

THE TYRANNOUS FATHER IN *OPERA SERIA*

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SUMMARY. The article examines the role and function of the father figure in the libretti of Pietro Metastasio, focusing on the representations of the tyrannous rather than the benevolent father. The bulk of his oeuvre written for the Viennese court, Metastasio's libretti took an active role in propagating the reigning and intertwining social–political systems of absolutist monarchy and patriarchy. The tyrannous father figure served to heighten the usual tension of the contradictory duties of public and private lives, highlighting the dilemma of how far the *paterfamilias* should be obeyed and his mistreatment towards his child be suffered, analyzed here through the example of Artabano in *Artaserse*, also pointing out the differing relationship dynamic and dramatic treatment of father–son and father–daughter relationships. Through Astiage in *Ciro riconosciuto*, the article examines the role of the tyrant, the political 'bad father', and how his figure ultimately serves to reinforce the absolutist system and the claim of the divine right of kings.

Keywords: opera seria, Metastasio, absolutism, patriarchy, operatic dramaturgy

Introduction

The genre of opera is rife with tense familial relationships: the figure of the overbearing, authoritarian father is well-known from characters of the standard operatic repertoire such as Wotan in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, Germont in Verdi's *La traviata*, or Duncan in Rossini's *La donna del lago*. Here, I aim

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to examine one that is central to the genre of *opera seria*: the father figure of Metastasio's works, and more specifically, the tyrannous father, as exemplified by the figures of Artabano in *Artaserse* and Astiage in *Ciro riconosciuto*.

The genre-defining libretti of Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), *poeta cesareo* of Charles VI and Maria Theresa, are the focus of this paper. Metastasio's libretti were ubiquitous, reaching a hegemonic prominence that no other librettist's work through operatic history managed to replicate: *Artaserse*, his most celebrated work, received over 180 productions within the century.² This dominant presence gives impetus to closer examinations of the Metastasian *seria*'s dramaturgical conventions, character archetypes, and recurring relationships, and their place in the dramatic structure of the work. Much has been done by Martha Feldman in this field, indeed, my reading of the parallel of familial and hierarchical relationships owes its roots to Feldman's book *Opera and Sovereignty*. Unlike Feldman's seminal reading on *Artaserse*, my focus is not on the 'good', aspirational father/ruler figure, but its mirror: a father who violently mismanages his domain. In examining Metastasio's libretti, I'd like to call attention to the tension set forth by the hierarchical family structure which dictates a child's obedience to their father, and the father's duty of care for his children's wellbeing, as the inevitably ensuing conflict where paternal interests clash with the child's own affections is central to multiple Metastasian works. Furthermore, I'd like to add that in the following analyses, 'father' and 'child' will be understood both literally and figuratively, describing the relationship between the absolutist ruler and his subjects, thus mapping relationships both on the personal and the political level. In analyzing this character type, I'd also like to emphasize the importance of the didactic function of Metastasian *seria*: teaching the appropriate conduct within a patriarchal, absolutist system both through positive and negative examples. My reading here is primarily a textual one, interested in examining the dramatic base on which the operas of the era had been built, and focusing on the political messaging and intent of Metastasio's oeuvre.

Opera seria

The genre of *opera seria* ('serious opera') emerged in the early 18th century, crystallizing in the operatic reforms of the Accademia dell'Arcadia and related figures, such as Apostolo Zeno, and Pietro Metastasio himself. The goal of the reformers was to 'purify' opera of the Venetian excesses of vice and sexual explicitness, and instead present a genre of upright morality and aesthetic value, following the structure and dramaturgy of French classicist

² Data retrieved from the CORAGO database: <https://corago.unibo.it/> (date of access: 2023. 01. 16.)

tragedy.³ (Indeed, often libretti would not only draw poetic inspiration from the tragedies of revered authors such as Jean Racine, the Corneille brothers, or Philippe Quinault,⁴ but adopt their *sujets* wholesale: such as in the case of Metastasio's *La clemenza di Tito*, an amalgamation of Racine's *Andromaque* and Corneille's *Cinna*.)

The result, emblematically embodied by Metastasio's *oeuvre*, was a genre with a rigidly ordered dramatic structure, a tight, hierarchically structured cast of characters, an almost flowery poetic language, and a strict, courtly sense of decorum. Using a three-act format, each act was made up of sixteen to twenty scenes, joined together in a logical flow of action. Scenes were built on the binary combination of recitatives and *da capo* arias: a scene would either begin with an entrance aria or a monologue/dialogue in *recitativo secco*, its emotional and dramatical culmination marked by an aria (usually also a character's exit from the stage). The cast included six main roles, typically made up of royal and/or aristocratic characters: the *primo uomo* and the *prima donna*, the central pair of lovers, the *secondo uomo* (often the *primo*'s friend and confidante) and *seconda donna* (often the *primo uomo*'s sister), the second pair of lovers, with the *primo tenore* usually embodying the sovereign, and the *ultima parte* being a counsellor or military figure. Both pairs of lovers tended to be younger characters, their vocal parts lying in the soprano/alto range, with the men sung by *castrati*, and the female roles by women. The paternal role was thus filled either by the *primo tenore* or the *ultima parte* (sung by a bass or tenor as well), occupying a distinctly different aural register than the young lovers in focus. (The character of Artabano, to be discussed in this paper, was routinely sung by tenors, including some of the biggest tenor stars of the 18th century.⁵)

The essential conflict of a Metastasian *opera seria* was always that between duty and love, public responsibilities, and private passions – the objects of the conflicting passions embodied by the figures of the father/sovereign and the beloved. (The same conflict of love and duty would be mirrored in the relationship of *primo* and *secondo uomo*, and *secondo uomo* and *seconda donna*, serving to complement and contrast the main conflicts of the work.) A Metastasian hero's arc would inevitably consist of first harming one of these interests, and then, by the end of the opera, also striving to right the wrongs he's committed, and moderate his conflicting

³ Strohm, Reinhard. *Dramma per Musica. Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 18–20, 122–25.

⁴ For a case study on such inspirations, see Strohm, Reinhard. "Apostolo Zeno's *Teuzzone* and its French models". *Dramma per Musica. Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 121–133.

⁵ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty. Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. University of Chicago Press, 2007. p. 310, 66n.

passions, bringing them to a harmonious unity.⁶ In contrast with Apostolo Zeno, whose libretti would more usually end in violent retribution against the offenders, Metastasio's *dénouements* promoted "the correction of misguided behavior, mostly without punishment".⁷

The didactic function of these conflicts must be emphasized here as well: aiming to guide its audience regarding the proper behavior of a subject in an absolutist society, Metastasio's libretti would:

"stress the importance of social hierarchy (...) or dictate the proper resolution of conflicts. They could teach viewers how to treat fathers, brothers, sisters, enemies, and friends, how to stay the tide of amorous feeling or channel it into virtuous action, how to balance love against duty to state, and how to honor the king."⁸

The father figure might fit into the conflict outlined above in various ways. The biological father is most often used to thwart a love affair and instead force an unwanted match for his own benefit: this usually impacts a daughter, not a son. The father might also demand that his offspring take such action that is at odds with their duty and loyalty owed to the sovereign: we will see so in *Artaserse*, where Artabano's treason and Arbace's consequent protection of his father out of filial duty makes him a traitor. Deference owed to the father can thus create a conflict both with public, social roles and responsibilities, and private relationships.

It must, of course, be noted, that specific settings of these libretti might not explore the complexities and tensions of the texts in depth: Reinhard Strohm has examined such contrasting cases regarding the portrayals of kings in Hasse's Metastasian operas.⁹ But even though meanings might, within certain bounds, shift in the musical setting and libretti might be reworked, shortened, or amended from one theater to the next, their ideological core and framework was so deeply ingrained in the text, and so crucially tied to the political environment that produced them, that it could not be simply excised or overturned.

⁶ Berthold Over explores the representations of heroic virtue in Metastasio's works at greater length in "Virtù Eroica: Heroic Music, Social Norms, and Musical Reflections in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Italy." *The Heroic in Music*, edited by Beate Kutschke and Katherine Butler, Boydell & Brewer, 2022, pp. 50–68. pp. 63–68.

⁷ Menchelli-Buttini, Francesca. "Literary Motifs in Metastasio's and Jommelli's *Ciro riconosciuto*". *Music as Social and Cultural Practice: Essays in Honour of Reinhard Strohm*, edited by Melania Bucciarelli and Berta Joncus. Boydell & Brewer, 2007. pp 250–274. pp. 255.

⁸ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 18.

⁹ Strohm, Reinhard. "Rulers and states in Hasse's *drammi per musica*". In *Dramma per Musica. Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 270–293.

The Father: Head of the Hearth, Head of the Kingdom

To say that 18th century Italy was a patriarchal society risks stating the obvious, but it is crucial to examine the construction and functioning of both family relationships and broader social relations in the era to grasp the systems of power reflected on the stage of Metastasian *seria*. What 18th century English jurist William Blackstone called “the empire of the father” was in full effect: as the head of the household, the father ruled over his wife, his children, and his servants. This power was based on both canon law and from the Renaissance onwards, Roman law, entrenching paternal authority through the early modern era:

“Since the fifteenth century, juridical and moral treatises and town ordinances had established the public authority of the male head of household, making him accountable for the conduct of his dependents. He was depicted as the guarantor of public order and his ability to rule over his family as the precondition for the good running of the city or state.”¹⁰

As a “mentor, provider, and enabler”, the father was not only in charge of his children’s care and education, but remained in legal and economic control over them in their adulthood.¹¹ The family was also structured along the lines of gender, with the relationship between father and son held up to be of special intellectual and emotional importance.¹² The father–son relationship (or more specifically, the father–male their relationship) defined matters of inheritance as well: from the 16th century onwards, the male line was increasingly privileged over the female one (and the firstborn son above all others), adopting a patrilineal family model with “vertical transmission of name, patrimony, and rank through the male line”.¹³ Focused on an oligarchic concentration of power, Italian aristocratic families adopted a highly exclusionary patrilineal structure between the 16th and 18th centuries, excluding not only female descendants from the line of inheritance, but younger male ones as well.¹⁴ Marriage became the privilege of the heir: the ‘superfluous’ children were driven towards religious professions that ensured their celibacy. This

¹⁰ Cavallo, Sandra. “Fatherhood and the non-propertied classes in Renaissance and early modern Italian towns”. In *The History of the Family*, Vol. 17, Nr. 3, 2012, pp. 309–325. pp. 309.

¹¹ Cavallo, Sandra. “Fatherhood”. p. 311.

¹² Idem

¹³ Pomata, Gianna. “Family and Gender”. In *Early Modern Italy 1550–1796*, edited by John A. Marino, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 69–86. p. 71.

¹⁴ Pomata, Gianna. “Family and Gender”. p. 75.

social system presents several features of the family structure that we will see reflected in Metastasian *seria*: the *patria potestas*, the paternal rule over the family, the patrilineal focus on the male heir with the sidelining of other children, and marriage restricted to the heir.

The figure of the ruling father, the *paterfamilias*, found resonance in contemporary political philosophy: as early as 1516, Erasmus described “the spirit that is right for a prince: being like a father to the state” in his *Education of the Christian Prince*, and likened the rightful monarch to a “benevolent father”.¹⁵ The image of the ruler as the paternal leader of his own political ‘family’, the state itself, emerged as particularly popular in the writings of absolutist philosophers.¹⁶ The most famous proponent of this was perhaps Sir Robert Filmer, whose patriarchalist philosophy advocating for the divine right of kings and their absolute power over their subjects was modeled exactly after a father’s rule over his family (*Patriarcha, or, the Natural Power of Kings*, 1680), but similar arguments are found in the writings of French political philosopher Jean Bodin,¹⁷ or jurists Pierre de Belloy and François Le Jay.¹⁸ (The framing of the ruler as the father to his people was not new: the title of *pater patriae* had been first created in the late Roman Republic and used extensively in the Roman Empire, but it was happily revived in the Renaissance and early modernity, used, across countries and centuries, by sovereigns such as Cosimo de’ Medici, Henry IV of France, and Frederick the Great.)

The rhetorical/political device of framing the monarchy as a form of fatherhood, in this context, is two-sided, introducing an affective element into the monarch–subject relationship: it constructs the king as a benevolent ruler who owes personal care towards his subjects (it might even infantilize the subjects whose subjugation under the king’s authority is necessary for their own good), while also charging the subjects to revere and love the king as their own father. Indeed, it casts any resistance against the king as personally offensive as it is to disobey one’s father: regicide carries the charge of parricide.¹⁹

Such was the *ethos* enshrined in Metastasio’s own libretti, written for the absolutist Habsburg court in Vienna: *opera seria*, in the context of 18th century court culture, didn’t passively reflect the political system of its

¹⁵ Quoted in Paraque, Estelle. “Royal representations through the father and warrior figures in early modern Europe”. In *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, edited by Elena Woodacre et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 314–329. p. 316

¹⁶ Cavallo, Sandra. “Fatherhood”. p. 311.

¹⁷ Burns, J. H. “The Idea of Absolutism”. In *Absolutism in Seventeenth Century Europe*, edited by John Miller, Macmillan Press, 1990. pp. 21–42. pp. 27–32.

¹⁸ Cuttica, Cesare. “Tyrannicide and Political Authority in the Long Sixteenth Century”. In *Routledge Companion to Sixteenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill, Routledge, 2017, pp. 265–292. p. 272

¹⁹ See in Cuttica, Cesare. “Tyrannicide”. pp. 272–284.

surroundings but actively served in its perpetuation and propagation. As Reinhard Strohm writes:

“[...] there had always been a solid alliance between opera and political absolutism. The hierarchic structures and the celebratory, ritualistic character of the *dramma per musica* [...] had come to symbolize aristocratic norms of morality and rulership. In the eighteenth century the *dramma per musica* aimed at social modelling rather than the self-glorification of power as it had done in the preceding century, but in representing rulers who conformed to general human norms, it helped to legitimize their actual power.”²⁰

Accordingly, Metastasio's own libretti embody and disseminate the dominant ideologies of absolutism and patriarchalism, constructing the image of a social order that, in Martha Feldman's words, is “meant to exist naturally, inevitably, and endlessly (...) its messages and denouements hardly susceptible to validation through inspections by earthly mortals”.²¹ Such messages are exemplified by Artaserse, who frames himself as a loving father to his subjects (“A voi popoli io m'offro non men padre che re. Siatemi voi più figli che vassalli”),²² or Tito, who, upon being named *pater patriae* („della patria il padre”),²³ declares that it is his most beloved title, and one that he wishes to fully merit („Più tenero, più caro nome che quel di padre per me non v'è; ma meritarlo io voglio, ottenerlo non curo”).²⁴ Rising against these benevolent sovereigns is both harmful to the sociopolitical fabric and personally injurious, and must be doubly atoned for by the offending subject.

Metastasio's *Artaserse*: The Tyrannous Father

Written for the 1730 Roman carnival season and first set to music by Leonardo Vinci, *Artaserse* swiftly became one of Metastasio's most celebrated libretti, with settings by 68 composers in over 180 productions emerging

²⁰ Strohm, Reinhard. *Dramma per Musica*. p. 6.

²¹ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 24.

²² Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Zempel and de Mey, Rome, 1730. Digital edition accessed at: <https://www.progettometastasio.it/public/testo/testo/codice/ARTASERS%7cP1%7c000> (date of access: 2023. 01. 12.) All following translations are my own. Act III Scene 8, lines 1459–61.

²³ Metastasio, Pietro. *La clemenza di Tito*. Van Ghelen, Vienna, 1734. Digital edition accessed at: <http://www.progettometastasio.it/testi/CLEMENZA%7cP> (date of access: 2023. 01. 10.). Act I Scene 5, lines 188–89.

²⁴ Metastasio, Pietro. *La clemenza di Tito*. Act I Scene 5, lines 207–10.

between its 1730 world premiere and 1799.²⁵ The work deftly encompassed all common Metastasian *topoi*: the conflict of friendship/love and duty and of family ties and social obligations – the complications of virtuous action within the contradictory relationship network of an absolutist system.

Controlling fathers are a major driving force in the plot of *Artaserse*. King Serse, father of Artaserse and Mandane, is the original source of one of the opera's main conflicts, the forbidden love of Arbace and Mandane, as Serse considers Arbace too lowly to be worthy of the princess's hand: indeed, Arbace even names him "unjust" and "tyrannous" in the opening recitatives, regarding his paternal conduct ("Serse è il tiranno, l'ingiusto è il padre tuo").²⁶ This insult, in turn, gives Arbace's father, Artabano, the convenient excuse to conspire against the ruling dynasty, aiming to assassinate its male members and usurp the throne as an act of revenge for the offense against his own family. Over the course of the opera, Artabano kills Serse, lets Arbace take the blame and even condemns him to death when forced to sit judgement over him, while also pushing his daughter, Semira, into a forced marriage with his co-conspirator, Megabise. Arbace and Semira are consequently caught in an excruciating dilemma: either they must disobey their father, the natural ruler of their private life, or defy their own affections and uphold their familial duties at the cost of personal, emotional harm.

This conflict, with the clash of paternally sanctioned relationships and the children's own love lives, is a common feature of Metastasian *opera seria*. In the highly popular *L'olimpiade* (1733), both the *prima* and *seconda coppia*'s lives are burdened by the paternal refusals of consenting to love matches: instead, they are forced towards loveless arranged marriages. These conflicts are only solved through last-minute recognitions of a long-lost father–son pair, and the subsequent transfer of paternal authority from one (false) father who would not allow a desired marriage, to another (genuine) one, who does not wish to thwart his newly recovered son's happiness. In *Demofonte* (1733), the *primo uomo*, prince Timante refuses to marry the bride assigned to him by his royal father, and even defies paternal privileges and the kingdom's laws by marrying one of their subjects: in the *dénouement*, these transgressions are sublimated as we learn that Timante himself was swapped in the cradle with the actual royal prince, and not being of royal blood himself, he's neither the subject of the king's paternal command, nor the laws forbidding royals to mingle with their vassals. (Though both sons and daughters are subject to this paternal control, such

²⁵ Data from the CORAGO database, accessible at: <http://corago.unibo.it/> (date of access: 2023. 01. 29.)

²⁶ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act I Scene 1, lines 50–51.

plotlines are more often centered around daughters – to little surprise, as the genre’s dramaturgical conventions primarily treat female characters as currency to be exchanged between male ones: in Martha Feldman’s words, they “inhabit a liminal role, protecting ethnic or patriotic interests”.²⁷)

Such paternal authority, as we’ll see, may be temporarily challenged, but it is never allowed to be subverted or overturned, as “endless, insuperable patriarchy [is] a foregone conclusion” of the universe of *opera seria*.²⁸ The *dénouement* never comes with the undermining of a father’s will, but rather, with its reinforcement: the conflict resolution can only happen through a genuine change of heart on the father’s part, or, in the case of mistaken or hidden identities, by the shifting/restoration of paternal authority from an assumed father figure to the real one. In both cases, the father remains the ultimate power over his family. Metastasio never intends to criticize the patriarchal family model itself, which is framed as natural and unassailable, but rather only its occasional ‘tyrannical’ extremes – fathers who exercise their rights without considering the emotional well-being of their children. The solution thus, obviously, can never be the abolishment of the father’s rule: rather, Metastasio encourages the fostering of a more harmonious, considerate relationship, but strictly within the bounds of a patriarchal family.

Artaserse presents an interesting case in this context. Artabano is the unquestionable villain of the opera: openly rejecting the path of virtue, he assassinates one king and conspires against another, embodying the worst kind of evil that could arise against the sacrosanct absolutist system of the *opera seria* world. His public ill conduct is mirrored in his private life, in the endangerment of his son, as Artabano imperils his own bloodline by implicating Arbace, his heir, in the killing of Serse; his actions thus stand contrary to the demands of both monarchical and patriarchal bonds. Artabano’s character consequently serves two purposes: he represents the very extremities of bad fatherhood, while also raising the question of contradictory alliances – how should a loyal son and subject act when the overreach of his father’s private authority threatens his king’s power? How must these loyalties be navigated when they stand entirely at odds with each other?

Focusing first on the issue of bad fatherhood, the libretto makes it amply clear that Artabano’s treatment of his son is damaging on a personal level, as Arbace is forced into a position of public dishonor to protect his father. The humiliation of his situation unfurls most poignantly in the Act I finale, as he’s arrested with Artabano’s bloody sword and taken before Artaserse and the court as Serse’s assassin. Artaserse, Semira, Mandane,

²⁷ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 251.

²⁸ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 24.

and Artabano all take turns to publicly denounce him for his supposed crime, in a string of highly charged recitatives and exit arias. While Artaserse is the one to begin this row, his own recitatives and aria (aria: *Deh respirar lasciatemi*) focuses not on Arbace's crime, but his own emotional upheaval – Artabano, on the other hand, swiftly takes the opportunity to disown his son (aria: *Non ti son padre*), delivering a particularly deep blow to Arbace, who still holds his father's opinion of him above all others':

ARBACE. Tu non mi guardi o padre! Ogn'altro avrei
sofferto accusator senza lagnarmi;
ma che possa accusarmi,
che chieder possa il mio morir colui
che il viver mi donò m'empie d'orrore,
stupido il cor mi fa gelar nel seno.
Senta pietà del figlio il padre almeno. (I.11. 490–496)

[You do not look at me, oh father! I would have born any other accuser without suffering, but that he may accuse me, that he who gave me life may ask for my death freezes my heart in my breast. May the father feel pity for his son.]

The importance of the father–son bond and Artabano's damaging treatment are further emphasized by Arbace's own arias: out of four arias, two are in direct response to Artabano's upsetting demands and problematic conduct (Act I: *Fra cento affanni e cento*, Act II: *Mi scacci sdegnato*), complaining of Artabano's "severity" and "unjust rigor" ("severo", "ingiusto rigore"),²⁹ and reflecting on Arbace's own emotional turmoil, and lamenting his sorry state. The Act II *Per quel paterno amplesso*, on the other hand, allows for a more affectionate exchange, as Arbace, resigned to death, pleads with his father to protect his beloved and his king. While the aria is showpiece of Arbace's unfailing virtue, upholding his filial duty, his loving care for Mandane, and his patriotic commitment to Artaserse and Persia, it also serves to contrast with how badly Artabano, the addressee of the aria, is lacking in all the virtues that his son represents. Artabano himself acknowledges this contrast as well after the Act II aria *Mi scacci sdegnato*, declaring that he loves his son exactly because he differs from him, arousing both admiration and anger in his father ("Io l'amo appunto perché non mi somiglia. A un tempo istesso e mi sdegno e l'ammiro").³⁰

²⁹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 2, lines 698, 703.

³⁰ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 3, lines 713–715.

The Act II and Act III finales are centered around conflicting duties: the dilemmas of what care a father owes to his son, a son his father, a sovereign to a subject and friend. The Act II finale is the great public judgement scene of Arbace, who must defend himself before the royal court. The newly crowned Artaserse is unwilling to sit in judgement over his friend: neglecting his duty, he delegates the task to Artabano instead, arguing that Artabano has even more reason than Artaserse himself to judge Arbace harshly, as he must avenge the death of his sovereign and cleanse himself of the stain of Arbace's actions ("*Ei deve nel figlio vendicar con più rigore e di Serse la morte e il suo rossore*")³¹ – mirroring Artabano's earlier claim of setting feudal loyalties above fatherhood ("*Non è mio figlio chi mi porta il rossor di sì gran fallo; prima ch'io fossi padre, ero vassallo*").³² What arises is a doubly excruciating situation: the characters who are in the dark about Artabano's own crime witness a father's tragical heroism in condemning his own son to die, conquering personal bonds to uphold the state and the law. For Artabano, Arbace, and the audience itself, however, an entirely different scene unfolds, in which a duplicitous man lets his son suffer the indignity of being named a traitor and rejected publicly by his family and his beloved, then condemns him to die, while himself masquerading as the virtuous subject, capable of making the ultimate sacrifice in service of his sovereign. Metastasio's writing emphasizes this image from the very outset of the scene, where Artabano's audacious boasting of his "constancy" is met with a vehement reproach by Arbace:

ARTABANO. Che pensi? Ammiri forse la mia costanza?

ARBACE. Inorridisco, o padre,
nel mirarti in quel luogo. E ripensando
quale io son, qual tu sei, come potesti
farti giudice mio? Come conservi
così intrepido il volto? E non ti senti
l'anima lacerar? (Il. 11. 989–994.)

[Artabano: What are you thinking? Do you perhaps admire my constancy?

Arbace: I am horrified, o father, to see you in this place. Considering what I am and what you are, how can you be the judge of me? How can you keep your face so fearless? And do you not feel your heart breaking?]

³¹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 10, lines 966–68.

³² Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 1, lines 596–98.

Through the scene, both father and son are allowed emotional outbursts or asides: Artabano's touched by his son's fidelity ("O amor di figlio!"),³³ while Arbace calls Artabano "barbarous" twice ("barbaro padre"),³⁴ allowing himself a brief, deeply bitter lashing-out at his father. Metastasio sharply contrasts the pretend 'virtue' of Artabano with the genuineness of Arbace's extreme sense of duty: he follows up his outburst with an immediate apology, declaring that rather than calling the decision tyrannous, he'll kiss the paternal hand that condemns him to die ("Tutto il mio sangue si versi pur, non me ne lagno; e invece di chiamarla tiranna, io bacio quella man che mi condanna.").³⁵

While Arbace's commitment to his father will be framed as a redemptive, highly praiseworthy element of his character, Artabano's false virtue gets denounced immediately within the bounds of the drama. The princess Mandane, Arbace's beloved, who denounced the young man in public, now ferociously attacks Artabano for condemning his son, emphasizing his duties as a father rather than a subject:

MANDANE. Ah scelerato!
 Fuggi dagli occhi miei, fuggi la luce
 delle stelle e del sol; celati indegno
 nelle più cupe e cieche
 viscere della terra,
 se pur la terra istessa a un empio padre,
 così d'umanità privo e d'affetto,
 nelle viscere sue darà ricetto.
 ARTABANO. Dunque la mia virtù...
 MANDANE. Taci inumano;
 di qual virtù ti vanti?
 Ha questa i suoi confini; e quando eccede,
 cangiata in vizio ogni virtù si vede. (Il. 12. 1084–95.)

[Mandane: Oh wretched man! Flee from my eyes, flee from the light of the stars and the sun, hide yourself, unworthy man, in the darkest, deepest bowels of the earth, if the earth itself will even give shelter to such a wicked father, devoid of humanity and of feeling.

Artabano: But my virtue...

³³ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 11, line 1029.

³⁴ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 11, lines 1017, 1062.

³⁵ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 11, lines 1066–69.

Mandane: Silence, inhuman man, what virtue do you boast of? Virtue has its boundaries, and exceeding them, every virtue then turns into vice.]

Mandane's accusations and her aria *Va' tra le selve ircane* (calling Artabano "barbaro genitore" and "mostro")³⁶ highlight his crucial character flaw, the absolute lack of care shown for his son: despite Artabano's insistence that he's committed his crimes for his son's sake, he's only ever shown exercising his paternal rights over Arbace, while offering no affection or protection. Indeed, the Act II finale will see the first instance of Artabano even showing care for his son, declaring that now that he's escaped justice with Arbace's sentencing, it's time for him to save Arbace as well ("salvai me stesso, or si difenda il figlio").³⁷ His following aria *Così stupisce e cade*, however, is centered solely around his exuberant relief over his own fate, with no concern spared for Arbace. A *volte-face* occurs only late into Act III,³⁸ when Artabano believes Arbace to be in mortal danger, with Arbace gone missing from his cell. This is the first time Artabano's thrown into the same emotional turmoil he's inflicted on everyone else: swaying between "a thousand worries and a thousand terrible suspicions", he has to confront the idea of being too late to save the innocent son he himself condemned to death ("Ondeggio fra mille affanni e mille orribili sospetti. Il mio timore quante funeste idee forma e descrive!").³⁹ In a lengthy recitative, Artabano voices his love for his son at considerable length (for the first time in the opera):

ARTABANO. Amico,
se Arbace io non ritrovo,
per chi deggio affannarmi? Era il mio figlio
la tenerezza mia. Per dargli un regno
divenni traditor; per lui mi resi
orribile a me stesso; e lui perduto

³⁶ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 12, lines 1109, 1011.

³⁷ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 14, line 1174.

³⁸ This dramatic structure is modified in Johann Adolph Hasse's 1730 Venetian setting (and its subsequent revivals): reworked by Giovanni Boldini, *Così stupisce* and its preceding recitative are discarded for an extended, highly agitated *ombra* scene and a new aria, *Pallida il sole*. The substitutions make Artabano's fear of losing his son more deeply felt and his figure more sympathetic, but they also severely undercut the impact of the Act III aria *Figlio se più non vivi*. For further notes on the Hasse/Boldoni version, see Torre, Robert. "Operatic Twins and Musical Rivals: Two Settings of *Artaserse* (1730)". In *Discourses in Music* Vol. 6, 2006, accessible at: <http://library.music.utoronto.ca/discourses-in-music/v6n1a1.html>. (date of access: 2023. 02. 15.)

³⁹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 3, lines 1281–84.

tutto dispero e tutto
veggo de' falli miei rapirmi il frutto. (III. 3. 1307–14.)

[My friend, if I cannot find Arbace, for whom should I worry? I loved my son tenderly. To give him a kingdom, I became a traitor, for him, I turned myself horrible even to myself, in losing him, I can only despair, seeing my faults steal the fruits of my labor.]

Then goes on to pledge that if Arbace's dead, he'll follow, but not before he carries out his mission of vengeance against the king:

ARTABANO. Trovaste avversi dei
l'unica via d'indebolirmi; al solo
dubbio che più non viva il figlio amato,
timido, disperato
vincer non posso il turbamento interno
che a me stesso di me toglie il governo.

(Aria)
Figlio se più non vivi,
morrò; ma del mio fato
farò che un re svenato
preceda messaggier. [...] (III. 4. 1329–42.)

[You have found, hateful gods, the only way to enfeeble me; at the mere thought that the beloved son lives no more I grow timid and desperate, and I cannot master the internal turmoil that deprives of control over myself.

My son, if you do not live / I shall die, but my fate / shall be heralded / by a slain king.]

This affective turn sets up the opera's eventual resolution – that Artabano, in the end, is incapable of actually sacrificing his son for the sake of his ambitions – but it also emphasizes that Artabano remains an unrepentant villain in his greater crime against the monarchical system. In the Act III finale, Artabano will threaten Artaserse's life twice: once covertly, by poisoning the 'sacred cup' Artaserse's supposed to drink out of, and then openly, once his crime is uncovered, by drawing his sword against his king. The relationship between Artabano and Arbace plays a crucial role here twice: first, it's only when the exonerated Arbace himself is handed the said

cup that Artabano reveals it's been poisoned, and admits to being the real culprit of the crimes Arbace's been accused of, calling himself "betrayed by fatherly love" ("già mi tradì l'amor di padre").⁴⁰ Second, it's only Arbace's threat of drinking the poison, upon Artabano trying to attack Artaserse as a final stand, that makes Artabano finally back off and flee in disgrace, though not before bitterly naming Arbace "ungrateful son" *twice* within four lines of recitatives ("Fermati figlio ingrato [...] Vincesti ingrato figlio").⁴¹

Arbace's laudable navigation of his conflicting loyalties once again serves to contrast how lacking Artabano proves in the same regard, failing both as a father and as a subject to almost a catastrophic degree. Though Arbace's own conduct – his loyalty to his father to the point of self-destruction – means that he is effectively aiding a criminal and maintaining a threat to Artaserse's rule, this loyalty is valorized in the end as Arbace only protects his father to the point that it doesn't immediately endanger his sovereign. In an offstage scene of the Act III finale, it is Arbace who slays the co-conspirator Megabise and calms the riotous Persian crowd that threatens to overthrow Artaserse's reign, and again, it's his self-sacrificial action that keeps Artabano from slaying Artaserse. Arbace's own sense of filial duty goes so far as to offer himself up for execution: the extreme measure of his commitment, combined with his previous proof of loyalty to his king, transforms his *de facto* transgression into a praiseworthy show of virtue for which Artaserse twice voices his admiration ("O virtù che inamora!", "anima bella"), rewarding Arbace's actions with an act of clemency ("doni il tuo sovrano l'error d'un padre alla virtù d'un figlio").⁴² Where Artabano fails, Arbace serves as an exemplary figure of loyalty, duty, and virtue – and as the decorated, "upwardly mobile" subject, a point of identification for the non-royal audience members.⁴³

An interesting additional aspect of the construction of fatherhood with regards to Artabano's character is his equally tense relationship with his daughter Semira. The father–daughter conflict is an almost tertiary element within the drama, remaining entirely on an interpersonal level rather than encompassing the clashing of personal and political spheres and private and public duties as the Artabano–Arbace conflict does. In Act II, Artabano commands Semira to marry Megabise, meeting his daughter's tentative protests with forceful decrees of his paternal power,⁴⁴ declaring she should obey his will in silence:

⁴⁰ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 11, lines 1546.

⁴¹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 11, lines 1568, 1571.

⁴² Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 11, lines 1568, 1592–96.

⁴³ Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 250.

⁴⁴ Articulated with an almost baffling intensity in Leonardo Vinci's 1730 Roman setting of the opera, Artabano's words being underscored with a bombastic accompaniment of trumpets and horns.

ARTABANO. Tu sei folle, se mi contrasti;
ecco il tuo sposo; io così voglio e basti.

(Aria)

Amalo e se al tuo sguardo
amabile non è,
la man che te lo diè
rispetta e taci. (...) (ll. 4. 774–84.)

[You are foolish, if you would oppose me: here is your spouse, I want it so, enough.

Love him, and if he isn't / lovable to your eyes / respect the hand that gave him to you / and be silent.]

Semira, though loathing Megabise and the idea of this engagement (being love with Artaserse instead), is given no recourse: unlike Arbace, who gets to voice his displeasure and pain at his treatment directly to Artabano, Semira's neither allowed such an emotional outlet or confrontation (her exit aria *Se del fiume altera l'onda* is situated later in the act, after clashing with Megabise and Mandane, and is performed as a soliloquy), nor given space to refuse or outmaneuver her father as Arbace will do later on. Her only attempt at escaping this engagement consists of unsuccessfully pleading with Megabise to renounce the match himself, to spare her the anger of her father ("Salvarmi del genitor così potrai dall'ira").⁴⁵ Notably, her refusal of and loathing for this match is not a principled stand like Arbace's refusal of Artabano's plans, but simply an expression of her personal affections – which, though never irrelevant in a Metastasian drama, hardly carries the same ethical weight or merits the same praise as Arbace's actions.

After Megabise's refusal, this side plot gets dropped entirely as the narrative refocuses on Arbace's fate, and is only resolved in the Act III finale: with Artaserse's reign secure and Artabano having fled, the king solves both love conflicts of the opera at once, decreeing that Arbace should marry Mandane, while he takes Semira for wife ("A te Mandane sarà sposa, se vuoi; sarà Semira a parte del mio trono").⁴⁶ This solution allows for both pairs of lovers to finally join hands in legitimate unions and smooths out all previous upset – however, it also renders Semira as an entirely passive

⁴⁵ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act II Scene 5, lines 792–3.

⁴⁶ Metastasio, Pietro. *Artaserse*. Act III Scene 11, lines 1568, 1577–8.

element in the arbitration of her fate, with her happiness still being brought on by a paternal will, the power of which has passed from the disgraced *paterfamilias*, Artabano, to the new *pater patriae*, Artaserse.

Moreover, while Artabano's treatment of Arbace is unquestionably framed as problematic and unjust, the same cannot be said of his handling of his daughter Semira. In the long line of *opera seria* fathers pushing their daughters towards unwanted marriages rather than their desired love matches (see the entirely respectable figures of Licomede in *Achille in Sciro*, Catone in *Catone in Utica*, or Clisthene in *L'olimpiade*), Artabano's actions regarding Semira aren't outright framed as another manifestation of his immoral, villainous character, nor does he reflect on them as such: it might be an unfortunate side-effect of paternal authority, but it is treated as natural and unquestionable by both its victim and the dramatic narrative itself. Legitimate and illegitimate uses of paternal power are clearly separated along the lines of gender, and the categories of public and private lives: in essence, paternal tyranny is recognized as such as it occurs between father and son, inevitably affecting the public sphere, while the father–daughter clash remains tucked away within the privacy of the family, without further political or narrative implications within the drama.

Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto*: The Tyrant as *Pater Patriae*

The 1736 opera *Ciro riconosciuto* was one of Metastasio's more middling works, seeing only 17 adaptations and 37 performances over the 18th century.⁴⁷ This relative lack of success owes, perhaps, to the work's more unusual *sujet* and structure: based on Scipiano Maffei's 1713 play *Merope*, the libretto is centered around a tyrannical ruler, Astiage, involves a rarely-seen three generations of the royal family in plots of vengeance and liberation, and rather than the usual love plots and father–child struggles, it focuses more heavily on the mother–son relationship of Mandane and Ciro. The plot's backstory is also remarkably violent: upon the birth of Ciro, son of Mandane and Cambise, his grandfather, Astiage, king of the Medes dreams that Mandane's child will one day depose him. Astiage commands the infant to be killed and exiles Cambise from his court. However, his command is disobeyed: his servant Arpago entrusts Ciro to the care of a shepherd, Mitridate, presenting Mitridate's own stillborn child to Astiage as proof that Ciro's dead. Mitridate raises Ciro as his own son, under the name Alceo. Fifteen years later, rumor rises that Ciro is in fact alive, with an impostor assuming his name and identity in a neighboring kingdom. Upon questioning,

⁴⁷ Data from the CORAGO database: <http://corago.unibo.it/> (date of access: 2023. 02. 08.)

Arpago, thinking the king to be remorseful, confesses that he did not carry out the deadly command – a mercy that Astiage rewards by executing Arpago's own son. Publicly, however, Astiage chooses to feign remorse and invites the impostor home, hoping to eliminate this supposed threat to his throne once and for all. Arpago himself feigns resignation at the king's actions while plotting Astiage's downfall, intending to bring the real *Ciro* out from hiding at the great feast where Astiage is preparing to meet the impostor, and overthrowing both tyrant and pretender, crown the young *Ciro* king.

Before the curtain goes up, numerous crimes are already on the king's conscience, his tyrannical exercise of monarchial and paternal authority throwing family lives and the political system both in disarray. Astiage's figure thus offers an exciting variation on the form: what happens when the king himself is the corrupt element in the system, being the one whose removal is necessary to restore peace and harmony?

Much like patriarchy, its symbiotic pair, the absolutist monarchy of *opera seria* is posited as a political system that cannot be altered or overturned. Plots against the monarch might rise (and might even be understood as a manifestation of genuine injury), but they can neither be framed as being in the right, nor be allowed to succeed. This is clearly reflected in the case of *Ciro*: Arpago, the mastermind of the *coup d'état* against Astiage, has suffered considerably at his king's hand, and his desire for vengeance, if not endorsable, is at least understandable. Metastasio, however, almost pointedly avoids affording him much sympathy through the opera. Monomaniacally focused on the idea of vengeance, Arpago spends his time onstage in the hardly respectable position of pretending to be Astiage's loyal advisor while spearheading the efforts to dethrone him. He's more dedicated to this plot than either one of Astiage's blood relations, Mandane and the prospective king himself, *Ciro*. Indeed, the mother–son pair's onstage actions are, from the outset, vastly more focused on emotional, familial matters rather than the political intrigue at hand: Mandane's first scene ends with her jubilant anticipation of a reunion with her husband and son (aria: *Par che di giubilo*), while *Ciro*, upon being told about his true origins, tries to rush off the stage to reunite with his mother, only stopping to reassure his foster father Mitridate of his enduring love (aria: *Ognor tu fosti il mio*). In detaching *Ciro* and Mandane from the political intrigue and centering their plot around the sentimental drama of familial recognition/reunion (and the near-tragedy rising from mistaken identities), Metastasio keeps the two characters who might most naturally be vested in a *coup d'état* innocent from the actual crime of rising against their sovereign: though they will ultimately benefit from this intrigue, *Ciro*'s ascent to the throne can and shall come only through legitimate means. (Mandane's detachment from the revenge plot is also emblematic of

Metastasio's treatment of female characters, her plotline's effective banishment to the private sphere made even more apparent by the fact that in Maffei's drama, Merope is a central figure in the political struggle against the tyrant Polifonte.⁴⁸)

In sharp contrast with the mother–son duo, Arpago is defined by a barely repressed wrath: the first of his two arias, *Già l'idea del giusto scempio*, is brimming with violence, celebrating his impending vengeance while deploring “that barbarian (...) who made the earth run red with blood” (“quel barbaro [...] fa di sangue il suol vermiglio”).⁴⁹ Metastasio avoids framing him as a heroic or tragic figure: his primary expressions through the opera aren't centered around grief and loss, but glee over the demise of a hated enemy. His Act II scenes with Astiage (Scenes 3–5) showcase his duplicitousness towards his king (never an honorable trait in Metastasian opera, no matter the sovereign's character), his asides both underlining his pretension and his delight in seeing his enemy in disarray.

Unlike his vassal, Metastasio's writing lends Astiage a considerably greater room for emotional expression and self-reflection. It's true, on the one hand, that Astiage's figure is wholly negative, with his dishonorable conduct being not only clear from the outset but continuing through the opera as well: in Act I, he plots (the impostor) Ciro's demise, in Act II, he plans to execute Mitridate (whom Astiage entrusted with his plans) and 'Alceo', who had become the accidental slayer of the impostor, to hide his own wrongdoing, and finally, in Act III, he threatens to slay Cambise and Mandane with his own hand in a fit of anger over the news that the real Ciro lives. Putting his interests above the common good and reacting to any form of subordination with extreme violence, Astiage functions as the negative image of the ideal sovereign, an example of what kind of ruler an enlightened monarch should *avoid* being at all costs.⁵⁰ One could easily read his figure as the inverse of the titular hero of *La clemenza di Tito* (written two years before *Ciro*): where Tito sacrifices his own interests for the well-being of the state *and* rules his

⁴⁸ Korneeva, Tatiana. “The Politics of Spectatorship”. In *The Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere, 1600–1800*, University of Toronto Press, 2019, pp. 69–90.

⁴⁹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Van Ghelen, Vienna, 1736. Digital edition accessed at: <http://www.progettometastasio.it/testi/CIRO%7CP> (date of access: 2023. 02. 05.) Act I Scene 4, lines 140–41.

⁵⁰ Such negative images of the sovereign weren't entirely unusual, though Metastasio would also take care to emphasize the fictional ruler's difference of character from that of the virtuous monarch in the audience. See the *licenza* of *Adriano in Siria*, proclaiming to Emperor Charles VI, for whose birthday the libretto was written, that while “the throne gives light to Adriano, it receives light from you”. Quoted in Feldman, Martha. *Opera and Sovereignty*. p. 263.

subjects with clemency rather than rigor, Astiage brutally clings to monarchical power while refusing to engage with its responsibilities. The parallel is evident in the two sovereigns' big monologues, Astiage's Act II Scene 3 and Tito's Act III Scene 7 recitatives, both centered around a ruler's dilemma of how to treat a problematic subject, and both resolving to continue in their usual footpaths rather than seeking more extreme solutions. In Tito's case, this concerns a genuine issue in the figure of Sesto, a friend-turned-traitor, and his resolution is to follow his policy of clemency, demonstrating his moral fortitude and an admirably firm control of his passions. Astiage's recitative, ruminating on whether to execute his co-conspirators against Ciro, shows the depths of his debasement, voicing his internal struggle over one crime forcing him to the next ("A quanti delitti obbliga un solo! E come oh dio un estremo mi porta all'altro estremo").⁵¹ Where Tito's character enables him to tread a path of virtue, Astiage's misdeeds lock him in a vicious circle of violent transgressions.

While the libretto doesn't quite make excuses for Astiage's behavior, it does provide a crucial insight into his mental and emotional state, if not quite rendering him sympathetic, then at least framing the tyrant as a pitiable figure. Astiage is hounded by fear. The stage directions, at turns, describe his suspicious looks, fearful exclamations, and frightened demeanor ("guardando sospettosamente intorno", "pieno di timore", "spaventato").⁵² His arietta *Sciolto dal suo timor* notes his brief freedom from his "usual worries" ("l'usato affanno"),⁵³ followed by a *sonno* scene where his fitful sleep is tormented by visions of being attacked by Ciro (while in actuality, in one of Metastasio's most dramatic scenes, Cambise stands over him with a sword). "I fear everyone, even myself" ("Temo ognun: temo me stesso"),⁵⁴ the closing line before his agitated aria *Fra mille furori*, could just as well be the motto of the Metastasian tyrant. The upset ruler produces an upset system, and vice versa: guided by vice rather than virtue, the tyrant's actions overturn the balance of the world around him, and the resulting disquiet only serves to aggravate his own distress. Peace – internal and external both – can only be achieved by correcting his erroneous behavior and seeking to remedy the harm he's caused.

How can this peace be achieved, when the man capable of delivering it is a paranoid, unrepentant villain? The key to Astiage's redemption will be none other than Ciro himself – a *dénouement* mirroring that of *Artaserse*,

⁵¹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act II Scene 3, lines 615–17.

⁵² Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act I Scene 6, line 260; Act I Scene 10, line 366; Act I Scene 9, line 347.

⁵³ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act I Scene 8, line 314.

⁵⁴ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act I Scene 10, line 371.

with the *primo uomo* serving as the example of virtue, providing a model of moral conduct and standing as a source of inspiration for other straying characters. *Ciro* already serves to soften *Astiage's* heart in their first meeting (Act II Scene 5), while he's posing as a shepherd. Both men are struck by some innate quality in the other that arouses their admiration: *Ciro* feels "tenderness and respect" for his king ("Pur mi desta in petto senso di tenerezza, e di rispetto"),⁵⁵ while *Astiage* is so moved by his "noble face" ("nobil volto")⁵⁶ that he launches into the aria *Non so: con dolce moto*:

ASTIAGE. Non so; con dolce moto
il cor mi trema in petto;
sento un affetto ignoto
che intenerir mi fa.

Come si chiama oh dio
questo soave affetto?
(Ah se non fosse mio
lo crederei pietà). (II. 5. 668–74.)

[I do not know / what sweet motion makes my heart tremble in my chest / I feel an unknown emotion / that moves me. How should, o gods, I name / this sweet affection? / (If it weren't mine / I'd think it to be pity.)]

This mutual emotional recognition isn't exclusive to *Ciro* and *Astiage's* interaction: it's first used by *Metastasio* as a highly effective dramatic tool in the scenes between *Ciro* and *Mandane*, as they feel and recognize (and in the case of tragic misunderstandings, struggle against) their innate emotional connection before they'd actually recognize each other as parent and child.

The same bond will be utilized to resolve the drama's untenable tensions between king and subjects, sire, and offspring. In the Act III finale, *Arpago* and *Cambise* lead the populace in revolt against *Astiage*: abandoned by all, the tyrant faces death at the hands of those he has most deeply wronged. It falls to *Astiage's* own blood to save him, with *Ciro* and *Mandane* stepping in at the last moment to halt *Arpago* and *Cambise's* hands, responding to their charges by emphasizing their blood bond and *Astiage's* superiority as king:

⁵⁵ *Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act II Scene 4, lines 656–57.*

⁵⁶ *Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act II Scene 3, line 652.*

CAMBISE. È un barbaro. (A Mandane)
[He is a barbarian. (To Mandane)]
MANDANE. È mio padre. [He is my father.]
ARPAGO. È un tiranno. (A Ciro) [He is a tyrant. (To Ciro)]
CIRO. È il tuo re. [He is your king.] (III. 14. 1437–38.)

The argument that kingship renders Astiage's tyrannous personage untouchable by his subjects will be the one pursued by Ciro once Arpago calls on the people to "oppress their oppressor" ("s'opprima l'oppressore"),⁵⁷ in a monologue that is, in essence, a declaration of the divine right of kings:

CIRO. Popoli udite.
Qual impeto ribelle?
Qual furor vi trasporta? Ove s'intese
che divenga il vassallo
giudice del suo re! Giudizio indegno,
in cui molto del reo
il giudice è peggiore. Odate in lui
un parricidio e l'imitate. [...] Un dritto
che avea sul sangue mio
forse Astiage abusò; voi quel che han solo
gli dei sopra i regnanti
pretendete usurpar. M'offrite un trono
calpestandone prima
la maestà. Questo è l'amor! (III. 14. 1441–51.)

[Listen to me, oh people. What fury moves you? Who has ever heard of such a thing that a vassal should become the judge of his king! A worthless trial, where the judge is guiltier than the defendant. (...) You hate a parricide in him, yet you would imitate his crime. Perhaps Astiage abused his right over my blood, but you would usurp the right that only the gods hold over kings. You offer me a throne and trample its majesty first. Such is your love!]

In representing the political turmoil sparked by tyrannous rule, Metastasio stages two clashing concepts of kingship here – the divinely appointed and thus inviolable leader, and the mere caretaker whose power stems from the people he governs, and who, failing in his duties or overreaching in his authority, can and should be resisted, held accountable,

⁵⁷ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act III Scene 14, line 1441.

and deposed. These contradictory views of sovereignty and political dynamics mirror the conflicting ideas of within the discourse of early modern political philosophy itself,⁵⁸ and it is no surprise that Metastasio's stance conforms with the former concept of kingship, framing the latter as not only lawless but outright unnatural. Ciro is the ideal mouthpiece for such a stance: the victim of Astiage's violence both on the familial and monarchical level, as grandson and as heir of a kingdom, he's in the most obvious position to want to seek redress against Astiage's abuses of power and to benefit from his overthrow. His refusal and refute of the king's attempted overthrow thus bear the most weight as well, serving to uphold the office of the king as divinely ordained and retaining absolute monarchical power rather than ceding the populace the authority to elect their ruler.

It's well worth paying close attention to Ciro's rhetoric here: the idea of subjects having the power of sitting judgement over their sovereign is framed as unthinkable, rendering any vassal attempting such thing more guilty than even a tyrant. The divine right of kings and their superhuman state over their subjects is assertively emphasized. Rebelling subjects are outright named potential parricides. The revolt sparked by Astiage's own misdeeds thus, in the end, serves to exonerate him, its process being mediated by the virtuous, innocent hero whose own moral and political stance must be recognized as superior and exemplary: Arpago and his followers lay down their swords, "disarmed by [Ciro's] virtue" ("Oh virtù che disarmò il mio furore").⁵⁹

It's not without irony that the opera about the tyrannous king is the one setting the idea of the divine right of kings forward most forcefully, but its consistent with the political ideology itself: even a tyrant is still a *king* who is owed duty and respect for his superior position, regardless of his character. This concept runs parallel to the issue of paternal authority in *Artaserse*: the reverence Ciro shows to Astiage's station is the same Arbace recognizes in Artabano, even though in both cases, the monarchical/paternal authority over the two youths is exercised to their detriment. Ciro will follow Arbace's suit in self-sacrificial obedience as well: he offers up himself for execution to atone for the assault on Astiage's authority ("Se a cancellar l'orrore d'attentato sì rio v'è bisogno di sangue, eccoti il mio."). As his display of virtue prompts the rebels to cease with their assault on Astiage, so does Ciro's fidelity inspire a heel-turn in Astiage:

ASTIAGE. Figlio mio, caro figlio
sorgi, vieni al mio sen. Così punisci

⁵⁸ See Cuttica, Cesare. "Tyrannicide". pp. 266–68.

⁵⁹ Metastasio, Pietro. *Ciro riconosciuto*. Act III Scene 14, line 1470.

generoso i tuoi torti e l'odio mio?
 Ed io, misero, ed io
 d'un'anima sì grande
 tentai fraudar la terra! Ah vegga il mondo
 il mio rimorso almeno. Eccovi in Ciro,
 Medi, il re vostro; a lui cedo il serto real. Rendigli o figlio
 lo splendor ch'io gli tolsi. (...) (III. 14. 1471–1480)

[My son, dear son, rise, come to my bosom. Thus you punish, generous soul, your suffering and my hatred? And I, miserable man, and I would have deprived the earth of such great soul! Oh, let the world see my remorse now. Here, Medes, is your king in Ciro, I pass him the royal crown. Give it back, o son, the splendor that I deprived it of.]

The tyrant's belated turn towards magnanimity and remorse helps to frame him as a sovereign worthy of Ciro's respect: Ciro's virtue redeems Astiage, aiding him in breaking his self-propelled cycle of violence and restoring peace in the world he set out of joint. Crucially, the right of this restoration rests with the king only: Astiage, the father of his people, remains in control over his political 'family'. And notably, the restoration centers only around the male royal bloodline, Astiage's pleas for forgiveness being addressed to and focused solely on his heir, Ciro: his subject, Arpago, deprived of his own son, merits no such apologies, nor is Mandane, his daughter who dutifully shielded her father against her own husband, treated with the same remorse and affection that Astiage affords Ciro. Despite the opera's previous, concentrated focus on the family drama and the extended episode of a happy family reunion, the final image isn't that of the reunited Mandane, Cambise, and Ciro: rather, Metastasio shifts the focus seamlessly to a dynastic celebration of the absolutist system, glorified by the titular hero. The rights of the kingly father – both paternal and monarchical, private, and public – remain intact, undisturbed and unassailable.

Conclusion

Opera seria, cultivated in the absolutist courts of 18th century Europe, was inextricably linked to the political and social systems of its age, flowering through the age of the *ancien régime*, and withering after its fall, "pushed back by bourgeois realities".⁶⁰ The influence of the absolutist, patriarchal

⁶⁰ Strohm, Reinhard. *Dramma per Musica*. p. 29.

world over the construction of the world of *opera seria* didn't merely consist of the necessity for royal, courtly settings and dutiful children onstage: rather, as I've tried to show, this influence manifested itself heavily in Metastasio's libretti through the framing of these systems as the natural, lawful, and unchangeable way of the universe. In analyzing *Artaserse* and *Ciro riconosciuto*, I had hoped to demonstrate how the already-quoted "solid alliance between opera and political absolutism" functioned on a textual level, and what strategies were deployed by Metastasio to promote the natural rights of the father and the divine rights of the king – stressing the familial and monarchial subject's duty of loyalty even through the portrayals of negative paternal and royal figures.

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