Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas

Troy, Carthage and Rome: the treatment of the myth

It is an age-old story: boy meets girl, they fall in love, but an external problem, which they cannot overcome, means that the relationship cannot be sustained. Boy ditches girl. Callously\*. (\**optional*)

When it comes to Dido (queen of Carthage) and Aeneas (founder of the Roman people), Virgil was not the first to deal with this story: we have names of other authors such as Timaeus of Taormina and Naevius. His near-contemporaries Trogus and Ovid dealt with the same story, Ovid very much engaging with and undermining Virgil in his *Heroides*.

What makes Virgil’s treatment notable is the way he uses it to refashion Rome’s foundation myth. After the civil wars of the late Republic, Augustus presented his actions as the (re)founding of Rome, just as Aeneas had done. Aeneas plays a bit-part in Homer’s *Iliad* as a prince of Troy who manages to escape its destruction. Virgil fills in the after-story: Aeneas escapes with a few other Trojan refugees to Italy, bringing the fire from the hearth (the same fire, incidentally, which the Romans believed was still burning in the centre of the Forum, attended by the Vestal Virgins). Aeneas has Venus as his mother. She intervenes at key points to remind him that his destiny is to found the Roman people. Juno is implacably opposed and sends many storms to hinder his journey. Driven by a storm to Carthage, on the north African coast, he meets Dido (sometimes *Elissa*), who treats him and his son Iulus kindly. On a hunt, the two of them get stranded together in a cave: the signs suggest marriage – at least to Dido. Certainly, Aeneas is very taken with Dido and sees his future life in the city that is being built. Jupiter needs to send his messenger, Mercury, to tell Aeneas to get moving for Hesperia (Italy). Dido kills herself with Aeneas’ own sword as she watches him sailing away without telling her - the ancient equivalent of ditching your girl-friend by texting.

The story had many resonances for Virgil’s contemporaries. The city of Rome was in the process of a massive rebuilding programme; the empire now had only one, undisputed leader in Augustus, rather than a handful of competing aristocrats; Augustus claimed direct descent from Aeneas’ son Iulus to help bolster his claim for legitimacy. He proclaimed peace. Historically, Carthage especially under Hannibal) had been the great competitor to Rome – indeed 200 years earlier it looked very likely that Carthage would wipe out Rome entirely. To some extent (the precise degree of which keeps academics in work) we are meant to identify Augustus with Aeneas.

Nahum Tate reworked the story. Dido’s previous husband and her current African suitor are written out. So too is the supernatural (rather like Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy* of 2004). Venus does not feature, and Juno’s interference is replace by the Sorceress and the witches. Even Mercury is written out – the Sorceress sends one of her Spirits disguised as Mercury to lure Aeneas away. And at the end there is no sword – Dido dies of a broken heart.

London 1659-95: Purcell’s context

Although his life was short, Purcell lived through traumatic times. His parents would have told him about the English civil war which ended ten years before his birth and the upheavals of the Protectorate which ended in the year of his birth. His father found employment as a musician in the new court of Charles II in the 1660s and the young Henry was a member of the king’s personal choir - the Choir of the Chapel Royal - until his voice changed in 1673. At 18, he was appointed court composer for Charles’ string band, Organist of Westminster Abbey in 1679 and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1682. He was thus closely involved in the ceremonial life of the court and would have seen, at first hand, the problems of establishing and maintaining a new constitutional settlement. He would also have experienced the rebuilding of London following the plague in 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666, with the new St Paul’s still under construction at his death.

The short, difficult reign of the Catholic James II, began in 1685 and would have affected Purcell because the monarch established a Catholic chapel. We certainly begin to see Purcell writing many more works for the theatre, leaving the church behind. He would have had to adjust to the arrival of William and Mary only three years later and a swing back to a Protestant monarchy. It might have seemed to be a good sign for Purcell and his church and court music but his output in this area decreased. In his last five years he wrote music for what we now term semi-operas – full-length plays with significant musical episodes in them.

Dido and Aeneas

*Dido* is Purcell’s only through-composed opera. We do not know when, why or who it was written for. The earliest source we have is a libretto for a performance at Josias Priest’s school for girls in Chelsea, dated to the spring of 1689. It was assumed until recently that it must have been written for them, but there are practical problems with this. Intriguingly, recent evidence has emerged of Priest putting on a similar piece – Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* – two years after its first performance at court. It seems likely that Purcell may also have written *Dido and Aeneas* for the court several years previously. Some commentators have gone further and seen the text as an allegory of the political situation, with the witches representing Catholicism.

For reasons of time, we are performing a cut-down version tonight. We have tried to keep the narrative intact: the witches and dances have felt the brunt of the director’s red-pen. The soloists all have close Stratford connections – either with the school or with the Choir of Holy Trinity church, some of them with both. There is reason to suppose that the part of the Sorceress was conceived as a travesty role for bass, and we have had no hesitation in following this splendid tradition. My thanks go to all in the band and chorus and parents, many from the farthest reaches of Warwickshire, who have freely given of their time and effort.

**Clive Letchford**

**Performers**

**Soloists**

Belinda – Lucinda Murphy

Dido – Emily Collins

Aeneas– Sam Bridges

Sorceress – Joe Woodman

Spirit – Patrick Ellis

Sailor – Chris Kingdom

**Chorus**

(*at various times courtiers, witches, sailors, Cupids*)

Felicity Barnard, Lesley Canning, Kathryn Ellis, Helen Heenan, Sue Robertson, Catherine Wyatt, Robert Kingdon, James Barnard, Malcolm Robinson, Peter Robertson

**Band (Cabinet of Curiosities)**

Violin: John Walton, Monika Walton, Eddie Jones

Viola: Sue Mock Cello: Ruth Elkan

Continuo: Sheila Koch

Director: Clive Letchford