

Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Virgil's *Aeneid*:
Roman Mythology Seen Through an English Restoration Lens

Luke Swartz

Opera—though the subject of much derision, scorn, and drooping eyelids—remains nevertheless the most important art form in the history of Western culture. No other genre combines so many elements—drama, literature, music, dance, scenery, and staging—to achieve coherent artistic unity. Based on ancient Greek tragedy, developed in Renaissance Italy, and refined by many Classical composers, opera still touches audiences not only in its original form but in its more modern adaptations such as musical comedy and rock opera. One opera which epitomizes this timelessness, Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, draws much of its affect from its antecedent, Virgil's *Aeneid*, yet still retains certain elements unique to Purcell's Restoration environment.

Purcell's opera, based on a libretto by Nahum Tate, who served as England's poet laureate from 1692 to 1715, draws mainly upon *The Aeneid's* Book Four for its plot. In order to accommodate the exigencies of the stage, in particular because it takes longer to sing a line of text than to speak it, Tate excised much of the text. Nevertheless, the basic plot remains the same: Aeneas reaches Carthage and courts Dido; she relents, yet he leaves to fulfill his destiny in Italy. Heartbroken, she dies. Among the elements removed due to time pressures are the characters Ascanius (Aeneas's son, upon whom Dido transfers her lust in Virgil) and Irabus (the wrathful neighboring king and suitor of the Queen of Carthage). Interestingly enough, many of the Italian *Aeneid*-based operas written in the same time period expand Irabus's role into substantive subplots, with several ending in a marriage between Dido and Irabus, achieving a forced, Baroque *lieto fine* ("happy ending").¹ Also, some changes result from the performance venue: an all-girls' boarding school in Chelsea run by the dancing master Josias Priest. Among these changes are the shortening

¹ Ellen T. Harris, *Dido and Aeneas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 30.

of the winter in which the noble pair are “prisoners of lust”² to a single, unseen night of passion. Nevertheless, some evidence exists that Purcell originally wrote the opera for an earlier court performance, so the influence of the Chelsea school remains somewhat dubious.

Despite these strayings from Virgil, some substantive changes remain which reveal much about Purcell and his times:

- No love potion spurs Dido into lust.
- Aeneas vows to defy destiny.
- Witches, not gods, direct their fall.

Furthermore, perhaps the composer and librettist focused too much on brevity and not on emotion: Many critics complain about how Tate turned many characters—in particular Aeneas—into bland caricatures. Criticism ranges from Matthew Boyden’s assertion that “Aeneas, by comparison with Dido, is psychologically underdeveloped”³ to Joseph Kerman’s acerbic critique in a chapter smugly titled “The Dark Ages”:

Little enough of Virgil remains [in the opera], perhaps. Dido is drastically simplified, and Aeneas is made into a complete booby; the sense of cosmic forces at play is replaced by the machinations of an outrageous set of Restoration witches.⁴

Yet perhaps the relatively uninspired text makes for better music: Christopher Spencer cites numerous examples of praise for Tate for basically giving Purcell a simple, flat canvas on which to paint his music.⁵

The libretto also draws from *Brutus of Alba*, a play Nahum Tate wrote several years earlier, also based on Book Four of *The Aeneid*. In *Brutus*, however, Tate noted in the Preface that “it wou’d appear Arrogant to attempt any characters that had been written by the incomparable Virgil,”

² *The Aeneid*, Book IV, line 265

³ Matthew Boyden, “Dido and Aeneas,” *Opera: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 1997), 29.

⁴ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 43.

⁵ Christopher Spencer, *Nahum Tate* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), 60.

so he changed their names to English mythical figures. This accounts for the appearance of the witches: they were the English equivalent of the scheming Roman goddesses. Yet the question remains: When Tate drew upon *Brutus* when writing *Dido and Aeneas*'s libretto, why did he not translate the witches back into goddesses, just as the rest of the characters were translated? Indeed, the witches make for rather unconvincing antagonists, who plot against the lovestruck couple simply for the fun of it (as seen in the chorus, "Destruction's our delight/Delight's our greatest sorrow").

Two interpretations account for the remainder of the differences between Virgil and Tate's libretto: that the opera was intended as a political allegory, or as a moral fable. The first view is proposed by John Buttrey in "Dating Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*" and Curtis Price in "Henry Purcell and the London Stage"; the second view is propounded by Ellen Harris in her comprehensive book on the opera, *Dido and Aeneas*.

Buttrey and Price have different views of the opera as political allegory: Buttrey sees it as a warning to King William to remain faithful to his wife, Queen Mary, whereas Price sees it as an indictment of the Catholics, in particular the exiled King James II. Buttrey bases his hypothesis on the Prologue to the opera, the music of which has unfortunately been lost, in which Nereid and Phoebus exchange some comments about each being "divine," hinting at the dual sovereignty of William and Mary. While this cannot be disputed, Buttrey's argument that the rest of the opera serves to show "the possible fate of the British nation should Dutch William fail in his responsibilities to his English Queen"⁶ has less weight. As Price contends, "the story of a Prince who seduces and abandons a neurotic queen would seem a tactless way to honor the new monarchs."⁷ Yet Price's own theory does not jibe with this statement: he, too, sees *Dido and Aeneas* as allegorical figures for the dual sovereigns, except he also sees the witches representing the Catholics, led by the exiled, Catholic James II. The difficulty with either interpretation rests in

⁶ Harris, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

this: if, indeed, Dido and Aeneas are allegorical representations of William and Mary, Purcell presents a rather unflattering, if not insulting, depiction of the dual monarchs. It is hard to believe that Purcell or Tate would make such a mistake; furthermore, as Harris argues, Tate wrote *Brutus of Alba* far before William and Mary ever took the throne. While there may arguably be some connection between the witches and the Catholics, such a connection has little basis and hardly constitutes a robust allegory.

Yet another political interpretation comes from Peter Holman, who, citing Andrew Walkling, contends that the opera has nothing to do with the Glorious Revolution but is instead a warning given to James II (Aeneas) to ignore the council of English Catholics (the witches) who implore him to forsake England (Dido) for Rome.⁸ This all depends, of course, on *Dido and Aeneas* being written before the Glorious Revolution, which has yet to be proved.

Harris, focusing primarily on the original performance at the Chelsea school for girls, sees the opera instead as a morality play. The moral is clear, Harris contends, “young girls should not accept the advances of young men, no matter how ardent their wooing or how persistent their promises.”⁹ Indeed, this would explain Aeneas breaking his vow to “defy the feeble stroke of Destiny.” This also connects him to the sailors, who sing of taking “a bouzy short leave of [their] nymphs on the shore/And silence their mourning with vows of returning/But never intending to visit them more.” Harris shows how “the pleasure and pain of love” in Virgil is replaced by “morality and the moral” in Tate’s libretto, because Dido and Aeneas are not tricked into the relationship with any trickery or love-potions—Dido alone bears the blame for her loss of chastity.¹⁰ She writes, “How different is Virgil’s couple! They are essentially puppets of gods, and thus no questions arise as to their responsibility.”¹¹ Also supporting the moral allegory theory is the incorporation of the

⁸ Peter Holman, *Henry Purcell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 195.

⁹ Harris, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 15.

opera in 1700 into Charles Gildon's adaption of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which a couple is condemned to death for fornication.¹² Harris finally cites the Epilogue, written by Thomas D'Urfey and read by Lady Dorothy Burke at the first performance of the opera:

All that we know the angels do above,
I've read, is that they sing and that they love,
The vocal part we have tonight perform'd
And if by Love our hearts not yet are warm'd
Great Providence has still more bounteous been
To save us from those grand deceivers, men.

How interesting that the political interpretations come from men and that this interpretation is asserted by a woman.

Yet despite the relative merit of her hypothesis, Harris misses some obvious differences between the ancient Roman culture and Restoration England that accounts for some of the changes. First, the absence of the Roman gods may in part be due to English theology; in this period just after the Puritan Civil War, much of England remained devoutly pious, and would find it hard to accept the gods—heathen gods though they are—as fallible. The decidedly Eastern idea of good and evil being intertwined would be foreign to the still-Puritanical English. Furthermore, the English had an obsession with witches, especially in this period of witch hunts. Christopher Spencer points out the connection between the witches in *Brutus of Alba* and *Macbeth*, noting that many of their lines and mannerisms are similar.¹³ Furthermore, the changes in the story that put more of the blame on Dido than Aeneas (in the opera, he is more stupid than uncaring) may reflect the English's less progressive ideas about women. Again, the Puritanical tradition would support women remaining chaste, while the men would be free to “love 'em and leave 'em” just as Aeneas and his Trojan sailors do. Finally, Harris overlooks the role of Purcell's chorus, as it comments on the action much like a Greek chorus (with the character Belinda often acting like the choragos) and adds insight into

¹² Spencer, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

the drama. Among the thought-provoking choruses that stand out are “Cupid only throws the dart,” which emphasizes the role each lover plays in the union, and “Great minds against themselves conspire,” which basically sums up the tragic ideal of hamartia—great people made low by their own weaknesses. Each of these elements expand the opera into far more than a simple morality play, but a complex insight into the way humans relate to each other.

Finally, given this depth of expression and timeless drama, one must address the relative unpopularity of Purcell’s masterpiece; it was never publicly performed in his lifetime and remained in obscurity until the late 19th century. Was the opera’s moralistic message and tragic ending too jarring for the English public? Was “its tale of a queen abandoned by her royal lover...hardly suited to the new reign of William and Mary”?¹⁴ Or was England simply not ready for an all-sung opera yet? Purcell’s masques, or “semi-operas,” which involved songs and dances interspersed with spoken dialogue (much like modern musical comedies), enjoyed much higher popularity than *Dido and Aeneas*. Perhaps, as Curtis Price asserts in *Music in the Restoration Theatre*, 17th century theatergoers believed that “music must always remain secondary to the play.”¹⁵ Whatever the reason for the opera’s contemporary unpopularity, it remains one of the great operas of all time, a testament to the universality of the human experience.

¹⁴ Tim Carter, “The Seventeenth Century,” *The Oxford History of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, ed. Roger Parker, 1996), 29–30.

¹⁵ Price 49.