

## *L'incoronazione di Poppea: Unmasked*

During the Age of Enlightenment, many writers, philosophers, artists and composers rejected and ridiculed religion, superstition and authority as doctrines that have failed mankind. Instead, they embraced reason, science and factual observations. Many operas written during this period also reflected these views. We cannot discuss opera history without discussing the impact of the Enlightenment on the arts. This conversation usually starts with Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, based on the scandalous play by Beaumarchais. Prior to this famous work, most operas focused on Greek and Roman mythology, with several supporting the importance of monarchies. *The Marriage of Figaro* is often perceived as the first major opera to question noble authority, and the perceived rights of kings. I contend, however, that we can date this skepticism and the questions of monarchs, especially in opera, back to Monteverdi and Busenello's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, over fifty years before the widespread acceptance of the Enlightenment.

Although the Baroque operas of this period predominantly featured mythology and stories of the monarchy's greatness, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* takes a sharp turn away from these typical operas. Of course, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* focuses on Ancient Roman monarchs, which were often viewed by Italians as the origin of Italian greatness. But only a few minutes into the opera, we certainly are not looking at greatness; we see flawed humans. Although *L'incoronazione di Poppea* focuses on the reign of Emperor Nero, which occurred over a millennium prior to the opera's debut in

1643, featuring leaders as immoral tyrants represented a challenge to authority. The idea of divine rights of kings and monarchs was starting to spread throughout Europe in the 17th century. This concept meant that kings were acting as a vessel of God, and were not to be held accountable for their acts.<sup>1</sup> In short, monarchs transcended mortality. A similar level of divinity was placed upon Roman emperors.<sup>2</sup> Although the Ancient Roman Empire was long gone, an opera focusing on the inhumane behavior and the ugliness of these “divine” rulers effectively questioned the accepted divinity concept that prevailed throughout Europe.

Many Enlightenment operas raising issues that might upset royalty were set in Spain allowing for commentary without upsetting the sitting monarch. Despite containing similar characters with habits that resemble local reigning monarchs, the opera is camouflaged by its setting in Spain. This allowed the composer and the librettist to contend that the work could not possibly be about monarchs in Austria, for example. Hopefully, the Austrian Hapsburgs would not take offense. Monteverdi and Busenello, therefore, took the opportunity to question authority without directly attacking those that were sitting in power. Again, they are protecting themselves by claiming that this is a look at Ancient Rome and not a greater questioning of monarchical power and papal authority.

Monteverdi and Busenello, like so many other Venetians, took great pride in the strength and influence of the Venetian Empire. Since the Crusades, Venice was a major power that dominated much of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> In addition to their control

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<sup>1</sup> “Divine Right of Kings,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/divine-right-of-kings>.

<sup>2</sup> George Heyman, “The Roman Imperial Cult,” in *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 45-94, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Buckley, “A Brief History of Venice,” in *The Rough Guide to Venice & the Veneto* (London: Rough Guides, 2016), 389.

of the Mediterranean, the Venetians expanded north to gain access to rivers that would help to broaden their trade into mainland Europe.<sup>4</sup> Many other governments in the Italian peninsula resented them for this, but Venetian military power was necessary to protect other Italian city-states from the expanding Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Venice, however, started to decline as trade opened up to the Americas in the early 16th century. Control of the Mediterranean sea was no longer as sustainable for power now that there were alternative trade routes opening up to the Americas and the Far East.<sup>6</sup> During this time, tensions between the Pope and the still-powerful government of Venice exploded. The Venetian Doge demanded that Pope Paul V rubberstamp the Venetian choice of the bishop. The Doge also insisted that he should have independent power to prosecute two clerics, something that the Pope would typically have jurisdiction over. An outraged Pope excommunicated the entire city of Venice in 1606.<sup>7</sup> In retribution, all the Jesuits, a Catholic order loyal to the Pope, were forced to leave the city under the orders of the Venetian government.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic Habsburgs of Spain and Austria were outraged at the policies of the Venetians and continued to harass and attack Venice throughout the century, leading to its weakened state. When much of Catholic Europe was subsumed under the Spanish Inquisition, Venice was a place that was fiercely proud of its independence and its opposition to Catholicism and papal authority. Although they no longer controlled massive fleets and had dominance over regional trade, their defiance remained a significant part of their identity and culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Buckley, *Venice & the Veneto*, 389.

<sup>5</sup> Buckley, *Venice & the Veneto*, 390.

<sup>6</sup> Buckley, *Venice & the Veneto*, 391.

<sup>7</sup> Buckley, *Venice & the Veneto*, 391.

<sup>8</sup> Buckley, *Venice & the Veneto*, 391.

Giovanni Francesco Busenello was a lawyer from a town near Venice, who despite his modest beginnings, became a member of the elite Accademia degli Incogniti. The Accademia degli Incogniti was a group of writers and philosophers who greatly influenced Venetian politics and culture.<sup>9</sup> The Accademia degli Incogniti had a nostalgic bent due to the great historical contributions of Venice, but they also had a strong sense of superiority. Although the Enlightenment was widespread a few decades later, Venice was already a center of intellectual thought and freedom. The Accademia degli Incogniti was at the heart of this culture of intellectualism. They looked down upon the restrictive morals of the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> They believed in self-autonomy and hedonism as necessary for survival, so much so that sexual exploration was not only embraced but encouraged.<sup>11</sup> Venice being a republic also influenced the anti-monarchical sentiments of the Accademia degli Incogniti, since they felt their own system of government was more advanced.<sup>12</sup>

The Accademia degli Incogniti studied many ancient texts and histories, most importantly, Tacitus, the 1st-century Roman historian. During his time, Tacitus was respected for his strong moral code. His parentage was unknown, but he managed to make a career for himself in politics as a government insider for Ancient Rome.<sup>13</sup> This leads us back to *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Today when we look at the genre of histories, we seek something that is attempting to be unbiased. Of course, through our own filters, nothing can be completely objective. Nonetheless, we are looking for content

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<sup>9</sup> Wendy Heller, "Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in L'Incoronazione Di Poppea," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 1 (1999): pp. 39-96, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 47.

<sup>11</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 47.

<sup>12</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 47.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Hugh McDonald, "Tacitus," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., January 1, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian>.

and analysis that allows us, the reader, to make our own conclusions. Tacitus' histories read almost as soap operas. This is not a dismissal of his work or his unique access to Roman leaders and generals. Tacitus not only provided a series of events, but he was strongly judging the figures he described. As he wrote about Nero and Otho and Poppea, it is clear that he felt a level of contempt for them. "This Poppaea had everything but a right mind."<sup>14</sup> Otho is described with "physical weakness and effeminacy."<sup>15</sup> Nero is described as being impatient that the poisoning of Britannicus was taking so long. Nero aggressively threatened the tribune, a committee of government officials, complaining that the slow process of poisoning Britannicus was causing Nero to suffer from anxiety.<sup>16</sup> Nero and Otho, both were Emperor for a period of time, while Poppea became Empress. Tacitus removed the divinity of these ancient rulers and exposed their perceived flaws. This humbling of authority figures is something the Accademia degli Incogniti gleaned and admired. When we look at how the characters are depicted in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, we don't just see a telling of history; we see an agenda. Therefore, as previously stated, when we discuss opera questioning authority, although the conversation typically starts with Mozart and the Marriage of Figaro, it should actually commence over 130 years earlier.

Many societies viewed women as inferiors, and certainly 17th century Venice was no exception. Women were under significantly greater restrictions in Venice than elsewhere in Europe. Women in Venetian society were obstructed from public view. Even when such a phenomenal artist and composer as Barbara Strozzi performed at the Accademia degli Incogniti, she was often derided, even though she was acknowledged

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<sup>14</sup> Tacitus, "Book XIII - A.D. 54- 58," in *Annals of Imperial Rome* (Pantianos Classics, 1876), 191.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline A. Perkins, "Tacitus on Otho," *Latimus* 52, no. 4 (October-December, 1993), 851.

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 180.

for her gifts.<sup>17</sup> At this time, women who had a public presence, such as composers like Strozzi, were considered to be of the same status as prostitutes. The Accademia degli Incogniti viewed such women with power and sexual autonomy as dangerous. We see this recurring theme in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Poppea is the sexually free seducer of Nerone who also shirks Ottone, a war hero. Her promiscuity and power makes Nerone ignore all monarchical responsibility. Poppea, according to Busenello, is an example of the dangers of a woman in control of her own sexuality. Ottavia is the evil and emotional empress who commands that Ottone kill his ex-lover and mistress of Nerone. Her inevitable banishment in the opera, and death in real life, show justice for those wronged by her evils. She is an example of the horrors of women in power. Every other significant female character in this opera is portrayed as maternal with the exception of Drusilla, who is fictional. Drusilla is spared from Nerone's violence and punishment due to her noble actions of claiming Ottone's crime as her own in order to protect him. Nerone recognizes this and rewards her for obedience and servitude. Drusilla is what women should be according to the Accademia degli Incogniti. It is interesting that in order for this message to be inserted into the opera, Busenello created an entirely fictional character.

It doesn't take an advanced ear or eye to recognize that *L'incoronazione di Poppea* is an opera that plays heavily on sexual dynamics, power and love. We see the love triangle (or love square) of Ottone, Nerone, Poppea and Drusilla. We see the decisions that heartbreak has on Ottavia and Ottone. We see the developing relationship between Ottone and Drusilla. We have a bit of a comedic break with Damigella and Valletto. And we have the forever fascinating duet between Lucano and Nerone.

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<sup>17</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 48.

Rewriting these roles to fit into the agenda that Busenello and the Accademia degli Incogniti had made perfect sense. The majority of audience members at this time were familiar with the histories of Ancient Rome and would even see these figures as authorities to an extent, although flawed. And in a time when pre-performance messages didn't have to announce that although these figures were real, the events might be fictionalized, this was a great way to manipulate a message. In this opera, whenever we see true sexual attraction and tension between two characters, we see a duet, which are the only times characters sing together. Lucano and Nerone's duet is often one of the highlights of this opera.

Lucan, an actual ancient philosopher of Stoicism, was also the nephew of Seneca.<sup>18</sup> According to Merriam Webster stoicism is “an indifference to pleasure or pain.”<sup>19</sup> The characters of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* behave in the opposite manner of Stoicism, without self-restraint. Therefore, with the writing of Seneca and Lucan characters, Busenello presents the greatest departure from truth in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. In the opera, Seneca is depicted as a bore and is often mocked by the other characters, and Lucan is depicted as a lascivious traitor to Seneca. The Accademia degli Incogniti was not one for restraint; they vehemently opposed Stoicism, especially as it became a characteristic of the Catholic Church. One of the leaders of the Accademia degli Incogniti was Cesare Cremonini, a follower of Aristotelian beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Seneca and the other early stoics, Aristotle did believe that some pleasure was necessary for happiness. Following that sentiment, Cremonini claimed that sexual pleasure was of

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<sup>18</sup> “Lucan,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., January 1, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucan-Roman-author>.

<sup>19</sup> “Stoicism,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed January 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoicism>.

<sup>20</sup> Heller, “Tacitus Incognito,” 45.

equal importance to survival as eating and breathing.<sup>21</sup> Sexual relations between men were even encouraged at this time, not only from a place of sexual exploration but out of misogyny, enabling men to avoid the pitfalls of women.<sup>22</sup> We see the influence of Cremonini on Busenello's work, most specifically in the duet between Lucano and Nerone. In the duet, Lucano and Nerone are passing sixteenth-note runs to one another (see example 1). Whenever we see characters singing together in this opera, there is intimacy. The duets between Nerone and Poppea, the charming scene between Valetto and Damigella, representing young love, and this famous duet between Nerone and Lucano, "Hor che Seneca è morto," are the only moments where the characters truly sing together. Yet, nowhere else in this piece do we see such active virtuosic singing. Two men singing this music go beyond hinting at what we may perceive as sexual intimacy between the two characters. Homoeroticism becomes more literal as the duet transitions into a dance-like triple meter (see example 1). Lucano initiates singing the text *bocca* meaning "mouth," while Nerone is singing exclamations of "ahi!" at the top of his range. Measure 21 is when Nerone reaches his music and physical climax of the scene (see example 2).<sup>23</sup>

What makes this scene all the more shocking is that Lucano is written as a vehicle to celebrate the death of Seneca, his uncle. Busenello and Monteverdi not only mock the legacy of the Stoics, but they took one of the key figures and transformed him into a character of hedonism as well as a vehicle for the exploration of homosexuality. As a modern audience, we might be surprised at the nature of the scene, especially since the work dates back to 1643. Nonetheless, with more context about Venice and the

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<sup>21</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 45.

<sup>22</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 49.

<sup>23</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 83.



Accademia degli Incogniti, it is possible to say that they were more open and free about aspects of homoeroticism than we are today.

**Example 1** Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, act 2, scene 6, mm. 66-88

The image displays a musical score for three systems of music, each consisting of a vocal line (soprano and alto) and a basso continuo line. The systems are numbered 66, 69, 72, and 81. The lyrics are in Italian and describe a scene of intense passion and desire.

**System 66:** The vocal lines begin with the word "can - tiam,". The basso continuo line has a "6" below it.

**System 69:** The lyrics are "di quel - la boc - ca, A cui l'In - dia, e L'A - ra - bia Le per - - - le con - sa - crò, do -". The basso continuo line has a "6" below it.

**System 72:** The lyrics are "-nò gl'o - do - ri. Boc - ca,  $\frac{1}{4}$  boc - ca, boc - ca, boc - ca,". The basso continuo line has a "4" and a "6" below it, with a sharp sign (#) under the "4".

**System 81:** The lyrics are "boc - ca, ahi, ahi, boc - ca, boc - ca, che se ra - - gio - na, se ra - gio - na, ò ri - - de,". The basso continuo line has a "6", "7", "6", "6", "7", "6" below it, with sharp signs (#) under the "7"s.

**Example 2** Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, act 2, scene 6, mm. 111-122

As mentioned earlier, the Accademia degli Incogniti had absolute contempt for the Catholic Church. A significant aspect of Church dogma at the time was that our actions were all predetermined by fate. Busenello has written many of the characters blaming the gods for the horrible actions that they commit. Poppea thanks the depiction of the Roman goddess, Amor, for the death of Seneca.<sup>24</sup> Ottone is repeatedly imploring the gods to give him the strength to commit murder.<sup>25</sup> Poppea tells Ottone to blame the goddess, Fortuna, for why she left him for Nerone.<sup>26</sup> We are left with an opera where many characters possess great power, but they feel no responsibility for their reckless and violent actions as it was all up to fate. It is a clear criticism of the concept of a lack of free will. As Busenello was critiquing the concept of fate, who better to involve in the

<sup>24</sup> Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, ed. Clifford Bartlett (Redcroft, Huntingdon: Kings' Music, 1993), 148.

<sup>25</sup> Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, 136.

<sup>26</sup> Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, 79.

opera than the Roman goddess Fortuna, the goddess of fate.<sup>27</sup> The Accademia degli Incogniti's rejection of Stoicism, which valued virtue over all other qualities, manifests in the appearance of Virtù (Virtus being the Latin name), the Roman goddess of virtue and honor.<sup>28</sup> It is no surprise that Virtù is the least effective of the three goddesses in this opera, and takes a backseat to Amor. In the prologue, Fortuna, Virtù and Amor are bickering over which one holds the greatest power. In the context of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Amor holds the greatest strength as Poppea and Nerone are unified while all those who were against them end up exiled or dead. As love and pleasure were of great importance to the Accademia degli Incogniti, the classic story of love prevailing makes for a good opportunity for spreading Incogniti beliefs.

Operas, like any form of great art, are never written in a vacuum. *L'incoronazione di Poppea* is an opera dominated by sexual politics, but looking between the lines, what we also have is social and political propaganda from the Accademia degli Incogniti. This opera is a musical and literary masterpiece, but it had an agenda. It derided authority, encouraged hedonism, dismissed superstition and religion, it criticized powerful and sexually independent women, and most of all, it turned a revered episode of Roman history into a scandalous and modern drama. We can still enjoy *L'incoronazione di Poppea* as a sexy and scandalous work, but without studying its original intent, we miss a major part of its aim and power.

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<sup>27</sup> Guirand Félix and A V Pierre, "Roman Mythology," in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (New York: Prometheus Press, 1968), 213.

<sup>28</sup> Guirand, *New Larousse Encyclopedia*, 216.

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