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**BERNARDINO STEFONIO'S *FLAVIA TRAGOEDIA*:  
CLASSICAL SOURCES.  
THE STAGING OF A VERY LONG TRAGEDY**

As we know, Bernardino Stefonio was one of the most important dramatists of Jesuit theatre.<sup>1</sup> He is best remembered in the history of theatre because his tragedy, *Crispus Tragoedia*,<sup>2</sup> written and first staged in 1597, laid the foundation of Christian tragedy, the so-called martyr tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Stefonio moves on a path cleared by Father Stefano Tuccio S.J., who had provided dramatists with the prototype for the martyr play. In fact, for the first time in a tragedy following the conventions of classical drama, namely *Christus Patiens* (about 1569), Tuccio staged Jesus' agony and death on the Cross. Suffering both as a God and as a man, Jesus Christ was the earliest martyr of Christianity (*Rex Martirum*).<sup>4</sup>

For the 1600 Jubilee, the 12<sup>th</sup> one of the Holy Catholic Church, Stefonio wrote and performed, at the Collegio Romano in Rome, his second martyr tragedy, *Flavia Tragoedia*. At the time, the Pope was Clement VIII, born Ippolito Aldobrandini.

*Flavia Tragoedia* was staged again and published in 1621. According to a letter written by Father Stefonio to Father Valentino Mangioni and dated April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1606,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernardino Stefonio S.J. was born in Poggio Mirteto, a little town near Rome, on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1560, entered the Society of Jesus on February 2<sup>th</sup>, 1581 and died in Modena on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1620. He was a professor of Rhetoric in Rome and Naples and a very good orator. He wrote, among other works, three tragedies, *Sancta Symphorosa*, which stages the martyrdom of a Roman Christian woman and her sons, and two historical tragedies, *Crispus* and *Flavia*.

<sup>2</sup> *Crispus Tragoedia* represents a great innovation in the development of the Jesuit theatre. It stages a historical event: the death of *Julius Flavius Crispus*, Constantin's son. The prince was falsely charged by his stepmother, whose advances he had rejected, and condemned by the emperor Constantin. Stefonio takes inspiration from two classical tragedies, namely *Hippolytus*, by Euripides, and *Phaedra*, by Seneca; we can say that *Crispus* is a Christianized version of an ancient myth. *Crispus Tragoedia* is available in a modern critical edition: see TORINO 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Stefonio does not say of Christian tragedy; Tarquinio Galluzzi does. In the treatise *Rinovazione dell'antica tragedia e Difesa del Crispo* (1633), he poses a problem: can a Christian man, good and pious, a martyr, in this case, represent a suitable subject for a tragedy? Galluzzi resolves the problem by Plato's thesis. According to Plato, Tragedy came out from the hatred of the Athenians toward Minos, the cruel tyrant of Crete; in simple terms a tragedy inspires a hatred of tyranny and it is advantageous to the citizens and the State. Galluzzi says that to see a martyr constant in his faith and persecuted by a tyrant represented on a stage, is edifying. At the same time, the cruelty of the tyrant's actions convinces everyone that freedom is most important. See GALLUZZI 1633, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> See VALENTIN 2004, 435, and TUCCIUS 2011, XLV–XLVI, 49–142. See a comparative analysis of the scenes of martyrdom in *Christus Patiens*, *Crispus Tragoedia* and *Flavia Tragoedia* in SAULINI 2014, 61–81.

we can believe this tragedy was expected to be staged, or published, in Rome at that time. Stefonio writes he is revising *Flavia*, which «is wished» by the Court and the College, and that Roman noblemen will cover the cost, but he does not clear up the project.<sup>5</sup>

The 1600 Jubilee was proclaimed on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1599 by the papal bull, *Annus Domini Placabilis* and it was the second Jubilee celebrated after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). In the opinion of Clement VIII, the Council had been an extraordinary event for the Church, and during his pontificate the Pope resolutely applied the decrees it had established. He was convinced that Rome as the Papal Seat was the centre of Christianity, more so then than before the Council of Trent.

The Tridentine Profession of Faith (*Professio Fidei Tridentinae*), promulgated by the bull of Pius IV, *Iniunctum Nobis*, [acknowledges] the holy Roman Catholic Apostolic Church as the mother and mistress of all churches. [It also] promises and swears true obedience to the bishop of Rome, successor of Saint Peter, Prince of Apostles, and Vicar of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, the 1600 Jubilee was celebrated with all due solemnity. The Pope had Saint John's Basilica and Saint Peter's Basilica completed and many churches restored. Thousands of pilgrims came to Rome to gain indulgences, and all year long there were magnificent ceremonies and triumphal processions all over the city. Within this milieu, Stefonio used classical sources – both historical and literary – to celebrate the *Ecclesia Triumphans*.

*Flavia Tragoedia* is set in Rome at the end of Domitian's reign (Domitian was murdered in AD 96). The emperor had just promoted to the rank of caesar Titus Flavius Vespasian and Titus Flavius Domitian, the sons of his own cousin, Titus Flavius Clement, and Clement's wife, Flavia Domitilla. A Golden Age is expected to return to Rome, and the imperial court and the Roman people are celebrating its advent with the so called *ludi saeculares*. But the temples are empty, and the gods are supposed to be angry. During the games, Apollonius Tyaneus, a magician who is the real *deus ex machina* of the tragedy, reveals to the emperor that his relatives are Christians. He also suggests that Clement and his sons be sacrificed to appease Rome's angry gods. The tragedy culminates in the martyrdom of three members of the Flavian dynasty at the hands of the cruel emperor Domitian.

However, the two young caesars and their father are not three real martyrs, they are pious and innocent men who refuse to surrender their faith. They choose Christ so they are deprived of corporeal life but keep the spiritual one. Secondly and importantly, they are beheaded because Domitian and his counsellor, Apollonius, are afraid

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<sup>5</sup> SAULINI 2007, 334–335.

<sup>6</sup> O'MALLEY 2013, 283–285.

of Christianity: in fact, they are really convinced that the new reign of Jesus Christ menaces the Roman power.

*Flavia Tragoedia* is both a martyr tragedy and a historical play. The historical events date to the years AD 95–96, but for his dramatic purposes the author compressed the actual chronology. For example, Domitian's *ludi saeculares* are dated to AD 90! As his historical source, Stefonio probably used Cardinal Cesare Baronio's *Annales Ecclesiastici*, but Baronio's chronology of those events is incorrect.

In the *Argumentum* of the tragedy the dramatist writes that Clement's wife, Domitilla maior, and her niece, Domitilla minor, were banished to the island of Pandataria and Pontia – that is, present-day Ventotene and Ponza:

Clemente iugulato, filijsque mactatis in Minervae sacro, in omne deinceps Christianae Reipublicae corpus saevitum est. In insulam Pandatariam et Pontiam amandatae Domitillae duae, Ioannes in Cycladas deportatus, in omnem aetatem, ordinem, sexum iterum erupit Neroniana crudelitas.<sup>7</sup>

However, Baronio mentions two Christian women of the name of Domitilla who were exiled from Rome, while Saint Jerome speaks of an illustrious Flavia Domitilla banished by Domitian to Pontia. The fact is that the ancient Christian writers do not agree on the historical identity of saint Domitilla and the question has not yet been clarified.

Apollonius Tyaneus was a philosopher and a magician, who might have lived in the first century. We know of him from his first biographer, Philostratus, and he is also mentioned by Sossianus and by Christian writers, such as Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea. Many of his deeds, both evil and good, have been exaggerated and it is difficult to figure out what kind of person he really was. In Baronio's treatise Apollonius seems to be a sorcerer hostile to Christians.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, I must state beforehand that the purpose of this article is not to present a historical hypothesis, but to demonstrate a theatrical one. Therefore, the following analysis is based solely on the text of *Flavia Tragoedia*.

We know that Jesuit school dramas focused on the confrontation between martyr and tyrant. The martyr is a virtuous man persecuted because of his faith, the tyrant is a powerful man who tortures the martyr and deprive him of his life; sometimes the martyr is a woman. For example, Eugenia is violently persecuted by Mahomet in *La Demetria in Trebisonda*, by the Sicilian dramatist Ortensio Scammacca.<sup>9</sup>

In *Flavia Tragoedia*, both the cruel pagan tyrants and the virtuous Christian martyrs are based on historical characters. Stefonio emphasizes the cruelty of the tyrants,

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<sup>7</sup> STEPHONII 1621, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> About the identity of Apollonius Tyaneus and Flavia Domitilla see: HOXBY 2016, 187–190, 213–214.

<sup>9</sup> See SACCO MESSINEO 1988, 149.

namely Apollonius Tyaneus and the emperor Domitian. Apollonius is thirsting for revenge on his former persecutor, Domitian and is so used to doing evil that he has become inhuman and, above all, he uses dark magic to make contact with Hell. At the beginning of the story, the magician asks Hades for help. The scene has a literary source as it is partly modeled on the so called Erichtho episode (6, 507-831) in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, commonly referred to as the *Pharsalia*.<sup>10</sup>

This poem is set during the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. The powerful sorceress Erichtho performs for Sextus, Pompey's son, a necromantic ritual. She reanimates the corpse of a recently dead soldier who foretells Pompey's defeat and also Caesar's murder. In more general terms, he foretells the fall of Roman Republic.

Differently from Erichtho, Apollonius does not bring people back from the dead, neither evokes Stigyan shades. Instead, he performs a ceremony in order to gain a positive help, so he brings his own invocation to an end by calling out for the king of Avernus:

Huc ades primi sceleris repertor,  
Horridi turmas Averni,  
Cocytia monstra recense,  
Vulgus eructa furiale terris.  
(I,2, p. 23)

After Apollonius' long and terrifying *carmen*, Cerberus and other Stigyan monsters ascend to the stage; the monsters transform themselves into sixteen black boys, skilled in singing and dancing, who are given by the magician to the emperor as a gift, thus gaining Domitian's forgiveness and friendship. Now the audience in the theatre knows that Hades, who could be identified with Satan, will provide the sorcerer with support and advice.

Domitian is the second tyrant. This Roman emperor reigned from 81 to 96 AD, and exercised an absolute political power. He firmly believed in Roman gods and venerated Jupiter and Minerva; many times in Stefonio's tragedy, Domitian is called Minerva's son. In the last years of his reign, this emperor heavily persecuted Christians and banished philosophers from Rome. One of the martyrs was Saint John the Evangelist, who was boiled in oil; by miracle, he survived and was exiled to Pathmos. Saint John is an important character in *Flavia*, too.

In *Flavia Tragoedia*, Domitian appears as a powerful and ambitious man. He hates Christians and their God, who is an enemy of the Roman gods. He is also afraid because, according to the Roman view of the world, he thinks that whoever

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<sup>10</sup> LUCANO 1981.

laughs at the gods, also undermines the authority of kings;<sup>11</sup> in Domitian's view, the only response must consist in persecuting Christians. In spite of persecution, fear makes the tyrant insecure and credulous, so when Tyaneus falsely charges the emperor's Christian relatives with conspiracy, the sorcerer easily brings the cruel and furious man to fear and hate his own heirs and their father.

We know that Jesuit dramatists took Seneca's tragedies rather than Greek ones as their model. Seneca provided them with the model for the structure and the verse. Finally and most importantly, Jesuit plays often transfer excerpts from the model in a new context; in writing the final scene of *Flavia*, Stefonio was inspired by a literary source, namely the myth of Pelops' sons Thyestes and Atreus, the main characters of Seneca's *Thyestes Tragoedia*.

We know that in this tragedy, a long rivalry between the brothers culminates in a Thyestian feast. As it is well known, Thyestes deprives his brother of Mycenae's throne, but Atreus comes back to the city and takes revenge on his enemy-brother. Atreus invites him for a banquet to mark the reconciliation. In truth, he has killed his brother's sons and then cooks and serves them to their own father. Obviously, Thyestes is unaware of what he is eating, until Atreus tells him!

Similarly, in Stefonio's tragedy, the two brothers, Flavius Vespasian and Flavius Domitian, are sacrificed by the emperor. They are beheaded, their corpses are destroyed by fire, though their heads are kept apart. After a feigned reconciliation with Clement, Domitian shows him the decapitated heads of the young caesars, and, similarly to Atreus, mocks at an incredulous father and asks him if he recognizes his own sons:

*Imp.* [...]. Filios nosis, pater?  
Agnosce vulnus, fruere, complexum expedi,  
Saturare, visus pasce, contrecta duos.  
Dubitas? Quid haeres? Crede, sunt nostrum genus.  
(V,9, p. 203)

Meanwhile, the emperor and his cruel counsellor cynically observe the grieving father.

If we read some lines of verse in Act 5 of *Flavia Tragoedia*, we can see that Stefonio does not reinterpret the ancient myth (as he does in *Crispus Tragoedia*), but he draws a parallel between Atreus and Domitian and underlines that the emperor's cruelty is very similar to Atreus'.

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<sup>11</sup> *Imp.* Imperia regum solvit irrisor deum: / Quicunque superos laedit, et reges simul. (II,3, p. 65)

Quo dira regis sacra ploratu querar?  
Romam an Corinthum, Domitius an Atreus tenet?  
*Cho.* Quae monstra peperit aula, Pelopeiae aemula?  
(V,9, p. 191)

Huc ergo (ne quid Atreum pudeat sui  
Dissimile monstrum generis) huc terrae lues,  
Domitius acer, liberos fratris trahit.  
(V,9, p. 192)

Ollam Thyestae vereor et fratrum dapes.  
At frater Atreus alter inscribi potest,  
Dici Thyesten alterum, plane est nefas.  
Quid cardo sonuit regius? [...]  
(V,9, p. 199)

Tyaneus has taken his revenge on Domitian; he knows well that unless there is an heir, the empire will fall. But this is not enough for him: one of the twelve apostles, Saint John, is in Rome, as a guest in Clement's home, and Apollonius takes personal revenge on the Evangelist showing him the three decapitated heads of the Christian martyrs.

Tyrants place their trust in cruelty, revenge and violence; on the contrary, martyrs place their trust in goodness, forgiveness and faith in God.

Clement and his sons are generous and loyal to Rome and the kingdom. Flavius Clement is a former consul and a valiant soldier who, at the beginning of the story, is awaited to return to Rome from a war. His sons are differently skillful: Flavius Vespasian is more skilled as a soldier than as a politician, Flavius Domitian is more skilled as a politician than as a soldier. They are grateful to their uncle, the emperor, and accept the rule of the caesars without reservation, but in all their actions they devote every effort of their body, mind and spirit to God. Thus, when they are required to renounce Jesus Christ and God they reject any kind of pressure and refuse to surrender their faith.

Walking on the path of Jesus Christ, the three innocent members of the Flavian family endure martyrdom. Differently from the ancient tragedies, the death of Clement occurs on the stage: obeying an order by Domitian, an official beheads him, while the condemned man turns his thoughts to Jesus and the eternal life.

The words spoken by the prisoners, Domitian and Vespasian, as they await execution, demonstrate feelings of love for their family and strong faith in God.

For instance, when Domitian, who seems to be less courageous than his brother, asks him where the tyrant will send them, Vespasian firmly answers him he will send them to Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

The caesars are aware of their own innocence, and hope that in the future Roman citizens will know the truth of their cruel execution. Imitating Jesus Christ, who is the archetype of all martyrs, the three innocent men offer their lives to God and pray to him to receive them into Heaven.

The point of difference between the cruel tyrants and the virtuous martyrs is that, in keeping with Christian principles, not only do none of the martyrs have feeling of revenge, but they forgive the tyrant and pray to God for him. This is a Christian's duty and above all the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

In *Flavia Tragoedia*, the characters often speak of the glorious history of Rome. At the beginning of Act 4, Stefonio combines a historical source with a literary one. The scene is set in a camp, a chorus of Roman soldiers and their commander are on the stage. To encourage the soldiers to fight, the commander recalls, in song, a chain of crucial events and many courageous protagonists of Roman history. In the first strophe he tells the soldiers about the ancestor of the Roman people, Aeneas; then, he mentions a great number of heroes and heroines, such as the ancient kings of Rome, Clelia, Cincinnatus, and so on. They are all presented as examples of virtue and courage to be imitated.

The soldiers are persuaded by the examples and after every strophe they express their consent and enthusiasm by singing a short paean. At the end, the commander celebrates Flavius Clement and the two young caesars in whom the Roman people place their trust: they are the heirs of Rome's political and military power:

*Praef.* Hunc olim, quaecunque sagis, quaecunque quieti  
Serviet aut animis aut armis utilis aetas,  
Nil, nisi Clementis nomen, te maius haberi  
Roma velit, victrix armis, animisque duorum  
Ambos Roma colat, gentes veneretur et ambos,  
Tam variae linguis gentes, quam moribus omnes,  
Secula dum claudat postrema volubilis orbis,  
Rursus et incipiant alij procedere menses.  
(IV,1, p. 123)

Obviously, the officer is unaware that the three members of the Flavian dynasty are Christians.

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<sup>12</sup> *Dom.* Quo nos tyrannus mittet? *Vesp.* Ad Christum, puto. (V,7, p. 184.)

The classical poet used as a model here is Virgil, in particular the description of the shield of Aeneas in *Aeneis*, 8,624–728.<sup>13</sup>

Aeneas' shield had been forged by Vulcan and presented to Aeneas by his mother, Venus. On the shield, Vulcan engraved, prophetically, some important events – both positive and negative – of Roman history. He begins by writing of Aeneas' son, Ascanius, the founder of the Roman progeny. He continues by recounting tales of heroes and heroines, such as Manlius and Clelia; he also tells about a defeated enemy of Rome, Catilina, and an important law-maker, Cato.

In Vulcan's prophecy the history of Rome culminates in Caesar Augustus' Empire, which is described in all its glory:

At Caesar, triplici invectus Romana triumpho  
Moenia, dis Italis votum immortale sacrabat,  
Maxuma tercentum totam delubra per urbem.  
Laetitia ludisque viae plausuque fremebant:  
Omnibus in templis matrum chorus, omnibus area;  
Ante aras caesi stravere iuveni.  
(8,714–719)

In keeping with the ancient world view, Aeneas places his trust in fate, and therefore he has no doubt that it will guide Roman history to a glorious imperial conclusion.

Taking Aeneas' shield as a narrative model for the commander of the Roman camp, Stefonio introduces a crucial difference: in the above-mentioned scene in *Flavia Tragoedia*, the history of Rome culminates in the reign of Flavius Vespasian and Flavius Domitian, that is in the new reign of Jesus Christ, son of God and God himself, and of his Vicar on earth, the Roman Pope. In fact, according to the Christian vision of the world, God's plan for mankind will guide the history of Rome to its glorious Catholic conclusion. In other terms, God himself wants the Holy Roman Catholic Church to be the heir of pagan Rome.

The above-mentioned commander of the Roman camp sometimes uses the same lines of verse as Virgil, for example in describing Titus Manlius, the guardian of the Tarpeian rock, standing before the temple and watching over the Capitol:

In summo custos Tarpeiae Manlius arcis  
Stabat pro templo et Capitolia celsa tenebat.  
(*Aeneis*, 8,652–653)

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<sup>13</sup> VIRGILIO 1962.



*Praef.* In summo custos Tarpeiae Manlius arcis  
Sic vigilata tegat: Capitolia clara, canori  
Anseris excitus cantu [...].  
(*Flavia*, IV,1, p. 118)

Stefonio is indebted to Virgil and even much more to Horace. In fact, in Act 1 of *Flavia Tragoedia*, a group of sixteen boys, who accompany the *Flamen Dialis*, sings Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* in its entirety. We know now Horace composed it in 17 BC, for the *ludi saeculares* of Augustus. Stefonio was probably unaware of this relatively recent discovery, but he surely knew the context. At the end of Act 1, a group of Christian boys replies to the pagan ones with a *Parodia* of Horace's *Carmen*. According to the Greek meaning of the word, *parodia* is a rewriting and in this case it is a Christianized version of *Carmen Saeculare*. Both Horace and Stefonio use the same meter, the tetrastich Sapphic strophe: three minor Sapphic (Sapphic hendecasyllabs) and one Adoneus (five-syllabled line). The purpose of Horace's hymn is to celebrate Apollo and Diana, the purpose of the *Parodia ex Horatio* is to celebrate Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary<sup>14</sup>.

We are not going to analyze here Stefonio's poem in detail; for our purpose it will be sufficient to compare the two third strophes:

Alme Sol, curru nitido diem qui  
promis et celas aliusque et idem  
nascaris, possis nihil urbe Roma  
visere maius.  
(*Carmen Saeculare*)

Vere Sol, vultu nitido diem qui  
promis et celas, aliusque et idem  
nascaris, malis nihil urbe Roma  
visere maius.  
(*Parodia ex Horatio*)

The strophes focus on the Sun, whose pagan attribute is *alme* (nourishing), and whose Christian attribute is *vere* (truthful). After Homer, Apollo was identified with the Sun, the identification of Apollo and Christ is well-known. Christian humanists, like Stefonio<sup>15</sup>, tried to conciliate classical literary tradition with Christian theology;

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<sup>14</sup> For every news about the context and its bibliography, and for an exhaustive comparative analysis of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* and Stefonio's *Parodia ex Horatio*, see BARTERA 2011. I use this article as a source for the quotations from the texts.

<sup>15</sup> About Bernardino Stefonio as a Christian humanist, see SAULINI 2007.

in doing so, they used a poetic identification of Christ with Apollo, of Olympus with Heaven, and so on.

The difference between the adjectives is crucial: *almus* is an adjective commonly used to describe pagan gods, both male and female; on the contrary, *verus* is an adjective describing the only god existing in actual fact – that is, the Christian Trinitarian God. Thus, through the use of the latter adjective, Stefonio claims that Jesus Christ, son of God and God himself, is the only God in whom mankind should trust. As a verb of which the Sun is the subject, Horace uses *posse* (to be able to), Stefonio uses *malle* (to choose / to want). What did God choose in making his plan for mankind? He chose everlasting glory for Rome. Rome as the Apostolic See, Rome identified with the Holy Roman Catholic Church, of course.

Let me describe a scene in *Flavia Tragoedia* that was not staged. From the Collegio Romano's chronicle, we know that this tragedy was performed four times. The actors were very good, the staging was spectacular and the large audience was delighted. But the text is very long (more than 5000 lines of verse); the Collegio's chronicle records the first performance lasted ten hours and therefore the play had to be abridged.<sup>16</sup>

As we know, *Flavia Tragoedia* was staged again at the Seminario Romano in 1621 and was published with a note by the publisher in which he gives us an important piece of information:

Lectori

Actus secundi scena quarta, ubi Domitillae inducuntur, quae postea nihil agunt, ab autore (sic!) dispuncta fuerat; quia inter scribendum animadvertit, sibi non licere, feminas illas in scenam dare. Placuit tamen eum quoque locum ibi reponere, ut ex opere preclaro nihil periret.<sup>17</sup>

In other terms, according to the rule of the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum Societatis Jesu*, whose last edition was published in 1599, which excludes female characters from the cast list of Jesuit school drama, the fourth scene of the second act – whose protagonists are Domitilla maior, Clement's wife, and her niece,<sup>18</sup> Domitilla minor – was not staged. According to that rule, women were not allowed to be present in the audience, but the rule (*Incitamenta studiorum*, VII,6) was often disobeyed in the observance.

Domitilla is venerated by the Catholic Church as Saint Domitilla martyr. In May 1597 – only three years before the first staging of *Flavia Tragoedia* – her relics

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in GARCIA VILLOSLADA 1954, 166.

<sup>17</sup> STEPHONII 1621, 207.

<sup>18</sup> In the *Argumentum* of *Flavia Tragoedia*, Stefonio writes that Domitilla minor is a daughter of Plautilla, Domitilla maior's sister: STEPHONII 1621, n.p.

were triumphantly transferred to the church of Saints Nereus and Achilleus<sup>19</sup> (who appear as characters in Stefonio's tragedy). At the same time, Cardinal Baronio commissioned the painting of the church with frescos representing images of saints and scenes of martyrdom.

Before going on, we should remember that, in spite of the above-mentioned ban on women, there are sometimes female characters in Jesuit tragedies. We know that Stefonio himself wrote a tragedy, by the title of *Sancta Simphorosa*, that was inspired by the martyrdom of a Roman woman!

The College's students-actors played female characters, of course. For example, in 1591 Gian Vittorio Rossi, a fourteen-year-old Stefonio's student, played the Roman martyr's part; from then he was nicknamed Simphorosa!<sup>20</sup>

In the early Jesuit theatre, when dramatists were inspired by the stories of Old Testament, Jezabel, cruel king Ahab's wife, was one of the most important characters. This evil queen was not alone. For instance, in *Juditha Tragoedia* (1564), by Father Stefano Tuccio, Judith, a courageous biblical heroine, is the protagonist. Moreover, in the occasion of *Juditha's* second performance, many ladies were allowed to be present in the audience. Father Jerome Domenech S.J. testifies this in a letter written on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1566 to the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Francisco de Borja:

Si è recitato, in questa rinovatione delli studij, una tragedia di Giuditta et, per gratia, è riuscita tanto bene che siamo stati forzati a recitarla un'altra volta. Nella seconda volta entrarono molte signore principali, che la prima volta non furono ammesse donne.<sup>21</sup>

Domitilla is a member of the Flavian dynasty, she is a Christian and in the fourth scene of the second act of *Flavia Tragoedia* she is preparing to go to the old priest Clement, actually the Christian Pope, Clement I. All Christians in Rome venerate the old man and Domitilla wants to honour him; she also wants to pray to Our Lord with the priest and to ask him to consecrate her sons to God.

She comes across as a mother who loves her husband and her sons; she is a good woman who has strong faith in God. Why did she not appear on a Jesuit stage? What is, for example, the difference between Domitilla and Judith?

The difference does not consist in their personal characters but in an interpretation. As it is known to everyone, Stefonio's *Crispus Tragoedia* and *Flavia Tragoedia* are not figural, but historical tragedies. On the contrary, in *Juditha Tragoedia* Father Tuccio uses the figural interpretation. Judith who beheaded the commander in chief of Assyrian army, Holofernes, and doing so saved Israel from the King of Babylon,

<sup>19</sup> See KRAUTHEIMER 1967.

<sup>20</sup> QUESTA 1999, 148-149.

<sup>21</sup> Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu. *Ital.* 131, 91<sup>r</sup>-92<sup>r</sup>. Quoted in SAULINI 2002, 68.

Nabuchadnezzar, is a prophetic figure of the Virgin Mary who saved mankind from Satan. The Prologue of the tragedy justifies the biblical heroine appearing on stage<sup>22</sup>. On the contrary, Flavia Domitilla is a historical character, she has her own personal identity and, most importantly, she is not identified with the Virgin Mary, such as Jezebel is identified with Satan, for example. Finally, she is not staged as a martyr, as Simphorosa was; therefore she is subject to the above-mentioned ban on women.

This time, a historical character could not be used on the stage neither to honour the Roman Pope, nor to celebrate the triumphant Roman Catholic Church.

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<sup>22</sup> See SAULINI 2002, 71.