

## 4 Tito's Burden

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### The Operatic Action, Intertext and Context

The libretto for *La clemenza di Tito* (by Pietro Metastasio in 1734, revised by Caterino Mazzolà in 1791) dramatises events on the day after Titus renounced his love for the foreign queen Berenice. Even though he was absolute ruler, he renounced his love in compliance with popular demand because he desired the Roman people's consent to his being their emperor. The opera's first scenes recount that agonising renunciation. It was already known to audiences as constituting the entire action of Jean Racine's 1670 tragedy *Bérénice*, during which the two main characters are both close to suicide. The following discussion invites reflection on the context of the times of composition of those two works, Racine's *Bérénice* and the libretto for *La clemenza di Tito*.

*Bérénice* was written about twenty years after the French royal armies' brutal crushing of the second Fronde—an important revolt of the nobles against the rule of Louis XIV. The 1670 tragedy expresses, in Titus's own disenchanted words, the loss of belief in the value of high status and *gloire*, the fame and grandeur attached to the desire and effort to be the impossible: the perfect ruler. In living memory of the Fronde, Racine's tragedy may have suggested to its first public a political commentary on their present time, as the playwright represents Titus as an absolute monarch, on the model of a French king.<sup>1</sup>

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The choice of the story of Titus's clemency to celebrate the coronation of Leopold II as king of Bohemia in 1791, at a time when Titus was a quasi-mythical figure of benevolent rule for the Enlightenment, can be seen as an expression of love for the reforming monarch, while the Roman ruler himself, in keeping with his earlier representation in Racine's tragedy, enacts his doubts and regrets, and even a distrust of his own royal authority. The confrontation of the subjects' uncritical love for Titus and the latter's self-criticism in Metastasio's libretto adumbrates an Enlightenment critique of monarchy as such.

Mozart was commissioned to produce a new score for the 1734 libretto *La clemenza di Tito* for the festivities accompanying Leopold's coronation on 6 September 1791 (he seems to have attended the premiere without enthusiasm, see Chapter 1, II Documents 9 and 16). Mozart's score entailed some modifications to the libretto. Metastasio's *opera seria* of the early Enlightenment had had many performances through the eighteenth century, with musical scores by a number of different composers. Almost sixty years after its original composition, the poetically powerful text needed the up-to-date revisions effected by Mazzolà without loss of its poetic qualities, to accommodate both Mozart's music and Mazzolà's stagecraft. The large body of Metastasio's writing preserved in the final version suggests that the creators of the new opera held his work in high esteem. At the same time, where certain verses of the original text are excised by the critical artists of 1791, we can discern the uncritical, sometimes self-indulgent character of the earlier era. The text of the Mozart-Mazzolà final version forms the subject of my comments on the libretto.

Anomalously, this demonstrably rich, multi-faceted libretto belongs with a Mozart score that may still be suffering from a lingering prejudice that deems it unequal to his other great operas. Discussion of the music is beyond the scope of my discussion here, but if there still persists any such disparagement of the music, I would be sorry to

set the matter aside without first citing the succinct vindication of *La clemenza di Tito* by Stanley Sadie. Many composers were setting Metastasio's classical librettos, adding ensembles and choruses for the tastes of the later times. In *La clemenza di Tito* Mozart cut eighteen arias and added four, with three new duets, three trios, a choral ensemble and two finale ensembles. Sadie points out that the music for this serious opera is necessarily more austere than that of the Mozart-Da Ponte comic operas or *Die Zauberflöte*. The style befits the serious topic, and 'in its reduced form it may be seen as conforming to the neo-classical ideals then rapidly gaining ground in Germany'. He adds: 'Mozart responded with restrained orchestral writing, smooth, broad vocal lines, and relatively brief numbers', and concludes: '*La clemenza di Tito*, compared with the preceding operas, is no less refined in craftsmanship, and it shows Mozart responding with music of restraint, nobility and warmth to a new kind of stimulus'.<sup>2</sup>

John A. Rice has described in detail the construction and the qualities of this *opera seria* that made it the perfect choice for the grand occasion and for the courtly audience of September 1791. It was a drama representing Tito's benign kingship and the judicious governance that peacefully resolves a dangerous day of political turbulence, evocative of the revolutionary events currently unfolding in other lands.<sup>3</sup> Rice's methodical assembling of all the external circumstances and reasons for the choice of that opera, its characters and its topic, facilitates and inspires a closer reading of the libretto, for internal analysis and discussion of the text and the action, which I hope will reveal further details that shed light on different facets of the work's historical context, and its importance for our own time.<sup>4</sup>

*La clemenza di Tito* celebrates virtuous kingship, while at the same time representing the monarch's role as onerous for him. Tito's generosity, the positive construction of his character, although derided by some critics, becomes credible when we perceive him as a victim of tragic irony, his deep love for Berenice having made him aspire to

become the perfect ruler who, for that very reason, must send her away from Rome.

When Leopold came to Bohemia for his coronation, it was the duty of the Bohemian Estates<sup>5</sup> to decide the festivities, which included the choice of the opera (see Chapter 1, II Documents 1 and 2). We can infer that the choice signified simultaneously both their homage to the emperor and their appeal to him to respect an ideal of benevolence and heed their supplications. Bohemia was at that time impoverished by famine and wars, and one of a number of provinces attempting to obstruct the ruler's policies and taxes, the more audaciously just after Joseph's death.<sup>6</sup> Leopold would anticipate a display of such tensions in the welcome extended to him. It was inherent in the situation of benevolent subjection that the subjects would inform the ruler of their needs. The pressure on the monarch of such appeals might account in part for his apparent lack of interest at the opera premiere.

*La clemenza di Tito* stages that relationship favourably. On stage the Roman people initiate their relationship with Tito with celebrations, but also with their stern demand, made in the republican spirit not forgotten in the era of the Roman Empire, that he should choose a Roman woman as empress. Imperial absolutism entitles Tito to disregard that demand, but he knows better than to do so. The opera powerfully dramatises the simultaneity of loving homage and pressure that so intensely defines the absolute monarch's experience of his closest courtiers' dependence on him. Once Tito concedes the people's demand by sending Berenice away, the people must reciprocate by giving their consent to the emperor's authority. They can henceforth make appeals to his goodwill, but they cannot make demands on him. The rebellion that dominates the opera's central action results from the failure of its instigator, Vitellia, to understand that Tito has already satisfied the popular demand. Vitellia's manipulation of the people's feelings about their ruler has mixed motivations, in which her own political ambition skews her perception of others' actions, and

momentarily blinds her to her own feelings—whether love or hate—towards Tito. She is a brilliant, larger-than-life creation. However, the people's generally positive feelings for Tito, their consent to his authority, and their relief when he is known to have survived Sesto's inept attempt on his life, soon prevail over her misjudged leadership.

Thereafter, with Tito's generous and affectionate authority confirmed, Act II can explore and partly resolve the mystery of the loyal Sesto's moment of guilt, and question his refusal to explain why he endangered his beloved monarch's life. This dramatic series of tense confrontations between the two men remains deadlocked, as Sesto would die rather than denounce Vitellia, whom he passionately loves. Heartlessly, she has relied on his helpless love for her, and ordered him to kill his other object of love, Tito, and Sesto's pathetic dilemma leaves him powerless to act on his horror at her criminal plotting. Vitellia is finally wakened from her indifference to Sesto's love by a transforming realisation that he will die without denouncing her. She resolves the deadlock. At the last moment, she rushes on stage with her full confession to Tito, before the whole court, admitting that she instigated the rebellion and compelled Sesto to attempt regicide. That attainment of complete clarification opens the way to the ruler's absolution of the entire Roman people.

In Act II, the hard work of Tito's determination to resolve the crisis ultimately succeeds through the laborious clarification of Sesto's destructive deeds. The extraordinary action of this Act is worthy of comparison with today's practice of *restorative justice*, whereby instead of traditional modes of punishment of an offender, an authorised person assembles all those involved in or affected by the crime so that the event can be excavated in detail and a resolution collectively agreed.<sup>7</sup> But unlike today's procedure, where traditionally imposed penalties give way to collective egalitarian processes that work towards restorative justice, the resolution in *La clemenza di Tito* remains, to the end of the work, the work of Tito alone, as the

sole recourse for justice. Tito remains imprisoned under the burden of his power; the operatic action exposes relentlessly that defining injustice of the tradition of absolute monarchy.

In the spirit of its official festive purpose, the opera celebrates good kingship, while maintaining the extreme tension between that celebration and an exploration of a turbulent moment in Europe's gradual falling out of love with absolute monarchy. In *La clemenza di Tito*, the tension is dramatised in the character construction of Tito himself. That tension remains unresolved at the opera's close, even as it remained unresolved in the Europe of 1791.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Monarch's Need for Truth**

In classical tragedy, the central character has a confidant who gives him or her advice and information about the small milieu of the court and the world outside the court. For Tito, the absence of a reliable interlocutor of this kind is a major obstacle towards him developing the non-authoritarian leadership he aspires to. Servilia, perhaps the member of Tito's small inner circle of the court who has the least status, earns his highest praise by disappointing him—telling him that she loves Annio. Tito's abiding ambition to be a perfect emperor puts him at the mercy of even his friends' incapacity to tell him the truth. Their admiring love for the absolute ruler obstructs the feeling of equality that might facilitate truthful exchange. Truth is almost continually inhibited or 'trapped' (cf. Act 1, scene 7, 'L'insidiata verità'). Tito is confident that the subjects closest to him admire and love him, but they respond to his own aspiration to perfection by idealising him and by withholding from him, for more or less innocent reasons, information that may not please him.

Pietro Metastasio is generally appreciated as a warmly lyrical poet, but is thought to have lesser talents for psychological analysis. *La clemenza di Tito* allowed him to display other strengths. His

undeniable gift of *political* insight, of which Servilia's scene is a subtle instance, unquestionably prevails in the libretto's brilliantly rich depiction of one turbulent day in the very gradual dismantling of the ancient institution of monarchy. We especially recognise it in the slow processes of change in the personal relationships prevailing at the monarch's court; processes not irrelevant to the demise of the classical tragic genre, structured as it was on the extreme representation of royal grandeur and courtly magnificence. Furthermore, Tito's anxiety about the rarity of truth-telling among members of his closest circle suggests to us the literary-political motivation for discarding the role of the confidant. One day before the action of the *opera seria*, Racine had given Titus a crucially necessary confidant in Paulinus, who told him his absolute power meant he could override Rome's objection to a foreigner and a queen as a choice of empress, but (when pressed by Titus) he admitted that he would then certainly have to deal with the Senate's complaints and the people's entreaties. The next day, in Metastasio's libretto, Tito finds himself with no reliable confidant as he had heeded Paulinus's warning and, to the profound grief of both the lovers, sent Berenice away from Rome—all this in order to be the perfect monarch that Berenice had always wanted him to be. He now has a group of grateful, respectful and affectionate friends who are not frank with him.

Servilia, however, knows from the start how to speak truth to the ruler in her situation of subjection, and in so doing, she enables Tito to express the longing for truth that from the opera's first Act constitutes the imperative of clarification which is catharsis.<sup>9</sup> In a rare reference to Berenice, his sacrificed love, Tito has explained to Sesto and Annio that another love is out of the question for him, but that he will marry a daughter of Rome, and that his friendship for Sesto can determine his choice of Servilia, Sesto's sister, to become his wife that very day (Act I, scene 4). Tito is unaware that Annio and Servilia are promised to each other. Sesto and Annio both instantly despair of the existing

love, but they hide their dismay, feigning their joy at his choice of such a woman. Their words seem close to flattery, but they contain none of the flatterer's veiled political cunning. The grieving Annio announces to Servilia her future greatness, but Servilia responds by confronting Tito with the news that her heart belongs to Annio and that her thoughts would always be of him. However, aware that she has no right to oppose the sovereign's will, she concludes by offering him her hand if, knowing of her love for Annio, he still wants her as his spouse. Tito responds with admiration and relief at being told a disappointing truth: his own heart could not bear to thwart their love (Act I, scene 7). At the end of the scene, Tito sings aria 8. 'Ah, se fosse intorno al trono', the words of which define both the opera's dramatic situation and the feelings of the character:

Ah, se fosse intorno al trono  
 Ogni cor così sincero,  
 Non tormento un vasto impero,  
 Ma saria felicità.  
 Non dovrebbero i regnanti  
 Tollerar sì grande affanno  
 Per distinguer dall'inganno  
 L'insidiata verità.<sup>10</sup>

(Oh, if the throne were surrounded only by such sincere hearts, a vast empire would not be torment, but bliss. Rulers should not tolerate the anguish of having to distinguish deceit from inhibited veracity.)

When Tito later decides in solitude (Act II, scene 11), after great inner conflict, to spare Sesto's life, he does not yet know why his former friend tried to kill him. Sesto has not told him the whole truth. So Tito's decision to set aside his just condemnation by not delivering Sesto to the rigour of the law only keeps this monarch true to his character, true to his habitual preference to let others accuse him of ill-inspired

pity rather than mistaken rigour. It follows that his final recourse to clemency for all, when publicly stated, does not constitute in itself the climax of the dramatic action. That would leave the audience with no vision of possible political change: the monarch still rules in isolation. The libretto reserves the last scene (Act II, scene 17) for truth-telling alone, the more significant for not having served as the condition of Sesto's deliverance from death. The opera ends with the full clarification that we can call catharsis. This last scene fully vindicates Tito's earlier insistence on frankness (in Servilia's scene), since everyone finally knows the whole truth in a rare moment of transparency for all.

Whatever Metastasio may have lacked in psychological analysis, I suggest, he made up for in penetrating political insights into the psycho-social relationships of monarchy, and in the highly dramatic elaboration of those relationships in the case of Tito himself, who yearns to undo them from within. Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke of Metastasio with reverence, and in his *Dictionnaire de musique* he regards his genius as inspiring for others.<sup>11</sup> Rousseau entered the Paris theatrical scene in 1749, and in his scandalous *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753) he denounced French opera, set against high praise for the Italian operas, where 'the arias are all in situation and form part of the scenes',<sup>12</sup> which is not the case, he asserts, in French operas. He gives examples of the dramatic relevance of Italian arias, referring to one sung by Tito: 'He is a good-natured ruler who, forced to set an example of severity, asks the gods to take away his empire, or to give him a less sensitive heart'.<sup>13</sup> Rousseau's high esteem for Metastasio's writing acknowledges the poet's gift for dynamising theatrical action long before Mozart's music and Mazzola's libretto revisions greatly advanced operatic stagecraft. These observations suggest a reading of Metastasio's libretto that transcends the assertion of lack of sensitivity to the human: no one attends more critically to the political dimension's affective reverberations than Rousseau. In the article

‘Opéra’ Rousseau describes the defining characteristics of the genre *drame lyrique*, that is, the *opera seria*, as consisting in the need to hold the spectator totally under the spell of the musical illusion; ‘nothing cold or reasoned’ is appropriate in the composition of the *opera seria* libretto.<sup>14</sup> He defines *opera seria* in terms of overwhelming musicality and warm emotion, rather than a happy ending. For Rousseau, beauty, graceful composition and verisimilitude will fill spectators’ hearts with pity and fear. We can agree with him when we see the complex depth of Tito’s emotions and experience the shock of others’ emotions and deeds in *La clemenza di Tito*. The task of dramatic poetry is to make clear that which is deeply unclear, and the clarification can help spectators to live. Racine’s heroine Berenice attests this clarification literally; faced with Titus’s insistence that they must part, she did not believe he loved her, but when he tells her that if she dies, he will die (Act V, scene 6, lines 1427-36), she knows he still loves her and so she can promise to live. We see the same powerful effect on Vitellia when she learns that Sesto intends to go to his death rather than denounce her. Understanding at last what it is to be loved, and what that means to him and to her, she sacrifices every ambition of her own selflessly to save him from death. Such life-saving effects achieved in a few lines of dramatic writing have a tremendous impact on spectators and readers; such effects are of the essence of *opera seria*.<sup>15</sup> Rousseau reports in his *Lettre à d’Alembert* that when Mlle Gaussin, a great actress in the role of Berenice, stopped weeping in the final scene of the tragedy, having suddenly understood that Titus still loved her, her dry-eyed promise to depart and to live caused the spectators to forget the tragedy’s overt lesson of the hero who prefers duty before love. They all left the theatre, writes Rousseau, having ‘married Berenice’.<sup>16</sup> His contention that in a contest between love and duty, love will always win, invalidates the notion of theatre as a school for moral improvement and suggests the need for another kind of theatre, of a kind glimpsed in such moments of emotional revelation.

## Historical Depth in the Character of Tito

What we learn of Tito's moral character from the defining scene with Servilia constitutes an instance of this opera's important intertextual relations with two great works of the previous century. The first of these, Racine's 1669 tragedy *Britannicus*, portrays Nero when a very young 'nascent monster', as Racine describes him in his preface.<sup>17</sup> In *Bérénice*, Titus will compare his own court favourably to that of Nero. Nero heeds the sinister advice of the corrupt flatterer Narcissus. He envies the young love between Junia and Britannicus; and desiring to possess Junia, he takes her prisoner. Fearing Britannicus as a rival to the empire, Nero then has Narcissus poison the young man. Narcissus is finally killed by the people of Rome; Junia takes refuge in the temple. In *La clemenza di Tito*, the scene in which Tito safeguards the love of Servilia and Annio enacts the most extreme contrast to the plot of *Britannicus*.<sup>18</sup> By contradistinction, Nero's destruction of the couple Junia-Britannicus sheds light on the meaning of Tito's open-hearted response to the love of Annio and Servilia. Tito will not be another Nero; his moral reform from the start of his reign, publicly illustrated by his separation from Berenice, is genuine and all-encompassing, and the vice of flattery has no place in the opera.

I have already referred to Racine's *Bérénice* (1670), the second seventeenth-century tragedy with a deep intertextual relation to *La clemenza di Tito*. The first two scenes of *La clemenza di Tito* clearly establish Tito's identity as being that of the equally fictional character Titus in *Bérénice*. The continuity of the action from the tragedy to the *opera seria* is perfectly precise. In Racine's tragedy, Titus renounces the love of his life, Berenice, in order to be true to his ideal conception of the faultless ruler. Foreshadowing the Tito of the opera, he speaks with bitter sadness of the 'glorious' identity to which he had aspired until he realised that having attained 'la gloire'—the consent of the people—he would have to lose his love. One day later in fictional

time, the action of the opera starts with the news of the heartrending separation of the lovers, and of Berenice's departure from Rome, spreading within Tito's court. These two works elaborate on their historical source, the essay on Titus in *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius. Suetonius's account was equally familiar to the first audiences of both Racine's tragedy and Mozart's opera.<sup>19</sup> However we cannot fail to take into account the changing political determinants of character construction from Racine's masterpiece to that of Metastasio, and again to that of Mozart and Mazzolà. In the course of the intervening years, social-historical changes impose upon Tito-Titus a new relationship to being a leader despite important persevering effects of the libretto's fidelity to the inaugural sacrifice of love, expressed in Racine's extraordinary poetry:

Je sens bien que sans vous je ne saurais plus vivre,  
 Que mon cœur de moi-même est prêt à s'éloigner.  
 Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut régner. (Act IV, scene 5,  
 1100–1102.)

(I surely feel that without you I could not go on living,  
 and that my heart is about to leave me.  
 But it is no longer a matter of living, I must reign.)

Tito's decision to exercise clemency, despite Sesto's refusal to explain his motivation for the attempted assassination, does not deny his need for truth. I suggest that at this point in the drama, the poet refers to the deep-level identity, even fusion, of the character of Tito and the hero Titus of Racine's tragedy. With Berenice, Titus has known a relationship extraordinary in its transparent truthfulness. The pain of the lovers' parting is excruciatingly truthful too, as dramatised by the poetic genius of Racine's tragedy and then as stated in a few simple words by the eye-witness, Annio, in the first scenes of the opera. The thought comes to mind of the idea of the 'limit experience', one of whose forms is an experience where nearness to death ('If you die,

I will die...') takes subjects out of life and yet not to literal death.<sup>20</sup> Might we apply the words: 'Mais il ne s'agit plus de vivre, il faut régner', to the entire characterisation of the emperor in the sequel to that parting: *La clemenza di Tito*? Should we not understand that what Tito and his subjects call his heart, 'il cor di Tito' (Act I, scene 8; Act II, scene 5), always bears the wound of the unbearable effort of the previous day? The action of the opera culminates in a collective situation where the truth, unsatisfactory as it is, is clear to all. Tito knows that the clarification does not guarantee an enduring collective acceptance of his principle of truthfulness. In the end, this ruler's freedom to act on his decision to exercise a universal clemency accompanies a complex clarification of the facts to which all the opera's characters contribute in different ways. Admitting his guilt in the attempt on Tito's life, Sesto does not divulge his motivation, but the *coup de théâtre* of Vitellia's profound remorse, and her genuine confession that she had abused Sesto's love for her to make him attempt the crime, enable Tito to absolve Sesto and all the rebels. Audiences needed no explanation that sexual love is involuntary, and so Tito could exonerate Sesto for his abject obedience to Vitellia's command. Her final clarification, despite its brevity and generality, satisfies the need for truth. The fact that the woman is not held to account for the enormity of the crime that she both plotted and made Sesto attempt, must have seemed acceptable to the eighteenth-century audience. The extremism of Tito's decision to absolve the guilt of Vitellia and her co-conspirators universalises the quality of clemency as the ultimate virtue for the rule of one over all.

### **From Servilia to Vitellia**

In this discussion of a libretto focused on the central character's political sensibility and burden of responsibility, the two female characters call for consideration. While both are apparently politically marginal,

I am struck by the fact that each in her own way acts and thinks more independently in relation to the male characters, including the monarch, than do the three male characters in their own situations.<sup>21</sup>

The important characterisation of Servilia and Vitellia, in the immediate aftermath of Tito's traumatic separation from Berenice, would certainly loom large in the imagination of the opera's creators and first audiences. In face of the emotional impossibility of loving any other woman, Tito must marry a daughter of Rome. Unacquainted with any eligible women, he thinks first of his friend Sesto's sister, then, after learning of her love for Annio, he announces his choice of Vitellia, daughter of Vitellius, a former emperor. As discussed above, Tito has perceived in Servilia's frankness a moral maturity superior to all that he has observed at the court: a quality confirmed by the poet's construction of her character. The astonishing character Vitellia, who has desired to be chosen as Tito's consort and has felt that she loved him, disgracefully abuses her young lover Sesto's weakness to make him stir up a popular revolt and assassinate his admired friend, Tito—all in her ill-judged refusal to believe that Berenice has left Rome. When later summoned to Tito's presence with the welcome news that he has in fact chosen her as his empress, Vitellia then needs desperately to revoke the conspiracy that she has set in motion against him.

The libretto balances these strong female characters, not as moral opposites but in a sharply contrasted tension, as two people whose lives have afforded them totally different situations from which their innate characters emerge as radically dissimilar. In an era of writing often marked by feminine stereotypes, we can admire the poet's ability for creating women who are unique, and as real and credible today as his fictional men. We can also admire the poet for creating men in whom emotion, especially love, is no less necessary than it is for the women. It is, however, the character of Vitellia that grows and changes most dramatically and convincingly in the course of the opera.

This colourful character creates the entire intrigue, the plot against Tito's life and the brutal manipulation of the emotions of the young man who attempts to carry it out for love of her, and while doing extreme violence to his own love for Tito. The Age of Enlightenment did not doubt the violence of amorous passion. Rousseau writes in his *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* [*Discourse on the origin of Inequality*]:

Among the passions that trouble the heart of man, there is one that is ardent, impetuous, which renders one sex necessary to the other, a terrible passion that braves all dangers, overturns all obstacles, and that seems, in its fury, capable of destroying the human species that its purpose is to preserve. What will become of men prey to this frenetic, brutal madness, without decency or restraint, spilling their blood day after day as they fight one another over their loves?<sup>22</sup>

Sesto does not fight Tito over his love for Vitellia, but rather breaks his own heart in his powerlessness to resist both his passion for her beauty and her brutally cruel command that he kill his emperor, the person he loves most after herself. To convince an audience, he would need to be portrayed as very young, barely adult, enslaved by an unrequited and destructive passion and yet fundamentally made for compassion and faithful friendship. After Sesto is exposed as the perpetrator of the attempted crime, when Vitellia cannot believe he will not expose her as its instigator, he begins to see her moral unworthiness of his love but even then, he still loves her, asks only for her pity, and assures her he will not denounce her.

Vitellia heeds only her own understanding of the political events that excite her ambition, even ignoring contrary evidence supplied by eye-witnesses. Perhaps we can accept that she loves or loved Tito, as she tells Sesto and finally tells Tito himself. Her obsession with his life situation and his position of power are perhaps a deflection of thwarted love. When planning Tito's assassination, she believes that since she cannot become empress by marrying him, she will, after

his death, inherit her father's power as ruler of Rome. As readers of Suetonius, the audience would know of Vitellius's irresponsible life and might thus infer a history of emotional and social deprivation from this strong-willed, intelligent but wrong-headed woman's grave errors of judgement through her self-centred obsessions and her gross insensitivity to the generosity and intelligence of others. The poet's art excels in making Vitellia so complex that we can interpret her character with a degree of freedom.

The brilliant characterisation of Vitellia makes her total transformation—a veritable conversion—entirely credible. She did not believe for one moment that Sesto would go to his death without denouncing her, and when she learns that he is doing exactly that, the change in her is immediate and all-embracing. She puts away her plans or expectation of empire and marriage, and in her final rondo 23. 'Non più di fiori' she sings of the dream of garlanded nuptials replaced by a horrific death.<sup>23</sup> At last she allows herself to feel sadness about what she has lacked and will never have. But she must save Sesto's life, and does so selflessly. She confronts Tito, and in the presence of everyone, confesses her guilt. Tito's first reaction of rage and despair at learning the depths of guilt of this most treacherous member of his court gives way to his habit of clemency in preference to cruel punishment. He commands that all the miscreants be freed, and absolves everybody, recreating order in his realm.

In the first scenes of *La clemenza di Tito*, members of the court praise Tito's warm generosity of character. At the end, his enacted clemency confirms their faith in him, and yet his feelings are obscure. He has changed, under the impact of shocking events. The opera stages his thunderstruck silence at Vitellia's revelations. Recalling his earlier lament about 'L'insidiata verità' that undermines even his warmest relations at the court, we must conclude that his state of shock contains his grim confrontation with any monarch's irreducible burden—the heavier for his being the best of monarchs—a lonely figure at the

top of a pyramid of unknowable subjects. *La clemenza di Tito* enacts the impossibility of monarchical rule, not just for the many who live under the rule of one, but most of all, for the one who, like Racine's Titus, understands that ruling is no longer a matter of living.

### The Opera's Burden

Metastasio's dramatic poem *La clemenza di Tito* holds together all the elements of hugely disruptive events without sacrificing any character as morally irrecoverable. Finally, the opera's representation of humanity remains positive even while dramatising the human potential for endangering lives by generating moral and political disaster. It seems that for more than fifty years, the libretto was the stable element, the dimension that was popular with the audiences, while the music was the variable accompaniment; following the libretto's composition in 1734, numerous composers wrote new music for it. We can be sure that Mozart's music at the Prague premiere on 6 September 1791, combined with some text revisions by Mazzolà, created an entirely new experience for the aristocracy and other dignitaries who constituted the first night audience. The reception of the music's originality and beauty, however, may have been affected by Leopold's late arrival and his implicit lack of interest. As some spectators had waited in the auditorium for two and a half hours (see Chapter 1, II Documents 8, 10, 11 and 12), their enthusiasm for a premiere was dampened, and this in turn may have influenced the lacklustre attendance on ensuing nights (see Chapter 1, II Documents 12, 16, 17, 20, 21). The ceremonial occasion of Leopold's coronation would necessarily have predetermined the politics of the celebratory opera so decisively—not only the choice of the 1734 libretto, but also the new music—that we can admire the credible tumult of the human world that its creators nonetheless dared to conjure up, especially in the first finale: a poetic reference (however momentary)

to the real revolutions of America and France. But more than that, the opera's portrayal of the Roman ruler himself, with his freely expressed warmth, his private torment about having to rule at all, and his clemency: all that was an audaciously ideal portrait to offer to the new emperor. But Leopold (who was not an illiberal ruler, although somewhat less liberal than Joseph had been) had already endured the pressure of his subjects pleading for his goodwill, he knew the plot of *La clemenza di Tito* as well as everyone else, and it is possible that Mozart's music was not to his taste. The relation of the theatre to authority, always problematic in pre-democratic times, must surely be more intense in the physical presence of the ruler, disturbing the fundamental relation of the spectators to the spectacle. It is as if Leopold set out to ensure the opera's failure, and he might even have succeeded, but that the production was revived three years later to a resounding success (see Chapter 1, II Documents 20 and 21), precisely because it was now independent from its original ceremonial and political setting.

### Notes

1. Georges Forestier, editor of Racine, *Théâtre – Poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 1457, makes that *rapprochement*, which also applies to Tito in the Mozart opera: 'A l'image d'un roi de France, Titus est présenté comme un monarque absolu'. Forestier goes on to explain that 'absolute', (Latin *solutus a legibus*, 'untied from the laws'), 'does not mean that the king can do what he wants with the existing laws, nor that he can give force of law to all his whims; it indicates that he has full legislative power, that is, he is invested with the right to replace an old law at any moment with a new one (which will be [...] discussed by the sovereign courts). On the other hand, he must respect the natural and divine laws, as well as the "fundamental laws" of the kingdom that established the conditions of the exercise of monarchy [...]. Transgressing those two types of laws means taking the path of tyranny' (1457–8). Forestier's points remain relevant for the Late Enlightenment opera; the fact that Tito's absolute power may be seen by the opera's public as a reference to a modern

European king has a critical function, but at the same time, the location in Antiquity, greatly favoured throughout the centuries of monarchical rule, corresponded to a deep affection for the ancient myths. I owe the latter point to Paul Bénichou, *Morales du grand siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 252, note.

2. Stanley Sadie, *The New Grove Mozart* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 161–4.

3. News of the American and French Revolutions travelled fast. In France, major changes before 6 September 1791, relevant to this opera and to the Holy Roman Empire (far ahead of France politically, thanks to Joseph II's liberalising reforms, most of them maintained by his brother Leopold II), include, in August 1789, abolition of the feudal regime based on privileges of nobility and clergy in favour of a new social order based on freedom and equality; *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. Ensuing changes included: in 1790, women, admitted to some Jacobin clubs, began to learn to talk about politics, to deliberate, speak publicly, sometimes vote. In early 1791: Olympe de Gouges, *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*. Her historic manifesto was ignored. 20 June: Louis XVI, trying to flee France, is brought back to Paris, watched by a huge silent crowd.

4. John A. Rice, W. A. *Mozart: La clemenza di Tito*. Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Rice pinpoints precisely the interweaving of the two great works in the emotions of Tito, p. 26: 'Since both Racine and Metastasio follow the classical precept of unity of time, we can conclude that Metastasio's drama takes place on the day following that on which Racine's drama takes place. [...] This would explain much of Tito's resignation, the lack of pleasure he feels in his reign. This would explain too why Metastasio's Tito lacks the passion of Racine's Titus: he has just given up the only thing that aroused his passion?.'

5. The Bohemian Estates were the regional government of Bohemia. Consisting of representatives from the nobility, the clergy, the knights and the burghers, the assembly was dominated by the aristocracy.

6. Derek Beales, *Joseph II: II. Against the World, 1780-1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1, 59, 243, 623–4.

7. From the extensive bibliography for all aspects of restorative justice, I mention three studies that helped me to connect and contrast Tito's negotiation of the crisis in Rome to this modern procedure: Heather Strang and John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice: Philosophy to Practice* (Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2000); Heather Strang and John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Heather Strang, *Repair or Revenge: Victims and Restorative Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). My thanks to Heather Strang and to Elizabeth Minchin for valuable discussions of many questions relevant to *La clemenza di Tito*.

8. However, in Paris on 12 July 1791 in the Legislative Assembly, the Marquis de Condorcet had read out a refutation of pro-royalty arguments entitled: 'De la République; ou un roi est-il nécessaire à la conservation de la liberté?' (On the Republic; or, is a king necessary for the preservation of freedom?).

9. For the instance of *La clemenza di Tito*, and more generally, I prefer Martha Nussbaum's analysis of the meaning of *katharsis* in Aristotle's era, for her conclusion that in its general sense it means clarification (as of water). Medical purgation and spiritual purification, which do not fit this *opera seria*, are specialised applications of that general meaning. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 388–91. *La clemenza di Tito* is not a tragedy, but Sesto's refusal to explain his reason for attempting to murder his beloved emperor creates the dramatic necessity, for all the characters, of clarification.

10. [Pietro Metastasio and Caterino Mazzolà,] *La clemenza di Tito, dramma serio per musica in due atti da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Nazionale di Praga nel settembre 1791* (Prague: Schönfeld, 1791).

11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique* [1767], article 'Génie', *Œuvres complètes*, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), V, 837–8.

12. 'Dans les opéras italiens, tous les airs sont en situation et font partie des scènes'. Rousseau, *Lettre sur la musique française*, in *Œuvres complètes* (1995), 316.

13. '[...] c'est un prince débonnaire, qui, forcé de donner un exemple de sévérité, demande aux dieux de lui ôter l'empire, ou de lui donner

un cœur moins sensible'. Rousseau, *Lettre sur la musique française*, in *Œuvres complètes* (1995), 316. The aria paraphrased by Rousseau is Tito's aria 20. 'Se all'impero, amici Dei'.

14. '[...] rien de froid et de raisonné'. *Dictionnaire de musique*, 'Opéra', in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes V* (1995), 948–62.

15. Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731) represents the same powerful effect when Manon, about to undergo deportation to the New World, finds Des Grieux beside her, determined to accompany her; she then understands what it means to be loved, and becomes a loving and faithful woman. She and Vitellia represent characters blind to love who exploit their lovers until the last extremity opens their eyes and hearts. Berenice does know love but loses faith in it when confronted by total loss of her lover; then she has to attain the extreme understanding that she remains loved despite total separation. I mention these instances here for their powerful resonance in the public; they are sudden, profound conversions and have something of the quality of a *coup de théâtre*. A great performer in the role of Berenice or Vitellia will remain in memory.

16. Jean Rousset, ed. in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, V (1995), 48–50: 'La reine part sans le congé du parterre; l'empereur la renvoie *invitus invitam*, on peut ajouter *invito spectatore*. Titus a beau rester romain; il est seul de son parti; tous les spectateurs ont épousé Bérénice.' (The queen departs without the audience's permission; the emperor, reluctantly, dismisses the reluctant woman; we can add: the spectator is reluctant too. In vain does Titus remain a Roman; he is the only Roman in the theatre: all the spectators have married Berenice). Rousset remarks: 'Rousseau entend prouver que, contrairement à ce que disent les défenseurs du théâtre, l'effet de la pièce sur le spectateur est indépendant du dénouement.' (Rousseau means to prove that, contrary to what the theatre's defenders say, the play's effect on the spectator is independent of the work's conclusion). This editorial comment by Rousset is in 'Notes et variantes' at the back of vol. V of Rousseau *Œuvres complètes*, V (1995), 1339, note 2. As Rousset remarks, Rousseau contends that a play's effect on spectators is independent of its overt moral argument.

17. 'Je l'ai toujours regardé comme un monstre. Mais c'est ici un monstre naissant.' ('I have always regarded him as a monster. But here, he is a nascent monster.') Racine, *Œuvres complètes I*, *Théâtre - Poésie*,

Georges Forestier, ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), Preface, 372–76: Racine explains that his main source for this work is Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*. All my references to Racine and to the discussions by the editor Georges Forestier are to this edition. As the present article only discusses in detail the characters of *La clemenza di Tito*, I give the Italian form of their names (e.g. Tito), but, for the sake of clarity, I resort to the English (Latin) forms when referring to Racine's characters by name.

18. Historically, the careers of Nero and Titus were not far apart. Nero (born in 37, died in 68) was emperor from 54 to 68; Titus (born in 39, died in 81) ruled from 79 to 81. The historical Titus' dissolute youthful conduct before holding power led the people to fear he would be another Nero. He knew it, and allayed their fears by a genuine reform, hence his legendary status as a good ruler, and his deification. However close the fictional portrayal of historical persons such as Nero and Titus may be, our understanding of characters based on real persons will always depend ultimately on our analysis and understanding of the fictional portrayal in the context of the work of fiction as a whole, since fictionalisation inexorably entails transformation of facts. What interests the literary reader most intensely is the creator's transformation of the 'source'.

19. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *De vita Caesarum* (known in English as *The Twelve Caesars*), 121 CE. Suetonius' account of the life of Titus is largely endorsed by the most recent scholarship, which however benefits from the much more precise historical documentation possible in recent times; see Brian W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus* (London: Croom Helm, 1984). Jones is somewhat sceptical about Titus's enduring reputation for clemency, but his account is not incompatible with that image; rather, he insists on a de-idealisation. He depicts Titus as an astute manager of men and of the empire; a benevolent, paternalistic autocrat. But with all his predecessors, Jones acknowledges the historical reality of the moral reform that Titus undertook after his very dissolute youth.

20. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) II, 119–418, 'L'Expérience-limite', esp. 'L'Indestructible', 180–200. English translation, Susan Hanson, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

21. Cf. Immanuel Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' [An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?], *Berliner*

*Monatsschrift* II/12 (December 1784), 481-94. See Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, edited and translated by Mary J. Gregor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-22: 'It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction (*naturaliter maioremnes*), nevertheless gladly remains minors for life, and that it becomes so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians.' Kant includes in that great part of humankind 'the entire fair sex'. But half a century earlier, Metastasio represented Servilia and Vitellia as autonomous actors of their own lives.

22. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité entre les hommes* [1755], *Œuvres complètes*, III (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 157: 'Parmi les passions qui agitent le cœur de l'homme, il en est une ardente, impétueuse, qui rend un sexe nécessaire à l'autre, passion terrible qui brave tous les dangers, renverse tous les obstacles, et qui dans ses fureurs semble propre à détruire le genre humain qu'elle est destinée à conserver. Que deviendront les hommes en proie à cette rage effrénée et brutale, sans pudeur, sans retenue, et se disputant chaque jour leurs amours au prix de leur sang?'

23 Act II, scene 15. Aria text by Mazzolà: 'No more lovely flower garlands...' refers to her former dreams of both the happiness of brilliant marriage and the grandeur of processing in a garlanded chariot or carriage as empress. Her portrayal, until the final scene, as a rebellious woman eager to become a political actor is not entirely unrealistic, whether we imagine the opera's context as imperial Rome, the aftermath of the Fronde or Revolutionary Europe. It would do less than justice to the poet's representation of Vitellia to interpret the rondo as an avowal that all she had ever really wanted was to marry the man she loved, and yet in the end, that becomes her truth.