ellen Rosand has wisely suggested that *Poppea* can be understood as a "cautionary tale."\textsuperscript{115} The happy ending, the celebration of the coronation of Poppea, and the lack of punishment for vice or reward for virtue impart moral lessons, properly understood only against the backdrop of history. Yet, which history is it to be? The version retold in this opera is not properly Tacitus, nor is it in any strict sense a "Tacitist text." Rather, it is Tacitus "incognito." An Incogniti reconstruction of the final episode in a familiar and oft-told historical narrative in Incogniti circles, it describes two generations of corruption and political expediency in which the absolutism so anathema to the Venetians was linked inextricably to the power and sexuality of such women as Messalina, Agrippina, and Poppaea, and through which the Republic, by contrast, was identified and celebrated as a masculine entity. Indeed, it is perhaps fitting that the dangers of empire found expression through one of the Republic's most visible demonstrations of its many freedoms: opera. Justus Lipsius, it turns out, was prophetic in describing Tacitus as the ideal instructor for those involved in state rule, though he could scarcely have anticipated all the ways in which Venetian mythology would have sought to use him: to give instruction on the appropriate virtues for civic-minded men, to reaffirm the political necessity of the suppression of women in public life, to celebrate man's right to artistic and sensual fulfillment, and to proclaim to the entire world that Venice's political wisdom and erotic enticements surpassed all, even the glory that was ancient Rome.

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Tacitus Incognito 95


Abstract

This essay considers opera’s use of a particular history in seventeenth-century Venice: Cornelius Tacitus’s Annals of the Roman Empire as transformed in Monteverdi’s and Busenello’s L’incoronazione di Poppea. In contrast with a recent hypothesis linking Tacitus, Poppea, and the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti with Neostoicism, this essay argues that the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti used Tacitus’s history of the Julio-Claudians as part of a highly specialized republican discourse on Venetian political superiority and sensual pleasures. After considering Incogniti philosophies and interest in the erotic in the context of Venetian political ideals and the influence of Tacitus on political and moral thought in early modern Europe, this essay places L’incoronazione di Poppea in the context of several other treatments of Tacitus produced during the mid-seventeenth century by Busenello’s colleagues in the Accademia degli Incogniti, in which empire and the liabilities of female power are contrasted implicitly with Venice’s male oligarchy. The Venetian rejection of Stoic philosophy and fascination with the erotic and the patriotic play themselves out in one of the opera’s most peculiar distortions of the historical record—the scene following the death of Seneca in

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which the philosopher’s nephew, the poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, known in Venice for his republican ideals, joins the emperor Nero in song to celebrate his uncle’s death and Poppea’s charms. As transformed by Monteverdi’s sexually explicit music, Lucan’s endorsement of artistic self-expression, sensual freedom, and republican ideals provides a critical counterpoint to Senecan support of the principate and moral restraint—a view that was far more compatible with Venetian concerns at midcentury.