

Le Grazie vendicate [‘The Graces Avenged’] Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Antonio Caldara (1735, Vienna).

The scene represents a delightful laurel grove, irrigated by the waters of the Acidalian spring in the district of Boeotia.

The *dramatis personae* of this *azione teatrale* are the three Graces of mythology, Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia, daughters of Zeus and Eurynome. As goddesses of grace, beauty, joy, mirth, and splendour, they were also attendants of Venus.

Angry at Venus for her failure to curb the offensive behaviour of Cupid, Euphrosyne bids her sisters join her in withdrawing their services from the goddess. When Aglaia and Thalia hesitate, Euphrosyne describes Cupid’s latest outrage. Caught by surprise in a sudden storm, he returned cold, wet, and dishevelled. Euphrosyne warmed and consoled him, but with energy restored, he asked for his weapons, then threw a dart at her which pierced her left hand. To this action, Venus simply kissed the child, applauded, and laughed. Euphrosyne wants revenge, but is told that she is not the only one to suffer. Aglaia also has a story. While she was asleep in a glade, Cupid bound her to a laurel tree with chains of woven roses. When she awoke and pleaded for release, he simply laughed. Surely, she fears, she may still have been so bound had Hebe, cup-bearer of the gods, not chanced to be nearby to rescue her. Unlike Euphrosyne, however, Aglaia’s anger has faded. Not so Thalia who is also angered but cannot see how to effect revenge. Cupid has played several tricks on her, including one in which he hid several arrows under a thick bush and concealed a thin net between flowers and grass. Then, wailing over a supposed bee sting, he prompted her to rush to his aid and so become caught up among the darts. Thus realizing herself the victim of a hoax, she then became entangled in the net as she pursued the perpetrator. Euphrosyne reiterates her earlier claim that the true source of the problem is Venus herself who hinders their function of inducing agreement, gratitude, peace, charity, and love among mortals by distracting them and forcing them to act as Cupid’s guardians, even appearing at times to condone his actions. Meanwhile, violence flourishes and destroys the rights of the people. All agree with Euphrosyne’s suggestion that they move their support to one who combines majesty with beauty, honesty, and charm – one who unites all virtues, the Empress Elisabeth.

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First performed in the private apartments of the Favorita Palace on 28 August 1735, *Le Grazie vendicate* formed part of the celebrations for the birthday of the Empress Elisabeth. The cast included Archduchess Maria Theresa, as Euphrosyne, her sister, Archduchess Maria Anna as Aglaia, and, as suggested by Andrea Sommer-Mathis, Camilla Fuchs, daughter of Countess Marie Karoline von Fuchs-Mollard, former governess of the archduchesses, as Thalia. When the same cast presented *Le cinesi* a few months earlier, it was important, as Metastasio was later to express in relation to *L’eroe cinese*, that his charges be costumed with due regard for decorum. Considering the manner in which the Graces had been depicted by such painters as Boticelli, Raphael, Rubens, and François Boucher, it is clear that some other form of attire was devised for this imperial celebration.

Although Hesiod (*Theogony*, line 907) and Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca*, 1.3.1) provide the names and parentage of the Graces, Metastasio’s setting and plot particularly reflect two explanations offered by Maurus Servius [Honoratus] on the epithet “*mater Acidalia*” which occurs in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, book 1, line 720. Servius’ *Commentarii in tria Virgilii opera* was first printed in Florence in 1471-72, and in an article entitled “The Significance of Virgil’s *Acidalia Mater . . .*” (*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 93 (1990), 335-342), James J. O’Hara, has clarified the two Servius comments on the Virgil epithet which both seem relevant to *Le Grazie* whether they influenced Metastasio or not. At the point in the *Aeneid* where the epithet occurs, Cupid, at his mother’s behest, has disguised himself as Ascanius, son of Aeneas, in order to turn Dido’s affections towards the Trojan hero, precisely the type of duplicity on Cupid’s part of which each of the Graces complain in *Le Grazie vendicate*. As O’Hara points out, Servius, in his second and simpler explanation of *mater Acidalia*, equates the epithet with the *fonte Acidalio*, the spring (or fountain) in Boeotia, which

forms part of Metastasio's description of the setting, Servius adding that it is in this spring that the Graces bathed. For the more complex first explanation of Virgil's epithet, Servius has interpreted the word *Acidalia* as a derivative of the Greek word "akis," meaning "arrow," "dart," or "needle," from which he builds the idea that the epithet stands for the notion of "mother who produces sharp care [or consternation]," i.e. through the arrows and craftiness of her son. Considering that although the expressed anger in *Le Grazie vendicate* is with Cupid, the revenge is aimed at Venus, the ultimate beneficiary of his actions, as fully clarified in Euphrosene's claim that the true source of their problems is Venus "che solo / D'Amore attende a dilatar l'impero (who merely waits upon Cupid in order to expand her dominions)."

In both length and layout, *Le Grazie* appears to be a twin piece to *Le cinesi*, a *componimento drammatico*. As a private tribute to the Empress Elisabeth rather than a mere introduction to a ball at the *Hofburg* and as a veiled expression of belief in the sovereignty at a time when Austria was suffering territorial defeats, it seems *Le Grazie* required some form of special distinction, factors which may account for its being elevated by its author to the rank of *azione teatrale*, albeit a modest one. Such elevation may also have been encouraged by Metastasio's natural partiality towards his royal amateurs.

Settings: Caldara (Vienna 1735); Ferrandini (Munich 1753); Reutter (Vienna 1758); Santos (? 1762); Anton of Saxony (Dresden 1784).