

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* are the three Graces of mythology, Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia, daughters of Zeus and his third bride, 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 did nothing but laugh. 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 enraged 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 amid flowers and turf on the other side of it. Then, wailing over a supposed bee sting, he enticed her to rush to his aid and so become injured among the piercing 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 compelling them at times to support 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.

DON NEVILLE, JOSEPH RAFFA

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. As with *Le cinese*, the cast included Archduchess Maria Theresa, as Euphrosyne, her sister, Archduchess Maria Anna as Aglaia, and as Thalia, probably Maria Josepha Fuchs, elder daughter of Countess Maria Karoline von Fuchs-Mollard, former governess to Maria Theresa and Maria Anna and a subsequent close confidante of the former.

In the “delightful laurel grove” where Venus and the three Graces bath in the “waters of the Acidalian spring,” the action begins not with utterances of love, charity, and happiness, but with Euphrosyne’s tirade against Venus. Gone is the satirical comedy of *Le cinese* to be replaced with a reflection of an adverse political situation in an allegorical world in disarray. Austria had entered the War of the Polish Succession in October 1733, from which source arises the continued suffering and violence to which the Graces refer. Less obvious and possibly softened in deference to the occasion for which the work was written, are the allegorical connections between Cupid’s individual acts of malice and military endangerments in general: the surprise attack on Euphrosyne, the siege suffered by Aglaia and broken by a relief force, and Thalia’s momentary victory and subsequent pursuit of the enemy, ending in an ambush. Anger with Cupid is justified, but for Euphrosyne, the fault lies with Venus upon whom she wants revenge. Thus, in her final appeal to her sisters for support, she reminds them of how often they have been forced to play along with Cupid’s wild schemes and of the extent to which Venus even uses him for her own purposes. Metastasio may well have recalled her instructions to Cupid as he manipulated Dido’s love for Aeneas (Virgil, *Aeneid*, book 1, 657-722) – a perfect example, and a passage in the *Aeneid* that even includes a reference to Venus as the Acidalean mother (*matris Arcidaliae*).

As a mythological figure in an allegorical reflection of an ongoing war, Euphrosyne can offer no solution to the violence that has arisen as a result of the Graces having been diverted from the tasks initially assigned them by the gods. She can, however, offer an alternative – to abandon Venus and volunteer their services to Elisa (the Empress Elisabeth) whose very person reflects the values they personify and which will pave the way towards peace.

In several respects – length, layout, same amateur performers – *Le Grazie* appears to be a twin piece to *Le cinesi* which Metastasio designated a *componimento drammatico*. In Vienna, however, court hierarchy alone could have demanded a differentiation between a public entertainment and a tribute to the empress. To that requirement, however, has been added a strong contrast between the amusing satire of the former and the serious references contained within the latter. *Le Grazie vendicate* had to be deemed an *azione teatrale* as also *Il Palladio conservato*, the equivalent tribute to the emperor presented a month or so later.

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