



## Homer to the defense: The *Accademia degli Incogniti* and the opera *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* in Early Modern Venice

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### *Setting the Stage*

In the seventeenth century the star of the once mighty Republic of Venice was waning. Although the state would survive until its capitulation to Napoleon in 1797 its glory days were over.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors contributed to the state's decline. In the east, the Ottoman Empire was expanding. Sultan Ibrahim I had consolidated the realm after a period of instability.<sup>2</sup> After he had secured the Eastern frontiers, it was merely a question of time until he would turn his attention westwards. War on Venice was declared in 1645. By 1669, when the war ended with a peace treaty after the fall of Crete, the Ottoman Empire dominated the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean almost completely.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Povolo 2000:491. Unless stated otherwise, all dates are AD.

<sup>2</sup> Under the reign of Murat IV (1623-40), Quataert 2000:xix. Ibrahim I reigned from 1640-1648. The Ottoman Empire had undergone a period of strife: between 1624 and 28 rebellions rose in Asia Minor and anarchy reigned in Istanbul. Between 1624 and 39 the Turkish were at war with Iran. In 1638 the sultan recovered Baghdad. He regained Azov in 1640, three years earlier conquered by the Cossacks who had been attacking the Black Sea coast since 1624.

<sup>3</sup> Quataert 2000:xix. In 1648, the year of Ibrahim's assassination, Venice blockaded the Dardanelles while the Empire underwent another period of strife under Mehmet IV, a child upon his ascension to the throne. The blockade was lifted in 1657 after the appointment of Köprülü Mehmet to grand vizier with dictatorial power in 1656. On Ottoman dominance in Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean basin see Quataert 2000:24. The Empire continued expanding until its armies once again laid siege to Vienna in 1683. Like the attempt of 1529, the effort proved futile, but resulted in the founding of the Holy League between the Habsburg Emperor, the king of Poland, and Venice in 1684.

Economic decline further weakened Italy as a whole and Venice in particular. Wars with the Ottoman Empire interrupted the trade in spices and silk, in which Venice and Portugal held a virtual monopoly and which constituted a major source of their wealth.<sup>4</sup> Markets in the South and East of the Mediterranean were lost to the French, English, and Dutch who provided, for example, less expensive and more fashionable textiles than Venice.<sup>5</sup> These competitors also took over the silk-route trade.<sup>6</sup> English ships furthermore beat Venetian vessels at sea because of their superior speed, thus winning over the dominance of trade in the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Markets in northern Europe, especially Flanders and Germany, were lost because of the Thirty Years War.<sup>8</sup> In addition, an outbreak of the Black Death decimated the Venetian populace.<sup>9</sup>

Although the seventeenth century witnessed the waning of political power and the decline of the economy, there was one area in which the *Serenissima* retained her supremacy: in the sphere of culture.<sup>10</sup> Music and art maintained the myth of the might and splendor of Venice in an age marked by the fading of her power.<sup>11</sup> The unique political and demographic make-up of the city made an innovation possible which continues to thrive to this day: the Public Opera. Hitherto resident composers had written opera exclusively for rulers. Each production was performed at court on a special occasion, such as a royal wedding, for which it

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<sup>4</sup> Divitiis 1997:24. A similar interruption of the silk-route trade had occurred during the war between Venetians and Turks in 1570-73.

<sup>5</sup> Cipolla 1968:134-140. Venice particularly suffered from the loss of its erstwhile prolific trade in woolen cloth, cf. also Sella 1968: 106-126. The increase of French, English, and Dutch commerce with the Levant had already started in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, Divitiis 1997:25.

<sup>6</sup> Cook 1978:202-3.

<sup>7</sup> Italian ships were of heavier build. Further, Venetian sailors were paid by the day, English ones by the voyage. Accordingly, the latter were often willing to take higher risks at sea than the Venetian competition. In the Late Renaissance period, the English traveller Fynes Moryson claims that the ships of his compatriots made the journey to Syria and back in half the time, Hughes 1903:135 quoted after Cipolla 1968:144n1. Even granting a healthy dose of partiality, the difference in speed must have been marked for such a claim to hold water. The account in question was written in 1596/7, Wiles 2003:282n51. Divitiis 1997:24 claims that the English aimed outright to replace the export of Italian manufactured goods to the Levant.

<sup>8</sup> Cipolla 1968:11 cites sources from Genoa (1651) and Milan (1641) on the issue, but emphasizes that all of northern Italy suffered resulting ill effects.

<sup>9</sup> Around 1630-33, Cipolla 1968:140. Another outbreak ravaged Italy in 1657, Cipolla 1968:142.

<sup>10</sup> Bouwsma 1968:625-6.

<sup>11</sup> Buelow 2004:82. On the myth of Venice and the mythical relations between the city and the sea cf. also Crouzet-Pavan 2000:39-64. The creation and canonization of the historiographical myth of Venice commenced after its fall to Napoleon in 1797, Povolo 2000:491-519.

had been specifically designed.<sup>12</sup> In the Venetian republic, however, groups of investors united to stage opera performances that were accessible to the general public, financing the shows through ticket sales. Theatres belonged to noble families who owned the land and buildings, renting them out to impresarios and thus using them as secure investments.<sup>13</sup> The importance of the public opera became very much apparent at the time of the end of Venetian autonomy. The loss of political power coincided with the inauguration of the magnificent opera house *La Fenice*, a monument to the aristocratic self-image and to the continuing dominance of Venice in the sphere of culture.<sup>14</sup>

Operas were presented during the Carnival season, when visitors would flock to the city famed for its broad range of diversions and entertainment. During this festival, the population of the city would double in number.<sup>15</sup> An important element in the phenomenon of Venetian Carnival was the fact that the Inquisition had little power in the *Serenissima*. Accordingly, the revels could be enjoyed without fear - certainly part of the attraction. The role of the Inquisition should not be underestimated. To name but one example, the English traveler Fynes Moryson was forced to make himself scarce during a stay in Italy at Easter-time, fleeing from Rome to Siena, than on to Florence, in order to avoid the arm of the Holy Office.<sup>16</sup> He specifically lauded the manifold pleasures, the free conversation, and the freedom enjoyed by Venetian citizens and strangers alike as outstanding qualities of Venice in his diary.<sup>17</sup> A compatriot of Moryson's who visited Rome even had to resort to passing himself off as a German Catholic to steer clear of trouble with the Holy Office.<sup>18</sup> The partial disregard of the Inquisition and its spies was to a certain extent due to the fact that the *Serenissima* was in constant trouble with the papacy in any case. Frictions resulted from the city's liberal attitude towards other religions and the practice of their rites, the taxation of church property, and the insistence on having a say in church appointments in Venice.<sup>19</sup> The Republic even protected intellectuals from the mainland who were being persecuted by the Holy Office.<sup>20</sup> The city, one of the leading centers of information and communication in Europe, was furthermore

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<sup>12</sup> The composer Claudio Monteverdi, whom we will encounter shortly, held the position of resident composer at the Gonzaga court in Mantua before being appointed maestro di cappella to San Marco in Venice in 1613, Buelow 2004:84.

<sup>13</sup> Buelow 2004:83.

<sup>14</sup> Feldman 2000:216-260, especially 218-223. The work on *La Fenice* commenced in 1792 and was completed after the fall of the city on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1797.

<sup>15</sup> Buelow 2004:82.

<sup>16</sup> Hibbert 1988:143. On English visitors in Italy and on their stays in Venice see Hibbert 1988:129-141.

<sup>17</sup> Moryson 1617:I 2,1 p.90.

<sup>18</sup> Hibbert 1988:143.

<sup>19</sup> Hibbert 1988:144.

<sup>20</sup> Heller 2003:50f. A prominent example was Cesare Cremonini, an Aristoteles-scholar at the University of Padua, teacher of several Incogniti and eulogist of Venice.

notorious for its cosmopolitan publishing, which included the clandestine printing of forbidden books.<sup>21</sup>

The first public operas were staged during the Carnival of 1637. In the period between this first season and 1650 alone, around 50 operas were composed and performed.<sup>22</sup> John Evelyn, an Englishman of property and means from Bedford, traveled in Italy during the 1640ies, that is, the very period in question.<sup>23</sup> In his diary, he described the Venetian Carnival thus:

The Women, Men & persons of all Condition disguising themselves in antique dresses & extravagant Musique & a thousand gambols, & traversing the streets from house to house, all places then accessible, & free to enter: There is abroad nothing but flinging of Eggs fill'd with sweete Waters, & sometimes not over sweete; they also have a barbarous custom of hunting bulls about the Streetes & Piazzas, which is very dangerous, the passages being generally so narrow in the City: Likewise do the youth of the several Wards & parrishes content in other Masteries or pastimes (fighting each other on the bridges) so as tis altogether impossible to recount the universal madnesse of this place during this time of license: Now are the greate banks set up for those who will play at Basset, the Comedians have also liberty & the Operas to Exercise: Witty pasquils are likewise thrown about, & the Mountebanks have their stages in every Corner: The diversion which chiefly tooke me up, was three noble Operas which I saw, where was incomparable Voices, & Musique.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Enter the Accademia degli Incogniti***

Around the year 1630 Giovanni Francesco Loredano, a young Venetian nobleman, founded a literary circle, the *Accademia degli Incogniti*. Its members belonged to the cr me of Venetian society, most of them aristocrats of classical education. In the thirties and forties of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *Accademia* became the city's leading salon.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Burke 2000:390 and 400-402. Texts in various languages like Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, "Slavonian", Spanish, German, and Italian were regularly published in Venice. Foreign language texts were widely available in translations. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam started to compete with the Republic on the information market, but Venice nevertheless continued to be of high importance.

<sup>22</sup> Buelow 2004:84. The music to these operas is in most cases lost: only 12 scores have survived. These have been composed by Monteverdi (two scores extant), Cavalli (nine scores extant) and Sacrati (one score extant, although Buelow 2004:84 claims that another score of his has been discovered recently and is awaiting publication).

<sup>23</sup> Hibbert 1988:140-141. According to Hibbert, Evelyn left Venice in March 1646.

<sup>24</sup> John Evelyn was born in 1620 and died 1706. Excerpt from: *The Diary*, London 1905, quoted after Robbins-Landon and Norwich 1991:71.

<sup>25</sup> Fenlon and Miller 1992:20 and 30.

A marked characteristic of the members of the *Accademia* was their patriotism.<sup>26</sup> Keen on perpetuating the myth of Venice's glory in the times of economical decline and loss of power, one of their vehicles for transporting their message was the field of culture. Active in advancing the arts, the *Incogniti* were a moving force in the development of the public opera, acting as impresarios and writing libretti. They may even have been involved in the establishment of a new theatre for the performances, the *Teatro Novissimo*, although some doubt remains on this issue.<sup>27</sup> Heller considers the fact that the public opera emerged precisely at the times of the height of *Incognito* prestige a "fortuitous coincidence".<sup>28</sup> Under the circumstances, I find this theory hard to believe: Cause and effect seems a much more likely explanation.

In their meetings the *Incogniti* discussed philosophy and the Aristotelian laws of composition. In addition to such venerable subjects, the discourses of the *Accademia* included less reputable topics. To name an example, their debates also centered on the nature of love and the role of beauty. Heller attributes a contradictory attitude to women to the members of the *Accademia*. On the one hand they supported female singers and engaged in an often heated discourse with the nun Arcangela Tarabotti, a woman of education who was forced to enter a convent because her family could not wed her off.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Heller stresses, they antagonized female self-expression.<sup>30</sup> I think it is important to keep two factors in mind. Although the members of the *Accademia* certainly did not agree with Tarabotti's opinions, which harshly criticized the patriarchic society that forced her and many other young women against their wishes behind the walls of convents, they entered a discourse with her. Without the circle, Tarabotti would have lacked a platform for her criticism. The counter-attacks of the *Accademia* awarded her further publicity for her issues. Secondly, Heller fails to distinguish between women of different social backgrounds. It is to be expected that the aristocrats of the circle would have quite diverging attitudes toward their own wives and daughters than towards women that did not belong to their social group. The supposedly curious mixture of conservatism and libertinism Heller invokes repeatedly<sup>31</sup>, which, I should like to add, may have been much less overt to 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetians than it is to us, is easily explained. Venice needed a certain supply of women of reputable morals - it was, after all, the Carnival city and the ready availability of female company was part of the attraction. On the other hand, the *Serenissima's* patricians expected the women of their own families to be virtuous: unsullied daughters to be married within the in-group, and faithful wives. This distinction is also apparent in opera plots like the one we will be discussing here: the wives of aristocrats are

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<sup>26</sup> Heller 2003:48-49.

<sup>27</sup> Heller 2003:48.

<sup>28</sup> Heller 2003:48.

<sup>29</sup> Heller 2003:49.

<sup>30</sup> Heller 2003:49.

<sup>31</sup> Heller 2003:48-50.

chaste while the serving wenches on the sidelines are willing and readily available – from the male patrician’s point of view doubtless a rather neat combination. We will return to the image of “good women” according to the *Accademia* shortly.

Apart from the issues of female virtue and the nature of love, the *Accademia* entertained a certain predilection for Epikouros, which resulted in allegations of hedonism – an accusation followers of the philosopher had to face since antiquity.<sup>32</sup> The liberal intellectual spirit of its members further added to the growing ill repute of the *Accademia*.

Apart from debates on aesthetics, the *Accademia* used the meetings of the salon to network and influence day-to-day politics. Although they professed to be politically conformist, the *Incogniti* were accused of subversion and libertinage. Such allegations could prove to be extremely dangerous in the Venetian Republic. Governed by her ruling class selecting officials in a complicated voting process riddled with mechanisms to avoid corruption, buffered by laws restricting electioneering, support of ones peer group was vital.<sup>33</sup> Seriously and constantly displeasing said group of people could lead to a fall from grace and a loss of power and income. In addition, Early Modern Venice was a center of information: weekly newsletters circulated, printing flourished, and political information was widely available in print.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the means of making disapproval public were widely and easily available. Under such circumstances, the *Accademia* needed to take action.

### ***Defending the circle***

Giacomo Badoaro instigated one course of action. Badoaro liked to while away empty hours by writing libretti for the recently invented public opera, a fact he emphasized in order to distinguish himself from professional writers who composed to earn a living.<sup>35</sup> His classical background is apparent from his works, such as *Ulisse Errante* (1644), *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria* (1640), *L’Helena Rapita de Teseo* (1653) or *Le Nozze de Enea con Lavinia* (1641).<sup>36</sup> *L’Helena* in particular

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<sup>32</sup> Seneca *De Vita Beata (On the Happy Life)* 12,4 and Cicero *Letters to Friends* 3,9,2. Attempts at rehabilitating the Epikoureans start to bear fruit during the Renaissance, Krämer 1980:312-324. On the *Incogniti* and Epikouros see also Fenlon and Miller 1992:35-6.

<sup>33</sup> Chojnacki 2000:263-264. Chojnacki refers in his paper to the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the changes in the constitution initiated during that period remained in place and are accordingly relevant. On the tripartite social structure of Venice consisting of *nobiltà*, *cittadini*, and *popolo* cf. also Grubb 2000:339-364.

<sup>34</sup> Burke 2000:390 and 396-397. The newsletters (*avvisi*) circulated from approximately the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, although they were occasionally outlawed. Burke dates the availability of political information in print to the 17<sup>th</sup> century at the latest.

<sup>35</sup> Rosand 1991:36-7 and 86.

<sup>36</sup> The attribution of *Le Nozze* to Badoaro is not entirely certain. MGG I 1 s. v. Badoaro (Abert) 1608f., see 1609 supports the authorship of Badoaro. Grove I s. v. Badoaro, Giacomo (Walker) 277 and Rosand 1991:86 as well as Rosand 1989:144 ascribe the libretto to an anonymous author.

demonstrates Badoaro's profound knowledge of ancient literature, based as it is on one of the less commonly known Greek myths.<sup>37</sup> One of the striking characteristics of the poetry of this *Incognito* is the careful depiction of his protagonists' characters and personalities.<sup>38</sup> He shared this predilection with the composer Claudio Monteverdi, who also was his friend.

Two of Badoaro's libretti are based on Homer's *Odyssey*. The earlier one, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, was staged for the first time during the Carnival season of 1640; *Ulisse Errante* was first performed in 1644. The opera *Il Ritorno* is based on books 13 to 24 of the *Odyssey*,<sup>39</sup> *Ulisse Errante* uses books 1-12 as its source.<sup>40</sup> Let us take a look at the reception of Homer in Venice during the late Renaissance in order to appreciate the background Badoaro would have had when he started out on his project.

### ***Homer in Venice***

Although the story of the Fall of Troy flourished in Medieval Western Europe, the Homeric Epics themselves fell into oblivion.<sup>41</sup> In their stead, amended and abridged versions circulated.<sup>42</sup> This changed when Demetrios Chalkondyles published the first printed edition of the *Odyssey* in Florence in 1488.<sup>43</sup> During the Renaissance, readers turned to the texts of the epics themselves once again, albeit frequently in Latin translations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Brief reference in *Odyssey* 11,628-631: Theseus and Peirithoos in Hades. Distinct versions in Hellanikos FGH 323aF18; Ploutarkhos *Theseus* 30-31; Diodoros 4,63,2; Hyginus *Fables* 79; Apollodoros *Epitome* 1,23. On the role of the Homeric reference to the episode in view of the reception of the myth see Fell 2004:26. Badoaro's source was most likely Ploutarkhos, whose *Lives* were frequently read in salons in this period.

<sup>38</sup> This might have been influenced by Ploutarkhos' *Lives* again. It is striking that another contemporary author of libretti, whose work is considered to be outstandingly elaborate in the development of its protagonists' characters, was a fellow *Incognito*: Busenello. His opera *L'Incoronazione de Poppea* was set to music by Monteverdi, who had previously composed the music to *Il Ritorno*. On the interpretation of *Incoronazione* see Heller 2003:312 note 2.

<sup>39</sup> Not 13-22 (as Glover 1985:291 claims) or 13-23 (so Rosand 1989:141). I assume Rosand does not count the 24<sup>th</sup> book because Monteverdi eliminated the scene culled from it, the suitors in Hades, from the score found in Vienna, commenting that it was too melancholic.

<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Badoaro parted the *Odyssey* into a section on the wandering and one on the homecoming of Odysseys. This distinction is in itself rather obvious, nevertheless it might be worthwhile pointing out that it is in use to this day, DNP 5 s.v. Homeros (Latacz) 686-699, see 696. See also Tracy 1997:365 and 368-9. On *Ulisse Errante* see Borren 1924-5:357-359.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson 2004:10.

<sup>42</sup> Brunner 2001:212-225.

<sup>43</sup> DNP 5 s.v. Homeros (Latacz) 686-699, see 698.

<sup>44</sup> Manuel Chrysoloras (ca. 1350-1415) was among the first to translate Homer into Latin, Büttner 2001: 271-2. In 1497 Raffaele Mattei Volaterrano published an influential Latin verse edition of the *Odyssey* in Brescia, Young 2003:177.

How widespread the reception of Homer actually was is subject to a large amount of scholarly discussion. According to Büttner, the reception of Homer was rather sporadic and inconsequential, because the Latin verses of these translations were considered coarse and ungainly in comparison to Virgil.<sup>45</sup> Although the Trojan War was a popular subject for example in paintings in Early Modern times, Homer was not typically the source employed. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Büttner claims, were seldom read before the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup> Only after François de Salignac de la Motte Fénelon (1651-1715) had published his French adaptation of the Homeric epics there began to appear translations in a literary, elegant style into modern languages.<sup>47</sup> This is a picture in need of revision. To start with, Homer had prominent followers in – to name but some examples – George Chapman<sup>48</sup>, Thomas Hobbes<sup>49</sup> and Alexander Pope<sup>50</sup>. Clarke characterizes the instances of preference of Virgil over Homer as rather isolated cases.<sup>51</sup> Most eloquent in regard to the reception of Homer is, however, the impressive number of publications in the time from 1470 to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century collected by Young.<sup>52</sup> If one includes all works then attributed to Homer, over 240 editions appeared between 1470 and 1600; during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the number comes close to a hundred. These are figures a lot of contemporary authors can only dream of.

Venice was on the vanguard of Homeric reception in the Renaissance and Early Modern period. Between 1486 and 1640, twenty-three editions of the epics were published in this city.<sup>53</sup> The first publication of the “complete works” of Homer appeared here, accompanied by a vita, supposedly based on Herodotos, Ploutarkhos, and Cassius Dio.<sup>54</sup> The first translation of the *Iliad* into Italian – albeit only of the first book – was published in the *Serenissima* in 1543.<sup>55</sup> A

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<sup>45</sup> Büttner 2001: 271-2.

<sup>46</sup> Büttner 2001: 271-2.

<sup>47</sup> Büttner 2001: 271-2.

<sup>48</sup> Chapman first translated parts of the *Iliad* in 1598; a complete text was published in 1600. His translation of the *Odyssey* appeared between 1614 and 1616. See Underwood 1998:21-2 and Dué 2005:402-403.

<sup>49</sup> Grafton 1992:156-7.

<sup>50</sup> Pope started his translation available for subscription between 1713 and 1714, Underwood 1998:33-4. On Pope, Chapman, and their high esteem of Homer see Dué in this volume.

<sup>51</sup> Clarke 1981:118-121.

<sup>52</sup> Young 2003:176-193.

<sup>53</sup> Young 2003:463. In the following, I will operate by the number of works printed without distinction between scholarly editions and publications for the general public (like, for example, Fénelon’s and Pope’s translations). Without looking at the actual manuscripts in the archives of Venice, such a differentiation based on the title of the work alone would be haphazard at best.

<sup>54</sup> Young 2003:177. The so-called complete works include such texts as the Homeric Hymns and the *Battle of the Mice and the Frogs*.

<sup>55</sup> Young 2003:182. The only earlier translation into Italian of a work attributed to Homer was published in Verona in 1470: the wildly popular *Battle of the Mice and the Frogs*, Young 2003:176.



bilingual edition in Greek and Italian became available in 1556.<sup>56</sup> Between 1543 and 1582, a large number of editions of Homer appeared in Venice, either in the original Greek, or translated into Latin, Spanish or Italian.<sup>57</sup> After this prolific period of Homeric reception, we encounter 60 years of editorial silence.

### ***Mustering the arms***

When Badoaro sat down to the task of defending his circle, Homer provided the perfect background. The tale of the Trojan War and its heroes was familiar enough to his peers, but its prime and venerable source had gone somewhat out of fashion. After such a lapse of time, the epics had the potential of being fresh and new again.

The war between Greeks and Trojans also had political potential. This was particularly true for the *Odyssey* because it allowed flashbacks to the fall of Troy. Accordingly, Badoaro exploits the possibilities in Penelope's first song in *Il Ritorno*, which introduces the plot at the beginning of the opera.<sup>58</sup> The woman remembers the cause for her husband's absence: the Greeks set out to avenge the wicked deed of the proud and lascivious Oriental who robbed one of their women, thus bringing doom down on his fatherland.<sup>59</sup> The ashes of Troy testify to the evil fate that awaited Orientals in an altercation with their western neighbors. In a time when the powerful Ottoman Empire was active in Greece and readying itself for the attack on Venice – which would follow just five years later – this message was bound to be well received. Thus, the political background of the period added further to the attraction of appropriating the *Odyssey*.

Interestingly enough, this drawing of the negative picture of the Trojans doesn't appear to have been conflictive. This is extremely remarkable given the fact that the Venetians considered themselves as descendants of the Trojans – at the time a very popular genealogy, also adopted by the Habsburg Dynasty, to name but one example. Fynes Moryson, abroad in the Republic in 1594, explains in his diary the ancestry of the Venetians<sup>60</sup>: the country Venice was, always according to Moryson, founded by the Henentians of Paphlagonia who accompanied Antenor in his journey because their king, Polemon, had died during the siege of Troy. The populace later moved to the island in order to avoid the attack of Attila the Hun.

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<sup>56</sup> Young 2003:184.

<sup>57</sup> Young 2003:182-187.

<sup>58</sup> Following a prologue in which *L'Humana Fragilità, Il Tempo, La Fortuna* and *Amore*, i.e. the personifications of human frailty, time, fickle luck and love, introduce the main motifs of the plot (the personifications vary in the different extant libretti, see Haas 1922:12-3 and Rosand 1989:142). They are also facets of the tests Penelope will have to withstand, Glover 1985:292.

<sup>59</sup> I would like to emphasize that I employ the pre-Saïdian terminology in full awareness of its implications in order to focus on the prevalent image of the Ottoman Empire in Europe at the time.

<sup>60</sup> Moryson 1617:I 2,1 p. 76.

As Homer was the perfect subject, the opera was the perfect stage for Badoaro's message. The institution of the public opera had been called into existence only three years earlier. Thus, the performances during the Carnival season still had the attraction of being a new kind of entertainment, in particular one that had been the prerogative of rulers and their courts. As luck would have it, the members of the *Accademia* had been involved in its creation from the beginning both in terms of money and of manpower, and had probably acquired a theatre where the performances could be staged. It is important to keep in mind that the opera in Early Modern Venice was attended exclusively by the ruling elite of the city, by aristocrats and rich citizens with the necessary financial backing to afford the tickets, as well as by visiting dignitaries and traveling gentlemen. It offered a platform for demonstrating membership in the in-group of power as well as an opportunity to show one's open-mindedness towards new developments and appreciation for aesthetics. Thus, the opera performances would unite under one roof exactly the kind of people the *Accademia* needed to address. Influencing them by way of music was a subtle and discreet method of broadcasting their message.

The only requisite ingredient for this system to work was a successful show – in order to make money and draw the masses. Badoaro took care of that by winning his friend, the celebrated composer Claudio Monteverdi, over to the project. Although the *Maestro di Capella* of Saint Marc had composed operas in the past, he had not done so for the public opera. Monteverdi, who had taken religious orders in 1632 and was now 73 years old, was in spite of frequent requests somewhat reluctant to join the stampede.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, when Badoaro managed to tempt his friend into composing for the new medium after all, the first Venetian opera of the celebrated musician was obviously the thing to see. As an appetizer, Monteverdi's *Arianna*, originally composed and performed in 1608, was revived in 1640, a few weeks before *Il Ritorno* first saw the light of the stage.<sup>62</sup> The success of the new opera was extraordinary to the extent that it was revived in successive seasons, in itself a remarkable and unprecedented event: *Il Ritorno* was the only opera performed over more than one season in 17<sup>th</sup> century Venice.<sup>63</sup> Let us now take a look at the message broadcasted.

## ***Reshaping the Odyssey***

Badoaro and Monteverdi worked hand in hand when producing the score to *Il Ritorno*. Because of this, I will not try to distinguish between their respective contributions, but will treat the work as an entity. In order to make divergences from the source readily apparent, I will not use the Italian names of the opera but the Homeric forms.

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<sup>61</sup> Rosand 1994:377.

<sup>62</sup> Rosand 1994:376.

<sup>63</sup> Rosand 1994:379.

Badoaro reshaped his source in order to broadcast his message and clear the reputation of the *Accademia*. In spite of a substantial amount of investigation concerning *Il Ritorno* and its plot, this fact has yet to be made clear: to this point the opera has been considered a rather faithful reproduction of the source.<sup>64</sup> As we shall see, this idea is probably based on widespread popular concepts of the subject of the *Odyssey*, not on the epic itself.

Important aspects are the transformations of the characters of Odysseus and Penelope. In Odysseus' case, the change is quite straightforward: The occasionally wily king of Ithaca is transformed into a wise and prudent sage. All deception is removed from the plot, trickery does not appear. The only exception to this rule is Odysseus' disguise as beggar, something so central to the storyline that it really cannot be eliminated. Interestingly enough, the apparition of Odysseus in his beggar-incognito may have reflected on the *Accademia*. Just like their protagonist, the Incogniti appear to veil their identity by the name they chose for their circle. Nevertheless, both identities are not that much of a secret: In the *Odyssey*, the right people are in on the plot, and the reader/listener obviously knows all. Likewise, the members of the *Accademia*, protagonists of the political stage of the period, were well known both in their function as major players and as members of the salon. I wonder whether they might be linking themselves to their Odysseus-figure intentionally, insinuating they were wise and prudent just like the epic hero crafted by them.

In the case of Penelope, Badoaro and Monteverdi went a step further. Let us look briefly at a few fairly straightforward actions and attributes of Odysseus' wife in Homer.

Starting with attributes, Penelope is characterized by the term *echephrôn* (sensible, prudent), a personality trait that also distinguishes her husband.<sup>65</sup> Another expression used to describe Penelope is *períphron* (very thoughtful, very careful).<sup>66</sup> In other words: the woman thinks.

When Penelope finds out about the suitors' plan to murder Telemachos, she gets hold of Antinoos and gives him a piece of her mind in no uncertain terms.<sup>67</sup> She only lays off when Eurymachos offers to personally protect her son. This is, of course, deceptive: Eurymachos is in

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. e.g. Rosand 1994:381.

<sup>65</sup> *Odyssey* xiii 406 and xiii 332.

<sup>66</sup> *Odyssey* xvi 435. The epitheton is also employed in the description of Arete, queen of the Phaiakoi (xi 345), and of Eurykleia (xix 137). Both are exceptional women, especially Arete, who speaks in public, settles disputes, and stands in high regard of her people. She thus assumes activities that are male prerogatives. This is something that is only possible in the context of the far off isle of Scheria, a strange land where blessed people live. See *Odyssey* vii 52-78 and vi 310-315. Cf. also Wickert-Micknat 1982:37-8, who does not do justice to the exceptional position of both Arete and Scheria. On the parallels between Penelope and Arete and the limits of their power see Doherty 1995:75-78.

<sup>67</sup> *Odyssey* xvi 408-433.

on the plan and means to kill Telemachos, too.<sup>68</sup> Regardless, in this case Homer depicts a woman who is quite capable of breaching the etiquette and accosting a male guest and ringleader when she considers it necessary.

After her husband's return, Penelope does not accept her son's and Eurykleia's conviction that the stranger is indeed Odysseus. Rather, she puts him to the test to see for herself.<sup>69</sup> In this case, it does not really matter whether we believe that she already recognized him during the interview in the evening, or needs to lure him into revealing the secret of the bed in order to be certain of his identity: the fact remains that Odysseus steps into the trap. In other words, Penelope does not budge under pressure and has the mental agility to elicit the information she wants.

In short, I would like to see Penelope as a strong and self-confident person who knows what she wants and does what she can in order to get it. This may reveal more about my upbringing and the society I live in than about the *Odyssey*<sup>70</sup>, but I will nevertheless use it as a working hypothesis for the moment. Let us now turn back to the opera.

After a prologue, the opera commences with Penelope in the palace, just like its source does. In her first scene, Penelope lays down the storyline and introduces the main characters, her absent husband, shrewd and wise Odysseus, and herself, his chaste wife.<sup>71</sup> She also lets us know her main pursuits: feeling sorry for herself and lamenting her husband's absence. This is a recurring theme throughout the opera.

The characters surrounding her differ in their characterization of Penelope. Melantho, in the opera Penelope's maid, considers her mistress stubborn.<sup>72</sup> Her concern with honor had turned her heart into stone. She tries to cajole Penelope into marrying one of the suitors by reminding her of the rotting bones of her dead husband and of her beauty that was withering away without love. Melantho has a reason for her actions: Penelope's marriage would enable her to spend more time openly with her lover, Eurymachos – who is not a suitor. Her mistress remains steadfast, but she rebukes love out of fear: she is frightened of being hurt again, thus she dares not love. As opposed to incostanza and love, she chooses costanza, even when that means sorrow and death. The discussions of the *Accademia* about the nature of love and beauty appear here. The *Incogniti* emphasize that they consider beauty an ephemeral quality that will pass away.

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<sup>68</sup> *Odyssey* xvi 449-451.

<sup>69</sup> *Odyssey* XXII 170-196.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Ebbot in this volume.

<sup>71</sup> *Il Ritorno* I 1. I quote the opera in the edition of Malipiero (1930), considered the most scholarly by Rosand, Grove 3 s.v. *Ritorno d'Ulisse* in *Patria* 1352-1354, especially 1352.

<sup>72</sup> *Il Ritorno* I 3.

The suitors take up Melantho's argument.<sup>73</sup> They compare Penelope's beauty to untended nature and to the winter: it would perish if she did not love once more. For a second time, Odysseus' wife refuses, but instead of countering the "*ama dunque!*" by invoking fear of love (*no dee di nuovo amar chi misera pend*), she takes a stronger stance: she does not want to love (*no voglio amar*). The reason for her refusal is her belief that she was only capable of crying and lamenting, and that love would only bring her sorrow. The argument lacks logic, but her position is nevertheless clear: Penelope remains steadfast. However, she takes a stance not out of deliberation, but because she is forced into it by the insistence of the suitors – she does not so much act as react.

The suitors offer gifts like they do in the epic.<sup>74</sup> However, while Penelope asks for the presents in the *Odyssey* just like her husband does on occasion, in *Il Ritorno* Eurymachos takes the initiative. He suggests to the suitors that gold might move the woman's heart, enticing them to a last ditch effort because a rumor is spreading that son and husband are on the point of returning.

The characters of Odysseus' party offer another view of Penelope.<sup>75</sup> Athena calls her steadfast and chaste, personality traits that describe Penelope like *echephrôn* and *periphron* do in the *Odyssey*.

When the storylines converge and the beggar enters the palace, Penelope has just accepted the gifts and declares that they made her change her mind.<sup>76</sup> She announces the shooting contest and that she will marry the winner. As she speaks the words she realizes that a god made her do it. Incidentally, this is correct: Athena is taking action. Disregarding the argument in the case of the *Odyssey*, in the opera Penelope has no active part in the decision. The suitors rejoice, thinking that their steady courting is on the point of paying off. Interestingly, they do not use the word *costanza*: "*cor fedele, costante sen*" is their way of being steadfast. Apparently, *costanza* is the prerogative of Odysseus' party. The bad guys may not grace themselves with this kind of firmness. Accordingly, when they fail the test, their constancy is at its end: two of them fall out of love, while the third realizes that everyone and everything is loyal to Odysseus, even his bow.

After Odysseus kills the suitors, the loyal Eumaios delivers the happy news.<sup>77</sup> Penelope, however, refuses to believe him. Telemachos enters, but also fails to convince his mother. Again, Penelope argues in a fashion completely lacking logic, but remains steadfast. A heated discussion ensues, also involving the supposed beggar and Eurykleia. Cornered on all sides,

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<sup>73</sup> *Il Ritorno* II 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Il Ritorno* II 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Il Ritorno* I 8.

<sup>76</sup> *Il Ritorno* II 12.

<sup>77</sup> *Il Ritorno* III 4.

Penelope finally takes a stand and refuses to be deceived by the stranger. This prompts Odysseus to reveal the secret of the bedstead – in this case an elaborately embroidered cover, not the frame being made out of a rooted olive tree. While Penelope fashions an elaborate trap in the epic, in the opera her husband takes the initiative in her stead. At last, the woman recognizes Odysseus and the two break into song together.

Penelope's refusal to believe in her husband's return has to date been interpreted as a sign of coldness and frigidity.<sup>78</sup> Thus, the wife of Odysseus stands in the way of all other characters. I believe this is missing the message of the opera. In fact, Penelope does not become progressively colder and less able to act, she rather seems to gather security in the course of the opera and to finally find the strength to take action. Her so-called frigidity towards the end is actually a rebuttal of deceit: the woman wants certainty the stranger is who he claims to be, no matter what her friends and relations say. She will not budge until she can be certain there is no deception at work. Accordingly, deceit is highlighted as the counterpart of *costanza* and thus the negative *Leitmotiv* of *Il Ritorno*.

The similarity in the couple's characters, the corresponding wisdom and wiliness to be encountered in the *Odyssey*, has been eliminated thoroughly in the opera. More importantly, every action Penelope undertakes in the epic is removed from her and attributed to a male character. Penelope is turned into a chaste, steadfast, but generally rather passive, helpless and feeble woman. Her only saving grace is her beauty, which is very much not an issue in the *Odyssey*. Her looks are the reason she is sought after – and she does not care about them for that very reason. She forsakes the ephemeral grace of beauty for the sake of her love for her husband, for without true love there is no beauty. Thus, she turns the argument of the suitors around to make it work for her situation, and to make it clear that for her there can only be one love, the love of Odysseus.

The musical form in which Odysseus and Penelope express themselves in the opera underlines the difference in character: Penelope sings in recitative until the very end. Recitative was the established form of musical expression in opera.<sup>79</sup> When the genre first came into being, singing needed an apology: after all, in real life people talked, they did not communicate by singing. The recitative style allowed the artists to sing while to a certain degree still resembling speech.

However, in Monteverdi's time, we witness the emergence of the aria.<sup>80</sup> Again, the new form of vocal expression needed an apology: extreme emotions like joy or grieve could

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<sup>78</sup> Carter 1993:11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Recitative established itself after the turn of the century. On Monteverdi's significant role in the development of the style see Ringhandt 2000:123f. At the same time, the lamento made its entrance into opera singing, see Ringhandt 2000:126-130.

<sup>80</sup> Rosand 1991:248-280.

provoke an aria, or the nature of the artist's character could provide the necessary backing. Gods, for example, frequently expressed themselves in the new style. In *Il Ritorno* Odysseus bounds from aria to aria - his joy at his homecoming or at meeting his patron deity Athene, to name but two examples, serve as pretexts for employing the not yet established form of musical expression. Thus, the harmony of the soaring arias highlights his exceptional status and his nobility.

In contrast, Penelope's recitative underlines her chastity, but also makes her rather uninteresting. Recitative, once a means to free the singers, now functions as a means to bind her voice. The instability and the lack of direction of this form of singing illustrate her lack of power. Interestingly, in her first appearance on stage, the one element that lends a certain structure and some amount of stability to her recitative lament is the line in which she sings of her longing for her husband's return: "*torna, torna, deh torna, Ulisse*".<sup>81</sup> Only when she is reunited with her spouse does her voice liberate itself and take wing. At the precise moment when steadfastness, strength, and responsibility become meaningless, harmony and rhythm return into Penelope's life. The soaring aria of pure joy is her final liberation - when her husband is at hand to take back control.

Badoaro and Monteverdi subtly transform Penelope's character. By removing all of her actions, they turn her into the passive victim of the proceedings around her. It is important to note that not only activities involving trickery are censured: that would be consistent with the treatment her husband receives and with the general gist of the libretto. In her case, all accomplishments have been eliminated, even completely positive passages like her defense of her son. The alteration in attributes further highlights the change of her personality: "*periphron Penelopeia*" is now "*la casta Penelope*", with the music constantly emphasizing the change. This variation goes down so well that a wealth of operas with chaste Penelope as heroine spring forth in the wake of *Il Ritorno*.<sup>82</sup> Not surprisingly, the *Accademia* features prominently in their production again.

As a side effect, by removing her actions from Odysseus' wife and letting other cast members take them over, Penelope's *costanza* changes in character. In the *Odyssey*, a lot depends on her strength. If she falters, the suitors might kill Telemachos and his father, thus extinguishing the noble house. They might distribute Odysseus' wealth, or what remains of it, between them, and one of them will take his *geras*, Penelope. Accordingly, Homer cunningly has his Penelope send out mixed messages: just like the suitors can never be entirely certain what she is up to, the listener/reader is kept on the toes. Thus, the suspense keeps the public's attention.

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. also Heller 2003:157.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. e.g. Dubowy 1998:215-243.

In the opera, Penelope is passive; therefore the outcome of the story ceases to depend on her actions. The one thing that a possible *incostanza* on her part can change is her and her husband's future happiness. Accordingly, *costanza* becomes an abstracted virtue, the path to true love, and is the only "course of action" a woman may and must undertake.

Summing up, apart from changing individual characters, two messages are inserted into the plot. In order to clear themselves of the charges of libertinism and subversion, which endangered the political careers of the members of the *Accademia*, the *Incogniti* advertised *costanza* as the highest virtue in women: according to the *Accademia*, there is no love without constancy, and without love, no beauty. Even more important is the message broadcasted about lies and deception. They are thoroughly eliminated; all trickery is removed from the plot – with the exception of the indispensable beggar-disguise. Deceit is the negative *Leitmotiv* of *Il Ritorno*, which is conquered by *costanza* in the end. In this way, the *Incogniti* carefully inserted the cultural values and morals of their society into the *Odyssey*. They presented themselves to their peers as steadfast supporters of established principles and standards, in the process whitewashing their circle.

### ***A Renaissance of Homer***

The attention the *Incogniti* paid to their own whitewashing and the power and skill they extended to achieve their goal founded the virtually unparalleled success of *Il Ritorno*. Their redesigned chaste and powerless Penelope obviously hit the right note. With the ostentatious display of the model of steadfastness, the assertion of the ephemeral quality of beauty and its insignificance, and the all-powerful ideal of unswerving, marital love, the *Incogniti* apparently succeeded in dispersing the accusations leveled against them. Thus Homer's *Odyssey* was turned effectively into the vehicle of their defense.

As a result of the opera's triumph, Venetian interest in Homer was renewed. Federico Malipiero translated the *Iliad* into Italian in 1642, putting an end to 60 years of editorial silence and dedicating his publication to Giovanni Francesco Loredano, founder of the *Accademia degli Incogniti*. He also announced a translation of the *Odyssey*, which appeared in the following year in a complete edition of Homer. Homer's works continued to be used as sources for opera plots during the remaining seventeenth century. Among them, the great number of operas featuring Odysseus and Penelope stand out.<sup>83</sup> Again, members of the *Accademia* promoted the productions with vigor. Creating and advancing the fashion, the *Accademia* linked herself further to Homer and his renewed fame as poet most sublime.

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<sup>83</sup> Dubowy 1998:215-243.



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