

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. Contrary to the traditional use of the *argomento* as a provider of background information pertinent to the ensuing action, that which Metastasio provided for *Giustino* is a succinct synopsis, a translation of which follows.

Giustino [Justin], nephew of the Emperor, Giustiniano [Justinian], had unrequitedly loved Sofia [Sophia], niece of Teodora [Theodora] (Justinian's consort) for some time. In order to escape at least the sight of his misfortune, Justin resolved to follow Belisario [Belisarius] who at that time was being sent by the emperor with a powerful army against the Goths who had long unjustly dominated Italy. He left, and with his departure, Sophia, who hitherto had shown disinterest in his love, tore the veil from her diffidence, and granting free rein to the passion she had so artfully concealed (or else because of mutual feelings that she herself had never previously experienced), made her distress clearly evident to Asteria [Astra], daughter of Silvano [Sittas], their father, and she, through Theodora, obtained Justinian's consent for Sophia to be given in marriage to Justin, and that he be recalled without further ado for the wedding. The messenger sent to deliver this message eventually reached the imperial fleet at the mid-point of their journey, and found it in a distressing calm that rendered it immobile. Justin, upon hearing the announcement, and without a moment's hesitation, dropped from the ship onto the little boat that had brought the order, and insisted, against the advice of the helmsman, upon immediate departure. He was soon beset by a ferocious storm, against which the small size of his boat and the exhaustion of the sailors were unable to hold out, and in view of Durazzo, he was miserably shipwrecked. Justin, tossed by the sea and half-alive, was thrown by the violence of the waves onto Durazzo's shore, just where the unfortunate Sophia sighed impatiently for his return. Believing him dead, Sofia straightway ran to her rooms, and goaded by her desperate love, drank a vial of poison. Then, through the action of Cleone [Cleon], a Greek sage, Justin was freed from the weight of the water, Sophia from the poison, and they were happily united. As a reward for his efforts, Cleon gained Astra as his consort.

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).