MATTEO NORIS'S *ATTILA* (1672) AND THE REPRESENTATION OF LATE ANTIQUITY ON THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY STAGE

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As one of the first operas written on a Late Antique subject for a Venetian theatre, Matteo Noris's *Attila* (1672) provides a unique case study on the dynamics of the reception of post-Classical history. In this paper, I examine what materials the librettist had access to, how particularly one work of Carlo Sigonio consequently shaped his understanding of Late Antiquity as a period, and thus how this and other primary sources influenced his treatment of the subject matter. I further examine how Noris accommodates traditionally Classical symbolism in his characterisation of Attila and how he freely alters the historical events in service of his specific audience and performance context. It is thus shown that the librettist presents a nuanced understanding of the period within the framework of traditional heroic operatic narrative, clearly delineating Late Antiquity as a separate conceptual category.

Key words: opera, Late Antiquity, Attila, Matteo Noris, Carlo Sigonio, political allegory, reception.

Introduction

It is commonly agreed that opera blossomed around the year 1600, developing from masques and other courtly entertainment. Given this origin, operatic subjects in the genre's infancy were typically of mythological nature. It would take until 1643, the year of Gian Franco Busenello's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, before librettists expanded their horizons to Classical historical themes. It would take still another two decades after that before history from other periods was represented.[1] Of these early operas, Matteo Noris's *Attila* of 1672, written for the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, with music by Pietro Andrea Ziani, is one of the first on a Late Antique subject.[2]

[1] The classic introduction to the development of early opera in Venice is Rosand 1991. Also of use is Selfridge-Field 2008:45–66. As this article deals with the texts rather than the music, I will refer to operas throughout together with their librettist's name rather than that of the composer as is the general custom.

[2] The earliest Late Antique themed opera written specifically for Venice and based on a purely historical episode appears to be *Il Genserico* by Nicolò Beregan, written in 1669 for the same theatre, with music by Marc'Antonio Cesti.

For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Graeco-Roman antiquity and its attendant virtues were held up as the golden standard – a consequence of the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance on the one hand, and the ubiquity of this material in the Latin school syllabus on the other.[3] Conversely, the Dark Ages, a term invented by Petrarch three centuries prior, portended the end of this illustrious history and a descent into chaos and upheaval.[4] This latter period nevertheless served as a rich source of inspiration for librettists during the early years of opera.[5]

My aim in this article is therefore twofold. Firstly, I will establish what the horizon of expectations might have been for a seventeenth-century opera-going audience with regard to Late Antiquity as a concept when placed against Classical Antiquity.[6] We in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been inclined to see Late Antiquity as a separate period, with its own attendant qualities and characteristics, due in no small part to the invention and popularisation of this term by Peter Brown.[7] Secondly, I will show in *Attila* how this subject is broadly treated and, in turn, manipulated given the historical context. I begin by considering the literary texture of the libretto within the context of what intellectual treatments of Late Antiquity were widely available at the time before proceeding to a discussion of the ways in which Noris treats his main theme of a potential fall of Rome. Finally, I consider how these features are relevant to the political aims of the piece, and thus what value the concept of Late Antiquity may have had for a contemporary seventeenth-century audience.

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[3] See Waquet 1997 and Leonhardt 2013. See additionally Ketterer 2003 on the primacy of Romanness in opera of this period despite the stated intention of early opera theorists to rehabilitate the practices of Greek tragedy.

[4] Mommsen 1942. Without dwelling too much on theoretical matters in this paper, a good idea of the state of the study of Late Antiquity as a reception object can be found in the volume *Reading Late Antiquity,* edited by Schottenius Cullhed & Malm 2018.

[5] For overviews of the presence of classical material in early opera written from a Classicist's perspective, see McDonald 2001:9–16, Ketterer 2009, and Ewans 2016. See especially Seebald 2009 for a comprehensive overview of libretti produced on Late Antique subjects in major European centres in the seventeenth century.

[6] The term is that of Jauss 1982:20–32.

[7] Brown 1971.

The work and its context

Attila is Matteo Noris's third libretto and his first on a Late Antique subject.[8] This was a period which clearly held some interest for him personally, given that libretti on such subjects occupy around twenty percent of his output for the stage. By contrast, Late Antiquity does not feature in his non-theatrical works of Classical inspiration, such as *L'animo eroe* (1689), a moralising compendium of heroic figures.[9] *Attila* was evidently quite popular, as it was revived in Naples in 1675, Milan in 1677, and Bologna in 1678. Additionally, it was translated into German and set with new music by Johann Wolfgang Franck for Hamburg in 1682.

On the surface, *Attila* is typical of the operatic libretto of the mid-seventeenth century. It has three acts, a balance between recitative which drives the action and rather short single strophe arias, and a large cast of characters, ranging from servants to monarchs. Unusually, there is no allegorical prologue, nor do the more low-class characters serve only to punctuate the main storyline with comic relief. The plot is meandering, but in essence deals with various points of palace intrigue: Attila's victory in conquering Aquileia and the resistance put up by the emperor Valentiniano; Attila's marriage to Irene, a Frankish princess, who is impersonating the emperor's sister; Irene's own attempts to free her husband Torismondo, who has been taken prisoner; and, finally, Attila's murder at Irene's hand.

Attila was the first major opera performed in the 1672 Carnival season. It was dedicated to Louis Grimaldi and Catherine-Charlotte de Gramont, the Prince and Princess of Monaco, who were visiting Venice on an official tour. The event drew great excitement in the preceding year already, as shown in a notice to the libretto of *Caligola delirante* (1671).[10] As in present times, the principality of Monaco was under the protection of France. Louis and Catherine-Charlotte were also Duke and Duchess of Valentinois, a peerage of France, and so were in close orbit to King Louis XIV. Indeed, Louis Grimaldi had in the years just before the première distinguished himself as a commander in the French navy during the recent wars between the English and the Dutch, in which France was allied to the United Netherlands – a fact which is eulogised at length in the dedicatory epistle.

It is striking that during this period so many works on Late Antique topics are dedicated to foreign dignitaries.[11] Whether there is any broader significance to

[8] For overviews of the opera, see Selfridge-Field 2008:106 and Woyke 2008:83.

[9] For the purposes of this article, I consider the limits of Late Antiquity to be from the accession of Diocletian in 284 to the death of Charlemagne in 815. The latest figure treated in *L'anima eroe* is Severus Alexander; see further on this topic Badolato 2014.

[10] Selfridge-Field 2008:106.

[11] On dedications to foreign dignitaries, see Selfridge-Field 2008:55.

this phenomenon is beyond the scope of the current investigation, but Selfridge-Field (2008:55) notes the following with regard to historical subject matter:

> Until 1700, most historical plots had some subtle link to the history of Venice. The division of empires was a compelling topic, partly because the origins of the Venetian Republic emerged from the collapse of the Roman empire. In the end, stories relating to the empire's collapse prevailed over other kinds of 'Roman' tales because they served as glosses on more recent times.

This habit would allow for the possibility of some connection between subject matter and dedicatee, but there are necessarily some caveats. To have a work act as social commentary would presuppose that audiences would be able to understand the significance of the stories told, either through pre-existing knowledge of the source material or through other markers which are present in the text itself. Moreover, scholars are divided as to what the interpretive value of the opera libretto is.[12] For much of the history of opera, attending a performance was as much a part of the requirements of society as it was in the consumption of art. To this end, there may have been a significant proportion of the audience at any given performance who were not there for the main event but rather, in the safety of their box, for the opportunity to network, conduct business, illicit affairs, or simply to be seen.

Attila was performed at the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo, an important theatre in the first three quarters of the seventeenth century. Theatres in Venice were business interests, unlike the court theatres at other Italian centres where opera flourished. Given the republican nature of Venetian society, these theatres were part of a broader portfolio of assets of the various patrician families. The Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo had been owned by the Grimani family since its founding in 1639. Their pedigree was both ancient and illustrious and three members were elected Doge during the century preceding the opera's première. That the Grimani family chose to woo the Prince and Princess of Monaco by means of art and have France on their side would have been indeed beneficial to Venice, given the Republic's recent losses to the Turks on Crete, and France's otherwise threatening behaviour towards the other northern Italian duchies and the Pope.

Such a situation would suggest a degree of intent in commissioning and then creating the opera. There were several players involved in the mounting of a production. Besides the librettist and the composer, there was also the impresario of the theatre and presumably the owners themselves. It is not always clear who

[12] See comments to this effect in Muir 2007:113–14. See also a discussion on the value of literary interpretations in Ketterer 2009:18–20.

had the greatest responsibility in selecting subject matter. Moreover, this responsibility probably did not always fall on the same person.[13] As far as our investigation of the significance of Late Antiquity goes, some points can be assumed in this regard: first, that one or more of the impresario, librettist, and opera-house owner must have had some idea, however vague, of what we today would consider Late Antiquity; second, that given the dedication of *Attila* and the advance notice of the visit of the foreign dignitaries, they knew enough about Late Antiquity to be able to use it to their advantage; third, that they expected there to be some literary merit to the endeavour.

How the libretto and thus the text was consumed is another important factor. In general, libretti were printed to coincide with the mounting of a performance and could be bought at the theatre itself, among other locations.[14] This would imply that some opera-goers would have been able to follow along in the text in the same way as we might put subtitles on television shows with particularly unclear dialogue today. Being able to notice specific detail might thus take place in the moment of performance, perhaps even on repeated listenings, or indeed long afterwards. In this light, we can now examine some aspects of the text itself.

Source material and the treatment of Late Antiquity

Our point of departure here is the paratexts of the libretto: the dedicatory epistle, the address to the reader, and the *argomento.* The information contained herein is both useful and misleading. This is the space in which the author introduces his work and can bring out its best features, highlighting motivations, aesthetic choices and, very importantly, the kinds of source material which he has consulted. However, there is also a great deal which is left unsaid here, and some information which is plainly irrelevant or wrong. Two observations on the paratexts to Noris's libretto deserve mention: the way in which the librettist draws attention to his source material as well as some preliminary indications of how he handles the information it provides.

The *argomento,* which provides a summary of the play, does not mention any source material at all. Although it was common for librettists to list their main ancient sources, Noris does not begin to do so until at the earliest 1694, with *Alfonso Primo*.[15] Until this time and even afterwards, he most often makes a vague excuse for 'sufficient historical basis' of the story, which is mixed with material which he has made up (the word he uses most often in this regard is *favoleggiare*).

[13] See Glixon and Glixon 2005:117–118.
[14] Glixon and Glixon 2005:135.
[15] *Pace* Badolato 2013.

Such noncommittal treatment would seem to suggest that either he was not – or wished to give the impression that he was not – relying on any substantial sources, or indeed that the audience would not have had widespread access to the material from which he was working.[16]

Nevertheless, some indication of Noris's conception of the period can be found in his declaration that the work is connected explicitly with an earlier opera, *Marcello in Siracusa* (1670). Noris writes in the preface to the reader:

> Eccoti in fine, doppo la spada del Lazio il fulmine dell'Italia, doppo il MARCELLO, l'ATTILA. Il Compatimento che dimostrasti nel primo, figliò in quest'anno il secondo, e diemmi tanto calore che mi sono arrischiato spiegar un volo fin su le nevi del Caucaso.[17]

Already here in the paratext, Noris thematises one of the tropes about Germanic invaders, namely that they originate from cold and far-flung climates. Two further points arise from this, the first paratextual and the second as relating to the source material. A glance at the *dramatis personae* reveals that Noris divides his characters into three broad groups: 'Vandali', 'Romani' and 'Franchi'. The first of these groups contains Attila, his captain, Oronte, and Liso, his servant. It is clear that Noris is very loose with his terminology. Besides the Romans, for him there does not seem to be any difference between the various Germanic barbarian tribes, and indeed no difference between them and the Huns, who were not Germanic at all. Instead, it would appear that the librettist prefers to establish broad groups of Romans and non-Romans, perhaps crudely equivalent to 'goodies' and 'baddies'. Such imprecision is carried through into the text, with 'Vandal' and 'Goth/Gothic' being used even by the Hunnic characters themselves.

This characterisation arises directly from primary source material. In particular, this comes from the sixth-century author, Jordanes, who in his *Getica* gives much space to the origin of the Goths.[18] He places their ancestral homeland, Scandza, in the far north, perhaps the Baltic. Procopius, another sixth-century

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[16] Selfridge-Field (2008:106) claims that Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Attila, roi des Huns* of 1668 is a model for this opera, but I have difficulty finding much in common between the two pieces other than that they deal with the same historical figure.

[17] 'Here it is at last, after Latium's sword, Italy's thunderbolt, after *Il Marcello, L'Attila.* The benevolence you showed in the first has given rise to the second in this year and has given me such great warmth of feeling that I have taken the risk of showing you a trip right to the snowy Caucasus.' All translations are my own and, where I quote the original languages, I have kept original spelling unchanged throughout.

[18] Jord. *Get.* 25–6.

author who had first-hand experience of Germanic barbarians, also favours a cold origin in his *Bellum Vandalicum*, though his is closer to the Black Sea.[19] The cold north, too, is a trope which authors like Sidonius Apollinaris invoke when referring to the Huns, as in *carm.* 2.243–269, a panegyric to the emperor Anthemius. Also possible is the idea of the Caucasus as a byword for any kind of cruel, inhuman, or hardened behaviour, as is found in Dido's rebuke to Aeneas at *Aen.* 4.367 – a line which subsequently became commonplace in poetry.

How might Noris have had access to these texts? The *editio princeps* of Jordanes's *Getica* had been made in the early sixteenth century already, and there were regular editions made in the subsequent two centuries, with the closest to Noris's time being that of Elsevier in 1655. Very often this work was transmitted with Procopius, and sometimes with other authors' works on similar subjects. As King (2013:593–94) points out in her outline chronology of Venetian intellectual life, the Biblioteca Marciana, the largest public library in the city, had been in existence since the middle of the sixteenth century already. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, it increased its holdings to some six thousand books and manuscripts, and one can only assume that this number continued to rise. Private library collections would most certainly have been able to supplement this, and it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination that a well-off family such as the Grimanis would have had a library of their own, which could have been at the disposal of their librettists.

Another important source of information is not editions of original texts but compendia and other derivative kinds of history writing. Attila is a figure who is closely related to the history of Venice itself, and as such appears extensively in such patriotic histories as Bernardo Giustiniani's *De origine urbis Venetiarum*, written in the early 1490s. Other Renaissance histories dealing extensively with the period were also in circulation. For the Attila episode, the most important is another fifteenth-century work, *De rebus Hungaricis* by Antonio Bonfini (which tried to connect the 'Hun' with 'Hungarian') and then *De occidentali imperio* (1578/9) by Carlo Sigonio. Bonfini's work is certainly known to Lucas von Bostel, the German translator of *Attila,* as he quotes this document in his additional preface to the opera.

Sigonio is especially conceptually important for Noris, as he presents events like a modern historian would, with supporting evidence of primary sources (which he often quotes at length) and analysis.[20] Access to this work would have the double benefit of exposing our librettist to the general period as well as selected source

[19] Procop. *Vand.*1.2.3–6.

[20] On Sigonius, the chief modern study is McCuaig 1989. He deals primarily with Sigonio's conception of Roman republican matters; a small section concerning the genesis of *De occidentali imperio* and its companion volume *De Regno Italiae* is to be found on page 77.

material, which includes not only historians such as Paul the Deacon and Jordanes, but also poets such as Sidonius Apollinaris and Claudian. In itself, this does not strengthen my case for texts from Late Antiquity being integral to the construction of the opera, but it does show that Noris was at the very least aware of them. Although he is silent on his sources, we can confirm that he was indeed using this compendium by virtue of a curious choice of epithet he applies to Valentiniano.

At *De occidentali imperio* 13, Sigonio writes: *Neque ita multo pòst Valentinianus, Maximo relicto, libidine ardens accessit, atque amorem testatus, castissimae mulieri stuprum nefarium intulit, Sex. Tarquinium imitatus, qui violatione Lucretiae regnum ex urbe deiecit*.[21] Noris clearly picks up on the parallel which Sigonius draws with the rape of Lucretia when he has Massimo say the following about his secret enemy the emperor:

Massimo. Costui, ch'empio lascivo
Nella Reggia Latina
Il Sesto fù della Lugrezia mia,
Per la mano d'Oronte,
Che già m'attende in solitario speco;
Avrà in brev'ora'l pie dei ceppi onnusto.[22]
(I.7)

The episode is referenced by Massimo again in Act 3, Scene 9. Valentinian III's alleged rape of Petronius Maximus's wife does not even feature in Bonfini, much less in Giustiniani.

Sigonio's commentary is also useful as a lens through which Noris can conceive of the world of Late Antiquity. Although not negative in the same way as Petrarch's conception of the Dark Ages, Sigonio prefaces his work with a general introduction in which he expresses his opinion as to the reasons for why the Western Empire collapsed. The language is extreme, apocalyptic even, and reflects

[21] 'And, thus, not long afterwards, Maximus was left behind. Valentinian, burning with desire approached, and after having declared his love, carried out an evil taboo against this most chaste woman, in the manner of Sextus Tarquinius, who on account of his violation of Lucretia, cast the kingdom out from the city'. All translations from Latin are likewise my own.

[22] 'This man, who impiously and cravenly in the Latin kingdom was the Sextus to my Lucretia, who awaits me now in a lonely grotto at the hand of Orontes, will soon have his feet covered with shackles.' Curiously, in one of the two extant manuscript scores the line is changed to be at once more explicit and yet sanitised: 'Costui ch'infame/ Sesto empio lascivo/ ne la Reggia Latina mi rapì la Consorte…' (He who like the infamous Sextus, impiously and cravenly stole my consort from me in the Latin kingdom…).

a sense of implacable fatalism that the empire was always doomed to fail, to make place for new kingdoms. In short, this is the mediaeval idea of *translatio imperii*:

> *Quae mala simul acerbitate sua terras usque adeo late complexa sunt, ut nulla prope earum tam remota regio fuerit, quae non aut hominum sanguine cruentata, aut urbium incendio deformata, aut fortunarum expilatione exinanita, atrox in omnes post annos sui spectaculum exhibuierit. Ut,* si elementa omnia in huius universitatis exitium conspirassent, *quod aliquando futurum viris olim doctissimis placuit, neque facilius, neque perniciosius, neque miserabilius tantam, tamque opibus firmam Imperii molem dissipatura fuisse videantur, quam cum principibus temere saevientibus, ac barbaris atrociter irrumpentibus ipsae provinciae clade etiam apud posteros lacrymabili pervastatae sunt. Donec vetere demum sublato in Occidente Imperio novas barbarorum dominationes, et nova regnorum domicilia receperunt.*[23]
>
> *De occidentali imperio* 1

Noris reflects such a sentiment by opening the opera with a red comet dominating the stage, as well as through the character of Filistene, an astrologer. Against this backdrop, I would now like to focus on treatments of two particular elements in the libretto as additional case studies in the way Late Antiquity is treated in *Attila.* I do not make any claims to comprehensiveness here. The first is the presentation of the titular character in the light of Roman convention, and the second is the way the historical narrative is changed in order to accommodate the panegyrical aims of the dedication. Finally, there are also some comments as to the role which fate and prognostication play in the opera's understanding of the past.

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[23] 'And at the same time these evils widely took over the lands to such an extent in their bitterness, that no close part of those lands was too remote, that they were not either stained with the blood of men, or deformed by the burning of cities, or emptied by the plundering of fortunes, and that they showed in all the years afterwards this terrible spectacle of themselves. To such an extent that, if all the elements of this universe had planned their downfall, which it once pleased very learned men would happen at some time or another, they would seem neither more easily, more perniciously, more wretchedly to be on the point of having destroyed the great mass of the Empire, so steadfast in its riches, than when those provinces were completely destroyed in a disaster still worth crying over even in generations afterwards, all while princes raged without heed and barbarians violently breached the borders. Until at last, once the old Empire in the West had been destroyed, they became subject to new lordships of barbarians, and territories of new kingdoms.'

The False Jupiter and gigantomachy

Like many contemporaries, Noris's style is essentially representative of *Marinismo,* a poetic movement spawned in imitation of Giambattista Marino, the sixteenth-century author of the voluminous epic poem *L'Adone.*[24] This manifests in both the flexibility of Latinate word order and a reliance on the epithet as the chief device of characterisation, which itself gives the lyric metres an epic varnish. [25] Noris's fondness for this device in turn reveals a studied encyclopaedism, as the increasingly obscure referents of his epithets attest. These sources are consequently quite diverse, ranging from the antique, such as stock references to episodes in Virgil's *Aeneid* or Statius's *Thebaid*, to the contemporary, such as a reference to another Marinist poet, Federico Meninni.[26]

As the title character, Attila has the most (and most varied) epithets. McDonald (2021) discusses at length how the description of Attila, as transmitted in Jordanes, became the stock description (unquestioned) in subsequent mediaeval and Renaissance works. It is thus significant, given the dominance of that image and Noris's evident knowledge of the conceits in Jordanes about the Goths and Vandals, that our librettist deliberately avoids this characterisation. Nor indeed is he treated as a 'noble savage'. Rather, he is presented in terms which would typically be applied to a Roman emperor. The most numerous relate to the Divine Ruler, specifically Jupiter and the Sun.[27] On the one hand, the question of rulership is central to the workings of the plot. As Badolato (2013) summarises, the libretti which Noris produces during the 70s and 80s are largely preoccupied with the idea of tyranny. But in *Attila* this is not just the matter of a cruel leader who is threatening the livelihood of romantic couples. Rather, this takes on epic and world-shifting proportions.

A few examples will suffice to give the general flavour. Attila is at various points 'the Gothic Thunderer, *Gotico Tonante*', 'Gothic Jupiter, *Gotico Giove*', 'High-thundering Goth, *Altitonante Goto*' or otherwise the Sun around which the other characters orbit. But more than this, he transgresses these boundaries, setting

[24] Ketterer 2009:8.

[25] On Baroque literary aesthetics in general, which are marked chiefly by the ideas of *ingegno* ('wit') and *delectatio* ('delight'), see Ancheschi 1959:488–92; for these ideas as applied specifically to the Italian Baroque, and especially on the ideals and polemics surrounding *Marinismo*, see Croce 1959.

[26] The reference to *Argo volante,* 'flying Argus' (III.1), here used to mean the goddess Iris, is typical of Marinist circumlocutions. Noris appears to have taken it from Meninni's poem *Il Pavone* (the Peacock) published in *Poesie* (1669); see Croce 1910:487, 539.

[27] On Jupiter in Roman imperial ideology, see particularly Fears 1981.

himself up as superior to the normal hierarchy, as in this scene where he receives prisoners in Aquileia:

Attila. Vengane à me dei prigionier la turba
E qui giuri adorar su questa spada
Ch'Universo regge,
Novo Dio, nova fede, e nova legge.[28]
(I.3)

His transgression extends the operations of fate, contradicting the traditional view that even Jupiter is not above what has been predestined. Filistene, the astrologer, acts as a kind of chorus, providing a cautionary voice of reason at intervals during the drama. Attila responds to his prognostications not only with derision but with the self-assurance that he is above them:

Attila. Tumido esplorator del Firmamento
Di quelle zifre vane
Folle rivelator vaticinante,
Dimmi: del nostro brando,
Che parlan gl'astri, e'l mio rival Tonante?[29]
(I.2)

Attila. Sorgi o de' neri abissi
Spettro filosofante, ombra animata
D'astri pellegrinanti
Lascia d'errar tra i ciechi errori erranti.
[da un calcio alla sfera]
Irene. (Mi proteggono i Cieli.)
Filistene. Calpesta l'Orbe un cieco amante, e folle.
Attila. Son Tonante, son Dio, calco le sfere.[30]
(II.21)

[28] 'Bring me the crowd of prisoners; and let them swear here, on this sword that rules the Universe, to adore a new god, a new fealty and a new law.'
[29] 'Turgid explorer of the firmament, foolish prognosticating unveiler of these empty numbers, tell me: what do the stars and my rival Thunderer say about our sword?'
[30] 'Rise from the black abyss philosophising spectre, shade animated by pilgrim stars. Leave the wanderers to wander through blind wanderings. [*He kicks the sphere]* – (Heavens protect me.) – A blind and foolish lover tramples the globe. – I am the Thunderer, a God, I crush these spheres.'

The most this portrayal has in common with the historical accounts of Attila is its underlying sense of *superbia*.[31] Attila's claim to godhood is self-proclaimed and thus of itself seen as illegitimate, something which Irene notes during the spectacle which opens Act Three:

Apollo. È mio cielo un bel sembiante,
Bionde chiome son l'auree sfere,
E una fronte Alba lucente;
E in duo luci, che son nere
Bipartito è un Sole ardente,
E una bocca Iri vermiglia
Vibran folgori due ciglia
Dove siede qual Giove il nume infante.
Degno è un Trono di stelle
Bella al tuo piè; dià che di lampi sparso
Con lucido portento
Chiudi ne tuoi begl'occhi'l Firmamento.
Irene. E un Ciel terren, se un Dio terren sostenta.[32]
(III.1)

In addition to the idea of a celestial ruler, it is not long before this Jovian imagery extends to gigantomachy. This becomes expressly articulated at several points, such as following the same spectacle in Act Three. Valentiniano (who himself does not form part of this constellation of epithets) in an aside references Attila as Typhoeus, the giant whom Jupiter defeated and buried under Mount Etna:

Valentiniano. Lieto giorno, e felice.
(O superbia l'empio Tifeo
Ne suoi pensieri gonfi
D'un espugnato Ciel sogna i trionfi).[33] (III.1)

[31] Jor. *Get.* 25.

[32] 'My sky is a beautiful countenance, blonde hair are the golden spheres, and the reddening dawn its forehead; and in two eyes, which are black, a blazing sun in two parts, and its mouth an orange rainbow, two eyelashes – lightning bolts – flash where this Jupiter, a young god, sits. He is worthy of a throne of stars, at your feet, beautiful lady […] – It must be an earthly sky, if an earthly God holds it up.'

[33] 'What a happy and propitious day. (O how this impious Typhoeus inflates his sense of pride in his thoughts, dreams of triumphs, having conquered the Heavens).'

Gigantomachy is a typically epic device.[34] It speaks not only to questions of regime change, but also a critical battle for the soul of the world. Seen through this lens, the idea of an iconic Late Antique figure pitted against an ineffective Roman emperor, combined with the heightened sense of melodrama offered by the scene dressing of the giant comet, could make for a typical understanding of the idea of Late Antiquity as a whole.

Changing history

Although historical operas are ostensibly based on the materials available to the librettist, fidelity to these sources is but one consideration which the poet must take into account. As has been mentioned, Noris is quite happy to have only enough historical basis to make the story plausible, and then to colour in the outline with the expectations of the audience of the time: typical Baroque theatrical devices such as mistaken identities, love intrigues, and the promotion of heroic morality.[35] One of the most obvious changes which he makes to the historical narrative is the manner of Attila's death.

In the historical accounts, Attila dies on his wedding night by choking on his own blood following a nosebleed.[36] One could suggest that this would not make for good theatre by seventeenth-century standards, obsessed as the spirit of that era is on the one hand with heroism and glory, and constrained as its dramatic literature is on the other by the ideas of propriety which governed what was permissible to be represented on stage. Indeed, in Pierre Corneille's *Attila, roi des Huns* of 1667, the French tragedian remains faithful to this sequence of events but is obliged to make it happen offstage, having the episode described after the fact by another character in graphic detail instead. Noris makes Attila first the object of an assassination plot by the three Franks (Irene, Torismondo, and Teodorico), and then, when the two men are late to the scene of the crime, has Irene decapitate him in full view of the audience after singing him to sleep.[37]

This deviation from the historical account is noted and commented on at length by Lucas von Bostel in the preface to his German translation. His first reaction is to be astonished, and then to be rather annoyed by this artistic licence,

[34] On which see the treatment by Hardie 1986:85–90.

[35] Ketterer (2009:2) goes so far as to argue that the recourse to Classical subject matter is precisely because of the need to portray a particular brand of heroism as a mirror for rulers.

[36] E.g. Jord. *Get.* 49.

[37] See, however, an opposing view of Muir (2007:125–26), who emphasises the libertine and carnivalesque origins of opera in Venice. This is not the only instance of Senecan-style gore in *Attila* either: in Act 3 Scene 2, two soldiers bring Attila a platter with two eyes and a goblet full of blood.

but it is more the way in which he frames this outrage which should be of interest to our argument here. He begins his corrective *excursus* with the following:

> Es ebliebe hierbey der Kunst-geneigte Leser sich zu erinnern/ dessen was albereit hiebevor gedacht worden/ dass nemblich die Italiaener kein so gar grosses Bedencken tragen/ in ihren *poëtischen* Gedichten von der Warheit abzugehen um die sinnreichen Verwirrungen/ als welche gleichsam die Seele solcher Schau-Spiele sinde/ desto fuglicher anzubringen. [38]
>
> ([von Bostel], *Attila, Inhalt des Singe-Spiels,* [p. 2])

Less surprising is his acknowledgement that there are practical reasons why necessity and art should triumph over being correct, than his acknowledgement that there are those who would have picked up on it immediately, and that these should be people who are devoted to Art. He goes on to explain how the ending differs from the historical account by invoking Bonfini's *De rebus Hungaricis* (again, relying on a compendium rather than original texts). Von Bostel may just be showing off his own erudition, but it is not impossible that there would have been those in the audience at the Venetian première who would have noticed the same thing.

Just as Noris chiefly associates Attila in his epithets with Jupiter and his associated myths, so too is Irene often associated with the myth of Hercules, mostly through the figure of Omphale: just as the former is the ruler of his own universe, so is the latter the 'strong woman' who can bring down a hero. When Irene kills Attila, however, Noris suddenly changes from Classical to Biblical epithets: she is Judith, and he Holofernes and later Goliath. The only other time where Noris employs this device, is Valentiniano's aria (a prayer to the 'foremost God') in Act I, scene 6, where Attila is referred to as Sisera. This seems to me to mean a tacit reference of *translatio imperii* in action. It is a new kind of empire, with the divine backing of the one true God, which takes over one which is illegitimate. In this way, not only does the Christian dominate the pagan, but the Frankish queen also does the job in place of the Roman emperor.[39] Such an interpretation is very much

[38] 'It remains from this for the reader who is inclined to Art to remind himself of that which has already crossed his mind: namely, that the Italians give barely any thought in their poetic productions to departing from the truth in order to bring together this ingenious patchwork all the more fittingly than the spirit of such a stage play might be, so to speak' (my translation).

[39] Cf. also Fears 1981:120–122 on the Christian displacement of Jovian ideology.

in line with the view which Sigonio expresses in his introduction and may well have been informed by Noris's reading.

Selfridge-Field (2008) suggests that Corneille's *Attila, roi des Huns* served as a model for Noris. While I cannot find much in common between the two pieces insofar as the treatment of the subject matter is concerned, the suggestion does have some merit if we consider the dedication again. Although Corneille's tragedy was produced at the time when both the talents of the author were waning and the tastes of the public shifted towards younger tragedians like Jean Racine, its production would nevertheless have been on the radar of those in high society given its first production at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal.[40] *Attila's* dedicatees, the prince and princess of Monaco, would likewise have been aware of that production given their status. With this in comparatively recent memory, the drastically changed ending of Noris's version, which turns the Frankish heroine into the saviour of the empire, leads us to the rather attractive conclusion that *Attila* is in fact a panegyric to the visiting French in disguise, and thus a diplomatic weapon for the Venetians. While turning the whole intrigue into a *roman à clef* with specific correspondences would perhaps push the issue too far, we might understand the use of Late Antiquity as a useful period 'to think with'.

Conclusion

A number of things can therefore be concluded in relation to our preliminary questions. We have seen that there is a precedent for some knowledge among Venetian audiences as to Attila and his general history, given the existence and circulation of several historical compendia on the subject, which could have not only provided information but also a gateway to primary sources. There is even more precedent for this in the case of the foreign dignitaries. From the discussion of the two major aesthetic choices which Noris makes, we can see that they broadly reflect the idea of a breakdown of the old order and the replacement of it with a transformed, yet continuous new order. This is especially prevalent where the librettist makes deliberate changes to the historical narrative in order, evidently, to appeal to the needs of his immediate dedicatees. These are clearly not accidental, nor do they arise from ignorance of the period, but rather reveal a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the period as something different from the examples offered by traditional Graeco-Roman models.

[40] See Voltaire's judgement of the play and the anecdotes included there in Corneille 1821:3–7.

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