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Excerpt
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PART I

From Purcell to Handel

1 | Purcell’s ‘Scurvy’ Poets

BY ROGER SAVAGE

High style, low style: one of Purcell and his colleagues’ strengths in writing for the theatre in the 1680s and 90s was the creation of vivid effects by juxtaposing the two. Think of the contrast between the Trojan Sailor’s jaunty song and the surrounding music of the Enchantresses in the last act of *Dido and Aeneas*, or between the Harvesters’ hoe-down and the minuet for the epiphany of Venus that follows it in *King Arthur’s* Act V masque. Something similar happens in the first act of *The Fairy Queen*. Forest fairies are entertaining Titania and her Changeling Boy with a delicate masque of rural retreat when suddenly three earthlings blunder in, one of them – he has a bad stammer – singing drunkenly. The Fairies capture the lubbers, blindfold the vocal one and dance tauntingly around him. He soon finds himself pinched black and blue from top to toe and forced by his tormentors to give an account of himself:

POET. Hold, you damn’d tormenting Punk,
 I confess —
 BOTH FAIRIES. What, what, &c.
 POET. I’m Drunk, as I live Boys, Drunk.
 BOTH FAIRIES. What art thou, speak?
 POET. If you will know it,
 I am a scurvy Poet.
 FAIRIES. Pinch him, pinch him for his Crimes,
 His Nonsense, and his Dogrel Rhymes.
 POET. Oh! oh! oh!
 1 FAIRY. Confess more, more.
 POET. I confess I’m very poor.¹

As it happens, Purcell’s juxtaposition of high musical style for the Fairies and low for the Poet is complemented in this scene by the bringing together of two theatrical strands: one thematic in a broad way, the

¹ H. Purcell, *The Fairy Queen*, ed. A. Pinnock (play-text) and B. Wood (music). Purcell Society Edition, vol. 12 (London: Stainer & Bell, 2009), p. lix.

other local and immediate. The fact that it is a poet who gets caught in the fairy ring chimes with the overall concern of *The Fairy Queen* – as of its parent play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – with things ‘fancy’-led: lunacy (in the sense of being in the thrall of moon-spirits), love and poetry. But at the same time it is germane that the particular poet the fairies torment is one who stammers, can sing after a fashion, writes nonsensical doggerel, will do you a verse-tribute to order, is strapped for cash and has ambitions to be Poet Laureate:

And as I hope to wear the Bays,
 I'll write a Sonnet in thy Praise.²

This has suggested to certain ingenious Purcellians that on the parish-pump level our poet is an actual figure whom some of the show's original audience would have recognised: Thomas D'Urfey, or Durfey,³ also known as ‘the Poet Stutter’. By the time of *The Fairy Queen* in the early 1690s, D'Urfey had been an associate of both Purcell and the force behind the show, Thomas Betterton, for several years. He may well have taken the role of the Drunken Poet himself – may even have written the scene's anti-masque-style text.⁴

This would suggest that, in part at least, the whole episode is a piece of genial self-mockery and that audiences need not feel too uncomfortable about its vivid violence. Still, the scene does have its dark connections. With his nonsense and doggerel rhymes, his volunteering a tribute to his tormentors in an outmoded verse-form (the sonnet, of all things), his boozing and coarse language, his poverty and his crazy ambitions, our scurvy poet forms a link between the pseudo-poetical sons of the Emperor of Nonsense in John Dryden's mock-heroic satire of the 1680s, *MacFlecknoe*, and the scribblers in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* of the 1720s: dwellers in ‘the cave of Poverty and Poetry’, dusky scene of the engendering of ‘New-year Odes and all the Grubstreet race’. Those are truly scurvy figures, and one might be tempted to speculate that through the Drunken Poet in *The Fairy Queen* Purcell was similarly settling scores with all the scurvy poets – or at least all the poetical scurviness – that he had had to cope with over the previous dozen years as court, salon and theatre composer.

² Ibid. ³ Though his name was actually Durfey, D'Urfey was apparently his preferred spelling.

⁴ B. Wood and A. Pinnock, ‘*The Fairy Queen*: A Fresh Look at the Issues’, *Early Music* 21 (1993), pp. 45–62, esp. 47–9.

Did he have a blacklist of such poets which he shared with confidants in his circle? If he did, he and they were too tactful to leave documentary evidence behind them. Still, there were certainly members of that circle who held that not all texts for singing lived up to the settings they were eventually given – indeed, that some texts were hardly settable at all. There is a nice instance in the Musick-Meeting scene (Act I, scene 2) near the start of Thomas Southerne's comedy of the early 1690s, *The Wives' Excuse*. There the Musick Master has been given a lyric to set by the egregious Mr Friendall but throws up his hands because 'the Words are so abominably out of the way of Musick, I don't know how to humour 'em'. Purcell, composer of several songs for the play, could well have nodded vigorously in the wings. And Purcell's admirers asserted that more than once his humouring had snatched musical victory from the jaws of poetic disaster. Tom Brown declared that 'each *British Muse*' owed the composer a tribute:

For where the Author's Scanty Words have fail'd,
 Your happier Graces, *Purcell*, have prevail'd.⁵

And remarkable graces they were, Brown thought, since they could not only outsoar the sublime of the Psalmist but stoop to give a helping hand to our Poet Stutter:

with equal Ease
 Could add to *David*, and make *Durfy* please.⁶

Purcell certainly spent a lot of time on verses by minor poets, obscure poets and anonymous poets, some of whom he may have considered 'scurvy' because their words were 'scanty' and their flights of fancy 'abominably out of the way of Musick'. That's not to say, though, that he spent no time at all engaging with writers whom literary history has come to see as canonical – as some of the most significant and worthwhile of the age. Indeed, it can come as quite a surprise to find just how many of the poetic and dramatic notables alive in Purcell's lifetime wrote words that he set: Abraham Cowley and John Dryden, George Etherege and Charles Sedley, Katherine Phillips and Anne Winchilsea, Nathaniel Lee and Thomas Otway, John Oldham and Matthew Prior, Thomas Southerne and William Congreve. That seems pretty good going canonically speaking,

⁵ 'To his Unknown Friend, Mr. Henry Purcell', in M. Burden, *Purcell Remembered* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

even if it does soon become clear that, aside from Cowley and Dryden, these writers supplied Purcell with only a handful of lyric-texts apiece. (Texts with bylines, that's to say; there may of course have been more work by them among the host of unasccribed texts that he set.) Three of the ten post-Cowley, post-Dryden canonicals – Lee, Southerne, Congreve – came up with about half-a-dozen lyrics each, mainly in connection with plays; but the other seven yielded only one or two, sometimes for the stage, sometimes not. Quite slim pickings then; and the actual texts by the ten that Purcell set are rarely ones that later readers have considered significant or memorable or deserving places in anthologies. (One exception that comes to mind is Congreve's sophisticated 'Pious Selinda', his sketch of the provoking girl who 'goes to Pray's, | If I but ask the Favour'.)⁷ Further, although there is this roster of canonically notable writers who contributed, if only in a small way, to Purcell's *œuvre*, there is another just as impressive of contemporaries who, so far as we know, did not. Among the older absentees are Milton, who died when Purcell was fifteen, William Davenant, Herrick, Marvell and Waller; among the younger, Aphra Behn (though Purcell did tangle with some of her plot-lines), the Duchess of Newcastle, the Earl of Rochester, Bunyan, Vaughan and Traherne. True, Milton was under something of a cloud at the time; Bunyan was in and out of Bedford Jail in Purcell's boyhood and early teens; and Rochester, who lived until the composer was twenty-one, was perhaps thought too hot to handle – though others did risk the scorching, including Thomas Tudway (with 'Phillis, be gentler, I advise') and John Blow ('All my past life'). Connections might conceivably have been made with the others, but it seems were not. In all, then, it would be difficult to claim that Purcell's engagement as song-writer with what professional literary history has come to think of as the great ones of his age was profound or extensive, even if, when he did set them, the outcome was arguably some of his finest work: 'O Solitude' out of Katharine Phillips, Southerne's 'Pursuing beauty', Congreve's 'Thus to a ripe, consenting maid', Sedley's 'Knotting Song'.

With Cowley and Dryden, though, it was different. The formidable *Works of Mr Abraham Cowley*, published when Purcell was nine, clearly came down from his shelf quite regularly for much of his career, the earlier part of it especially. Sung from beginning to end without a break, his Cowley settings would take over an hour to perform, including, as they

⁷ W. Congreve, *The Works of William Congreve*, ed. D. F. Mackenzie, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. ii, p. 326.

do, two 'Pindaric' doorstoppers: one a big moral meditation ('Begin the song'), the other an even bigger biblical paraphrase ('Awake, and with attention hear'). But then Purcell's Cowley was really three poets in one: Cowley the Pindaric, Cowley the Anacreontic and Cowley 'the last Metaphysical'. Since his Pindaric-ode manner was to be so influential in the later seventeenth century, it is interesting to see the composer engaging with it at source in such a blockbusting way, and equally interesting to see him making contact through Cowley with another but very different classical Greek tradition in three jauntily energetic settings of his paraphrases after Anacreon (or, more exactly, after the anonymous *Anacreontea* the age attributed to the Greek poet).⁸ Sublime Pindar and sociable Anacreon: it is as if Purcell's response to Cowley's impersonations of the pair of them validated the composer's having both a high and a low musical style, a chapel manner and a smoking-room manner, an introspective declamatory mode and an extrovert, dancing strophic mode. And just as interesting is Purcell's dropping off at the salon between the Pindaric temple and the Anacreontic chocolate house to sample the style of the early seventeenth-century English Metaphysical Poets (as they were once confidently called) through his setting five of the eighty-odd poems that make up Cowley's 1647 sequence *The Mistress*: 'The Thralldom' ('I came, I saw, and was undone'), 'The Rich Rival' ('They say you're angry'), 'The Concealment' ('No, to what purpose should I speak?'), 'Weeping' ('See where she sits') and 'Honour' ('She loves and she confesses too'). True, *The Mistress* wears its metaphysics with a difference – always self-consciously, sometimes frigidly – but the energetic wit of the 'school of Donne', its argumentativeness, paradox-spinning and play with conceits are all there in the poems that Purcell chooses to set.

As for Dryden, like Cowley he was a highly professional man of letters with a big output in a wide range of modes, though the lyric-writing Dryden set by Purcell is quite unlike the author of *The Mistress*. The difference in their birth-dates – Cowley late in the 1610s, Dryden early in the 1630s – ensured that the paradox-spinning and play with conceits characteristic of Cowley would not be part of Dryden's mature manner. Yet the major achievements of the Dryden–Purcell conjunction showed that the great 'Mr Bays' could deploy his pared-down style with a wit and intellectual energy equal in their own way to Cowley's, and perfectly fitted to the composer's abilities: witness the pastoral dialogue in *Amphitryon*, the delightfully dotty Spirits' songs in *Tyrannic Love*, the infernal invocation

⁸ 'Fill the bowl with rosy wine' ('The Epicure'), 'Oft am I by the women told' ('Age') and 'Underneath this myrtle shade' ('Another [Anacreontique]').

scene in *Oedipus* and – probably the most close-up-and-personal where active collaboration was concerned – the ‘semi-operatic’ *King Arthur*, its text first written by Dryden some years before Purcell got involved and then revised with him as collaborator.

Not much poetic scurvy affecting Dryden and Cowley, one might think, though, as we shall see, there is a case for not giving Cowley an absolutely clean bill of health. Where symptoms would be more likely to be found, at least in the view of critical opinion through much of the last century, was in those lyric-texts, sacred and amorous, elegiac, political and masque-furnishing, written by ‘Anon.’ (some of them Purcell’s own perhaps), or by obscure folk who had professional backstage connections with the composer, or by those rather shadowy figures who obligingly contributed occasional lyrics to plays and songbooks: figures like Major General Sackville (with ‘Ingrateful Love’ in *The Wives’ Excuse*), Colonel Henry Heveningham (with the non-Shakespearean ‘If music be the food of love’), Thomas Cheeke, Esq. (‘Corinna, I excuse thy face’, again for *The Wives’ Excuse*) and the still more shadowy ‘Lady E. M’. (‘She that would gain a faithful lover’). By members, too, of the tribe of Grub Street poets and playwrights who were active in the 1680s and 90s, only to find themselves damned thirty or forty years later by Pope in *The Dunciad*: men like Thomas Shadwell (already a target of Dryden’s), Elkanah Settle, Nahum Tate and the Poet Stutter himself, Tom D’Urfey. Up to the mid-twentieth century there were certainly very few critics to speak up for the work of any of these people: perhaps once in a while for the text of an occasional singleton song (though more as a source of sound than sense),⁹ hardly ever for their operatic texts and never for their odes. And this seemed to lead critics generally to the conclusion that Purcell, fine composer though he was, set a great deal of very bad verse in vocal music that was saved from fatal scurvy only by the liberal vitamin C of his genius. Why, they asked, did he? Perhaps because the whole poetic taste of the age was depraved; perhaps because the composer himself had little literary discrimination; perhaps because he was almost wholly at the beck and call of piper-payers who, if they did not quite call the tune, at least told the tunesmith just what words to set, so that it was ‘Yes, sir; of course, sir; happy to oblige, sir’ to the Poet Laureate or his paymasters at Whitehall for court odes; to the stewards of the Musical Society for any texts they came up with for the feast of St Cecilia on 22 November; to Mr Betterton at Dorset Garden for the texts of playhouse masques and stand-alone stage songs; and to one of the publishing Playfords for tavern rhymes, salon lyrics or pious ejaculations. (It is certainly reasonable

⁹ E.g., A. K. Holland, *Henry Purcell: The English Musical Tradition* (London: Bell, 1932), p. 152.

to speculate that the Playfords suggested texts to Purcell in his *Harmonia sacra* vein, since this is the one area of his work where the Restoration moderns are largely deserted in favour of authors born fairly near the year 1600, such as Francis Quarles, Bishop Fuller, the anonymous librettist of *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, even on one occasion the great George Herbert himself.)

However, by mid-century critical attitudes were starting to shift. Imogen Holst deserves a pioneer's credit for arguing in 1959¹⁰ that Tate's libretto for *Dido and Aeneas* was by no means as tawdry and risible as had been assumed. Other voices were raised in the 1970s and 80s suggesting a fresh look at the texts for the 'semi-operas', and in the 1990s a scattering of Purcellians began to speak up for the verse of some at least of the political and Cecilian odes. These people were not proposing a wholesale revision of the purely literary canon of the late seventeenth century (insofar as such a canon still existed); rather the introduction of other criteria – libretto criteria, really – for the texts set in Purcell's songs. Thus, the argument ran, while the autonomy of a lyric-text meant for speaking or for private reading lies entirely within itself, with song the autonomy is a matter of words and music combined. In that situation the verbal text does not need to be of great independent standing or accomplishment to be a good – and hence 'unscurvy' – text for setting. Rather, it needs first to be singable and then to float vivid and engaging ideas; it is for the music to do the rest. It was Stravinsky who once declared that in a text for setting he looked for 'syllables' and 'meanings', not for *poésie*. The late seventeenth-century equivalent would be that the words of a good settable lyric should avoid both 'scantiness' and being 'abominably out of the way of music' by having an *easiness* about them. 'Easiness' is the word Peter Motteux uses in *The Gentleman's Journal* in 1694 about the Tate–Purcell ode for Trinity College, Dublin, *Great Parent, Hail*. 'Mr Tate', he says, 'who was desired to make [the ode], has given Mr Purcell an opportunity, by the easiness of the words, to set them to Music with his usual success'.¹¹

'Easiness' is a good Cavalier virtue. Think of Pope's *Epistle to Augustus*, with its slightly amused backward look from the 1730s to

the Wits of either Charles's days,
 The Mob of Gentlemen who wrote with Ease.

¹⁰ I. Holst, 'Purcell's Librettist Nahum Tate', in I. Holst (ed.), *Henry Purcell 1659–1695: Essays on his Music* (Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 35–41.

¹¹ Peter Motteux, *The Gentleman's Journal, or The Monthly Miscellany*, 3 (January and February 1694), p. 25.

Think, too, of Congreve's heroine Millamant in *The Way of the World*, the ultimate lady of wit and refinement c. 1700, enthusing over the verse of one of those gentlemen, Sir John Suckling (two of whose theatre songs Purcell turned into tavern catches and a scene from one of whose plays helped inspire the Drunken Poet scene in *The Fairy Queen*). 'Natural, easie *Suckling*', Millamant calls him. In his *Dictionary* Dr Johnson would later define 'Ease', 'Easy', 'Easiness' in stylistic matters as involving 'Facility; not difficulty ... Unconstraint; freedom from harshness ... or conceits',¹² and would cite lines from a poem of the mid-1680s, the Earl of Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse*. 'Abstruse and Mystick thoughts', Roscommon says, must be rendered

With painful care but seeming easiness,
 For truth shines brightest through the plainest dress.

And this, surely, is the verbal easiness we find in so many of the lyrics Purcell sets – lyrics by distinguished authors, but also by many obscure and anonymous ones. Though it may have its limitations (as Pope's couplet hints), this easiness certainly has positive virtues.¹³

Positively, it is a matter of lines of verse that are grammatically lucid and tolerably self-contained, that move forward clearly from concept to concept, that field words and phrases that can be separated out, repeated, vocally decorated, and are grounded in a poetic metre that is open to mutation into various musical metres. Take a couple of tiny anonymous texts set by Purcell: each of them efficiently 'easy' in this way and each graciously prepared to leave almost everything to the composer where the artistic effect and weight of the song are concerned. One presents a sad lover's plight in two succinct, metrically precise iambic couplets, the first comprising a five-pulse line followed by a four-pulse, the second a five followed by a three:

Not all my torments can your Pity move;
 Your Scorn increases with my Love.
 Yet to the Grave I will my Sorrow bear;
 I love, though I despair.¹⁴

The faintly Pindaric look of that on the page may have encouraged Purcell to set it as declamatory *arioso*; and so he does (see Example 1.1), in the

¹² [S. Johnson], *Dictionary of the English Language* (London: s.n., 1755), s.v. 'facility'.

¹³ See Pope, *Epistle to Augustus*, lines 107–8, Congreve, *The Way of the World*, IV/4, and Roscommon, *Essay on Translated Verse*, pp. 25–7, in J. E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), vol. 2, p. 303.

¹⁴ H. Purcell, *Secular Songs for Solo Voice*, ed. A. M. Laurie. Purcell Society Edition, vol. 25 (Sevenoaks: Novello, 1985), pp. 174–5.

Example 1.1 Purcell, 'Not all my torments', bars 1–6

Not all, all, not all my torments can your piety move,

process pretty much ignoring the versification and instead so cramming the text with repetitions and extending it with roulades that only the just-about-audible rhymes stop it sounding like prose made powerfully eloquent through music.

The other instance works the clean contrary way. Its 'easy' lyric, which presents a keen and constant lover who is cheerfully scornful of his messmates' passing flirtations, offers two rhyming iambic quatrains, with a four-pulse, then a three-pulse, then two further four-pulse lines. (There's a hypermetric adjective – 'dusty' – in the second quatrain: perhaps the composer added it on the spur of the moment when setting the text.)

Who can behold *Florella's* Charms
And not like me adore;
One glance from her my Soul disarms,
And robs me of resisting pow'r.
Let unblest Hero's still pursue
Coy Glory in the dusty Field,