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FROM SHE-DEVIL TO RECALCITRANT MOTHER: 
WOMEN AND THE “MALE GAZE” IN VIVALDI’S OPERAS*

In order to understand women as a historical phenomenon, it is indispensable to understand the ways they were interpreted by men. Most of the documents on women in 18th-century opera are authored by men, whether they are texts written to describe women, texts written to be pronounced by them, texts put in the mouths of men to be said about them, and the same again for musical notes, or indeed for costumes, scenographies, choreographies, impresario’s contracts and audience criticisms, because these, too, document the existence and actions of women.

The enquiry how women were represented by men is a cautionary tale, a form of textual criticism that tries to uncover or decipher the distortions which memory has undergone before reaching us. We aim at interpretations that relativize the historical sources about women since they are written by men.

What sorts of male preconception do we have to reckon with? A rough typology of the different mechanisms in the male representation of women might be:

a) The male gaze: representations of women, or of feminine aspects of life, are more or less wilful constructs satisfying certain male desires or fears;
b) patriarchalism: the insistence on specifically male interests and values;
c) sublimation (possibly a sub-group of the male gaze): the representation of women with added extra colour or attributes, from the divine to the devilish, to compensate for desires, fears or frustrations;
d) stereotyping: women and what they do being classified in order to have a more effective control over them.

In the 18th-century theatre and opera business, the stereotyping of actresses and their contributions was almost synonymous with the sexually-accentuated typologies then rampant in the arts. One of the best-known examples, Leporello’s ‘catalogue’ aria in Don Giovanni, may be interpreted as an

*This paper is based on passages from my book The Operas of Antonio Vivaldi (“Quaderni vivaldiani”, 13), Florence, Olschki, 2008, where more detail on all these topics can be found.
impresario’s notes for a play, a theatrical enactment of the famous seducer’s career. Hundreds of operas throughout the century live on stereotyped female figures. But simplistic dualistic classifications, as for example into a blond and a dark woman, or a young and an old one, are usually only hinted at in librettos; it was the hiring practice of the impresarios that could bring it to life. The opera composer could further flesh out these typologies in the music. Antonio Vivaldi was not only the composer of his operas but also often his own impresario, and his dealings with female singers went far beyond the performances in the theatre.

Still, Vivaldi as an opera composer had to conform to a theatrical and literary world with established ideologies. Although a priest and thus quite familiar with ideological or stereotyped attitudes towards women, he had probably something to learn when he began to produce operas at age 35, late in life for the standards of his time. *Ottone in villa*, Vivaldi’s first opera given in Vicenza in 1713, had a misogynic libretto from the aristocratic Venetian tradition. Its libretto had been premiered in 1680 in Venice; it focused the contemporary male gaze on *Messalina*, believed to be a notorious nymphomaniac of Roman antiquity. Vivaldi’s version was much adapted, removing some of the ‘chauvinistic’ insults but also some of the fun. The heroine is here called Cleonilla.

**SYNOPSIS OF *OTTONE IN VILLA* (VICENZA, 1713)**

Characters:
Cleonilla, mistress of Emperor Ottone (S): Maria Giusti detta la Romanina Virtuosa del Principe Reale Alessandro di Polonia.
Ottone, Roman Emperor (A): Diana Vico.
Cajo Silio, very handsome young man loved by Cleonilla (S): Bartolomeo Bartoli.
Decio, confidant of Ottone (T): Gaetano Mozi.
Tullia, foreign lady in love with Cajo, but abandoned by him for Cleonilla, disguised as Ostilio, page to Cleonilla and loved by her (S): Margherita Faccioli Vicentina.

Location: A pleasure villa near the city walls of Rome, serving for Ottone’s entertainment.

Act One, I.01-06.
Cleonilla, Emperor Ottone’s mistress, is picking flowers in the garden of his summer villa. She tells the audience that despite her secret liaison with Cajo, she has more recently fallen in love with her handsome page, Ostilio (= Tullia in male disguise). When Cajo appears and remonstrates about her flagging interest in him, she makes excuses. Her love-song (“Sole degli occhi miei”) is misunderstood by Cajo as addressed to himself, although she intends it for Ostilio. Ottone appears, immediately to be reproached by Cleonilla for his apparent coldness towards her. He feels guilty but is also flattered. Cajo is buttonholed by Ostilio (= Tullia), who accuses him of having abandoned Tullia. Tullia, alone, decides on revenge: she plots to make Cajo jealous by encouraging Cleonilla’s infatuation with Ostilio (= herself).
I. 07-11.
At the swimming pool Ottone admires Cleonilla’s beauty. Cleonilla interrogates General Decio about her reputation in the city of Rome, but does not like much what she hears. Then she makes advances to Ostilio, but ‘he’ asks her to swear first to leave Cajo; Cleonilla complies. Cajo has overheard this and immediately confronts Ostilio, who escapes. Now Cajo seeks revenge and decides to tell Ottone of Cleonilla’s new love...

Act Two, II.01-05.
Decio reports to Ottone that Rome is offended by his relationship with a hussy, and warns him of consequent dangers. Ottone is worried, thinking of problems for Cleonilla instead (“Come l’onda”). Decio then tries to warn Cajo of the danger arising from his secret relationship, but Cajo is absorbed in his own jealousy. Tullia, alone, still hopes to make him regret his infidelity.

II.06-11.
Cajo enters Cleonilla’s apartments to question her; when she refuses to listen, he leaves an accusing letter. Ottone, now suspicious, suddenly enters and reads the letter after Cleonilla. She allays his suspicion by saying that the letter is written to Tullia, who has been unfaithful to Cajo: now she will add another one (letter-writing aria “Tu vedrai”) … Tullia despairs of her prospects (“Misero spirto mio”).

Act Three.
Decio now decides to inform Ottone about Cajo and Cleonilla, who are just then appearing between the hedges, fighting. Ostilio also appears, immediately attracting Cleonilla’s attention. Cajo is hiding in the hedge in order to overhear their amorous conversation. When Cajo jumps out of the hiding-place to kill Ostilio, Ottone and Decio arrive. Ottone now believes Cleonilla to be unfaithful with Ostilio, and asks Cajo to kill Ostilio, but the page reveals ‘himself’ as Tullia, who accuses Cajo of infidelity. She also exonerates Cleonilla, who has only helped her as a woman-friend. Ottone believes everything, marries Cajo to Tullia and begs pardon from Cleonilla. Tullia’s constancy triumphs.

The prima donna, played by Anna Maria Giusti, was the only performer who had to sing difficult coloraturas. The other performers were presumably chosen partly for their good looks and acting skills. Genuine passion is rare in this drama, but Vivaldi’s contrasting portrayals of Cajo’s jealousy, or of Cleonilla’s fake admiration for her credulous lover and her complaints, aim at poignant characterization. Tullia is portrayed as a sentimental character and more stereotypical. The figure of the ‘abandoned girl travelling in male disguise’ had often enough been seen in Venetian operas since at least Antonio Cesti’s Argia (1669).

Vivaldi’s second operatic production was Orlando furioso, with music by Giovanni Alberto Ristori (libretto by Grazio Braccioli after Lodovico Ariosto’s Orlando furioso). It was given in autumn 1713 at the Teatro S. Angelo in Venice, where Antonio Vivaldi himself was the impresario together with his father, Giovanni Battista Vivaldi. Facing the risks of the operatic business in competitive Venice, Vivaldi apparently assured himself by hiring female singers whom he knew from his Vicenza debut: Anna Maria Giusti detta la Romanina
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was again the *prima donna* and her counterpart Margherita Faccioli *detta* la Vicentina again the almost equal-ranking *seconda donna*. This casting subverted the women’s relationships as they had been in *Ottone in villa*. Giusti, formerly Cleonilla, reverses character to become an innocent enamoured princess, Angelica. Faccioli – a singer of lower tessitura and energetic deportment – develops from jilted lover Tullia into revenge-seeking sorceress, Alcina. But in addition, the stereotypical Tullia character is also there, represented by the harmless but persistent Bradamante. This part was given to Elisabetta Denzio – a promising soprano who had not much of a career, however, as she was murdered three years later. As for Giusti, she had actually created the part of Angelica at Rome in 1711, in the opera *Orlando, ovvero la gelosa pazzia*, by Domenico Scarlatti (libretto by Carlo Sigismondo Capeci). The Venetian librettist, Grazio Braccioli, probably knew this libretto when writing, in his preface, that he had altered the character of Angelica (ultimately derived from Ariosto): “I have done this to put into focus the spirited acting ability of the performer”. There could hardly be a stronger compliment paid to an Italian artist than being put forward as a reason for changing Lodovico Ariosto’s world-famous plot. Giusti’s role in the new opera, however, does not have spectacular or otherwise striking ingredients: one wonders whether the phrase “spirited acting ability” referred to Angelica’s (newly inserted) attempt at Orlando’s life, or whether the whole statement was just a poet’s boasting.

The success of *Orlando furioso* (almost 50 performances during the year 1713-1714) made Vivaldi’s business flourish, so in the next autumn, 1714, he put on a sequel, *Orlando finto pazzo*. This was a similar adventure–and fairy-tale story derived from Renaissance literature (*Orlando innamorato* by Matteo Maria Boiardo). But it was also a challenge to the composer, as it was his first completely original score written for Venice – which in our context means, Venetian audiences hearing some of the best singers of Italy.

**SYNOPSIS OF ORLANDO FINTO PAZZO (VENICE, 1714)**

Characters:
- Orlando (B): Anton Francesco Carli *Virtuoso della ... Gran Principessa Violante di Toscana.*
- Ersilla, sorceress and queen, called Falerina by Boiardo, in love with Brandimarte and with Origille believed to be Ordauro (S): Margherita Gualandi *detta la Campioli.*
- Tigrinda, in love with Argillano (S): Elisabetta Denzio.
- Origille, in love with Grifone, disguised as a man under the name of Ordauro (A): Anna Maria Fabbri.
- Argillano, chosen champion of Ersilla, in love with her (A): Andrea Pacini.
- Grifone, in love with Tigrinda, disguised as a woman under the name of Leodilla (S): Francesco Natali.
- Brandimarte, friend of Orlando, loved by Ersilla, pretending to be Orlando (S): Andrea Guerri.
- Chorus of priests of Hecate and ministers of the temple of Pluto.
- Chorus of nymphs and fauns.

Location: In the realm of Organa where Ersilla (Falerina) had an enchanted castle.
Act One, I.01-07.
Brandimarte, Grifone and Origille are trapped in Ersilla’s demonic realm, where arriving knights are enchanted and killed...Orlando arrives incognito in Ersilla’s court, entertained by magic choruses. The music makes him fall asleep and he is put in chains, but Brandimarte intervenes to free him again, presenting himself as suitor to Ersilla, who is attracted to him. She also welcomes the unknown knight (Orlando) as a new champion against the renowned Orlando.

Act Two, II.01-06.
Grifone is interested in Tigrinda – Ersilla’s companion; in female disguise as ‘Leodilla’, he offers his services as a maid to her in her apartments; Origille, formerly jilted by Grifone, follows, disguised as ‘Ordauro’. Grifone thinks Ordauro is Origille’s twin brother. Ersilla finds Ordauro attractive. Argillano, Ersilla’s lover, interrupts a flirtation between Ersilla and the elusive Ordauro; she rejects his complaints. Argillano now thinks of breaking loose from Ersilla’s tyranny.

Act Three.
... Tigrinda asks Argillano to give Ersilla a magic potion that will put her to sleep permanently; he and Tigrinda can then seize power. Argillano, left alone, feels unable to harm Ersilla, whom he still loves. III.06-09. The magic grotto opens. Ersilla, with assistance from priests, performs necromantic rites, conjuring up the image of Angelica...

III,10-15ult.
Tigrinda comes with Argillano and Grifone, who quarrel; she realizes that Argillano loves only Ersilla. In desperation, Tigrinda drinks the sleep-potion herself; Grifone, out of devotion to her, does likewise. Argillano triumphantly shows the two sleepers to Origille, who decides to take revenge. Ersilla triumphs over the chained Orlando and Brandimarte, guarded by Argillano; she takes the magic sword from the pillar to kill the invulnerable Orlando. He, however, breaks his chains, snatches the sword from her and disarms Argillano. Then he knocks down the pillar with the sword, so that the building collapses and the tents with the enchanted knights are revealed; Ersilla invokes Hell and flees.

The plot relies much on supernatural or hellish stage effects. The female roles comprise, again, a jilted girl, Origille, and a sorceress or she-devil, Ersilla. Instead of an innocent fiancée, we have a sidekick to the sorceress, the mischievous if enamoured Tigrinda. Plus some people in cross-gender disguises. This opera was not successful, but it was a learning process for Vivaldi as a composer of women’s roles.

One of several scenes demonstrating what I call sublimation of Ersilla’s character as a she-devil is “Lo stridor” in Act Three. This scene is a conjuration of the underworld, typified by an exceptional key and tempo (F minor, largo). Ersilla sings an ambitious fioritura when she “lets loose” the infernal spirits. The following recitative accompanies her magic actions, very solemn at first, before breaking into a furious presto aria with tremolo strings.
Example 1. “Lo stridor, l’orrore d’Averno” (Orlando finto pazzo, III.6)
The last piece in Vivaldi’s autograph score is a substitute song, “Sventurata navicella” (“Unfortunate little ship”), an incredibly simple, child-like tune (see example 2).

He composed it after two previous arias in this scene had been rejected, most probably by the soprano, Margherita Gualandi. Vivaldi’s notation looks dashed off in a state of anger: at the top of the page he wrote, “Se questa non piace, non voglio più scrivere di Musica” (“If this one does not please, I do not want to write music any more”). Such musical and autobiographical explicitness is rare in music history. Imagine what might have happened, had Gualandi rejected this aria too (she did not: Vivaldi’s comment is struck out). Thus a woman performer’s sense of musical effect possibly saved the career of a budding opera composer called Antonio Vivaldi.

The substitution of this aria also had a dramatic aspect. Unlike in most contemporary arias about ships in the storm, the “little ship” in this case has a conscious mind, that of Ersilla herself. It is she who remembers the storm and becomes more prudent: “If the unfortunate little ship ever comes to be shipwrecked, she will always fear the storm and the cliff”. A case of sublimation: the she-devil is allowed to portray herself as a harmless and submissive creature or object.
Example 2. Ersilla, “Sventurata navicella” (Orlando finto pazzo, III.7), l-Tn, Giordano 38, fol. 174r (autograph) (Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria). Deleted headings: “Invece dell’usignolo” (i.e., instead of “Sperai la pace qual usignolo”, III.7) and “Se questa non piace, non voglio più scrivere di Musica”.

One of Ersilla’s opponents has a formidable revenge aria. The jilted lover Origille, no less, threatens to incite the whole chivalric world to vengeance with her aria “Anderò, volerò, griderò”. This furious song has become one of the most famous pieces in Vivaldi’s operas, but I think only when it was transferred from Origille’s part to that of a sorceress. In fact, a few weeks after the première of Orlando finto pazzo in November 1714, Vivaldi decided to revive the much more successful Orlando furioso, which went on stage on or around 1 December 1714. Vivaldi had added so many arias of his own to Ristori’s score (several probably already in carnival, 1714), that this Orlando furioso of 1714 could pass as his own opera. He used of course the same singers who had created Orlando finto pazzo, and who were, as usual, under contract for the whole season. The singer of the terza donna part of Origille took her chance and obtained the seconda donna part in Orlando, that of Alcina. This promotion from jilted lover to evil sorceress made it possible that she could take her revenge aria “Anderò” over into the new role. Perhaps she actually used her successful performance of this revenge aria as a tool for her promotion to sorceress. The name of this singer, a high contralto, was Anna Maria Fabbri.
In the operas of the years around 1716 to 1725, Vivaldi’s dramaturgy does not yet essentially change. The stereotyped and sublimated roles are continued, even proliferated: the sorceress and seducer, the innocent enamoured princess, the jilted lover. The sorceress is sometimes ‘secularized’, being a non-magical adversary or political schemer; the jilted lover, often in male disguise, treads the stage ever more confidently. The lively Anna Maria Fabbri remained with Vivaldi’s business for some years obtaining several of these roles. Her typical seconda donna roles were almost equally balanced with those of the enamoured princess, the traditional prima donna part. Vivaldi as composer did more to strengthen the impact of the femme forte roles than the librettists did. The enamoured princess, the femme fragile type, is sometimes presented as a young girl who is as yet sexually inexperienced. (In L’incoronazione di Dario, carnival 1717, she is even mentally slow, although clever in unexpected ways.) The stereotype of the ‘rite-of-passage’ girl comes from the older Venetian opera tradition and remains a feature of the male gaze of Vivaldi’s librettists until the early 1720s. The singers who performed these roles never stayed long with him, whereas those specializing in schemers and sorceresses did. One of the greatest of the latter was Antonia Merighi, whose famous career really began in Vivaldi’s operas – surely not without the composer’s encouragement. She is now known only for her performances at the Haymarket Theatre in London (1729 for Handel, 1736 for the ‘Opera of the Nobility’).

I believe that there was a major transformation, beginning in the 1720s, in Vivaldi’s collaborations with women in opera. Whether this was triggered by personal experience, by mere practical coincidences, or by larger socio-cultural trends of the time is unclear; I would suspect by all three of them. In the early 1720s the composer met the young Anna Tessiere, called Girò; she made her stage debut at age thirteen in 1723 and by 1726 performed the first Vivaldian role in Venice. We do not know the name of her singing teacher, but this might be because her main vocal tutor was the composer himself. Girò’s slightly feeble contralto voice became all but indispensable to Vivaldi’s operas for the following 15 years, and even more indispensable became her spirited stage action and charming manners. Girò began to influence the choice of the libretti as well as the settings; she developed into an image according to which the music and drama were modelled. By no means was she a ‘creature’ of the composer; she sometimes performed in operas by others and had her own sponsors and admirers (she married a nobleman in 1747, six years after Vivaldi’s death). But there is no known instance of Vivaldi obtaining an opera contract through her influence, as was then the case elsewhere, for example with Porpora and his student Farinelli.

Girò’s artistic influence is attested by Vivaldi himself in Carlo Goldoni’s famous autobiographical account on the revision of Griselda (1735). The text of
Vivaldi’s libretto, originally written by Apostolo Zeno (1701) was adapted by the dramatist Carlo Goldoni (Venice, 1707 - Paris, 1793): we know this from two autobiographical accounts by the poet himself, which is quite exceptional. These accounts were published in c.1773 and 1787, respectively, the first (in Italian) in the preface to vol. xiii of Goldoni’s collected plays (Venice, Pasquali, 1761-1778), the second in his French autobiography, Mémoires, Paris, 1787. The two narratives are a little different from each other in their emphases and in the details included. The story will be summarized here following the French (Mémoires) version.

After some wanderings around Northern Italy, Goldoni was about to establish himself as a dramatic poet in Venice, when in Lent 1735 he had the good fortune to be recommended by the theatre director Giuseppe Imer to the owner-impresario of the Grimani theatres, [Michele] Grimani. As a result, Goldoni was hired to adapt an old dramma per musica, Griselda by Zeno, that Grimani wished to have performed at his theatre of S. Samuele in the short season of the Ascension fair in 1735. The young poet’s task was the adaptation of older libretti – whether to shorten the drama, or to change the position and character of the arias to satisfy the actors or the composer. The poet then went to discuss the project with “Signor Abbate Vivaldi”, known as “the Red Priest” because of his red hair, an excellent violin player and fair composer. He had teamed up with Madame Giraud, his student, a young singer, not beautiful, not having a good voice, but graceful and a talented actress. She was to play Griselda.

“The abbé was reading his breviary and received Goldoni coldly; although he had heard of Goldoni’s successful drama Belisario, he doubted that his visitor knew enough about the rules of musical poetry. After some comments about the role of Signor Lalli in this project, the abbé seemed to consider the conversation concluded. Only at the poet’s insistence did the composer show him the libretto of Zeno’s Griselda, illustrating the adapter’s difficult task with a touching scene between Gualtiero and Griselda. The author had concluded it with a pathetic aria [for the eponymous heroine]. “Madame Giraud, however, does not like languishing songs, she prefers a piece full of expression, excitement, an aria that expresses the passion in diverse manners, for example with abrupt sentences, interrupted by sighs, with action and movement, if you understand what I mean”. “No”, says Goldoni, “I do understand; I have heard Madame Giraud; her voice is not very strong” – Vivaldi protests furiously: “Are you insulting my student? She sings everything!” The poet asks for the libretto, offering to write a new aria for this scene; the composer objects that he needs the text himself and is in a hurry, but then agrees to let the visitor try, since he offers to do it on the spot, and gives him pen and paper. In less than a quarter of an hour the aria is ready, in eight lines of two groups of four in the
dramatic manner as requested. Vivaldi reads it, bursts into joyful exclamations, throws the breviary to the ground, calls for Mademoiselle Giraud: “Read this; the gentleman here has written it here and now, here he has done it”; he apologizes to Goldoni, embraces him and praises him as his favourite poet forever. Goldoni is then entrusted with the adaptation, receiving further instructions; the opera goes on stage and is well received."

Although Vivaldi maintained that Anna Girò could sing everything, she and he had strong preferences. The singer was the main reason for the transformation of Griselda’s character from a suffering and moralistic female saint into a short-tempered Amazon and recalcitrant mother. Vivaldi arias which favoured Girò’s particular talent on stage, are of a mezzo-carattere or mixed style, lively but also sentimental, complaining but entertaining, usually in a medium to fast tempo, featuring stage action or at least dramatic declamation. Vivaldi and Girò together developed this specific aria type, known as “speaking aria” (aria parlante) or “acting aria” (aria d’azione). An example is “No, non tanta crudeltà”, composed for Girò in 1735 and repeated by her in many other operas, where the heroine adresses two opposing men simultaneously (see example 3).

The choice of roles was relatively wide open for Girò – but when the Florentine impresario Count Albizzi proposed to engage her for carnival 1736 as the submissive and suffering princess Ginevra, Vivaldi protested. He proposed Merope instead, where Girò as the eponymous heroine would be a forceful widow on the brink of killing her long-lost unknown son for vengeance before she recognizes him. Obviously, Vivaldi also promoted other female singers’ careers in those years; several of them were coloratura sopranos. For him as impresario, female voices were generally preferable to castratos because they were cheaper to hire. He cultivated different vocal policies for the various singers. In his pasticcio opera Tamerlano (1735) where Girò is the tragic heroine, she and the tenor sing only arias by Vivaldi that concentrate on action and expression. The sopranos (two castratos, one woman), however, are all given arias by other composers, several of them written for Carlo Broschi detto Farinelli, and were mostly arias that concentrate on vocal effect. Vivaldi himself was perfectly happy to write bravura pieces for those other singers, as for example the sea-storm aria “Agitata da due venti” (Adelaide, 1735, I. 17) for Margherita Giacomazzi, seconda donna in Griselda of 1735.
Example 3. “No, non tanta crudeltà” (Griselda, II.5), sung by Anna Girò
One reason for the changes in Vivaldi’s attitudes to women singers was surely the presence of Anna Girò in his life. But the general background was the development of the Venetian operatic environment, with increased competition between women and castratos, with shifts in local patronage from established patrician families to foreign aristocrats, with the attractions of new operatic markets abroad, for example in London, and the beginning influx of liberal ideas. In a letter of 1735, Vivaldi wrote to his own patron on behalf of Giovanna Gasperini, a soprano who performed in his opera, for help in releasing Giovanna’s young children from an apparently contested guardianship of others. The singer, apparently a single mother, had asked him for help in getting her children back, and he complied. Many questions are lurking behind this mother story from real life, and I am sorry I cannot elaborate on them here.

As the leading female in Vivaldi’s opera *Farnace* (1727), Anna Girò caught the attention of connoisseurs. The writer Antonio Conti described the opera as both “sublime” and “tender”, praising Girò’s performance as the distressed mother and wife Tamiri. Although the “sublime” or, as we would say, heroic, element is primarily represented by her husband Farnace (played by a woman), she participates in it. When the royal couple and their infant son are threatened with death by the Roman invaders, Farnace’s last resort is a suicide pact in which Tamiri must kill herself and her son, should Farnace die. But Tamiri, determined to commit suicide, saves the child’s life by hiding him in the tomb of their ancestors, in a heart-wrenching monologue. Tamiri’s role balances motherly tenderness and devotion to her husband with a heroic resistance to his fatalistic world-view. The opera was revived, usually with Girò, and importantly, it was
musically revised by Vivaldi as she developed. For example, he increased her accompagnato recitatives in which acting was paramount. He also inserted heroic coloratura arias for her in 1731 after she had sung elsewhere in casts together with Farinelli and Faustina Bordoni.

Anna Girò’s major roles under Vivaldi were often mothers. This has not been pointed out before; the cultural relevance of the general topic has been emphasized in Martha Feldman’s essay on the absent mother in opera seria. Unfortunately, her conclusions are blurred by incorrect information (see Appendix: “Mothers in opera seria”).

Mother roles are also given to Girò in five further operas performed under Vivaldi’s direction in 1732-1739; he usually chose the libretti, although the singer and her patrons must have influenced him. In 1732, Girò performed as prima donna in Semiramide, where the heroine leads her husband by the nose and outwits her rival for power, King Ninus, with erotic, diplomatic and military means – but she is not a mother as in other operas on this topic. In 1733, Girò had again a tragic mother role as Mitrena, wife of the Aztec ruler Motezuma. While trying to be loyal to an irrationally aggressive husband, Mitrena defends her adolescent daughter against a threat of being sacrificed to the Aztec gods. The drama, freshly written for Vivaldi, benefited from Girò’s success as Tamiri; Mitrena has expressive and belligerent arias and long accompagnato recitatives. A novel idea is a terzetto in which the heroine intercedes, pleading for peace, between the two male contestants, Fernando and Motezuma. But the most typical Girò aria is ‘parlante’: she agonizes over the losses of both daughter and husband in “La figlia, lo sposo” (II.14). This extremely agitated song (C minor, allegro molto, C) expresses the queen’s anguish before her daughter’s sacrifice. It is an outburst of short phrases or exclamations, which sometimes form chains of repeated staccato notes on words such as “mille, mille, affanni”. It was an archetypical aria parlante and was probably created specially for Girò at Mantua in carnival 1732, for Farnace 32 (“La madre, lo sposo”). Metastasio’s “Fra sdegno ed amore” (from Siroe, re di Persia) served as inspiration; the words “tra sdegno e timore” appear in the B-section. Let us remember that Girò was 23 when she played this role.

In 1735, Anna Girò sang Griselda, just mentioned, where the heroine finds a long-lost daughter, defends the life of her infant son against a sexual blackmailer, and regains the acceptance of her royal husband and the people. Similarly multi-tasking in Feraspe (1739), Girò defends her own honour against calumny, shelters the life of her infant son and promotes the love interest of her adolescent daughter.

What emerges here is actually a career aspect of women in opera: emulating Farinelli or Tesi was a professional requirement now, but so was expressing feminine values and meeting male preconceptions in a transformed society. The female artists themselves acquired additional functions and were judged by how well they measured up. Archetypical was the two-partner constellation, of
a woman having to face two different male opponents simultaneously. This crossfire situation, on stage as well as in life, fed new opera plots as well as dramas and novels. The initial economic damage done to women’s careers in opera by the castrato phenomenon led to extra transformations and ultimately to new images and powers of women in opera.

Vivaldi’s career itself was subverted when he left Venice in 1740 as an old man, to seek new operatic business in Vienna. Anna Girò, who in the preceding years had been employed in Austrian companies, went with him; her career was perhaps the trigger for the composer’s fatal decision. Far away from the city where he had spent his whole previous life, Vivaldi died in Vienna in 1741. The opera he had prepared for revival there, L’oracolo in Messenia, was one of those designed for Girò in a heroic mother role; it went on stage posthumously in 1742. There are no cast lists, but I conclude from one particular aria in the Viennese libretto of 1742 that Girò sang in it; it was “No, non tanta crudeltà” – her aria.
Appendix. Mothers in opera seria

Vivaldi’s opera *Semiramide* (Mantua, 1732) raises questions of the representation of women, and specifically, of mothers in eighteenth-century theatre and opera.

The libretto was Francesco Silvani’s last original dramma per musica (Venice, 1713, music by Carlo Francesco Pollarolo). It was one of several responses to the literary accounts of Semiramis, Queen of Assyria, which are transmitted by ancient writers (Ctesias, Diodorus Siculus). Other Semiramis dramas of Vivaldi’s time were written, for example, by Crébillon (1717), Zanelli (*Nino*, 1720), Zeno (*Semiramide in Ascalona*, 1725), Metastasio (*Semiramide riconosciuta*, 1729) and Voltaire (*Sémiramis*, 1748). In some accounts Semiramis murders her husband Ninus; in others she reigns in male disguise on behalf of her infant son, Ninus. In most stories, questions regarding royal dignity, female succession and the constitutional limitation of monarchical power are probed. The latter two concepts were familiar to Silvani’s readers from the English monarchy, and in fact the accession of Queen Mary and William III of Orange after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the Act of Settlement (1701), might have provided recent historical examples. The accession of the Habsburg archduchess Maria Theresa was considered inevitable by 1732, when Vivaldi set Silvani’s libretto. Beyond these (speculative) political parallels, Silvani’s drama thematicizes the metaphysics of worldly power, using the figures of Ninus and of the philosopher-king Zoroaster to demonstrate its fragility. Silvani’s main theatrical idea is, however, the feminine resourcefulness and mental strength of a spirited “queen for a day”, who establishes herself vis-à-vis hereditary patriarchs mainly by acting with diplomatic skill against her potential enemies. This Semiramide symbolizes a female triumph.

Martha Feldman, in her essay *The Absent Mother in Opera Seria*, remarks on the character of Semiramide, among others, as a mother. Feldman claims that mid-eighteenth-century opera seria is characterized by the absence of mother roles, and ascribes this to the influence of the librettist Pietro Metastasio. She says that he was the first or even only Italian librettist to eliminate Semiramide’s motherhood, whereas this character “was evidently a mother throughout the long literary tradition she inhabited, except in Metastasio’s 1748 libretto, composed in honor of the empress Maria Theresa, where in fact her motherhood is suppressed” (p. 255 n. 5).

This is erroneous on several counts. Semiramide’s motherhood is not suppressed in Metastasio’s libretto: she reigns as king disguised as her son Nino, who is alive although not on stage. In the last scene, the heroine’s male

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disguise is recognized;² she offers that her son, “who is living nearby in the palace”, be crowned as king – but the people acclaim her as queen instead, because of her prudent and forceful reign. In Silvani’s libretto of 1713, however, Semiramide has no child, since this author follows different literary sources, according to which Ninus is Semiramide’s husband whom she ousts from the throne. Metastasio’s Semiramide riconosciuta was written for Rome in 1729, not for Vienna in 1748 (which is the date of Voltaire’s tragedy), and of course it is not originally dedicated to Maria Theresa, twelve years old in 1729. When Semiramide riconosciuta was revived in 1748 in Vienna with music by Gluck, it was dedicated to her as ruler – but in fact by the theatre managers (“Gli associati”), not by the poet; not a word of the motherhood references was changed or eliminated.

Metastasio wrote not only one libretto with a leading mother-role (Feldman cites Demofoonte as a “rare exception”, ibid.) but three, all for the Habsburg court at Vienna. In Issipile (1732), Eurinome is, to her despair, the mother of the young villain (sung by a castrato) who ends up committing suicide; in Demofoonte (1733), Dircea is a young mother under the threat of a suspicion of incest; in Ciro riconosciuto (1736), Mandane fights the attempts of her tyrannical father to have her adult son murdered. The last-named drama was significantly dedicated to Empress Elisabeth, Maria Theresa’s mother; and of course, Mandane is not “put in the lowly place proper to a Metastasian mother” (as Feldman claims for Dircea, ibid.): she is the heiress to the throne.³ These libretti by Metastasio, and several others whose main conflict concerns mothers and their sons, were popular throughout the second third of the eighteenth century: They were joined by revivals of earlier libretti such as Zeno’s Merope, where the eponymous heroine is the mother of the young hero (always performed by a castrato), and by the Semiramis and Thomyris dramas (among them Angiolini’s and Gluck’s Viennese tragic ballet drama Sémiramis of 1761). In many of these, a mother is on the brink of killing her own son – as in the much-acclaimed opera Talestri, regina delle Amazzoni by Maria Antonia Walpurgis of Saxony (1760). Other famous mothers seen in opera seria in mid-eighteenth century were Salvi’s Rodelinda, Zeno’s Andromaca, Griselda and Nitocri, Lalli’s Candace: mothers who are fighting for the lives of their (infant or grown-up) sons, as they are threatened by tyrants. Thus the mother was quite present and active in pre-bourgeois opera seria, and the anthropological connotations of these near child-killers or heroic defenders of their sons’ lives are highly interesting when we ask about the

² The poet explains in the preface that her disguise is helped by the Asian custom that women were not seen in public.

mothers of castratos.\textsuperscript{4} Feldman, a former promoter of anthropological approaches to opera, does not follow this line of enquiry at all. The European success of Calzabigi’s and Gluck’s \textit{Alceste} (1767), presenting a royal mother of two teenage children, is likewise entirely omitted by her. Feldman also insists that Metastasio did not give women a morally leading function (p. 33), a statement that is contradicted by many of his libretti, including \textit{Semiramide riconosciuta} (1729), \textit{Demetrio} (1731), \textit{Issipile} (1732), \textit{Ciro riconosciuto} (1736), \textit{Zenobia} (1737), \textit{Ipermestra} (1744) and \textit{Il trionfo di Clelia} (1762). It is a truism, of course, that bourgeois values in the representation of mothers appear only towards the end of the century, whereas the many earlier examples were rather influenced by dynastic values. Feldman’s dramaticized narrative, however, constructs epochal exclusions and makes one particular poet responsible for these (a procedure which Edward W. Said has called the “rhetoric of blame”); it forgoes the great potential of the topic with regard to dozens of popular opera plots – and in this way does not really help to understand the question of mothers in opera seria.
