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«La filologia musicale oggi: il retaggio storico e le nuove prospettive»

Murder in Thrace A Shakespearean Orpheus in Seventeenth-Century Venice

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§ Tutti i momenti storici più significativi della storia dell'opera includono una versione del mito d'Orfeo, un mito musicale il cui protagonista è stato l'eroe operistico per eccellenza dalle favole della corte fiorentina alla riforma di Gluck, fino alla ripresa comica di Offenbach. In una delle versioni si è celato finora un riferimento ad un'altra figura drammatica: Otello. *L'Orfeo* di Aureli e Sartorio (Venezia, 1673), un lavoro importante nella storia dell'opera seria, contiene un'imitazione dell'*Otello* di Shakespeare, malcelata sotto il manto mitologico. Sebbene non sia chiaro quando *Otello* sia arrivato a Venezia, i numerosi paralleli tra quest'*Orfeo* e *Otello* non possono annoverarsi fra le coincidenze. Questo studio suggerisce che Aureli e Sartorio si rivolsero a Shakespeare (e non alla sua fonte originale, il veneziano Giraldo Cintio) come fonte addizionale e nascosta per dimostrare il loro intellettualismo cosmopolita e nel contempo ammiccando con i concittadini colti che conoscevano non solo la storia di Tracia ma anche la tragedia inglese e forse anche il suo avo veneziano.

§ Most momentous points in the history of opera involve retelling the myth of Orpheus. This “superannuated” musical myth has been the quintessential operatic hero for centuries, from the Florentine court *favole*, through Gluck's reform, to Offenbach's spoof. Hitherto undetected in one retelling of the myth are allusions to another dramatic figure: Othello. Aureli and Sartorio's *L'Orfeo* (Venice, 1673), a pivotal work in opera seria history, contains under the mythological plot an intentional imitation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. While Shakespearean scholars don't know when *Othello* reached Venice, the similarities between this *L'Orfeo* and *Othello* are too numerous to be coincidental. I argue that Aureli and Sartorio used Shakespeare (and not his Venetian source Giraldo Cintio) as an additional, concealed, source to demonstrate their cosmopolitan intellectualism, and as a wink at the educated Venetians who knew the Thracian story, but also the English play, and perhaps even its Venetian ancestor.

A long and distinguished line of works on the Orpheus myth marks the path of the genre of opera. The myth was invoked as a symbol of the power of music to justify the very first attempts at the genre (*pace* the lost *Dafne*), as well as at each momentous turning point, such as, for example, Gluck and Calzabigi's operatic 'reform' of 1762. Since the dawn of the genre, Orpheus and Eurydice's story, this 'superannuated' myth in Rosand's terms,¹ has been a favorite subject for operas, to a degree various orders of magnitude above any other subject.² This of course has been known and repeatedly described in operatic literature.

This particular myth lends itself perfectly to operatic presentation as it includes elements of love, adventure, magic, music, obstacles for the hero to prove his worth, heartbreak and pathos, a sprinkling of lust (if one interprets Orpheus's turning around as that), and the possibility to tag on not one, but two happy endings (before her second death or after, only for him). It is also perfectly suited because of the small cast—one primo uomo, a demigod with supernatural powers but human feelings and passion, a secondo uomo, his nemesis (Pluto, who has power over Orpheus's wife), an occasional terzo uomo (Orpheus's half brother and Eurydice's suitor Aristaeus), and two women—a young, pure and virtuous innocent victim, and her counterpart, a seasoned lover who has suffered and pleads love's case. Each character is fairly straightforward and the plot line is quite linear, even when it includes Aristaeus.

¹ A few of the writings focus on the use of the myth to justify and lend credibility and status to the new genre, as well as to counterbalance the non verisimilitude of something sung beginning to end. Some notable examples include F.W. Sternfeld, *The Orpheus Myth and the Libretto of Orfeo*, in *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo*, ed. J. Whenham, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass. (1986), (Cambridge Opera Handbooks), pp. 31-33; E. Barsham, *The Orpheus Myth in Operatic History*, in *C.W. von Gluck: 'Orfeo'*, ed. P. Howard, Cambridge, Mass. (1981), (Cambridge Opera Handbooks); N. Pirrotta, *Li due Orfei: da Poliziano a Monteverdi*, Torino, Einaudi (1975); F. W. Sternfeld, *The Birth of Opera*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1993); N. Pirrotta, *Inizio dell'opera e aria*, in N. Pirrotta et al., *Li due Orfei: Da Poliziano a Monteverdi*, Torino, Einaudi, (1975), pp. 276-333; E. Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre*, Berkeley, University of California Press (1991); E. Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas: A Venetian Trilogy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, (2007). This quotation of the superannuated myth is in Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice* cit., p. 388.

² A quick count yields the following partial list: *Euridice*, by Peri & by Caccini & Rinuccini (1600); *Orfeo*, by Monteverdi & Striggio (1607), Rossi & Buti (1647), Sartorio & Aureli (1672-3), Lully (*Orphée* 1690), Graun & Villati (1752), Benda & von Lindemann (1785), Cannabich & Calzabigi (1802), Kanne (1807), Rieti & Poliziano (1927), Burgon & Porter (1982); *Orfeo dolente*, Belli & Chiabrera (1616); *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Krieger (1683), Fux & Pariati (1715), Gluck & Calzabigi (1762 & in French 1774), Tozzi & Coltellini (1775), Bertoni & Calzabigi (1776), Naumann & Biehl (1786), Krenek & Kokoschka (1923-6), Badings & Werumeus Buning (1941); *La morte di Orfeo*, Landi & Landi? (1619); *La descente d'Orphée aux enfers*, Charpentier & ? (1686-1687); *Orfeo nell'inferi*, Campra & Regnard (1699); *Amor spesso inganna* by Sabadini & Aureli (1689); *Die sterbende Eurydice* by Keiser & ?Bressand (1699); *Die Wunderbare... oder Orpheus*, Telemann & du Boulair (1726); *Orpheus der Zweyte* by Ditters von Dittersdorf & Schröder (1788); *L'anima del filosofo ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* by Haydn & Badini (1791) *Le petit Orphée*, Deshayes & Roubier-Deschamps (1793); *La mort d'Orphée* (unperformed) by Dauvergne & Marmontel (before 1797); *Orphée aux enfers*, Offenbach & Crémieux-Halévy (1858); *Les malheurs d'Orphée*, Milhaud & Lunel (1925); *La favola d'Orfeo* by Casella & Pavolini (1932); *Mask of Orpheus*, Birtwistle & Zinovief (1986). That is only the operas. There are countless other works, both with text (cantatas etc.) and without, and in other media, such as film.

The mythic outline of the plot is remarkably standard, despite the many minor variants inserted in one or the other telling. The original myth as found in the ancient sources,³ tells of a demigod Orpheus, son of the god Apollo and of Calliope the nymph, who on his wedding day loses his bride Eurydice as she is bitten by a poisonous snake. In Virgil's version Eurydice steps on the serpent as she tries to escape the unwanted advances of Orpheus's half-brother Aristeo, the son of Apollo and the huntress Cirene. Orpheus cannot accept the loss and decides to go to the underworld to fetch her, wherein he gains access through the power of his music. She is returned to him but on the condition (which in Virgil is imposed not by Pluto but by Proserpina) that he lead her out without turning around to gaze at her. The demigod is unable to hold himself, and thus loses her forever, condemning her for eternity.

The story of the myth continues with Orpheus lamenting his lot and renouncing women, in Ovid followed explicitly by his stated preference for 'the better sex.' This gesture provokes the Maenads who, outraged, dismember him and throw the pieces into the Lethe River. The severed head falls on the lyre and while floating down continues to sing. Head and lyre finally and ironically land on the island of Lesbos, where a snake decides to make his meal out of the head (a clear parallel to the snake who killed Eurydice). Phoebus intervenes in time and petrifies the animal. In Plato's version Orpheus is offered the option of saving Eurydice by taking her place in Hades but he declines, prompting the comment that his weakness of character is due to his being a musician. In 1480 Poliziano takes the myth from the Latin sources and writes his own play for the Gonzaga court, the *Favola d'Orfeo*, which, being in Italian, will be the basis for most of the libretti.

None of the operas on the myth continues beyond Orpheus's exit from Hades, whether or not there is a happy ending and regardless of whether the happy ending happens before or after Eurydice's definitive death (that is if both spouses are saved or just Orpheus). Most of the operas stay reasonably close to the outline of the story, except for Offenbach, who overturns virtually every element except for the mythological deaths. The first opera to really stray from the spirit and story of the myth is Sartorio and Aureli's *Orfeo*.⁴ Though some of the additions and transformations are due to the requirements of Venetian opera of the second half of the 17th century, others cannot be explained as such. Their peculiarity has prompted this author's observation that the opera seems to be a conflation of the mythical story and a relatively novel Shakespearean play, *Othello*, the transmission history of which in Italy is unknown.

There is no documentary evidence on the relationship between Aureli and Sartorio, but it is conceivable if not probable that at least a good portion of the changes may have been the librettist's idea. Aurelio Aureli (*fl.* 1652-1708) was

³ Particularly as in Virgil's *Georgics* of around 35 BCE and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written about forty years later, both partially based on Plato's *Symposium* written after 385 CE.

⁴ A summary of the plot and subplots and of the metamorphosis of the characters is in E. Rosand, *L'Orfeo: The Metamorphosis of a Musical Myth*, «Israel Studies in Musicology», 2 (1980), pp. 104-107.

a leading librettist in Venice, possibly the first one to actually define himself as a librettist and not primarily a poet. He was trained a lawyer and was a member of the Accademia degl'Imperfetti with the name 'Indifferente' and of the Accademia Delfica. He was born in Murano (one of the isles in the Venetian lagoon), and lived in Venice till 1659 when he went to Vienna for a year at most, before returning home. He also probably lived in Parma from 1688 to 1693.⁵ He wrote over fifty libretti, his first, *Erginda*, from 1652. He started writing in the tradition of Giovanni Faustini, who had standardized a type of libretto set in an exotic foreign land, usually Africa, with two noble pairs of lovers, characters from different social classes, various comic servants, sleeping potions, disguises, eavesdropping, etc., and sundry adventures for the lovers prior to their reunification.⁶ Most of Faustini's libretti had been for Francesco Cavalli.

Aureli reverts to historical or mythological sources, mixing them with material of his own invention, and eventually standardizes his own formula, where a historical or mythological story is embroidered upon. Gradually, fictitious material comes to preponderate over the original source. Aureli however does at least try to bow to verisimilitude in some of his structural conventions, for example only inserting verses for additional arias where they would not interrupt the flow of the story, of the drama. As is well known, in the 1650s the singers, supported by the opera-goers and their own narcissism, took the upper hand in asking for increasingly more such solo display pieces. This challenged the linearity and credibility of the plot, given that many other constraints were brought to bear, such as the inclusion of an aria of each of a number of types (rage, love, etc.) for each of the main characters, and none in proximity of each other, each followed by the obligatory exit of the character. By way of comparison Aureli's early libretto *Erismena* had around 30 arias, while *Orfeo* has almost twice as many.

Besides stroking the singers' egos with display pieces, Aureli had to adhere to the Venetian operatic custom that imposed a sleepwalking scene, two pairs of lovers, a pair of comic servants, a scene with a mirror or a portrait, intercepted letters, and so forth. The end result often lacked in verisimilitude, despite the stated wish of the poet to have a perfectly believable plot. Some librettists went so far as to put disclaimers in their introductions, paying lip service to some ancient authority such as Aristotle or Ariosto to justify their work.⁷ For example, in the 'Argomento' of this *Orfeo* after the brief summary of the mythological story it reads 'SI FINGE' (it is pretended that) followed by the fictional portion of the story (such as, for example, the presence of

⁵ C. Mutini, *Aurelio Aureli*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Roma, Treccani, 1962, vol. 4, pp. 587-588.

⁶ E. Rosand, *L'Ovidio trasformato*, introduction to the score in facsimile *Aurelio Aureli*, Antonio Sartorio, *L'Orfeo*, Milano, Ricordi, (1983), pp. XIX-XX.

⁷ E. Rosand, *L'Ovidio trasformato* cit., pp. XXII-XXIII.

Autonoe, Aristeo's wife, or the anachronism of joining in one place and at one time Hercules and Achilles).

The Arcadian reform of opera, led by Apostolo Zeno, will eventually tackle the problem of verisimilitude, at a time when the pendulum marking the dominance of music over text had swung too dangerously far towards music, to the detriment of any plot coherence or believability. The Arcadian reformers will advocate, among other things, the presentation of pastoral or heroic figures and the elimination of inconsequential comic scenes. Not too much later Gluck and Calzabigi, with their own *Orfeo*, will further undermine the Venetian type of opera by returning to a more naturalistic way of singing (as opposed to the strict alternation of recitative and aria) and to more believable plots.

In Venetian opera Francesco Cavalli (1602-1676) had continued in Monteverdi's footsteps, by writing operas that had many but short arias, and with recitatives that were much more melodious than those of his predecessor or even some contemporaries. He reserved melismata and long flourishes only for very few emotionally charged moments. His restrained expression kept arias and recitatives fairly close in style. By the mid 1660s his successor, Antonio Cesti (1623-1669), started championing the more modern style of Venetian opera, where music moved ahead of the words, signaling the dominance of singers that will mark the next era. In his operas we find a sharper dichotomy between aria and recitative in terms of expressiveness and expansiveness. The arias become more numerous and far longer. Sartorio seems to look more back to Cavalli than forward to Cesti. His arias are numerous but short and austere in style.

Antonio Sartorio (1630-1680) was a Venetian composer who spent a good portion of his life in Hanover as the chapel master to Duke Johann Friedrich of Brunswick-Lüneburg. He composed fifteen operas, two of which on Aureli's libretti (his first, *Gl'amori infruttuosi di Pirro*, and this *Orfeo*). The rest of his compositions are arias, cantatas, and sundry sacred pieces. One of the librettists and impresarios who collaborated with him on various operas and who was also a friend of the Duke, Pietro Dolfi (1636-1709), was present at the premiere of *Orfeo*. He reported to the Duke that it had not been received with great applause and that while both Sartorio's music and the singer performing the role of Euridice deserved high praise, scenes and costumes were ordinary and Aureli's libretto bad ('pessimo').⁸ Perhaps he considered it poor because of all the

⁸ «Sappin adunque come mirabile riesce sin hora la musica del Sigr. Ant. [Sartorio]. Li musici di V.A. [your highness the Duke] l'uno piaciuto in estremo da moltissimi più del Torto Fusai et è il Baritono. L'altro pur piaciuto, et da mè stimato il meglio di ogni altro soprano per la maniera debbolissima di voce anco minorata doppo l'arrivo in Venetia. L'opera intitolata l'Orfeo dell'Aureli (che da mè sarà il primo ordinario all'A.V. trasmessa) pessima, gl'altri musici ascoltabili...» (Let them know then how admirable is already the music of Mr. Antonio Sartorio. Of your Highness's musicians the baritone has pleased very much many more people than Torto Fusai. The other one has also pleased and I think it is better than all other soprani for the very soft voice, even softer since her arrival in Venice. The opera titled *Orfeo* by Aureli, which I will send to you by the first post, is very bad, the other musicians are passable...). Letter of 23 December 1672, quoted in E. Rosand,

alterations to the myth, or maybe out of professional jealousy. Either way, however, it is the comment of a knowledgeable librettist.

This is billed as an opera on the myth of Orpheus. Remarkably, however, no scholar or opera lover seems to have noticed how the story and the characters have become almost unrecognizable in these two men's hands, nor the similarities to the Shakespearean tragedy. Of course Ellen Rosand comments at length on the changes to the story and on the transformation of Orfeo into a «jealous Venetian husband,» an «Everyman,» which she clearly sees as a symbol of the «erosion of operatic decorum,» a harbinger of the decline of opera's stature.⁹ Her analysis goes much further than this in both her discussions of this opera she knows so intimately. As she does mention, the myth has been modified almost beyond recognition, and at many different levels—plot, setting, personae, etc. The first clue to the non-orthodoxy of this Orpheus opera is the cast of characters (as listed in the libretto):

Orfeo figlio di Calliope, e d'Apollo

Euridice Ninfa di Tracia, moglie d'Orfeo

Aristeo fratello d'Orfeo, figlio di Apollo, e della Ninfa Coronide, allevato da Bacco

Autonoe figlia di Cadmo Re di Tebe

Chirone dotto Centauro

Ercole e **Achille** Discepoli di Chirone

Esculapio fratello d'Orfeo, e d'Aristeo, addottrinato ne la medicina da Chirone.¹⁰

Erinda Vecchia Nutrice d'Aristeo

Orillo giovanetto Pastorello di Tracia

Deità: **Bacco, Pluto, Tethide**

Not only there is a preponderance of characters extraneous to the myth, but, as Aureli admits in his disclaimer, also people who could not have been in the same story (in particular Ercole and Achille). A host of adventures and anecdotes for the other characters are added on to the mythological story, which begins on the wedding day of Orfeo and Euridice. To fulfill the requirement of having two pairs of lovers, the libretto includes Aristeo's wife Autonoe, daughter of Cadmus, founder and King of Thebes, and of the goddess Harmonia. In Greek mythology she and her husband Aristaeus even had a son, Actaeon. She, who does not appear in any other opera on the myth, in this fictional plot when abandoned by Aristaeus leaves the royal paternal house and, dressed as a gypsy, follows him to take him back, like Donn'Elvira. The young page Orillo and the old nurse Erinda (a traditional tenor role) add the

Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice cit., Appendix III, pp. 441-442. All translations in this paper are the author's.

⁹ *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, pp. 387-391, particularly pp. 390-391.

¹⁰ A character from Greek mythology; he is tutored in medicine by the centaur Chiron, and is the son of Apollo and either Coronis or Arsinoe, or, according to Homer of a mortal woman.

expected laughter, often with the help of Hercules, Achilles, and Aesclepius. For example, after Euridice's death Aesclepius the curmudgeon forcefully states that rather than pining for their wives' death Orpheus and all widowers should celebrate.

Without any doubt, the most obvious and profound deviation from the mythological story is at the level of the protagonists, and it is the transformation of Orpheus into a husband-Othello completely blinded by jealousy, to the point of deciding to murder his Eurydice-Desdemona, as he believes her guilty of betraying him with Aristeo. There is no other opera on the myth in which Orpheus is jealous and much less one where he is a killer. In Offenbach's spoof *Orphée aux enfers*, Orphée will be more than happy to be rid of his wife but not because of jealousy, but rather because Euridice is a pest who refuses to listen to his music and whom he threatens with his latest violin concerto, one hour and fifteen minutes long. Besides, in that version, where everything is reversed, she is in fact having an affair with Aristaeus. Not to be outdone Orphée has a mistress as well.

Jealousy is certainly not an uncommon topic in opera or in literature. But, to make of Orpheus a character blinded by murderous jealousy seems to defeat the purpose of choosing this myth. Even though it's true that also Sartorio and Aureli's Eurydice dies of a snake bite, the fact that this only happens after one attempted murder and while a second attempt is taking place, not only diminishes but practically obliterates the dramatic impact of her death. As Rosand points out, death loses its affective impact since it saves Euridice from either being murdered by Orfeo or being seduced by Aristeo.¹¹ By the same token it weakens the demigod's credibility, integrity, and status. His impassioned plea to Pluto becomes almost an afterthought, after a total change of heart. This element is completely extraneous to the original story, which in the history of opera had and will always have as its final goal to demonstrate the power of Orpheus's music, a demigod, not a raving killer.

Orfeo's status as the demigod of music (again, the main "mission" of this myth) is further weakened in this setting by the fact that his big scene, the moment when he has to conquer the powers of Hades (as, for example, *Possente spirto* in Monteverdi and Striggio's setting), doesn't exist. After going to Hades because Eurydice pushes him to do so in the sleep scene, we only hear that he must have sung his way into it when Pluto declares «Orfeo, vincesti. Il canto tuo sonoro placò le Furie e raddolcì l'Inferno.» (act 3, scene 14, You won Orpheus. Your sonorous singing placated the Furies and made Hell sweeter). In fact Orpheus only sings a first lament about his pain and his unfaithful beauty, before he even knows if Orillo, the killer he sent, has succeeded (act 3, scene 1), and another one after he turns around and loses Eurydice (act 3, scene 16), followed by his last aria where he renounces

¹¹ E. Rosand, *L'Ovidio trasformato* cit., p. XXXI.

womankind. Orpheus, the title character, only sings in less than ten percent of the arias and duets; even Eurydice's arias outnumber his.

It seems obvious the myth was not chosen for its traditional and expected message and role. None of the usual *raison d'être* of it have any impact on this one opera. So what is this choice hiding? What else is going on? Peeling all the layers of Venetian operatic convention away the latent ties to Shakespeare's *Othello* become patent, even beyond the most obvious similarity, that of the jealous husband, blinded by unjustified suspicions, who decides to murder his innocent and pure bride, confused, disbelieving, and powerless.

An element that seems to come right out of *Othello* is the scene in which Orfeo eavesdrops on a conversation not intended for his ears though it did not hide anything illicit in it, and misinterprets it to suit his point. In act 2 scene 9, Orfeo, hidden, hears Euridice talk about love with Aristeo. Exactly like Othello (act 4, scene 1) who, hearing just a few words here and there, believes that Cassio, provoked by Jago, is talking about Desdemona and not about Bianca, Orfeo is convinced he holds the smoking gun as he had been suspecting, when Euridice was in fact vainly trying to convince Aristeo to return to his wife Autonoe, desperate for having been abandoned.

*Aristeo, Euridice, Autonoe in disparte, Orfeo
che sopraggiunge*

ARISTEO Ecco il Sol che m'innamora
Cara vaghezza,
O vaga bellezza,
Che l'anima adora.
EURIDICE Accostati Aristeo.
ARISTEO Ti servo, o bella.
Che fortuna!
Qui sopraggiunge Orfeo
ORFEO Euridice
Sola con Aristeo? Ciel, che favella?
Si ritira in disparte ad ascoltarla
EURIDICE Dimmi? Dove apprendesti
Ad accenderti, o crudo, e a spegner poi
Bambina in fasce del tuo amor la fiamma?
ARISTEO Spento il mio ardor? Ah, più che
mai m'infiamma!
EURIDICE E pur so che tu amasti e or più
non ami.
ORFEO E questa, o iniqua, fedeltà tu chiami?

ARISTEO Io più non amo? Anzi, già mai nel
core.
Com'or sentii d'Amor le fiamme ardenti
AUTONOE Ah, infedele, tu menti.
EURIDICE Dunque s'è ver che avampi
Godrai veder de gl'occhi amati i lampi
ARISTEO Ardo, peno, e sospiro,
Ma pur gioisco all'or quando gli miro.
EURIDICE E se chi t'ama al seno tuo venisse
Volontaria ad offrirti, e che faresti?

Aristeo, Euridice, Autonoe on a side, Orfeo arrives

ARISTEO Here is the sun that I love
Dear loveliness,
O Lovely beauty,
That my soul adores.
EURIDICE Come closer Aristeo.
ARISTEO At your service, o beautiful.
How lucky!
Here Orfeo arrives
ORFEO Euridice
Alone with Aristeo? Heavens, what does she say?
He hides on a side to listen in to her
EURIDICE Tell me? Where did you learn
o Cruel one, to light and then extinguish
In infancy the flame of your love?
ARISTEO My ardor extinguished? It burns more
than ever!
EURIDICE However I know that you used to love
but you don't anymore.
ORFEO O unfair one, do you call this being
faithful?
ARISTEO I don't love anymore? On the contrary
Never like now have I felt the flame of love.

AUTONOE Ah, you lie, unfaithful.
EURIDICE So if it's true that you burn
You'll be happy to see the beloved eyes.
ARISTEO I burn, pine, and sigh,
But I also rejoice when I see them.
EURIDICE And if she who loves you were to come
offer herself willingly to you, what would you do?

ORFEO Empia, che ascolto!
ARISTEO Innalzerei divoto
Templi a la sorte e voti al Dio di Gnido.

EURIDICE Chi t'adora è vicina.
Orfeo, reso impaziente a queste voci, si scopre e, sdegnato, passa inanzi Euridice minacciandola

ORFEO Vidi e intesi a bastanza, o core infido.
A la comparsa d'Orfeo, Aristeo si ritira, ed Euridice, confusa, chiama l'amato sposo che parte adirato

EURIDICE Orfeo, mio ben, idolo mio, consorte.

ARISTEO Cupido traditor.

AUTONOE, *in disparte* Perfida sorte.

ORFEO What do I hear, o traitress!
ARISTEO I would devotedly rise
Temples to fate and vows to the God of Gnido.

[Cupid]

EURIDICE She who adores you is close.
Orfeo, restless after hearing this, comes out and passes in front of Euridice, indignant and menacing

ORFEO I came and heard enough, unfaithful heart.
When Orfeo appears Aristeo leaves and Euridice, confused, calls her beloved groom who leaves in anger

EURIDICE Orfeo, my love, my idol, husband.

ARISTEO Cupid traitor.

AUTONOE, *aside* Cruel fate.

After this he resolves to kill her, following his own advice from act 1 scene 14, when he was responding to Euridice who suspected him jealous and was trying to reassure him of her faithfulness. He says that he who is not jealous is not a lover.

ORFEO Chi geloso non è, non vive amante.
So che fido e costante
È il mio vago tesoro,
Ma geloso son io, perché l'adoro.
[segue aria "Cerco pace e mi fa guerra"]

ORFEO He who is not jealous, is not a lover.
I know that my beautiful darling
is faithful and steadfast,
But I am jealous because I adore her.
[follows aria "I look for peace and get war"]

The first time Orfeo tries to murder her, Ercole stops his hand and a textbook Othello/Desdemona duet follows (She betrayed my honor. I am innocent, and so forth). Then Orfeo sends the servant Orillo to kill her, but while the latter is hidden in the bushes waiting for the appropriate time, Aristeo charges Euridice again, who in fleeing steps on the obligatory snake and dies, fulfilling her mythological destiny. Thus mythology saves Orpheus from being a killer or the architect of a successful murder, but does not absolve him from the intention. The myth is of no help to Orpheus for his motivations and desires—he sent Orillo to murder his wife, after failing himself, for something that did not exist, chasing after an unfounded suspicion, driven by a sentiment completely extraneous to the traditional character profile of Orpheus—jealousy.

Again like in *Othello*, when Orillo reports back to Orfeo that Euridice had been faithful and is now dead, Orfeo is sorry and sings himself to sleep, lamenting her demise (the sleep scene required in Venetian opera). Aristeo is sorry too, and decides to kill himself to join her, but Bacchus, who had raised him, stops him with an offering of wine. Euridice's spirit appears (the ghost scene, another Venetian operatic convention) and scolds Orfeo for not

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Seventeenth-Century Venice*

rescuing her. Orfeo goes to the underworld, purportedly sings himself in, and is given Euridice with the mythological condition. Unlike all of her counterparts, while the pair is leaving Hades Euridice encourages her bridegroom to hold on, not to turn around, but he can't, or won't. After losing his spouse, when Orpheus exits from Hades alone he cursorily renounces womankind and disappears (Act 3, scene 16).

<p><u>ORFEO</u> Mai più, stelle spietate, Io m'innamorerò. Acciò il mio cor stia sciolto Da i lacci d'un bel volto, Donne, vi fuggirò. Mai più, stelle spietate...</p>	<p><u>ORFEO</u> Never again, o cruel stars, Will I fall in love. So that my heart remain free From the bonds of a pretty face, Women I shall flee you. Never again, o cruel stars...</p>
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The rest of the opera is concerned with the other subplots, manufacturing the required happy ending with the other couple—Aristeo and Autonoe, reconciled and reunited. All things considered it may be a happy ending for the principal character too—he seems to be spared death and dismemberment.

In this awkward story, full of death threats, murder attempts, and one double death (Achille tries to strangle Aristeo, Orfeo attempts to kill Euridice, Orillo is sent to do the same, a snake actually does the deed, Aristeo wants to kill himself, Orfeo does too, Orfeo wants Aristeo dead, and so does Autonoe), both Orfeo and Euridice are changed characters. Orfeo is a jealous husband, in this one version absolutely and completely guilty of Euridice's final doom—even her encouragement doesn't do the trick. His only 'mitigating' circumstance, if it can be considered as such, is his blinding jealousy, fueled by Aristeo's aggressive and relentless courtship.

Euridice is a complex figure too, morphing from the ancient pure and innocent mythological nymph into a deeper, human, and practical woman, guiltless and pure like Desdemona, though more astute. The first part of the opera presents her as a happy pastoral character, enjoying her wedding; obstinately refusing to understand the not-so-veiled hints Erinda gives her of Aristeo's love (act 1, scene 3). She still claims not to understand when Aristeo tells her behind a curtain is the portrait of the person for whom he is pining (quite literally, he is in bed) and then reveals a mirror for Euridice to look into! The portrait or mirror scene was another Venetian operatic requirement. After the first attempted murder at Orpheus's hand, like Desdemona in the duet of act 4, scene 2 of *Othello*, Euridice defends her faithfulness (act 2, scene 14).

ORFEO [*a Ercole*]
Mi tradì ne l'onor.
EURIDICE
Son innocente.
ORFEO
Dirai tu che non t'ama
Il lascivo Aristeo?

ORFEO [*to Hercules*]
She betrayed my honor.
EURIDICE
I am innocent.
ORFEO
Are you saying that the lascivious
Aristaeus doesn't love you?

EURIDICE

Mi segue, è vero,
Ma 'l timor menzognero,
Che t'alberga nel sen, t'ha 'l cor deluso;
Fida ti son, il tuo sospetto accuso.

EURIDICE

It's true he follows me,
But the deceiving fear
You have in your breast has mislead your heart;
I am faithful to you, I resent your suspicion.

Exactly like in *Othello*, Orfeo is already too convinced to believe and trust his wife and thus sends an assassin (Orillo). It is worth noting though that the accusation meted out is not that of loving but that of being loved, though his anger is directed at her, not Aristaeus.

When Euridice-Desdemona senses the proximity of death she sings an aria to a plant *Querce annose* (act 2, scene 21).

EURIDICE

Querce annose, Piante ombrose,
Mi vedeste un di scherzar,
Or, co 'l core addolorato,
Fatta scherzo d'empio Fato
Vengo a voi per lacrimar.

[vede poi Aristeo e nel fuggirlo viene morsa dal serpente e muore invocando Orfeo davanti ad Orillo che voleva ucciderla e ad Aristeo che l'incalzava]

EURIDICE

Ancient Oaks, shadowy Plants,
You once saw me play,
Now, with my heart in pain,
Mocked by cruel Fate
I come to you to weep.

[then she sees Aristaeus and in fleeing him she is bitten by the snake and dies calling Orfeo in front of Orillo (who wanted to kill her) and of Aristaeus (who was pursuing her)]

This lament occupies the same dramatic position of Shakespeare's *Willow Song* (act 4, scene 3) and, more importantly, fulfills the same function, that of a dirge, a funeral song. As in the corresponding scene of the English drama Euridice is moved to tears as her death approaches and finds solace in singing about or to a tree.

It is obvious that Sartorio and Aureli's opera is part of both the praxis of contemporary Venetian opera and of the stylistic genre of Aureli's and some of his colleagues' libretti, but it is just as evident that as a work in the long and illustrious line of operatic setting of the Orphic myth it is suspicious to say the least, for it changes the story in a way that makes the selfsame choice of the myth, with its implicit message as well as its explicit drama, bizarre. It is possible that like Peri, Caccini, Monteverdi, and then Gluck, Aureli may have chosen the myth of the demigod of music to signal a turning point in operatic history, since he saw his type of libretto as a paladin of a new era. Sartorio himself, inspired by Cesti, felt that he was ushering in a newer, more "modern" version of Venetian opera.¹² That notwithstanding, it seems likely

¹² E. Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice* cit., pp. 387-390, and M Dellaborra, *E' morta Euridice: influenze di Cesti sull'Orfeo di Sartorio*, in *La figura e l'opera di Antonio Cesti nel Seicento europeo: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi - Arezzo, 26-27 aprile 2002*, ed. M. Dellaborra, «Quaderni della Rivista Italiana di Musicologia» 37 (2003).

that the new English tragedy may have been a model for the opera: there are too many similarities for them to be coincidences. It is also clear, however, that the model could not have been Shakespeare's own original source: Giraldo Cinzio's novel *Il moro di Venezia*.

Giovan Battista Giraldo (Ferrara 1504-1573) was a professor, a dramaturg, and an author of tragedies, novels, and poetry, who already as a young man added the academic surname Cynthius (or Cinzio in Italian) to his name and is often known by that name. He studied at the University of Ferrara in the Faculty of Arts and Medicine, graduating in 1531. Three years later he obtained the post of Professor of Philosophy there and was also a physician (having as one of his patients the great Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto). Later he took the post of Professor of Rhetoric, a post he held till 1563, at which point he also abandoned definitively the practice of medicine in favor of literature. He was employed as a ducal secretary by Ercole II at the Este court (1547-1559 year of Ercole II's death). From 1563 to 1565 he lived in Mondovì, at the service of Duke Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia, teaching humanities. There he published the *Hecatommithi* («De gli Hecatommithi di M. Giovanbattista Gyraldi Cinthio nobile ferrarese, nel Monte Regale, appresso Lionardo Torrentino, 1565»). When his post was transferred to Torino, Giraldo followed, though he was entertaining the idea of creating his own university. In his quest he went to the University of Pavia where he taught oratorical arts and became a member of the Accademia degli Affidati. In Ferrara he had been a member of the Accademia degli Elevati till its dissolution in 1541 and then of the Accademia dei Filareti, since its founding in 1554. He is mostly known for his tragedies but also for his *Hecatommithi*, a collection of 113 novels subdivided in ten days (giornate), modeled after Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which contains not only *Il moro di Venezia* (7th novel 3rd day), the source of Shakespeare's *Othello*, but also that of *Measure for Measure* (5th novel 8th day).

It's not known whether Shakespeare read the original Italian version of the *Hecatommithi*, the French translation by Gabriel Chappuys (Paris, 1584), or possibly a now lost English translation or adaptation. Nobody knows how much Shakespeare knew Italian or French.¹³ In this story, the only named character is Desdemona herself (actually Disdemona). The future Othello is simply 'il Moro' or 'il Capitano,' the future Jago is 'l'Alfiere' (the Ensign), the future Cassio is 'il Capo di squadra' (the Chief of the Squadron) and all other characters are named as related to them (the wife of, the child of, etc.). The outline of the story is the known one. The Alfiere falls desperately in love with Disdemona who is faithful to her Capitano, and thus his love turns into vengeful hate, bent on destroying what he can't have. He plants into the

¹³ For a brief discussion see the introduction to *Othello* in the *Arden Shakespeare* collection, by M. R. Ridley, *Introduction*, in Shakespeare W. *Othello*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1985, pp. xv-xvi, who states that it may have been any of the mentioned versions, or A. Kernan, *The source of «Othello»*, in Shakespeare, W. *Othello*, New York, Penguin, 1963 (Signet Classic) p. 171, who believes that Shakespeare must have read the original Italian. Kernan in turn refers to K. Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources*. London, Routledge, 1957, pp. 122-123.

Moor's head the seed of Disdemona's love for the Capo di squadra with lies, and steals, using his three-year old daughter as a decoy, the famous embroidered handkerchief. He then leaves it in the home of the Capo di squadra, who is puzzled but recognizes it and even attempts to return it. The Alfieri meanwhile takes the Moor to see it in the Capo's house. The Moor and his Ensign plan to kill both, but the latter, under cover, only manages to wound one of the Capo di squadra's legs, requiring amputation. Then, and this is different from Shakespeare's play, the Ensign and the Moor together plot to kill Disdemona, who has strengthened the Moor's conviction of her guilt by being concerned about the Capo di squadra's wound. According to plan they murder Disdemona by beating her on the head with a sock filled with sand, then make a ledge above her bed collapse, blaming that for her "split skull." There is a post-death action as well: the Ensign is stripped of his standing by the Moor, so he plots with the Capo di squadra to bring down the Moor, whom he accuses of having caused the Capo di squadra's leg wound. There is a trial against the Moor in Venice and he is exiled and eventually killed by Disdemona's family, while the Ensign accuses falsely other men until justice catches up with him and he dies, after having been made to take a large dose of his own medicine.

The story is short, simple, and linear, all in the third person, with no dialogue. While there is no doubt it was Shakespeare's source, Giraldi Cinzio can not have been Aureli's source since it does not include any of the episodes mentioned. Giraldi's Moor is convinced of his wife's guilt only by the handkerchief and by the Alfieri's insinuations, without eavesdropping on any conversation. There is, however, little doubt that Aureli the poet knew the *Hecatommithi*, which may well have been what inspired him to seek out the Shakespearean tragedy, or what might have inspired him after seeing a performance of it.

Unfortunately, very little is known on the transmission of *Othello* in Italy. The tragedy was probably written in 1603 and first performed in 1604. In 1622 it was published in quarto and the next year in a longer version in the first folio edition. During the seventeenth century it was reprinted quite a few times, but there is no evidence to even suggest when or where may have been the arrival of *Othello* in Italy. It is not unlikely, however, that an itinerant company may have been seen and heard in Venice by the time of Aureli's libretto, almost seventy years after the premiere. There is also the possibility, of which however there is no documentation, that somehow Sartorio may have come into contact with *Othello* either in Hanover or through some Hanover connection.

The coincidences between the two works, the Venetian opera and the English Bard's tragedy, are too many to be dismissed as coincidences. There is, to my knowledge, no other opera, novel, story, or play that changes the protagonists in any way that even approaches this one. What would be the reason for an author to insert the motive of murderous jealousy in a myth that has at its core the theme of the power of music, strength and reason of which is the love

for the prematurely dead bride and thus the supreme desire to wrangle her from Pluto, an *exploit* that is made possible by the power that his singing has to move Hades? How does a jealous and murderous husband contribute to the story? What need would Orpheus have to eavesdrop right when Euridice pleads Autonoe's case with Aristeo, without mentioning her name, to be convinced of his idea, since Euridice's death, a double one, is already sanctioned by the myth? Moreover, in almost all operas Euridice is a secondary character, who never sings a single entire aria, and with a considerably lesser role than Orfeo. Here she sings a number of them and one, at the moment when she senses her end is near, to a tree. Happenstance? It seems improbable, there are too many parallels. More likely than not, this opera is the proof Shakespeare scholars have been searching for of the arrival in Venice of the Moor's tragedy.

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