

## Purcell's Dido and the Fate of Mark Morris

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Mark Morris has said that he first imagined choreographing and dancing *Dido and Aeneas* as a solo. It was the mid-1980s, and the AIDS epidemic was ravaging the dance world. “I just assumed because I am selfish that I was next,” he told Joan Acocella in 2009. “Before I die, let me make up this dance about love and sex and death.”<sup>1</sup> He decided, ultimately, to expand the cast, and the production that premiered at the Théâtre Varia in Brussels in 1989 distributed the roles across his company. But there remains in the dance he created some evidence of his original conception, and that conception—its solipsism and its lonely grandeur—is a key to the way Morris read the Purcell opera and the Nahum Tate libretto that he chose (as it happened, prematurely) to be his swan song.

The *dramatis personae* of *Dido and Aeneas* had a curious history long before Morris got to it. Tate based his libretto, inevitably, on Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*, but as a serial adapter of old plays (especially Shakespeare) he was accustomed to taking considerable liberties with his sources. He is best remembered today for his rewriting of *King Lear*, in which Lear survives to bless the marriage between Cordelia and Edgar. (“’Twas my good Fortune to light on one Expedient to rectifie what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale, which was to run through the whole A Love betwixt Edgar and Cordelia,” he explained in a preface.<sup>2</sup>) His freedom with Virgil's story was equally unembarrassed. In the *Aeneid*, the hero's dalliance with Dido in Carthage is interrupted by a visitation from Mercury, sent by Jove to put Aeneas back on the path to Rome, the city and the empire-without-end that he is destined to found. He sails before Dido can discover his betrayal, and she kills herself in grief. When Tate rewrites the story he does not spare any lives, as he did in his *Lear*. But he introduces a new character, the Sorceress, who is animated by an unexplained hatred of Dido, and who becomes the menacing, campy mainspring of the play's tragic action. Out of spite for the queen who loves him, she sends one of her enchantresses in the guise of Mercury to urge Aeneas to flee. Aeneas, in Tate's version, is not called by the gods, but deceived by bad magic. Moreover, he does not steal away, but tells Dido that he must go, and then, confronted with her sorrow, recants: “In spite of Jove's command I'll stay.” It is up to her to refuse him, if his epic destiny is to be fulfilled: “No, faithless man, thy course pursue. . . . For 'tis enough whate'er you now decree, / That you had once a thought of leaving me.”<sup>3</sup>

The ideological complexity of these transformations has been much discussed by modern critics. At first glance, Tate would seem to be determined to purge his text of the ambivalence that has always haunted Virgil's poem, the persistent anxiety about the price of Roman glory that we feel when we, like Augustine and so many subsequent readers, weep for Dido.<sup>4</sup> Tate takes strong measures to protect Dido and Aeneas from blame, everything coming back to the motiveless malignancy of the Sorceress. Aeneas in particular benefits from Tate's intercession, for how could he be responsible for Dido's death if he deserts her at her own command? The hero's conscience has never been so clean. Recent accounts, however, have complicated the picture. The reduction of Aeneas's role and the dramatic centrality of Dido have seemed to some to be entailed to a political allegory of bad counsel in the Stuart court, for example, or of Tate's general disenchantment with the monarchy in the years before the Glorious Revolution.<sup>5</sup> (Aeneas in his dithering can be made to stand in for James II.) Such readings tend to view the opera as taking a skeptical view of English imperial destiny, at least as managed by its rulers in the 1680s. Wendy Heller, more concerned with the opera's gender politics, notes Tate's debt to Ovid's revisionary Dido, who is treated with great sympathy in the *Heroides*, a collection of epistolary poems composed in the personae of love-tormented heroines of antiquity. Dido, in this lineage, becomes an exemplar of female stoicism, and the opera a didactic melodrama well suited to the first performance we can be sure of, at Josias Smith's school for girls in Chelsea in 1689.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1 Mark Morris as Dido in the New York premiere of *Dido and Aeneas* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater, June 19, 1990, performed by the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris. Photograph by Tom Brazil ©, courtesy of the Mark Morris Dance Group.

Morris knew the *Aeneid* and the performance history of *Dido and Aeneas*. His choreography is involved with the ideological convolutions of the text and the music. His fundamental intervention, however, might be said to be his casting. He choreographed Dido and the Sorceress with a female and male dancer, respectively, but then learned both parts himself for the premiere. (He experimented later with separating them, but found that “the integrity was lost” when different dancers played the two roles.<sup>7</sup>) Such amalgamations have occurred to some of the opera’s critics. Roger Savage suggests that, setting Aeneas aside,

all the characters in the opera are really personified aspects of Dido: Belinda and the Second Woman projections of her yearning towards erotic fulfillment, the Sorceress a formidable anti-self embodying all her insecurities and apprehensions of disaster contingent on her involving herself in any deep personal relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Morris’s doubling of Sorceress and Dido is more particular and strategic, fusing as it does the new cause of the tragic action with its traditional victim. (He might be said to recover Tate’s debt to *Antony and Cleopatra*, too, if we recognize Shakespeare’s Egyptian queen, who haunts the libretto, as simultaneously the genius and the saboteur of her own play.<sup>9</sup>) The doubling becomes only more pointed—in the premiere, and in the film by Barbara Willis Sweete<sup>10</sup>—given the sex of the dancer, his sexual orientation, and above all the fact that he is the man who made the dance.

The language of the choreography is where these puzzles get worked out, creating rhyming effects that bind scene to scene and character to character. Throughout the opera there is a nearly one-to-one correspondence between word and gesture. Important words (like “fate,” arms above the head and falling outward, hands rotated and fingers splayed) recur and migrate and accrue meaning as act follows act. Desire has its particular marker, a double-handed plunging gesture toward the groin that twice attends the word “press’d.” (“Ah! Belinda, I am press’d, / With torment not to be confess’d”; “the Trojan guest / Into your tender thoughts has press’d.”<sup>11</sup>) That gesture returns, and climaxes, in the third act, when in the heat of her scheming the Sorceress lies down at the front of the stage and thrusts her hands between her legs. It is a flamboyant declaration of erotic autonomy, one that finds its final, structural counterpart in Dido’s refusal of Aeneas’s love. If the work began as a solo, it would seem that Morris never entirely abandoned that ambition. The double figure of Dido and the Sorceress is the author of her own tragedy, a tragedy to which Aeneas becomes incidental. He does what men do, which is to betray, or just to falter, and that faltering is pretext enough for Dido in her rigorism to fulfill the Sorceress’s plan, a plan which is now her own. Her own climax will be her death. The lament that foretells her end is the glory of the opera, and what Morris is proposing, to Tate and to Purcell and to us, is that her glory—tragic, not epic—is essentially self-made.

It is a question for the genre: whether anyone can be full author of his or her own tragedy. Do we not need the force of the outside world brought to bear on the

hero, some encounter between agency and external fate? Morris, to hear him tell it, began to think about *Dido and Aeneas* when he was considering his own exit, wondering how he might come to his own terms with the tragic compound of “love and sex and death” that was the AIDS crisis. Tate’s and Purcell’s Sorceress offered him a mirror of a Dido who decrees her own death, compelled neither by hero nor by empire, nor for that matter by plague, but by something like aesthetic opportunity. It probably should not work as tragedy for her to usurp both sides of the tragic agon. But that is Morris’s wager, and when he dances, it does.

#### NOTES

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1. Mark Morris, interview with Joan Acocella, 2009 International Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven, CT, Youtube, accessed September 3, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioS4dbx8F2c>. For the discovery of this interview and for her wisdom about the dance, the author owes a considerable debt to Abigail Levine.

2. Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear* (London: 1681), A2v–A3r.

3. Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas: An Opera*, ed. Curtis Price (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 75.

4. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 33.

5. See, for example, Andrew R. Walkling, “Political Allegory in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*,” *Music & Letters* 76 (1995): 540–71. Deborah Payne Fisk and Jessica Munns, in their article “Clamorous with War and Teeming with Empire’:

Purcell and Tate’s *Dido and Aeneas*,” see Tate as fundamentally sympathetic with Dido: “Betrayal and ingratitude, themes that loom large in Tate’s plays and poems, suggest something of his compassion for the all too human casualties of political ambition.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 26 (2002): 38.

6. Wendy Heller, “‘A Present for the Ladies’: Ovid, Montaigne, and the Redemption of Purcell’s Dido,” *Music & Letters* 84 (2003): 189–208.

7. Morris, interview with Joan Acocella.

8. Roger Savage, “Producing *Dido and Aeneas*,” *Early Music* 4 (1976): 397.

9. Compare, for example, Dido’s “Thus on the fatal banks of the Nile / Weeps the deceitful crocodile” (Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, 74) with Cleopatra as the “serpent of old Nile” and with Antony’s description of the crocodile, both recurring tropes. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008), 1.5.25, 2.7.25ff.

10. Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, video, directed by Barbara Willis Sweete (1995; Canada: Rhombus Media).

11. Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, 67.