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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Special Section

Giovanna Casali*

Aristotle's Presence in Opera Between Theory and Practice. A Case Study: Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti's *Ercole in cielo*

Abstract

Since the origins of the opera genre, reflection on Greek tragedy and music as they were described in ancient treatises, and above all in those of Aristotle, has been crucial. Reflecting on *Poetics*, in particular, led to several essential considerations for creating the genre in the sixteenth century and influenced the poetics of seventeenth-century *dramma per musica*. This new theatrical genre, with its specific characteristics, was consolidated during the seventeenth century, nonetheless, towards the end of the century, in the context of the so-called opera reform, some neo-classical librettists stood out, of whom Count Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti was considered the most radical. Frigimelica Roberti, whose ideas were considered "distorted" by his contemporaries, distinguished himself as a staunch supporter of Aristotelian demands and accompanied his reflections on Poetics with an attempt to apply its principles. In my contribution, I intend to focus on the libretto *Ercole in cielo* (1696), highlighting how the librettist's attempt to adhere to a strenuous observance of Aristotelian principles nevertheless went hand in hand with the need for different choices on a practical level.

Keywords: Aristotle's *Poetics*; Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti; opera; opera reform; seventeenth-century librettos; Hercules; classical reception

1. Aristotle's *Poetics* and the Opera Genre

The influence that Aristotle's *Poetics* had on western theatre offers a vast and fruitful field of study, and within that, the study of its specific influence on opera is just as wide-ranging. There is no shortage, in fact, of contributions from musicology that explore in depth how the reception of the *Poetics* – and the commentaries on it – played a fundamental role in artistic thought at the birth of the opera genre, right from the first musical experiments born within the cultural temperament of the late Italian Renaissance. The first modern staging of a Greek tragedy took place in 1585 at the Olympic Theatre in Vicenza, where a group of scholars set out to revive ancient Greek tragedy by staging the choruses from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, set

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to music by Andrea Gabrieli.[1] Orsatto Giustiniani, who was in charge of the Italian translation, defined the chosen play in his preface as "la più eccellente tragedia del mondo, stimata da ogn'uno bellissima sopra tutte l'altre; et della quale Aristotile istesso in quella parte, ou'egli ragiona della Tragedia, si valse per esempio nel formar la sua *Poetica*" ("The most excellent tragedy in the world, esteemed by everyone to be beautiful above all others; and which Aristotle himself, in that part where he discusses Tragedy, used as an example in formulating his *Poetics*"; translation mine).[2] The fact that *Oedipus Rex* was defined in the *Poetics* as the perfect tragedy certainly legitimised its choice, as well as its symbolic value. However, the Sophoclean drama must also have been chosen by the Academicians of the Olympic for another reason, namely its choruses. In a 2015 article, Donatella Restani analyses several documents related to the choruses of the *Oedipus* of Vicenza – the staging designs made by Angelo Ingegneri and Sperone Speroni, various comments, reviews by Ingegneri himself and other spectators – situating them in the context of the ideas on the chorus circulating at the time, derived from the contemporary reception of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Olympic Academy. The Academicians, in fact, were familiar with Alessandro Pazzi's Latin translation of 1536 and Bernardo Segni's vernacular version of 1549; furthermore, some of them were undoubtedly also familiar with the commentaries by Robortello (1548), Vettori (1560) and Castelvetro (1570). Restani's article offers, in general, "an interesting case study in order to investigate how Italian sixteenth-century transmission, translation, and interpretation of ancient Greek and Latin treatises on poetry, rhetoric, and music shaped new musical theorisations and experiments" (78), since the very reflection born among Renaissance intellectuals was certainly at the basis – or at least constituted the prelude – of the subsequent birth of the new musical genre we now call opera. Moreover, it allows us to see specifically the Academicians' thoughts on the function and purpose of the chorus as it was described in the *Poetics* – or rather, as they had, often erroneously, interpreted Aristotle's description.

The experiment of the Academicians of the Olympic Theatre was an isolated one, as it explicitly aimed at recovering Greek tragedy. It was, in fact, Greek music that constituted the major subject of study and consideration for the intellectuals who pondered this new type of theatre, as can be seen in works such as *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna pratica* by Nicola Vicentino (1555) and the *Dialogo della musica antica e moderna* by Vincenzo Galilei

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[1] Among the many studies on the subject, some fundamental ones are: Gallo 1973, Palisca 1985, Flashar 1991 (in particular 25-32), Mazzoni 2013.

[2] The entire quotation can be found in Gallo 1973, xxxi. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

(1581-1582).[3] However, the attempt to recreate the ancient harmony between word and music was also imbued with a certain misunderstanding of what ancient drama was: in fact, theorists – and the reference is of course to the exponents of the Florentine Camerata – "studied and imitated ancient Greek music theory and practice, mistakenly thinking that ancient poetic drama had been sung in its entirety" (Ketterer and Solomon 2017, n.p.). On the other hand, it is well known how much cultural prominence was given to the study – and consequent dissemination – of the *Poetics* and the commentaries on it by members of the Florentine Camerata and the Accademia degli Alterati, whose facilitators were authors such as Piero Vettori and Girolamo Mei. The paradoxical discovery of lost music laid the foundations for devising a new kind, so much so that Jacopo Peri's Euridice speaks of a "new way of singing" ("un nuovo modo di cantare").[4] In the wake of the sixteenth-century critics and literati, in the following century there followed members of the Accademia degli Incogniti,[5] who, considering chapter 1 of the *Poetics*,[6] questioned the various possible functions that music had in ancient drama – that is, whether tragedy was entirely sung, whether only the choruses were sung or neither – and this debate was amply highlighted by Claude Palisca in his fundamental *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*.[7] That Aristotle, again, had formed the basis of the Incogniti's reflections should come as no surprise. In fact, the Academy's philosophy derived from the teachings of the peripatetic Cesare Cremonini, professor of philosophy at the University of Padua, where many of the Academy's members had studied. Reflection on the *Poetics,* therefore, led to a series of crucial considerations for the definition of the genre in seventeenth-century

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[3] On Galilei, see especially Palisca 2003 and, on the whole operation of reviving – or rather, attempting to emulate – ancient music from ancient treatises on philosophy (Plato and Aristotle among all) and music theory (Aristoxenus), see Maniates and Palisca 1996, and Palisca 2006. In particular, Peri and Caccini attempted to recreate the *hêdumenos logos* of Greek tragedy as described by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, based on Aristoxenus' distinction between musical intervals and spoken language, and the recitative style developed from these principles. See also Solomon 2011.

[4] See Restani 2001, 39ff.; see the entire essay for her analysis of the legacy of ancient dramaturgy in sixteenth-century musical culture. On the Alterati, see also Palisca 1968.

[5] On the Accademia degli Incogniti, see Rosand 1991, 37-40.

[6] *Po.* 1447b24–8: "there are also some arts which use all the stated media – rhythm, melody, metre – as do dithyramb and nomes, tragedy and comedy. They differ in that some employ them all together, others use them in certain parts" (εἰσὶ δέ τινες αἳ πᾶσι χρῶνται τοῖς εἰρημένοις, λέγω δὲ οἷον ῥυθμῷ καὶ μέλει καὶ μέτρῳ, ὥσπερ ἥ τε τῶν διθυραμβικῶν ποίησις καὶ ἡ νόμων ἥ τε τραγῳδία καὶ ἡ κωμῳδία· διαφέρουσι δὲ ὅτι αἱ μὲν ἅμα πᾶσιν αἱ δὲ κατὰ μέρος). For the English translation of the *Poetics,* see Halliwell 1995.

[7] Palisca 1985; see, in particular, Chapter 14: "Theory of Dramatic Music".

Venice.[8] However, the conclusion reached was always the same, namely that "regardless of ancient practice, the requirements of modern taste alone were sufficient to justify *dramma per musica*" (Rosand 1991, 40). It is not surprising, then, that the ancient Aristotelian rules that were the basis of the debates that had animated the theorists, such as the famous Aristotelian unities of time, place and action, the division into acts, the mixture of genres, and the use of choruses, were abandoned. However, the question of unities continued to be a matter for debate in the seventeenth century, in which "the crux of the problem . . . was the disagreement as to whether Aristotle had addressed the unities at all in his *Poetics*" (46).[9] Again, the debate was resolved in favour of freedom to (not) respect the Aristotelian unities, so much so that the librettists emphasised making excuses to the reader for their absence. An absence that, on the other hand, had its motivation, since the theory also came into conflict with one of the main requirements of the new operatic genre: variety. The issue of division into acts, as Ellen Rosand (1991, 52) points out, "seems to have been much simpler proposition for the librettists than adherence to the unities". The choice facing the librettists was simple: the plot could be divided into three or five acts. The five acts were clearly reminiscent of ancient tragedy, generally articulated in five episodes, while the choice of three acts drew on both *commedia dell'arte* and Spanish drama, which had a great influence on seventeenth-century librettists. Many librettists initially followed the five-act division, but from 1640 the second option was favoured, becoming conventional for the genre of *dramma per musica*, and "the issue did not rise again until the end of the century, when a few of the most radical neo-classicising librettists, especially Frigimelica Roberti, but also Zeno, used five-act division as an emblem of their orthodoxy" (53). Frigimelica Roberti,[10] in particular, is considered the most radical of librettists in the context of the so-called opera reform that animated the late seventeenth century.[11] Between 1694 and 1708, he composed

[8] Starting in 1637 – the date chosen by convention for the performance of Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli's *Andromeda* at the Theatre of San Cassiano – a new era of opera theatre began in Venice: an impresario-type theatre. This structural change implied that the type of performance offered and the dynamics relating to its production also changed. See especially Bianconi and Walker 1984; Bianconi 1986; Fabbri 1990.

[9] Rosand 1991, 46. See the chapter "*Drama for* Music: The Question of Genre". Specifically, the question of unities can be found on pages 45-51, the question of division into acts on pages 52-3, and the chorus on pages 54-5. On Aristotle's interpretation and attempts to legitimise the new genre by referring to him, see also Weiss 1987, 1-30.

[10] For the biography and librettist activity of Frigimelica Roberti see, among others, Leich 1972; Freeman 1981; Saunders 1985; Balata and Finocchi Ghersi 1998.

[11] For an overview of the opera reform see, among others, Di Benedetto 1986.

a series of librettos for the Teatro S. Giovanni Grisostomo, aiming to outline what the new rules for theatre should be. Frigimelica Roberti's starting point was Aristotle, who maintained his stronghold in the Paduan environment where the count was born and trained (Balata and Finocchi Ghersi 1998). In this article, I intend to use a specific case study, namely the libretto *Ercole in cielo* (1696), to highlight Frigimelica Roberti's method, which represents a peculiar case of Aristotelianism at the end of the seventeenth century – and, in general, in known libretto production.[12]

2. The Aristotelianism of Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti

To understand Frigimelica Roberti's method, it is necessary to focus briefly on the theatre for which he composed all eleven of his librettos,[13] since "his extreme solutions, while they contributed to the climate of reform at the time they were written, were fitted to the Theatre S. Giovanni Grisostomo's special circumstances" (Saunders 1985, 79). Frigimelica Roberti was related to Giovanni Carlo Grimani, who founded the aforementioned theatre with his brother Vincenzo. In addition, Giovanni Carlo had founded the Accademia degli Animosi in Venice, which was incorporated into the Accademia dell'Arcadia in 1698. The relationship between the literary theories of the Arcadia and the reform of opera has been extensively investigated by scholars;[14] what I would like to emphasise here is that S. Giovanni Grisostomo became the venue for the so-called "reform librettos"[15] shortly after 1690. Until the first half of the eighteenth century, when it was closed, serious operas with librettos by well-known reformers such as Apostolo Zeno, Domenico David, Francesco Silvani and Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti were staged. Specifically, in addition to the eleven operas by Frigimelica already mentioned, David wrote only two operas for the S. Giovanni Grisostomo (1692 and 1696); Silvani wrote eight operas between 1708 and 1714, followed by four operas between 1740 and 1748; Zeno wrote three between 1698 and 1703, and thirteen between 1717 and 1743. However, if one considers the

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[12] Indeed, as Giuntini (2019, 440n11) writes, "Frigimelica's is an unprecedented undertaking in terms of the breadth of theoretical reflection and the systematic (ingenious) application of Aristotelian principles".

[13] Except for a libretto, *Il Ciclope*, staged in Padua in 1695.

[14] On the Accademia degli Animosi and the relationship with the Roman Accademia dell'Arcadia, see Saunders 1985, in particular, chapter 2. On the positions of the members of the Accademia dell'Arcadia regarding the reform of opera, see Di Benedetto 1988.

[15] Rosand 1991, 397. For an overview of the Theatre of S. Giovanni Grisostomo in the context of opera reform, see chapter 13 of this volume, with reference to the bibliography, and Saunders 1985.

operas premiered in all the theatres up to 1716, there are five by David, fifteen by Frigimelica, sixty-five by Zeno and sixty-three by Silvani, and, expanding the perspective even further, an estimate of the individual authors over the entire operatic production amounts to 701 librettos for Zeno (1696-1830), thirty for Frigimelica (1694-1737), and sixteen for David (1691-1717). The only librettists who fully participated in the late seventeenth-century theatre tradition – not only in Venice – were Silvani and Zeno; David is marginal: his librettos were hardly known. When viewed in context with the entire operatic season of the end of the century, Frigimelica was relatively obscure: the data[16] indicates that he had a privileged and continuous relationship with the Theatre S. Giovanni Grisostomo, which is not the case with any other librettist. Frigimelica's production context was thus limited to the Grimani brothers' Theatre, which allowed him to theorise – and implement – his dramaturgical solutions.

In fact, there were a variety of positions of the literati who questioned the manner in which opera librettos should be written at the turn of the century, and these were not uniform nor unequivocal (see Di Benedetto 1986). Frigimelica appeared to follow meticulously Aristotelian *Poetics* in reinterpreting the opera libretto; however, the literati who were questioning these issues in those same years considered the count's ideas extravagant and difficult to apply.

Indeed, from the writings in which Zeno expresses his views on Frigimelica, it is clear that the librettist did not consider his ideas merely extremist, but downright preposterous; in a letter to Antonio Muratori dated 26 May 1708, one reads:

> Mi è stato detto, che anche il Frigimelica in Padova voglia dar fuori qualche cosa contro di voi: non l'ho nondimeno per nuova sicura; ma quando fosse, avremo campo di ridere, essendo egli pieno d'idee stravolte, e così poco ragionevoli, come i suoi drammi.

> [I have been told that Frigimelica in Padua also wants to come out with something against you: I do not have it for certain, but when it is, we will have cause to laugh, as he is full of distorted ideas, and as unreasonable as his dramas.]

The members of the Accademia degli Animosi themselves made fun of him, as denoted by the sixth satire written by Bartolomeo Dotti (1757, 103), where Frigimelica is mocked precisely for his relationship with Aristotle:

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[16] The proposed data were obtained by searching the Corago project database ("Corago: Repertoire and archive of librettos of Italian opera from 1600 to 1900", https://site.unibo.it/corago-dbc/en; Accessed 5 December 2024).

Non v'è forse chi più posi
Sovra l'arte Aristotelica?
Su i costumi maestosi,
Esce in campo il Frigimelica.
Via levate la berretta,
E inchinate la sua musa,
Ringraziando ch'ei la metta
Con cent'altre alla rinfusa.

[Is there anyone who I would rank higher than / Aristotelian art? / With majestic costumes on, / Frigimelica comes out on the field. / Take off your hat, / And bow to his muse, / Being thankful that he puts it on / With a hundred others in bulk.]

The reputation Frigimelica had in Venice among his contemporaries, due to his Aristotelianism, was therefore not the best, but let us see what ideas the librettist pursued. The common denominator of all Frigimelica's librettos was the desire to follow slavishly the dramaturgical possibilities listed in Aristotle's *Poetics.* Whether Frigimelica had actually understood the meaning of Aristotle's words[17] is not the point here; what is important is to try to follow the thought processes and consequent dramaturgical choices made by Frigimelica based on the *Poetics.* The count's ideas are well explained in the prefaces of his librettos and in the *Discorso poetico sopra lo scioglimento della tragicomedia per musica* entitled *l'Alessandro in Susa.*[18] Furthermore, Frigimelica had written a manual of poetics in which he referred to Aristotle's *Poetics.* This early eighteenth-century poetics manual, preserved in the British Library in three manuscript copies (Add. MSS. 10731, 10732 and 10733), is nothing more than an account of a series of lessons given by the Paduan count to Girolamo Giustiniani, a member of a well-known Venetian family.[19]

For an exhaustive analysis of the manual, see the entire article by Francesco Giuntini, where the author highlights how the discovery of this document, read together with Frigimelica's other writings, offers a

[17] As Leich wonders in his analysis (1972, 146).

[18] The commentary on his last libretto, *Alessandro in Susa* (1708), was so extensive that it was published as a standalone volume. See Saunders 1985, 87.

[19] The manual has not yet been published, and I was unable to consult it. Francesco Giuntini, however, published an article on this subject in 2019; therefore, only some parts of the manual quoted in Giuntini's article, which are useful to the arguments presented here, are reported in this contribution. They will be cited with the abbreviation (i.e. AP = *Arte Poetica*) and folio number indicated by Giuntini, together with the article page reference. Regarding manuscript copies, Giuntini chose the last one as the reference copy, given the probable authorship of the second part (438).

broader overview of the librettist's peculiar classicist method. Specifically, I would like to emphasise here how the count wished – in intent – to adhere strenuously to Aristotelian norms, and how, through an analysis of certain passages from the manual and libretto under study, one can gain a better understanding of how Frigimelica's method was implemented in the encounter between theory and practice. To set the stage for the case study, I will briefly mention some aspects that generally characterise the Paduan count's dramaturgical choices. Firstly, as mentioned in the introduction, all of Frigimelica Roberti's librettos are characterised by their division into five acts. Of the operas staged in Venice from 1680 to 1720, less than ten per cent were in five acts, and more than a third of those were works by Count Frigimelica Roberti. Moreover, each act is separated by a chorus – with which the last act always ends – precisely to emulate Greek drama, organised according to a subdivision into episodes and stasimons.[20] We can observe the "Aristotelianism" of Frigimelica Roberti even in his use of the chorus, since this had been abandoned in Venetian practice. Furthermore, Frigimelica emphasises in the preface of each of his librettos that he wants to follow the three Aristotelian unities, and he specifies, case by case, how this will be achieved; as Freeman (1981, 114) points out, "the most obvious effect of this interest on the librettos themselves lies in the limits placed on the number of set changes", namely, the tendency to have only one set per act, and occasionally a few scene changes within the same act. Thus, the librettist, arguing and justifying his poetic choices, tries to stick to these dramaturgical elements listed by Aristotle, namely the division into acts, the unities of time, place, and action, and the use of choruses.[21]

These are, more or less, the general characteristics that distinguish Frigimelica's work. Other aspects are relevant to a more detailed analysis, such as, for instance, the distribution of arias among characters. It is important to consider these elements in order to gain a broader understanding of how Frigimelica's libretto production might be interpreted. I now intend to specifically analyse another particular aspect of Frigimelica Roberti's classicising method, namely the choice of subject and the way in which it is elaborated within the libretto, highlighting how the theoretical desire to adhere stringently to the norms described by Aristotle in the *Poetics* was at odds with compositional practice (or rather, impracticality, as we shall see).

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[20] See the list compiled by Freeman 1981, 275n179. On the division into five acts, in general, see also Freeman 1981, 90, and on Frigimelica's use of it in particular, 114.

[21] It is worth noting that such issues were also central to the classical period of French theatre. Thus, it is not surprising that Frigimelica admired seventeenth-century French playwrights such as Corneille and Racine. See Leich 1972, 146.

3. *Ercole in cielo*

Frigimelica Roberti's *Ercole in cielo* is defined by the author as "Tragedia", a term that was at the time completely out of use to define *dramma per musica*. The traditional term is not generally used for any of the librettos, but always *tragedia*, *tragicomedia*, and so on. Of course, the very naming of "tragedy" highlights the focus on the distinction between genres as Aristotle conceived it.[22] Not only that: the librettist provides a "brief Explanation" ("breve Allegazione") to the libretto from which we can infer his intention to differentiate dramas according to a meticulous typology by referring to Aristotle's doctrine, and this characterises the entire play (Giuntini 2019, 440). The inclusion of this paratext by Frigimelica indicates a singular attitude on the part of the count. In fact, Frigimelica devotes considerable attention to writing the libretto, which is accompanied by a detailed and articulate apparatus and notes, which distinguishes him from other librettists. The libretto under study includes a preface, an address to the reader ("L'autore A Chi Legge"), and an *Argomento* ("Argument"), all of which are well-described and punctual. In order for the reader to understand Frigimelica's intentions when preparing these texts, he added precise information to the libretto. I quote part of the address "To the Reader" from the libretto *Ercole in cielo*:

> Presento la seconda mia Tragedia, con questa breve allegazione, in cui vi dica cosa ella sia. Non perché voi nol sappiate in vederla, ma perché in vederla voi possiate giudicare se lo sa chi l'ha fatta. Quattro modi di Tragedie, come altre volte ho accennato, insegna Aristotele. Due nella quali non segue l'orribilità, e sono i due ampissimi fonti delle tragedie di fine lieto. Due nelle quali segue, e sono le due sorgenti delle tragedie d'esito infelice. Fra questi un modo si è quando l'orribilità è commessa conoscendo, e volendo, tal è la *Rosimonda*. L'altro quando è commessa per ignoranza. Ed ecco il caso nostro, in cui l'orribilità di uccider Ercole vien eseguita per ignoranza non di persona, ma di strumento. Credendo Deianira di dare al marito un magistero amoroso per farsi amare, gli dà una veste avvelenata e contra sua voglia l'uccide. Ognun vede le spezie di questa tragedia, e comprende che ella è atta a destare più compassione che terrore, al contrario della *Rosimonda*, che portava più terrore che compassione tal'è la natura degli errori nati per ignoranza, perché hanno per lor natura tutto il compassionevole, e nulla dello scellerato. (Frigimelica 1696, 8-9)[23]

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[22] The question of genre had, however, already been a matter of debate for seventeenth-century theorists, who questioned the primary Aristotelian distinction between tragedy, comedy and epic. See Rosand 1991, 46. Moreover, it is worth noting that the term "Tragedia" was usually employed for librettos divided into five acts.

[23] In the transcription of Frigimelica's texts, the use of punctuation, capital letters,

[I present my second Tragedy with this brief explanation, in which I tell you what it is. Not because you would not know when you see it, but so that you may judge when you see it whether the person who made it knows. Aristotle teaches four modes of tragedy, as I have mentioned elsewhere. Two in which horribleness does not follow, and these are the two very ample sources of tragedies with happy endings. Two in which it does follow, and these are the two sources of the tragedies with unhappy endings. Of these, one is when the horribleness is committed knowingly and willingly, such as in *Rosimonda*. The other is when it is committed through ignorance. And here is our case, in which the horribleness of killing Hercules is committed through ignorance not of person but of instrument. Deianira, believing she is giving her husband an amorous enchantment to make him love her, gives him a poisoned robe and kills him against her own will. Everyone sees the characteristics of this tragedy and understands that it is apt to arouse more compassion than terror, unlike Rosimonda, who brought more terror than compassion. Such is the nature of errors born out of ignorance, for they have by their nature everything pitiful, and nothing of the dastardly.]

It may be noted how the address "To the Reader", which was conventionally placed before the *Argomento* of the *libretto*, may be read as a declaration of the author's poetics. It suffices to dwell on the first part, concerning the distinction between the various types of tragedy, in which Frigimelica clearly refers to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in particular chapter 14, where Aristotle deals with "the question of what sorts of incidents strike us as terrible or pitiable" (*Po.* 1453b14-15; ποῖα οὖν δεινὰ ἢ ποῖα οἰκτρὰ φαίνεται τῶν συμπιπτόντων, λάβωμεν), presenting the possibilities for the tragic character (*Po.* 1453b27-1454a5):

ἔστι μὲν γὰρ οὕτω γίνεσθαι τὴν πρᾶξιν, ὥσπερ οἱ παλαιοὶ ἐποίουν εἰδότας καὶ γιγνώσκοντας, καθάπερ καὶ Εὐριπίδης ἐποίησεν ἀποκτείνουσαν τοὺς παῖδας τὴν Μήδειαν· ἔστιν δὲ πρᾶξαι μέν, ἀγνοοῦντας δὲ πρᾶξαι τὸ δεινόν, εἶθ' ὕστερον ἀναγνωρίσαι τὴν φιλίαν, ὥσπερ ὁ Σοφοκλέους Οἰδίπους· τοῦτο μὲν οὖν ἔξω τοῦ δράματος, ἐν δ' αὐτῇ τῇ τραγῳδίᾳ οἷον ὁ Ἀλκμέων ὁ Ἀστυδάμαντος ἢ ὁ Τηλέγονος ὁ ἐν τῷ τραυματίᾳ Ὀδυσσεῖ. ἔτι δὲ τρίτον παρὰ ταῦτα τὸ μέλλοντα ποιεῖν τι τῶν ἀνηκέστων δι' ἄγνοιαν ἀναγνωρίσαι πρὶν ποιῆσαι. καὶ παρὰ ταῦτα οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλως. ἢ γὰρ πρᾶξαι ἀνάγκη ἢ μὴ καὶ εἰδότας ἢ μὴ εἰδότας. τούτων δὲ τὸ μὲν γινώσκοντα μελλῆσαι καὶ μὴ πρᾶξαι χείριστον· τό τε γὰρ μιαρὸν ἔχει, καὶ οὐ τραγικόν· ἀπαθὲς γάρ. διόπερ οὐδεὶς ποιεῖ ὁμοίως, εἰ μὴ ὀλιγάκις, οἷον ἐν Ἀντιγόνῃ τὸν Κρέοντα ὁ Αἵμων. τὸ δὲ πρᾶξαι δεύτερον. βέλτιον δὲ τὸ ἀγνοοῦντα μὲν πρᾶξαι, πράξαντα δὲ ἀναγνωρίσαι· τό τε γὰρ μιαρὸν οὐ πρόσεστιν καὶ ἡ

some spelling elements – such as the letter *h* –, apostrophe and accents have been modernised.

ἀναγνώρισις ἐκπληκτικόν. κράτιστον δὲ τὸ τελευταῖον, λέγω δὲ οἷον ἐν τῷ Κρεσφόντῃ ἡ Μερόπη μέλλει τὸν υἱὸν ἀποκτείνειν, ἀποκτείνει δὲ οὔ, ἀλλ᾽ ἀνεγνώρισε.

[First, the action can occur as in the early poets who made the agents act in knowledge and cognisance (as Euripides too made Medea kill her children). Alternatively, the agents can commit the terrible deed, but do so in ignorance, then subsequently recognise the relationship, as with Sophocles' Oedipus: here, of course, the deed is outside the play, but cases within the tragedy are, for instance, Alcmaeon in Astydamas, or Telegonus in *Odysseus Wounded*. This leaves a third possibility, when the person is on the point of unwittingly committing something irremediable, but recognises it before doing so. These are the only patterns; either the action is or is not executed, and by agents who either know or do not know its nature. Of these, the worst is for someone to be about to act knowingly, and yet not do so: this is both repugnant and untragic (since it lacks suffering). That is why no one makes such plots, or only rarely, for instance with Haemon and Creon in *Antigone*. Next worst is execution of the deed. Better is the act done in ignorance, and followed by recognition: there is nothing repugnant here, and the recognition is thrilling. But best is the last option: I mean, for example, in Cresphontes Merope is about to kill her son, but recognises him in time. (Halliwell 1995)]

This question is also taken up within the manual, in Chapter 2, 21, where the four ways the drama can be arranged are presented, depending on whether the evil happens or does not happen and whether it is done knowingly or through ignorance. Frigimelica specifies that, in the first way, the person who acts does an evil thing knowingly and willingly; in the second, the person who knowingly wants to do an evil, then does not do it; in the third, the one who does an evil does it out of ignorance and, when they realise they have done it, can no longer remedy it; in the fourth, the person who is about to do evil does not know the people involved, but then, thanks to a recognition, refrains from doing it (Giuntini 2019, 442). Thus, in the libretto under consideration, based on the mythical story of Hercules and Deianira, we have the third 'mode', which leads to compassion.

Of the issues mentioned in the address "To the Reader" that clearly refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*, this is not the only one to be elaborated in a more systematic form within the manual: in fact, another aspect can be explored, namely that of the reworking of the ancient tragedians, which Frigimelica claims is based on Aristotelian principles (Giuntini 2019, 445). If, in fact, we return to the address "To the Reader", it may be useful to dwell on what is specified regarding the plot, that is, the construction of the plot from the tragic reference text; in fact, Frigimelica writes:

Tra il numero immenso delle favole ricevute ho poi eletta questa trattata da Sofocle nella tragedia intitolata le Trachinie, perché serviva alla mia intenzione, e per altre ragioni, che vi dirò forse una volta, se quest'ultima fatica d'Ercole non sarà anche l'ultima mia. Basta che quest'uso di trattare un argomento trattato da altri poeti, e approvato da Aristotele, e dall'uso de buoni antichi e moderni . . . Dietro a tanti Esempi verrà per via battuta il mio Ercole a farsi vedere con abito italiano, deposto il greco di Sofocle ed il latino di Seneca. Nell'intreccio, com'è l'uso della buon Arte, ho tenuto savi gli universali ricevuti, e cangiate le cagioni, e le cose particolari, come le ho credute più acconce per formare un drama in cui s'unisca il vago ed il forte, a fine d'introdurre un'altra sorte di piacere accomodato alla seconda parte del Carnevale, senza offendere il decoro del Teatro, di chi ascolta, e di chi ha composto. (Frigimelica 1696, 9-11)

[From among the immense number of fables received, I chose this one treated by Sophocles in the tragedy entitled the *Trachiniae*, because it served my intention, and for other reasons, which I will perhaps tell you one day, if this last labour of Hercules is not also my last. It is enough that this practice of treating an argument treated by other Poets, and is approved by Aristotle, and by the practice of good ancients, and moderns . . . After so many examples will come my Hercules to be seen in Italian dress, having deposed the Greek of Sophocles, and the Latin of Seneca. In the plot, as is the custom of good *Art*, I have kept safe the universals that have been received, and I have changed the motifs and particular things, as I believed them to be more suitable to form a drama in which the beautiful and the strong are united, in order to introduce a different kind of pleasure suitable for the second part of the Carnival, without offending the decorum of the theatre, of the listener and of the composer.]

From this statement, it is clear that even the 'orthodox' Frigimelica is aware that he must model his libretto for the context in which he proposes it, where the key word is variety. However, herein lies the exceptionality of the Paduan librettist's method; the changes made to the drama are always justified based on the *Poetics*. In fact, Frigimelica, in the libretto, claims to have based his work on a fable written by an ancient poet – Sophocles' *Trachiniae* – and retained its "universal" aspects. The use of this very term naturally refers back to the *Poetics*, where a distinction is made between poets, who deal with the universal, and historians, who instead deal with the particular: "consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more to the universal, while history relates particulars" (*Po.* 1451b5-8; διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ'ἱστορ καθ'ἕκαστον λέγει).

Frigimelica reiterates this distinction within his manual, where, in chapter 21, he emphasises how poets

per render poi più credibili siffatti successi e simili ravvolgimenti di fortuna mirabili, ed in persone illustri, pigliano nomi noti di persone chiare nelle storie e fingono cose possibili a loro accadute. Gli spettatori poi credono possibile o verisimile ciò che credono o sanno che sia avvenuto; vi prestano fede perché non sarebbe avvenuto se non fosse possibile. E non è poi probabile che casi gravi e meravigliosi di persone illustri non siano registrate da qualche storia. . . . Lo stesso s'intende quando si prende invece della storia a rappresentare le antiche favole già ricevute (AP, c.21*v*; qtd in Giuntini 2019, 445).

[To make more credible such miraculous successes and similar reversals of fortune, and in illustrious persons, they take well-known names of famous people in history and make up possible things that happened to them. The spectators then believe possible or likely that which they believe or know to have happened; they believe it because it would not have happened if it were not possible. And it is not probable that grave and wonderful things happening to illustrious people are not recorded in some history . . . The same is meant when history is taken instead to represent ancient fables already received.]

It is thus emphasised in this passage that the poet must represent what could happen according to a criterion of verisimilitude. Frigimelica, therefore, dwells on the fact that in the imitation of human actions, the poet must first aim at the universal and then choose the characters and weave the plot with particular elements as they wish (Giuntini 2019, 446). This thought is also expounded in the same chapter of the manual:

Il poeta vorrà tessere una favola tragica con fare in modo che l'orribilità sia la morte d'un figliuolo innocente datagli dal suo medesimo padre, non per effetto di odio e di scelleraggine, ma per errore di crederlo colpevole contro di lui di gravissima offesa. Ecco in breve l'universale che si prefigge ad imitare il poeta. Ora convien riempire questa favola d'accidenti che cagionino il ravvolgimento, e che lo impediscano, altrimenti seguirebbe subito il ravvolgimento e la favola non avrebbe la giusta grandezza con altri notabili mancamenti. Come farà il poeta? Ha prima da scegliere i nomi, e quelli gli daranno gli episodi. Se vuol rendere particolare questa sua imitazione col caso di Teseo, dovrà prendere gli episodi dagli avvenimenti succeduti, o possibili a succedere a Teseo (AP, c.25*v*; qtd in Giuntini 2019, 446).

[The poet wants to weave a tragic tale so that the horribleness is the death of an innocent son, inflicted by his own father, not as a result of hatred or

villainy, but as a result of the error of believing him guilty of a very serious offence against him. Here, in short, is the universal that the poet sets out to imitate. Now it is necessary to fill this fable with incidents that motivate the upheaval, and that prevent it, otherwise the upheaval would immediately follow and the fable would not have the right grandeur with other notable failings. How will the poet do it? He first has to choose the names, and those will give him the episodes. If he wants to make his imitation particular to Theseus' case, he will have to take the episodes from the events that happened, or that may possibly happen to Theseus.]

This passage is particularly interesting because it sheds light on the (convoluted) uniqueness of Frigimelica's method, which, while taking as its model the "received fables" of the ancient tragedians, freely covers their essential narrative core by justifying itself through the Aristotelian categories of "universal" and "particular". However, Frigimelica's method, presented under the guise of an 'orthodox' Aristotelianism, is nothing more than the libretto-writing mechanism that characterises all opera production in seventeenth-century Venice. Indeed, librettists draw material to elaborate their plots in particular from classical sources, but they do so in a completely arbitrary manner, using, rather than Greek tragedies, others derived from Latin literature, vernacular versions, the great mythographic collection, as well as theatrical texts and other opera librettos. The librettist, who thus operates according to a criterion that can be defined as *ars combinatoria*, makes use of a classical subject from which he starts, and then recreates it in a new plot invented to meet the taste of the time and genre conventions; in fact, the expressions "*si finge che*" and "*fingesi*" ("it is pretended that") are common, to emphasise the purely inventive act. It is clear, therefore, that if in studying seventeenth-century librettos one must try to trace which sources were actually used by the librettist, one must at the same time bear in mind that these sources were a mere tool aimed at producing new plots at a rapid rate, as is often evident from the same notes to the reader that are dedicated to the subject of the libretto, where the librettist complains about the haste with which he had to compose.[24] Frigimelica, in fact, is bound to the Venetian theatrical production context like all the other librettists of his time (although, as we have said, the theatre he wrote for differed from the others towards the end of the century) and this is the reason[25] why he adds elements to Sophocles' plot that are extraneous to it, such as the role of the

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[24] On the mechanisms of ancient source reworking in seventeenth-century librettos, see examples in Badolato 2009; Restani 2009; Casali 2022. On the (failed) relationship between Greek tragedy and librettos, see also Napolitano 2010.

[25] In addition, of course, to the genre conventions that had become established for the plot structure.

centaur Nessus,[26] the love affair between Hyllus and Iole, and Deianira's jealousy. In this and other contemporary libretti based on the same *fabula*, the addition to the love plot, which is a requirement for the operatic genre, is in fact derived from the Latin versions. The mythical segment that has at its centre the story of Deianira and Hercules is in fact taken up and exploited above all by Ovid, in no less than two compositions: both in the *Heroides*, in which Epistle 9 focuses on Deianira, and in *Metamorphoses* 9. *Heroides* 9, in particular, sees the consecration of Hercules as an elegiac lover, bent on *servitium amoris* for Iole, who is no longer represented as the distraught Sophoclean prisoner. The needs to develop the theme of love naturally implies significant dramaturgical changes to the Greek tragedy: first of all, Deianira is represented as jealous, beginning to outline the traits that will characterise her in all – or almost all – subsequent performances; furthermore, she fears that her role as wife may be undermined, from a social and legal point of view, offering a thematic precedent that will have great resonance in the theatre of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, in almost all the plays that will be based on the love theme and, in general, on Ovid as a source, there arises the concrete possibility of Hercules repudiating Deianira in order to marry Iole. Moreover, the elegiac representation of Hercules makes Ovid dwell on other aspects of the myth that were only mentioned in the *Trachiniae*, first and foremost the period of slavery that Hercules spends with Omphale: in *Heroides* 9 it is mentioned by Deianira as a precursor to her husband's actual *servitium amoris*, but it acquires a specific literary status that will prove fruitful.[27] In fact, in the same *Argomento*, after presenting in great detail the plot of the *Trachiniae*, to which he explicitly refers, Frigimelica adds:

> Alcuni altri fatti d'Ercole, che hanno servito per intrecciare la favola sono notissimi. Egli nell'ultimo di sua vita partì per una impresa con dubbio di non aver più da tornare, lasciò scritto il suo testamento, ed il comando d'essere atteso fino a tal giorno, e non più, avendo avuto per oracolo in Dodona, che in quei tempi cadeva l'ultima sua fatica. Egli fu mandato da Euristeo per compiacere Giunone, in vari rischi, fra quali all'Inferno per trarre il gran Cerbero. Egli pure si piegò alla bassezza tanto famosa di filare con Iole, vestita lei della pelle del leone, e cedutale la fatale sua clava. Di tutte queste, se n'è lavorata una favola sola col nodo, episodio e soluzione, che si vede chiaramente nel decorso della tragedia, con quell'unità d'azione e di tempo che insegna l'Arte, e con l'unità di luogo, che concede il magnifico

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[26] In Greek tragedy, the episode of Nessus is only told by Deianira to the Chorus at 557-77, when she reveals her plan to win back Hercules' love.

[27] For an analysis of the sources and librettos centred on the myth of Hercules and Deianira, see Casali 2021.

abuso di mutare per contentar l'occhio, e l'opinione della spesa, tante volte il teatro. (1696, 15-16)

[Some other facts about Hercules, which have served to weave the fable, are very well known: in the last part of his life he set out on a quest, doubting whether he would be able to return. He left his will written down, and the command that he must be awaited until such a day, and no longer, since he had received an oracle at Dodona that his final labour fell at that time. To placate Juno, he was sent by Eurystheus into various dangers, among them to Hell to capture the great Cerberus. He seems to have stooped to the famous baseness of spinning with Iole, having clothed her in the lion skin, and handed over to her his fatal club. Out of all these, one single fable has been worked, with the binding of event and resolution which can be clearly seen in the course of Tragedy, with that unity of action and of time that the *Art* teaches; and with the unity of place, which validates the extraordinary and frequent makeover of the theatre to please the eye, and the opinion of the expense.]

Also depicted in this libretto, as in many others of the period centred on the story of Hercules and Deianira,[28] is the episode of Hercules' spinning in the service of Iole, which occurs in 4.3 and is taken from the chapter centred on Iole in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. Degiovanni (2019), in fact, sheds light on how Boccaccio made an extremely fortunate misinterpretation of the Ovidian text, which, in *Heroides* 9, described Iole instead of Omphale. Thus, in the chapter dedicated to Iole, Boccaccio actually describes Hercules' *servitium amoris* for Omphale, where the famous scenes of the spinning and the exchange of clothes are depicted: having put on the skin of the Nemean lion, the woman hands Hercules the distaff and spindle, with which he begins to weave wool instead of her. This scene, in which Iole thus becomes the protagonist, would be reprised in most plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[29]

Without dwelling further here on the sources used by the librettist, what must be emphasised once again is how Frigimelica's work presents rather singular peculiarities precisely because of the author's attempt to

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[28] Such as, for example, *Ercole amante* by Francesco Buti with music by Francesco Cavalli; for other cases, see Degiovanni 2019.

[29] Degiovanni (2019, 314) compares how this episode is presented in Francesco Buti's libretto *Ercole Amante* and in the one examined here. In Buti's libretto, Hercules voluntarily offers his services to Iole in order to flatter her, whereas, in the libretto *Ercole in Cielo*, Iole imposes the task of spinning on Hercules. In fact, as Iole confides to Hyllus in 4.6, she wants Hercules, angered by this humiliation, to stop desiring her. This episode is a shining example of the influence of Boccaccio's text in seventeenth-century librettos; indeed, in the chapter on Iole in *De mulieribus claris*, in fact, it is described how she wants to humiliate Hercules so as to take revenge in a devious way.

reconcile a strenuous observance of Aristotelian rules with the need to adapt to the demands of the *dramma per musica*. This necessity thus leads to a confirmation of the mechanisms of reception and re-elaboration of the ancient sources in the libretto context of the time, where the poet, as we have said, makes use of various sources, 'mixed' together, most often without declaring their authorship; however, if this is the practice, in this case the operation is justified, in theory, by the desire to follow Aristotle. This also explains another aspect. As in other librettos whose plot centres on the story of Deianira and Hercules dramatised in the *Trachiniae*, Frigimelica Roberti includes the love subplot between Iole and Hyllus, which in turn naturally complicates the main relationship between Iole and Deianira, who end up being allies. However, unlike other librettos, Frigimelica also stages Deianira's suicide anyway, in fact taking up, in 4.7, the intimate moment of greeting at the nuptial thalamus finely described by Sophocles (Soph. *Tr.* 896-946). Deianira's death could have been avoided, from a dramaturgical point of view; one can see the reason for its inclusion in the author's need to remain faithful to the chosen 'type' of tragedy, that is centred on an unconscious action that is carried out. Deianira's failure to commit suicide would have betrayed the type described by Aristotle (and described by Frigimelica in the preface to the libretto) and is therefore kept in the plot: Deianira has killed her husband out of ignorance of the instrument and, realising too late the evil she has done, takes her own life. However, in order to comply with genre conventions, Frigimelica cannot but vary the ending: the hero's apotheosis is necessary because the *dramma per musica* required a happy ending.[30]

Having to follow the happy ending and thus betraying the ending of the Greek tragedy of reference, the librettist convinces himself (and wants to convince others) that he has remained faithful to Aristotelian categories. Indeed, even in his manual (2.19), Frigimelica resorts to the authority of Aristotle to emphasise the superiority of the happy ending:

> Aristotile ha detto che tragicissima è la favola passante dalla felicità alla miseria, né contradice punto il dire che quando non segue l'orribilità per sopravveniente riconoscenza sia modo ottimo, perché anche in questo modo vi è il passaggio dalla felicità alla miseria; e v'è di più, che né l'operante né

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[30] It is for this reason that Sophocles' drama, despite its original tragic nature, is admitted into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century librettos, because the apotheosis allows for the realisation of the happy ending (see Casali 2022, 264-5). The resolution of the apotheosis, which every theatrical revival owes – directly or indirectly – to Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, allows for the complete abandonment of the all-too-human tragic nature that characterises Greek drama. Becoming a god, Hercules is indeed able to restore order and provide the happy ending that every opera of these centuries demands.

il paziente è mai scellerato; e di più ancora, che la miseria tutto ad un tratto svanisce e termina la tragedia, che vuol dire in tempo che la tragedia ha fatto già il suo effetto movendo il terrore e la compassione, e poi nell'atto che lo spettatore è già per uscir del teatro parte contento col sapere che l'orribilità non è seguita né seguirà (AP, c.38*r*; qtd in Giuntini 2019, 443).

[Aristotle has said that most tragic is the fable that passes from happiness to misery, nor does he contradict himself in saying that when horribleness does not follow, due to a sudden recognition, it is the best way, because even in this way there is the passage from happiness to misery; and what is more, that neither he who acts nor he who suffers is ever wicked; and still more, that the misery all of a sudden vanishes and the tragedy ends, which means in time that the tragedy has already had its effect by arousing terror and compassion, and then at the moment when the spectator is already about to leave the theatre, he leaves happy knowing that the horribleness has not followed nor will follow.]

The tragedy, with the death of Deianira following the sending of the robe, had fulfilled its 'orthodox' task by inspiring compassion. Instead, the decision to abandon the Sophoclean tragic ending proved necessary to make the spectators leave the theatre happy.

4. Conclusion

According to scholars, Frigimelica Roberti is "one of the most important and austere neoclassical librettists" (Rosand 1991, 398n23), "the extremist" (Saunders 1985, 79); Zeno and the librettists of his time thought of him as an extremist too, as they considered his ideas as distorted as his dramas. Frigimelica's method of setting the dramaturgy of his librettos on the basis of Aristotle's *Poetics* was undoubtedly unique. The librettist, indeed, identified the canon to be followed in reforming opera librettos in the Aristotelian *Poetics* and, based on this theory, he attempted to be consistent in his dramaturgical practice as much as the conventions of the opera genre allowed. We have seen from the perspective of how the subject was developed that Frigimelica could not deny the convention of the love plot, as well as that of the happy ending. Whenever adherence to Aristotelian norms failed in practice, the librettist returned to theory in order to justify his actions on the basis of the *Poetics*. However, beyond the efforts made to reform the librettos, Frigimelica Roberti's plays had very few spectators, since his librettos were not successful, outside of performances in Venice, and they remained in obscurity (Freeman 1981, 114). The extravagant method of the Paduan count, who justified his poetics through the *Poetics*, in fact led him to disrupt the traditional system of *dramma per musica* to such

an extent – including the exaggerated use of choruses, the disproportionate number of characters,[31] and the absence of metrical conventions – that his texts were rendered unworkable for the theatre.[32]

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[31] In *Ercole in cielo*, for example, the action is represented by five main roles, three male (Hercules, Hyllus, Nessus) and two female (Deianira, Iole), to which are added two more male roles (Lico, Philotetes) and four secondary female roles (Hergirida, Climene, Driope, Coronide), as confidantes. For the final apotheosis, three gods (Jupiter, Juno and Hebe) are added and there are seven choruses. The scheme echoes *Il Pastore d'Anfriso* (1695), where, however, there were only two female confidantes; see Leich 1972, 59.

[32] Frigimelica's lack of success is precisely due to this, namely to the fact that his works were not suitable for the theatre from a dramaturgical point of view. Thus, I disagree with Saunders (1985, 78-9), who argues that it was "the academy's propaganda apparatus" that was responsible for Zeno's greater success rather than authors such as Frigimelica, who had assimilated "neoclassical literary precepts into opera" much more than him in reforming the genre.

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