

Mark Morris's *Dido and Aeneas*.

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Just a few minutes into Mark Morris's 1989 dance to Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* it is clear that at least some of the movement "represents" the words of the libretto. Whether by looking apt (shaking hands in the air to "shake"), or through repetition (hands held out in an Indian dance mudra every time the word "fate" is heard), associations build up between gestures and words, creating a lexicon of gestural signs. This "re-presentation" of the libretto through gestures might be viewed as a redundant doubling of the words, but my contention is that, on the contrary, Morris exploits the transparency of this strategy to sophisticated and moving effect. By generating something approaching a sign language that evolves through the course of the dance (which also happens to incorporate gestures from American Sign Language (ASL)), he is able to foreground and problematize the relationship of the signifier to signified. Thus his whole meaning-making process becomes self-reflexive. At the same time, by grouping certain words together, linked through similar gestures, and by deliberately contravening his own representational system, Morris is also able to speak of tragedy, 300 years after the opera was first performed.

Morris has stated that he "always" starts with the music when making a dance<sup>1</sup> and most reviews of his work make some reference to the ensuing close relationships between dance and music. There have been many scholarly essays and articles on the relationships between dance and music in Morris's work as a whole and in this essay I am drawing on my own work over the past fifteen years and that of other dance scholars who have engaged in choreo-musical analysis of *Dido and Aeneas*.<sup>2</sup> It is a tribute to Morris's *Dido and Aeneas* that it merits and rewards repeated analysis over many years; this is something that is common in musicology but all too rarely seen in dance scholarship. What all these analyses reveal, through their different strategies and perspectives, is that Morris (as usual) works very closely with Purcell's score and one of the things that emerges from this close reading of Morris's *Dido and Aeneas* is that even his departures from his own system of signs are a reflection not only of the audible aspects of the music but also of its inner structures. Both the relationships between keys, and the recurrence of musical motifs, are matched through similar relationships and recurrences in the dance. Indeed, the very strategy of one-to-one, gesture-to-word, setting is itself a reflection of baroque word-setting in music, so beautifully exemplified in Purcell's opera.

The plot of Nahum Tate's libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* is based on Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid* which describes Aeneas's sojourn in Carthage as the guest of Queen Dido, herself a refugee but one who has set up a thriving empire with her dead husband's wealth. Earlier in Virgil's tale Aeneas has been told that he should seek the site of a new Trojan empire. When Aeneas seems to be settling down too well in Carthage, with thoughts of marrying Dido and joining their two empires, Jove sends Mercury to remind him of his true destiny and send him on his way. In the *Aeneid*, Dido tries to tempt Aeneas to stay but when she is unsuccessful she builds a huge funeral pile, climbs up on it, stabs herself and dies amidst the flames.

Tate's libretto departs from the Virgil in a number of important ways and presents the Carthage episode entirely from Dido's point of view. It begins with her misgivings about whether Aeneas returns her affection and whether he can be true to her, given his destiny. Her courtiers, in particular her handmaiden Belinda, reassure Dido that Aeneas does love her and they hint at the benefits of uniting the two empires, Carthage and Troy. Aeneas himself enters and swears that he will deny his destiny if only Dido will give herself to him. Dido does not answer but there follow songs praising the triumph of love and a Triumphant Dance.

The first scene of the second act is set in a cave and introduces the Sorceress who devises a plot to trick Aeneas into leaving Dido. The Sorceress tells the other witches that Dido and Aeneas "are now in chase" (presumably of each other as well as of the quarry of the hunt) but says that "when they've done" she plans to send a false messenger, disguised as Mercury and pretending to come from Jove, to tell Aeneas he must leave that night.

In the second scene of Act II the royal hunting party is entertained while resting in a grove. The Second Woman tells the story of Actaeon, who was turned into a stag as a punishment for looking on Diana while she was bathing, and then was torn to death by his own hunting hounds. Aeneas's reaction is to make a thinly-veiled allusion to his own sexual prowess but Dido's only response is to cry out that a storm is coming and the party is urged back to the safety of the town by Belinda. The storm, we know, has been conjured up by the witches and, as the others run away, Aeneas is commanded to stay by the "Spirit of the Sorceress in the likeness of Mercury" who tells him to leave Dido instantly and continue his quest. Aeneas agrees to this (false) command but worries about how he is going to tell Dido.

Act III begins with the Trojan sailors telling each other to "take a boozy short leave of your nymphs on the shore, / And silence their mourning / With vows of returning, / But never intending to visit them more" (providing a rustic, revealingly commonplace, version of

Aeneas's fickleness) after which there is a matching, gleeful scene from the witches. The remainder of Act III is given over to Dido both recognizing and lamenting her fate. When Aeneas approaches her with, according to Belinda, “such sorrow in his look...as would convince you he's still true” Dido accuses him of weeping crocodile tears and of blaming the gods for what is, in fact, his own decision. Aeneas offers to defy Jove’s decree and stay with Dido but she calls him “faithless” and spurns him saying: “For ‘tis enough whate’er you now decree / That you had once a thought of leaving me.” As soon as Aeneas has left, however, Dido reflects: “But Death, alas! I cannot shun, / Death must come when he is gone.”

As with the consummation and, indeed, the reason for the Sorceress’s hatred of Dido, there is no depiction of, or explanation for, Dido’s death in Tate’s libretto. \* She sings her (now famous) heart-wrenching lament, dies and is laid in a tomb by her courtiers who have the final chorus: “With drooping wings ye Cupids come / To scatter roses on her tomb. / Soft and gentle as her heart / Keep here your watch and never part.”†

For his danced version of the opera, Morris studied not only the music score but also (as he always does)<sup>3</sup> as much as he could about the context and history of the piece. This included a collection of essays together with a critical edition of the libretto and music, in the Norton Critical Score: *Henry Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera*, edited by Curtis Price and only published a few years before the first performance of Morris’s *Dido and Aeneas*. Morris included one of the essays, by Wilfrid Mellers, in the program of the premiere performance which suggests that he felt that at least this essay (“The Tragic Heroine and the Un-Hero”) was pertinent to his own understanding of the opera.‡ Morris made the, not unusual, choice to add an instrumental version of the final cupids’ chorus at the end of the work and to repeat the instrumental music for “The Grove” at the end of the Hunting scene, after Aeneas has been told to leave by the false messenger. These are both amendments suggested in the Norton Critical Score and, in combination, they assist what becomes almost a mirror structure to the whole dance (see Table 1).

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\* See Price “Dido and Aeneas in Context” in *Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986): 3-41 for possible reasons for Tate's reticence.

† All quotations from the libretto are taken from Curtis Price, “The Libretto: A Critical Edition” in *Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986): 63-79.

‡ Wilfrid Mellers, “The Tragic Heroine and the Un-Hero” in *Purcell “Dido and Aeneas” An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986): 204-13. I am grateful to Professor Stephanie Jordan for the information that Morris included Mellers’s essay in the premiere programme for *Dido and Aeneas*, in 1989. See Stephanie Jordan, “Mark Morris Marks Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* as Danced Opera” *Dance Research* vol.29, no.2 (2011): 167-213.

Morris reinforces this mirror structure by having the two roles of Dido and the Sorceress performed by a single dancer (as, in some productions, they are given to a single singer) but with almost opposite, inverted, movements and performance styles.\* When he performed in *Dido and Aeneas* (from 1989-2000), Morris took on both roles and, after briefly separating them in 2006, giving Dido to Amber Star Merkens and the Sorceress to Bradon McDonald, he returned to combining the roles, allowing each dancer to perform both.† In the first image Morris presents of the Sorceress, she is nearly upside down, sprawled over the bench with her arms splayed out to the side in a wanton manner that Dido would surely never allow herself to fall into - except that this is exactly the same position as Dido's in death.

Curtis Price identifies that “the tonal plan” of the first two Acts, featuring respectively Dido and her court and the Sorceress and her coven, “reflects the parallel resolutions of inner conflict.”<sup>4</sup> In each case, “the chorus, singing in the major mode, coaxes the Sorceress [or Dido] from her F minor [C minor] recitative.”<sup>5</sup> There are other structural connections between the court scenes and those of the witches. Roger Savage notes that both contain

a female protagonist singing mainly slow music, two girl attendants with more animated music, a cheerful but hardly sensitive chorus which sings simple dance numbers in the main, and one male soloist – a voyager who loves and leaves. If you look at the witch scenes (including the one with the sailors) you will find this structure repeated exactly, which can hardly be accidental.<sup>6</sup>

Morris reflects this structure closely in the dance, presenting Dido, Belinda and the Second Woman in exactly the same, triangular, stage configurations as the Sorceress and the First and Second Witch. He also gives the first “Come away” gestures in the instrumental opening to the sailors' scene to Aeneas, clearly identifying him both with, and as, “the voyager who loves and leaves.”

Morris also reinforces the mirror/double structure of *Dido and Aeneas* via his strategy of creating virtually a gesture for each word of the text. In my previous analyses of Morris's *Dido and Aeneas* I identified movements that are seen each time the following words are heard:

shake; brow; fate; allow; empire/ Italian ground/ Hesperian shore; pleasures  
flowing/ Elysian bowers; smiles; you; banish; sorrow; care; grief; never/ no

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\* Curtis Price points out that the Sorceress and Dido have the same mezzo-soprano vocal range and tessitura and suggests that “the Sorceress, like Dido, is also consumed - not with grief - but with hate, which she expresses by plotting to destroy the queen.” Curtis Price “*Dido and Aeneas* in Context” in *Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986), 27.

† See Stephanie Jordan, “Morris Marks Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* as Danced Opera” for a detailed account of the performance history of these roles and the ramifications of changing the gender of one or both roles.

trouble; fair/ Queen/ Dido/ royal fair; Ah!; Belinda; press'd/ heart/ breast;  
 torment/ oppress'd/ distress'd/ confess'd; languish; guess'd/ know/ known/  
 forget/ sensible; Trojan guest/ Royal guest/ Aeneas/ hero; Carthage/ state/ this  
 land; revive; monarchs/ Troy; foes; storm; soft; strong/ wretches/ wretched; woe/  
 bless'd; see; piety/ pity; loves/ lover; strew; pursue; fire/ flame; flight; your/ my/  
 his; fall; conquest/ fact/ resolv'd; triumph; raven; appear; Jove / god-like / gods/  
 the Almighty powers; commands; tonight/ here/ this night/ this place; drive/  
 haste/ away; vaulted cell; Diana/ Actaeon/ cupid/ in chase; hounds; after; mortal  
 wounds; obey/ decree; anchors weighed; part; forsook; heaven; bereft; die/  
 death; deceitful streams/ ocean/ fatal Nile.<sup>7</sup>

I have grouped words together when they are accompanied by the same, or very similar, gestures and I am grateful to Stephanie Jordan for identifying that the following words could be added to the existing groups: “crocodiles (added to hounds), desire (to fire/ flame), counsel (to obey), earth (to soft), leaving (to part), give (to woe), shun (to drive / haste), scatter (to strew (referring to flowers)).”<sup>8</sup> Rachel Duerden and Bonnie Rowell similarly include a list (with useful descriptions of the gestures and notes for “additional uses” of the same gestures) in their detailed study of the work.<sup>9</sup> Jordan adds a few words I had missed: “remember, stay, fleet, sunset/sunrise, mountain, and kill.”<sup>\*</sup> I have since identified a few more: “touch,” “shelter,” “more,” “hard,” and, most importantly (to my reading), “drooping wings.”

Some of these groupings are a little surprising: soft and earth; strong and wretched; and woe and bless'd do not seem to have enough in common with each other to be conveyed by the same gesture. My suggestion is that in some cases Morris is deliberately representing a word with the “wrong” gesture, in that, when the movement is later performed to a very different word, there is a much more obvious connection between the two. It then becomes apparent that the first rendition was foreshadowing the later text, further enhancing both the mirror structure of the dance and the inevitability of the tragedy. In doing so Morris continues to work closely with the opera since analysis reveals that this foreshadowing often occurs when the music is pre-empting a pitch interval, motif, or key, heard later.

By creating a system in which each word is accompanied by a single, usually gestural, movement, Morris is equipped to demonstrate the same, often significant, repetitions of words as occur in the text. Thus Belinda’s encouragement to Dido to “pursue thy conquest

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<sup>\*</sup> Jordan, “Morris Marks Purcell,” 213. Jordan also makes “one suggested amendment: decree (with the palms facing front) is not the same as obey where (as for command and will) the elbows are lifted, wrists flexed and palms face downwards.” Jordan is making a mistake here (probably typographical) in that “command” and “will” are like “*decree*,” with the arms extended horizontally from the shoulders and palms facing forward, not like “obey.” I only point this out for reasons of clarity since I am genuinely grateful for Jordan’s observations and it is worth noting that we are both seeing new things even after years of close reading of the dance.

love” contains the same word, made more memorable by having the same gesture (in which one arm is flung up after another) as the story of Actaeon being “pursued by his own hounds.” Similarly, the word and gesture for “fate” in Belinda’s opening “fate your wishes doth allow” presages Dido’s final cry: “but ah! forget my fate.”

Belinda’s early assurance that “Fortune smiles and so should you” contains the same word, and gesture, as when Aeneas says, falsely, “Let Dido smile and I’ll defy the feeble stroke of Destiny.” It is a mark of Morris’s genius that he has made the gesture for “smile” – pulling both elbows up and back so that the lower arms make a “v” around the mouth – practically an inversion of the gesture for “wretched” in which the lower arms make the same “v” shape, but this time by drawing the elbows down and in front of the body. We see this movement (which immediately afterwards is performed in “mean wretches’ grief” by Aeneas) when Belinda sings “a tale so strong and full of woe,” making it clear that it is strong because it is so sad. There is a similar association made at the end of Dido’s recitative leading into her lament. She feels that “Death is now a welcome guest” and, because Morris has used the same gesture for “Trojan guest” as for “Aeneas,” we see the sign for Aeneas now being associated with death.

As well as echoing the way that certain words are repeated with changed significance in different sections of the opera, Morris’s movement language also allows him to reflect the pre-echoes of the final tragedy that are fleetingly alluded to in the music. The most famous section of the opera is Dido’s final recitative and lament and this, coupled with the following chorus “With drooping wings, ye cupids come,” contains movements, musical motifs and keys that have been seen and heard, perhaps unconsciously, all the way through the dance and opera. Thus, the first phrase of the opera, “shake the clouds from off your brow,” ends with a movement that at first just looks as though Belinda is gesturing to Dido’s forehead. She stands behind Dido and brings one arm around in front to hold a hand over Dido’s brow and the other over her breast. Both women lean to one side and Dido is leaning back almost to rest on Belinda. The same position is seen at the end when Dido sings “on thy bosom let me rest.” At this point the full import of the movement is apparent: Belinda is not just indicating Dido’s forehead but cradling her head in her arms to provide succor. In fact the support and sympathy being shown by Belinda, here, has been previously suggested in the dance by a number of appearances of the position to both “pity” and “piety.” In the first Act the Second

Woman exclaims: “What stubborn heart unmoved could see / Such distress, such piety?”\* On “piety” she runs to stand in front of Belinda, who cradles her head and upper body, both women leaning to one side. Aeneas even takes the same position relative to Dido when he performs “pity,” placing his head and shoulders within her embracing arms, but almost immediately withdrawing again.

Dido’s first aria contains a number of movements that reappear either in her final lament or in the chorus that follows it and that make more sense there, in terms of how appropriate they are for the words. On the “I” in “Peace and I are strangers grown,” Dido holds her arms out to the side in line with the shoulders but with the lower arms dropping down at right angles, palms facing behind. She then extends one arm out diagonally downward, curving her upper body towards it and looking down to her hand. This is the same position the courtiers take when they call the cupids to gather “with drooping wings” around Dido’s tomb at the end of the opera. Having recovered to the right-angled arm position, Dido flips her lower arms upwards so that the arms still make right angles but both hands are pointing upwards, and arches her back in a way that becomes closely associated with “death” and “die.” In the final chorus at the moment of Dido’s death, the dancers follow the “drooping wings” posture with the same reaching up of both arms bent at the elbows, with the upper back arched, and alternate this with a deep plié in second position stretching their curved arms out to the sides from their bowed-over bodies.

This bowed-over position with arms curving out to the sides has also been seen earlier, at the beginning of the Triumphant Dance, performed much more quickly by everyone (including Dido and Aeneas) except for Belinda and the Second Woman who stand to one side looking on and whispering. Mellers describes the Triumphant Dance as being “a little uneasy, with sharply accented dissonant passing notes that hint that all may not, after all, be for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>10</sup> That Morris hears these hints is evident in the inclusion of such gestures as the one the courtiers take bowed over Dido’s tomb and also in the way Aeneas holds out his free arm in the gesture for “obey” (the gods) while he is running along a balustrade holding Dido’s hand.

The Triumphant Dance comes straight after the chorus “To the hills and the vales” in which, on “cool shady fountains” the dancers perform the gesture that has become identified

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\* Price, in his critical edition of the libretto, gives the Second Woman the line as “Such distress, such pity?” while noting that in other editions the last word is “piety.” The singer in the Mark Morris version sings “piety” – as is almost necessary to accommodate the dotted eighth-note – sixteenth-note – quarter-note rhythm – but Morris is clearly giving both the Second Woman and Aeneas the same position for the two words.

with “sorrow”/“weep” and sink to the floor to recline with one leg extended to the side and one arm reaching up and back like Dido in “thy hand, Belinda.”

This, again, is an echo of Dido’s opening aria and a foreshadowing of her lament and the same sequence is performed many times in Act II Scene 2, the Hunting Party in the grove. Belinda begins her solo, “thanks to these lonesome, lonesome vales, these desert, desert hills and dales” with her right arm on her hip holding the left out low so that she looks like a cupid with drooping wing. She traces out “vale” and “dale” by stroking her left hand diagonally downwards, bending the arm at the elbow momentarily so that it looks like a version of “no trouble” from Dido’s lament. In the story of Diana and Actaeon, as the Second Woman sings “Oft she visits this lone mountain, oft she bathes in this stone fountain” the “no trouble” shape is traced in the air again, followed by raising the arms straight up overhead (the gesture for “Jove”) then dropping the hands in front of the face for “sorrow”, and ending with the arm reaching up and out as in “Thy hand Belinda.” The sequence is repeated by the chorus sitting on the floor and, although these gestures could also reasonably represent “mountain” and “fountain,” it is undeniable that Dido, to whom the tale is being related, is watching her tragic end being played out in front of her.

These premonitions in the dance are in themselves reflections of similar forebodings in the music. Mellers identifies that it is on “cool shady fountains” that the otherwise major-key music slips into G-minor – the key of Dido’s death.<sup>11</sup> It is at this point that we see the chorus “weep” and slip down into the first position of Dido’s lament. In Dido’s first aria the long melismatic phrase on “languish” moves the music from C minor into G minor, and as it does so the dancers (first Dido and then Dido and Belinda) raise their arms above the head, one bent, one straight, in the position of the cupids’ “drooping wings,” held above the head instead of down by the side of the body.

After the courtiers depict the cupids with drooping wings in their final chorus, they quietly move into two lines stretching away from their dead queen where they alternate between two movements, both sideways on to the audience, like a living, moving frieze. The first is a gentle drop down with arms curved, one in front of, and one behind, the body and is a sideways-on version of the bowed-over position already mentioned. The second is a recovery to standing with one arm raised in a right angle in front, one lowered in a right angle behind. Over the chorus’s reiterated “soft” the dancers drop down in a canon that travels down the two lines either side of Dido. Morris has presaged this moment by giving the movement to Dido when she comments on Aeneas’s “soft” charms in Act I. As Dido drops



forward the other dancers draw closer to her, and closer again on the repeat, as if they, too, have a premonition of where Aeneas's soft charms will lead.

Another advantage to having such an apparently straightforward gestural vocabulary is that Morris is able to vary one position or motif to mean subtly different things. This is particularly true of Dido's "press'd" motif, in which she places one hand on her breast and the other on her abdomen and presses both palms in toward her body and downward, while opening her legs. As Joan Acocella writes, Dido "tells us where it hurts—not just in the heart."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after Dido first performs this movement, telling us that she is "press'd with torment," Belinda stands behind her and presses her hands in and downward in front of Dido, observing that Aeneas "into your tender thoughts has press'd." Morris is then able to show that, in response, Dido presses the backs of her own hands against her outspread knees in what turns out, later, to be the gesture for "forsook."

The hands are similarly placed over heart and stomach, but more gently, when the word "heart" is sung, including in the final chorus. This is also their position for more violent gestures and meanings such as Actaeon's "mortal wounds" or when Dido talks of the mountain oaks being "rent asunder." In both these cases the hands first of all pull sharply outwards and then drop forwards with the fingers wriggling downwards depicting, as Acocella suggests, the guts falling out.<sup>13</sup> Every time the Sorceress and or the witches mime disemboweling Dido, which they do with revolting frequency, they include the same literal depiction. In another gesture starting with this placement of the hands (but this time in fists) they perform small, quick, rising circles to "revive."

There is an inversion of the press'd motif that frequently recurs, to the word "love" or, as Aeneas puts it, "one night enjoy'd," in which one hand, with the fingers pointing slightly upward, presses in toward the breast while the other scoops down, in front of the abdomen, to lift, so that both hands are rising. At the same time one leg is lifted slightly in front, with the knee bent and foot flexed. Morris even plays with this already inverted motif by giving it to the Sorceress, not just for "love" but also for "hate."

The placement of the hands over heart and stomach is similar to the ASL sign for "enjoy" or "appreciate" in which the palms are placed on or near the "chest" and "belly" and circled in opposite directions.\* This precise combination of hand shapes and movement is not employed in the dance but Morris acknowledges using ASL as a basis for some of the

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\* An animation of this sign is available at the "ASL University" website <http://lifeprint.com> under "enjoy" (accessed December 22, 2013). All the examples of ASL in this article are taken from this excellent website.

gestures in *Dido and Aeneas* and some, like the signs for “crocodile,” “here” and “never,” are exact copies.\* The gesture for “never” (in both the dance and ASL) resembles tracing a question mark in the air but at an approximately 30 degree angle outwards from the vertical. This means that when Dido performs it in her lament, standing behind Belinda, who is sitting on the bench, she appears to be stroking her hand down in parallel to the outline of Belinda’s head and upper arm.†

Other references to ASL are less accurate but nonetheless recognizable. Morris makes his own version of the ASL sign for “touch,” extending the hand being touched by a fingertip, right out to arm’s length for “approach” in “grief should ne’er approach the fair.” There is more of a departure from ASL, but still a link, in gestures such as bringing the heel of the hand to the forehead as part of the sign for “reason,” “sensible” (as in being capable of feeling), “know” and “forget.” The ASL sign for “forget” wipes the hand away from the forehead as though “you are wiping information off your memory banks” and the sign for “know” involves touching the temple with the tips of the fingers.<sup>14</sup> Although this means that Morris’s gestures are not the same as the ASL signs, they all refer to the side of the forehead as the site of knowledge or understanding. It is well-known (and clearly apparent) that much of the Sorceress’s physicality (including her vamp-like walk) is taken from Cruella de Vil in the Disney animation of *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) and the heel of the hand to the forehead gesture is what she does when she is exasperated at her two henchmen. It is the Sorceress who makes another reference to an ASL sign truly her own. The gesture for “Carthage,” “state” and “this land” is similar to the ASL sign for “area,” a horizontal circling of flat hands, with the palms facing down. The Sorceress performs it in the phrase “the Queen of Carthage, whom we hate” (which is when she uses the gesture for “love”) and she circles her hands with such malicious glee that she could be stirring a cauldron.

An intriguing reference to ASL is visible in the important and moving series of gestures to Dido’s repeated “Remember me!” in her lament. Dido draws the fingertips of one hand together as if picking something up off the other hand, in a similar movement to the ASL sign for “learn.” Morris told Jordan that he was making a reference to the ASL sign and, as part of her evocative description of the lament, Jordan notes that Morris expands it by “extending the arm overhead and arching into a fall backwards.”<sup>15</sup> Through consistent

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\* Morris talked about “knowing some ASL” in a “Meet the Artist” session, Sadler’s Wells Theatre, London, November 31, 2013 and then paused any time he used a word such as “bullshit” to see how the BSL interpreter at the session would sign it.

† Jordan, “Morris Marks Purcell,” 201. Morris told Jordan that he used the sign for “never” on “No trouble” to mean ‘Never trouble in thy breast.’

repetition every time the word “death” or “die” is heard, that arching of the back has come to mean death by this point in the dance, when Dido is asking us to remember her when she is “laid in earth.”

Morris draws on other codified systems of signs as well as ASL in *Dido and Aeneas*. The ballet mime gesture for “beautiful” is used for “fair,” “Dido,” and “the royal fair,” and the gesture for “sorrow” and “weep” makes reference to the ballet mime gesture for “sad.” The hands in the “fate” gesture are held in the Bharata Natyam hand position (or mudra) called Alapadma, or “fully bloomed lotus.”<sup>16</sup> This mudra can also be used to express “separation from a dear one”<sup>17</sup> and Dido holds one hand in this position against her sternum as she parts from Aeneas and then, soon afterwards, as she signs “no trouble.” There are also naturalistic gestures such as the taps on the shoulder to “Then let me speak” while others are straightforwardly pictorial, as in the Sorceress's peaked hands when she sings of a “vaulted cell.”

There are also references in Morris's version of the opera to classical antiquity, in the balustrade and bench and also in the costumes which, although they are actually sarongs with simple sleeveless tops, in black, look like tunics and togas. At the same time the sarongs are similar to Martha Graham's favored costume of a long split skirt. There are other possible references to Graham in the use of the bench and in Morris's hair style as Dido, when he has his hair held back with the aid of a stick. I have also previously identified links to musical theatre in the Triumphant Dance, when first Dido and then Aeneas runs along the balustrade while holding on to the other's outstretched hand.<sup>18</sup> There is a possible link to Javanese Wayang Kulit (puppet theatre) in the hand positions held down by the side of the body and pointing backwards and there are clear references to Irish dance in the Sailors' dance with light stepping jumps and kicks performed with the arms held firmly by the sides of the body.

Because Morris's choreography for *Dido and Aeneas* does not draw on just one “movement language” or codified system, it is clear that all the borrowings are *knowing quotations* or, as Morris puts it, “the references are ‘fake.’”<sup>19</sup> Morris is not making a piece of 1930s modern dance any more than he is working in Bharata Natyam, but he is reflecting on the meaning-making processes in both those forms and in ASL, Disney cartoons and musical theatre. By creating a system of signs that evolves meanings through the course of the piece, he is questioning the relationships between *signifiers* and *signified* and exposing that none of them is natural or inevitable.

At the same time, Morris is also incorporating another system of meanings – that of word-setting in baroque music. Mellers describes Purcell's setting of the false confidence the courtiers have in the union of Dido and Aeneas saying: “The love match is symbolized... in a bit of traditional counterpoint – a canon two in one (!) that creates, within its unity and its regular dance metre, a rather painfully dissonant texture.”<sup>20</sup> In reflection of this dissonance Morris gives each of the courtiers a sharp little stabbing movement (“Cupid’s darts”) but he also, more subtly, has them take up the arm position for the “cupids with drooping wings” who gather about Dido’s tomb at the end of the opera.

Mellers continues: “it is appropriate that Belinda should follow with a deliberately conventional pursuit aria ... with virtually no dissonance, and with “echoes” between voice and bass, to suggest illusion.”<sup>21</sup> Morris gives both Belinda and the Second Woman an arm gesture for “pursue” that involves flinging each arm up in turn and then down, rapidly, one after another. While this looks like (literally) a throwaway gesture suggesting the speed of pursuit, it is also a broken version of the gesture for “Troy” and “monarchs” in “When monarchs unite” and it also moves through the arm position (lower arms at right angles to the upper arms, one pointing upwards, the other down) that forms part of the final frieze. That Morris is closely following the music is evident in that the two dancers are working in a close canon that synchronizes with the canon between the voice and the cello – the “echo.” By working so closely with the music he is also following the same theories about the importance of close word-setting that Purcell and other baroque composers followed.

Morris’s reflection of the readily audible structures of Purcell’s music is so detailed it is, at times, almost a *music visualization*. In the first chorus, on the repeat of “Banish sorrow, banish care, Grief should ne’er approach the fair” the sopranos and tenors start together and are followed half a measure later by the altos and basses. The dancers stand in four lines at right angles to the front of the stage and the first and third line move with the sopranos and tenors while the second and fourth move with altos and basses. Purcell plays with the word order, breaking up the phrase and repeating “banish” and “should ne’er” at different points in different parts. The four lines of dancers match the four vocal lines exactly, ending with the line furthest stage right moving on its own (with the sopranos) followed by the other three lines in unison with the altos, tenors and basses.

There is one structural device that Purcell employed to significant end that Morris not only matches but also develops and extends in his setting of the opera. Whereas Purcell often creates a hemiola and/or syncopated accents to suggest a falsehood, Morris takes these cross-

rhythms even further and employs them more often. Mellers writes of the misguided confidence of “Fear no danger to ensue:”

The deliberate unreality of this is suggested by the first appearance of the major key and perhaps by the perky rhythms which makes hay of the verbal accents. In arioso Purcell’s accentuation is always meticulous, growing inevitably from the way in which the character would speak in passion. Here, if the false accents are not deliberate, they are the kind of accident that happens only to genius. They make the “*ever gentle ever smiling*” hero seem slightly fatuous.<sup>22</sup>

Morris echoes these false accents in his choreography for Belinda and the Second Woman, which returns again and again to a little jumpy pattern taking them three times from flat foot to balancing on their heels as their arms rise from a downwards curve to an upwards one. The timing of these little jumps is on each of six beats across two measures of fast 3/4, but because it is only a two-beat pattern (flat-foot to heel) the three repetitions of two work across the two measures of three in the music, creating a hemiola which reflects, but does not copy or exactly match, the shifting accents and rhythms of the music.

Purcell gives a hemiola cadence to the witches in “In our deep vaulted cell” but Morris creates many more for both the witches and the sailors and even the courtiers in all cases when they are being (wittingly or unwittingly) false. For the sailors, Morris revels in many hemiolas between the dancers’ footwork and the musical pulse as they plan to leave their lovers on the shore, promising to return “But *never*, no *never* intending to visit them more!” These are the same false accented endings to the words as were given to the *ever smiling* hero who is, after all, planning exactly the same betrayal. Savage points out that in this chorus Purcell’s music contains “a jaunty pre-echo of the familiar ground bass which will support Dido’s aria of mourning at the climax of the opera.”<sup>23</sup> This is a presentiment that Morris supports by having the dancers take the same gesture for “never” as Dido herself performs in her “aria of mourning” on “no trouble.” Morris similarly introduces a movement that presages Dido’s end when he matches the cross-rhythm of the music in the short chorus “When Monarchs unite, how happy their fate, they triumph at once o’er their foes and their fate.” The dancers all take a rapid version of “remember me” plucking something from one hand stretched out in front and drawing it up and backwards overhead, as Dido does in her lament. They are meanwhile performing a backwards-stepping foot pattern that is, like the accents of the words, working in three twos against the two measures of three. Yet again Purcell, and Morris, are both forewarning us that the chorus is entirely wrong: Dido cannot “triumph over her fate” or even deny it.

It is clear, therefore, that Morris, far from simply choreographing mimetic gestures in a redundant doubling of the text of *Dido and Aeneas* has found a way to echo not only the audible rhythms and canonic structures of the music but also its internal and significant key structures and the whole system of meaning-making through sympathetic word-setting. The fact that he does so by incorporating such an eclectic range of movement sources, combined with the very obviousness of the signing, makes the process both self-reflexive and self-aware. By making full use of the meaning-making process he has constructed in the dance, while at the same time exposing it, Morris has managed to create a work that simultaneously echoes the tragedy in the original while also recognising the three-hundred year gap since it was made.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris interviewed in *The Hidden Soul of Harmony*, dir. Nigel Wattis, South Bank Show, London Weekend Television, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Inger Damsholt, "Mark Morris, Mickey Mouse and Choreo-musical Polemic," *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2007): 4–21; Rachel Duerden, "Predictability and Inevitability in Dance-Music Relationships in Mark Morris's *Falling Down Stairs*," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2008): 239–57; Rachel Duerden, "The Misshapen Pearl: Morris, Handel, Milton and *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*," *Dance Research*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2010): 200–17; Rachel Duerden and Bonnie Rowell, "Mark Morris's *Dido and Aeneas* (1989): A Critical Postmodern Sensibility," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 36 (2013), 143-71; Stephanie Jordan, "Mark Morris Marks Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* as Danced Opera," *Dance Research*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2011): 167-213; Sophia Preston, "Iconography and Intertextuality: The Discreet Charm of Meaning," *Proceedings Society of Dance History Scholars 21<sup>st</sup> Annual conference*, (Riverside: University of California Press, 1998): 241–52; and Sophia Preston, "Echoes and Pre-echoes: The Displacement of Time in Mark Morris's *Dido and Aeneas*," *Dancing in the Millennium: An International Conference* (SDHS, CORD, DCA, NDA, 2000): 344–48.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Morris, Interview with the Author, Mark Morris Dance Centre, Brooklyn, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Savage, "Producing *Dido and Aeneas*" in *Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986), 265.

<sup>7</sup> Preston, "Echoes and Pre-echoes," 348.

<sup>8</sup> Jordan, "Morris Marks Purcell," 213.

<sup>9</sup> Duerden and Rowell, "Mark Morris's *Dido and Aeneas*"

<sup>10</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, "The Tragic Heroine and the Un-Hero," in *Purcell Dido and Aeneas An Opera* ed. Curtis Price (London: Norton, 1986), 208.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Acocella, *Mark Morris* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1994), 98.

<sup>13</sup> Acocella *Mark Morris*, 100.

<sup>14</sup> ASL University <http://lifepprint.com/> (accessed Dec 23, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Jordan, "Morris Marks Purcell," 202.

<sup>16</sup> Online Bharatanatyam <http://onlinebharthanatyam.com/2007/09/20/alapadma-hand-gesture-mudra/> (accessed December 23, 2013)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Preston, "Iconography and intertextuality."

<sup>19</sup> Jordan, "Morris Marks Purcell," 174.

<sup>20</sup> Mellers, "Tragic Heroine and Un-Hero," 208.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>23</sup> Savage "Producing *Dido and Aeneas*," 265-266.