

EARLY MELODRAMA, EARLY TRAGICOMIC

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ABSTRACT

This essay tries to demonstrate that the tragicomic blend, typical of Baroque Melodrama, has been born much earlier than what is commonly believed. Just in the Jesuitical play “Eumelio” (1606) the hellish characters are definitely comical; a year later, in the celebrated “Orfeo” by Striggio jr. and Monteverdi, we think to find droll, if not grotesque, elements. The article ends considering the opera “La morte d’Orfeo” by S. Landi (1619), particularly focusing on the character of Charon.

Key Words: Tragicomic, Melodrama, Orpheus’ myth.

INTRODUCTION

An excellent scholar as Gloria Staffieri, in a recent historical frame of Melodrama from its birth up to Metastasio, reaffirms a widespread statement: the “invention” of tragicomic blend in the Opera is due to Rospigliosi, during the Barberini age [1], starting from 1629 (*Sant’Alessio*) and developing increasingly during the Thirties [2].

A quite late birth, therefore, of the tragicomic element, which is universally considered one of the most *identitarian* – strongly peculiar – feature of Baroque Melodrama [3]. In our short speech, we would demonstrate that this fundamental trait of Operatic mood was born at the very inception of the genre itself.

Rinuccini

If we skip now the case of *Dafne* [4] (where Rinuccini puts himself in line with the experiment of *satira scenica* by Giraldi Cinzio, the *Egle* [5], with its sad metamorphic ending), we may consider *Euridice* as a happy ending tragedy. This is the clear intent of Rinuccini [6]: to write a *tragedy*, with a *boscareccia* scene, alternated with the infernal one, and with Gods, demigods and shepherds and nymphs on the stage. Well, we have a *new* non-horrifying tragedy [7], and on the other hand we may confirm the suggestion by Pirrotta that pastoral play is at the origin of the new genre [8].

There are no comic elements in *Euridice*, but we may find in it two “structural” traits that lead us towards the tragicomedy’s field.

- a. First, the partial derivation from *favola pastorale* that is, in the theory and praxis by Guarini [9], the very tragicomic newness, the up-to-date theatrical innovation.
- b. Second, the difficult definition of *status* [10]: the boundaries between tragicomedy (in a broader sense) and happy ending tragedy were often blurred, in the coeval querelle about the non-Aristotelian theatrical news. In fact, some classicistic theorists maintained that tragicomedy was nothing but a kind of happy ending tragedy, which is why it was to be taken into account of perfectly Aristotelian, notwithstanding the claim of originality trumpeted by the *moderns*.

This said, we do not state *Euridice* to be as it were a tragicomic paradigm. We want only to underline that this Florentine-Atticistic [11] exploit was not definitely unrelated to tragicomic area.

Eumelio

But now it gets better. In 1606, at the Jesuitical Seminary in Rome a new moral-melodrama is staged, for the edification of students and the entertainment of pleased spectators: the *Eumelio*, written by Tirletti and De Cupis [12] and set to music by Agostino Agazzari, a Sieneese composer not of the less important than others of his time. The event was of some substance. Among the public, there were prelates, connoisseurs, and among the singer students and performers there was Stefano Landi, f.i., the future composer of *La morte d'Orfeo*. Not considering the extreme importance of this *Eumelio* entails not to understand the evolutionary process of the *albori del melodramma* ('melodrama's dawning'), sharing this way an Angelo Solerti's famous title [13]. Why?

The point is that *Eumelio* shows, without risk of misinterpretation, a perky mix of serious and comic—rather farcical—situations, in spite of (or making more effective) the moral edifying aim. Particularly the inferno's scene is populated by comic characters, *in primis* Charon, a peevish guardian who rebels against Pluton, King of Hades; consequently, the whole hellish people participates in an uprising against their monarch, with grotesque tints and consequences [14].

So, we must consider – in a short résumé – that:

- a. *Eumelio* is a genial Jesuitical timely answer to the up-to-date new genre of the Florentine Opera, an all-sung drama;
- b. The *parody* lato sensu of *Euridice* is patent:
 - analogous prologue (here Poetry's prosopopeia sings, whereas in *Euridice* it was the Tragedy to sing) [15],
 - similar tripartition (consecutively *boscareccia*, *infernale*, *boscareccia* sceneries) [16],
 - parallelism between Orpheus, sublime musician-singer, and Eumelio, (*eu-melos*), young sweet cantor;

- happy ending and lucky *anabasis* from the Hell;
- musical allusions by the composer etc.
- c. The structural *parody* implies an *ideological* parody [17];
- d. To get such a complex reworked version (so to speak), the insertion of frankly comic characters (Charon, but also Mercury) is a bright early *rejuvenation* of the new genre.

Obviously, the differences are full of interest, particularly about musical texture (for instance the *arie* with melodic repetition). But now we are interested on the specific variations that *reinforce* the new theatrical form, putting the basis for the next develop of Opera.

The Mantuan Orpheus

It is the time to arrive at the masterpiece by Monteverdi, on the libretto by Striggio jr: *Orfeo*, staged in Gonzaga's Mantua the next year, 1607 [18]. While *Eumelio* has been meeting a tiny bibliographical success so far, we have a huge critical literature about the *Orfeo*. Nonetheless, full scores of both melodramas had a publication with the same editor, Amadini, one of the better at the time. So, we must be cautious to undervalue the brilliant *Eumelio*, as we just said.

Is the noble *Orfeo* lacking in comical nuances? We think not.

The protagonist, mirthful and then desperate in first two acts, in third descends to Hell to take back his dead Euridice. The *Speranza* (Hope) abandons him at the gates of Hades, quoting abundantly verses by *father* Dante. It is the prime let-down Orpheus must suffer, and those quotations from Dante's *Inferno* sound—we dare to say—almost mocking.

Just later, Orpheus meets Charon who, remembering past outrages, harshly denies to the unhappy singer entering Hell.

Now we have the most bewildering episode of the Opera: Orpheus gives his entire self in performing a hyper-flowery *aria*, *Possente spirto*. This is nearly the maximum of the art of singing, a supreme enchanting effort (for the composer too). And this *akmè* of the orphic talent is addressed to a humble mumbling petty officer of the infernal staff. Orpheus does not sing in front of Pluto and Proserpine (as in *Euridice*); on the contrary he *never* will meet King and Queen face to face. That so-called *nobile dio*, whom he is singing for, is so dull and obtuse to answering: «Ben solletica alquanto / dilettrandomi il core / sconcolato Cantore / il tuo canto e 'l tuo pianto. / Ma lunge, ah lunge sia da questo petto, / pietà di mio valor non degno affetto» (libr. edit. 1607 p. 21). Therefore, far from convincing hellish Deities, Orpheus is now able to persuade not even the coarse helmsman.

And the *favola* has another insult now—*novello insulto*—set aside for the Hero: Charon falls downright asleep, so much he enjoyed Orpheus' singing. Anyway, Charon benumbed, Orpheus is eventually able to cross the river.

We may recognize other subtle tesserae of irony in the continuation of the Opera; furthermore it is relevant to remember that the ending of the libretto, different from the text of the score [19], is a bacchanal that preludes, without showing it, to the dismemberment of Orpheus, as it happened in Poliziano's *Orfeo* [20], with that concoction of blood, double-entendres and Maenads' humors, puking and squirting and quartering. Even today we discuss whether it's a happy ending or not.

Is Striggio's *Orfeo* strictly a parody? Probably that would be excessive. But we do not know exactly how the melodrama was performed in Mantua, and we cannot exclude that the piercing and elegant elements of funniness we pointed out in the text have been in some way emphasized in the Palazzo Ducale stage

La morte d'Orfeo (Orpheus' death)

Sure is that, if we jump to the opera *La morte d'Orfeo* by Stefano Landi [21], we find again comical accents in a serious and moral—although very complex—work. And we recover them just concerning the character of Charon again. We do not know the author of the libretto of this impressive Opera, wrote by Landi in 1619 in Padua, but functioning as a sort of calling card for the composer to be introduced in the Roman Curia, where he will achieve great successes [22].

Once dead, Orpheus, still desperate for his loss of Euridice, is accompanied by Mercury to meet the beloved in the afterworld; here he verifies that the woman is totally absentminded: she does not remember her past love. “Who is this fool”, she asks Mercury, pointing at Orpheus, “who goes around the dead-world talking about love and looking for paramour? Who is this, who's aflame in the ice?” Actually, Euridice has drunk the Lethe's water to get rid of her mundane memories. Orpheus, sad but resigned, has to drink the water of oblivion too. And here comes Charon, who cheerfully invites the son of Apollo to have a drink: *bevi bevi sicuro l'onda*, (‘sip sip safely the wave of Lethe’). The nine-syllable lines of Charon's song are set to music in a rhythm of *Siciliana*, and the result is very similar to a merry *chanson à boire*. It is a bit surprising, perhaps, but we must insert this episode and Charon's *number* (or tune, *canzone*, as you like) within the context of the whole work. *La morte d'Orfeo* shows heterogeneous aspects and registers, by varying from Maenads' horrific choir to the apotheosis, from painful love to ascetic raising.

CONCLUSION

In provisional conclusion, we have ascertained that a comical common thread, specifically in the name of crabby and funny Charon, connects unlike melodramas from *Eumelio* to *La morte d'Orfeo* by way of Monteverdi's masterwork *Orfeo*, *i. e.* from 1606 to 1619. The first of these three operas is modeled on the Florentine *Euridice* as a moral parody of the birth of the genre; the third is composed by a musician who will be a protagonist of the *tragicomic* theatrical works on Barberini stage just a decade later.

Certainly, our analysis has been restricted only to three-four examples, as far as founding they are. Therefore, a more in-depth study is needed in order to gain a better historical framework of styles and forms of early operas in the opening thirty years of musical drama. That is a story

supposedly just examined in depth, but it can still reserve some intriguing and illuminating surprises.

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- [9] B. Guarini, *Opere*, M. Guglielminetti (ed.), UTET, Torino, 1971; cfr. Id., *Il Pastor fido e il Compendio della poesia tragicomica*, G. Brognoligo (ed.), Bari, Laterza, 1914.
- [10] Cf. *Instabilità e metamorfosi dei generi nella letteratura barocca*, S. Morando (ed.), Venezia, Marsilio, 2008.
- [11] Curious "classicistic" birth of the less classicistic genre!
- [12] Critical text of French manuscript and of the score-text, with in apparatus the Viterbo's print variants, in my *Tragicomico e Melodramma*, cit.
- [13] A. Solerti, *Gli albori del melodramma*, Sandron, Milano-Palermo-Napoli, 1904.
- [14] Pluton says bye to his friends and then he must face the revolt.
- [15] In *Dafne* by Rinuccini it was Ovid in person, in *Orfeo* by Striggio the Music.
- [16] Whitt no indication of acts.
- [17] F.i. religion vs paganism, but also matrimonial love vs fondness (love?) between maestro and his favorite; cfr. L. Barkan, *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Herotic of Humanism*, Stanford U. P., 1991.

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