

Giustino ('Justin'). Tragedy by PIETRO METASTASIO, first published by Michele Luigi Muzio (1717, Naples)

During his reign from 527 to 565 C.E., the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian, sought to reconquer the western half of the lost Roman empire. Belisarius, his military general, became the dominant figure in this enterprise, leading campaigns against the Persians, the Vandals in North Africa, and the Ostrogoths in Italy, where Theodahad held the throne. The action of the present drama takes place against the background of this last offensive. The chorus (here

a soloist) comments on the action at the end of each act, each observation divided into two parts, identified as (a) and (b) in the following synopsis.

ACT 1 In the port city of Durazzo, Giustiniano [Justinian] makes clear his dependency on Belisario [Belisarius] for the success of the campaign against Teodato [Theodahad]. Giustino [Justin], Justinian's young nephew, begs to accompany the general, for which consent, at least on the part of the Empress Teodora [Theodora], comes only with Belisarius's guarantee of special protection. With the army departed, Sofia [Sophia], Theodora's niece, in love with Justin, now regrets having trifled with his affections to the point of driving him towards so dangerous an exploit. Asteria [Astra], her older sister, plans to ask Theodora to have Justinian recall his nephew. Chorus: (a) Praise of Belisario and a reflection on his Adriatic crossing – the dangers, the call for fair winds, the preservation of life, and for final victory. (b) An admonition of Sophia as the cause of her own distress.

ACT 2 Astra describes Sophia's sudden anguish to Theodora as Cupid's punishment for her coldness. To Astra's suggestion that the couple be reunited, Theodora offers assistance. Meanwhile, Justinian, alone, ruminates over the difficulty of maintaining cohesion within his domains. For now, grain must be conveyed to the troops in Italy, and appoints Narses, one of his older generals, to direct the process. At the sight of Theodora who suddenly interrupts, his thoughts turn to Sophia, whereby he anticipates his consort's intentions by naming his nephew an appropriate partner for her niece, and readily agrees to Justin's recall. Justinian will send Sophia to Theodora who, momentarily alone, contemplates the fleeting nature of life's pleasures as opposed to its interminable anxieties. Justin's recall must therefore be cherished. Sophia is enraptured by the news and the notion of a wedding immediately upon Justin's return. Chorus: (a) With orders for Justin's return on their way, Sophia need weep no more. Fate, the heavens, and the stars are propitious, and even Cupid can dispel sorrow. (b) Rarely, however, does Cupid grant a moment's peace to his servants, and already slight misgivings undermine Sophia's pleasure.

ACT 3 Sophia explains to Theodora that although she happily anticipates Justin's return, she remains fearful. Such is her nature, and thus she is ever prepared for disaster which, she claims, if sudden, could end her life. For this reason, she would have Cleone [Cleon], a sooth-sayer, foretell her future and so asks Fosca, a servant, to send him to her. Meanwhile, she informs Theodora that Cleon is in love with Astra, but she remains committed to the memory of her deceased husband. Cleon predicts a happy future for Sophia and Justin, but only after a painful beginning for which he is unable to provide details. Alone with Cleon, Astra rejects his marriage proposal while acknowledging his noble birth, wealth, and virtue. Alone, while contemplating the futility of any effort to dispel his suffering, Justinian enters, requesting his predictions for the future of Italy and the empire. Cleon sees immediate success for Belisarius but predicts troubled times, first for the empire, then for Italy, and finally, for the church. Charlemagne, once crowned, however, will carry Justinian's sceptre to Germany, where the first of the Habsburgs (Rudolf I) will initiate a drive towards peace and an end to the schism between church and empire that will reach full realization with Charles VI. Justinian praises Cleon's clear vision. Chorus: (a) A warning against tempting fate with unrestrained and ill-considered daring. (b) Since future events are revealed only to certain prophets, Sophia should limit her conjectures to the words of Cleon.

ACT 4 Beside the stormy sea, Fosca attempts to mollify Sophia's fears for Justin's safety, reminding her of Cleon's predictions. Defiantly, Sophie declares that should he be wrong, death would take precedence for her over a life of noble suffering. When Fosca identifies some distant objects as parts of a shipwreck, Sophia erupts in alarm at the

possibility of Justin having been on board. With composure regained by the recall of Cleon's predictions, the discovery of Justin's body washed up on shore thrusts her into deeper despair. Her wailing summons Astra who, having sent Fosca in search of Cleon, exacerbates her sister's grief with such stoic responses as to drive Sophia to seek the solace of her own room. Alone, Astra expresses greater compassion, but with anger at life's setbacks. Coming upon the scene, Cleon feels himself betrayed by the signs that lead to his predictions. Hope rises, however, as he observes a flicker of life remaining in Justin's body which he has servants convey to his quarters as he and Astra follow. Sophie, believing herself the cause of Justin's death would gladly give her life for his. Instead, taking poison, she determines to follow him. Such rashness appals Astra who hastened to report Cleon's success in Justin's resuscitation. As she rushes in despair to find Cleon, she considers how every advancement leads to an even worse disaster. Chorus: (a) Fallacious love is ever a source of torment. (b) Happy the people of the first age when violence, avarice, and inner torment were unknown.

ACT 5 At the request of Theodora and Justinian, Justin describes how, soon after departure, the fleet was caught in a severe storm, then becalmed, and that he received the recall command just as a breeze began to pickup. Leaping into the barque that brought the messenger and against the protestations of the helmsman, he demanded at sword-point that they set sail immediately. Mid-way through the journey, a terrifying storm took control of the ship, shredded the sails, splintered the mast, and plunged it into the deep within sight of Durres. Beyond feelings of intense fear, he remembers nothing. Fosca enters, horrifying all with news of Sophia's probable death. Justin insists the servant take him to Sophia's rooms straightway but is stopped short as Astra brings Sophia before the assembled group; Cleon, with the aid of an emetic and an antidote, has saved her life. Justinian is ready to reprimand Sophia for her excesses, but Theodora intervenes, opening the way for the young couple to declare their love for each other and for Astra to extol Cleon's mastery. Willingly, as Justinian proposes, she offers her hand as his reward. Chorus (a) How strange are the pathways of human events that can lead from threatened bereavement to happiness. (b) Faithful lovers, enjoy the happiness you have purchased at the relatively low cost of your past troubles.

In a letter to Ranieri Calzabigi dated 09:03:1754, Metastasio described *Giustino* as a pedagogic exercise written at age fourteen (i.e. in 1712) under the tutelage of his guardian, Gianvincenzo Gravina, in strict imitation of the Greeks. Cast in five acts, each divided from the next by a Chorus that stands apart from the character interactions, and with any elements of a prologue integrated into the first act, *Giustino* is as much Horace and Seneca as it is Sophocles and Euripides. More inclusive, therefore, is Metastasio's reference to the "impossible imitation of the ancients" that was required of him and reported in a letter written to Aurelia Gambacorta d'Este on (01:08:1716). Here, the poet also mentions his careful observance of the unity of place, a reminder that he was also bound by eighteenth-century interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* where no such unity is mentioned. Furthermore, the Chorus sections of *Giustino* follows the form of the contemporary Italian cantata: in two parts, each comprising a recitative and aria – a reminder, perhaps, that Metastasio's subsequent treatise on the *Poetics* is largely an attempt to justify the *opera seria* in Aristotelian terms. For a subject, Gravina directed his pupil to Book 3 of Gian Giorgio Trissino's epic, *Italia liberata dai Goti*, published in 1547. Not only was Trissino an eminent Greek scholar, but his tragedy, *Sofonisba*, written, like his epic, in hendecasyllabic lines of blank verse, provided an influential model in Italy for drama in the vernacular. Metastasio followed suit, and it is interesting that the action of his first opera, *Siface* (q.v.), a reworking of an existing libretto, also includes the offering of a poisoned cup to the heroine. (See the commentary to *Il sogno di Scipione* [q.v.]) With the main action of *Giustino* described rather than played out, emphasis falls on character reactions, and the work as a whole becomes a lesson in stoicism. Senecan, again, is the wise and self-possessed Cleon through whom Metastasio issues an early Habsburg encomium by tracing a line from the Byzantine Emperors to Charles VI. Such sagacity on Cleon's part also points towards the essence of Cartesian moral philosophy, the study of which Metastasio was to begin with Gravina's cousin, Gregorio Caloprese later the same year. Indeed, the *Giustino* exercise provided excellent preparation for such a study, introducing a focus upon the actions that emotional responses can incite and the need for reason to control such actions. For Sophia, for example, suicide is not the answer to sudden grief nor for Justin is an impetuosity that negates prudence. "Back to the Greeks," it seems, could embrace yet another contemporary overlay while adding further purpose to the pedagogical exercise.

Settings:

The two 'arias' from the cantata-like Coro text at the end of *Giustino's* Act 4, Sc.7 were set at the turn of the nineteenth century as duets for two sopranos and continuo. The first 'D'amor nel regno non v'è contento,' by Adalbert Gyrowetz (active in Vienna), the second, 'Fu il mondo allor felice,' by Vincenzo Panerai (active in Florence). The first of these texts also served Felix Mendelssohn for the cabaletta of his 1834 *scena ed aria* 'Infelice! già dal mio sguardo' (*recit.*) – 'Ah, ritorna, età dell'oro' (cavatina) – 'D'amor nel regno non v'è contento,' the *recit* of which also draws on the Coro *recit.* Other Metastasio texts incorporated are from *Il trionfo di Clelia* (3,3) and *Romolo ed Ersila* (3,5). The same texts are treated more freely in a second version (Op.94) which Mendelssohn composed in 1843. (See further, John Michael Cooper, "Mendelssohn's Two *Infelice* Arias," in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, ed. J.M. Cooper and Julie D. Prandi [Oxford: University Press, 2002], pp. 43-97).