

Laughing at the Great King: Ottomans as Persians in Minato's *Xerse* (Venice 1654)

The famous Largo from G. F. Handel's opera *Xerxes*, sometimes known by its opening words "Ombra mai fu," is familiar to every piano student. The tune has been reset at least twice for church hymns, and it was the first music ever to be played on the radio. In Handel's opera it is the first thing one hears after the overture, used to introduce the title character in diction reminiscent of Petrarchan lyric (Noe, 73ff). The traditions of reception of this solemnly beautiful music thus encourage us to take the aria and the opera's plot seriously. But in "Ombra mai fu," King Xerxes is singing to a tree: the plane tree that Herodotus tells us Xerxes admired so much that he decorated it with gold and left a guard to protect it (7.30). This paper will examine the libretto that Handel adapted, Nicolás Minato's *Xerse*, written for a 1654 Venice production set by Francesco Cavalli. It will show how the librettist used the Greco-Roman literary and historiographical tradition to create a comedy that reflects his Venetian audience's attitudes toward the Ottoman Turks.

The opera takes place in Abydos just before the Persian invasion of Greece. Two well-known passages from Herodotus anchor the plot in historical time, the episode with the plane tree, and the bridge built across the Hellespont that is destroyed by a storm (Hdt. 7.25, 33-35). However, the librettist follows the lead of Aelian (*Varia Historia*, 2.14) who calls Xerxes ridiculous (*geloios*) in his pretensions to conquer land and sea, and for idolizing a tree. Both these episodes in the opera become foci for slapstick, associated with comic servants. In the case of the plane tree, Xerxes praises it, decorates it with gold and leaves Magi to call up demons to protect it (I.2). Xerxes himself makes no mention of the tree again, but the woman he loves parodies his song to the tree (I.4), and comic servants attempt to rob the tree of its gold and are treated to mocking torment by the protective demons (III.10). The destruction of the

bridge is similarly an opportunity for spectacle and comedy. One of the servants is on the bridge when it is blown away and responds with comic terror. He is picked up from the sea by another servant, and the two while away their return to land by singing bawdy lyrics. No mention is made of Xerxes' famous punishment of the Hellespont, nor is the bridge episode moralized.

Hence, the libretto follows Aelian's interpretation of the two historical events and exploits their potential absurdity. This is consonant with the central plot that centers on complicated erotic attractions of Xerxes' court in the New Comic manner rather than serious drama. Xerxes is betrothed to Amastre, daughter of the governor of Susa, who is onstage throughout the action disguised as a man and not recognized by Xerxes. Xerxes is instead attracted to Romilda, daughter of the governor of Abydos. But she in turn loves and is loved by Xerxes' brother Arsamene, whom Xerxes treats tyrannically. Romilda's sister Adelanta, for her part, loves Arsamene, too, and is jealous of her sister. The plot includes frustrated and endangered love, and the usual comic elements of mistaken identity and a happy resolution with two marriages. In the midst of all this action, Xerxes emerges as a slightly absurd *miles gloriosus*, the venerator of trees and invader of Greece who may potentially wreck the proper romantic outcomes.

Modern criticism of seventeenth-century Italian opera allows for comic plotting, but generally argues that a baroque opera's presentation of a king or autocrat is meant to provide examples of kingship and heroic virtue for *European* rulers and aristocrats. (e.g., Heller, 41; Ketterer, 13). This paper will conclude with an argument that Minato's *Xerse* does not present a model for princes so much as a response to Venetian relations with the Ottoman Turks, with whom Venice was currently at war over the possession of Crete. The opera's prologue makes explicit reference to hostility toward the Ottoman Empire; Xerxes' glorification of the plane tree

and embroilment in complicated erotic relations is reminiscent of the excesses of the dissolute Sultan Ibrahim's relations with his Seraglio. In this respect, then the opera follows a tradition of mockery and triumphalism over a tyrannical eastern enemy to be found in Aeschylus' *Persai* and Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, as well as the defeat of the foreign *miles* of the kind found in Roman new comedy.

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