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The Colossus of Rhodes according to Giacomo Torelli

When reflecting on how to address the trope of the lighthouse in a manner appropriate to my discipline of French seventeenth-century theatre history, I did not immediately foresee any difficulties. After all, ports, the sea and seashore scenes abound in the spectacular drama of the period, with the most notable of the latter undoubtedly being that in which Perseus flies down on Pegasus to rescue Andromeda from the monster in Pierre Corneille's *Andromède* of 1650. Moreover, scenic designers relished the challenge of imitating waves, as we see from Nicola Sabbattini's *Pratique* of 1638, where he describes three different ways of 'causing the sea to appear', 'rise up, swell, become agitated and change colour', and make vessels seem to glide across it (Sabbattini, 1994: 110-113, 115, 117, 120). However, when I came to look for examples of lighthouses, at first I found none – a fact I found all the more surprising given that lighting effects were also extremely popular (Clarke, 1999, 2007, 2011a). The only explanation I could offer was that the majority of these effects sought to reproduce the grandeur of the natural world, with the rising of the sun and moon, and the appearance of stars, planets and constellations being particularly appreciated.

After some searching, though, I did find one striking image (Figure JC-1): a representation of the decor for the prologue of the opera *Deidamia* performed at the Teatro Novissimo in Venice in 1644 (libretto by Scipione Herrico, music possibly by Laurenzi Filiberto, although frequently attributed to Francesco Cavalli) (Whenham). The decors for this production (like those subsequently for *Andromède*) were produced by Giacomo Torelli, 'the magician of Fano', who worked at the Teatro Novissimo from 1641 to 1644 before moving to Paris in 1645. Engravings of three of them, together with those of the decors for another of Torelli's Teatro Novissimo productions, *Venere gelosa* (1643), have been identified in a volume published the same year entitled *Apparati scenici* (Bisaccioni, 1644) (Bjurström, 1962: 122).



[Figure JC-1: Giacomo Torelli, *The Harbour with the Colossus of Rhodes*, oil on canvas, Pinoteca Civica de Fano, Italy]

The decor for the prologue of *Deidamia* features two towers, one square and one round, to either side of the stage, with the Colossus of Rhodes set slightly further back in the centre. The prows of vessels can be seen beyond, ranked to either side of the harbour, with waves between them, and a painted backcloth representing the city of Rhodes closes up the rear of the stage. Cupid hovers above, his bow clearly visible, while two female figures are borne upon the waves, one supported by a kind of lily pad and the other on a machine featuring a large wheel. These are the nymph Thetis and the goddess Fortune, who appear along with the god of love in the opera's prologue. The fact that all three are naked, with the modesty of the female figures preserved only by loose draperies, suggests that this aspect of the depiction at least does not suggest a theatrical reality. This does not, though, necessarily cast doubt on the authenticity of the image's other features.

The Colossus of Rhodes is said to have been a representation in bronze of the Sun god Apollo, the archetype of light and power, and this is what Torelli depicts: his statue bears a golden staff, his head is surrounded by rays of light, and he holds aloft a flaming beacon to guide vessels into the port. But although fire and firework effects were frequently used on the Renaissance stage, it is probable that a painted scenic element would have represented not only the beacon, but also the whole figure. Similarly, the vessels in the harbour would have been depicted on a series of progressively smaller stage flats running parallel to the stage front on either side, painted to create the impression of perspective.

The Knights Hospitallers captured and established their headquarters on Rhodes in 1307, and were confirmed in possession of it by Pope Clement V in 1309. In 1522, after beating off Ottoman attacks over many decades, the Knights and Suleiman the Magnificent came to terms and the Knights left the island. Thomas Corneille, in the third volume of his *Dictionnaire universel géographique et historique* of 1708 (III. 273), describes the main port of Rhodes as follows:

At the entrance to this port, on the right, there can be seen a new tower, that the Turks constructed in the place of an old one that had been there previously, and that was called the Saint Nicholas tower. It is square, and at the top there is a very beautiful donjon, with a look out post at each corner. [...] [O]pposite this tower, is an old castle that was known as Saint Ange, from the time when the Knights were the masters of the island. This castle and this tower, which are more than fifty toises apart, are built on the two spots where were placed the feet of the great bronze Colossus, one of the seven wonders of the world, between the legs of which vessels passed in full sail.

We see, therefore, as Bjurström notes, that the tradition according to which the Colossus bestrode the harbour entrance persisted into the eighteenth century, ‘in spite of the knowledge that the harbor entrance was three hundred feet wide whereas the statue was only one hundred and sixty feet high’ (1962: 91). Also, that the tower and castle were said to have been built on the place where the Colossus’s feet had stood, whereas Torelli shows tower, castle and Colossus as existing simultaneously.

Bjurström traces the development of the image of the Colossus via Maerten van Heemskerck’s 1572 engraving to that of Marten de Vos (1614), concluding that ‘the *contrapposto* [OED: ‘the arrangement of a figure so that the action of arms and shoulders contrasts as strongly as possible with that of hips and legs; a twisting of the figure on its own axis’], so pronounced in Heemskerck and less so in de Vos, is still noticeable in Torelli’s structure (1962: 93). Another imaginative illustration of the Colossus, by Georg Balthasar Probst, this time from the eighteenth century, similarly purports to show this wonder in operation with a boat exiting the harbor through its legs. While the engravings of van Heemskerck and de Vos feature only a single tower, Probst includes two, but sets one back from the other, thereby giving the impression of greater depth. Torelli’s choice, on the other hand, of two parallel towers is rational in a theatrical sense, in that the two towers serve to

The two towers described by Corneille are visible in a map of Rhodes made in the sixteenth century by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg (Figure JC-2), although it is not possible to distinguish here the domed building seen in the two engravings. Nonetheless, we can conclude that Torelli is presenting for his Venetian audience a seventeenth-century conception of Rhodes, onto which he has superimposed the Colossus. The main question, therefore, is why.



Torelli's primary objective must have been to set the scene for his spectators. Herrico's Deidamia must not be confused with Achilles's lover, the heroine of operas by Cavalli, Campra and Handel. Our Deidamia is daughter of Aeacides, King of Epirus and his wife, Queen Phthia, and sister of Pyrrhus, who also appears in the opera, which tells the convoluted

story of how she came to be married to Demetrius, son of the King of Asia Minor. The prologue to *Deidamia* tells the reader that it is set in ‘Le port de Rhodes’. How better to render this for the spectator than by the representation of the Colossus? In fact, Rhodes itself is mentioned only infrequently in the opera: four times in the front matter, five times in stage directions and seven times in the text. More importantly, though, given its central position in Torelli’s decor for the prologue, the Colossus is not mentioned at all. Possible insights into why this figure was nevertheless made so central are provided by comparing Torelli’s decor for the prologue of *Deidamia* with an engraving showing his set for *Bellerofonte*, produced at the Teatro Novissimo in 1642 (Figure JC-3).



[Figure JC-3: Giacomo Torelli, set for prologue of *Bellerofonte*, 1642]

Elements of decor were frequently re-used, and the appearance of ships with curved prows on the left in Torelli’s Colossus depictions and on the right in the *Bellerofonte* engraving can be explained by the fact that images in engravings are automatically reversed. However, perhaps more striking in the latter is the view of Venice itself to the rear of the stage. According to Ellen Rosand, during the course of the opera, a ‘model’ of the city was caused by Neptune to emerge from the sea (Rosand, 1990: 134); although, in my view, this was more probably represented by a painted backcloth.

In her book on opera in seventeenth-century Venice, Rosand describes how, in the 1640s and 1650s, these works reflected the current political situation, as authors of librettos moved away from the Trojan-Roman founding myths that had formed their previous subjects:

If less concerned with the legendary origins of Venice, [these librettos] seem to bear an even more specific relationship to current events. References to and personifications of Venice continue to cultivate or expand upon her image as a stronghold of freedom and haven against the barbarians, but the barbarians are now pointedly Turkish, as if in response to Venice's growing preoccupation with the Ottoman threat to her maritime power (Rosand, 1990: 143)

Indeed, 1645 saw the outbreak of the sixth Ottoman-Venetian War or Cretan War, which was to continue until 1669.

In these librettos, and as would subsequently be the case for the France of Louis XIV (Clarke, 2011b, c), Venice is praised not only as a haven of liberty, but also as a promoter of the arts – a sentiment echoed by Herrico in his dedicatory epistle to *Deidamia*:

This great city has, as much as by her site, always shown herself to be admirable and exceptional in public and private activities. Nowadays, the foreigner is amazed to see richly decorated theatres where so many works of musical drama are performed that are ingeniously planned and full of varied and wonderful things to see. So many great geniuses are there given the opportunity to exercise their talents and attract praise, either in poetry, or music, or the construction of machines, or in other fields that are just as honourable with regard to this art form.

Similar themes are developed in the text of the opera, as when the President of the Rhodes Senate declares (I, 8):

[...] I will be justly praised
If for our dear liberty
I must risk, if necessary, my life.
In truth, a wise perspicacity is necessary,
Because all around us,
On one side the untrustworthy Greek,

And on the other the lords of Asia and Egypt
Show by many signs
That our liberty annoys them and makes them envious.

As noted above, Torelli's decor for *Deidamia* is in many ways a mash-up of old and new elements: towers from the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries; a vaguely Ottoman domed building; together with an entirely anachronistic Colossus, since the latter was felled by an earthquake in 226 BC. Indeed, the Colossus in Torelli's decor is still more anachronistic than might immediately appear, since Herrico's opera deals with the marriage of Deidamia to Demetrius, the son of Antigonus. This is the same Demetrius who, in 305 BC, besieged Rhodes on the instructions of his father, but then relented and departed a year later, leaving behind a huge store of military equipment. The Rhodians then sold this and used the revenue to construct the Colossus (Pliny the Elder, xxiv.18). Herrico was right, therefore, in omitting the Colossus from his libretto, since it did not exist at the time of the events he is relating, and there is a profound disjunction between text and decor in this respect. Perhaps more importantly in the context of this discussion, there is evidence to suggest that the Colossus did not actually straddle the harbour (and may not even have been constructed near it) and did not carry a torch (Jordan, 2014: 22-33). In other words, it was not a lighthouse. But, of course, we can hardly blame Torelli for following the accepted wisdom of his time.

I would suggest that, by deliberately echoing the decor of the earlier *Bellerofonte*, which had revealed Venice in so magical a fashion, and onto which he has superimposed the Colossus in order to suggest Rhodes, Torelli is making a conscious parallel between the two states. The Knights had constructed Rhodes City as a model of the medieval European ideal, only to see it fall beneath the Ottoman onslaught. How very pertinent, then, this must have seemed to the members of the Venetian audience of *Deidamia* as they geared themselves up for yet another episode in their own titanic struggle against the same forces.

Even if the real Colossus was not a lighthouse (and let us not forget that there was another lighthouse among the seven wonders of the ancient world: the Pharos of Alexandria), and even if its representation within Torelli's decor did not actually serve to emit light, the

Deidamia Colossus could, nevertheless, be said to be a beacon in another regard, alerting contemporary spectators to the danger of the Ottoman threat and thereby representing Venetian (and by extension Christian) values of liberty, art and culture in the face of a perceived encroaching Muslim ‘darkness’.

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