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Constructions of gender in Monteverdi's dramatic music

SUSAN McCLARY

One of the great accomplishments of seventeenth-century culture was the development of a vocabulary by means of which dramatic characters and actions could be delineated in music. The techniques for emotional and rhetorical inflection we now take for granted are not, in fact, natural or universal: they were deliberately formulated during this period for the purposes of music theatre. Monteverdi's descriptions of how he invented the semiotics of madness for *La finta pazza Licori* or of war for the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* reveal how very self-consciously he designed methods for 'representing' affective states.¹

The achievements of the *stile rappresentativo* made possible most of the musical forms with which we still live today: not only the dramatic genres of opera, oratorio and cantata, but also instrumental music, which is dependent on the tonality and semiotic codes born on the seventeenth-century stage. Indeed, we are so immersed in these and other cultural forms of the early modern era that only recently have their original social purposes been examined critically. Studies such as José Antonio Maravall's *Culture of the Baroque*, Jacques Attali's *Noise* and Lorenzo Bianconi's *Music in the Seventeenth Century* have begun to lay bare the post-Renaissance politics of 'representation' and to demonstrate how opera and other public spectacles of the seventeenth century served as sites for struggles over power. For if audiences can be made to believe that what is presented on stage is literally the *re*-presentation of reality itself, then questions of what gets represented, how and by whom become vital political concerns to rulers and ruled alike.²

To be sure, the ideological struggles Maravall, Attali and Bianconi have in mind are those of the public sphere: those of the Counter Reformation, the disintegrating courts of northern Italy or the rise of the absolutist state. But

¹ For passages concerning *Licori*, see Claudio Monteverdi, *The Letters of Claudio Monteverdi*, trans. Denis Stevens (Cambridge, 1980), 315, 318, 320, 335–6; concerning *Combattimento*, see the foreword to his *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi* (Venice, 1638), trans. Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York, 1950), 413–15.

² José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis, 1986); Jacques Attali, *Noise*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1985), esp. 46–86; and Lorenzo Bianconi, *Music in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. David Bryant (Cambridge, 1987). Bianconi states: 'Attribute of authority, pedagogical requisite of the ruling classes, instrument of propaganda and persuasion: these are the three central features of seventeenth-century music as an agent of "publicity"' (p. 65). See also Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York, 1986).

For information directly concerned with Monteverdi's patronage at the Gonzaga court

the crisis of authority in the seventeenth century was not confined to the realm of princes and popes: it also impinged on the most intimate dimensions of private life. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* marks the seventeenth century as a pivotal moment when the West started to alter radically its attitudes towards and treatment of human erotic behaviour. He writes: 'Since the end of the sixteenth century, the "putting into discourse of sex", far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement.'³ As Foucault goes on to demonstrate, even if such public discourses are intended to control and contain sexuality, the obsession always to talk – or sing – about sex also has the effect of continually stirring libidinal interests. To a greater extent than ever before, gender and sexuality become central concerns of Western culture in the seventeenth century, and the new public arts all develop techniques for arousing and manipulating desire, for 'hooking' the spectator. Witness, for example, the brand of tonality that emerges at this time: a surefire method for inciting and channelling expectations which easily supplants the less coercive procedures of modality.⁴

In staged 'representations' of the social world, the identification of characters as either male or female is fundamental. The seventeenth-century composer writing dramatic music immediately confronted the problem of gender construction – how to depict men and women in the medium of music. The concept of 'construction' is important here, for while the sex of an individual is a biological given, gender and sexuality are socially organised: their forms (ranges of proper behaviours, appearances, duties) differ significantly in accordance with time, place or class.⁵

It may be possible to trace some of the musical signs for 'masculinity' or 'femininity' that are displayed in opera back to earlier genres such as the madrigal. Erotic desire undeniably ranks among the central themes of Italian madrigals, and vivid musical images simulating longing, frustration or fulfilment occur in abundance in this repertory. But such musical images of desire need not be marked as gender-specific. Because madrigal texts typically speak from the

and its political dimensions, see Iain Fenlon, 'The Mantuan Stage Works', in *The New Monteverdi Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London, 1985), 251–87.

For a perceptive theoretical model through which to address these concerns, see Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: Contributions to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', trans. Richard Nice, in *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Collins et al. (London, 1986), 131–63.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980), 12. For a discussion of the 'putting into discourse of sex' for political purposes in Elizabethan England, see Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, 17–71.

⁴ For discussions of tonality in these terms, see my 'The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Monteverdi', Ph.D. diss. (Harvard, 1976); 'The Rise and Fall of the Teleological Model in Western Music', *The Paradigm Exchange II* (Minneapolis, 1987), 26–31; and 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year', in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge, 1987), especially 21–3.

⁵ See, for instance, Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1981); Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, 1980); and Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?': *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis, 1988).

masculine subject position that is assumed as normative in Western culture, they are usually treated as neutral or undifferentiated with respect to gender. However, there are texts – especially those drawn from Guarini or Tasso – that are understood to be female utterances, and some musical settings of these seem subtly coded as ‘feminine’.⁶ Still, the convention of setting texts as mixed-voiced polyphony tends to make the ‘realistic’ representation of gendered individuals a lesser priority in the madrigal than in opera. Music drama provides the incentive for the full-scale entry of gender construction into music. Opera emerges and continues to function as one of the principal discourses within which gender and sexuality are publicly delineated – and are at the same time celebrated, contested and constrained.⁷

Not surprisingly, musical delineations of ‘the feminine’ or ‘the masculine’ in early opera were shaped by attitudes prevalent in the societies in which the composers lived. And those delineations of gender in turn participated in social formation by providing public models of how men are, how women are – much as film, television and popular music do today. Some of these early gendered types in music have survived along with the attitudes that first gave them voice, and are recognised relatively easily by present-day listeners. But many of the ways in which gender is construed in this music are alien to us and can be recovered only if we know something of the historical context within which they were developed. This may seem counter-intuitive, since many of us are still inclined to believe in the immutability of gender and sexuality. But recent research is beginning to establish that even certain fundamental concepts concerning sexuality have changed radically since the seventeenth century, making it extremely treacherous for us today to depend on what we might assume to be universal experiences of the transhistorical body.

To give an example, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the dynamic energy characteristic of Shakespeare's erotic dialogues is predicated on a belief that was then prevalent even in medicine and science: namely, that for purposes of reproduction, both male and female partners had to be aroused to the point of ejaculation.⁸ If the woman was not brought to such a state of ardour that she emitted her

⁶ See for instance Monteverdi's ‘Vattene pur crudel’ (Book III), with its fierce depiction of feminine rage; ‘Io mi son giovinetta’ (Book IV), with its cute, mincing beginning (sung only by the women); or ‘O Mirtillo’ (Book V), with its shy, hesitant opening and subsequent emotional outburst. Very little work has been done on the musical articulation of sexual desire in Renaissance repertoires, perhaps because studies of that music tend to concentrate on theoretical issues such as modal identity, *musica ficta* or signs of emerging tonal awareness, rather than on the ways modes were used to create particular kinds of images. See, however, ‘The Transition’ (n. 4). I am at present writing a book – *Power and Desire in Seventeenth-Century Music* – that includes an examination of musical constructions of the erotic in the madrigal.

⁷ For a provocative discussion of how the standard opera repertory organises gender and sexuality, see Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988).

⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley, 1988), 66–93. See also Thomas Laqueur, ‘Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology’, *Representations*, 14 (1986), 1–41; and Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, 1988).

'seed', conception was thwarted – thus the emphasis in many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cultural documents on feminine desire and mutual arousal. Greenblatt suggests that the rapid repartee in Shakespeare's comedies is meant to simulate this all-important 'friction to heat'. He also notes that when science discovered that feminine arousal served no reproductive purpose, cultural forms silenced not only the *necessity* but finally even the *possibility* of desire in the 'normal' female. This discussion would seem to shed light on the erotic friction celebrated in the trio texture so beloved by seventeenth-century composers from Monteverdi to Corelli – trios in which two equal voices rub up against each other, pressing into dissonances that achingly resolve only into yet other knots, reaching satiety only at conclusions. This interactive texture (and its attendant metaphors) is largely displaced in music after the seventeenth century by individual, narrative monologues.

Regardless of whether or not they happen to survive, all modes of gender-encoding are social constructs rather than universals. As such they warrant historical investigation. The area of research I am describing is vast and would demand many book-length studies to do it justice. This article will focus on one issue: the ways gender is organised in early opera with respect to rhetoric and, by extension, to social power.

1

It has long been recognised that rhetorical virtuosity was one of the central concerns of early monody. But rhetoric was cultivated for purposes far more prestigious than the arts in Monteverdi's time. As Gary Tomlinson has demonstrated, sixteenth-century society regarded rhetorical skill as indispensable for effective participation in public affairs: 'Behind the humanist exaltation of oratorical persuasion lay a recognition of the passions as dynamic forces directing human thought and action, and a felt need to control and exploit these forces.'⁹ Given the personal and political power ascribed to rhetorical prowess, it is not surprising that Renaissance humanists sought to regulate who was to have access to such skills, and thus the 'woman question' arose in many humanist treatises on behaviour and education.¹⁰ Attitudes concerning women and

⁹ Gary Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1987), 7.

¹⁰ For extensive documentation concerning women's rhetorical training and their access to cultural production, see Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, 1977), 137–64; Patricia H. Labalme, ed., *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York, 1980). For information directly concerning music, see also the following essays in Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds., *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950* (Urbana, 1986): Howard M. Brown, 'Women Singers and Women's Songs in Fifteenth-Century Italy', 62–89; Anthony Newcomb, 'Courtesans, Muses, or Musicians? Professional Women Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Italy', 90–115; and Jane Bowers, 'The Emergence of Women Composers in Italy, 1566–1700', 116–61.

For more on the 'woman question' in the Renaissance and seventeenth century, see Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des femmes*, 1400–1789', in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, 1984), 65–109; and Riley (see n. 5), 25–35.

rhetoric were divided. On the one hand, St Paul's injunction that women remain silent still informed etiquette. Bembo declared that under no circumstances were women to be trained in rhetoric. On the other hand, Castiglione advocated the same humanist education for female as for male children – although he also made it clear that males developed rhetorical skills in order to operate effectively in the public realm, while females were to exercise their abilities in order to enhance their charm in the private sphere.¹¹

Rhetoric in the mouth of a woman was understood as a different phenomenon from that issuing from a man. A man skilled in oratory was powerful, effective in imposing his will in society at large. A woman's rhetoric was usually understood as seduction, as a manifestation not of intellectual but of sexual power.¹² So pervasive were the constraints on feminine utterance in the public sphere that even those few women who exercised political power had to cultivate images that made their speech socially acceptable: Elizabeth became 'the Virgin Queen' and Catherine de' Medici identified herself in official iconography as Artemis.¹³ In essence, both women had to disavow or elaborately redefine their sexualities in order to secure credibility and voice.

There are many fine musicological studies that analyse the devices used to heighten the texts of characters – male and female – in early music drama. But most do not differentiate according to gender or consider portrayals up against the contemporary social apparatus that would tend to privilege male utterances and to silence women. However, even a cursory survey of the ways the issues of gender, speech and power intersect in early opera raises many questions about the politics of representation in the early seventeenth century. For despite the fact that aristocratic patrons had extensive control over the subject matter of their entertainments, the works themselves often appear – at least at first glance – to undercut assumed social hierarchies and call into question the authority of patriarchy and nobility. The remainder of this article examines the ways in which Monteverdi deals with the rhetorical options available to male and female characters in his operas.

¹¹ See Brown, 'Women Singers', 62–7; and Ann Rosalind Jones, 'City Women and Their Audiences: Louise Labé and Veronica Franco', in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy I. Vickers (Chicago, 1986), 299–301.

¹² For a discussion of how this attitude informed the phenomenon of the female writer of the Renaissance, see Jones, 'City Women', 299–316. See also my discussion of Poppea on pp. 218–19 below. This attitude has persisted in Western culture. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), especially Part I, 3–104.

¹³ For an examination of Catherine's imagery, see 'Catherine de' Medici as Artemisia: Figuring the Powerful Widow', *Rewriting the Renaissance*, 227–41. For Elizabeth's imagery, see Louis A. Montrose, 'A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Form', *Rewriting the Renaissance*, 65–87. However, the fact that England's monarch during the reign of Elizabeth was female strongly influenced the constructions of femininity and sexuality in the arts developed under her patronage. See Tennenhouse (n. 2), 17–71.

2

More than most subsequent operas, *L'Orfeo* appears to reproduce the stable Renaissance world. It includes instances of the old-fashioned musical genres characteristic of court entertainments; its formal structure is organised in self-contained, ultimately static symmetries and palindromes; and its themes are easily recognised as humanist. As we might expect, it also re-inscribes, for the most part, traditional hierarchies of authority: mortal women defer to men and the shepherds to their 'semi-god'. Likewise Orfeo submits – although somewhat more ambivalently – to the deities who ground this imaginary universe. How does rhetoric operate within this stable order?

Orfeo is, of course, the quintessential rhetorician of mythology and of early music drama. His eloquence was able to sway the passions of humans and gods alike. Writing music for such a character was far more difficult than simply asserting that Orfeo had such powers: Monteverdi was faced with the task of actually moving the passions of listeners, otherwise the representation would have proved hollow. He created two kinds of rhetoric – two discursive practices – for Orfeo, both of which continue to resonate (though in different ways) in subsequent operas.

The first I will call the rhetoric of seduction – a process of artificially arousing expectations and then wilfully channelling the desires of listeners. The sexy, arrogant, charismatic Orfeo is best illustrated by his first utterance – the wedding song 'Rosa del ciel'. There are three sections to this oration, each with a different rhetorical strategy. In the opening section, Orfeo commands that the sun stand still to listen to him as he spins his virtuosic apostrophe out over a single chord (Ex. 1a). Modern listeners and performers are accustomed to similar recitations over sustained bass notes in later *recitativo secco*, and thus the power of Monteverdi's strategy may be lost on us. Monteverdi's contemporaries were used to modal syntax, in which the melodic line carried the relevant information and in which the bass usually supported the mode-bearing melodic pitches on a one-to-one basis.¹⁴ Underlying Orfeo's opening strain is one of the most familiar and most predictable progressions for that time: the generating modal line initiates a descent through the G-dorian diapente from the fifth degree to the mediant and is harmonised in the strongest fashion available (Ex. 1b). Yet instead of simply singing that modal line as his melody (as might be the case in a

¹⁴ The theoretical discussions that follow are based on my 'Transition' (n. 4). Orfeo's headstrong impetuosity and Euridice's reticence do not exist in the notes *per se*, but in the qualities of motion indicated by the designated pitches up against particular norms. Thus understanding the syntactical norms and expectations of this music affects critically the ways in which one perceives compositional strategies and, consequently, performance choices.

The reductions in the examples may resemble Schenkerian graphs, but they represent the linear modal processes that guarantee the coherence of the passages in question. These pieces are not tonally conceived (except for a few moments prolonged by cadential harmonies, such as the conclusion of Ex. 1); yet the strategy of implying long-term goals, persuading the listener to desire those promised goals, and manipulating expectations in the process of attaining the goals is crucial to the emergence of common-practice-period tonality.

madrigal or a Caccini monody), Orfeo embellishes its first element to an extraordinary degree, given the expectations of the day. Listeners (including Apollo – the sun) must wait until he is ready to move on before the syntactical progression may proceed. We are instilled with a longing to hear motion, yet dazzled by the audacity and control with which he stretches out . . . and out . . . his initial appeal.¹⁵

The second section teases us – repeatedly moving purposefully through the standard Romanesca progression towards the final, *g* (Ex. 2a). Twice the listener is encouraged to expect the promised resolution, and twice – after tricking us into investing libidinally in hearing that final – Orfeo interrupts the descent on the penultimate pitch (Ex. 2b). What occurs in the rarified, suspended animation that follows the ruptures is extremely significant. His initial, self-consciously Petrarchan figures ('Fu ben felice il giorno' and 'e più felice l'ora' invoke Petrarch's ecstatic sonnet 'Benedetto sia 'l giorno, e 'l mese, e l'anno') are sung with the confidence we might expect of the orator who sang the opening section. But when he approaches the source of his happiness – Euridice and her responses to his sighs – his forthrightness is sidetracked by Eros. Gradually that moment of rupture on *a* becomes the pivot to another pitch centre that lies deep within his modal ambitus: *d*. After the second interruption deflects him towards *d*, he submits to this alternate reality – the site where he abandons his G-dorian orientation to join with Euridice – through an elaborate cadential confirmation of *d*. He thus delivers a different final from the one promised, but he does it so compellingly (and for such agreeably sentimental reasons) that the listener cannot object. We are seduced along with him as he reports this crucial event through the stammering resimulation in music of his desire-laden frisson.

¹⁵ Many of Monteverdi's and Striggio's rhetorical strategies are indebted to a venerable legacy of devices and tropes developed in literature. For a discussion of this literary tradition, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1967). For two seventeenth-century attempts at borrowing rhetorical terminology for the purposes of music theory, see Joachim Burmeister, *Musica poetica* (1606; Kassel, 1955), and Christoph Bernhard, 'The Treatises of Christoph Bernhard', trans. Walter Hilse, *The Music Forum*, 3 (1973), 31–196. Claude Palisca discusses Burmeister's rhetorical theory and offers an analytic demonstration in 'Ut oratoria musica: The Rhetorical Basis of Musical Mannerism', in *The Meaning of Mannerism*, ed. F. W. Robinson and Stephen Nichols (Hanover, N.H., 1972), 37–65.

Because I am concerned with indicating how the music itself creates its rhetorical effects, I will not burden the discussion with Latin literary designations or correspondences. However, Orfeo's opening here might be fruitfully compared with the rhetorically dazzling opening of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (discussed briefly in Curtius, 243–4). Just as Monteverdi launches an extraordinarily prolonged 'upbeat' that is released finally on the word 'Dimmi' (tell me), so Milton too directs all the energy of this passage – a synopsis of the entire Christian history of humankind – towards 'Sing'. In both instances the listener is swept up in an onrushing flow towards the suspended outcome.

The sexual connotations of such musical devices seem at least implicitly recognised by Joseph Kerman, 'Orpheus: The Neoclassic Vision', *Claudio Monteverdi: 'Orfeo'*, ed. John Whenham (Cambridge, 1986), 129: 'Monteverdi met this ideal with a perfect genius for declamation [. . .] And to whip the recitative line into passion, he harrowed every available musical means for tension. Declamation guided him to sudden halts and spurting cascades in rhythm, and to precipitous, intense rises and falls in melodic line.'

Orfeo

Ro - sa del ciel vi - ta del mon - do e deg - na Pro - le di lui

che l'u - ni - ver - so af - fre - na Sol che'l tut - to cir - con - di e'l tut - to

mi - ri Da gli stel - lan - ti gi - ri Dim - mi ve -

- de - stù mai Di me più lie - to e for - tu - na - to A - man - te?

Rosa del ciel vita del mondo e degna	Rose of the heavens, life of the earth, and worthy
Prole di lui che l'universo affrena	offspring of him who guides the universe,
Sol che 'l tutto circonda e 'l tutto miri	Sun, who encircles and sees all
Da gli stellanti giri	from your rotations among the stars,
Dimmi vedestù mai	tell me, did you ever see
Di me più lieto e fortunato Amante?	a happier, more fortunate lover than me?

Ex. 1a: 'Rosa del ciel', section 1. Note: Examples transcribed from the edition printed in 1615 in Venice

Ex. 1b: Syntactical reduction

The third section begins verbally as though it were but the third member of a rhetorical triad (felice, più felice, felicissimo), but its musical setting marks it as distinctly new. It both absorbs the deferred energy of the previously unfulfilled progressions and serves as a final push for the cadence. The organising context



Ex. 2a: Syntactical reduction (Romanesca)

Orfeo

Fu ben fe - li - ce il gior - no Mio ben _____ che pria ti vi -
 - di E più fe - li - ce l'ho - ra Che per te so - spi -
 - ra - i Poi ch'al mio so - spi - rar tu — so - spi - ra - sti

Fu ben felice il giorno
 Mio ben che pria ti vidi
 E più felice l'ora
 Che per te sospirai
 Poi ch'al mio sospirar tu sospirasti

Happy was the day,
 my love, when first I saw you,
 and happier still the hour
 when I sighed for you,
 for to my sighs you also sighed;

Ex. 2b: 'Rosa del ciel', section 2

remains G-dorian (Ex. 3a), though this becomes clear only with the re-establishment of the Romanesca-based progressions beginning at 'Se tanti cori havessi'. Instead of moving methodically towards *g* as in earlier instances, in this section the progression rushes impulsively, exuberantly through the whole cycle (Ex. 3b). Orfeo pauses only once (at 'tutti colmi sarieno') and, as he does so, we learn how truly manipulated we are: we hang on his every pitch as though he constructed reality for us – which indeed he does. Once again at the last moment he surrenders his own final (*g*) for an unexpected, dramatic yet somewhat self-effacing conclusion on *d*, thus opening the way to Euridice's answer.

The extraordinary difference between the modes of rhetoric traditionally available to men and to women is evident in Euridice's reply. As we shall see in



Ex. 3a: Reduction

the examples of Proserpina and Poppea, it is feasible for female characters to be rhetorically skilled; but it is significant that both of these counter-examples are mature, experienced women. Euridice is an untouched maiden. If her speech were too compelling, her innocence might well come into question (how did she learn to manipulate – or even to express – desire?). The librettist, Striggio, already creates a kind of speaking void of Euridice, as she begins haltingly with ‘I cannot say’, then tells Orfeo her heart is with him and he must look to himself for her answers.¹⁶

Monteverdi has the difficult task of creating music for this moment that is lovely yet self-deprecating, that lacks rhetorical force but charms us all the more for that lack. He uses several rhetorical devices towards this end (Ex. 4). Whereas Orfeo’s speech is intensely teleological, Euridice finds it difficult to move directly towards a goal without apologising. Her very first, forthright move from d'' to a' is immediately qualified by a move to g^\sharp' . She makes her linear descent (a' to d') seem erratic by establishing tiny unexpected tonics here and there – on a' , c'' and g' ; yet she does finally reach out and match Orfeo’s pledge on d' . She backs away immediately, however, as if afraid she has been too forward. Her last phrase is even ambivalent with respect to its own final: if d' is still her final, then she returns to the equivocal species of fourth ($d''-a'$) for her conclusion and hovers indecisively on the fifth degree. If, however, G-dorian can still be heard as organising the entire exchange of vows (with Euridice’s reply simply elaborating the intimate domain Orfeo established and circumscribed for this purpose), then this conclusion may be heard as lingering shyly on the penultimate second degree to g' , hesitating to state the bottom-line tonic. In any case, this bottom line is cheerfully supplied for her by the chorus, which leaps in with its boisterous ‘Lasciate i monti’ to seal the marriage contract in G major.

I am not suggesting that Monteverdi wrote inferior music for Euridice, still less that he thought of women as inferior. But his musical construction of ‘maidenhood’ is informed by what his audience would expect to hear as the

¹⁶ This figure of the exchange of hearts between lovers is a convention of lyric verse and romance narratives since medieval times. It is significant here that Euridice alone testifies to this condition. A similar kind of speaking void can be found in Mimi’s self-deprecating ‘Mi chiamano Mimi’ in Puccini’s *La bohème*. See the discussion in Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *La bohème* (Cambridge, 1986), 71–3.

Orfeo

Fe - li - cis - si - mo il pun - to Che la can - di - da ma - no Pe -

- gno di pu - ra fe - de à me por - ge - te

Se tan - ti co - ri ha - ves - si Quant' oc - chi ha' l' ciel e -

- ter - no e quan - te chio - me Han que - sti col - li a -

- me - ni il ver - de mag - gio Tut - ti col - mi sa -

- rie - no e tra - boc - can - ti Di quel pia - cer ch'og - gi mi fa con - ten - to

Feliscissimo il punto
 Che la candida mano
 Pegno di pura fede à me porgete
 Se tanti cori havessi
 Quant' occhi ha 'l ciel eterno
 e quante chiome
 Han questi colli ameni il verde maggio
 Tutti colmi sarieno e traboccanti
 Di quel piacer ch'oggi mi fa contento

Happiest the moment
 when your white hand
 pledge of pure faith, you give to me.
 If I had as many hearts
 as the eternal heaven has eyes
 and these pleasant hills
 leaves in verdant May,
 all of them would be full and overflowing
 with this joy that today makes me content.

Ex. 3b: 'Rosa del ciel', section 3. *There is a pitch missing here in the original print. This is the solution provided in the Malipiero edition

5̇ 4̇ 3̇ 2̇ 1̇ 5̇ = - (g:3̇ 2̇ 1̇)

Chiedilo (i or v?) Lasciate

Ex. 4a: Reduction

Euridice

Io non di - rò qual si - a Nel tuo gio - ir Or - feo la gio - ia

mi - a — Che non ho me - co il co - - re Ma

te - co stas - si in com - pa - gnia d'a - mo - re Chie - di - lo

dun - que à lui — s'in - ten - der bra - mi Quan - to lie - to gio - i - sca e quan - to t'a - mi

Io non dirò qual sia
 Nel tuo gioir Orfeo la gioia mia
 Che non ho meco il core
 Ma teco stassi in compagnia d'amore
 Chiedilo dunque à lui s'intender brami
 Quanto lieto gioisca e quanto t'ami

I cannot say how great
 my joy is, Orfeo, at your joy,
 for I do not have my heart with me,
 but it remains with you together with my love;
 ask it then if you desire to hear
 how happy it is and how much it loves you.

Ex. 4b: 'Io non dirò'

utterance of a young girl.¹⁷ This tiny speech, painstakingly composed out of the available rhetorical devices to produce *anti*-rhetoric, might well have been more difficult to accomplish than the flamboyant oratory of the Orfeo character.

The rhetoric of seduction is also practised by a female character in *L'Orfeo*: Proserpina, who intercedes with her consort Plutone as an advocate for Orfeo's case. The text of her intercession seeks very frankly to arouse and manipulate Plutone's desire, as she recalls her own courtship and the joy of their marriage bed. She even echoes the Petrarch-inspired 'fu ben felice il giorno – e più felice – felicissimo' sequence of Orfeo's early vow. The music Monteverdi gives her closely resembles that of Orfeo's wedding song, as she likewise prolongs her recitations dramatically over suspended basses or fuels her arguments through the logic of Romanesca-type progressions. Three circumstances legitimise Proserpina's rhetorical skill: first, she is communicating with her own spouse – a situation in which sexual pleasure is socially condoned; second, her rhetoric is in the service of Orfeo – her manipulation is for a worthy cause; and third, she appeals directly to Plutone, whose replies (at once legalistic in that he tends to sing the bass, and yet arbitrary in that his movements are difficult to predict) make it clear that he maintains patriarchal authority. He yields to Proserpina's wishes, though by his own choice and for his own interests. However, despite the obviously patriarchal relationship (and ignoring for the moment the circumstances that cause Proserpina to be in Hades in the first place), this scene is unusual: the mutual and explicit acknowledgment in music by a man and a woman of sexual desire and pleasure untainted by a sense of shame or impending punishment.

The other form of rhetoric displayed by Orfeo is the lament: his expressions of pathos following Euridice's two deaths (the end of Act II and most of Act V). Laments are typically performed in traditional societies by women, and they are often ritual rather than personal. Orfeo unwittingly participates in a female genre – and without the protective shield of ritual. In his erratic outbursts, he frequently seems to lose control of his own speech, and this turns out to be crucial. For if the glory of opera is its ability to give the illusion of depth to characters – to deliver both the verbal text and an additional dimension that inflects the text affectively – then a great deal depends on who seems to be wielding that second dimension.

When Orfeo is operating as a rhetorician (at the beginning of his wedding song, in his appeal to Caronte, 'Possente spirto', etc.), he appears to direct the musical flow himself. But in the laments it is Monteverdi rather than the

¹⁷ For another reading of this passage, see Robert Donington's treatment of Euridice's vow in 'Monteverdi's First Opera', *The Monteverdi Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (New York, 1972), 263–4. Donington rightly argues that the pitch-centre A is associated in the opera with death, and he thus sees in Euridice's own utterances the foreshadowing of her doom. I accept this argument concerning long-term symbolism, but would interpret the details of Euridice's speech on the more local and immediate level in which her gendered identity is delineated, for Monteverdi here creates a perfect musical instance of the 'enclosed' woman. See Peter Sallibrass, 'Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed', *Rewriting the Renaissance* (n. 11), 123–42.

orator who constructs the signs of Orfeo's temporary insanity – the disorientating fluctuations in modal centre, the rapid changes in rate of declamation, the discontinuous melodic lines, and so on. Madness, like gender and sexuality, is socially organised, and definitions of what it means to be mad vary greatly with respect to time, place, class and especially gender.¹⁸ Orfeo's version of madness is defined precisely in opposition to his former rhetorical prowess. His speech remains affectively heightened, but now the gestures that once persuaded us have become unglued from their sustaining logic. He can no longer assemble those shards and fragments rationally, and the illusion of secure reality his oratory had previously created is literally deconstructed before our ears.

Instead of wilfully seducing the audience, Orfeo's involuntary utterances appeal to the *pity* of the listener, all the more because they seem 'authentic', not manufactured for purposes of manipulation. These anguished outbursts, not his calculated seductions, move the gods finally to relent, though at considerable cost: in having his innermost thoughts exhibited as public spectacle, Orfeo is rendered vulnerable, even impotent. The audience has auditory mastery over him, as it is permitted to 'eavesdrop' on his private grief; likewise the provisional nature of his powers – his dependence on aristocratic liberality – is laid bare. The traditional hierarchy of class authority may be preserved and reinforced, but Orfeo's masculine authority is severely threatened.

If the audience has invested too much in Orfeo's charisma, these sections – brilliant as they are – are bound to provoke discomfort.¹⁹ Catherine Clément argues that, in later opera, men who lose control and display their pain are marked as somehow feminine, and are often subjected to fates similar to those of tragic heroines:

But now I begin to remember hearing figures of betrayed, wounded men; men who have women's troubles happen to them; men who have the status of Eve, as if they had lost their innate Adam. These men die like heroines; down on the ground they cry and moan, they lament. And like heroines they are surrounded by real men, veritable Adams who have cast them down. They partake of femininity: excluded, marked by some initial strangeness, they are doomed to their undoing.²⁰

¹⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1965); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York, 1985); and Klaus Doerner, *Madmen and the Bourgeoisie: A Social History of Insanity and Psychiatry*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Jean Steinberg (Oxford, 1981). Compare, for instance, Orfeo's madness with that of Monteverdi's sexually obsessed woman in 'Lamento della ninfa' (Book VIII). I am at present preparing a study of the musical representation of madwomen from various historical moments.

¹⁹ This reading of Orfeo's undoing in his moments of rhetorical excess is informed by Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, 1988), especially 51–4. See also Kerman (n. 15), 132–7, for a discussion of the dramatic problems created by Orfeo's unconstrained passion.

Of course Orfeo's mourning of Euridice owes much rhetorically to Petrarch's reactions to Laura's death. But the two media – carefully constructed sonnets versus staged, enacted representation – produce very different effects, especially with respect to implied authority.

²⁰ Clément (see n. 7), 118. Kerman (see n. 15), 136–7, explains how Gluck's eighteenth-century Orfeo avoids this dilemma.

Orfeo could stand as a prototype of Clément's feminised hero.

Iain Fenlon has noted the strangely cool reception of this opera, which modern musicologists regard as one of the monuments of music history. We know of only two contemporary performances; and when reminiscing later about his accomplishments in the *stile rappresentativo*, Monteverdi usually cited *L'Arianna* rather than *L'Orfeo* as his first great achievement in the new medium.²¹ It is not at all clear that Monteverdi and Striggio stumbled on this problem inadvertently. Indeed, they seem to have intended from the beginning that Orfeo be sacrificed, one way or another: they had originally concluded the piece in accordance with classical models, in which Orfeo is ripped to shreds by the Bacchantes. This version establishes a stronger resonance with the figures of Christ or Prometheus, as Orfeo becomes the supreme artist whose talents challenge traditional authority and who is punished for his insubordination, his violation of 'natural' class boundaries (this at a time when Monteverdi was feeling unappreciated by his patrons). For whatever reasons, the patrons apparently demanded the substitution of a less inflammatory *lieto fine* in which Orfeo is rescued and brought up to the heavens by Apollo. It is this ending that is preserved in surviving musical sources.

Even without the expurgated ending featuring the Bacchantes, the mere fact that Orfeo's psyche is publicly displayed already strips him of discursive agency and dismembers him. The opera delivers a host of mixed messages: is Orfeo a hero or a transgressor? virile or effeminate? rational or mad? Along with other ways of accounting for the lesser success of this opera, I would suggest that Monteverdi's depiction of Orfeo may well have precipitated a crisis in gender representation for the musical stage: a crisis that perhaps influenced both its own reception and subsequent operatic conventions. While sexuality and madness remain favourite themes of music drama, they prove extremely problematic when enacted by male characters. The 'mistake' was rarely repeated, for in operas by Monteverdi and others after *L'Orfeo* (with the intriguing exceptions of the feminised males analysed by Clément), both forms of rhetoric – seduction and lament – come to be practised almost exclusively by female characters.²²

²¹ Iain Fenlon, 'The Mantuan "Orfeo"', in Whenham (see n. 15), 1–19. See also Tomlinson's discussion of the differences between monodic style in *L'Orfeo* and *L'Arianna* in *Monteverdi* (n. 9), 136–41.

²² Robert Walser's work demonstrates that it is precisely these taboos – the taboos traditionally circumscribing representations of masculinity in opera – that are seized and deliberately violated in Heavy Metal, today's answer to baroque spectacle. Metal bands regularly flaunt rhetorical and sexual excess, simulations of madness and androgynous dress as anti-patriarchal signs of hypermasculinity. See his 'Running With the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music', Ph.D. diss. (University of Minnesota, forthcoming).

3

The principal Monteverdian wielder of the rhetoric of seduction after Orfeo is the courtesan Poppea, who operates outside both the humanist ethical code that grounded Orfeo and the patriarchal context that legitimised Proserpina. Much has been written about the courtesans of Renaissance Venice and their rhetorical prowess. Thomas Coryat, an English traveller, advised in 1608: 'Also, thou wilt find the Venetian Courtezan [...] a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if she cannot move thee with all these aforesaid delights, she will assay thy constancy with a Rhetoricall tongue.'²³ Like Woody Allen's 'Whore from MENSA', Venetian courtesans were often highly educated so that they could converse intelligently with the élite men who frequented them. It is largely from their ranks that women poets and intellectuals emerged. They were also, of course, skilled in the arts of seduction, so as to be able to sustain two essential illusions: first, that they really meant what they said and did with their clients (even though they performed their services for hire); and, second, that they acted on passive male victims, who could then disavow responsibility for their erotic adventures (even though it was the men who sought out these women and who sustained such institutions of high-class prostitution).

The traditional repositories of patriarchal authority in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* – the husband, Ottone; the head of State, Nerone; the philosopher, Seneca – are all depicted as passive and impotent. Seneca habitually reverts to silly madrigalisms, which destroy the rhetorical effect of most of his statements.²⁴ Each of Ottone's lines droops flaccidly to its tonic; and Nerone's utterances are almost all reactive – we witness the volatile flux of his emotions as the direct result of Poppea's manipulation. Only Poppea seems capable of sustained manipulation, and, significantly, many of her speeches use precisely the same devices as did Orfeo's wedding song. The major difference is, however, that we are also given glimpses of the 'real' Poppea who pulls the strings so skilfully, so cynically. For instance, immediately after her passionate farewells to Nerone in the first act, we witness her throw off the mask of sincerity and gloat triumphantly over how successfully she has ensnared him. The illusion of 'authenticity' (always to some extent manufactured in rhetorical situations) is here unambiguously revealed as contrived deception.

²³ Quoted in Jones (see n. 11). As Jones comments: 'Coryat reverses the gender roles on which love poetry was conventionally based. Constancy was assumed as a feminine trait, to be admired or overcome by men's uses of rhetoric; for Coryat, men's chastity is endangered by women's manipulations of language, and to encounter a "public woman" is to risk the casuistries of a previously masculine discourse. Practically speaking, he was wrong; a man who had sought out a courtesan could hardly claim to be seduced by her rhetoric' (303–4). See also Arturo Graf, 'Una cortigiana fra mille', *Attraverso il cinquecento* (Turin, 1926), 174–284; and Georgina Masson, *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* (London, 1975).

²⁴ For a different reading of Seneca's musical characterisation, see Ellen Rosand, 'Seneca and the Interpretation of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 38 (1985), 34–71.

Tomlinson argues in *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* that by this moment in the seventeenth century, humanist rhetoric had lost its authority and had gradually been replaced by the fetishised imagery of Marino and his followers. I am suggesting that as the potency of humanist discourse evaporated so did crucial assumptions concerning the potency of patriarchy, male domination and masculine sexuality. The nadir of this decline is dramatised in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as Poppea usurps and perverts to her own ends the tools of patriarchal persuasion, making pathetic 'victims' of these last refugees of humanism.

Not only is the role of seductive orator often reassigned to female characters in later operas, but most of the lamenters celebrated in dramatic works after *L'Orfeo* (Arianna, Penelope and Ottavia) are female: women who have been betrayed by treacherous, absent or ineffectual male authority and who express their righteous indignation in tirades as blistering as any present-day feminist critique. In contrast to Orfeo's apparent delirium, these women state their appeals in carefully organised speeches that enumerate grievances with the most self-possessed rhetorical skill. As they condemn the male authority that would make them submit to silence, their eloquence is doubly electrifying: the fact that they speak their cases in defiance of the traditional prohibition is as powerful as the arguments themselves.²⁵

4

What happened in the course of the early seventeenth century that permitted these reversals in the representation of gender? How did the rhetorical skill so jealously guarded as a male prerogative in the Renaissance come to be put almost exclusively into the mouths of women in the predominantly masculine realm of opera? The answers are as complex and contradictory as the tangle of competing ideologies, cultural forms and social institutions within which the pieces took shape.

First, the range of behaviours considered appropriate to men began to alter considerably in the seventeenth century. From this moment on in Western history, men are encouraged to stifle their feelings, while women are expected

²⁵ There was, in fact, a notable feminist presence in the seventeenth century. See Kelly (n. 10); and Riley (n. 5), 25–35. There seems even to have been an occasional feminist voice in opera, made feasible by the extraordinary coincidence of a female patron and a female composer. See Suzanne Cusick, 'Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* (1625): A Feminist Misreading of *Orlando furioso*?', paper presented at the American Musicological Society Meeting, Baltimore (November 1988), and Ellen Rosand, 'The Voice of Barbara Strozzi', in Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music* (n. 10), 168–90.

to indulge in emotional expression.²⁶ Both the extravagant sensuality and the extravagant anguish exhibited by Orfeo come to be regarded as ‘effeminate’.²⁷ Indeed, I have argued above that even within *L’Orfeo* the very success of the hero’s rhetoric is also his undoing, for the more Monteverdi’s representational genius convinces us that we witness Orfeo’s agony or erotic transport, the less tenable we find that character’s rhetorical and masculine authority. Such symptoms of vulnerability are increasingly projected onto women – both on and off the stage. Surrendering rhetorical flair to women may thus be seen as a way of redefining the spectacle’s proper object. In subsequent operas, it is constructions of *feminine* sensuality and suffering that are exhibited – for the pleasure of the patriarchal gaze and ear.²⁸

Second, the extensive soliloquies of abandoned women and the seduction tactics of Poppea offer what are supposed to be insights into the inner workings of the female mind. They purport to reveal without mediation *what women are really like*: not docile like Euridice, but insubordinate or threatening unless they can be reconciled (like Penelope) with a strong male authority. These characterisations are motivated in part by the increasing social power of women at that time. But they can also be construed as playing on the male fear of women so prevalent in the seventeenth century. For this was a time when more women than ever were managing to emerge into the musical profession (Monteverdi had women colleagues at the Gonzaga court who made ten times his salary)²⁹ and when images of female eroticism proliferated in

²⁶ For studies of the differences in social and emotional development between males and females in Western culture, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, 1978), 180–90; and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, 1982).

²⁷ The Orpheus legend often makes it explicit that Orpheus turns to homosexuality after his loss of Eurydice. See Charles Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore, 1989). Linda Austern has compiled extensive documentation demonstrating that music itself, often personified as Orpheus, was regarded by the Elizabethans as effeminate because of its tendency to rhetorical excess. See her ‘“Alluring the Auditorie to Effeminacie”: Music and the English Renaissance Idea of the Feminine’, paper presented at the American Musicological Society Meeting, Baltimore (November 1988). See also John Guillory, ‘Dalila’s House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor’, in *Rewriting the Renaissance* (n. 11), 106–22, for a discussion of how male sexual pleasure (even the heterosexual variety) comes to be regarded as effeminate during the seventeenth century.

²⁸ See Clément (n. 7). Film theory has dealt extensively with the organisation of masculine desire and constructions of femininity. See, for instance, Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16 (1975), 8–18; Silverman (n. 19); and Carol Flinn, ‘The “Problem” of Femininity in Theories of Film Music’, *Screen*, 27 (1986), 56–72.

²⁹ See Stevens (n. 1), 56. Stevens protests this situation by lumping women professionals together with other fads he finds deplorable when he condemns ‘the Dukes with their lavish and uncontrolled devotion to dwarfs, alchemists and lady singers’ (187). See also Bowers, ‘The Emergence of Women Composers’ (n. 10). Bowers documents some of the ways in which women’s activity as professionals begins to be curtailed during the seventeenth century (141–6).

music.³⁰ It was also, however, a time when some thought that castratos enacted women better than women themselves,³¹ and when thousands of women were being executed as witches. In this paranoid world, in which women were often selected as scapegoats for the crumbling social order, such 'powerful' constructions could also serve to justify patriarchal backlash. As a case in point, Nino Pirrotta argues that Monteverdi's audience would have known about Poppea's ultimate fate – that Nero later murdered the pregnant Poppea by kicking her in the stomach – and could thus have supplied for themselves the missing patriarchal retribution for her apparent triumph at the conclusion of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.³²

But these constructions of powerful women may also be understood as potentially liberating, for the shift in gender representation was bound up with the

³⁰ Representations of feminine desire abound in seventeenth-century music and then disappear with the eighteenth-century insistence on patriarchal values. See, for instance, the settings of texts from the *Song of Songs* by Schütz or Grandi, Frescobaldi's 'Maddalena alla Croce' or Stradella's malignant *San Giovanni Battista*. This obsession with charting female sexuality is again something that needs much more research. It has fascinated me, however, to note that my women students immediately pick up on the erotic imagery of seventeenth-century music, while most of the men fail to recognise it as having anything to do with the erotic. They claim to associate sexuality rather with the forceful thrusting [sic] of Beethoven. See my 'Getting Down Off the Beanstalk: The Presence of a Woman's Voice in Janika Vandervelde's *Genesis II*', *Minnesota Composers Forum Newsletter* (January 1987), for a discussion of the constructions of masculinity in nineteenth-century symphonies.

³¹ In fact, the female characters in the premiere of *L'Orfeo* were all played by castratos (some of whom were scarcely able to learn their parts), despite the availability of virtuoso women singers. See Fenlon (n. 21), 9–16. As late as the 1780s, Goethe could still write that by observing female impersonators on the Roman stage, 'we come to understand the female sex so much the better because some one has observed and meditated on their ways'. See 'Women's Parts Played by Men in the Roman Theatre', *Goethe's Travels in Italy*, trans. Charles Nisbet (London, 1883), 567–71.

The phenomenon of the castrato needs rethinking in terms of social gender construction. It stands as an extreme example of gender re-construction: the social 'need' for adult males who could sound like women was literally and violently inscribed on the body itself. While the motivation was not as simple as the desire to usurp jobs that otherwise would have been held by women, the practice did emerge at the same time as women virtuoso singers were rising to fame and creating a new demand. If it is not easy to puzzle out quite what this practice meant, it most certainly is tangled up with notions of gender organisation. For an imaginative reconstruction of the world of the castratos, see Anne Rice's novel, *Cry to Heaven* (New York, 1982).

³² Nino Pirrotta, 'Scelte poetiche di Monteverdi', *Nuova rivista musicale italiana*, 2 (1968), 254. An extraordinary misogynist backlash followed the reign of Elizabeth and can be traced chillingly in Shakespeare's Jacobean plays. See Tennenhouse (n. 2), 102–46. For discussions of similar periods of masculine paranoia and attendant anti-feminist portrayals of 'powerful' women, see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, 1985), 15–33; my own discussion of Bizet's *Carmen* in 'Sexual Politics in Classical Music', in *Alternative Musicologies*, ed. John Shepherd (New York, forthcoming); and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Tradition and the Female Talent', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York, 1986), 183–207. Although they have been heavily criticised for presenting somewhat prurient accounts of their subjects, see also Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford, 1986); and Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis, 1987). The recent film *Fatal Attraction* is an instance from our own time.

more general crisis in all forms of authority – political, economic, religious and philosophical – during the first half of the seventeenth century.³³ Significantly, composers and librettists grant the right to launch attacks on traditional authority not only to women characters, but also to servants, who complain constantly about class oppression. Although such grievances are blunted somewhat by being put into the mouths of women and grotesque comic characters, these moments of resistance may reveal – and yet conceal – more general dissatisfaction with powerful social institutions: critiques are safer, after all, when displaced onto marginalised others.³⁴

Displaced or not, complaints from the disenfranchised against traditional authority *were* registered in this public forum with surprising candour. Indeed, the reforms at the end of the century served to purge opera of precisely these carnivalesque ‘impurities’: to guarantee consistency of style, but also to silence troublesome voices from the margins.³⁵ Patriarchy and the nobility returned with a vengeance in later court operas: musical and dramatic structures became formulaic; impulsive tonality was domesticated and even ‘naturalised’ through Enlightenment music theory; the comedians were quarantined; and victimised female characters such as Scarlatti’s *Griselda* were trotted out to sing hymns of faith to male authority.

However, between *L’Orfeo* and *La Griselda* there existed an anomalous moment in culture when power relationships associated with gender and rhetoric were oddly reconfigured. If, as Maravall, Attali and Bianconi indicate, operatic spectacles are bound up with the reproduction of aristocratic – and, I would add, patriarchal – interests, they may not actually have served their masters

³³ In addition to Bianconi (n. 2), 28–33 and Tomlinson (n. 9), 243–60, see Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660* (London, 1965), and Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1985).

³⁴ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), for an explanation of how celebrations of the ‘grotesque body’, taken from popular carnival festivities, can be used to challenge authority and official order. See Tennenhouse (n. 2), 17–71, for an effective reading of Shakespeare in terms of Bakhtin’s model. Tennenhouse argues that Shakespeare’s inclusion of the carnivalesque in his Elizabethan plays served not to subvert authority, but rather to create the image of a more inclusive society in a way that flattered the queen, his patron. See also Attali (n. 2), 21–4, for a discussion of *Carnival’s Quarrel with Lent* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Attali uses this painting as a preliminary way of illustrating the opposition between collective and official musical cultures. This model would seem to offer valuable insight into the use of comic and female characters in seventeenth-century opera.

³⁵ Bianconi (n. 2), 183–4, explains the presence of these comic figures as the result of the merger in Venice between imported court opera and the network of professional *commedia dell’arte* theatres already established. He also argues (208–9) that they disappeared from opera at the turn of the century because of increasing specialisation: comic episodes became autonomous and were eventually detached from the *dramma per musica*. That there are formal and practical considerations involved in the elimination of comic characters from serious opera is unquestionable. Yet even the increasing segregation of serious and comic figures in the later seventeenth century (a necessary step if the comic scenes were finally to be detachable) is part of a cleaning-up process that gradually rectifies their promiscuous intermingling in mid-century. The impudent interventions by comic characters in some of the most serious scenes in *L’incoronazione di Poppea* could not be excised without destroying the piece.

in as monolithic a way as we might expect. Indeed in Venice, where a degree of free enterprise tempered the administered culture of the courts, it seems actually to have been in the interest of some of the élite to underwrite spectacles that displayed a more varied, more liberal social network.

For instance, Gianfrancesco Busenello, the librettist of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, was a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti. Bianconi describes this group as

a club of libertine intellectuals whose apparent praise of deceit in reality cloaks *nothing but* an underlying attitude of bitter philosophical scepticism, intolerant of all preconstituted authority (political, moral, rational, religious) [. . .] Only the pessimistic scepticism and subtle immoralism of the Incogniti can explain the fanciful yet disenchanting mockery of certain scenes of this opera.³⁶ (my emphasis)

The mere fact that some patrons and artists subscribed to the tenets of or even belonged to groups such as the Accademia degli Incogniti indicates that Venetian social power was organised along substantially different lines from those prevailing in earlier Mantua and Rome, or in later Naples. Monteverdi's Venetian operas quite clearly testify to a more complicated web of interests than we have thus far been able to explain. We need to know a good deal more about what is 'cloaked' by this 'underlying attitude of bitter philosophical scepticism' and intolerance 'of all preconstituted authority'.

For a variety of reasons, traditional hierarchies of authority were subjected to extraordinary questioning during this period of doubt and shifting alliances. In the name of 'entertainment', many contradictory models of power slipped by as guileless representations of the world itself – at least until the art police clamped down to dictate what was and was not to be heard on the stage. And much of this crisis in power was played out dramatically in terms of gender, which thus became one of the principal sites of contestation in the new cultural media. If we are to make sense of early opera – its achievements and its discontents – we must begin to unravel that tangle of gender, rhetoric and power which first found its voice in the musical conventions of the *stile rappresentativo*.³⁷

³⁶ Bianconi (see n. 2), 188.

³⁷ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Musicological Society Meeting, Baltimore (November 1988). I wish to thank Linda Austern, Barbara Engh and Robert Walser for their helpful reactions to that draft. I am also grateful to Leonard Tennenhouse and Nancy Armstrong, who made valuable suggestions for this revision.