

Siface re di Numidia ('Syphax, King of Numidia') [Siface; Viriate]. Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Francesco Feo (1723, Naples).

Act 1 Siface [Syphax], King of Numidia, has sought peace with Viriato [Viriathus], King of Lusitania by offering marriage to his daughter, Viriate, even though he loves Ismene, daughter of Orcano, a Numidian nobleman. Ismene ignites Siface's animosity towards Viriate when she threatens to reject him if she cannot have the throne. Viriate, however, gains the support of Erminio, general of the Numidian armies, who, in love with Ismene, is distressed by her conduct, as is Orcano. Viriate also gains the respect of Libanio, Siface's confidant, when she repels his advances. Orcano threatens Ismene with his sword, then offers his own life to Viriate in reparation for his daughter's conduct. Viriate blames herself for his distress and urges Ismene to leave the palace; this she refuses to do.

Act 2 Viriate is imprisoned; when Orcano protests, Siface charges her with infidelity. Erminio attempts to rescue her, fails, and is also imprisoned. Siface then reads a spurious letter to Orcano, supposedly written by Viriate to Erminio, in which the king's assassination is planned. Both Viriate and Erminio deny such duplicity in spite of rewards offered by Siface for confessions.

Act 3 Libanio brings Viriate a cup of poison and a dagger and bids her choose her means of death. She asks permission to write a letter to her father, which Siface, suspecting treachery, snatches from her – only to discover a request for his pardon. Although moved, he still insists upon Viriate's death, in response to which she requests his sword. This, however, she uses to defend him when Orcano and Erminio rush in to rescue her. Overwhelmed, Siface yields. Orcano and Erminio are pardoned as is Ismene who, after a failed attempt on Viriate's life, is reunited with Erminio.

The plot of *Siface* centres around the Spanish historical figure, Pedro the Cruel (1334–69), King of Castile from 1350. Although in love with María de Padilla, he was forced into marriage with Blanche, daughter of the Duke of Bourbon, to secure a Franco-Castilian alliance against England. Pedro abandoned Blanche immediately after the marriage (1353) and María remained his mistress until her death in 1361. These events are recorded in vol.5, bk.4 of the Bartolomeo de Rogatis *Historia della perdita e reacquisto dell Spagna occupata da Mori*, which account Domenico David acknowledges in his *argomento* as the source for his libretto, *La forza della virtù*, first set by Carlo Pollarolo for Venice in 1692. Acclaimed by members of the Arcadian Academies, this libretto served as a basis for several subsequent settings including one by Giacomo Perti for Bologna (1694) and a version of Pollarolo's opera with arias by Alessandro Scarlatti given in Naples in 1699 as *Creonte tiranno di Tebe*. As demonstrated by Rosy Candiani (*Pietro Metastasio da poeta di teatro....*, Rome: Aracne, 1998, 91-129) and Lucio Tufano ("Itinerari librettist tra sei e settecento....," *Il melodramma di Pietro Metastasio*, Rome: Aracne, 2001, 193-231), Metastasio drew upon all three of these texts, thus creating a derived work which he would subsequently discount in favour of *Didone abbandonata* as his first libretto for the professional opera house. The derivation process involved changes in location and in the names and numbers of the *dramatis personae*, with two allegorical figures, Virtù (in a machine) and Tajo (the river through Toledo) discarded from David's libretto and two comic servants removed from *Creonte* along the way.

In true Aristotelian fashion, the *Siface* text demonstrates a marked attempt to emphasize characters in action, that action evolving out of "Siface's infidelity, Viriate's constancy, Ismene's ambition, and Orcano's heroic sensibilities.," as Metastasio states in his *argomento*. Such characterization the poet extended further in his revision of the text for Nicola Porpora that had simultaneous premieres on 26 December 1725 in Milan and Venice. In this version, the characters of Ismene and Erminio become more complex, Orcano's deliberate ambiguity during the trial scene of act II expanded, and the *dénouement* made more convincing with the removal of Ismene's attempt on Viriate's life. The *recit.* text of the two Porpora renditions is much the same, and both contain set pieces carried over from the original Feo setting as well as the newly-written arias common to both. The Venice version, however, retains more from the Feo score than does its Milan counterpart which also contains substitute arias from previous Porpora operas. Porpora attended the Milan premier, Metastasio the one in Venice, along with Nicola Grimaldi and Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli, his original Siface and Viriate who now played the same roles in this new revision. Surprisingly, it is the Milan version that is printed in the Brunelli edition of the poet's works rather than the libretto from the Venice premiere, an occasion Metastasio surely recalled when, in a letter to Vincenzo Alberti dated 29:06:1772, he

referred to *Siface* as having been written at Porpora's request.

Aristotle advocated free reference to historical names and events as a means of adding authenticity to a drama, but he also cautioned against altering fundamental historical facts even though the dramatist, like the portrait painter, should aim for character likeness, but with enhanced appearance (9.51b16-18, 14.53b23-27, and 15.54b8-11). Livy, in his *Ab Urbe Condita* (28.17-18, 30.11-13, etc.), presents Syphax (Siface) as a powerful King of the Western Numidians, defeated, along with Hannibal, at the end of the Second Punic War. Metastasio makes no mention of Sophonisba, his wife (Livy, 30.12), but rather, contrary to Aristotle's recommendation, reduces him to the level of a tyrant in his persecution of a fictitious Viriate, whose name appears to have been derived from Viriathus, whom Silius Italicus describes as leader of the Lusitanians (*Punica* [10.219-231]). Thus, in adapting the existing libretto, Metastasio chose the lesser of two evils. Either to distort the historical couple, Syphax and Sophonisba or reduce the disregard for history to just one character and give him a fictitious partner. In choosing the latter, Metastasio has created a moral heroine whose existence, along with her moral integrity, is a fiction, thus making *Siface* a fictional moral drama within an historical framework, a juxtaposition that must have contributed to his subsequent dissatisfaction with this libretto as exemplified in the letter cited above. Never again was the moral hero or heroine of a Metastasian drama so completely devoid of historical authenticity. (For Sophonisba's story, see the commentary on *Il sogno di Scipione*. For Metastasio's awareness of it, see the commentary on *Giustino*).

Settings:

Feo (Naples 1723); Porpora (Venice 1725 [v.1]); G. Redi (as *Viriate* – Florence 1729); Porpora (Rome 1730, rev. ?Vanstryp [v.2]); G.M. Nelvi (Frankfurt 1732); Vinci (Naples 1734 *post.*); Leo (Bologna 1737); Hasse (rev. Domenico Lalli as *Viriate* – Venice 1739); Maggiore (Rovigo 1744); Cocchi (Naples 1748); Fiorillo (Brunswick 1752); Fischietti (Venice 1761); Mich. Valentini (as *Viriate* – Pavia 1761); Galuppi (as *Viriate* – Venice 1762).