

Vergili opera? Dido and cultural crisis in 1689.¹

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This article is concerned with the opera (or mini-opera) *Dido and Aeneas*, composed by Henry Purcell and Nahum Tate and first performed (to the very best of our knowledge) in 1689-by no means a neglected corner of the Virgilian tradition. But what I hope to achieve in this discussion is a better understanding of the opera's relation to the momentous historical circumstances which surrounded its première, in simple terms the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which replaced the Catholic James II of Great Britain and Ireland with the Protestant joint monarchy of William and Mary.

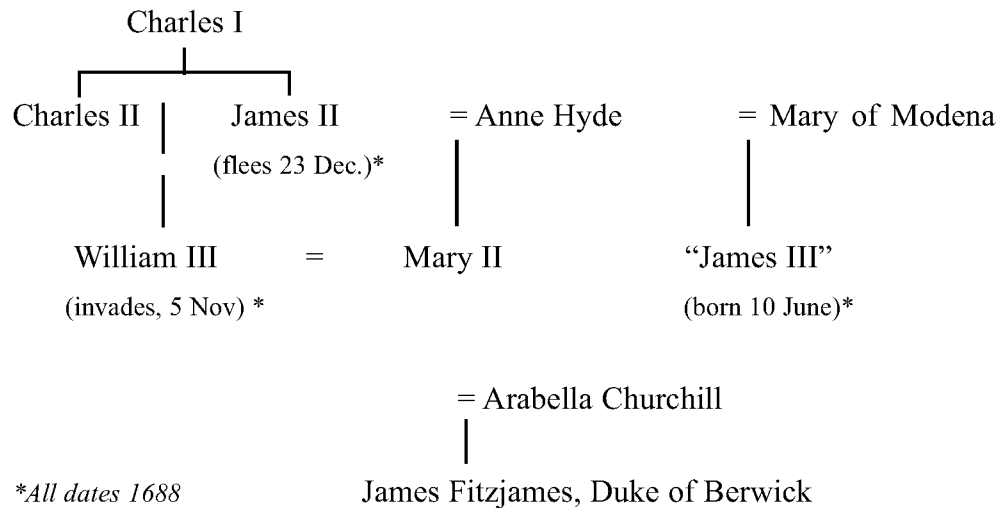
In tackling this topic I confront immediately a large weight of scholarly writing on *Dido and Aeneas*, particularly dense around the tercentenary of Purcell's death in 1995, which has focused on two main issues: the dating of the opera and its political significance. The one has implications for the other, and I shall begin by describing my own position on dating, but the emphasis of this paper will be on the political dimension of the work. My ultimate conclusion will actually be that the politics of *Dido and Aeneas* are much more elusive than most contributors to the debate have appreciated. What unites the various political readings of *Dido and Aeneas* is a conviction that the work is *designed*, at an authorial level, to communicate a political message. What I now appreciate is that *Dido and Aeneas*, whilst bursting with political significance, had only limited control over its meaning. Rather than setting out to say something, the truth is rather that this presentation of the Dido myth was being made to say things, often fundamentally contradictory things, by the events beyond its control which surrounded it. *Dido and Aeneas* communicates despite itself, and any authorial contribution to the political dimension of the piece is typically restricted to rather cack-handed attempts to neutralize its political charge; and I want to suggest that this tells us interesting things about the status of high-cultural artefacts like *Dido and Aeneas* at this particular

historical juncture.

Dating the original performance is a complex task, but in simple terms it amounts to this. We know that *Dido and Aeneas* was performed at a girls' school in Chelsea run by Frances Priest and her husband Josias (or Josiah), a noted dancer and choreographer whose interests were amply represented in the performance. We can also date this production to the spring or summer of 1689. That much nobody disputes. What has been suggested, however, is that this was not the first performance, and that *Dido and Aeneas* had been performed at an earlier date at Court. Now there is no evidence of such a performance at Court, and I think it can be established quite satisfactorily that no such performance ever took place. But what is also clear is that *Dido and Aeneas* is in its fundamental conception a 'courtly' kind of work, very much the kind of thing which would have entertained the Stuart kings, just as another mini-opera, John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, the model for *Dido and Aeneas*, was performed at Court before it was also performed at the Priests' school in 1684, as the libretto of the school performance (recently rediscovered) proudly testifies.² It will at any rate be assumed in what follows that the 1689 performance at the Priests' school was the première. But that does not alter the *strangeness* of the fact. *Dido and Aeneas* is fundamentally-in its staging, casting and vocal requirements, not to mention its authorship (Tate and Purcell would not normally be commissioned by a school)-a work designed for professional performance at Court, and we may suspect that at some early stage of its genesis this was indeed its intended destination. If there was no such Court performance, as I firmly believe, a ready explanation is to be found in the overthrow of the Stuart court which had just occurred. To this crucial contextual information we now turn; but that initial hint of a mismatch between text (a courtly opera) and performance context (a girls' school) will with luck emerge as far from the only awkward element of the first performance of *Dido and Aeneas*.

But before that I shall provide some background information, divided into three parts: first an outline, necessarily simplistic, of the Glorious Revolution; then some more information about the Priests' school at Chelsea; and finally some general thoughts on the composition and form of this version of the Dido myth.

Stated very simply, the Revolution of 1688 was the product of English concerns regarding the intentions of the reigning king James II. A Catholic, James had by various means managed to alienate a country which at his accession in 1685 had seemed reasonably, perhaps surprisingly, comfortable with the idea of an openly Catholic monarch. But it took very little to activate deep-seated English fears of Catholicism, absolutism and France, conveniently embodied as they all were in the dominant and daunting figure of Louis XIV just across the channel. Suspicion and paranoia-not entirely without foundation given James' friendly relations with Louis and recent events in France like the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes-were the hallmarks of this revolution. Events were brought to a head, at any rate, by the birth of a son to James in June 1688. Hitherto the heir apparent had been Mary, James' *Protestant* daughter, but the birth of James, the 'Old Pretender' as he would come to be known, raised the strong possibility of the persistence of Catholic rule: a Catholic dynasty. Amid rumours that the child was no child of the Queen at all but a changeling, Mary's husband William of Orange landed at Torbay in November 1688 and rapidly and relatively peacefully secured control of the country. James escaped to France, but whilst the revolution in England had been effectively bloodless, in Ireland things were to turn out very differently. There the Catholic majority rose in support of James, to be defeated by William's forces at the battles of the Boyne in 1690 and Aughrim in 1691, names which still, sadly, resonate. The Irish dimension to these events will concern us later, but I provide a royal family tree to clarify the situation:



To illustrate the motives that drove the coup against James, here also is a specimen of the kind of rhetoric the Revolution generated, this from John Locke, philosopher, Whig and fierce opponent of the deposed king:

Every one, and that with reason, begins our delivery from popery and slavery from the arrival of the prince of Orange and the compleating of it is, by all that wish well to him and it, dated from King William's settlement in the throne. This is the fence set up against popery and France, for King James's name, however made use of, can be but a stale [i.e. a rung of a ladder] to these two. If ever he returne, under what pretences soever, Jesuits must governe and France be our master. He is too much wedded to the one and relyes too much on the other ever to part with either. He that has ventured and lost three crowns for his blinde obedience to those guides of his conscience and for his following the counsels and pattern of the French King cannot be hoped, after the provocations he has had to heighten his naturall aversion, should ever returne with calme thoughts and good intentions to Englishmen, their libertys, and religion. (Bodleian MS Locke e. 18, fo. 1)³

The document from which this passage is taken is a sketch for a possible pamphlet which John Locke sent, probably in April 1690, to his friend the Whig MP Edward Clarke, whom we shall meet again in another context. Note in particular the implied synonymity of 'popery' and 'slavery' (i.e. absolutism) and 'popery' and 'France', James' perceived proximity to Louis XIV, and the paranoia evident even in the writing of a reasonable man like John Locke.

We shall see an attempt being made in the course of the performance of *Dido and Aeneas* to put distance between these tumultuous contemporary events and the school at which it was staged. What made that possible above all was the school's location. It stood above the Thames in Chelsea,⁴ and consequently at a remove from the bright lights and dubious morality of London, or this at any rate was how it could be presented. *Dido and Aeneas* stands at the beginning of a long collaboration between the owner of the school, Josias Priest (though his wife Frances seems to have been the guiding force in its management) and Purcell.⁵ The institution itself, like other schools of its kind, was essentially designed to prepare its charges for marriage. Upper-class girls ('Young Gentlewomen' according to the libretto of *Dido and Aeneas*) were sent there to gain that finish which would ultimately catch them a good husband. Here, for example, is Sir Edmund Verney writing to his daughter Molly, a pupil at the school:

I find you have a desire to learn to Jappan, as you call it, and I approve of it; and so I shall of any thing that is Good and Virtuous, therefore learn in God's name all Good Things, & I will willingly be at the Charge so farr as I am able-tho' They come from Japan & from never so farr and Looke of an Indian Hue and Odour, for I admire all accomplishments that will render you considerable & Lovely in the sight of God and man...⁶

Decorative, non-practical accomplishments like dancing and singing-and japanning (lacquering) - made up the curriculum. Performances along similar lines to *Dido and Aeneas* (though perhaps not generally so ambitious) would seem to have been fairly regular.⁷

The opera itself brought together some of the foremost dramatic artists of the day, Purcell most obviously. But Priest himself, as we have mentioned, was a leading choreographer. The author of the libretto, Nahum Tate, is now notorious for his version of *King Lear* with a happy ending and his *magnum opus* entitled *Panacea-a poem on Tea*, but he was generally respected in his day (though not by Pope) and became Poet Laureate in 1692, if that post had any status after Dryden's dismissal from it at the Revolution. The plot is based, as its title suggests, on Books 1 and 4 of the *Aeneid*: thus Dido and Aeneas confess their mutual love in Act 1, they hunt and Aeneas is ordered to depart from Carthage in Act 2, and in Act 3 there are unfriendly exchanges between Dido and Aeneas, Aeneas leaves and Dido dies. The major difference between Virgil's and Tate's accounts lies in the causation of Aeneas's departure and Dido's death, and in the moral status of the protagonists. In the *Aeneid* the hero's departure is of course motivated by Mercury, sent by Jupiter to remind him of his obligations. In *Dido and Aeneas* the job is done by a malicious sorceress who dispatches her 'trusty Elf/ In Form of Mercury himself/ As sent from Jove' to 'chide his stay,/ And Charge him Sail to Night with all his Fleet away.'

The effect of this change on the meaning of the story is rather dramatic, since it renders the critical moment of moral enlightenment in *Aeneid* 4 a sham, and a sham perpetrated by malign forces. The implications of the difference can be brought out by comparison with an earlier stab by Nahum Tate at the Dido myth, the play *Brutus of Alba* of 1678, which Tate himself admits in his preface was closely based on Virgil's Dido.⁸ In both Tate versions a central part is played by wicked sorceresses. In *Brutus* the sorceress Ragusa directs her malign energy towards encouraging the love-affair between Brutus and the Dido-figure, the Queen of Syracuse. Brutus eventually extricates himself from this affair and sails off to found Britain, as destined. In other words this is essentially the same scheme as in the *Aeneid*: the hero is distracted from his destiny by a supernatural conspiracy promoting a love affair, but ultimately comes to his senses and continues on his allotted way. In *Dido and Aeneas*, on the other hand, the sorceress doesn't use her magic to *cause* the love-affair but rather to send her elf to *end* the love-affair and hasten Aeneas on his way to Italy. In short, whereas in *Brutus* malign forces delay the mission, in *Dido* they expedite it. The effect in *Dido* is inevitably to undermine the value of Aeneas' mission and our sense of the force and value of the imperative to leave Carthage which he obeys.

Our respect for that mission is further undercut in the final scenes of the opera. If in the *Aeneid* the self-discipline and moral backbone is all Aeneas', and a lack of self-control is what characterizes Dido (in ways all too easy to analyse in terms of gender stereotypes), in *Dido and Aeneas* the roles are again reversed. Once she has learnt of Aeneas' decision to leave Dido is heroically resolved that he must go, but Aeneas starts to vacillate:

Aen. What shall lost *Aeneas* do?
 How, Royal fair, shall I impart
 The Gods' decree and tell you, we must part?

Dido Thus on the fatal Banks of *Nile*
 weeps the deceitful Crocodile.
 Thus Hypocrites that Murder Act
 Make Heaven and Gods the Authors of the Fact.

Aen. By all that's good -

Dido By all that's good no more:
 All that's good you have Forsworn.
 To your promised Empire fly,
 And let forsaken *Dido* dye.

Aen. In spite of *Jove's* Command I stay,
 Offend the Gods and Love obey.

Dido No, faithless Man, thy course pursue:
 I'm now resolved as well as you.
 No Repentance shall reclaim
 The Injured *Dido's* slighted Flame.
 For 'tis enough, what e're you now decree,
 That you had once a thought of leaving me.

Aen. Let *Jove* say what he will, I'll stay.

Dido Away [Exit *Aen.*

Dido then dies, delivering the famous, noble lament to her confidante Belinda, 'When I am laid in Earth/ May my wrongs Create/ No troubles in thy Breast./ Remember me, but ah! forget my Fate.' *Dido and Aeneas* thus embodies a radical inversion of the Virgilian scheme.

There are other, more minor divergences, which I shall attempt to make something of later. But to round off this brief account of the shape of the opera, I need to mention two elements of the original piece which are rarely, if ever, included in contemporary productions. These are the prologue and epilogue. The prologue, originally sung (but the music has been lost), is a dramatic allegory of the arrival of spring. Phoebus the sun rises and pays court to Spring with the assistance of Venus. There have been attempts to find in this prologue a further, allegorical dimension, to read it as a celebration of the accession of William and Mary,⁹ or allusions to peculiar climatic conditions obtaining in the spring of 1684,¹⁰ but they have not been convincing: it is no more nor less than an allegory of spring. However if the prologue has little to say about contemporary events, the epilogue is a rather different matter:

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.
 Here blest with innocence, and peace of mind,
 Not only bred to virtue, but inclin'd,
 We flourish and defy all human kind.
 Art's curious garden thus we learn to know,
 And here secure from nipping blasts we grow.

Let the vain fop range o'er yon vile lewd town,
 Learn play-house wit, and vow 'tis all his own;
 Let him cock, huff, strut, ogle, lie, and swear,
 How he's admired by such and such a player;
 All's one to us, his charms have here no power,
 Our hearts have just the temper as before;
 Besides, to shew we live with strictest rules,
 Our nunnery-door is charm'd to shut out fools;
 No love-toy here can pass to private view,
 Nor China orange cramm'd with billet doux,
 Rome may allow strange tricks to please her sons,
 But we are Protestants and English nuns;
 Like nimble fawns, and birds that bless the spring
 Unscarr'd by turning times we dance and sing;
 We hope to please, but if some critic here
 Fond of his wit, designs to be severe,
 Let not his patience be worn out too soon;
 In a few years we shall all be in tune.

This was composed not by Nahum Tate but by another contemporary literary figure, Tom D'Urfey, a popular playwright and songwriter who achieved the difficult task of remaining, as the *Oxford History of English Literature* puts it, 'during four successive reigns one of the most successful entertainers of his age', as well as being another regular collaborator with Purcell around this time.¹¹ In 1689 he was apparently experiencing a lean patch in his career, and hence presumably his temporary employment in the summer of that year at the school in Chelsea. The probable reasons for his fall from favour, and the means by which he revived his fortunes, will concern us later. The last thing we need to know by way of background, however, is that the epilogue was published in D'Urfey's *New Poems* of 1690, entitled, 'An Epilogue to the Opera of *Dido and Aeneas*; performed at Mr. Priest's Boarding-school at Chelsey: spoken by the Lady Dorothy Burk.' The speaker of the epilogue will occupy the very centre of our attention later in this article.

But for now we have a context for this performance, historical, geographical and to some extent also sociocultural (though this can be filled out further), and with luck we also have the germ of a sense of its idiosyncrasy within the Virgilian tradition, the quite radical departures it marks from the Virgilian model. What I shall try to do in the remainder of this paper is to draw out the resonances with contemporary events - the Glorious Revolution, essentially - which the opera possesses. I shall ultimately be suggesting that the things which *Dido and Aeneas* has to say about the Glorious Revolution are diverse to the point of incoherence, but in their very incoherence offer a fascinating portrait of the profound ambivalence with which this revolution was met, amongst the British public at large, but particularly in the social circles associated with institutions like the Priests' school at Chelsea.

The clearest allusion, in fact probably the only clear allusion, to contemporary circumstances in the body of the opera comes early in the first act. Dido confesses to Belinda, her confidante, that she is in love with Aeneas, but is unwilling to give way to her passion. Belinda, like Anna in the *Aeneid*, encourages her to succumb, and Belinda is supported in this by the Chorus, who contribute the declamatory couplet, 'When Monarchs unite how happy their State,/ They triumph at once on their Foes and their Fate.' The fact that this couplet is delivered by the Chorus, its declamatory

style, and the abrupt lack of connection of the sentiment with what precedes it, all make it a very marked passage, and it seems a fairly blatant allusion to the very unorthodox arrangements made in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. Mary was the source of legitimacy for the regime, such as it was, by virtue of being James II's daughter, but William was *de facto* in control after his military invasion, and was not inclined to take a subordinate constitutional role. A joint monarchy was the solution, but it was a very unusual solution. Certainly in the context of the remainder of the opera this optimistic observation by the Chorus sits very awkwardly indeed. It is in fact blatantly untrue. Dido does succumb to Belinda's and the Chorus' persuasion; she and Aeneas do 'unite'; but they certainly do not 'triumph ... on their Foes and their Fate.' Aeneas abandons Dido and Carthage, following his *fate* towards Italy, and Dido as a consequence dies. As she dies Dido sings 'Remember me, but ah! forget my *fate*.' Now it is easy to understand the impulse to construct a parallel of this kind between the plot of the opera and such a remarkable constitutional settlement, and particularly if (as seems likely) it was a spring performance. John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* was performed at the Priests' school on April 17, 1684; if *Dido and Aeneas* was performed at a similar time in 1689, it would have happened in the immediate aftermath of the coronation of William and Mary on April 11, a unique event to reflect the unique circumstances of this reign.¹² It was surely impossible not to make the connection in the circumstances. But the fate of the mythical couple makes a terribly unfortunate analogy, if pursued, for William and Mary, and the fundamental awkwardness of the gesture in the context of the opera as a whole is actually very typical of this work's maladroit self-positioning in respect of contemporary events, as if it is drawn to make such connections but unable to do so comfortably or satisfactorily.

If we turn to the epilogue, this text too seems to betray contradictory impulses, simultaneously a desire to acknowledge the political situation (and express loyalty to the new regime) and a determination to deny the relevance to the performance of these contemporary events. The Epilogue, as D'Urfey informs us in *New Poems*, was delivered by a pupil of the school named Lady Dorothy Burke. The significance of this choice of speaker cannot be overestimated. There is a rather remarkable bundle of documents in the Public Record Office (now renamed The National Archives) centred around a petition submitted by Lady Dorothy Burke to the King (ruling alone after Mary's death in 1695) dated June 1696. In the process of requesting money to which Lady Dorothy claims a right, the petition reveals some fascinating details about her past life:

To the King's most Excellent Majestie

The Humble Petition of the Lady Dorothy Burke Sheweth

That your Petitioner's father the Earl of Clanricard going over into Ireland during the last Rebellion there and declaring himself a Roman Catholick commanded your Petitioner to leave this Kingdom in order to be bred up in the same Religion, and in case of her refusal threatened to expose her to want.

That the late Queen of ever Blessed memory was pleased to rescue your Petitioner in that great difficulty and out of her Majestie's great Piety and Goodness to promise your Petitioner an honorable provision, and made her an allowance of one hundred pounds *per annum* for her present support, which your Majestie has been graciously pleas'd to continue since the Queen's deplorable Death.

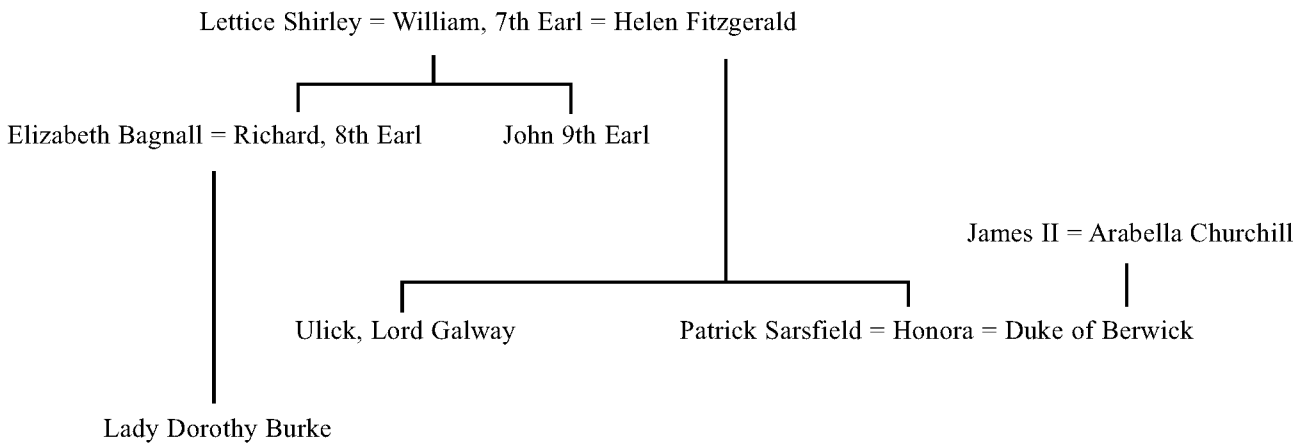
That your Petitioner is the only Child of her Father, and the only Protestant of her Family, and

your Petitioner's Uncles the Lords Gallway and Boffin on whom her Father's Estate is entailed in Remainder, and the Duke and Duchess of Barwick who have a debt on the Said Estate are outlawed for High Treason against your Majestie, and as your Petitioner believes, their own Estates as well as their Remainders of your Petitioner's Father's Estate forfeited to your Majestie, tho' as yet no Inquisition has been taken for your Majestie:

Your Petitioner doth therefore most humbly beseech your Majestie to grant to your Petitioner the several Forfeitures made by her Uncles and Aunt and all your Majestie's Right to Their Estates, either in possession or Remainder

And your Petitioner shall ever pray the...¹³

This document tells us a great deal, but the crucial material will be explicated by another family tree, this time of the Burke or de Burgh family, at the head of which stood the Earls of Clanricarde. It may be noted that this and the earlier tree intersect by virtue of the Duke of Berwick, product of the affair between James II (then Duke of York) and Arabella Churchill, sister of the Duke of Marlborough:



As can be seen, Lady Dorothy Burke is the daughter of the 8th Earl of Clanricarde. After the Revolution of 1688 her father declared for James and joined his forces in Ireland, taking command of the city of Galway, near the family seat at Portumna. The tree also indicates quite what a glorious pedigree Dorothy could claim. As an example, her aunt, Honora de Burgh/Burke married Patrick Sarsfield, the most prominent soldier in James' forces and a hero of Irish folklore—the archetypal 'Wild Goose'—and she was really marrying beneath her.¹⁴ After he died she married James Fitzjames, Duke of Berwick, favourite illegitimate son of James II, and subsequently one of the greatest generals of the age, fighting for the French against his uncle the Duke of Marlborough: he and she are the 'Duke and Duchess of Barwick' of the petition. So this family are at the very summit of the Irish aristocracy and at the centre also of Irish resistance to the Revolution. What makes them so loyal to James, above all, is their Catholicism. As the petition tells us, Dorothy's father commanded her 'to leave this Kingdom in order to be bred up' in the Catholic faith, 'and in case of her refusal threatened to expose her to want.' But Dorothy clearly did refuse, and had to be rescued from penury by a grant of £100 *per annum* from Queen Mary, which evidently allowed her to remain a student at the Priests' school. Certain parallels will have been noted between Dorothy's pious disobedience to her Catholic father and the not dissimilar state of affairs which obtained between Queen Mary and *her* Catholic father.

Reading the epilogue again in the light of this understanding of the speaker's identity and significance certain things stand out. For example, particular force attaches to 'Rome may allow strange tricks to please her sons,/ But we are Protestants and English nuns' when spoken by this heroine of the Protestant cause, willing to surrender family ties before her faith. But here a strange diffidence intrudes itself: for while the choice of speaker seems to trumpet the political character of this event, the *text* of the epilogue is essentially an exercise in asserting the irrelevance of the political situation to the girls of the school, their virtuous sequestration far away from such disturbances. There is plenty here to corroborate my earlier suggestion that the Priests' was a bride factory, but also great emphasis on the protection offered by the school, the security it offered from men, London, Catholics-and revolutions: 'Like nimble fawns, and birds that bless the spring,/ Unscarr'd by turning times we dance and sing.' The epilogue puts as much energy into *denying* the pertinence of

events to the cast of this opera as it does into inviting, by virtue of the girl who delivered it, an awareness of it.

We can perhaps see this tendency to discount contemporary events in other elements of the opera. One odd, specific departure from the Virgilian model is the change of name experienced by Dido's confidante, from Anna to Belinda. I have seen no convincing explanation for it.¹⁵ But an explanation did occur to me which would again show a diffidence in the opera's engagement with the circumstances of the Revolution. Queen Mary also had a sister named Anne, the future Queen. The removal of an Anna from the plot of *Dido and Aeneas* looks rather like an attempt to discourage the parallels which might otherwise suggest themselves between this noble female made to suffer by a feckless male (remember Lady Dorothy, too)-and Queen Mary.

I shall soon offer some explanation of the strange contradictory dynamics of this work, the apparent need to respond to the Revolution balanced by an even stronger impulse to shut it out. Before that, though, I want to discuss this element of 'depoliticization' as it impacts on the form of the story at a broader level. It has been well argued by Steven Zwicker that the Revolution of 1688 and the regime of William and Mary which emerged from it were at something of a loss when it came to representing themselves in literary or artistic mode. As Zwicker puts it, 'the muses were reluctant to speak in 1688. They were, I think, uncertain of what to say and what form to say it in.'¹⁶ If this was the case, Zwicker suggests, it was partly due to the peculiar character of the Revolution (above all the resistance its apologists put up to considering it a revolution at all), which militated against the conventional heroic treatment, but it was also (and these alternatives are not clearly distinguishable) a consequence of the inalienable association of High Culture, in all its forms, with the regime which had been displaced (175):

Perhaps it was merely an accident of literary history that the former laureate [i.e. Dryden] should have been trapped in his Roman Catholicism and Jacobitism in 1689; that the greatest exponent and exemplar of high culture in the 1690s should have been an adherent of Stuart monarchy and Stuart policy; and that the closest student of his art, Alexander Pope, should also have been a Catholic and Jacobite, and in his first major work, *Windsor-Forest*, should have identified himself as an acolyte of Stuart monarchy. Was it, however, solely chance that high culture should have been so firmly attached to Stuart monarchy, and that the revolution should have been attacked in cultural terms as boorish, illiterate and dull; that William's first laureate was Thomas Shadwell, dunce of *Mac Flecknoe*; and that the Williamite epic should have been Blackmore's *Prince*

Arthur rather than Dryden's *Virgil*?

Charles II and James II had put enormous energy and resources into promoting the artistic life of the Court, and became as a result powerful sources of patronage and constant objects of literary treatment. Consequently, the conventional idioms of literary panegyric could not help but be associated with, and when deployed call to mind, James II rather than William III. To take a more specific example, Aeneas was a figure who featured with such regularity in Caroline and Jacobean panegyric that he was bound to evoke the deposed king rather than his replacement at every appearance. For illustration I can cite two examples of late Stuart court poetry deploying Virgilian imagery to the end of eulogizing James II: from John Dryden's *Britannia Rediviva*, which celebrated the birth of the Old Pretender in June 1688, and from a poem *On the Earl of Castlemaine's Embassy to Rome in King James II's Reign, 1687* composed by a certain Nahum Tate. The latter incidentally plays on the potential of 'Rome' to designate the ancient city *and* the papacy in the same way as D'Urfey's Epilogue seems to do: at the end of an opera about the founder of Rome, who is presented as an untrustworthy male, the couplet *Rome may allow strange tricks to please her sons,/ But we are Protestants and English nuns* may well obliquely evoke Aeneas too.

Here may'st thou see thy wond'rous fortunes trac'd,
 With suff'rings first, and then with empire grac'd;
 Long toss'd with storms on Faction's swelling tide,
 Thy conduct and thy constancy was tri'd,
 As Heaven design'd, thy virtue to proclaim,
 And show the crown deserv'd before it came.
 Troy's hero thus, when Troy could stand no more,
 Urg'd by the Fates to leave his native shore,
 With restless toil on land and sea was toss'd,
 Ere he arriv'd the fair Lavinian coast;
 Thus Maro did his mighty hero feign.
 Augustus claim'd the character in vain,
 Which Britain's Caesar only can sustain ...

Nahum Tate, *Castlemaine's Embassy* 5-17

Fain would the fiends have made a dubious birth,
 Loath to confess the godhead cloth'd in earth;
 But sicken'd, after all their baffled lies,
 To find an heir apparent of the skies,
 Abandon'd to despair, still may they grudge,
 And, owning not the Savior, prove the judge.
 Not great Aeneas stood in plainer day,
 When, the dark mantling mist dissolv'd away,
 He to the Tyrians show'd his sudden face,
 Shining with all his goddess mother's grace;
 For she herself had made his countenance bright,
 Breath'd honor on his eyes, and her own purple light.

John Dryden, *Britannia Rediviva* 122-33

If we turn to *Dido and Aeneas*, the denigration of the hero is obvious, but the more striking in the context of this persistent deployment of the figure in Stuart panegyric. I repeat that my sense is that we are not to see the representation of Aeneas in *Dido and Aeneas* as a deliberate subversion of Stuart imagery so much as another attempt to drain the myth of any political applicability: Aeneas does not cut the figure that he did in Stuart propaganda, and that should preclude any interpretation of him in line with panegyric tradition. But since a strong vein in the justification of the Glorious Revolution consisted precisely in suspicion of the elaborate self-promotion of the previous regime, the subversion of the glory of Aeneas' mission in *Dido and Aeneas* inevitably resonates with the ideology (or anti-ideology) of the Revolution. In this respect *Dido and Aeneas* is an exercise in defusing political allegory which only succeeds in turning the allegory to another application: in denigrating Aeneas, this opera rejects the very category of heroism, so central to Stuart self-presentation, or at any rate attributes heroism to a most unconventional figure, Dido. The analogy between the feckless James and Aeneas, and the noble Mary and Dido, is hard to resist; and if so, that is because it is in this allegorical way that we (the audience of *Dido and*

Aeneas) have been taught to understand Virgilian myth.

In its profound incoherence, its inability to decide whether it is positively loyal to the Revolution or innocently detached from it, *Dido and Aeneas* is thus an eloquent document of its times, a work which exemplifies the problems encountered by high art after 1688. But I want to move away from abstract processes towards the individual experience of these 'turning times' which our relatively full knowledge of the circumstances of this production allows us to see. When Zwicker summarizes the situation at the Revolution as, 'the highest forms of literature are then either in difficulty or in the hands of an opposition' (181), it is clear that the problem for high art in 1689 is partly a simple matter of personnel. Artistic forms are closely associated with the Stuart monarchy primarily because, as a centre of patronage, it attracted artists into its ambit. That patronage had now vanished, it not being William III's style at all, and the artists were in many cases left disoriented without much of their artistic *raison d'être*. As it happens, a number of them were apparently washed up at the Priests' school in Chelsea. We have seen an example of Tate's production in 1687, and it places him very close to James indeed: in the wake of the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-81, more damningly still, he was collaborating with Dryden on the second part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, a satirical assault on the enemies of James, then Duke of York. As for D'Urfey, he was on familiar terms with both Charles II and James II, and was the author of a recent poem entitled *A Poem Congratulatory on the Birth of the Young Prince; most humbly dedicated to their August Majesties, King James and Queen Mary*, which must have been awkward, to say the least, given the insistence of apologists for the Revolution that the baby in question was supposititious, smuggled into the Queen's chamber in a warming-pan, by Jesuits. (Paranoid, as I say.) It is in fact the temporary embarrassment of his loss of patronage with James' departure which best explains D'Urfey's presence at the school in 1689. Purcell, meanwhile, had regularly composed for the festivals of James' court, and cooperated on projects with Tate, Dryden and D'Urfey; the scope to produce music at Court was also now much restricted. Every single one of the artists involved in the production of *Dido and Aeneas* thus had reason to feel discomfited by the Glorious Revolution. It wasn't a life sentence for any of them. Unlike Dryden they all recover their status, and more. But at this juncture they are all likely to be experiencing, in greater or lesser degree, feelings of insecurity.

To contemporaries, at any rate, the Priests' school could look like a nest of Jacobites. In 1690, after his departure from the school, the resourceful D'Urfey betrayed his erstwhile hosts with a farce entitled *Love for Money: or The Boarding School*, which satirized a lightly fictionalized boarding-school in 'Chelsey, by the River.' The *dramatis personae* include the heroine Mirtilla ('the fair forlorn'), apparently penniless but in reality, as it eventually turns out, worth £50,000 pounds (£3,000 a year), who attends the school out of an act of generosity, and who self-evidently owes a lot to Lady Dorothy Burke; and 'a singing, dancing, talking, fluttering nothing' named Le Prate, a French dancing master whose name I assume is meant to suggest Priest's (*Le Prêt*): Priest was not, as far as we know, French, but his profession, dancing, was considered an intrinsically French activity, and deeply suspect as a result. Le Prate, along with most of the other people associated with the school (Mirtilla of course excepted), is a dyed-in-the-wool opponent of the new regime. The headmistress of the school, Crowstich, thus comments on a master who has eloped with a Catholic pupil: 'Nay, and what's worst of all, the

Villain Made her sit on's knee and sing an Impudent Ballad twice over in praise of King *William*.' (It is fascinating that the audience is being encouraged to approve of heiresses who marry against the wishes of Catholic Jacobite parents: this was a revolution which needed to validate filial disobedience, Mary's and Anne's above all, but Lady Dorothy's too, and England's fundamentally.) The satire was transparent enough for the play's performance at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (probably in December 1690) to be interrupted by 'my hissing Antagonists of the *Nimble Craft*', the dancing master Josias Priest and friends, in other words. As D'Urfey complains, ironically, in the Prologue,

Or if we show the humours of a School
Offending none, Still some will play the Fool;
Some dancing Critick, in despite of Witt,
Shall swear, we do it to offend his Kitt.¹⁷

D'Urfey's protestations of innocence should of course convince nobody: the Priests' school is being presented as a Tory establishment uneasy, to say the least, with the new dispensation. And there is more evidence that the Priests' school could be perceived as politically unsound. In an excellent recent article Mark Goldie has published and elucidated a letter which refers to the school from a certain Mrs Buck to her friend Mary Clarke, wife of the leading Whig MP Edward Clarke, himself (we may recall) an intimate friend of John Locke and recipient of Locke's sketch for a political pamphlet which we met earlier. Mrs Buck is reconnoitring schools for the Clarkes' children, whose education was a concern to Locke, too (inspiring *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, 1693):¹⁸

I went myself to three schoolls. Preists att Little Chelsey was one which was much commended; but he hath lately had an Opera, which I'me sure hath done him a great injury; and the Parents of the Children not satisfied with so Publick a show. I was att Hackney at one of their Balls: I cannot commend itt. Kingsinton was commended for a delicate air, but I cannot finde out what the Children are improved in. Att present all schoolls are redicul'd: they have latly made a Play cal'd The Boarding School.

The letter dates to May 1691, and it seems pretty clear that the stir at 'Preists att Little Chelsey' was caused by *Dido and Aeneas*. But what Goldie draws out of this letter is the Whiggish standpoint shared by author and recipient. Both the school and the opera which the school staged were in the eyes of people like Mrs Buck (or the Clarkes, or Locke)—all too ready to see pernicious, or worse, French influence in flamboyant exhibitions like opera or dancing—deeply suspect, tainted by an association with Toryism and (inevitably) Jacobitism. As Goldie puts it, '[i]n 1689 Josias Priest was reviving a cultural artefact of this high Tory court, a regime which stood for everything Locke, the Clarkes and Mrs Buck abhorred.'

The picture painted by D'Urfey's farce and Mrs Buck's letter is clear enough. In 1689 the Priests' school at Chelsea embodied a representative section of Stuart high culture left stranded, exposed and anxious in the harsh light of the Revolution of 1688. No wonder *Dido and Aeneas* exemplifies so well the profound insecurities experienced by artists at this time.

So I hope I have established that the standard record-sleeve assessment of *Dido and Aeneas* as the first major achievement of English opera, or whatever, is only part of the story. That

performance in the spring or summer of 1689, a paranoid time, was an event fraught with anxiety, a suspect art form written, composed and rounded off by suspect artists in a suspect educational establishment, and quite possibly attended by suspect parents. No surprise, given the displacement of cultural resources which Zwicker describes, that this rare instance of Williamite high culture took place far from William's court, or that it was so tentative, inept even, in its treatment of the heroic material it tackled. As a cultural event Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* perfectly exemplifies the peculiar diffidence which Zwicker identifies as characteristic of the literary culture, such as it was, of the Glorious Revolution (177-8). Comment on the Revolution, he writes, 'seems hampered, confused in its handling of themes, caught out for an idiom'. The violence done to the Virgilian model, its ethics, its consistency, its very status as a text with any ideological significance at all, makes this hamstrung composition a paradoxically eloquent document of what Zwicker calls (180) 'a troubled circumstance for a literature of heroism and high principles.'

I would like to end by reasserting, in a rather oblique way, my opening remark to the effect that *Dido and Aeneas* is not a work deliberately and confidently communicating a political position, but rather a passive victim of events beyond its control. I want to do this by stressing the fundamental importance to the work of its performance context in a girls' school in Chelsea. In particular the description offered in D'Urfey's epilogue of the Priests' school as a haven of security away from dangerous influences has applicability far beyond the schoolgirl performers. As Ellen Harris suggests,¹⁹ the basic gist of the epilogue is to characterize the opera, in retrospect, as nothing more controversial or politicized than a 'morality', a lesson in the dangers of men proper to the finishing school in which it takes place. But D'Urfey has his own reasons for wanting us to believe this. It suits these grown-up Tory artists, no less than the girls, to avail themselves of the protection offered by the school environment, the ideological protection which allows them to present *Dido and Aeneas* as in *absolutely no sense* a contribution to contemporary political debate. The whole opera, in fact, betrays a desire to keep a low profile, avoid topicality, *not mention the revolution*, which offers a close analogy on the intellectual plane to the geographical situation of the girls' school, at a safe distance from the perils of London Town. But any such attempt to control and restrict the meanings of the myth presented at this performance was always as sure to fail as the attempt to protect the schoolgirls from outside influences. D'Urfey's play about the school gives the lie to the ideal of virginal purity peddled by his own epilogue, to the extent of presenting on stage an assignation arranged between a pupil and a male admirer by means of a *billet doux* concealed in an orange, a practice explicitly disavowed in the epilogue. But we also know quite independently of D'Urfey that for Lady Dorothy Burke to describe herself, or be described, as 'unscarr'd by turning times' was hopelessly wishful thinking. D'Urfey and his colleagues in this endeavour might piously hope to evade notice and avoid controversy in a morality entitled *Dido and Aeneas* in a girls' school *outside* London, but the *Aeneid* was too essential a component of high culture, and the Revolution of 1688 too conflicted in its attitude to that high culture, for *Dido and Aeneas* to escape attention, for Virgilian myth to be disarmed, for Dido to lose significance. For all the attempts to keep a lid on things, *Dido and Aeneas* could not help but be, as Mrs Buck appreciated, 'so Publick a show.'

NOTES

- ¹ I first spoke about Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at the Cambridge University Classical Literature Seminar in 1994, and then at a meeting of the International Society for the Classical Tradition at Boston University in 1995: I am still waiting for the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* to honour their undertaking to publish the text that I supplied in the summer of 1995. I returned to the opera, with a rather different slant, at the Dublin Classics Seminar at University College Dublin in 1997, and a fuller version of that argument was delivered to a meeting of the Virgil Society in 2002 and a seminar at the University of St Andrews shortly afterwards. I owe a special debt to two people: Andrew Erskine for reigniting my interest in this peculiar contribution to the Virgilian tradition, and for providing my title in the process; and Jonathan Foster for his firm commitment to bring to an end its decade-long quest for a publisher.
- ² R. Lockett, 'A New Source for *Venus and Adonis*', *Musical Times* 139 (1989), 76-9.
- ³ The document is published in J. Farr and C. Roberts, 'John Locke on the Glorious Revolution: A Rediscovered Document', *Historical Journal* 28 (1985), 385-98.
- ⁴ There is a near-contemporary map in R. Thompson, *The Glory of the Temple and the Stage: Henry Purcell, 1659-1695* (London, 1995), 44.
- ⁵ R. Semmens, 'Dancing and Dance Music in Purcell's Operas', in M. Burden (ed.), *Performing the Music of Henry Purcell* (Oxford, 1996), 180-96, at 190-96.
- ⁶ F. P. and M. Verney, *Memoirs of the Verney Family* (London, 1907), Vol. 2, 312-3, quoted in J. Keates, *Purcell: a biography* (London, 1995), 175.
- ⁷ Keates, op. cit. (n. 6), 175-6.
- ⁸ E. T. Harris, *Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas* (Oxford, 1987), 20.
- ⁹ J. Buttrey, 'Dating Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*', *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 94 (1967-8), 51-62; C. Price, *Henry Purcell and the London Stage* (Cambridge, 1984), 229-234; answered by B. Wood and A. Pinnock, "'Unscarr'd by Turning Times'": The Dating of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*', *Early Music* 20 (1992), 372-390, at 375-6.
- ¹⁰ Wood and Pinnock, art. cit. (n. 9), 388-9; answered by A. R. Walking, "'The Dating of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*'?", *Early Music* 22 (1994), 469-81, at 470-1.
- ¹¹ *Dictionary of Literary Biography 80 (Restoration and Eighteenth Century Dramatists)*, 86. In April 1688 we hear of Purcell collaborating on D'Urfey's comedy *A Fool's Preferment*: C. Price (ed.), *Purcell, Dido and Aeneas: An Opera, Norton Critical Scores* (New York & London, 1986), 76. In March 1690 we find him setting to music D'Urfey's ode, *Of Old, When Heroes Thought it Base* for 'the Assembly of the Nobility and Gentry of the City and County of York' in London, and in April 1690, similarly, D'Urfey's *Arise my Muse* in celebration of Queen Mary's birthday: R. King, *'A Greater Musical Genius England Never Had': Henry Purcell* (London, 1994), 177, 179.
- ¹² H. and B. van der Zee, *William and Mary* (London, 1973), 277-9.
- ¹³ The National Archives T1 41, no. 20.
- ¹⁴ P. Wauchope, *Patrick Sarsfield and the Williamite War* (Dublin, 1992); for Honora de Burgh, see 89-90, 296, 299-300.
- ¹⁵ That offered by Keates, op. cit. (n. 6), 180 ('Anna, whose name, doubtless because it seemed hard on the ear, was changed to Belinda') does not seem adequate.
- ¹⁶ S. N. Zwicker, *Lines of Authority: Politics and English Literary Culture, 1649-1689* (Ithaca, 1993), 198.
- ¹⁷ 'Kitt' here seems to mean both 'setup' or 'establishment' and a type of fiddle typically used by dancing instructors.
- ¹⁸ M. Goldie, 'The Earliest Notice of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*', *Early Music* 20 (1992), 392-400.
- ¹⁹ Harris, op. cit. (n. 8), 33.