Political allegory in late-seventeenth-century English opera

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Many French and Italian Baroque operas were occasional. In the early days, premières were planned to coincide with celebrations of political events – coronations, royal weddings, battlefield victories, the ratifying of peace treaties, and so forth; later, when opera became a regular feature of the theatrical season, librettos often made direct or oblique references to such events.¹ In France during the reign of Louis XIV this practice was carried to extremes, as each of Lully’s tragédies en musique included a topical prologue to flatter the king and to glorify the state. Some of these operas seem to comment metaphorically on court intrigues. Whether such interpretations were intended by the librettist or were simply construed by cynics and courtiers with guilty consciences is debatable, but Philippe Quinault. Lully’s main librettist, was in fact banned from court for two years after the production of Isis in 1677, because Juno had been seen as a caricature of Mme de Montespan, while the title role was taken to represent the king’s new mistress, Mme de Ludres.²

Late-seventeenth-century English opera was also occasional. Like Stuart masques, some were produced to commemorate specific events or to honour the monarch or an important aristocrat. The prime example is John Dryden’s Albion and Albanius of 1685, which is an allegory of the Restoration and reign of Charles II. But not all English operas were so royalist, and in this essay I argue that, beginning with the Commonwealth, some operatic works adopted an anti-establishment stance which later in the century developed into veiled satires on the monarch, especially during the reign of William and Mary. Such hidden designs, which have been hitherto unnoticed or flatly denied by scholars, were not the sort of good-humoured references to the king’s peccadilloes that got Quinault into trouble, but cleverly encoded comments on heady and potentially

dangerous issues such as Elective Kingship and Loyalty to the Pretender. English dramatists had long used the stage to air their political views, and, if openly treasonable, their plays were censored, actors banned, or the offending theatre ordered to close. But for operas to have defied the very institution that had in other countries inspired and nurtured them is striking testimony to the audacity of certain English librettists and to their underlying distrust of an exotic (that is, foreign) form of entertainment.

*Albion and Albanus* is a transparent political allegory. It is also the first full-length, all-sung English opera for which the complete music survives, and though the first production was cut short when the theatres closed at the outbreak of Monmouth’s Rebellion in June 1685, there is no evidence that the work was regarded as an artistic failure. Louis Grubu’s full score was published two years later and the libretto reprinted in 1691. The music, which has generally been derided by modern scholars, is beginning to be reappraised and its virtues acknowledged. But the real significance of *Albion and Albanus* is political. It was composed at the express wish of the king to help commemorate his delivery from the Rye House assassination plot and the resolution of the Exclusion Crisis. Charles wanted to bring over the Paris Opéra to mark the occasion but had to settle instead for this home-grown work, which was nevertheless set by a French-trained composer and is a *tragédie en musique* in all but language. Dryden, the Poet Laureate, who had never before attempted a true opera, produced a polished libretto without resorting to spoken dialogue, which was a characteristic of English music drama at the time.

Albion represents Charles II, Albanius his brother James Duke of York. As the editors of the new Dryden edition have remarked, to give Albanius so prominent a role was itself a political statement – a public affirmation of the Catholic succession. Act 1 ends with the restoration of Albion, assisted by Archon, who is clearly General George Monck, later the Duke of Albemarle. Other correspondences are equally plain: Acacia (or Innocence) is Catherine of Braganza; Pluto and Zelota are the perpetrators of the Popish Plot. Most of the action of Acts 2 and 3 centres on various attempts to undermine Albion’s reign, and the reasons for Albanius’s being sent into exile are explored in painful detail. While Dryden may have stopped short of drawing ‘warts-and-all’ portraits of the royal brothers, the libretto shows an allegorical frankness that would have astonished Quinault. The only major figure in the struggles of Charles’s final years who is not represented is the Duke of Monmouth, his illegitimate son and the darling of the Exclusionists. As is explained below, Dryden chose to dramatize

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Mommouth’s activities elsewhere. The king attended several rehearsals of Albion and Albanius in early 1685 but died before the première. Dryden states in the preface to the libretto that this calamity might well have wrecked the opera, ‘but the design of it Originally, was so happy, that it needed no alteration . . . for the addition of twenty or thirty lines, in the Apotheosis of Albion, has made it entirely of a Piece’. Would that the allegorical designs of other late-seventeenth-century English operas had been so clearly chalked out.

With the example of Albion and Albanius to work from, John Buttrey has interpreted most operas of the period as grand compliments to the monarch, which were supposedly first performed as near to the royal birthday as possible. Yet his attempts to locate the kind of political metaphor that is the essence of Dryden’s opera are often unsettling. For instance, he views Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas (1689), with its several allusions to sharing the throne and (in the prologue) the clear identification of Phoebus and Venus with William and Mary, as an offering to the newly installed monarchs. But in the light of Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido and its tragic consequences, Buttrey is forced to conclude that the opera is a cautionary tale: Nahum Tate, the librettist, dramatizes ‘the possible fate of the British nation should Dutch William fail in his responsibilities to his English Queen’. In moving beyond the obvious symbolism, Buttrey has encountered what John M. Wallace calls the allegorical conundrum: are political meanings ‘in’ the work, or have we put them there? Wallace cuts the Gordian knot: ‘they are there if we see them, and if we can establish a contemporary background that makes them likely’. Seventeenth-century literati were accustomed to looking for various layers of meaning in poetry; and dramatists in particular were skilled at inventing emblematic characters and symbolic actions. During the turbulent years between the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis (1678–82), when direct reference to the usurpation of a crown or satires on Roman Catholicism were nearly taboo in drama, Dryden and Nathaniel Lee (among others) wrote plays that seem to refer obliquely though unmistakably to contemporary politics. And after 1668, when James II fled abroad, plays in which exiled kings are treated sympathetically, even though they might have been written years before, could provoke scandal.

In spite of the existence of a sizeable number of plays that seem to offer specific advice on contemporary politics, there is a danger that almost any drama of the period can be interpreted allegorically simply by digging

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3 See Price, op. cit., p. 293.
deeply enough into historical detail; one can always find persons and events that seem to have inspired plots. As Wallace succinctly puts it, ‘commentary turns all works into allegories’. I would add that the more contrived and more detailed the metaphor seems to us, the less likely the poet intended it – or, at least, the more vehemently he would deny it. Therefore, in this study I have tried to avoid constructing elaborate metaphors that involve minor political figures or events that were not common knowledge at the time, even though English opera, with its rich spoken dialogue, offers more fertile ground for speculation than, say, a tragédie en musique. As we shall see in the case of Dryden – the greatest master of the weaving of political allusions into dramas – treasonable double meanings are most effective when drawn with broad strokes; even then, they are unlikely to be noticed by blockheads.

THE COMMONWEALTH

With Charles II in exile abroad and most of the politically minded gentry dispersed to the country, masques and lavish theatrical spectacles were impossible and the public playhouses closed during the Protectorate years. Sensing the winds of change, Sir William Davenant, who hoped to secure a theatre monopoly upon the restoration of the king, outflanked other would-be producers by finding a way round the ban on public entertainments, which did not apparently cover dramas ‘sung in Recitative Musick’. He thus created the first English opera, The Siege of Rhodes (1656).* This was already too delicate a venture to be put at even greater risk by introducing blatant political comment or royalist sentiments, but the curiously inconclusive plot does, I think, take notice of the unstable and complex political situation prevailing in England in the mid-1650s. The opera is based on a historical event – the 1522 siege and easy conquest of the Knights of St John by the Ottomans. In Davenant’s libretto the Admiral and Grand Master of Rhodes, along with knights from various countries, chief among them Duke Alphonso of Sicily, face annihilation at the hands of the Turks under the sultan Solyma. Alphonso expects reinforcements from France, Italy and England. But no rescue is attempted, because in spite of their good intentions the allies are preoccupied with the Crusades. Disaster is averted when Alphonso’s wife lanthe sails valiantly from Sicily; captured by the Turks en route, she is released because Solyman admires her courage and determination. Alphonso is humiliated by his wife’s bold initiatives and dishonoured by his own inaction. Yet nothing is settled and there is no grand finale. Davenant was too good a

* The music, composed by Matthew Locke, Henry Lawes, Henry Cooke, Charles Coleman and George Hudson, is lost.
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dramatist to have allowed the plot to trail off for lack of invention. The non-resolution of the drama – a probing study of a prince who is stranded, let down by his allies amid promises of help and forced to stand by powerless as incompe...
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for two minor deletions which nevertheless reveal that the 1659 producers were aware of its political overtones. In the First Entry the following remark about Folly and Madness—a half-hearted gibe at the ancien régime—was prudently cut:

CHAMBERLAIN: A pair of precious instruments, and fit
To be o’th’ privy counsell.
HOST: We may see
What most of our Nobility are come to.
CHAMBERLAIN: Sure they are well descended sir.¹¹

The seditious allegorical design of Cupid and Death, which seems a particularly daring gesture considering the occasion of its 1653 première, anticipates the even more subversive operas of the 1690s, in which patriotism is used to disguise attacks on an unpopular king.

CHARLES II, JAMES II

The operatic activities of Davenant and Locke during the waning years of the Commonwealth proved a flash in the pan, because after the Restoration, when new companies were formed and theatres reopened, the spoken play reigned supreme for more than a decade. But by the mid-1670s, when English music drama seemed to be moving in a line of development parallel with the French, several operatic works were produced under royal protection and encouragement which were certain-ly occasional and in at least one case plainly political. Ariane, ou Le Mariage de Bacchus was performed at the Theatre Royal in late March 1674. The libretto is by Pierre Perrin, one of the founders of the Académie Royale de Musique; the score, which does not survive, was evidently a revision by Grabu, then Master of the King’s Music, of the original by Robert Cambert, who was exiled to London after Lully took over the Académie. Sung in French by members of the short-lived Royal Academy of Musick, the opera was occasioned by the marriage of the Duke of York to his second wife, Mary of Modena, the ceremony being concluded by proxy on 30 September 1673 over the strong objections of the Earl of Shaftesbury and others who feared further Roman Catholic incursion into the royal family.

¹¹ A few lines earlier the following obscure reference was also deleted:

CHAMBERLAIN: He [Death] is kin to the devouring Gentleman
Of the long robe—
HOST: That has bespoke a Chamber
In ‘th’ College among the Bears, and means to be
In commons with them.

These variants between the 1653 and 1659 versions are not mentioned in the notes to the score in Musica Britannica, ii, ed. E. J. Dent, rev. B. Harris et al. [London, 1965].

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The princess landed at Dover two months later, but Charles II did not publicly acknowledge the intensely unpopular marriage until September 1674. Nevertheless, there are clear references to it in *Ariane*, which, according to the dedication, received the king’s approbation.

In the prologue (presumably the work of Perrin and Grabu, though this part of the libretto is unascribed) three nymphs representing the Thames, the Tiber and the Seine pay their respects to Albion and his brother. They are identifiable as Charles and James in the English version of the text (it is more than a translation), which was published as a separate quarto in early 1674. The Seine sings of the recent war:

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J’ai vu 1 un de tes Fils,  
[have I seen thee] Warlike Duke of thine,
Sois l’Enseigne des Lyz,  
Whose Lofty Mien speaks him of Royal Line
Du superbe Mastricq, forcér la Resistance:  
In Lewis’s sight, his vaillant hand imbrues
Dans sa Noble fieré, dans ses Trais,  
In Belgian-blood, and
   dans ses Yeux,  
   Maestricke-Wals subdues.
   Je reconnais le Sang des Grand Rois
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The French libretto has no equivalent of the following lines found in the English version: ‘Vallor and Justice both may act their parts, / But Love makes Charles to Rule his Peoples hearts.’ (The lifting of the allegorical veil is most curious. Dryden also dispenses with the metaphorical pretence at a few places in *Albion and Albamias*.) Near the end of the prologue, a fourth nymph, representing the River Po, enters to cap the occasion. At this point the French is the more unguarded:

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Reine des Flots, belle Thamise;
Qui dans l’éclat où ton Grand Roi t’a mise,
   Soufre qui je vienne en ces Lieux,  
   Suffer this happy Day, that I
   Malgré les Destins & l’Envie,     
   May through thy Chrysal Waves
   Joindre ma Divine Marie      
   And my Princess divine,
   Au plus Grand de tes Demidieux.    
   To thy great Heroe joine.
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In her song of welcome, Thamesis acknowledges the initial lack of enthusiasm for the duke’s marriage: while the people both love and honour the new Duchess of York,

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This Bliss, thou ow’st to her alone, whose Charm,  
In ’spight of Fate, all resistance disarm:
And makes Envy it self l’adore
Her now, whom it oppos’d before.
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In spite of the royal connections (or perhaps because of them), _Ariane_ sank without a trace. Less than a year later a far more important work in the history of English music drama had its première: Thomas Shadwell and Matthew Locke’s _Psyche_ (February 1675), the archetypal semi-opera. It too may have been planned to mark the Duke of York’s second marriage (see below), because Shadwell says in the preface that he had written the bulk of the libretto sixteen months before, that is, in October 1673, just before Mary of Modena arrived at Dover. The king may have helped the Duke’s Company to obtain dancers and singers for the production, and both the libretto and Locke’s printed score are dedicated to Monmouth, who also danced in the belated première. The duke’s support of _Psyche_ has led one modern scholar to view the opera as a Protestant, anti-Gallic reply to _Ariane_. Such factionalism was certainly rife at both court and theatre in the mid-1670s, but _Psyche_ owes a great debt to the _tragédie-ballet_ of the same name; furthermore, Shadwell’s version also seems to allude to the Duke of York’s wedding, though the allegory is more obscure than in the prologue to _Ariane_.

Because it is so closely related to _Psyché_ (1671) – a collaboration of Molière (who wrote the lion’s share), Corneille, Quinault and Lully – one must wonder whether the English semi-opera on the subject of the marriage of a god and a mortal princess was anything more than a _pièce d’occasion_, like Perrin’s recycled opera on a similar theme. Shadwell, however, chose a story with closer parallels to the more controversial ramifications of the royal marriage of 1673: a princess more beautiful than Venus herself is betrothed to what she believes is a dreadful monster but which turns out to be the god of love. Shadwell defended himself against charges of plagiarism by claiming rightly that his version was ‘more of a play’ than Molière’s. The significant differences are: the main events in the drama happen on stage rather than being reported by messengers; the musical episodes are woven into the action rather than being confined to a prologue and entr’actes as are Lully’s; and Shadwell altered the story to make it reflect the circumstances surrounding the Duke of York’s marriage.

Mary was a reluctant bride. One of at least three princesses proposed at various times by Louis XIV as suitable wives for the widower James, she was minded to enter the nunnery of the Visitation near the ducal palace at Modena and was persuaded to forsake the veil only by Pope Clement X himself. The other serious contender for the duke’s hand was Princess Eleanora of Modena, Mary’s aunt, who was at the time twice her age. The first scene of Shadwell’s semi-opera, which has no counterpart to Molière’s, finds Psyche in a deep wood in retreat from the strife of court

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and city, sheltered from factions that ‘undermine each other, all mean ways they take / Each strives who shall his Monarch lead. / Though at the price of his own Father’s Head: / Nor care they how much they their Prince misguide . . .’ Shadwell’s play is always more political than Molière’s.

In the tragédie–ballet the heroine is courted by a pair of insipid princes, Cleomenes and Agenor, who, because of her extreme beauty and innocence, ‘go with one accord’ to declare their passion to her. Psyche’s jealous elder sisters, Aglaura and Cidippe, are unable to stir up any divisive rivalry between the suitors. Shadwell exaggerates the age difference between Psyche and her sisters (perhaps to allude to Princess Eleanor) and makes the princes (whom he calls Nicander and Polynes) spirited rivals who agree to bury the hatchet only at Psyche’s request; they later become the symbiotic champions of her liaison with Cupid. This added twist may refer to the proxy marriage at Modena in September 1673, when Henry Mordaunt, second Earl of Peterborough, stood as substitute for the Duke of York. Seconding him as emissary for Louis XIV was Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis of Dangeau. Having been on opposite sides in the Second Dutch War, the two men now shared the honour of escorting Mary to London. Nicander and Polynes perform a similar duty for Psyche in the first scene of Act 5.14

Shadwell also politicizes the central event of the drama, the union of Cupid and Psyche, by giving it contemporary overtones. The first scene of Act 2, which has no equivalent in Molière, takes place in the Temple of Apollo, where the oracle announces that the princess is to be sacrificed:

You must conduct her to that fatal place . . .
On Venus Rock upon the Sea,
She must by you deserted be;
A poys’noys Serpent there she’l find
By Heav’n he Psyche’s Husband is design’d.

In the political mythology of seventeenth-century Britain, Venus had supposedly changed her dwelling, forsaking the Cyprian grove for the Fairest Isle (‘Venus Rock upon the Sea’); the implication that the ‘poys’nous serpent’ represents the Duke of York is thus rendered felicitous when Cupid later tells a bemused Psyche that he is the monster she had feared. One could continue to embroider this design—to see the vengeful Venus as Catherine of Braganza and the reconciling Jupiter as Charles II. But, as these characters behave much as they do in Molière, the links are only a happy coincidence. The new scenes do, however, seem to underscore Shadwell’s covert message: the royal marriage of 1673 was not the dreaded monster that Shaftesbury was claiming it to be.

14 For this and other insights into the possible political content of Psyche, I am indebted to John Wagstaff.
Curtis A. Price

The climax of King Charles's infatuation with Frenchified music drama was John Crowne's lavish pastoral—ballet Calisto, which had its 'première' in February 1675 after numerous public rehearsals. The court production in which all the speaking parts were taken by princesses or maids of honour and the songs and dances performed mostly by professionals, it was called a masque. Calisto is, however, much more like a play than Psyche: it is as long as most heroic dramas of the period, and its musical scenes are confined to the prologue and entr'actes. As Crowne reports in the preface to the playbook, he was initially flattered by the royal command to devise a brisk allegorical drama with Princesses Mary and Anne, future queens of England, and Sarah Jennings, later Duchess of Marlborough, in the leading roles. But, being allowed only a few hours in which to choose a subject, he hit upon the worst imaginable in the circumstances. Crowne then faced the difficult task of writing 'a clean, decent, and inoffensive Play, on the Story of Rape'. The first draft, which was rejected because Jupiter's assault on Calisto's virtue was thought to be too brutal, must have been exceptionally bold, because the published version is lewd and suggestive enough, especially in the mouths of little princesses. Yet the casting itself rendered harmless what in the professional theatre would have been a wicked satire on the king's promiscuity and abuse of sexual prerogative. For Princess Mary, already the personification of the purity of the state, to act Calisto prevented all misapplication, and the pastoral edged towards reality: Mary was Calisto; Calisto was Mary.

William and Mary

In the preface to Calisto Crowne humbly apologizes for being unable to satisfy both the understanding and the senses: 'had it been written by him, to whom by the double right of place and merit, the honour of the employment belonged, the pleasure had been in all kinds complete'. This clearly refers to Dryden, the Poet Laureate, whose success in fulfilling both requirements came not in the court opera Albion and Albanius, whose allegory certainly did not challenge the understanding, but in the semi-opera King Arthur. I have written elsewhere about the political aspects of the two works; the present study summarizes their joint gestation, adds further evidence to support my claim that a cynical vein flows beneath the patriotic skin of King Arthur, and attempts to show that Albion and

15 The work is discussed in detail in E. Boswell, The Restoration Court Stage (London, 1952), passim.
16 The ubiquitous dancer Monmouth was a notable exception.
17 Henry Purcell and the London Stage, pp. 290-5.