

The Death of a Queen

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In 1988 the Mark Morris Dance Group, then in residence in Brussels, gave its first performances of a ballet choreographed to Nahum Tate and Henry Purcell's brief opera *Dido and Aeneas*. In Morris's ballet, which has since been performed elsewhere in Europe and the United States, singers in the pit with the orchestra perform the opera entire as if in concert version, while the dancers enact the story silently on stage. Narratively speaking the ballet is a cover of a cover of a cover—the most recent appropriation in a line that goes back through Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* to Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and finally to a few dim scraps of myth about the Queen of Carthage from which Virgil constructed his heroine.

As billed, Morris's take on the opera threatens to be a swish postmodern send-up. For one thing, his casting goes decidedly against the grain. Ballet's "wild child," as one critic has dubbed him,¹ chose to place himself in the two lead female roles—Dido and the Sorceress—backed by a unisex *corps de ballet* dressed in identical black sarongs and passing as handmaidens, sailors and a coven of witches. His decision to cross-dress as the Queen of Carthage could be taken as an enormous in-joke about his sexuality: there's a story that in Brussels the Queen of Belgium came to see a performance and meet Morris. As she made her way to him the crowds in the lobby cried out "Long live the Queen." Morris later remarked, "I thought they meant me."²

1. Tobi Tobias, "Wild Child," *New York Magazine*, 21-28 December 1992, 92.

In contrast to the self-conscious provocativeness of his casting, however, Morris's choreographic vocabulary responds to the textual and musical surfaces of the opera with what can seem a banal literalness—Morris the kid in his Seattle backyard “acting out” the implications of the music with earnest exactitude, the way kids do. He employs an uneven pastiche of incongruous signs and gestures, at times deliberately ungainly, that work on varying iconographic levels: the dancers paint words, often using the vocabulary of American Sign Language; they act out details of musical structure—grounds, imitations, and the like; less frequently they mime the larger arcs of the narrative, or break out into ecstatic expressive gestures that are reined in by a sign. Efforts to impart a vague air of classical antiquity to the production also lend it a certain ungainliness: at times the dancers move with the flatness of figures in Greek vase painting, heads turned in flat profile, arms canted at unnatural angles; the *corps de ballet* takes poses that resemble lines of figures on a frieze. In short, the dancers move in and out of the music's surface, accentuating its humps and craters with an opportunistic and fractioned style that is a kind of choreographic madrigalism. Baryshnikov said of Morris that “he detests any kind of acting onstage.... He always hates it when people start to *portray* something.”³ The coherent persona we tacitly expect a particular performance to represent is fragmented here by this diversification of the function of the dancer's gestures. Verbatim translation is anti-expressive.

The opening aria by Belinda, Dido's confidante, exemplifies this style:

Shake the cloud from off your brow.
Fate your wishes doth allow.
Empire growing,

2. Christine Temin, “Mark Morris: Brussels and Boston,” *Ballet Review* (fall 1989): 72.

3. Nancy Dalva, “Misha and Mark: Out On a Limb,” *Dance Magazine* (January 1991): 41.

Pleasure flowing,
Fortune smiles and so should you.

Purcell had already provided his own madrigalism on “Shake”—a dotted-rhythm melisma. Morris’s Belinda acts out the melisma, her body responding directly to the musical figure—this is semantics, not psychology. Then there is the embrace of the forehead on “brow,” the expansive gestures on “Empire growing,” the sinuous movement on “flowing,” arms crossed and then flung apart on “Banish,” the gesture to the face on “the fair.” You complete the list. This chain of gestures is taken as a unit in itself and repeated in stanzaic dead pan as often as the music and text repeat.

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But for all its seeming provocativeness, this *Dido and Aeneas* is neither a send-up nor a put-down, but an uncanny completion of Purcell’s opera. For all I’ve just said about Morris’s flaunting of conventional casting and choreographic expectations, I find the performance to be a deeply satisfying account of the work. Rather than “problematizing” the work, the very dance vocabulary I have just described can be seen as Morris’s attempt to meet the opera on its own terms, to address its own problems.

For there are problems—both stylistic and thematic—with Purcell’s “little jewel of an opera.” England’s first and only opera for a considerable length of time shows the unevenness consonant with a new beginning. Morris himself is quoted as saying that as an opera *Dido* would probably be difficult to stage; I suspect it finds some of its happiest performances in concert version. Like an album of snapshots, the opera moves through styles, forms, and affects with dizzying rapidity, flickering in these brief *tableaux vivants* from the deeply expressive to the utterly mechanical, the serious to the silly, from plastic soliloquy to formal canon, pellucid declamation to fractured prosody: “Fear *no dan-ger* to *en-sue*; the he-ro loves as well as

you.” Here the famous lament and chorus, that extraordinary flower that blossoms out at the end of the piece; there the campy menace of the Sorceress and her witches, a coven of bloodthirsty mechanicals. Morris’s choreographic style responds to these peculiarities; making no effort to set up long-range narrative or expressive lines (as he does, for example, in *The Hard Nut*, his remake of the *Nutcracker*, where he responds to the breadth and flight of classical ballet), he makes the Purcell style his own.

And in making it his own, he earns the right to control the telling of the tale. For in his retelling, Tate bowdlerized Dido’s tragedy. Virgil invented the love affair between Aeneas and the Queen of Carthage in order to show the grim human costs of founding an empire. In the process of turning this episode from epic into a free-standing narrative, Tate reduced the conflict to local dimensions: instead of the cosmic apparatus of Jupiter and the fates, we have the manic mischief of a neighborhood banshee who has it in for the provincial queen. Her messenger to Aeneas is an elf who feigns the figure of Mercury. (When in the aqueous gloom of her cave the Sorceress invokes this spirit, in one of those glintingly comical moments Morris scatters through the work, briefly in midmotion her body wobblingly coalesces into the form of Mercury *en arabesque*. You’re hardly sure you saw it: was it a spirit, or was it the FTD man? [figure 1].) Also, peculiarly, Tate robs Dido of the final motivation for her death. Destiny necessarily turned Virgil’s Aeneas into a weasel; at Mercury’s appearance the hero’s hair stands on end, and ever after he is the obedient puppet of the gods, brushing Dido off with the temporizing “We were never married.” Empire builders are unsympathetic in their obligatory isolation from human passions; Virgil’s point is that in this respect empire building is not a noble calling.

Tate, on the other hand, allows Aeneas the luxury of a lover’s conflict; the hero claims to prefer death to desertion, and seeing Dido’s grief he begs to be allowed to stay, renouncing the founding of Rome with remarkable ease. But Dido

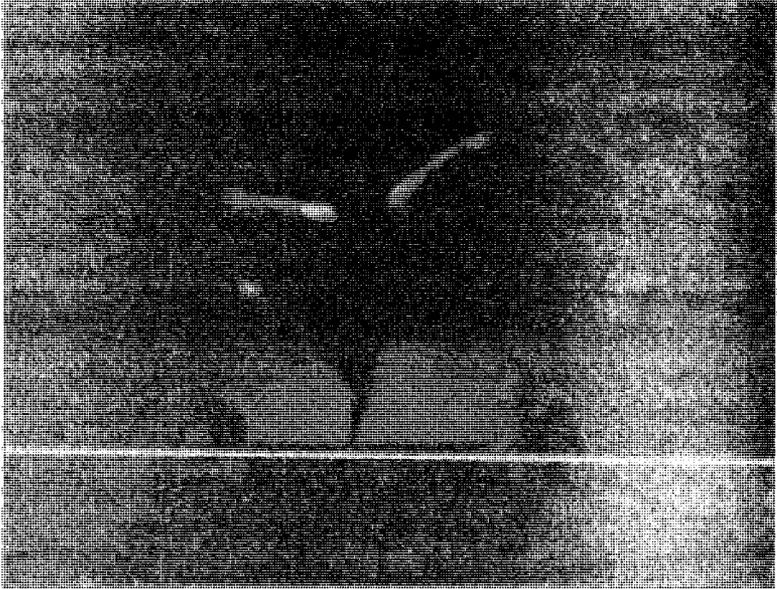


Figure 1

angrily rejects his offer, leaving her handmaidens clucking sadly in chorus that “Great minds against themselves conspire, / And shun the cure they most desire.” Are we to infer neurosis here? Could she have had happiness, as her chorus of faithful retainers seems to suggest? Tate’s strangely modern version of the story seems to be an attempt to “save the appearances”: Aeneas is really a decent fellow, moved by grief; larger-than-life figures like Dido *will* have their eccentricities. Tate wanted to have his tragedy and bowdlerize it too.

It’s also not wise to look too closely at the end. Dido is not granted her suicide, as was the great queen in the *Aeneid*; death *visits* her, as a “welcome guest.” Her end is sad, but Tate robs it of the noble inevitability of Virgil’s fourth book. Love is a disease, and death is sleep. As much as the witches’ sabbath and the sailors’ hornpipe, the languishing accents of the close of the opera indicate the extent to which Restoration England has supplanted ancient Carthage in Tate’s retelling of the tale.



Morris's extraordinary empathy for the figure of Dido is the transforming grace of his ballet. In a sense he can be seen as returning Virgil's Dido to Purcell's piece. The dancer's lithe but rangy body, tumbling long curls, and angular features suit the powerful figure of whom Virgil wrote, "Dux femina facti"—"A woman was leader of the deed" (emphasis Virgil's, by position). One remembers Virgil's vision of the towers of Carthage rising under Dido's dynamic captainship before the coming of the foreign intruders, and the dire consequences for the city when love makes industry fall idle. Morris's intent here does not seem to be to "undermine heterosexual ideology," as one critic trendily prated—nothing so tritely polemic as that—but to investigate the fluidity of gender boundaries in a sympathetic portrait of this powerful and pathetic *dux/femina*: the woman/man is danced by the man/woman in an empathetic reading that tells Morris's tale as well as Dido's. Drag-for-drag's-sake is almost entirely absent, relegated principally to the witches' scenes; the occasional shimmies and swishes are as appropriate to Purcell's counterrhythms as they are to the demeanor of a drag queen. But Morris does manage a critique of the equivocating Aeneas: in the unisex atmosphere he has created, Aeneas's aggressive maleness is odd man out. One thinks of the rigid Pentheus facing the liquidities of Dionysus and his Bacchantes in Euripides's *Bacchae*. Strikingly, in this context there is an orgiastic component to the opera—the frenzied witches. By appearing as both Dido and the Sorceress, Morris drives home this duality.

Consider the numbers that close act I. In a brief recitative Aeneas makes his first appearance. The subsequent chorus—"Cupid only throws the dart"—is one of those places where the dancers foreground musical process to become the imitative entries of the singers, threading their way through an arbor of outstretched arms to tip their darts at Aeneas (posed himself as an archer, aiming at Dido a far more poisonous arrow). In

Belinda's aria "Pursue thy conquest, Love. Her eyes / Confess the flame her tongue denies," Morris's stage image of the word "pursue" is Belinda and the Second Woman chasing each other in a tight circle, their arms in frenetic gestures of persuasion (figure 2). The chase image becomes a take on the nature of the confidant role: the loving but uncomprehending attendants through the ages—the nurses in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Phèdre*—who want to buy their mistresses peace at any price. Their ceaseless circling here suggests the misdirectedness of their desire.

The text of the closing chorus is a mine of madrigalisms:

To the hills and the vales, to the rocks and the mountains,
To the musical groves and the cool shady fountains,
Let the triumphs of love and of beauty be shewn.
Go revel, ye Cupids, the day is your own.



Figure 2

Purcell has already begun the wordpainting, at least rudimentarily: the line rises to the mountains and falls through a musical melisma to a cool minor triad for the cool shady fountains. "Triumph" gets military dotted rhythms, and "Go revel" points of imitation. Morris's corps becomes a chorus of dryads who canter with graceful wiriness across the stage, then sinuously puddle to the floor at the mention of fountains. But look again: that verb "canter" is more appropriate than I thought when first I wrote it: the dryads suddenly affect a subtle equine posture, tossing their heads and pawing with their right forefeet—the noble steeds that transport the company to the hunt. These choraic metamorphoses have an Ovidian tinge, or perhaps descend from the ships-turned-dolphins in Book VII of the *Aeneid*.

To continue, "triumph" is the outflung, stiff-armed gesture that is emblematic of the word throughout the ballet—Morris invents his own signs as well as borrowing them from extant languages. "Go revel" is enacted by pairs of dancers peeling off in imitation of the imitative entries until the corps is a throng of revelers in ceaseless local motion. The final Triumphant Dance is an eloquent celebration of the royal lovers' happiness. Morris uses lifts here for the only time in the work (his dancers have had their centers of gravity close to the ground). Aeneas lifts Dido and then, in a gesture utterly touching in its innocence, the two take turns in assisting each other to leap onto the low wall that runs along the back of the stage—like children playing along a curb.

Turning to Morris's Sorceress, the alter ego of Dido, I confess that I find this portrayal less satisfactory than the other, at least in its darkest moments. When Morris tries to achieve the maelstrom of a witches' sabbath, all that writhing cannot be bestial enough, and the comparison to kids in backyard dramatics returns in an uncomplimentary fashion. But when Morris is being funny he is successful. He choreographs the Echo Dance as a Halloween version of Simon Says, which wittily suggests the witches' slavishness. Later a pair of witches

celebrate the sure success of their plot with a comical upright leapfrog, and at the close Morris's Sorceress summons them affectionately to her grasp, tucking them under her arms to form a many-limbed beastie. In the final witches' dance, *riverenza*-like passages in French overture style are choreographed as murders—guts are viciously spilled on stage and bodies thrown in the air. At the end, the Sorceress saunters sensually through the throng, one arm akimbo, and sits on the bench, tolerant monarch of all she surveys.

Morris lays the groundwork for Dido's great lament, "When I am laid in earth," at the beginning of the opera, in the opening of Dido's first recitative, "Ah, Belinda," where he introduces a sign and a stage picture that will resonate later. The *sign* is for the word "press'd"; Morris places both palms one above the other on his abdomen and presses downwards. The *picture* is of the two women leaning toward each other with outstretched hands that do not meet; bent from the waist, Belinda in her posture has a compelling awkwardness. The declamation takes place over a ground bass, and this complex of gestures is repeated several times.

Reminiscences of these gestures in the recitative "Thy hand, Belinda" that precedes the lament, and in the lament itself, function as a framing device and transform the prosaic signs into meaningful symbols. Finally the hands connect. In the lament Belinda clings to Dido's hand as if holding her back from death, while Dido walks a broad circle around her (figure 3). Dido releases herself, spins broadly to the right and left, and returns to Belinda, placing her hand in the "press'd" gesture to Belinda's breast. The sign functions as a cadence to this complex of gestures, which sets the text of the first half of the lament and takes place over three repetitions of the ground. The complex is repeated—again the ecstatic gesture reined in and then repeated, formalizing it, and circumscribing its expressiveness. In the second half of the lament, "Remember me," Morris's gestures are more unrestrained, but again are

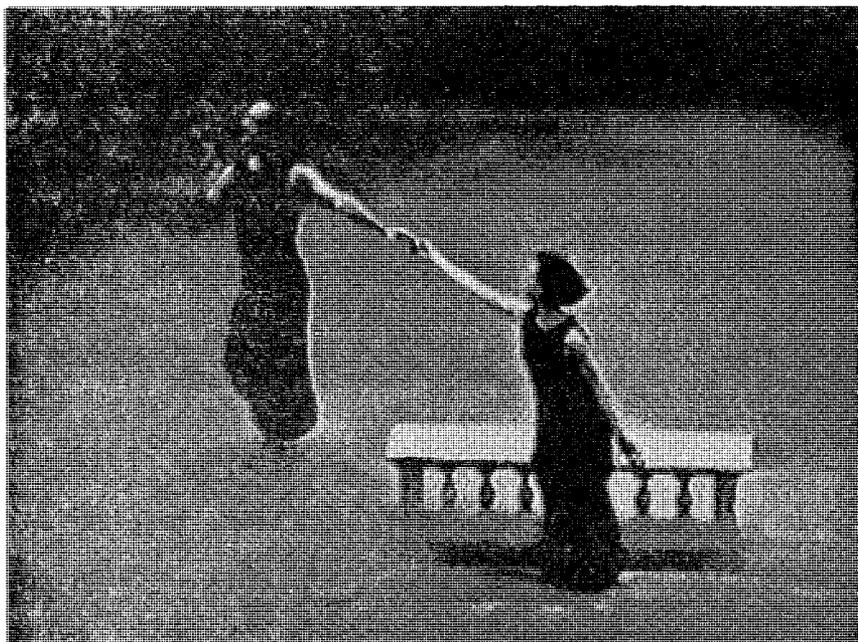


Figure 3



Figure 4

reined in by a sign—the hieratic motion of heel of hand to forehead, left and then right (figure 4).



In conclusion, it must be admitted that the word “cover” is just a metaphor, and perhaps not a very good one, for what we’re talking about here, if the paradigm for a cover is a pop remake of a song that is known by its first recorded instance rather than by its (usually nonexistent) score. Sellars’s productions of Mozart operas could be classified perfectly correctly as performances of a work in the traditional sense, even if rather irritating ones in many respects. And Morris’s ballet could go by a name that is current in the historic preservation industry in my old hometown—adaptive reuse. To both men something like an original score is an irreducible minimum; the work is carefully preserved in their performances. Both use fine musicians, with training in so-called authentic practices. Neither tinkers particularly with the score; in fact Sellars lovingly restores to *Figaro* arias in the fourth act that have traditionally been eliminated.

It is ironic that Morris’s production, which is technically further away from the original work than Sellars’s by these definitions, is the one more attentive to it. In Sellars’s covers, performers are the locus both of the work and of the transgressions against it: they sing the original while looking, acting, and interacting in ways that problematize the very words they are singing. In *Dido* the original is presented separate and intact, and the cover is more like a covering or coverlet—a new layer overlaid on the original. Because the purveyors of the original are concealed from the audience’s view and the cover is what the eye beholds, the cover *reads* the original for us. But I do not think that Morris’s reading, its choraic dead pan notwithstanding, means to “go against the grain.” He is said to have had his dancers memorize the music, and sing it during rehearsals.⁴ In the process they internalized it, and at times one forgets the

split between singer and dancer. Instead of singers suggesting the motions of dancers on stage (as I have argued elsewhere that they should in Mozart operas), at the most heartfelt moments the motions of the dancers suggest that the voices we hear are emanating from their very diaphragms; they seem to be singing. Superficially one might gather from Morris that in this postmodern cosmos mere expressiveness is an add-on, a disposable element that one foregrounds sometimes in self-parody. But I suspect that it is the quality of passionate expression restrained by formal constraints that draws Morris, with his aversion to "acting," to set Baroque music. One is continually pulled back from the brink of naturalism, and expression becomes incantation.

4. Temin, "Mark Morris," 74.