# Introduction

Gruesome as the two works under discussion are, they exemplify two normative Baroque modes of composition: the lament and the cantata. The composer of the earlier cantata is uncertain: one possibility, though debatable, is Bellerofonte Castaldi (d. 1649); the composer of the later cantata is Antonio Cesti (d. 1669). Since the two works concern a Jewess, the introduction opens with background material on the lament and cannibalism in Hebrew scriptures, and, in search of the Jewess's identity, in an historical account. After prefatory remarks on the composers and librettists, the two works are examined for their poetry and music.[1]

## Laments and Cannibals in Scriptures

When Joseph went into the fields with his brothers, yet failed to return, his father Jacob "tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days … and he said: 'I will go down to the grave mourning for my son' " (Genesis 37:34-35).[2] No less moving is the lament of David over Saul and Jonathan, "beloved and pleasant in their lives and inseparable in their death" (2 Samuel 1:23). David had other occasions to grieve: when he learned of the death of his son Absalom, he vented his sorrow in one of the most striking expressions of filial love in the Hebrew Bible. "My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If I had only died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son" (2 Samuel 19:1).

Women wailed at burials and in times of suffering. "Call for the mourning women. Let them hasten and begin wailing for us, and our eyes will shed tears, and our eyelids will drip with water. For a voice of wailing is heard from Zion" (Jeremiah 9:16-18). Rachel bemoaned the loss of her children: "A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing, and bitter weeping: Rachel weeping over her children" (Jeremiah 31:15).

The Bible has three examples of cannibalism. One of them occurs in Deuteronomy, chapter 28. Should the people stray from the Lord's commandments, they will be cursed: "they will eat of the fruit of their belly, the flesh of sons and daughters" (28:53); the husband will give nothing of their flesh to his wife, nor will the wife to her husband (28:55-56).

Another example is in 2 Kings. The armies of Benhadad, king of Syria, besieged Samaria, causing a "great famine" (6:25). Two women made a pact to feed on their children: the first mother cooked her son, eating him along with the second mother; when asked to do the same to her own son, the second mother refused. The first mother appealed to the king to make her keep her promise, but he was so distressed that "he tore his clothes … and put sackcloth on his flesh" (6:30).[3]

A third example occurs in the Book of Lamentations. Of the many sufferings the inhabitants of Jerusalem knew under siege, one was their hunger. They "seek bread: they exchanged their precious things for food to relieve their soul" (1:11), those who once fed on delicacies now claw at rubbish heaps (4:5), "infants … faint from hunger at the entrance to every street" (2:19), their tongues stick to the roof of their mouths from thirst (4:4), mothers ate their children (2:20), they cooked them to relieve their starvation (4:10).

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[1] On the contents of the two cantatas, see Don Harrán, "A Jewish Cannibal in Two Seventeenth-Century Cantatas", *Journal of Musicology* 31/4 (2014) (in press).

[2] Except when noted, all translations here and below are the author's.

[3] See, thereabout, Gina Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and Without Shame: Two Cannibal Mothers before a King* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).