

The Poet and the Nun: Role Doubling and Petrarchan Allegory in *Gli amori d'Apollo e di Dafne*

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The prejudice one most often encounters when analyzing the dramaturgical implications of seventeenth-century role doubling is that it only served a practical function, then as now, sceptics objecting that it was merely a way of saving performers or of making full use of a limited cast. The attribution of dramatic meaning to a doubling plan indeed occurs on the borderline between historical research and literary interpretation, and though it can be substantiated that a seventeenth-century spectator might have seen an allegorical connection between two characters represented by the same performer, it is (in most cases) impossible to prove. In my view, this should not prevent us from exploring these potential meanings, however, which were also merely potential in the seventeenth century, in accordance with the open and interactive nature of allegorical aesthetics. As a historically informed drama critic, therefore, I see my role as that of an attorney who defends an interpretation by adducing circumstantial evidence, and not as that of the presiding judge who passes the final verdict on the dramatic meaning of a text or its historical performance.¹

¹ The comparison of the role of the drama critic to role of the attorney – as opposed to that of the judge – was introduced and discussed by Jan Kott in Charles Marowitz: *Roar of the Canon: Kott and Marowitz on Shakespeare*, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, New York 2001, p. 16. I tend to put greater emphasis on the importance of circumstantial evidence than Kott does in that conversation, however. But see his historically informed discussion of role doubling in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the title essay of *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1987, pp. 29-68.

The scepticism regarding what the Shakespeare scholar Stephen Booth called ‘thematic doubling’,² but which I prefer to call ‘allegorical doubling’, also reflects the fact that theatricality is a historically changeable phenomenon, and that it is challenging to imagine the ways in which spectators of the past saw and heard what happened on stage. The doubling convention was closely linked to a form of dramaturgy and theatricality, which poets, performers and playgoers had inherited from medieval theatre, and which eventually gave way to the classicist dramaturgy that began to dominate from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. From then on, playwrights greatly reduced the number of characters in plays so as to avoid doubling altogether, which also relied on a contrast aesthetic that fundamentally disagreed with the new demands for the unity of action, the purity of genre, and the decorum of characterization.

When attempting to reconstruct the doubling plan for a seventeenth-century play or opera production, I believe it is necessary to distinguish between three functions of the practice: the *practical*, the *artistic* and the *allegorical*, of which I hold the ‘practical’ function to be the least important.³ After all, nobody demanded that dramas should have twenty or more characters when casts were half that size, so when the aesthetic of doubling went out of fashion along with the allegorical aesthetics, the number of characters was simply reduced.

Reconstructing the Doubling Plan for *Gli amori d’Apollo, e di Dafne*

When Gian Francesco Busenello’s and Pier Francesco Cavalli’s opera *Gli amori d’Apollo, e di Dafne* was premiered at the Venetian Teatro di San Cassiano in the Carnival of 1640 I believe that the cast included only eight singers: three sopranos (two of whom were castratos), one alto castrato, two tenors, one baritone and one bass.⁴ The only cases of ‘practical’ doubling probably occurred in the two madrigal ensembles: the chorus of

² See his appendix “Speculations on Doubling in Shakespeare’s Plays” in *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1983, pp. 129-53. See also Richard Fotheringham’s response in “The Doubling of Roles on the Jacobean Stage” in *Theatre Research International* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 18-32.

³ For a study of the uses of the practice, see my attempted reconstruction of the doubling plan for *Poppea*, in “Seeing the Empress Again: On Doubling in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*” in *Cambridge Opera Journal* Vol. 24, No. 3 (November 2012), pp. 249-91.

⁴ This suggestion almost agrees with that of Tim Carter who claims, however, that the opera requires the participation of four sopranos, and hence a complete minimum of nine singers, though he does not specify how the roles may be doubled; see “Mask and illusion: Italian opera after 1637” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Music*, eds. Tim Carter and John Butt, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 241-82, here p. 254.

Ninfe and Pastori in I.4 and in the chorus of Muse in II.1.⁵ Assuming that they had time to descend from their cloud machines, change their costumes and enter the stage during Dafne's long soliloquy, the singers of Amore and Giove in I.3 might be able to double as the soprano Ninfa and the bass Pastore; and the singers of Amore and Filena would have no trouble doubling as the soprano Muse. The alto Ninfa and the tenor Pastore might recur as the alto and tenor Muse, but would probably not have sung anything else in the opera.⁶

The 'artistic' function of doubling (using Willmar Sauter's well-known term)⁷ was probably more important, since it served to highlight performers' command of contrasting dramatic and musical expression: their ability to transform themselves. If the cast included a good castrato, for example, audiences might want to hear him in more than one scene, but not necessarily as the same character, his reappearance as another character displaying complementary facets of his voice and talents.

The singer of Venere – who only appears in I.3 – would necessarily have had to appear as a different character elsewhere in the opera; and what would be more appropriate than to reappear a little later, in I.5, as Filena and then again as a Musa in Act II, which would allow the singer (probably a castrato) to appear at least once in each act? One moment the singer would be the weeping goddess of love and beauty whom the sun god Apollo exposed to all the gods of Olympus while she was lying naked in the arms of Mars because, as Giove says,

[...] non essendo egli capace
Di tanta gloria in vagheggiarti solo,
Chiamò compagni tutti gl'altri numi,
E gli diedero aita,
Per non restar confuso in tanti lumi.

[unable to admire you in all your glory on his own, he called on all the other gods to be his companions, and they helped him so that he did not stand confused when confronted with so much light.]

⁵ For my division of the acts into scenes, see the Appendix. The printed libretto and the manuscript score do not agree about the division of the acts into scenes. In two instances the score conflates two of the libretto's scenes into one: the original I.6 (Filena's soliloquy) and the beginning of I.7 (Cefalo's soliloquy before Aurora's entrance) are conflated; as are the libretto's II.4 (Apollo and Dafne) and II.5 (Apollo's soliloquy). However, on two other occasions the score divides the libretto's scenes into two: the original I.7 (Cefalo and Aurora) is divided at Aurora's entrance, and the original II.3 (Amore and Apollo) is divided at Apollo's entrance. The libretto was published as the first drama in Gio. Francesco Busenello: *Delle hore ociose*, Andrea Giuliani, Venice 1656. A facsimile of the score has been published as Francesco Cavalli: *Gli amori d'Apollone e di Dafne*, ed. Howard Mayer Brown, Italian Opera, 1640-1770 vol 1., Garland Publishing, New York 1978.

⁶ The surviving doubling plan from *La maga fulminata* (performed at the same theatre in 1638) suggests that extra singers for the small choral roles were only called for if it was impossible for other cast members to double in them. See Schneider, "Seeing the Empress Again", p. 268.

⁷ See his discussion of the different levels of theatrical communication in Chapter 8: "Theatrical Actions and Reactions" in Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter: *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm 1995, pp. 78-102.

The light metaphor would then be contrasted to the shadow metaphor describing the cheerful old nymph, as whom the singer would reappear a few moments later. According to her own admission, Filena is

[...] sì sconcia
E di viso, e di seno,
Se con lui mi stringessi in dolce laccio
Semberei proprio un'ombra al sole in braccio. [III.1]

[so hideous both in face and in bosom that if I was clasped by [Apollo] in a sweet snare, I would truly resemble a shadow in the arms of the sun.]

This transformation is a virtuoso feat that calls attention to the acting (and makeup) skills of the performer. There even seems to be a reference to the singer's metamorphosis in the refrain of Filena's entrance aria in I.5: "Più fugace del lampo è la beltà" [Beauty is more elusive than lightning].

But while the virtuoso aspect of the doubling tends to separate Venere and Filena, they are connected by its allegorical aspect. The name of the old nymph is derived from *philia*, one of the Greek words for love, so Filena is Venere in one of the goddess' earthly representations, or in disguise, just as Venere would later disguise herself as an old woman in the libretto *L'Orione*, which Francesco Melosio wrote for the Teatro di San Moisè for 1642 (and which was set by Cavalli in 1653),⁸ and in Francesco Buti's and Luigi Rossi's opera *L'Orfeo*, which was performed at Paris in 1647.⁹ The main difference is that Filena does not openly disclose her identity as Venere.

The production would have needed a high tenor and a low tenor or high baritone who appeared together in three scenes: as Morfeo and Sonno in the prologue, as old Cirilla and Alfesibeo in I.2, and as Apollo and Pan in the final scene. Doubling as Sonno, Alfesibeo and Pan would give the baritone one appearance in each act and also an opportunity to display the range of his histrionic skills. Busenello and Cavalli helped him contrast the two first characters by giving both Sonno and Alfesibeo a three-stanza morning song at their first entrances that point in very different directions, however. Sonno hails the hour before sunrise as his favourite hour,

⁸ In I.7 "Venere travestita da Vecchia" sings the following lines: "Chi mai lo crederà? / Queste neglette spoglie, / Questo rugoso volto, / Questo canuto crine, / Ascondan la più bella Deità." In Francesco Melosio: *L'Orione, Dramma*, Venice 1673. I am grateful to Dinko Fabris for this reference.

⁹ See libretto from the recording.

In cui godo vedere
Dentro un dormir profondo,
La natura sopita

[In which I enjoy seeing nature lulled to a profound sleep]

The low tessitura, syllabic setting, stepwise melody, static bass line and soporific ritornellos aptly portray the “god of rest, the giver of peace and quiet”. Alfesibeo, on the other hand, waits impatiently for the sunrise in I.2, preferring

Quel mondo glorioso,
Che non soggiace all'ombre oscure, e rie,
E lieto gode un infinito die.

[That glorious world, which is not subject to dark and wicked shadows but cheerfully enjoys an infinite day.]

His higher tessitura, energetic coloraturas, wide melodic leaps, walking bass line and monumental ritornellos suggest the vigorous nature of this confirmed early-morning person. On the allegorical level, however, the three baritone characters are connected in intricate ways. In the prologue Sonno orders his “dear deputies” to get up and,

Mentre vengono i sogni
Dalle porte fatali,
Servite pronti al vaticinio loro
Con le vostre figure,
E con mille apparenze, e mille forme
Itene a visitar chi posa, e dorme.

[While the dreams come from the fatal gates, to readily serve their prophecy with your figures; and with a thousand appearances and a thousand shapes go visit those who rest and sleep.]

Two scenes later Alfesibeo, recently arisen from his bed, has been visited by one of these shapes in his dreams: the image of a woman transformed into a plant. Unable to interpret “such a figure” on the spot, he suggests

Di ritentar gl'antichi studi, ed arti,
Per ritrovar un così occulto senso,
Che istupidir mi fa più, che ci penso. [I.2]

[Reattempting my ancient studies and arts in order to retrieve so secret a meaning, which stupefies me the more I think of it.]

In II.2 he returns from his studies and arts that, like the dreams coming from the fatal gates, “prophesy downfalls and evils”. Searching in vain for old Cirilla (who meanwhile

has been transformed into Apollo, as I will argue below), he continues to observe that heaven speaks to mortals in various guises:

Son le sue voci, e fulmini, e comete,
E terremoti, e sogni,
E tutto quello, che trascende, e varca
L'uso della natura
Col partorir dei mostri
Vien per addottrinar gl'ingegni nostri.

[Its words are thunderbolts and comets and earthquakes and dreams; and all that which transcends and exceeds the uses of nature through the birth of monsters comes to instruct our intellects.]

Among these prophetic monsters or dream figures are not only the transformed Dafne and Siringa, supernatural blends of plant and woman, but also Pan, a no less supernatural blend of goat and man, in which shape the god of sleep consoles Apollo in the final scene by offering him the solution to the riddle that troubled Alfesibeo and Cirilla at the beginning of the opera. Just as the two pastoral characters had both dreamt of a nymph transformed into a plant, Pan and Apollo have both *seen* a beloved nymph transformed into reeds and laurels, respectively, and just as it was Alfesibeo who succeeded in interpreting the dream, it is Pan who explains to Apollo how he should respond to the “profound mystery” of the transformation: sublimate the desire and turn the matter of the opaque dream figure into art, into music or poetry, the solid products of dreams.

In order to finally offer this allegorical lesson, however, Sonno needs his three deputies: the tenor Morfeo, the treble Itaton and the bass Panto. Assuming that the singer of Giove would have the time to reappear as the bass Pastore in I.4, all the bass characters in the opera could be sung by the same singer, who would have plenty of time to change into Peneo in III.2. The connection between Giove and Peneo is highlighted by the fact that the first word uttered by both of them is “Figlia” [My daughter], which Cavalli even set to the same two notes: D and B flat. This helps to bring out the structural parallel between the two scenes, in which a divine father reluctantly agrees to help a weeping daughter – Venere and Dafne, respectively – who feels that Apollo has offended her modesty. But the parallel also serves to highlight the contrast between the bass characters: Giove’s vocal line, characterized by pompous punctuated figures and fanfare-like leaps, portrays the frivolous and insistently sanguine king of the gods who first warns Venere against letting “those unworthy and wicked spirits” enjoy the sight of “the gods weeping in Paradise” and eventually leaves after warning Amore against letting heaven “be filled with tears [pianti]”, going up the high C of the bass. In contrast, the more angular profile of Peneo’s vocal line with its concluding ‘tear figure’ portrays the subdued and melancholy river god who leaves after predicting that “the river Peneus will be a river of tears [pianto]”, going down to the low F.

The allegorical connection between the bass roles is outlined already by Panto in the prologue:

Le figure diverse
Delle cose insensate io prenderò,
E tra chi dorme andrò;
Del quadro, del triangolo, del cerchio
Figurerò le prospettive belle,
E tutte inventerò l'arti novelle.

[I shall take the different figures of the insensible things and walk among those who sleep; I shall fashion beautiful perspectives out of the square, the triangle and the circle and invent arts entirely novel.]

In the theatrical dream world of the opera Panto is the stage designer, the father and creator of the material world, who orders two of the opera's striking stage effects that function as the turning points of the drama: as Giove he orders the shooting of Apollo by Amore's arrow; as Peneo he orders Dafne's transformation into a laurel tree.

Amore – probably written for a very young castrato – is likely to have been doubled with Itaton who presents himself as follows in the prologue:

Ed io d'augelli, e fere
Vestirò le sembianze,
E son pronto a cangiarmi in tante guise,
Che non potranno i numeri adeguarle,
E spesso in un oggetto
Unirò, mescerò più d'un aspetto.

[And I shall clothe my semblance as birds and beasts; and I am ready to change myself into so many forms that they cannot be numbered; and often I shall unite and mix more than one appearance in one object.]

In fact, it is the costumes of winged Amore and goat-legged Pan that mix the forms of "birds and beasts", respectively, with the human form, so in the world of the theatre Itaton is the fanciful costume designer.

Morfeo, the third deputy of the god of sleep, presents himself as follows:

Tutti gli umani volti
Io prenderò ben tosto, e com'è l'uso
Delle mutanze mie
Vaneggerò col sogno avanti il die.

[Very soon, I shall take all human faces, and I shall rave with the dream before the coming of day, as my changes are wont to do.]

Clearly, Morfeo is the leading actor whose quickly-changing characters will people the theatrical world designed by Panto and clothed by Itaton. In any case, it is highly unlikely that the singer of Apollo, the leading man, would not have made his first appearance on stage before the beginning of Act II, halfway through the opera, so doubling would need to have occurred. Most likely, the show opened with a series of virtuoso quick-change acts, perhaps inspired by the tenor Annibale Graselli's quick-change role as three different characters in the last scenes of Benedetto Ferrari's and Francesco Manelli's opera *L'Andromeda*, which Busenello had admired when it was performed at the San Cassiano in 1637.¹⁰ During the Ballo de' Fantasmi that concludes the prologue of *Gli amori d'Apollo, e di Dafne*, the tenor would be able to change into the costume of ancient and weeping Titone of the "bearded and grizzly lips", lying among his "light and smooth pillows" in his bed in the clouds in I.1. At the end of this scene, after the departing Aurora has told him to "turn over there and remain quiet" – after which he may roll over and disappear into the pillows – the tenor would somehow be able to transform into the "decrepit and silly elderly woman" Cirilla of the "trembling foot" whose body resembles "the portrait of time", as she says, but whose cheerful entrance aria in I.2 contrasts with Titone's plaintive notes and breathlessly halting vocal line. At the end of the act, in I.7, the tenor would return as young and handsome Cefalo of the "golden down" which Aurora repeatedly contrasts to Titone's "shaggy beard", apparently implying that the absence of an artificial beard was what mainly separated these two doubled characters. During Procri's lament in I.9 the tenor would then be able to transform into Apollo who descends from the clouds at the opening of Act II. His high tessitura and dancelike airs suggest both the shiny quality and exuberant, haughty character of the blond sun god, in contrast to the lower tessitura, tormented chromaticism and halting, hesitant vocal lines of melancholy Cefalo. Before exiting after his rejection by Dafne in II.5, Apollo reflects that he should not have shown himself "as a heavenly god", his insight motivating the quick change back into Cefalo in the final scene of the act, chasing Aurora onto the stage just as Apollo has just chased Dafne off the stage. At the end of II.7, however, when Aurora has left her young lover, he reflects before exiting:

Chi per bellezza nobile, e sublime
Diffonde pianti, e pubblica lamenti,
Veste di maestade i suoi tormenti

[Those who shed tears and set forth laments for the sake of noble and sublime beauty clothe their torments in majesty]

This perhaps suggests that the tenor will don Apollo's 'majestic' costume for his lament in III.3, the next time he appears on stage. Apparently, however, these frequent transformations tend to estrange the emotionally confused Dafne, as implied by a possible pun in one of her responses to Filena in III.1, just after Cefalo's last exit: "Non

¹⁰ See Schneider 2012, pp. 256-57. The printed libretto from the *Andromeda* production include a sonnet by Busenello dedicated to Ferrari; see Benedetto Ferrari: *L'Andromeda*, Antonio Bariletti, Venice 1637, p. 15.

voglio, che si muti / Di mia vita il tenore” [I don’t want the content [or “tenor”] of my life to change].

However, the leading soprano seems to have been no less changeable. In the first scene of the opera we meet Aurora, the voraciously sexual goddess of dawn, who would have plenty of time to change into the nymph Dafne who is as obsessed with her chastity as Aurora is craving for love. Cavalli appealed to the singer to distinguish between the two characters by means of a chiaroscuro effect, giving the “bright goddess” a higher tessitura than the humble Dafne who prefers “the fair shadows and kind darkness” of the woods to the caresses of the sun. After Dafne’s exit, the singer would have two scenes to change back into Aurora’s costume for I.8, after which she would have to transform herself swiftly into Procri in I.9 whose melancholy contrasts markedly with Aurora’s noisy ebullience. Like the refrain of Filena’s entrance song, the refrain of Procri’s lament seems to imply a reference to the quick-change act. One moment the singer seems to be once more the ardent lover she was in the previous scene:

Io son pur quella Procri,
Che degli amori tuoi delizia fu.
[...]
Cefalo torna a me,
Io son colei, che tua diletta fu;
[...]
Cefalo riedi a me,
Io son colei, ch’idolo tuo già fu

[I am still that Procris who was the pleasure of your loves. [...] Cephalus, come back to me; I am she who was your delight; [...] Cephalus, return to me; I am she who was once your idol]

But each time the singer is forced to remind herself (and the audience) that she now plays a different character: “Lassa, io m’inganno, io non son quella più” [Alas, I deceive myself; I am her no more]. The singer would then reappear as Dafne in II.5; during Apollo’s brief exit soliloquy she would be able to change into Aurora in the last scene of the act; and during Cefalo’s exit aria she would be able to change into Dafne for Act III, her final lines as a woman potentially referring not only to her impending transformation into a laurel tree but also to her past transformations into various other characters:

Vada peregrinando
Per mille forme varie l’esser mio,
Pria, che cader dal virginal decoro
Delle grand’alme singolar tesoro. [III.2]

[May my being wander through a thousand different forms before losing its maiden decorum, the singular treasure of great souls.]

While this survey of what I assume was the transformations of the leading singers of the original production focusses on the artistic and meta-theatrical levels of the role doubling, it still remains to be answered what it all means, on the allegorical level.

Busenello, Petrarch and the Laurel Tree

With his characteristic predilection for riddles and intertextual references, Busenello offers a hint in his succinct little preface to the libretto that deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

“Daphne did not understand, or did not want to understand, what love was. Apollo fell in love with her and attempted, with flatteries and with entreaties, to persuade Daphne to comply with him. But since all his endeavours were in vain, he finally began to pursue her, and when she arrived at the banks of the river Peneus she transformed herself into a laurel. As you shall see, the other things in the present drama are interlaced episodes; and if it happens that some minds find the unity of the plot divided by the doubleness of the loves – i.e. those of Apollo and Daphne, of Tithonus and Aurora, of Cephalus and Procris – may they please recall that these interlacements do not undo the unity, but adorn it; and may they recall that Sir Guarino in *The Faithful Shepherd* did not claim the doubleness of the loves – i.e. those of Myrtilus and Amaryllis, and of Sylvius and Dorinda – but he made the loves of Dorinda and Sylvius serve as the ornament of his plot. The restrictive minds have corrupted the world, for while we learn how to wear ancient attire, they make the clothes ridiculous according to modern usage. Everyone is full of his own opinion, and I am full of mine and find approval in the maxim of our divine Petrarch: “*Ogn’un del suo saper par che s’appaghi* [Everyone seems content with his own knowledge]”.¹¹

Here Busenello apparently defends the extremely loose – not to say absent – plot structure of his drama by referring to the literary quarrel raging in the late sixteenth century between Neo-Aristotelian classicists and the proponents of the mixed genres of allegorical dramaturgy, which was sparked by Giovanni Battista Guarini’s pastoral drama *Il pastor fido* (first published in 1590). Guarini’s drama resembles Busenello’s partly by presenting its two pairs of lovers as contrast-parallels – Mirtillo and Dorinda are the faithful lovers, while Amarilli and Silvio initially prefer a chaste hunter’s life in

¹¹ “*Dafne non intendeva, ò non voleva intendere, ciò che fosse Amore. Apollo se ne invaghì, e diede opera con le lusinghe, e co’ prieghi acciò che Dafne si rendesse persuasa à compiacerlo; mà riuscirogli vano ogni tentativo si diede per ultimo ad inseguirla, & essa capitata alle rive del Fiume Penèo si trasformò in un Lauro. Le altre cose nel presente Drama sono Episodii intrecciati nel modo che vederai; & se per avventura qualche ingegno considerasse divisa l’unità della Favola per la duplicità degli’Amori, cioè d’Apollo, e Dafne; di Titone, e dell’Aurora; di Cefalo, e di Procri, si compiaccia raccordarsi, che queste intrecciature non dis fanno l’unità; mà l’adornano, e si rammenti, che il Cavalier Guarino nel Pastor Fido non pretese duplicità d’Amori, cioè trà Mirtillo, & Amarilli, e trà Silvio, e Dorinda; mà fece, che gli Amori di Dorinda, e di Silvio servissero d’ornamento alla Favola sua. Gl’ingegni Stitici hanno corrotto il Mondo, perche mentre si studia di portar l’abito antico, si rendono le vesti ridicole all’usanza moderna. Ogn’uno abbonda nel suo senso, & io abbondo nel mio, e trovo in me verificata la massima del nostro Divino Petrarca, / Ogn’un del suo saper par che s’appaghi.” The “Argomento” in Busenello, pp. 6-7.*

the forest to amorous pursuits – and partly by letting neither the two men nor the two women appear simultaneously on stage, which makes it possible to double the couples in performance. However, Busenello's drama is far more loosely plotted than Guarini's, in which Amarilli and Silvio have been promised to each other in marriage in their childhood, the resolution of the conflict centring on the breaking of this promise, which allows them to marry their lovers instead. But what connection exists between the couple of Apollo and Dafne and the two other couples in the opera, apart from the fact that Aurora uses Apollo as an alibi when deceiving Titone? The preface raises more questions than it answers.

A hint seems to be found in the reference to Petrarch.¹² Jean-François Lattarico has already pointed to the way Apollo's language echoes Petrarch's love poetry, specifically the *Canzoniere*,¹³ the love poems written in honour of Laura, the mysterious woman whom he loved from a distance and extolled as his laurel: the allegorical emblem of the eternal glory received by the poet tormented by a sublime amorous passion. In particular, I would like to draw attention to sonnet 291 in the *Canzoniere*, apparently written after Laura's death by the plague. Together with other sonnets, this seems to have inspired the interlacements of Busenello's plot:

Quand'io veggio dal ciel scender l'Aurora
co la fronte di rose et co' crin' d'oro,
Amor m'assale, ond'io mi discoloro,
et dico sospirando: Ivi è Laura ora.

O felice Titon, tu sai ben l'ora
da ricovrare il tuo caro tesoro:
ma io che debbo far del dolce alloro?
che se 'l vo' riveder, conven ch'io mora.

I vostri dipartir' non son sí duri,
ch'almen di notte suol tornar colei
che non â schifo le tue bianche chiome:

le mie notti fa triste, e i giorni oscuri,
quella che n'â portato i penser' miei,
né di sè m'â lasciato altro che 'l nome.

[When I see Dawn descend from heaven with rosy brow and golden hair,
Cupid assails me, so I grow pale and sighing say: 'Now, there is Laura!' O
happy Tithonus, you well know the hour when you'll regain your dear
treasure: but what can I do with my sweet laurel? To see her again I have to

¹² The closing quotation is taken from Chapter 3 of *Il trionfo della fama*.

¹³ Lattarico points out that Apollo's line "Piangete erbe, ombre, antri, aure, augelli e fronde" is even a direct quotation from sonnet 303; see *Busenello: Un théâtre de la rhétorique*, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2013, p. 204.

die. Your partings are not so harsh, for at least she who does not scorn your white hair is wont to return to you every night: while she who has carried off my thoughts and left me nothing of herself but her name makes my nights sad and darkens my days.]

Here we recognize the sentiment of Cefalo waiting all night for Aurora, jealous of the white-haired Titone. But Busenello tells us, in fact, that Titone is not as happy as Petrarch and Cefalo imagine, but is tormented by similar doubts: in the opera “O felice Titon” has become “Infelice Titon” [unhappy Tithonus], the opening line of Titone’s brief aria. Furthermore, Petrarch plays on the phonetic similarity between “l’Aurora” (Dawn), “Laura ora” (Laura now), “l’ora” (the hour) and “alloro” or “lauro” (laurel), all of which are poetic metamorphoses of the beloved Laura who left her lover nothing but the name he recites endlessly and which becomes the source and subject of his poetic world. Aurora is in fact a divine, immortal counterpart of the mortal woman, the laurel tree whose Greek name is *daphne*. The lover of Daphne is, of course, Apollo, the god of poetry, who in Petrarch’s sonnet becomes the poet’s divine, immortal counterpart.

The allegorical metamorphoses of Petrarch and Laura seem to have been the source of the libretto’s “interlaced episodes”, the “doubleness of the loves”, which may simply be the metamorphoses of a single love: Aurora, Dafne and Procri are the same woman, just as Titone, Cefalo and Apollo are the same man. Sonno already gives the cue in his opening aria when he predicts the arrival of “the goddess who sprinkles humid pearls with profuse hand”. This goddess is Aurora, “the distributor of dews”, but she is also the weeping Procri, the personification of the morning dew, which drops she sprinkles, as teardrops, in the eyes of the moved spectators in her grand lament. Similarly, Cefalo, whose Greek name means ‘head’ (*kephalos*) in Greek, is the head of the sun that kisses dawn before the actual sunrise, the arrival of Apollo, which drives away the dew. In other words, Cefalo is the one who is about to become Apollo. This linking of the characters may also serve to explain the otherwise cryptic title of the opera – *The Loves of Apollo and Daphne* – which suggests that the love of the leading male character is reciprocated by the leading female character.

But even if an allegorical connection has been established between the doubled characters, wherein does the unity of the plot consist that Busenello still maintains that his drama contains? The references to Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, at the centre of which was a real love story in fourteenth-century Avignon,¹⁴ perhaps suggests that a similar love story is to be found at the heart of the opera, which it is challenging but not impossible to divine, as Sonno and his deputies imply at the end of the prologue when they address the dream creatures coming from the fatal gates:

¹⁴ Scholars disagree about whether Laura was the real name of Petrarch’s beloved, but interest has centred on one Laure de Sade *née* de Nove (1310–48), a married noblewoman who died from the plague. Petrarch claimed to first have seen his beloved at the Good Friday mass on 6 April 1327 in the Église Sainte-Claire.

Uscite in varie torme
Immagini gioconde, e strane forme,
E all'addormito mondo
Portate in sogni lieti
Metamorfofi mille, e mille segni,
E l'uomo frale a indovinar s'ingegni.

[Enter in variable troupes, merry images and strange forms, and carry in joyful dreams a thousand metamorphoses and a thousand signs to the sleeping world; and let frail man apply his wits to divine them.]

The Romance in the Convent Parlour

In accordance with the enigmatic ambiguity of allegorical aesthetics, the exact nature of this underlying love story remains speculative, but in the rigorously chaste society of nymphs and shepherds a seventeenth-century Venetian operagoer may well have recognized a poetic representation of convent life. And in Cefalo's complaint to Aurora in II.7 the vaguely religious imagery may hint that the mythological character conceals the admirer of a cloistered nun, tormented by jealousy of her heavenly bridegroom:

Io resterò tra queste oscure chiostre
Destituto piangente,
Peregrin sospiroso,
E tu godrai del tuo diletto sposo.

[I shall remain among these dark cloisters, destitute and weeping, a sighing pilgrim, while you enjoy your beloved bridegroom.]

Indeed, Gian Francesco Busenello loved several nuns in his youth, as we know from the poems he wrote about the so-called 'forced nuns' who represented a deep human and social tragedy in seventeenth-century Venice.¹⁵ In the first half of the century the city included thirty-nine nunneries, which housed ca. 2500 girls and women of whom many from the middle and upper classes had been pressured by their families to become the brides of Christ rather than marry earthly bridegrooms who usually demanded higher dowries. These women who had no religious calling but who lived their entire life behind cloistered walls, in accordance with the demands of the Tridentine Council, were in reality guiltless prisoners. They were often tormented by hopeless longing for the freer and more privileged lives of their siblings if they did not manage to accept their destiny, but some nuns sat in the windows of the convents in order to attract lovers, though such romances were challenged by the grates of the

¹⁵ On the subject of Busenello and the 'forced nuns', see Arthur Livingston: *La vita veneziana nelle opere di Gian Francesco Busenello*, Officine grafiche V. Callegari, Venice 1913, pp. 160-61, 164-66, 254-59; and Lattarico, pp. 115-17.

parlour, which allowed no other physical contact than the touching of hands. Busenello's first biographer, Arthur Livingston, quoted a versified and undated letter from the poet to his fellow lawyer Niccolò Crasso, in which he tells about these clandestine affairs. Some of them had been established through his old nurse who gave him access to a nun he had loved from a distance for a long time. The young people met in the convent parlour, but Busenello quickly tired of his mistress and instead fell in love with another beautiful nun to whom he got access through an old woman who supplied the convent with beans.

“O che parole dolce, o che maniere / Da tirar in preson chi è in libertà!”¹⁶ [O what sweet words, O what gallantries that could draw the free man in prison], Busenello recalled, continuing to praise the nun's peerless beauty, starry eyes, marzipan skin, rosy lips and golden locks. One of their meetings was interrupted by the bell summoning the nuns for matins, but after the lovers had arranged for a new meeting the following day, young Francesco saw another face that struck him so violently with Cupid's arrow that it seriously affected his health. Having recovered from this malady, he had got enough of these convent romances. It was probably in this period, however, that Busenello wrote his convent poems that have titles like *Bella monaca*, *Per bella monaca*, *La Bella Monaca*, *A bella bendata*, *Monaca amata*, *Lettera a bella monaca* and *Costituto di bella monaca*.¹⁷ Other poems in the same genre, in which he gives voice to the women, have titles like *Lamento della monaca forzata*, *La monaca malcontenta*, *Pater noster sopra una citella sforzata ad andar monaca*, *Pentimento della monaca* and *Pentimento della monaca sopra il De profundis*. Here the poet fantasizes about what the beloved might be doing behind the convent walls: now she may be reading his poetry, now she lets birds and flowers grow forth in her embroideries, now she bewails her lost future, now she is ashamed of her sinful longing, and now she blesses the calm and contemplative space of convent life. According to Livingston, “the love was opposed not only by the forced separation, but also by the fear of sacrilege, of the sin of breaking the solemn vow.”¹⁸ On the other hand, as he adds, the controversial literary subject “could adapt itself to Petrarchist Platonism as well as to sensualistic gallantry: the love of a woman devoted to God suggested a certain ideal loftiness that gave occasion to countless conceits, and the temptations of love were rendered more spicy by the very grates of the parlour.”¹⁹ A more sympathetic view is adopted by Jean-François Lattarico, according to whom the amorous sentiment in the poem *Bella monaca* “does not lead to a physical relationship but is lived in a purely mental representation.”²⁰

We know little about how the adored nuns from Busenello's youth experienced these affairs, but we know a little about his acquaintance with the famous feminist nun

¹⁶ Letter to Niccolò Crasso, quoted from Livingston, p. 258.

¹⁷ The poem *Per bella monaca* is reproduced in Lattarico, p. 116.

¹⁸ Livingston, p. 161 (my translation).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lattarico, p. 116 (my translation).

Arcangela Tarabotti in the 1640s, which may have been more literary than romantic. Tarabotti had entered the Benedictine convent Sant'Anna in Castello at the age of fifteen and had taken final vows at the age of nineteen, but she never forgave her patrician family that they forced her into a convent and protested vociferously against the systematic oppression of women in a number of printed and manuscript books with such titles as *La tirannia paterna*, *Inferno monacale* and *Che le donne siano della spetie degli uomini*, which attracted much attention in the literary circles of the time.²¹ Busenello, too, was apparently fascinated with this independent and irrepressible woman, and the fascination seems to have been mutual. The poet may have been identical with one "Francesco B." who paid tribute to the learned nun in four sonnets from the years 1642-43,²² and when Tarabotti in 1650 asked the celebrated poet to write an introductory sonnet to a book commemorating the deceased nun Regina Donati, her best friend in the convent, she remarked in a letter to the patrician Enrico Cornaro that she had "fallen in love with the most divine compositions of the illustrious Businello"²³ whom she described as "an Apollo" on more than one occasion.²⁴ Of particular interest is an undated letter to Cornaro in which she describes a visit by the poet to the parlour during the Carnival, at which he wore a mask in defiance of convent rules:

"Because the greatest consolations cannot be fully enjoyed if they are not communicated to the dearest friends, I share with Your Eminent Lordship how the visit of the illustrious Businello to this place filled my soul with contentment. My desire was partly fulfilled, and, like that prophetic soul who held the Savior in his arms, I will say in the future, *nunc dimittis*, etc. [Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord] I admired his regal bearing, I enjoyed his refined conversation, and I felt myself transformed from nun to muse when, in proximity to an Apollo who is a friend to each, I heard praise attributed to me that would have made Humility itself arrogant. He was masked and therefore he could in the male fashion tell lies without blushing. Perhaps he kept his face from me out of compassion, mindful of the fate of Semele. Nonetheless, the sun, although sometimes covered by clouds, always shines forth."²⁵

Significantly, the both passionate and strangely transcendental meeting of the poet and the nun is described by means of a web of Christian and mythological allegories that raise the situation to a sublime poetic sphere. Now Tarabotti is the old saint Simeon who was prepared to give up the ghost after having held the infant Jesus in his arms; now she is the priestess Semele who burned up when her wish to behold Jupiter in all his glory was fulfilled; and now she is a Muse who inspires Apollo himself, the

²¹ See Arcangela Tarabotti: *Letters Familiar and Formal*, ed. and trans. Meredith K. Ray and Lynn Lara Westwater, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto 2012. For my introduction to the case of the forced nuns, I have also drawn on the editors' excellent introduction.

²² See letters 30 and 154 in Tarabotti, as well as notes 110 and 485.

²³ Tarabotti, letter 112.

²⁴ Tarabotti, letters 104 and 152.

²⁵ Quoted from Tarabotti, letter 152.

god of poets. In a sense, Tarabotti and Busenello performed, through the grates of the convent parlour, an allegorical drama featuring multiple doubled characters in a way that is not unlike *Gli amori d'Apollo, e di Dafne*.²⁶

Seen from the perspective of Busenello's convent romances, the opening scene of the opera depicts, in the guise of a dream, the relationship between a warm-blooded but sexually frustrated young woman (Aurora) and her lover (Titone) whose decrepitude is a metaphor for the impotence imposed upon him by the physical restrictions of the convent. He is constrained to make love to her in his dreams alone, but even these dreams have a sinister undertone, as we learn in the next scene when he has been transformed into the equally decrepit Cirilla who dreamt about a woman turned into a tree. Meanwhile, the nun, tired of craving for a physical love that will never be consummated, has decided to dedicated herself to the convent life and has transformed herself into the chaste Dafne. It takes no more than some persuasion by the old Filena, however – perhaps the operatic alter ego of Busenello's real-life nurse who acted as his go-between – to transform her back into the amorous Aurora. The poet, for his part, still tormented by his feeling of impotence and the jealousy of his lover's heavenly bridegroom, has now become the sensitive young Cefalo who waits impatiently for her in the parlour, but after their meeting the girl is immediately struck by the emotional recognition that their union will never take place: she becomes the abandoned Procri, and the rest of the drama depicts her gradual withdrawal from her lover. The young man, however, abandons himself to the poetic fantasy of the relationship: he becomes the exuberant Apollo who fails to understand why his beloved suddenly begins to withdraw: now she is the chaste Dafne again. He comes down to earth, trying in passionate accents to persuade her to remain his, but even as the amorous Aurora she has made up her mind to give up the relationship, and the young man's pursuit of her (as Apollo) only makes her withdraw even further into the disembodied existence of convent life, the ultimate emblem of which is the laurel tree. Simultaneously, the tree is an allegory of the poet's sublimation of his passion into the written work of art, the drama *Gli amori d'Apollo, e di Dafne*, the chaste "foglie" (leaves) of

²⁶ Wendy Heller, who was the first scholar to see a connection between Arcangela Tarabotti and Busenello's work as a playwright, has offered a somewhat different interpretation of this letter in "O delle miserabil sesso": Tarabotti, Ottavia, and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in *Il saggiaiore musicale* Vol. 8 (2000), pp. 5-46. In Heller's view, the poet's mask "separated appearance from intention and mouth from heart", implying an attitude towards Tarabotti that combined "admiration, prurient interest, and patronizing flattery" (p. 6). I see no sign of condescension in Busenello's wearing of a mask, however, which was common practice during the Venetian Carnival, even if it was prohibited in the convent parlour. Nor does Tarabotti's rhetorical use of allegory and hyperbole suggest, in my view, that she experienced his attitude as patronizing; on the contrary, she claimed to have "fallen in love" with the writings of the poet whom she described as "a friend" of nuns as well as of the Muses. Heller's suggestion, furthermore, that Tarabotti may have served as a model for Ottavia in Busenello's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642/43) sits ill with the fact that Ottavia's situation is very much that of a married woman. Seventeenth-century readers and operagoers are more likely to have recognized the plight of nuns in the destinies of chaste nymphs such as Dafne and Calisto. For Heller's perceptive reading of *Gli amori d'Apollo, e di Dafne*, and specifically of Dafne's transformation as an emblem of "the inspirational power of frustrated desire" (p. 196), see "Daphne's Dilemma: Desire as Metamorphosis in Early Modern Opera" in *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Cultural Expression*, ed. Susan McClary, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2010, pp. 177-208.

which he must kiss now that he is barred from kissing the lips of the beloved nun. In Busenello's drama the laurel tree is a highly ambiguous image that stands for Dafne's loss as well as for Apollo's gain, but it is also a general metaphor for the way frustrated longings transform into the both beautiful and troubling images that we encounter in dreams and in art, and which are illusory and truthful at the same time.²⁷

²⁷ Significantly, Petrarch did not only see the laurel as an allegory of fame and immortality, but also of the truths found in dreams and poetry. This appears from his coronation oration, given at the Capitol of Rome on 8 April 1341 on the occasion of his Reception of the Laurels (*Collatio laureationis*). "[...] when a person who is asleep is touched with laurel his dreams come true. Which makes it singularly appropriate for poets, who are said to be wont to sleep upon Parnassus, as Persius has it: *Nec in bicipiti somniasse Parnaso* and the rest. This is said to covertly show that truth is contained in poetic writings which to the foolish seem to be but dreams – the poet's head being wreathed with the leaves that make dreams come true. It is appropriate in another respect also, for in so far as it promises foreknowledge of the future it is fitting for Apollo as the god of prophecy – whence, as I shall say presently, he is feigned to have loved the laurel tree. Accordingly, since Apollo was held to be the gods of poets, it is no wonder that deserving poets were crowned with the very leafage of their own god, whom they regarded as their sustaining helper, whom they called the god of genius." "Petrarch's Coronation Oration", trans. Ernest H. Wilkins, in *PMLA* Vol. 68, No. 5 (December 1953), pp. 1241–50, here p. 1249.

Appendix: Reconstructed doubling plan for the 1640 Venice production

		Prologue	Act I									Act II							Act III						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4			
Soprano 1	Aurora		x							x						x									
	Dafne				x	x									x			x	x	o	x				
	Procri									x															
Soprano 2	Itaton	x																							
	Amore			x									x	x								x			
	Ninfa I				x																				
	Musa II										x														
Soprano 3	Venere			x																					
	Eco				x																				
	Filena					x	x													x					
	Musa III										x														
Alto	Ninfa II				x																				
	Musa I										x														
Tenor 1	Morfeo	x																							
	Titone		x																						
	Cirilla vecchia			x																					
	Cefalo								x	x												x			
	Apollo											x			x	x	x							x	x
Tenor 2	Pastore I				x																				
	Musa IV										x														
Baritone	Sonno	x																							
	Alfesibeo			x									x												
	Pan																								x
Bass	Panto	x																							
	Giove				x																				
	Pastore II					x																			
	Peneo																								x