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*Venezia in Egitto: Egyptomania and Exoticism
in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Opera*

This place is usually well stored with diversity of company, led hither either upon pleasure or business. The noble Venetians have a peculiar walk to themselves; in other parts, persons of meaner quality, strangers and merchants, from several parts of the world, have theirs, as Turks, Persians, Sclavonians, Grecians, and Jews; *in fine*, people of so many different languages and habits, that it is a just surprise to see so much of the world in so narrow a place¹.

Operatic representations of the East had become commonplace in Venetian opera by the middle of the seventeenth century. The Greek and Roman myths – in particular the tales of Ovid – that inspired the first librettists were supplanted by other classical authors such as Homer, Virgil, Tacitus, as well as Plutarch, Herodotus, Pliny, and others who recounted the wonders of the Eastern world. That the Venetians would have adopted these exotic climes as backdrops for their operas is by no means surprising. Venice, after all, was an important trade center, one of the more cosmopolitan cities on the Italian peninsula, in which signs of Eastern visitors could be seen both on and off the stage. Some of those encounters were part of the peaceful rhythm of Venetian life, as suggested by observations of travelers such as Sir John Reresby. At the same time, the battle for supremacy between East and West – particularly between the Turks and Venetians in the Mediterranean – inspired considerable anxiety, which was not without its influence on opera from both cultural and economic perspectives².

In seventeenth-century Venetian opera, exoticism and fascination with the East found expression not only in the central plots of the operas, but also – as Irene Alm has shown – in the numerous *balli* – in which a variety of

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¹ JOHN BERESBY, *The Memoirs and Travels of Sir John Reresby Bart* [1634-1689], London, printed for Edward Jeffery, Pall Mall, and J. Rodwell, 1813, p. 67.

² ELLEN ROSAND, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 143-151; BETH GLIXON-JONATHAN GLIXON, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and his World in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Eastern figures – Turks, Moors, Armenians, Egyptians Chinese, etc – danced on the stage³. That the *balli* often had only a marginal connection to the central plots is suggestive: the dancers were an exotic presence on the fringe of the primary events, a constant reminder of the difference and distance that lurked just outside the borders of the evening’s entertainment – stretching beyond the boundaries of the Venetian Republic.

This essay is concerned with one particular aspect of opera’s engagement with the Eastern world: the representation of ancient Egypt on the Venice stage. In the early modern period, Egyptian art, architecture, religion, and philosophy had a unique impact on European culture that was to become particularly strong in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as new archaeological discoveries heightened interest in the mysteries of the land of the pyramids⁴. When considered from the vantage part of the eighteenth-century – in particular such works as Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* – it seems almost self-evident that the philosophies, relics, and symbolism of Egypt inspired a special way of thinking about the secrets of the Universe – a unique perspective that was somehow distinct from generic conceptions of the “mysterious East”. My preliminary investigation of the roots of this phenomenon in the operas of seventeenth-century Venice considers the following questions. How might we understand the different varieties of exoticism explored in seicento operas – particularly for those librettos based on ancient sources with distinctive literary traditions? To what extent did the knowledge about and fascination with Egypt that was apparent in the early modern period impact opera, and if so, did it manifest itself in a manner that was distinct from mere generic orientalism? Is there evidence that some sort of operatic “Egyptomania” existed in seventeenth-century opera? First, I will provide a brief overview of the early modern reception of Egypt, and then consider a group of mid-Seicento operas that grapple with the Egyptian heritage in differing ways.

Those interested in exploring the wonders of Egypt in the early modern period had a variety of sources from which to choose. Italians had cer-

³ IRENE ALM, *Dances from the Four Corners of the Earth: Exoticism in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Opera*, in IRENE ALM-ALYSON McLAMORE - COLLEEN REARDON (a cura di), *Musica Franca: Essays in Honor of Frank D’Accone*, Stuyvesant, New York, Pendragon Press, pp. 233-257.

⁴ JEAN MARCEL HUMBERT, MICHAEL PANTAZZI, CHRISTIANE ZIEGLER (a cura di), *Egyptomania: L’Égypte dan l’art occidental, 1750-1950*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1984; for reproductions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century operatic sets inspired by Egypt, see pp. 393-447. See also JAMES STEVENS CURL, *The Egyptian Revival*, London and Boston, George Allan and Unwin, 1982.

tainly inherited their Roman ancestors' obsession with Egyptian culture⁵. Particularly during the early empire, Romans developed a fetishistic interest in the Egyptian world, including its funeral rites, mummification, monuments, and architectural wonders. Egyptian religious practices proved to be particularly fascinating, and could be melded with Roman beliefs and traditions. The cults of Isis, which first came to Rome as early as the 4th century B.C., became quite fashionable during the reign of Augustus, and continued to be recognized by the Empire well into the fourth century A.D.⁶ The Cleopatra episode, of course, would ultimately prove to be of primary importance in the shaping of the Roman Empire's attitude towards Egypt and the East, the influence of which can be seen in no less a text than Virgil's *Aeneid*⁷. Germanicus had died after a trip to Egypt, and the Emperor Caligula may well have gained some of his interest in Egypt from his father. Seneca, who had spent time on the Nile, brought back knowledge of his Egyptian travels to the highest circles of power in Rome including, of course, his charge the Emperor Nero, who subsequently included feasts to Isis in the Roman calendar⁸. Egypt continued to be a focus for later Roman emperors. Hadrian, for example, became enamored with Egypt on his own travels. His fascination with the Nile can be traced to the death of his favorite Antinous, who presumably drowned in that legendary river, and the famous villa in Tivoli also reflected his fascination with Egyptian art and architecture⁹. Several sphinxes and a fragment of an Egyptian statue were also found in Diocletian's villa at Split (now Croatia), thus suggesting that Diocletian chose to enjoy his sojourns away from Rome against an Egyptian setting¹⁰.

⁵ On the relationship between Rome and Egypt in the Imperial period, see M.J. VERSLUYS, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes And The Roman Views Of Egypt*, Boston and Leiden, Brill, 2002, pp. 3-22.

⁶ On the cults of Isis see ANNE ROUILLET, *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments of Imperial Rome*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, pp. 1-6. Book 11 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, written under the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 A.D.) provides substantial evidence about the cult of Isis in the first century A.D. See CARL SCHLAM, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, pp. 113-125; M.J. VERSLUYS, *Aegyptiaca Romana* cit., pp. 10-11.

⁷ M. PUTNAM, *Virgil's Aeneid: Interpretation and Influence*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1995; PHILIP R. HARDIE, *Virgil's "Aeneid": Cosmos and Imperium*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁸ PIA CESARETTI, *Nerone e l'Egitto. Messaggio politico e continuità culturale*, Bologna, CLUEB, 1989.

⁹ M. J. VERSLUYS, *Aegyptiaca Romana* cit., pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ A. ROUILLET, *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments* cit., p. 5.

The Roman cityscape, of course, was profoundly changed by the Egyptian monuments, in particular the many obelisks that mark the various sectors of the city, and the pyramid of Caius Cestius that was erected in Rome during the first century B.C. Indeed, the presence of Egyptian elements in architecture and sculpture in the Imperial city was so strong that it is often difficult to know if a picture of a pyramid or obelisk was intended to invoke Egypt or was part of the generic design vocabulary that had been assimilated by Rome¹¹. This adds an additional layer of complication to the analysis of surviving drawings for operatic stage designs that might contain one or another sign of Egyptian influence, but do not refer to Egypt in particular.

In the Renaissance, interest in the Egyptians was heightened by humanistic inquiries¹². By the third quarter of the fifteenth century, Italian readers had available to them a number of sources on Egypt, many of which would be cited by seventeenth-century librettists: editions of Pliny's *Historia naturalis* had been printed by 1469 and Herodotus *Histories* – a source for many opera plots – was published in a Latin translation in 1474. The same year saw the publication of Ammianus Marcellinus' *History*, which contained a discussion of Roman obelisks. The works of Josephus had also been translated during this time, as had had Strabo's *Geography* and Diodorus Siculus's *Biblioteca*, all of which discussed Egypt's physical and cultural features¹³. Apuleius's *Metamorphosis* and Plutarch's *Moralia* (with its section on Osiris and Isis) captivated readers with the mysteries of Egyptian religion. Egypt thus becomes regarded as a source of wisdom, fertility, mystery, and renewal that could be conflated with Greek mythology and (or) Christianity. This is apparent, for example in such works as Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published in Venice in 1499, which opens with the protagonist's allegorically suggestive dream of Egyptian pyramids and obelisks, complete with wood-block illustrations¹⁴.

¹¹ For a late sixteenth-century view of the obelisks, see MICHELE MERCATI, *De gli obelischi di Rome*, Rome, Domenico Basa, 1589.

¹² On Egypt on the Italian Renaissance, see BRIAN A. CURRAN, *Ancient Egypt and Egyptian Antiquities in Italian Renaissance Art and Culture*, PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1996; KARL H. DANNENFELDT, *Egypt and Egyptian Antiquities*, "Studies in the Renaissance", 6 (1959), pp. 7-27.

¹³ For more on the printing of these texts in the Renaissance, see K. H. DANNENFELDT, *Egypt and Egyptian Antiquities* cit., pp. 8-10.

¹⁴ FRANCESCO COLONNA, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, translated and edited by JOSCELYN GODWIN, London: Thames and Hudson, 2003. See also A. CURRAN, *Ancient Egypt* cit., pp. 281-321.

Vicenzo Cartari's widely read *Le imagini de dei de gli antiche* includes an extensive discussion of the goddess Iside (Isis)¹⁵.

The rediscovery of the writings of Hermes Trismegistus during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was also of profound importance. As Frances Yates has discussed, Giordano Bruno was deeply influenced by hermetic thought, and his linking of Egyptian theology with Christianity caused him no end of difficulties. Hermitic thinking also had an impact on Ficino's writings and became incorporated into Ficino's brand of Neoplatonism¹⁶. Hieroglyphs, too, were a source of great fascination, being regarded as powerful symbols and a key to the lost wisdom of the ancients. Piero Valeriano, Venetian humanist and author of the oft-reprinted *Hieroglyphica* (1556), introduced hieroglyphs to a broad audience, considering these enigmatic signs from a literary rather than archaeological perspective. *The Hieroglyphica* was an encyclopedic guide to the meaning of all sorts of signs and symbols, conflating Eastern and Western myths, and included discussions pyramids, obelisks, the sphinx, and the River Nile¹⁷. For example, Valeriano calls upon the myth of Prometheus and his unfortunate encounter with an eagle in his discussion of this noble bird as a symbol of the abundant and fast-flowing River Nile¹⁸.

The published reports from travelers provided first-hand information about Egypt. In the sixteenth-century, for example, Leo Africanus presented his description of Africa to Pope Leo X, who was himself intensely interested in things Egyptian; it was translated into Italian and incorporated into Gian Battista Ramusio's *Descrizione dell'Africa*, first published in 1550¹⁹. Africanus not only discusses present day Egypt, but also provides a vivid

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¹⁵ VINCENZO CARTARI, *Le imagini de i dei de gli antichi*, Venezia, Marc'Antonio Zaltieri, 1592, pp. 118-121.

¹⁶ FRANCIS A. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* I, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 1-6. The works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were actually written in the 2nd or 3rd century and were concerned with astrology and cult sciences. In the Renaissance, however, it was believed that ancient Egyptian priests had actually written these works.

¹⁷ PIERO VALERIANO, *Hieroglyphica, sive De sacris Aegyptiorum alliarumque gentium literis commentarii Joannii Pierii Valeriani Bolzanii Bellunensis*, Basel, 1516; ed. P. FRELON, Lyons, 1602; reprinted by Garland Press, New York and London, 1976. For a seventeenth-century Italian translation, see P. VALERIANO, *Ieroglifici ovvero Commentari delle occulte significationi de gli Egittij*, Venezia, Franceschi, 1602. On Valeriano, see also A. CURRAN, *Ancient Egypt* cit., pp. 482-489.

¹⁸ P. VALERIANO, *Ieroglifici* cit., p. 288. The story of Prometheus and the eagle is best known from Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*.

¹⁹ LEO AFRICANUS, *Descrizione dell'Africa*, in GIOVANNI BATTISTA RAMUSIO, *Primo volume delle navigationi et viaggi*, Rome, 1550, a cura di MARICA MILANESI, Torino, 1978, vol. 1.

descriptions of the surviving monuments. The Venetian Pellegrino Brucardo brought an artist with him on his travels to Egypt; the artist's drawings were subsequently published in Sebastiano Serlio's third book of architecture (Venice, 1584)²⁰. In the seventeenth-century, Pietro della Valle's *Viaggi* (1650) profoundly influenced one of the period's most influential Egyptologists, Athanasius Kircher, who not only exhibited Egyptian artifacts but also wrote about them extensively²¹. Artists, too, become preoccupied with Egyptian imagery. James Steven Curl notes the popularity of Egyptian elements ornaments in Roman and Florentine garden design, citing the engravings in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* as an inspiration for Bernini's design for the base of the obelisk in the garden of Santa Maria Minerva²². Charles Dempsey demonstrates the novel ways in which Nicholas Poussin's *Holy Family in Egypt* was inspired by details known only from recent archaeological investigations²³.

Although the major archaeological discoveries would come in the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries, artists, poets, and many who attended operatic performances in the seventeenth century would have some familiarity with and recognition of the most idiosyncratic elements of the Egyptian landscape – the sphinx, the pyramids, the obelisks – as well as the seductive image of the Nile river overflowing its banks, ripe with fertility and sexual promise²⁴. This high degree of preoccupation with Egypt thus becomes clearly manifest in numerous facets of Italian intellectual and artistic expression. How then might this Egyptian influence manifest itself in Venetian opera? We might, for example, look either to the philosophical interests of the producers, the plots themselves (particularly

²⁰ SEBASTIANO SERLIO, *Tutte le opera d'architettura et prospetiva di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese*, Venezia, 1616.

²¹ PIETRO DELLA VALLE, *In viaggio per l'Oriente: le mummie, Babilonia, Persepoli*, edizione dei testi e introduzioni di ANTONIO INVERNIZZI, Alessandria, Edizione dell'Orso, 2001; ATHANASIVS KIRCHER, *Ad Alexandrum VII. Obelisci aegyptiaci; nuper inter Isaci romani rudera effossi interpretatio hieroglyphica*, Roma, Varesii, 1666; see also, GIOVANNI CIPRIANI, *Gli obeliscchi egizi: Politica e cultura nella Roma barocco*, Firenze, Olschki, 1993.

²² J.S. CURL, *Egyptian Revival* cit., p. 67.

²³ CHARLES DEMPSEY, *Poussin and Egypt*, in "The Art Bulletin", 1945 (1963), pp. 109-119. These are cataloged in A. ROUILLET, *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monument* cit. On Egyptology in the seventeenth century, see also HELEN WHITEHOUSE, *Egyptology and Forger in the Seventeenth Century: The case of the Bodleian Shabti*, "Journal of the History of Collections", 1 (1989), pp. 187-195.

²⁴ M.J. VERSLUYS, *Aegyptiaca Romana* cit., provides a detailed discussion and catalog of Nilotic scenes and their significance.

those involving Egyptian history), and the extent to which the visual aspects of the production – the stage settings or costumes – invoked specifically Egyptian elements²⁵.

The members of the Accademia degli Incogniti, who penned many of Venice's first opera libretti, were apparently well aware of the philosophical and symbolic implications of Egyptian thought²⁶. As Nino Cannizzaro has shown, notions about Egypt played an essential role in the Academy's self-definition and iconography²⁷. The emblem of the Academy, in fact, features the Nile River itself as it divides into various tributaries before emptying into the Mediterranean²⁸. The importance of the Nile to the Academy is also apparent in a sonnet penned by Incogniti founder Giovanni Francesco Loredano. He compares the Academy to that fertile river, contrasting the Nile's dark, fierce and dangerous nature (one that "generates crocodiles" and has a "voice of thunder"), with the fairness of the Academy members, a "white multitude of swans", who speak with the voice of a lyre²⁹. The Nile River, with its unknowable source, thus represented secret knowledge to the members of the Academy, who themselves could be likened to the Nile's many tributaries. The emblem was an ideal symbol to accompany the Academy's motto "ignoto deo", which expressed perennial doubts about the possibility of attaining knowledge or truth and the power of language to express those truths³⁰.

Despite this apparent fascination with Egypt, Incogniti librettists wrote relatively few operas that focused on this country. Antiquity – both eastern and western – was usually invoked by the use of what would become conventional operatic sets – gardens, palaces, street scenes, often with ge-

²⁵ Libretti provide the most important source for information about sets. A preliminary survey of the surviving set designs show little evidence of elements that are specifically Egyptian. See FRANCESCO MILESI (a cura di), *Giacomo Torelli: L'invenzione scenica nell'Europa barocca*, Fano (Pesaro Urbino), Fondazione Cassa di risparmio di Fano, 2000; MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *Filippo Juvarra scenografo e architetto teatrale*, Torino, Edizioni d'arti Fratelli Pozzo, 1970.

²⁶ See MAURO CALCAGNO, *Signifying Nothing: On the Aesthetics of Pure Venice in Venetian Opera*, in "Journal of Musicology", 20 (2003), pp. 461-497.

²⁷ NINA CANNIZZARO, *The Nile, Nothingness and Knowledge: The Incogniti Impresa*, in LARS R. JONES - LOUISA C. MATTHEW (a cura di), *Coming About: A Festschrift for John Shearman*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 325-332.

²⁸ N. CANNIZZARO, *The Nile, Nothingness and Knowledge* cit., p. 325.

²⁹ The sonnet is translated into English and discussed in M. CALCAGNO, *Signifying Nothing* cit., p. 485.

³⁰ On the musical implications of these notions of nothingness, see M. CALCAGNO, *Signifying Nothing* cit.

neric ruins; but virtually no Venetian opera libretti from the late 1630s or 1640s specifically called for the use of the unambiguous signifiers of Egypt, such as pyramids, the sphinx, or the River Nile. For example, the preface to Giovanni Busenello's libretto *La prosperità infelice di Giulio Cesare dittatore* notes that the third Act is set in Egypt, although there are no specific references to the land of the pyramids in the libretto³¹. Giulio Strozzi's libretto *La finta savia* (1643) contains a dance for Egyptian women at the end of Act I ("Le donne egittie serve de' Coribanti formerano il ballo per la stessa allegrezza"), but this libretto focuses on a proto-Roman topic; the Egyptian dancers seem to have merely supplied a contrasting touch of Eastern exoticism³².

Giacinto Cicognini's libretto for *Oronthea* (1649), set first by Francesco Lucio and later by Antonio Cesti, actually features an Egyptian Queen in the title role³³. Once again, however, there is nothing in the libretto that specifically highlights Egyptian elements. The sets are entirely generic, such as *Marino Villagio*, *Giardino*, *Cortile regio*, with no references to Egyptian history as reported in the ancient sources. Other than the brief mention of Egypt in the prologue, the opera focuses on an entirely conventional topic: Queen Oronthea's resistance to love. The most exotic character, the stuttering, drunken Gelone, owes far more to the commedia dell'arte than to pseudo-Egyptian philosophers.

A somewhat different approach is taken in *Il Cesare Amante* (1651), a playful rendition of the love story between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra³⁴. This is a work that seems to delight in enigmas. Dario Varotari wrote the libretto, but the author's name in the published libretto is given as the anagram Ardio Rivaroto. We are told in the preface that the subject was suggested by none other than the Incognito Maiolino Bissaccioni³⁵. *Il Cesare Amante* is a notably self-conscious work, in which one of the major characters, Gilippo (who is eventually revealed as Caesar's son Marzio) is the court musician, who spends much of the opera actually singing.

³¹ GIOVANNI FRANCESCO BUSENELLO, *La prosperità infelice di Giulio Cesare dittatore*, Venezia, Giuliani, 1651. This opera was likely never performed.

³² GIULIO STROZZI, *La finta savia*, Venezia, Leni, e Vecceelio, 1643.

³³ GIACINTO ANDREA CICOGNINI, *Oronthea*, Venezia, Batti, 1649.

³⁴ IL / CESARE AMANTE / Drama per Musica / DI ARDIO RIVAROTA. / Accademico / fra' / DELFICI / Il Volonteroso. Da rappresentarsi nel Thea- / tro GRIMANO. / [device] / IN VENEZIA, M DC LI. / [RULE] / Per il Giuliani. / Si vende per Giacomo Batti Libraro / in Frezzaria. Con licenza de' Superiori, / e Privilegio.

³⁵ DARIO VAROTARI, *Il Cesare Amante* cit. Bissaccioni's name is mentioned in the letter to the reader, p. 9.

Il Cesare Amante is also the first Venetian opera to engage visual and intellectual notions about Egypt. The prologue features no less a character than the River Nile herself. Venetian audiences would have several opportunities to see the personification of the River Tiber on the operatic stage; this is the only Venetian opera to feature the Nile as an actual character⁵⁶. She appears on a mountain as a seductress, the stage illuminated by sixteen youths carrying torches. The Nile then sings with Bacchus, Ceres, satyrs, and the goddess Venus, and the scene culminates in a *brindisi*. It is difficult to know the extent of the Egyptianizing of the rest of the opera, since the settings are described with a frustrating lack of detail. The first scene of the opera is set in Alexandria, but no other specific details are given in the libretto. Given Bisaccioni's involvement in the work's genesis, however, we might wonder whether or not the prologue is a gesture towards the well-known use of the Nile in the Incogniti motto. With this ingenious prologue, Varotari creates an elegant marriage between Egypt and the mythology associated with the Nile and the conventional operatic representations of Arcadia, including Venus, Bacchus, and nymphs. Of note is the *ballo* that concludes the first act: "Ballo di fanciullo mori, sopra-giungono a volo cinque Aquile, che pur ballano". The references to the five eagles might also have been a subtle evocation of the Nile River, as suggested in Valeriano's discussion in the *Hieroglyphica*⁵⁷.

The river Nile plays a more prominent role in the next Egyptian opera: *Le fortune di Rodope e Damira* (1657) by Aurelio Aureli, set by Pietro Andrea Ziani and presented at the Teatro S. Apollinaire⁵⁸. The opera is notable, among other things, for the fact that the role of Rodope was sung by none other than Anna Renzi⁵⁹. Aureli, with his customarily careful, albeit playful use of ancient sources (he cites Polydorus, Strabo, Herodotus, and Virgil) bases his opera on the story of the Egyptian courtesan Nitocris, which, in some sources, has been conflated with the myth of Rhodopis. According to Herodotus (2.100), Nitocris sought to avenge the death of her brother, the King of Egypt. She built an underground chamber osten-

⁵⁶ For example, Badoaro's *Le nozze di Enea con Lavinia* (1642) includes the Tebro Fiume as a character.

⁵⁷ P. VALERIANO, *Ieroglyphici* cit., p. 288.

⁵⁸ AURELIO AURELI, *Le fortune di Rodope e di Damira*, Venezia, Giuliani, 1657. On Aureli's use of classical sources, see WENDY HELLER, *The Beloved's Image: Handel's Admeto and the Statue of Alceste*, "Journal of the American Musicological Society", forthcoming.

⁵⁹ On Anna Renzi see BETH GLIXON, *Private Lives of Public Women: Prime Donne in Mid-Seventeenth Century Venice*, in "Music and Letters", 76 (1995), pp. 509-531.

sibly to hold a festive celebration to which she invited all of her brother's enemies; she then contrived for the chamber to be flooded by the river Nile, thus killing everyone while they feasted, after which she casts herself into the hot ashes in order to avoid their vengeance. Aureli's libretto, however, refers to an entirely different mythic strand concerning her marriage to an Egyptian King, as reported in Strabo's *Geography* (17.33). Presumably while Rhodopis was bathing, an Eagle came and snatched her sandal and dropped it into the lap of the King, who was so fascinated with this occurrence that he searched high and low for Rhodopis, eventually marrying her. When Rhodopis died he built a pyramid in her honor that has since been referred to as the "Pyramid of the Courtesan". Rhodopis is thus linked with the two most important visual symbols of Egypt – the pyramid (in particular the Pyramid of the Courtesan) and the abundant river Nile.

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La fortune di Rodope e Damira concerns King Creonte's love for the beautiful Rodope and his desire to rid himself of his wife Damira. He conspires to have Damira drown accidentally in the Nile River, celebrates her funeral, and then introduces Rodope in court. Meanwhile Damira has survived and returns to court in disguise as a poor Egyptian. The river Nile plays a central role in this drama. For the opening of Act II, Damira laments her fate against a setting that includes a painted representation of her accident on the Nile river: "Cortile del Palagio Reale, su la di cui prospettiva dipinto si vede l'accidente occorso a Damira nel Nilo". Although there is no "Pyramid of the Courtesan" in the opera, the king does erect a monument in honor of the (presumably) deceased Damira, which is also used as a backdrop in the opera. Considerable attention must have been devoted to the visual elements in this opera, as the libretto lists Gasparo Mauro and Francesco Santorini as the directors of the scenes and machines and Antonio Lech, Antonio Zanchi, and Giovanni Battista Recaldi as set builders. Egyptian-style exoticism provides the backdrop for what would become a conventional representation of two contrasting heroines: one a faithful and suffering virtuous wife, and the other an erotically charged courtesan⁴⁰. The subject of this opera was sufficiently appealing to inspire a revival. In 1680 *Damira Placata* was performed to a revised version of Aureli's libretto

⁴⁰ Aurelio Aureli included several heroines of this type in his operas, such as Frine in *Alcibiade* (1680) and Taide in *Alessandro Magno in Sidone* (1679). See also W. HELLER, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, chapter 7.

with music by Pietro Ziani's nephew, Marco Antonio Ziani⁴¹. Like *Il Cesare Amante* in which the author felt compelled to sign the libretto with an anagram, this Egyptian opera once again inspires riddles: the libretto is dedicated to "Signori Curiosi", and signed somewhat mysteriously by "il bel humore".

With *Antioco* (1658), Venetian audiences were given a far more deliberate lesson in Egyptian history⁴². As was his usual practice, the librettist Nicolò Minato clearly delineates for his readers that which is derived from history – in this case Pausanias and Justin – and that which is imagined. The background of the opera concerns the fate of Alexander's kingdom after his death – and the various battles the ensued between Seleucus, Ptolomey, and Lysimachus against Antigonus in the third century B.C. In fact, Nicolò Minato's *Antioco* introduces a cast of characters that proved to be quite popular in opera well into the eighteenth century.

The strand of history treated in this opera concerns Antiochus II (c. 287-246 B.C), the son of Seleucus, who was married to Laodice, Queen of Syria. Antiochus II repudiates Laodice in order to marry the daughter of Ptolomey II Philadelphus (308-246 B.C), Berenice (born ca. 280), as a means of solidifying the peace. After Antiochus' death, Laodice and her son (Seleucus II) murder Berenice and her son (Justinus, *Epitome*, 27.1). In the opera, Minato pretends that Laodice (Laodicea) is actually Berenice's sister, and that Ptolomey (Tolomeo), having learned from the oracle that Berenice would ruin her sister's marriage, has Berenice (disguised as the slave Erinta) imprisoned in the tower. In this case, the explicit focus on Egyptian history seems to have influenced the stage setting directly, at least from the evidence supplied in the printed libretto. In the opening scene, Laodicea sings a love duet with Stesicrate, an Egyptian who has also been incarcerated by Tolomeo against this backdrop: "Un ramo del Nilo, che scorre dietro il Giardini Regii con Ponti, che sorpassano, e una gran Torre in Luoco solitario". We have thus seen several ways in which

⁴¹ DAMIRA / PLACATA. / DRAMA/ Da rappresenarsi nel loco ov'era / Il Zane à S. Moisé. / Posto in Musica dal Signor / MARC'ANTONIO / ZIANI. / [rule] / Per AL GENIO DE' CURIOSI. / [device]. / IN VENETIA, M, DC, LXXX. [sic] / [rule] / Per Francesco Nicolini. / Con Licenza de' Superiori, e Privilegio.

⁴² NICOLÒ MINATO, *Antioco* (Venezia, Giuliani, 1658). *Antioco* is one of the works considered in detail in THOMAS WALKER-LORENZO BIANCONI, *Production, Consumption and Political Function of Seventeenth Century Opera*, in "Early Music History", 4 (1984), esp. pp. 221-227. On productions of the opera outside of Venice, see 221n. A good deal is known about the financial circumstances of the opera from the surviving account book, I-Vas, SGdSM, b. 194.

the River Nile asserted itself in opera. In *Il Cesare Amante*, the Nile had first appeared as a character on the stage. In *Rodope*, it was used as a plot device, a means of temporarily getting rid of an inconvenient wife, represented in the painting in the opening of Act II. In *Antioco* it is actually part of the stage set.

But if *Antioco* provided audiences with a hint of the Egyptian landscape, *Il Tolomeo*, produced in the same year at the Teatro S. Apollinaire, seems to have been the first to represent Egyptian monuments on the stage – or at least to specify Egyptian monuments in the libretto. We do not know the name of the librettist – the preface mentions that this is the second libretto produced by the Accademia Impertubabili; thus once again an Egyptian setting is used for a libretto with academic pretensions⁴⁵. The story deals with Philadelphus Ptolomey III (born ca. 280-288), who was married to yet another Berenice (born ca. 273 B.C). The bit of ancient history recounted in the first part of the *argomento* is intriguing. Berenice is concerned about her husband's fate in the battle with Seleucus, and promises that she would sacrifice her hair to Aphrodite should he return safely. She cuts off her hair and leaves it on the altar, but it vanishes the next day. The court astronomer and mathematician, Conon of Samos (who is also a character in the opera) proclaims that Berenice's hair had been transformed into a constellation, which is now known as the Coma Berenice. (Callimachus, *Fragments*, 100: 40-78; Catullus, 66: 9-78). The plot that is woven out of this material is complicated in all the expected ways and with the usual multiple layers of deception: Tolomeo returns to his kingdom in disguise so as to spy on his wife; Pirro, the king of Epiro (who was captured as a child and brought up as the brother of King Glauce), is in love with Berenice's daughter Antigona, whom he believes to be dead. King Glauce is disguised as Damaste, and is love with Berenice.

The Egyptian backdrop is evoked quite specifically in this opera. Much of the first act, for example, takes place within the tombs of the Egyptians. While we do not have a specific description of the stage set, it is worth emphasizing the profound differences between Roman and Egyptian funeral rites, and the extent to which the tombs themselves would have been marked culturally as Egyptian. The tombs provide the backdrop for the

⁴⁵ IL TOLOMEO / Drama de gl'Academici / IMPERTURBABILI/ Rappresentato nel Theatro / Di S. APOLLINARE / Di Venetia, L'Anno 1658. / Consacrato / ALL' ILLUSTRISS.mo SIGN.re IL SIGN. / VETTORE PESARO. / [device] / In Venetia, Apressol il Valvasense. 1658. / [rule] / Con licenza, e Privilegio.

conventional operatic games with lovers and deception: Pirro, mourning the presumed death of his lover Antigona, is delighted to find her alive inside the tombs; the disguised Tolomeo descends into the dark nether-world in search of his presumably unfaithful wife Berenice; even Berenice finds reason to wander the tombs with her nurse-counselor. Much of the humor and suspense is in fact a result of the tension between the amorous games of the protagonists and the gloomy setting in which these scenes unfold. In the opening of Act III we have an unambiguously Egyptian set: “Piramidi Egittie con Porta, e mura della Città di Mensi”. Moreover, the author has made the sense of Egypt palpable throughout the libretto, saturating the dialogue with references to the Nile, the Egyptian gods, and the Egyptian birth of Tolomeo.

Not surprisingly, Cleopatra comes to represent a special brand of Venetian orientalism in seventeenth-century Venetian opera. While she made a few cameo appearances in operas already mentioned – Busenello’s *La prosperita infelice di Giulio Cesare* and *Il Cesare Amante* – her most commanding appearance is in *La Cleopatra* (1662), music by Daniele di Castrovillari and text by Giacomo Dall’Angelo⁴⁴. In this case, the River Nile becomes part of another stock setting – the *loco delizioso* – that is often associated with the most alluring female characters. The full description of the setting for Act I, scene 1 reads as follows: “Loco suburbano, ò Borgo delizioso della Città à Alessandria, dove si vedono le habitationi delitiosa di Cleopatra, o per mezzo del quale score un ramo del fiume Nilo, attraversato da un sostegno racchiuso.” As in *Tolomeo*, there is also a fascination with Egyptian tombs. The scene in which Cleopatra almost kills herself with the asp (the opera, after all, does have a happy ending) is set in the tombs of her ancestors. Bussani’s libretto for Sartorio’s *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (1677) – which would be transformed and presented to London audiences for Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* – is also quite explicit in its use of Egyptian settings⁴⁵. The first stage setting, for example provides a description of the Egyptian countryside, scourged by the rays of the sun, with an ancient bridge over a branch of the Nile. This is precisely the sort of vision of Egypt that will be assimilated in more standard versions of Egyptomania in the eighteenth century. The Egyptian episodes in seventeenth-century Venetian opera provide us with an intriguing glimpse into the roots of operatic orientalism and the ambiguous ways in which opera absorbed seicento conceptions of the an-

⁴⁴ GIACOMO DALL’ANGELO, *La Cleopatra*, Venezia, Batti, 1662.

⁴⁵ GIACOMO FRANCESCO BUSSANI, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, Venezia, Nicolini, 1677.

cient world. Of course there is much that we can only imagine about opera's first encounters with Egypt. The printed libretti supply only a limited amount of information; there is much that we do not know about the costumes, props, and other visual elements that might have brought Egypt to life on the operatic stage. Nonetheless, despite the considerable interest in Egypt in early modern society, it would seem that the producers of Venetian opera were surprisingly reluctant to embrace this particular topos. Practical considerations may well have played a role; given the fact that numerous settings needed to be recycled for performances, it was far more sensible to design a generic backdrop – a castle garden, city, or harbor – that could be used for any opera invoking any exotic Eastern land, rather than restrict the topic by including a pyramid. But the relative infrequency with which the topic was used may well be a sign of the quite special way in which Egypt was viewed in the Seicento, and the unique status accorded representations of that country. Egypt represented the unknowable that which beyond human understanding – a place in which hieroglyphs were symbols of unfathomable truths. This was certainly recognized by the members of the Accademia degli Incogniti, who used the River Nile in their emblem, and might well be acknowledged by the special treatment accorded that River in the operas considered above. Perhaps the mysteries of Egypt were too profound, too distant, and too exotic to be presented with any degree of regularity on the stage. This may have been implicit in Dario Varotari's use of an anagram in *Il Cesare amante* or the enigmatic dedication to *Damira Placata* (1680) to "Signori Curiosi" and signed so mysteriously by "il bel humore":

Voi, che saper bramate
 I secreti più occulti
 De l'Arte, e di Natura,
 Deh cortesi gradite
 Quest'Opera, ch'io consacro
 Al Genio vostro, e ad ammirar venite,
 Chiuse in angusta parte
 I portenti de l'Arte;
 Che stupidi vedrete
 Sforzo d'umano ingegno
 Con muti gesti ad animar un legno;
 E con fusi direte,
 Ch' in picciola figura
 Sà l'Arte far, ciò che non fà Natura.

Art, our anonymous writer reminds us, has the power to express that which nature cannot, to bring to life that which is inanimate, to reveal the secrets of the universe, and to attract the attention of the most sophisticated listeners – those “signori Curiosi” who had the capacity to understand hidden meanings. Ancient Egypt and the mysterious Nile, as “il bel humore” certainly knew, provided one very special path to understanding the mysteries of the universe.

WENDY HELLER

