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*Recalcitrance and Reformation: Virgil, Purcell, and Tate's Dido and Aeneas*

By Jennifer Hart

Purcell's only opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, is believed to have been premiered at Josias Priest's boarding school for girls in Chelsea, England, in 1689. The libretto was adapted by Nahum Tate from the story of Dido and Aeneas out of the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>1</sup> In Virgil's original tale, Dido, the widowed daughter of King Bellus has fled to North Africa after the murder of her husband Sychaeus by her brother, Pygmalion. Upon arriving in North Africa with other loyal members of her court, Dido founded the ancient city of Carthage. Aeneas, one of the Trojan leaders during the Trojan War, flees after the fall of Troy with his son, his father, and others. As a result of a storm (only one incident in a long line of troubles and adventures on his quest to discover the land on which he will ultimately found Rome) Aeneas and his men land in North Africa and are welcomed by Dido, Queen of Carthage.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the prearrangement of the relationship of Dido and Aeneas by Venus, Aeneas' mother, and being struck by Cupid's arrow, Aeneas falls in love with Dido and defies his destiny as founder of Rome to remain in Carthage. Juno and Venus encourage this love affair until King Iarbas, who had been rejected by Dido, appeals to Jove to interfere in the affair. Jove commands Aeneas to leave Carthage and fulfill his destiny, which Aeneas obeys. He leaves Carthage despite Dido's entreaties. Furious and distraught over her

abandonment and lost love, Dido arranges her suicide by falling on Aeneas' sword.

There is uncertainty regarding the premiere of Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. It is believed to have been written and, perhaps, performed at court as early as 1681,<sup>3</sup> due to the nature and style of the music, which is much more indicative of earlier Purcell works.<sup>4</sup> However, the earliest known performance was in 1689 at Josias Priest's boarding school for girls in Chelsea. Although much of the material seems rather inappropriate for schoolgirls, the opera was embedded with "morals" regarding the role of women in imperialist enterprises and the "negative" influence of men and passion on the actions of women, the performance of which would have helped in the inculcation of "proper feminine virtues".<sup>5</sup>

Although adapted from Virgil's original text, the opera libretto contains alterations, which cohere with the ideas of Restoration theater in London that functioned during Purcell and Tate's lifetime. Basic changes in the story outline effected by Tate include the reduction of the number of characters, the replacement of mythological figures with witches, and "the non-violent death of Dido."<sup>6</sup> In an effort to shorten the effective length of the play, manifested through the long-range goals and fates of the characters, Tate substitutes witches for the mythological Juno and

<sup>1</sup> Written between 29 and 19 B.C.

<sup>2</sup> "Dido and Aeneas". *The Treble Chorus of New England*.

<<http://www.treblechorus.com/content/main/chorusOpera2001.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Payne Fisk and Jessica Munns.

"Clamorous with War and Teeming with Empire: Purcell and Tate's *Dido and Aeneas*." *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Spring 2002, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> "Dido & Aeneas, 2002". *The Oxford Girls Choir*. <<http://www.oxfordgirlschoir.co.uk/events/dido2002.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Payne Fisk and Jessica Munns. p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen T. Harris. *Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas*. Clarendon Press (Oxford): 1987, p. 14.

Venus. This change is coupled with a change in motive of this set of characters. As contrasted with Juno and Venus who were concerned with the happiness and success of Dido and Aeneas respectively, the witches of Tate's libretto are motivated by jealousy and envy and seek only to destroy Dido, a goal which they achieve. There is no long-term goal that exceeds the temporal boundaries of the opera. Tate's addition of witches is also reflective of seventeenth century drama. Witches were popular additions throughout drama of this period, and their inclusion is perhaps most famously illustrated in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Tate's alteration of the circumstances surrounding Dido's death is also reflective of seventeenth-century English society. "Illicit sexual encounter[s]"<sup>1</sup> in drama of the period usually resulted in the subsequent death of the woman in question, though rarely through suicide. In other plays of the period, "the fall from chastity is described as sufficiently fatal in itself."<sup>2</sup> This opera and its altered version of Virgil's story is seen by many as a morality, the goal of which was to show "the gentlewomen of Chelsea the results of sinful behavior."<sup>3</sup>

Aeneas' character in the opera, as well as the relationship between Dido and Aeneas is also altered from Virgil's original text. Contrary to Virgil's image of Aeneas as a great, strong, and powerful warrior and hero, Tate's Aeneas plays the fool, being the victim of a sham, as the Spirit messenger was merely an illusion created by the witches as a part of their plan for Dido's destruction, and being forced to submit to the will of a woman in the final scene in which Dido orders him to leave. The relationship between the couple is also very different. In Tate's libretto, the couple is not

coerced and the foundation of their relationship is their creation only and the result of their personal feelings toward each other. They are partially responsible for their state. In Tate's libretto, Dido and Aeneas also effectively change roles in the last Act of the opera. Aeneas, the strong warrior who is bound by destiny, defies his destiny and promises to stay with Dido, thus showing his weakness. Dido, on the contrary, behaves in a much more courtly manner, ordering Aeneas to leave and only later acknowledging her feelings for him and her inner turmoil and pain as a result of his departure. In contrast, in Virgil's story Dido and Aeneas are "essentially the puppets of the gods."<sup>4</sup> Dido submits only as a result of mythological and godly intervention, and the departure of Aeneas and the reminder of his destiny are delivered by Mercury, messenger of Jupiter. Aeneas never defies his destiny and thus never breaks any promise of marriage. In Virgil's story, Dido is the overly emotional one, who tries to sway the stalwart Aeneas, but fails and "takes her own life, throwing herself onto a funeral pyre."<sup>5</sup>

Tate's libretto cuts out much of the detail, history, and explanation of Virgil's original story. The most obvious explanation for such exclusion is that students and citizens of seventeenth-century England would have been well aware and probably would have intimately known both the story of Dido and Aeneas from the fourth book of the *Aeneid* and the background and history pertinent to that story. Tate's exclusions also reflect the necessities of an operatic libretto. As Ellen Harris explains:

Because it takes substantially longer to sing a text than to speak it, libretto cannot be as expansive as a play, neither in

<sup>1</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 16.

overall length, nor, generally speaking, in the number of lines given to a single character at any one time. This is even more true for *Dido*, which was apparently intended to be a short production... Tate used this restriction to tighten his original drama; in the printed libretto the entire text of *Dido and Aeneas* covers only five and a half pages.<sup>1</sup>

Tate, due to restrictions on time, was forced to leave out details and characters which were not essential to the understanding of the story such as King Iarbas, Aeneas' friend, and Aeneas' son. Speeches are also cut significantly in length or dispersed by inserting choruses or arias. Tate's libretto also has rhyme, which is characteristic of seventeenth-century English writers, as influenced by Dryden. Writers of this time "clearly felt that sung text should be rhymed, perhaps because rhyme was considered inherently musical."<sup>2</sup> Tate's text is consistently well suited for musical setting and provides flexibility for the composer in variation and in reflecting "the sense of the words they contain."<sup>3</sup> This genius is, perhaps, most greatly exhibited in Dido's lament in the final scene of the opera, for which Tate wrote, "When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create / no trouble in thy breast! / Remember me—but ah! forget my fate."<sup>4</sup>

This opera, considered by many as Purcell's masterpiece, is much more accessible to the average audience than most opera. The libretto, written in English, depicts a familiar mythological story with

many themes with which the modern audience and cast can identify. The typically overdramatic plot, throughout which one must suspend reality (or disbelief), still provides themes such as love and betrayal, which are readily identifiable with audiences from all walks of life. Although the attitudes and actions of the characters might seem overdramatic in real life, the beautiful music and carefully constructed libretto and scenes allow audience members to identify with individual characters and become involved in the story. Furthermore, the English libretto makes this opera more accessible to the average citizen than Italian or French opera by breaking down language barriers; however, it simultaneously maintains the form and style of Italian and French opera. The combination of aria and recitative in the relation of the story—arias serving to comment on action, while recitative moves action along—is typical of both French and Italian opera, while the frequent inclusion of dances (many of the originals of which have been lost and are, subsequently, replaced with alternates or not included) is a characteristic of French opera, with the heavy presence of ballet in many French operatic compositions or those modeled on the French style.

Only an hour long and requiring a fairly small cast (although size depends on your resources and requirements and can be altered to fit such), Purcell's only opera is performed in boarding and preparatory schools and universities around the world. Limited resources are frequently limiting concerns in terms of opera production, especially in small schools with small Departments of Music. Written originally for a girl's boarding school, *Dido and Aeneas* demands less than most traditional operas. However, although the required level of mastery is less than that of some opera, *Dido and Aeneas* still requires well-

<sup>1</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 35

<sup>3</sup> Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum Tate. *Dido and Aeneas*, Act III.

trained singers who can perform, at times, very challenging passages, the access to which is limited by the size of the Department of Music and the school. Participation in *Dido and Aeneas* provides classically trained voice students with invaluable experience and exposure to realistic professional performance. Opportunities to sing opera roles with orchestra can greatly aid in the development of singers and their education in performance and history.

*Dido and Aeneas* is also very flexible in terms of staging. Depending on financial resources and performance spaces, the opera can be staged to varying degrees, from the very simplistic with little or no acting, costumes, and scenery and with a minimal cast; to the grandiose and ornate with huge sets, elaborate costumes, and large casts; and everything in between, which, perhaps, also speaks to its frequent use by schools and universities of all types. *Dido and Aeneas* was never publicly performed during Purcell's lifetime outside of its initial performance at Josias Priest's boarding school. However, today it is widely performed, which is a tribute to the accessibility of the opera to modern audiences as well as to the true genius of both Purcell and Tate in their creation of a work that truly transcends time.

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