

COMPREHENDING *THEODORA*

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ABSTRACT

Handel's Theodora (1750, libretto Thomas Morell), an oratorio about a Christian martyr, does not have the religious-political import of his other English oratorios or the literary-critical stature of his English secular dramas and odes. A 'sport' among Handel's oratorios, until recently *Theodora* resisted whole-hearted appreciation and elicited widely differing summaries of its meaning. This is the first extended study to be published since the chapter in Winton Dean's *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* of 1959. Drawing on guidelines proposed in the appendix 'Approaches to Oratorio', the article examines the libretto's sources, dramatization and relation to the librettist's interests; positions the work with regard to the religious ideas of its time, identifying its religious-historical standpoint; and describes its kinship with contemporary drama, fiction and aesthetics. Connoisseurs among Handel's audience appreciated *Theodora* but 'the Town' did not. It is suggested that both Morell and Handel were aiming for inclusiveness, comprehensiveness and breadth of appeal, and in so doing produced a work – more ambiguous and conspicuously open to interpretation than the biblical oratorios – that demands the listener's active and discriminating engagement.

I can't conclude a letter, and forget *Theodora*. I have heard it three times, and venture to pronounce it, as finished, beautiful and labour'd a composition, as ever Handel made. To my knowledge this took him up a great while in composing. The Town don't like it at all; but Mr Kellaway and several excellent musicians think as I do. (Fourth Earl of Shaftesbury to James Harris, 24 March 1750)¹

It is by now generally accepted that knowledge of the events and thought of Handel's time enhances our appreciation of his English works for the theatre. His oratorios based on the Bible and his odes and dramas based on other great literature (Sophocles, Dryden, Milton) have obvious cultural contexts which we can tap to increase our understanding.² But *Theodora*, an oratorio about a Christian martyr, based on a novel unknown to modern audiences, does not have the religious-political import of the other oratorios or the critical stature of the secular works. A 'sport' among the oratorios, until recently *Theodora* resisted whole-hearted appreciation.³ In the late 1990s it attracted new and much enhanced admiration in Britain, principally in response to staged performance. But while staging the oratorios, however intelligently and sensitively, may point up their emotional power, it tends to mask their subtleties and layers of significance. This is especially the case for *Theodora*, which is to my mind the most conspicuously open to interpretation of all Handel's dramas.

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1 Quoted in *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris*, ed. Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 269–270.

2 See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3 Winton Dean, in *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 563, suggested that the 'wearisome' effect of the first act 'can be remedied by cuts'.



That openness is exemplified by the divergent summations of *Theodora* in the most influential mid-twentieth-century studies of Handel's oratorios. For Percy Young it was 'a tragedy of youthful love' whose lesson is 'resignation to the will of God'; according to Winton Dean the theme is 'the necessity of man's subjection to destiny'; and Paul Henry Lang found it characterized by a 'poise that is almost detachment, betraying only the merest hint of moralizing'.⁴ These remarks have not been seriously addressed in any more recent publication, but they now seem to merit reconsideration, especially in the light of recent performances of *Theodora*.⁵ Peter Sellars's and William Christie's production (premiere Glyndebourne, 1996) convinced its audiences of *Theodora*'s religious ardour and power to move. Why, then, did it fail so completely in Handel's own time, except with his own circle of connoisseurs (see the epigraph above), given his public's desire for exactly that in his music?⁶ It is easy to adduce the earthquakes that kept faint-hearted theatre-goers at home,⁷ the unfamiliarity of a Christian story as a Handel oratorio theme, the obscurity of this particular Christian story and the lack of an upbeat ending.⁸ But though these are all valid, they do not account for the distance between twentieth-century opinions and the more recent response, or between the enthusiasm of Handel's circle and the coldness of 'the Town'; nor for the authors' choice of story, or their rendition of it; nor do they reach the essential strangeness of *Theodora*, its ambiguity. This essay aims to address these issues of audience reception and some questions of authorial intention that they raise.

The absence, in the case of *Theodora*, of the routes to understanding available for Handel's other oratorios prompts the question: what are the available approaches to understanding a Handel oratorio? A provisional schedule, given here as Appendix 1, could also be applied to other words-and-music by Handel and perhaps by other composers. Exploring all the avenues suggested, even for a single oratorio, could yield a book-length work, and here I concentrate on only some (1–3, 12, 5, 9, 11, 4). To spare extensive quotation and to enable the reader to locate individual passages, the entire libretto is provided as Appendix 2.

THE LIBRETTO

The uniqueness of *Theodora* among Handel oratorio plots has frequently been noted. Its most telling features seem to be these:

- 1 Unlike all Handel's other religious oratorios, *Theodora* is set in the Christian era, focusing on Christians in a time of persecution, while having to accommodate to the legal prohibition on the naming of Christ in the theatre.

4 Percy Young, *The Oratorios of Handel* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1949), 187, 192; Dean, *Oratorios*, 556; Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (New York: Norton, 1966), 486.

5 Leslie Robarts, 'Rendering Virtue Amiable: A Study of Some Formal and Intellectual Aspects of Thomas Morell's Libretto and George Frideric Handel's Music for *Theodora*, 1749–50' (MPhil dissertation, Open University, 1997), consulted by kind permission, is a considerable addition to previous accounts.

6 See Smith, *Oratorios*, 167–170. *Theodora* was written between 28 June and 31 July 1749 and first performed on 16 March 1750, with only two further performances that season (to thin houses, giving rise to drastic alterations by Handel), and it was revived once for a single performance in 1755; Dean, *Oratorios*, 571–573.

7 The earthquakes were actual, not rumoured, as suggested by Dorothea Schröder, "'A Sect, Rebellious to the Gods, and Rome": Händels Oratorium *Theodora* und der Methodismus', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 6 (1996), 101–114; they occurred on 8 February and 8 March 1750 and gave rise to sermons on divine punishment for such depravities as theatre-going.

8 Handel's alleged comment that the Jews would not come because it was a Christian story, and the ladies would not come because it was a virtuous one, is recorded by Morell in a letter dating from a quarter of a century later, and is not reliable evidence at the bar of reception history, whatever it suggests about Handel himself; see Ruth Smith, 'Thomas Morell and His Letter about Handel', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127/2 (2002), 191–225.



- 2 Unlike all Handel's other dramatic oratorios, the religious belief of the heroine and her community (Christianity) is shared by the majority of Handel's audience. This might lead one to expect the enemies of that belief to be painted in blackest hues, but in fact the heathen oppressors are less clearly bad than those of the Old Testament oratorios.
- 3 In contrast to the Old Testament oratorios, the heroine and patriotism are dissociated: Theodora is a princess, but does nothing to serve her community – unlike, for example, Iphis in *Jephtha*. The hero and patriotism are also dissociated; in fact the hero is a traitor, and the concluding trial scene is needed as much for Didymus to argue the justice of his action (Part 3 Scene 4) as for the resolution of the plot. This dissociation could have perturbed the eighteenth-century audience, for whom patriotism was a touchstone of integrity, especially in tragedy,⁹ and who had come to expect reassuring patriotic uplift from Handel's oratorios.
- 4 The oratorio culminates in the deaths of exemplary, virtuous characters of the 'right' religion, as happens to no other prominent Handel oratorio characters except Jonathan in *Saul*. This would have been disturbing to the majority of the eighteenth-century theatre audience, for whom (to cite the classic instance) the ending of *King Lear* had been rewritten to satisfy the moral and emotional need to see divine and poetic justice done in the theatre.
- 5 Death is not failure, as it is in the Old Testament dispensation, but, because Morell's conclusion is omitted, there is no certainty that it is a triumph. Morell's conclusion (see Appendix 2) recounted the serene courage of Theodora and Didymus during their execution and the resulting conversion of Septimius and a thousand other Roman onlookers. Their martyrdom is thus ratified as no mere solipsistic sacrificial act of faith, but a proven powerful force for enlightenment, and the concluding text is correspondingly more overtly positive than that of 'O Love divine' (Part 3 Scene 7). Handel not only omitted the whole sequence, he also chose not to set the 'hallelujah' which Morell added to the truncated version as a finale;¹⁰ moreover, famously, he ended with a chorus in a minor key. The audience is left not knowing how, finally, Theodora and Didymus confronted their martyrdom. The truncated ending, which evokes a distressing sensation similar to that of not being at the deathbed of someone close to one, demands of the audience the same act of faith that Irene makes: the manner of the martyrs' dying is not important, we are to hold by the idea that they are now in heaven. We could say that the oratorio is a 'rescue opera' that goes terribly wrong twice over: the human rescue comes to nothing, and there is no divine rescue in the form of either a *deus ex machina* (as in *Jephtha*) or a confirmed apotheosis (as in *Acis and Galatea* and *Hercules*). The eighteenth-century audience would probably have assumed that all was going to the normal opera plan at the start of Didymus's trial: *The World*, 14 November 1754, speaks of 'The handcuffs and fetters in which the hero commonly appears at the end of the second, or beginning of the third act'.¹¹
- 6 The story was unfamiliar to its original audience, as it is to the modern audience, unlike oratorios setting narratives from the Old Testament or the Apocrypha (of which only *Alexander Balus* was seriously unfamiliar – Morell had a rather reckless penchant for the esoteric). There had been some Italian oratorios about Theodora,¹² but we have no evidence that the authors or their audience knew them, and, unlike biblical subjects, the story was unknown to English music and unrepresented in familiar literature and painting. An unfamiliar story would have been objectionable to many eighteenth-century listeners:

9 See, for example, Lisa Freeman, 'What's Love Got to Do with Addison's *Cato*?', *Studies in English Literature* 39/3 (1999), 463–482.

10 See autograph libretto, Manchester Public Libraries, Newman Flower Collection MS 130 Hd 4 vol 350, and Leslie Roberts, 'A Glance at the Libretto to Handel's Oratorio *Theodora*', *Association of Open University Graduates' Journal* (1999), 11–16 (with illustrations).

11 *The World*, 14 November 1754, 589, quoted by Lawrence Woof, 'Italian Opera and English Oratorio as Cultural Discourses within Eighteenth-Century English Literature, with Particular Reference to the Novels of Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney' (DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 1995), 109.

12 See Schröder, "'A Sect, Rebellious'", 102–103.



neo-classical artistic canons required tried and tested themes. Even a modern audience unfamiliar with the story but accustomed to Handel's other dramatic oratorios (which mostly end with temporal success) can find the finale, of martyrdom and of virtue unrewarded except in the afterlife, disturbingly tragic.

All these differences from the norm could well cause difficulty for any audience, and especially for the English eighteenth-century audience, which regarded novelty of genre in high art as an unwarrantable aberration.¹³

THE LIBRETTO'S SOURCES AND THE LIBRETTIST'S USE OF THEM

The martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus under Diocletian in the fourth century AD was first recounted by St Ambrose in his work in three books about lives of admirable virgins.¹⁴ His narrative established the main outlines of succeeding accounts, Morell's among them, including the Antioch setting (Theodora's home city was disputed, but Antioch was highly apt, being the chief cradle of Christianity and a focus of persecution¹⁵), Theodora's grounding of her integrity in her chastity, her sentence to prostitution as punishment for refusing to sacrifice to Roman gods (Part 1 Scene 5), the exchange of clothes with a brother Christian – initially feared as her first ravisher – in her brothel cell (Part 2 Scene 5), the alteration of the sentence (Part 3 Scene 3), Theodora's running to the place of judgment (Part 3 Scene 3), the attempt of the hero and heroine to die in each other's place and Theodora's metaphor of redeeming a debt (Part 3 Scene 5).

In 1675 Theodora's legend first appeared in the *Acta Sanctorum*, a collection of saints' lives compiled from records written by the early church fathers.¹⁶ For Morell this would have been the earliest easily accessible source for the figure of the governor and for the prominence of his court room, where the bulk of the *Acta* version of the story is played out. The narrative refers twice to Theodora as a dove and once to her having wings (compare Part 2 Scene 2). Theodora's story was also included in what was for many English Protestants a companion volume to the Bible, John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'.¹⁷ In Foxe, as in Ambrose and the *Acta*, Didymus is still one of the Christian brothers, who puts on soldier's clothes as an effective disguise in which to reach Theodora, and not a genuine soldier whom she has converted.

Morell knew Pierre Corneille's unsuccessful play about Theodora;¹⁸ he refers to it in his Preface, follows Corneille in making Theodora a princess of Antioch and takes on Corneille's name for the Roman

¹³ See Smith, *Oratorios*, chapter 1.

¹⁴ *De virginibus* (AD 377), book 2 chapter 4.

¹⁵ Acts 11.26 ('the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch') and *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003), see entry on Antioch: 'Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363) made Antioch the headquarters of his campaign to suppress Christianity and restore paganism and a number of Christians, especially in the army, were martyred in Antioch . . . The Arian emperor Valens in 365 inaugurated a persecution of orthodox Christians at Antioch which continued until 376.'

¹⁶ Godefridus Henschenius, Daniel Papebrochius and the Society of Jesus, *Acta sanctorum, Aprilis III* (Antwerp: Michael Cnobarus, 1675), volume 3, 572–575 (*Acta sanctorum* is available as an electronic database, Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1999–2002).

¹⁷ John Foxe: *Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Special and Memorable. Happening in the Church: with an Universal History of the Same. Wherein Is Set Forth at Large, the Whole Race and Course of the Church, from the Primitive Age to These Later Times of Ours, with the Bloody Times, Horrible Troubles, and Great Persecutions against the True Martyrs of Christ, Sought and Wrought as well by Heathen Emperors, as Now Lately Practised by Romish Prelates, especially in this Realm of England and Scotland*, ninth edition (London: printed for the Company of Stationers, 1684), volume 1, 70.

¹⁸ *Théodore, vierge et martyre, tragédie chrétienne* (1646), in Pierre Corneille, *Théâtre complet*, ed. Alain Niderst (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1985), volume 2/1, 370–428.



governor.¹⁹ But his primary source was *The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus* (published 1687), a novel by Robert Boyle (1627-1691).²⁰

Boyle, known now as the ‘father of chemistry’ and the author of ‘Boyle’s law’, was more celebrated in his own time as the founder of Boyle’s Lectures, an annual series of sermons in defence of orthodox Christianity against the depredations of free-thinking. In the preface to his *Theodora and Didymus* he stated his two aims in writing it. The first was ‘rendring Vertue Amiable’, a phrase which Morell picked up for the preface to his libretto, and ‘recommending Piety’. Boyle wished to improve upper-class youth with an inspirational story about attractive and virtuous young people, which would be made more engaging by being conducted largely in dialogue (he even refers to speeches of ‘the persons I brought upon the stage’ in his novel). The second aim was to show that women can be heroines, as brave, constant, generous, rational, understanding and capable as men. Such proto-feminism is prominent throughout his novel and anticipates a popular theme of the next generation of plays, novels and serious music theatre: the beleaguered, brave, feminine heroine.

Morell’s Preface implies that he knew only the printed version of Boyle’s novel. Boyle’s Preface states that, while circulating in manuscript, the first part of his novel became so dispersed that it could not be reconstituted, and he gives a summary of it. Morell recapitulates this summary in his own Preface, and he drew on it for his text. Morell’s interest was probably fostered by the handsome edition of Boyle’s works issued by Thomas Birch in 1744, but he could have known an earlier, manuscript, version of the novel copied out by Boyle’s friend John Mallet,²¹ for it was owned by Charles Wheatley, vicar of Furneux Pelham, Hertfordshire. By the time Morell became vicar of nearby Buckland (1737), Wheatley had long been eminent as the author of the widely used clerical handbook *The Church of England Man’s Companion* (1710). It would be odd if, in the rural emptiness of that bleak part of Hertfordshire, Morell, an inveterate bibliophile, did not enjoy Wheatley’s company and collection, only seven miles distant. Wheatley bequeathed the manuscript of Boyle’s novel to his college, St John’s, Oxford (also the college of Morell’s brother Nathaniel), to which it passed on his death in 1742.²² This was also the year in which Morell ceased to reside at Buckland.²³ The manuscript, unlike the printed text, starts at the beginning of the story.

There is some textual foundation for the possibility that Morell knew the manuscript. ‘Racks’ and ‘gibbets’, associated with Valens in the manuscript as his instruments of torment, appear in Morell’s text for Valens at the same point early in the narrative (Part 1 Scene 1, not represented in the published version of Boyle’s novel); in the manuscript but not in the published version Theodora swoons when her supposed ravisher enters her cell, and at the corresponding point in the libretto Morell describes her as lying ‘entranc’d’ (Part 2 Scene 5); the association of Theodora with ‘rose and lily’ which Morell’s Didymus then makes does not occur in the printed version but does occur in the manuscript; and Valens refers to the Christians as a sect at the same narrative points in the manuscript and libretto (Part 1 Scene 1) but at a different point in the published version.²⁴

Boyle’s published narrative begins, after a summary of preceding events, with Theodora incarcerated in her brothel cell awaiting her first ravisher. While he follows the outline of *Acta*, in his account, for the first

19 Corneille is the source usually given for Valens’s name in the oratorio. But Morell may have derived it from the Emperor Valens, who persecuted Antioch Christians; see note 15.

20 *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, volume 11 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), xi–xiv, 3–78.

21 *Works of Boyle*, volume 11, xi, and volume 13 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000), xii, xxi–xxiii, 3–41.

22 John Nicholls, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (London: printed for the author by Nichols, son and Bentley, 1812–1815), volume 9, 484; H. O. Coxe, *Catalogus codicorum MSS qui in collegiis aulisque Oxoniensibus hodie adservantur* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1852), volume 2, see entry ‘... Collegii S. Johannis Baptistae’, item LXVIA.

23 Smith, ‘Thomas Morell’, 201–202.

24 The editors of the Boyle edition point out that Wheatley made notes of other sources of the Theodora story on the flyleaves of the MS. Morell may have benefited from this information.



time, Didymus is not only a Christian, he has been converted by Theodora and is in love with her; he not only appears in soldier's garb but has been a soldier, having served in the Roman army; and Septimius and Irene are introduced.

Morell made significant choices from this variety of sources and also effected telling changes. The most notable are the following:²⁵

- 1 Where Boyle has only two principals, Morell offered Handel five, among whom differentiated vocal registers could be very conveniently distributed. He strengthened the personality of Irene to make her a lynchpin of the Christian community; he advanced the role of Septimius from a single appearance to a central character; and by presenting Valens as a determining figure in each act, he restored something of the contest between Theodora and Rome that characterizes the *Acta* account. He did this largely through invention of his own, but he also made dexterous adaptations. For example, the attempt in Boyle by an unnamed Roman soldier to persuade Theodora and Didymus to save their lives by apostatizing, after Valens has finally condemned them, is converted by Morell into Septimius's attempt to rally the Romans to save them. The weight Handel gave to Irene's and Septimius's arias shows him fully appreciating his librettist's dramaturgy (Septimius has the longest aria in the oratorio – 'Descend, kind Pity', in Part 1 Scene 2 – and the longest aria in Part 3).
- 2 Morell used many of Boyle's phrases verbatim, as the well-read Lady Shaftesbury noticed at the first performance,²⁶ but stripped out dozens of pages of theological discussion: his libretto has less argument, and more reaction. In their exchanges with each other, Boyle's hero and heroine are always repressing self-interested emotion, self-consciously and ultra-considerately thinking before responding. In order to fit his libretto to the convention of opera seria and oratorio whereby emotion is given free rein in arias, Morell needed to turn their reticence into something more ardent. What Boyle's hero and heroine lack in emotional self-expression they make up for in their intellectual exchanges: they argue their positions at eloquent length (the passage corresponding to Part 2 Scene 5 covers seven double-column folio pages). Morell communicates doctrine less by set-piece reference to biblical exemplars and more by integration of New Testament phraseology (in fact some of the key passages that have been objected to as platitudinous moralizing are taken from the Gospel of St John and Revelations, as Leslie Robarts has noted²⁷).
- 3 Morell reinforces Boyle's claims for female heroism, for example by strengthening Irene from Boyle's docile original.²⁸ An aspect of Theodora's heroism which is open to criticism on doctrinal grounds is her determination to secure her chastity by a form of assisted suicide. In the *Acta* she plans to forestall her first ravisher by provoking him to be her murderer. In Boyle she asks Didymus to kill her, as an act of friendship, and in retaining this high point of the drama and putting it at the centre of their work (Part 2 Scene 5), Morell and Handel show Theodora, even at her most fragile, having astonishing strength of purpose.

²⁵ For further detail than is possible here, see Robarts, 'Rendering Virtue Amiable'.

²⁶ 'Mr Boyle has wrote a very pretty, I think I may call it *Divine Novel* on the same Subject and the best words in the Oratorio are taken Verbatim from him' (*Music and Theatre*, 268); at a conservative estimate there are over fifty verbal echoes. Lady Shaftesbury, wife of the fourth Earl of Shaftesbury, had unusually ready access to Boyle's novel because her husband, Handel's patron, had subscribed to Birch's edition of Boyle's *Works*.

²⁷ 'Rendering Virtue Amiable', chapter 3; for example, the B section of 'As with rosy Steps the Morn' (Part 1 Scene 4), which according to Dean is 'disastrous, and seems to have been added merely to use up the words with which Morell underlines his superfluous moral' (*Oratorios*, 565), is a paraphrase of John 8.12 and 14.6. Robarts's study demonstrates how saturated the libretto is with Christian thought and language.

²⁸ Cecil Hill explores this point, with rather different emphasis, in 'Theodora and the 18th-Century Feminist Movement', *Alte Musik als ästhetische Gegenwart: Bach, Händel, Schütz. Bericht über den internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress Stuttgart 1985* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1987), volume 2, 49–54.



- 4 There is nothing in the libretto to suggest that Theodora is in love with Didymus. Morell entirely discarded the effort that Irene makes in Boyle to persuade Theodora to marry Didymus, who in Boyle is Irene's cousin. In Boyle Theodora declines marriage because in a time of persecution it would lead to a conflict of loyalty between family and faith; but finally, on the verge of execution, she concedes that, if she and Didymus are spared, she will requite his love and loyalty. In the oratorio Theodora's love for Didymus is purely Christian, based on their shared faith and on the esteem due to and from a generous disposition.
- 5 Morell intensified and widened the focus on conflicts of loyalty. Notably, he made Didymus a serving Roman officer rather than (as in Boyle) a Syrian who formerly served in the Roman army, an alteration which enhances his bond with the Roman Septimius, deepens his transgression to the state and intensifies his peril. (Diocletian's persecutions targeted army personnel who had become Christian, Didymus's situation exactly.²⁹) Likewise, by making Septimius both Valens's right-hand man and Didymus's closest friend, Morell introduced an entirely new element of anguish into every act of the drama.
- 6 Morell makes the actions of the Christians less destined, and more voluntary, than in previous accounts. The educated members of Handel's audience would have known that Theodora was martyred during a time of Roman persecution which church historians (and Boyle) described as the *consequence of corruption* among the early Christians (see note 66). In the libretto Christian corruption is touched on so faintly as to be imperceptible, lessening the retributive element and increasing the independence of Theodora's actions.
- 7 Instead of starting the story with Theodora present in court, being tried and sentenced there (as in the martyrologies and as in Boyle's account of his 'lost' first part), Morell saves the trial for his climactic scene and has Theodora's sentence of enforced prostitution announced to her, and to the audience, by Septimius (Part 1 Scene 5). The drama is heightened, and the horror deepened, by making us feel shock at the same moment as she does. Morell then reinforces the drama of violation by doing what Corneille pronounced impossible, presenting Theodora shut up in the brothel (Part 2 Scene 2: 'Theodora, in her Place of Confinement' is not prison, as most modern accounts, without foundation, define it³⁰).
- 8 The particular crime, in Roman eyes, of the Theodora of hagiography is that she refuses to marry, on the basis (doctrinally correct for her time) that Christ prefers those who espouse him through the virgin state to those who dilute their affection for him by marrying. This is the ground of the accusation made against her by the local Roman governor and the main matter of her trial, with which the early accounts open. So her sentence of enforced prostitution is brutal but apt. Morell changes Theodora's ground of resistance to authority and so alters the dramatic logic: she makes her stand on adherence to the Christian faith as such, not to one part of its doctrine, and is punished only for being a Christian. So her initial sentence, of enforced prostitution, is less apt, more shocking, more gratuitously cruel, and – importantly – directed more specifically at her faith than at a chosen doctrine, that is, it attacks her more inwardly and where she is more vulnerable.

Morell set himself a large and complex assignment. On the face of it, his source material was not grist for an oratorio. Surrendering the Bible as a source was a high-risk strategy. When Handel had done this before, he

29 Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, volume 1, Chronology (unnumbered pages): 'Anno Christi 304. About the nineteenth year of this *Dioclesian*, doth he begin the tenth Persecution. . . . In the third act he comes to the common Christians; but first begins in his Camp, where many of his soldiers valiantly and voluntarily died to be soldiers of Christ, under the colours of Martyrdom.'

30 She is in solitary confinement there while Valens (as in earlier versions of the story) waits to see if she will change her mind; see Part 2 Scene 1, 'Return, Septimius'. Boyle specifies 'the Stews' (= brothel) and is quoted thus by Morell in his preface. Morell also initially used 'Stews' in his libretto in Septimius's line in Part 1 Scene 5 and Irene's in Part 1 Scene 6, where 'the vile Place' is a substitution apparently instigated by Handel; see Roberts, 'Rendering Virtue Amiable', chapter 8, section 'Alterations to the Libretto at Composition Stage'.



had used other monuments of great literature, but his audiences were seemingly displeased with works stemming from sources that did not belong to their own heritage, or were unfamiliar, or were too nearly opera *manqué* (such as *Hercules*). Not only was Boyle's novel not biblical, not 'great literature' and not familiar, it was a religious work, which had designs on its readers' souls. An oratorio based on it could be suspected (justifiably) of directly preaching to the audience (see below, 'Religion in *Theodora*') – a potentially discomfiting and offensive form of theatrical entertainment.

Morell's libretto is a considerable achievement, and superior to most didactic moral drama of his time.³¹ His major initiatives amount to a transformation of tract to drama, of lesson to persuasion, of one-dimensional icons to human beings, of doctrine to faith and, concurrently, interestingly, the complication as well as the intensifying of 'meaning'. This too was a high-risk strategy.

THE LIBRETTIST'S WRITINGS AND CAREER

Morell's biography and his collaborations with Handel are relatively well documented.³² He moved in a circle of accomplished artists and men of letters, and was accepted as one of them. He was a Church of England clergyman. In this capacity he contributed to the movement in establishment religious circles of the time to revitalize religion in England through an appeal to the heart, through art³³: he wrote in celebration of a wide range of religious poets, enlisting himself as one; his own religious poems and their copious notes defend the certainty of miracles and the truth of the bible; and he preached a Three Choirs sermon, making the usual recommendation for music in worship as an affective means to raise devotion.³⁴ Morell shared Boyle's aim to evangelize through art.

The 1744 edition of Boyle's works might additionally have caught Morell's attention because it was dedicated to Lord Burlington, who was not only Handel's former patron and Boyle's great-nephew but, at Chiswick, the neighbour of Morell's parents-in-law; and there is some evidence that Morell was a literary associate of the Burlington circle.³⁵ Morell would also have had an interest in Boyle as a philosopher. Boyle influenced the philosophy of his friend John Locke, and Morell had written a commentary on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of which he was proud, since Queen Caroline had commissioned it.³⁶

The *Theodora* story combined Christian and Roman history. Morell too had a foot in both camps. As a minister of the church he had a Judaeo-Christian base, but he was also a distinguished classicist.³⁷ One of Morell's own major works on classical authors infiltrated his libretto. He produced a translation with commentary of Seneca's letters, in which the topic that most exercised him was Seneca's attitude to suicide, the only point, he thought, on which Seneca fell short of Christian teaching.³⁸ The central scene of *Theodora* (Part 2 Scene 5) likewise repudiates inducements to suicide with Christian teaching. But like many of his educated contemporaries, Morell strongly admired Roman institutions, Roman civic republicanism being a

31 Especially as described by Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form 1660–1760: An Essay in Generic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), which would have given a different picture of eighteenth-century drama if the serious musical works performed in the London theatre had been included.

32 See Smith, 'Thomas Morell'.

33 See Jeremy Gregory, 'Anglicanism and the Arts: Religion, Culture and Politics in the Eighteenth Century', in *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain, 1660–1800*, ed. Jeremy Black and Jeremy Gregory (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 82–109.

34 Smith, *Oratorios*, 111–112, 147–148, 354.

35 Smith, *Oratorios*, 197–198.

36 Smith, *Oratorios*, 198; Robarts, 'Rendering Virtue Amiable', chapter 2, section 'Morell, Locke and Revelation'.

37 Smith, 'Thomas Morell', 192–215.

38 *The Epistles of Lucius Annaeus Seneca; with Large Annotations, Wherein, Particularly, the Tenets of the Ancient Philosophers Are Contrasted with the Divine Precepts of the Gospel, with Regard to the Moral Duties of Mankind. In Two Volumes* [bound in one] (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1786), notes to Epistles 13, 24, 70.



standard of political integrity in the early modern period. This might explain his relatively even-handed portrayal of the Romans – a historically sound but dramatically complicating position to adopt.

Morell's inclusiveness of outlook is nicely epitomized by his own engagement with Boyle's friend Locke. During Morell's time at Cambridge the university saw itself as a nursery for future Church of England clergymen but accommodated a wide spectrum of religious opinion, with Locke being included as a staple of the curriculum.³⁹ Morell's education left its mark. On the one hand, in his commentary on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he tries to invest the text with a more orthodox Christianity than Locke himself espoused;⁴⁰ on the other, he transcribed Locke's very forward-looking advocacy of freedom of belief from *A Letter Concerning Toleration* into the libretto of *Theodora* (Didymus, Part 1 Scene 1). Boyle's novel, though for political reasons he did not advertise the fact in his preface, is a plea for religious toleration, and that would have added to its attractions for Morell.

Morell's diversity of intellectual sympathy, his commitment to preaching Christianity through art, his church's sympathy to comprehension of 'old Dissent' in the late 1740s and the zealous latitudinarianism ingrained by his Cambridge training⁴¹ combine in this oratorio. The result is that the libretto, at least, lacks simple clarity of 'message' (offered by most of Handel's Old Testament oratorio librettos, at least at surface level), which may well be one reason why it has proved 'difficult' even to admirers of the oratorio as a whole. It would appear that Morell was trying to make his text as inclusive as possible, in order to inspire religious feeling in people of all persuasions. This is perhaps one reason why *Theodora* failed in its own day.

RELIGION IN *THEODORA*

The modern audience may well feel that the religious faith portrayed in *Theodora* transcends sectarian difference, and that Morell successfully aimed at something that would touch the greatest number of people. But in 1750, when religious belief was central to the definition of personal and group identity, Morell's libretto would have seemed to suffer rather than gain from the lack of a single religious standpoint.

Firstly, this was not a text well suited to the religiously inclined. Many in the audience would have thought that the philosophy voiced by Didymus at the outset (Part 1 Scenes 1 and 2), against persecution on the grounds of religion, for complete freedom of belief and for a separation of church and state (all echoes of Locke), was excessively liberal and unorthodox.⁴²

Secondly, for many there would have been too strong a nonconformist element. The Christians are *dissenters from the state religion*, unlike the bulk of Handel's audience. Moreover, putting his aims for religious verse into practice, Morell uses the language of heightened fervour which marks English religious verse of all denominations throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁴³ but which for Handel's

39 See John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 140.

40 Smith, *Oratorios*, 148.

41 Richard Burgess Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Toleration in England during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1962), 113–116; John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, 'Introduction: The Church and Anglicanism in the "Long" Eighteenth Century', in *The Church of England c. 1689–c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32, 36–38, 43.

42 Donald Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 335, includes this in a summary of religious cross-currents in the oratorio. Locke strongly advocated separation of church and state, non-interference by government ('the magistrate') in matters of religion, and the free right of public or closed assembly for worship (compare Part 1 Scene 5, 'you in private Oratories dare'), and stressed the pointlessness of persecution. His *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689, written early 1685) was a radical work, banned at Oxford University (Mark Goldie, 'John Locke, Jonas Proast and Religious Toleration 1688–1692', in *The Church of England*, ed. Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, 154).

43 Including Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw; Watts and his fellow dissenters; Addison in his hymns; many poets in the first half of the eighteenth century now unknown but then much read (for example Elizabeth Rowe, Thomas Parnell); and Charles and John Wesley. Morell's models among religious poets spanned orthodoxy and dissent; see Smith, *Oratorios*, 111.



32

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Bass[o]

blest be the hand, and blest the pow'r, that in this dark_ and_

blest be the hand, and blest the pow'r, that in this dark and dan_g'rous_

blest be the hand, and blest the pow'r, that in this dark and

blest be the hand, and blest the pow'r, that in this dark and

[f]

36

[tr]

[f]

[f]

[f]

THEODORA

Lord, fa - vour still the

dan - g'rous hour_ sav'd_ thee from cru - el strife!

hour sav'd thee_ from_ cru - - el strife!

dan - g'rous hour sav'd thee from cru - el_ strife!

dan - g'rous hour sav'd thee from cru - el strife!

Example 1 Part 3 Scene 2, Chorus and Theodora: 'Blest be the Hand', bars 32–51



41

kind in - tent, and bless thy gra - cious in - stru - ment with li - ber - ty ___ and ___ life!

49

Tutti

Lord, fa - vour still the kind in - tent,
 Lord, fa - vour still the kind in - tent,
 Lord, fa - vour still the kind in - tent,
 Lord, fa - vour still the kind in - tent,

Example 1 *continued*

audience would have had distinctly nonconformist connotations, not least because in the oratorio it is used in the context of worship, given communal expression rather than reserved for ‘private ejaculation’.

Several of the religious poets whom Morell cites as his models in his volume of religious verse are authors of hymns, and hymns punctuate the oratorio. In 1750 the language, forms and music of the Christians’ worship in *Theodora* were probably most readily associated with, though they did not *originate* with, the Methodists, because of the Wesleys’ copious production of hymns and their use of them in worship – contra the mainstream practice of the established church.⁴⁴

Handel himself created one of the most electrifying moments of the work by heightening the nonconformist, individual-testifying nature of the worship. When the Christians celebrate Didymus’s rescue of Theodora (Part 3 Scene 2), she intervenes with a prayer for her rescuer’s safety, the fact that it is a spontaneous intervention being underlined by her music’s stark difference from that of the chorus, especially the sudden cessation of instrumental accompaniment (Example 1). This was just the kind of extempore utterance that horrified High Churchmen after the Methodists had effectively taken over the voluntary religious societies that were the eighteenth century’s nearest live parallel to Theodora’s community.⁴⁵

44 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961–1975), volume 3, 65. Already in 1732 (9 December) *Fog’s Weekly Journal* sneered that among ‘this Sect call’d Methodists . . . to employ two Hours a Day in singing of Psalms and Hymns is judged an indispensable requisite to the Being of a Christian’.

45 John Walsh, ‘Religious Societies: Methodist and Evangelical 1738–1800’, *Studies in Church History* 23 (1986), 285–286.



In 1750 Methodism was both a minority practice and seen as subversive by the majority.⁴⁶ So non-Methodists in the audience who perceived a parallel could well have been affronted, taking the oratorio to mean that Methodism was an admirable version of Christianity. However, they would have been mistaken; despite the interesting near-connections of Handel and Wesley, the oratorio is not Methodist propaganda.⁴⁷

Morell is on record as having preached very severely against Methodism.⁴⁸ His libretto does not call that record into question. Its religion is not significantly Methodist. In *Theodora* the Christians reject this world; but Methodists and Dissenters did not require material sacrifice. In the first Christian scene (Part 1 Scene 3) the phrase ‘Bane of Virtue’ is used to decry material prosperity, but John Wesley used the identical phrase in a sermon written during the 1740s decrying those who *objected* to the acquisition of wealth.⁴⁹ For Methodists, the unqualified, sufficient ground of faith was personal inner light, often accorded in a moment of sudden revelation that ‘Christ died for *me*’. But *Theodora*’s moment of most inspired certainty, when she decides to rescue Didymus (Part 3 Scene 3), is modelled very closely on Boyle (that is, it is pre-Methodist in origin) and makes no reference to the characteristically Methodist conviction of personally received divine grace. Conversion – of Didymus and of Septimius – is achieved not by revelation but by the Church of England methods of precept and example. The hymn texts in *Theodora* use ‘we’, not the ‘I’ characteristic of Methodist hymns, and the axis of personal conviction of sin and conviction of personal salvation, central to Methodist faith, is absent. Moreover, it is unlikely that there were any Methodists in the audience to appreciate the hymns and spontaneous worship in the oratorio, because John Wesley condemned the theatre as ‘the sink of all profaneness and debauchery’.⁵⁰

Thirdly, to complicate matters further, the Romans (as already noted) are not wholly bad or alien, though heathen; indeed the imperial Roman establishment, both in fact and in the oratorio, is nearer to eighteenth-century English society than the oratorio Christians are. State authority and majority religion were fused in both England and imperial Rome. Valens is not a complete monster – he gives *Theodora* opportunities to

46 Church of England pulpits were denied to the Methodists from 1738; see John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: Epworth, 1921), 180, 183, 224, 233–236. Though John Wesley had always stated that he did not aim to create a new or separate church, by 1749 his ‘society’ was a national network and viewed by the Church of England establishment as separatist; see Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth, 1970; reprinted 2000), 69–73, 106–119.

47 Contra Schröder, “‘A Sect, Rebellious’”, which in this regard ignores too much historical fact to bear close scrutiny. That is not to deny interesting interconnections: Handel set three of Charles Wesley’s hymn texts in about 1746–1747 (Burrows, *Handel*, 294, and G. F. Handel, *The Complete Hymns and Chorales*, ed. Donald Burrows (London: Novello, 1988), Preface); for his research into Moravian belief John Wesley visited Halle in 1738; and Selina Countess of Huntingdon showed an interest in Handel (O. E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: A & C Black, 1955), 813). On the distinctions between Methodism and religion in Handel’s oratorios see further Smith, *Oratorios*, 354–359.

48 Smith, ‘Thomas Morell’, 208. On evangelical Anglicanism’s ‘highly critical’ stance towards Methodism see Walsh and Taylor, ‘Introduction’, 44.

49 John Wesley, ‘The Use of Money’, in *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life*, ed. Max Stackhouse, Dennis P. McCann, Shirley J. Roels and Preston N. Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 194. I am indebted to Helen Elsom for this reference.

50 Sermon 89, ‘The More Excellent Way’, section V.4, though Wesley was himself well read in English drama from the Restoration onwards; and he wrote to the mayor and corporation of Bristol to prevent a theatre being opened there. (Wesley’s sermons are available online at <<http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/sermons>>.) His only recorded reference to a Handel oratorio is to a performance of *Messiah* in Bristol Cathedral. His comment in his Journal on Willem DeFesch’s *Judith*, 29 February 1764, shows that he would not have approved of the style of Handel’s oratorios any more than of their place of performance: ‘there are two things in all modern pieces of music which I could never reconcile to common sense: one is singing the same words ten times over; the other, singing different words by different persons, at one and the same time’; *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, volume 21, *Journal and Diaries IV (1755–65)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992), 444.



change her mind; and Septimius epitomizes the eighteenth-century ideal of loyalty to state, family and tradition, and of the ethically sound man of feeling (and in the omitted conclusion he and other Romans become converts).

Fourthly, for many there would have been too strong a Roman Catholic element. Theodora is of course not only a martyr in Foxe but a saint in the Roman Catholic church, and chastity in the form of *virginity*, which is made the locus of her integrity ('thou Mirror of the Virgin State', Part 2 Scene 5), is a Catholic, not an Anglican, ideal. Anti-Catholic feeling was still very strong in 1750;⁵¹ sermons still celebrated the defeat of the 1745 rebellion with breathless gratitude for escape from a threatened Inquisition. The state religion being depicted in *Theodora* is foreign at best, papist at worst. The occasion of the drama, and of Theodora's arrest, is a festival of pagan deities in honour of the emperor's birthday (Part 1 Scene 1, Part 2 Scene 1); the analogy of pagan deities and Catholic image worship was a commonplace of Protestant anti-Catholic polemic. Roman authority, represented by Valens, is shown revelling in the punishments of the Catholic Inquisition (fire, racks). This parallel too was conventional, the common stuff of sermons such as *Papal Rome and Pagan Rome Led by the Same Persecuting Spirit* (second edition 1747); the classic text was Conyers Middleton's *A Letter from Rome*, which reached its fifth edition in 1742, and the parallel was even used half-jocularly, as in Addison's *Freeholder*.⁵²

Septimius's reference to the Christians' gatherings in 'private Oratories' (Part 1 Scene 5) would have reminded the knowledgeable of the programme of the Counter Reformation, the European Catholic church's campaign initially to accommodate, then to curb, Protestantism and to reinvigorate the authority and spiritual appeal of Roman Catholicism. Roman oratorio (ur-oratorio) was a part of that movement. Through oratorio the Roman Catholic church deliberately harnessed the emotive power of music 'to draw, with a sweet deception, the sinners to the holy exercises of the Oratory'.⁵³ Oratories, and the compositions performed in them, began as informal small private meetings for spiritual conversation, prayer and songs of praise – in this respect Septimius's reference is accurate. While the association with Roman Catholicism evoked in *Theodora* by the Romans, the Christians' oppressors, might have been acceptable to Handel's audience, the identification of the Christians themselves with an engine of the Counter Reformation could have been disquieting.

But *Theodora* can claim to be a Counter-Counter-Reformation work, presenting a voluntary religious community whose elite is defined by spiritual excellence, instead of a religious structure heavy with doctrines, hierarchy and priesthood. It allies Christianity with freedom of thought and belief, rather than prescribed belief and practice; religious observance is private and spontaneous, not public and ritualized; and it opposes fresh, pure, individual belief to tradition, authority and world domination.

Theodora in fact presents a Christian community of the time before the Council of Nicaea (325) when there was no established church or fixed creed. This period of Christian history has frequently been singled out for emulation, and so it was in Morell's and Handel's time. From the 1670s the evangelical movement within the Church of England was much interested in the 'primitive church', the church in the first four centuries AD, especially as a model of pure faith, behaviour, liturgy and worship. The key text here is William Cave's *Primitive Christianity* (1673), which reached its seventh edition in 1728

51 See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 18–28 (with illustrations); Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

52 Addison (*Freeholder*, 105) mentions fans as being 'much more innocent Engines for propagating the Protestant Religion, than Racks, Wheels, Gibbets, and the like Machines, which are made use of for the advancement of the Roman-Catholic' (quoted by Raymond Tumbleson, *Catholicism in the English Protestant Imagination, 1660–1745* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 176).

53 Orazio Griffi, 1617, quoted in Howard Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, I: The Oratorio in the Baroque Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 122.



and is described by the historian Eamon Duffy as ‘an idealised portrait of *anglican* devotion as it might and should be’.⁵⁴ Cave writes of the early Christians:

about *midnight* they were generally wont to rise to *pray* and to sing *hymns* to God; this custom was very ancient, and doubtless took its original from the first times of persecution, when not daring to meet together in the *day*, they were forced to keep their religious Assemblies in the *night* . . . *Pliny* reports it as the *main* part of the Christians Worship, *that they met together before day to joyn in singing Hymns to Christ as God*: these Hymns were either *extemporary* raptures, so long as immediate *inspiration* lasted, or *set* compositions, either taken out of the holy Scriptures, or of their own composing, as *Tertullian* tells us: for it was usual then for any persons to compose divine Songs, to the honour of *Christ*, and to sing them in the Publick Assemblies, till the Council of *Laodicea* ordered, that no *Psalms* composed by *private* persons should be recited in the Church. ⁵⁵

Morell faithfully follows Cave’s and others’ accounts of the early church. In *Theodora* he depicts the Christians worshipping informally together, praying through the night and singing non-liturgical hymns – all distinctive features of early Christian worship in contemporary descriptions. He foregrounds the intense night vigil by his division of Parts 2 and 3, splitting the action ‘overnight’: Part 2 ends with the Christians praying for Theodora at night, Part 3 opens with them still keeping watch at dawn. As others have pointed out, Handel perfectly captures the freshness and innocence of the young faith, for example in the Christians’ first hymn, ‘Come, mighty Father’ (Part 1 Scene 3).⁵⁶

The early church’s practice of hymn singing was often mentioned in the late seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth as justification for music in church (contra the Puritans), for example in Blow’s preface to his *Amphion Anglicus*:

the same Celestial Spirit of Musical Concord and Harmony, was all along cherished and entertained in the Christian Church, during the very best Times of its purest Doctrines and Devotions. It will be enough, to mention one undeniable Instance, That, in the Primitive Age, during the cruellest Persecutions, in their most Private and Nightly Assemblies, the Christians of that early Time, as *Pliny* informed *Trajan*, remarkably distinguish’d themselves, by their alternate Singing of Psalms, and Spiritual Songs.⁵⁷

Morell’s own masters called for choral worship specifically in imitation of the early church. In his charge to the clergy of his diocese in 1741, Bishop Secker advocated that

All persons indeed who are by nature qualified, ought to learn, and constantly join to glorify Him that made them, in psalms and spiritual songs. This was the practice of the early Christians: it was restored very justly at the Reformation: and hath declined of late, within most of our memories, very unhappily.⁵⁸

54 Eamon Duffy, ‘Primitive Christianity Revived: Religious Renewal in Augustan England’, *Studies in Church History* 14 (1977), 287–300.

55 William Cave, *Primitive Christianity, or, the Religion of the Ancient Christians in the First Ages of the Gospel* (London: printed by J. M. for Richard Chiswell, 1673), part 1, chapter 9, ‘Of their Usual Worship, both Private and Publick’, 266, 276. Another model, also described by Duffy, is Anthony Horneck, ‘A Letter to a Person of Quality, concerning the Heavenly Lives of the Primitive Christians’, appended to his *The Happy Ascetic* (1681), sixth edition (London: printed for Samuel Chapman; and Richard Ware, 1724), 473–514.

56 The relation of Handel’s settings of the Christian hymns in *Theodora* to chorale and passion music may be a good topic for a dissertation.

57 John Blow, *Amphion Anglicus* (London: printed by William Pearson for the author, 1700), preface.

58 *Eight Charges Delivered to the Clergy of the Dioceses of Oxford and Canterbury* (London: printed for John and Francis Rivington and Benjamin White, 1769), 65–68.



In *Theodora* Morell is ‘enacting’ his Three Choirs sermon, showing, rather than merely mentioning, the historical ratification for the use of music in worship.

Admiration for ‘Primitive Christianity’ is the root of the oratorio’s spiritual complexion and also of its apparently Methodist timbre. As a devout Church of England man in his formative years Wesley was greatly influenced by Cave’s work,⁵⁹ so much so that his friend Mary Granville, later Delany, called him ‘Mr Primitive Christianity’.⁶⁰ The pure, ‘apostolic’ early church was the model for Methodist hymn singing and night vigils,⁶¹ for many Dissenter gatherings (a description of Congregationalist worship in 1723 strongly parallels the first Christian prayer meeting in *Theodora*),⁶² for Anglican religious societies such as that of the Savoy Chapel,⁶³ and for Morell’s *Theodora*.

Moreover, in the story of Theodora the scholarly Morell had chosen a martyr narrative that bore many of the features typical of attested martyrdoms of the early church under the Roman empire and which he made features of his libretto: an urban setting, interrogation by and argument with the magistrate, prostitution as the sentence for women, bribing of guards (Part 2 Scene 3), and joy in death (including reddening with joy, as happens to Theodora in Part 3 Scene 3). The church fathers were exercised by the problem of voluntary martyrs – suicides – and laid down the central importance of testifying to Christian faith rather than courting martyrdom. Part 1 Scene 5, Part 2 Scene 5 and the final scenes of the oratorio dramatize these teachings of the early church.⁶⁴

The purity and single-mindedness of the primitive church so vividly portrayed would have been a perplexing challenge to Handel’s theatre audience: were they meant to try to emulate its ideals, and abjure the society from which they originated and of which many of them were leaders? That would be nearly impossible in a capitalist, consumerist age. But to query the oratorio’s religious base would mean to query the life and death of the hero and heroine. This is perhaps a problem for the modern audience too. With his eclectic mix of religious elements, and his apparent advocacy of Primitive Christianity, Morell may well have missed his aim of inclusiveness and instead produced a text to which no one in his audience could whole-heartedly assent.

POSITION IN HANDEL’S OUTPUT

Unique as *Theodora* is, admirers of Handel’s work could have found in it several themes that are free of the complications of religious difference, of which three in particular connect *Theodora* to adjacent works by Handel:

Justice: Both *Solomon* and *Susanna*, which immediately precede *Theodora*, also contain trial and judgment scenes which are matters of life and death. This was a theme of considerable interest to Handel’s audience and patrons, for whom the integrity of the British justice system was a hallmark of British liberty and of the peerlessly unautocratic British constitution, and many of whom themselves regularly dispensed justice as local magistrates.

Persecution is a theme common to many of Handel’s oratorios, in the form of persecution merited by corruption.⁶⁵ *Judas Maccabaeus*, *Susanna* and *Jephtha* all begin with the community feeling the wrath

59 Kelly D. Carter, ‘The High Church Roots of John Wesley’s Appeal to Primitive Christianity’, *Restoration Quarterly* 37/2 (1995), <http://www.restorationquarterly.org/Volume_037/rq03702carter.htm>.

60 John Pollock, *John Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 32.

61 Davies, *Worship and Theology*, volume 3, 199.

62 ‘From the Bury Street Church Records’, *Congregational Historical Society Transactions* 6 (1913–1915), 333–334.

63 See Duffy, ‘Primitive Christianity’.

64 G. W. Bowerstock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27, 32, 42, 53, 54, 59–63, 66–72. I am indebted to Ellen Harris for acquaintance with this germane study.

65 On corruption in the Israelite community of Handel’s oratorios, and its consequent punishment, see Smith, *Oratorios*, 261–275.



of God for their backsliding (in *Susanna* ‘Our crimes, repeated, have provok’d his rage, And now he scourges a degenerate age’). Similarly, the source texts for *Theodora*, including Boyle and eighteenth-century histories, identify Diocletian’s persecutions as God’s punishment of the church’s laxity at this time.⁶⁶ But in Morell’s *Theodora* persecution is unmerited, and is focused on the blameless heroine.

Female virtue in danger: The line of blameless, vulnerable, beleaguered women whose predicament brings out their heroism stretches back to Handel’s first English dramatic oratorio, *Esther*, and continues to the last, *Jephtha*. (It is of course not confined to his oratorios; see, for example, Ginevra in *Ariodante*.) Female heroism was a popular dramatic topic in the mid-eighteenth century, and Boyle’s novel was a harbinger of a literary type. The abduction of Cleopatra in *Alexander Balus* and the attempted rape of Susanna are immediate precedents for the assault on Theodora’s virtue, and Daniel’s hymn to chastity at the culmination of Susanna’s long endurance is a premonition of *Theodora*’s central theme. The torment of both Susanna and Iphis is the more horrific in that it strikes them in the supposed safety of their own homes, where they could expect to have the protection of their family, but in both works the normal chief protector, their father, is no support: Susanna’s father is simply removed from the narrative until after the resolution of the crisis, and Iphis’s father is her catastrophe. Theodora presents another version of the woman without protecting family: she has no relatives at all. Her only and true protector is God. As she says (Part 3 Scene 2), when she prayed to God, he sent Didymus to act a father’s role: ‘Heav’n heard my Pray’r, / And bade a tender Father’s Care / The generous Youth employ.’ (Similarly, when Susanna proclaims her faith in her redemption, God sends Daniel to intercede, and when the priests appeal to God on Iphis’s behalf, God sends an angel to command the future direction of her life.)

With hindsight we can see that *Theodora* in fact is not such an anomaly in Handel’s output as it may first appear; and it would not have seemed wholly strange to the reading public of its day. To those cognoscenti willing to ignore the boundaries of genre, it could have appeared to be in the mainstream of modern literary taste.

RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

The majority of the present-day audience searching for guidelines in this work lacks an advantage that the reading public of Handel’s audience enjoyed: familiarity with striking literary parallels. If we want to assign one plot of ground as the soil from which *Theodora* grew, it is contemporary literature, and in particular two genres.

The novel

Attempted rape specifically, and endangered female virtue more generally – ‘virtue in distress’ – is a dominant motif in English fictions of the mid-eighteenth century, specifically of the 1740s. The theme is prominent in Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*; it is central to Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, epistolary novels which won huge admiration at their first appearance. *Clarissa* was first published during 1747–1748, *Theodora* was written in 1749, and footnotes to Morell’s *Seneca* show that he was

⁶⁶ See for example Philip a Limborch, *The History of the Inquisition*, trans. Samuel Chandler (London: J. Gray, 1731), and Samuel Chandler, *The History of Persecution* (London: J. Gray, 1736), 29: ‘This was the deplorable State of the Christian Church, which God, as *Eusebius* well observes, first punished with a gentle Hand; but when they grew harden’d & incurable in their Vices, he was pleased to let in the most grievous Persecution upon them, under *Dioclesian*, which exceeded in Severity & Length all that had been before.’



an ardent admirer of Richardson's novels.⁶⁷ The principal parallels between the figures of Theodora and Clarissa are striking (there are also several incidental similarities of events):

- 1 Like Theodora in the church fathers' accounts of her life, Clarissa refuses to marry on demand.
- 2 Like Theodora, Clarissa is subjected to mental and physical cruelty.
- 3 Like Theodora, Clarissa is confined in a brothel, in order to have her chastity and self-respect destroyed.
- 4 Like Theodora, Clarissa is devoutly Christian, adheres to her faith throughout her torment (though nearly unhinged by it), proclaims her trust in her salvation and is celebrated (by those with sufficient integrity) as a model of Christian fortitude.
- 5 Like Theodora's, Clarissa's end is described as a triumph.
- 6 Like Theodora, the nearer her life draws to its close, the greater is the power that Clarissa exerts over her persecutors, causing witnesses to atone and change their ways.
- 7 For both Theodora and Clarissa, as in the eighteenth-century novel generally and for the audiences of their time, chastity is the essence of female integrity. But there is nothing coy or insipid in these heroines' resistance to violation. On the contrary, for all their vulnerability to male oppression, Theodora and Clarissa are women of astonishing dignity and strength, showing an independence of mind and will that would now be called feminist. They and their close female confidantes stand out above their male oppressors in spirit and spirituality.

Sentimental drama

Sentimental drama shares many of the contemporary novel's characteristics. A type of theatre much esteemed and much practised in eighteenth-century Britain, it was especially favoured by thinking people of sensibility and those who wanted to be. Leading writers of sentimental dramas included Handel's and Richardson's friend Aaron Hill and Morell's friend James Thomson (poet and playwright, author of the lastingly influential poem *The Seasons*).⁶⁸

As has often been remarked, many of the features of sentimental drama recur in operas and oratorios by Handel (for example, action in the form of one-to-one conversations), but in none, I think, are they so consistent and pervasive as in *Theodora*. These are some of the defining features of sentimental drama which also characterize *Theodora*:

- 1 Displays of self-denying generosity to an individual, a cause or both, the leading characters often seeming to vie with each other to be the more generous ('generous' occurs eight times in the libretto of *Theodora* and twenty-three times in the music – though this is economical compared with Boyle, who has 'generous' or 'generosity' forty-five times), coupled with humble admiration of such inspiring nobility on the part of the beneficiary.
- 2 Tenderness for the feelings of others – compassion, pity, empathizing sorrow – as hymned in Septimius's great aria, the longest in the oratorio, 'Descend, kind Pity' (Part 1 Scene 2). 'Sympathizing Woe' is the hallmark of sentimental drama and is not culpable weakness but admirable generosity, evidence of refined sensibility and a mainspring of noble action. In connection with *Susanna* Percy Young aptly quotes Henry Brooke's prologue to Edward Moore's *The Foundling* (Drury Lane, 1748),⁶⁹ which I would suggest Morell had in mind when writing 'Descend, kind Pity':

67 Morell, *Epistles of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, volume 1, 156, and volume 2, 73, where there is a suggestion that Morell knew him: 'my late friend Mr. Richardson'. Richardson attested to greatly admiring Handel, in print in *Sir Charles Grandison* and privately; see Tom Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47.

68 For brief discussion of their sentimental dramas in connection with Handel's oratorios see Smith, *Oratorios*, 336–337.

69 Young, *Oratorios*, 168.



He forms a Model of a virtuous Sort,
 And gives you more of Moral than of Sport;
 He rather aims to draw the melting Sigh,
 Or steal the pitying Tear from Beauty's Eye;
 To touch the Strings that humanize our Kind,
 Man's sweetest Strain, the Musick of the Mind.

- 3 Women, especially a heroine, rising higher up the scale of moral discernment, nobility, generosity, courage and self-sacrifice, setting an example to their admiring male counterparts, as in Aaron Hill's *Henry V* and James Thomson's *Edward and Eleonora* (compare Theodora and Didymus).
- 4 Extensive, detailed, exposition of feelings, motive, moral position and moral dilemma. This is sentimental drama as the precursor of Henry James, and such exploratory exposition and elaboration is of course the very stuff of the baroque da capo aria in opera and oratorio.
- 5 A plot articulated by a succession of moral dilemmas pressurizing characters into making choices, often fatal, arising from clashes of exemplary loyalty (to a parent, friend, lover, sister, brother, country or a pledge previously made).

All these are defining features of sentimental drama, and central aspects of *Theodora*. The last is perhaps the most remote from a twenty-first-century notion of convincing theatre, and it is especially marked in *Theodora*. All the main characters are repeatedly confronted with choices that will crucially affect both their own and others' lives. (The main characters of many of Handel's operas are also subjected to stringent and life-determining choices, but not nearly so often.)

There are twenty-three instances (by my count) in *Theodora* when a character decides to take one action rather than another. Most of these testing moments occur in the recitative and so they are easy to miss, but once they are noticed, it becomes clear that there is nothing 'predestined' about the action (as Young and Dean suggested that there was). Theodora, Didymus and Irene are not automata; they could choose to behave differently. Pressure of choice *brings out* their unhesitating loyalty to their faith. When Didymus hears that Theodora has been arrested (Part 1 Scene 6), his first words are not the outcry against fate that we might expect, but 'Kind Heav'n', as he recognizes a God-given opportunity for heroic self-sacrificing initiative. When Theodora initially renounces the world (Part 1 Scene 3), she does not expect so soon to be dragged back into it; and then she voluntarily steps forward to defy the state's decree, though she realizes that she may be risking her life (Part 1 Scene 5). When Theodora goes to her martyrdom (Part 3 Scene 3), Irene moves from preventing to celebrating her self-sacrifice ('New Scenes of Joy'), recognizing that Theodora has found her vocation and her path to salvation.

By contrast, Septimius, the 'ordinary' person, does hesitate, and does change. Initially Valens's right-hand man, and chief agent of Roman repression, he becomes increasingly sympathetic to the Christians, to the point of converting. The religious commitment of the Christians demands the choice between life and death. Septimius, torn between duty and sympathy, faces choices nearer to ordinary experience, and his reactions form a bridge to the feelings of the audience, while illuminating the faith of Theodora, Didymus and Irene. He is, as W. S. Rockstro realized, a central character.⁷⁰ The scenes in which he appears, especially those with Didymus, explore the pain of moral choice: between commitment to belief and family ties; between belief and national identity; between loyalty to a friend and pledged allegiance to one's country.⁷¹

⁷⁰ W. S. Rockstro, *The Life of G. F. Händel* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 306. Rockstro devotes over half his description of the oratorio to Septimius.

⁷¹ Anticipating E. M. Forster's famous gauge of moral standing, whether one betrays one's friend or one's country ('What I believe', in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1951)), and possibly critiquing the just-published testament of eighteenth-century England's most famous sceptical political moralist, Lord Bolingbroke, who took the same dilemma as an indicator of probity but reversed it: 'he, who abandons or betrays his country, will abandon or betray his friend' (*The Idea of a Patriot King* (London, 1749), in *Bolingbroke: Political Writings*, ed. David Armitage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 219).



MORAL ORIENTATION

Like so much fiction and drama of its period, the oratorio raises the question: where does duty lie? It is most often raised for Theodora: should she renounce the world, that is, the society that she (being a princess of Antioch) has a responsibility to lead; should she speak out for Christianity when the soldiers arrive to enforce Valens's decree; should she preserve her integrity by killing herself; should she ask Didymus to kill her; should she accept his offer to change places with her; should she offer to die for him?

We know that the eighteenth-century audience for the arts had a great love of moral pointers.⁷² Moral questioning such as permeates this oratorio is characteristic, too, and gives vitality and nuance to the prevailing passion for instructive sentiments. We are being engaged as well as instructed, on an issue of great interest to us: how to live – which is the whole theme of Handel's next oratorio, *The Choice of Hercules*, itself a favourite theme of eighteenth-century moral art.⁷³

The sentimental drama, the novel and, according to their eighteenth-century commentators, operas can feature detailed expositions of moral and emotional positions, teasing out and elaborating them, with the aim of heightening the reader's or listener's moral awareness and discrimination while also displaying psychological penetration and admirable art. The full-page lead article in the *Universal Spectator* of 5 July 1735 on *Alcina* as 'a Lesson of Morality', describing and universalizing the hero's experience in remarkable detail and in the eighteenth-century equivalent of psychotherapist's language, shows how readily Handel's audience received his dramas as maps for their own potential moral-psychological development.⁷⁴

Eighteenth-century epistolary novelists play with, and teach through, the fact that the reader cannot be certain what the author thinks of what characters say and do. One aspect of our engagement is that we are prompted to evaluate the characters' statements and behaviour against our own (developing) moral sense. When a novel was published serially, this kind of engagement extended to taking an opinion on how the characters *should* behave, what they should do next, in real time, as well as how they had already behaved – an engagement intended by Richardson.⁷⁵ Richardson's wide circle of admirers advised him on the outcome of *Clarissa* while he was writing it, several of them (including Mrs Delany) imploring him not to let Clarissa die, others (including Dr Delany) encouraging him to give her an exemplary death and praising him for doing so.⁷⁶ Tom Keymer's brilliant account of the dynamic, morally educative novel–reader relationship that Richardson sets up is highly suggestive for students of *Theodora* and, perhaps, more of Handel's operas and oratorios:

The reader is offered no definite answers and is instead required to confront problems and resolve ambiguities himself . . . Richardson's concern is not to spell out for his readers a single and definitive reading of the text but instead to enhance still further the text's capacity to put them on their mettle and make them work . . . complexity and openness take the place of simplicity and closure . . . Its usefulness will derive not from any bare message but from the process of striving for it, a process which demands from the reader the most strenuous efforts of interpretation and

72 Witness, for example, the report by Francis Peck of the London theatre audience's delight in the 'moral instructions' both original and added to *Comus* in Dalton's and Arne's version, 1738 (*New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr John Milton* (London: published by the author, 1740), 21). [See the article by Berta Joncus earlier in this issue. Ed.]

73 Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, 'A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules' in *Second Characters, or the Language of Forms*, ed. Benjamin Rand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914); Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in Art of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 38–43.

74 Summarized in Smith, *Oratorios*, 62.

75 See Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa*, 96.

76 See Keymer, *Richardson's Clarissa*, 203–204.



adjudication, of mind and moral sense – a process which demands, in effect, that he educate himself.⁷⁷

Potentially, analogous forms of engagement exist for the audience of a music drama (opera or oratorio), which is like the epistolary novel in that it occurs in real time. But music drama is not only more complex (words-*and*-music), in the eighteenth century it required even more acute attention. Firstly, whereas the novel could be reread, the oratorio could be re-experienced only in different states: at another performance (no two performances are identical), in another season (with different performers and, often, an altered score) or reduced for domestic music-making.⁷⁸ Secondly, the transformative element of the performer means that the engagement is not just between author and audience. The added effect is double: the performer interprets the text, different performances conveying various, possibly even opposite, impressions of it; and the experienced audience habitually judges, while listening, the appropriateness (‘decorum’) of the interpretation, reflecting, in the process, on the significance of the music-and-words. For the acute listener, oratorio was and is a multifarious moral-aesthetic exercise.

HANDEL’S SETTING

Handel’s audience could buy the libretto to read in advance of the performance.⁷⁹ From the text alone they might well have been dismayed by an apparent bleakness in Theodora’s character and fate. In sharp contrast to other heroes and heroines in Handel’s oratorios, she has no family, she is not in love with her hero-admirer, she spurns the society to which by birth she belongs and she breaks away even from her fellow believers and her dearest friend in pursuit of her ideals. To the eighteenth-century public such strength could have seemed too devoid of feminine graces to make an attractive heroine.

But *Theodora* contains some of the most radiant, heartwarming, aspirational music that Handel ever wrote. To an extent which we may well feel overrides all uncertainty, and to a greater extent than in any other of his oratorios, Handel transforms the libretto by the emotional expressiveness and directness of his music, which constantly invests the characters with tenderness and selfless generosity, and – a particularly striking feature of the work – repeatedly evokes the happier state of being to which the characters aspire, rather than the cruelty, violence and death that form much of the drama.

Yet, the emotional directness of much of the music notwithstanding, it seems to me that the relationships of the words and music are very complex and thought-provoking. The challenging openness to engagement and interpretation noted in contemporary literature such as *Clarissa* seems to be an equally striking feature of Handel’s word-setting in *Theodora*. That could provide a topic for a separate article (by a different author), but the final section of this article attempts to identify some pertinent elements of Handel’s score.

- 1 The dramatic context invites us to attach significance to the orchestral accompaniment. *Theodora* is rich in ambiguous orchestral ‘comment’ on the vocal line. For instance, in the incarcerated Theodora’s ‘O that I on Wings cou’d rise’ (Example 2), are the wingbeats of the dove (in the upper strings) ecstatically soaring, evoking her wished-for state, or beating against the bars of her cage, evoking (as the scene direction has it) ‘Theodora, in her Place of Confinement’? The continuation of the insistent bass through the B section (Example 3), where convention leads us to expect a change of mood, could suggest a sense either of ‘I am above it all’ or of ‘I cannot get out’. ‘Either’ is plausible, but it seems to me that ‘both’ is not, as they are opposing states of mind and mood. In ‘Defend her, Heav’n’, does the introduction (Example 4) represent the nervous flutter of the human heart, corresponding to Irene’s previous words

⁷⁷ Keymer, *Richardson’s Clarissa*, 65–69.

⁷⁸ The score of *Theodora* was announced by John Walsh junior in June 1751; it lacks secco recitatives and choruses (as was usual with Walsh’s editions of Handel’s later oratorios: see Dean, *Oratorios*, 86).

⁷⁹ For an example see Henry Fielding, *Covent-Garden Journal*, 31 March 1752, of the initial run of *L’Allegro*. See also Dean, *Oratorios*, 95.



(see Part 2 Scene 4) and suggesting anxiety, or angelic wingbeats, corresponding to the text of her aria and suggesting comfort? Here both are possible, an 'Irene point of view' (anxiety) and an 'authorial point of view' (comfort: heaven *will* redeem Theodora), and the question arises whether the composer *intends* the listener to infer both. Perhaps, as Keymer posits for Richardson, the composer intends the listener to be uncertain.

Example 2 Part 2 Scene 2, Theodora: 'O that I on Wings cou'd rise', bars 7–15

- There are conspicuously 'unexpected' settings for both voice and accompaniment. For example, famously, in the Roman choruses 'For ever thus stands fix'd the Doom' (Part 1 Scene 1) and 'Venus laughing from the Skies' (Part 2 Scene 1) the *words* express gloating cruelty of the most horrible kind, but the *music* is not correspondingly brutal. A range of interpretations is possible. Hence Dean described the Romans in these choruses as 'charmers', 'gay', 'care-free children of nature';⁸⁰ Sellars and Christie (Glyndebourne 1996) made them vacuous, complacent, yes-men; McCreesh (Deutsche Grammophon 469 061-2, 2000), with blaring horns and hissing vocal entries, made 'For ever thus' a hunting chorus and turned the Romans into a lynching party. It seems to me a key characteristic of this work that any of these can be convincing. Such instances are numerous. Dean wondered why 'Bane of Virtue' (Part 1 Scene 3; an 'egregious text') was set as a 'lullaby',⁸¹ but Harry Bicket (Glyndebourne 2003) made it incisive and vehement, the preacher's condemnation. Dean described the B section of 'As with rosy Steps the Morn' (Part 1 Scene 4) as 'disastrous, and seems to have been added merely to use up the words with which

80 Dean, *Oratorios*, 560, 564, 566 ('the brothel scene is delightful').

81 Dean, *Oratorios*, 565.



Example 3 Part 2 Scene 2, Theodora: 'O that I on Wings cou'd rise', bars 35–43

Morell underlines his superfluous moral⁸²; McCreech made it appear a new access of conviction through faith which is prepared for by dedication in the A section. But in no instance is the dramatic coherence obvious; we have to think about it to see that it is persuasive.

- 3 The scope given to the singer to affect characterization seems greater than is usual in the oratorios. The conspicuous change in note values and metre in 'The raptur'd Soul' (Part 1 Scene 2, Example 5) and in note values and tempo in 'Kind Heav'n' (Part 1 Scene 6, Example 6) brings onward momentum to a halt, creating a moment of stasis which cries out for ornament (at repetitions if not in the first instance). Handel uses the same device in other oratorios at significant moments (such as 'From virtue' in Jonathan's 'Birth and fortune' in *Saul*), but not in such quantity as in 'Kind Heav'n', where the singer is given six opportunities to add individuality to the phrase that confirms Didymus's loyalty to his new faith. (Knowing that the role of Didymus was to be created by Guadagni could have encouraged Handel to provide space for opera-style ornament.⁸³)
- 4 Meaning is complicated and extended by purely orchestral music in the introduction or play-out of an aria, notably a 'debate' or 'conversation' in the orchestral introduction even before the entry of the voice, which does not provide a straightforward anticipation of the character's opening statement or state of mind. If we are hearing the work for the first time, we know nothing of Theodora when we hear the introduction to her first aria, 'Fond, flatt'ring World, adieu!' (Part 1 Scene 3; Example 7). We have as yet no indication of her mood to which we can relate this music. Its distinct and answering initial statements suggest a discussion, quickening in intensity with the rise in pitch at bar 9, followed by answering phrases

⁸² Dean, *Oratorios*, 565, but see above, note 27.

⁸³ On Guadagni in the role see Dean, *Oratorios*, 561, 571.



Larghetto e piano

Example 4 Part 2 Scene 4, Irene: 'Defend her, Heav'n', bars 1–9

[Andante]

Example 5 Part 1 Scene 2, Didymus: 'The raptur'd Soul', bars 9–14

in bars 12–19 which continue the impression of debate. Commentators have attached significance to the 'voices', but not only can there be no certainty as to what they 'mean', it is not even obvious whether in bars 1–4 they are two or three, and the first-time listener will be in suspense. When Theodora herself enters, it is with music surprisingly unrelated to the introduction, forming its conclusion and shaping our retrospective response to it. The listener may deduce that the foregoing represents the strife of the world, from which Theodora thinks (mistakenly) that she is now securely withdrawing; or Theodora's own internal debate with worldly attractions, reaching a conclusion in her 'Adieu!'; or some other interpretation. Though Handel's meaning is ambiguous, his careful weighing of the effect of this densely detailed introduction is not in question: Dean points out from autograph evidence that on second thoughts he reversed the dynamics.⁸⁴ In Septimius's 'Tho' the honours' (Part 2 Scene 3) the agony of choice is enacted in obviously distinct sections (five in sixteen bars; Example 8) and in delays to the vocal

84 Dean, *Oratorios*, 564.



19 [Andante]

Violins

Bass

22

25 Adagio Andante Vns 1 and 2

Violin 1 [p]

Violin 2 [p] col Vn 1

Viola [p]

DIDYMUS

Kind Heaven, if vir-tue be thy care: with cour-age_ fire me, or art_in - spire me,

Bass [p]

Example 6 Part 1 Scene 6, Didymus: 'Kind Heav'n', bars 19–31

entry, which is expected six times (at bars 4, 6, 8, 12, 16, 18) before it happens at bar 25. This is music as moral debate, and it could be compared with the third Earl of Shaftesbury's method of soliloquy debate for arriving at moral truth⁸⁵ – an approach to appreciation of Handel's accompanied solo numbers as yet unattempted in musical criticism.

For Handel's oratorio audience, the fact that they knew the story already, or could easily follow it with the wordbook which they had in their hands, increased the attention that they could give to the musical elaboration of the story's events, to the exploration of its meaning by music and to the complication of its meaning by music. To this extent, Handel's oratorios were particularly well attuned to sensitive and thoughtful members of their audience, for they provided that emotive yet rational musical art form so explicitly demanded by guardians and proponents of the very text-based culture of the mid-eighteenth century.⁸⁶ Here, perhaps, is an explanation of the initial reception of *Theodora*, cited at the opening of this essay: connoisseurs appreciated it but 'the Town' did not. Through the openness to interpretation that seems to characterize *Theodora* perhaps Handel, like Morell, was aiming at inclusiveness, comprehensiveness and breadth of appeal but produced a work too 'labour'd' (highly wrought) for any but the cultivated, attentive, thinking listeners in his audience to relish completely. Yet the invitation, one could say the demand, to engage actively is, for many, one of the elements that makes Handel's oratorios so widely attractive; and it contributes to making *Theodora* the most disturbing of them.

85 Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Soliloquy: or, Advice to an Author', (1710), in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London: John Darby, 1711; second edition 1714).

86 See Smith, *Oratorios*, chapter 2.

COMPREHENDING THEODORA



Larghetto

Unison violins

Bass

4

9

14

19

THEODORA

Fond, flatt'ring world, a - dieu!

Example 7 Part 1 Scene 3, Theodora: 'Fond, flatt'ring World, adieu!', bars 1–23



Andante

Strings *mp*

Viola and Cello [simile]

4

Tutti Bassi

8

[*mf*]

i V'celli sminuciando come li Violini in queste passagie

11

[simile]

p

Viola and Cello

14

Tutti Bassi

f

Example 8 Part 2 Scene 3, Septimius: 'Tho' the honours', bars 1-17



APPENDIX 1

APPROACHES TO ORATORIO: ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER WHEN
ATTEMPTING TO UNDERSTAND A HANDEL ORATORIO

- 1 Librettos, all versions, including MS: plot, characterization, prosody, imagery
- 2 Libretto's immediate sources: source texts, librettist's use of them
- 3 Librettist's other writings (published and unpublished) and career (life and works)
- 4 Handel's setting (including autograph and revisions), singers written for, musical sources used
- 5 Handel's works that stand in immediate relation to it and to its musical sources
- 6 Handel's other works and, more generally, his career, biography
- 7 Other contemporary musical works: what Handel heard, what his audiences heard (competing oratorios, operas, pasticcios, masques, odes, concert and pleasure-garden music, occasional sacred and secular music, dances, marches, liturgical music, anthems, hymns)
- 8 Writings (published and unpublished) of the author's circle of friends and contacts
- 9 Literature: published plays, poems, novels of the period
- 10 Other arts: for example, visual depictions of oratorio subjects possibly known to authors and their audiences
- 11 Criticism of Handel and other art and artists; aesthetics, including prescription, which includes moral philosophy
- 12 Polemic: social (overlapping with moral philosophy), religious, political, historiographical
- 13 Journalism: political comment, essays, news
- 14 Events, both contemporary and recent history
- 15 Audience and reception of oratorio: publication, theatre conditions, audience income, social conditions, competing attractions



APPENDIX 2

THEODORA: 1750 LIBRETTO WITH CORRECTIONS FROM
HANDEL'S AUTOGRAPH

Valens, President of Antioch

Didymus, A Roman Officer, converted by, and in love with Theodora

Septimius, A Roman Officer, his Friend

Theodora, A Christian of Noble Birth

Irene, a Christian

Chorus of Christians

Chorus of Heathens

Part 1 Scene 1

VALENS

Recit – 'Tis *Dioclesian's* natal Day. –

Proclaim, throughout the Bounds of *Antioch*,

A Feast, & solemn Sacrifice to *Jove*. –

Whoso disdains to join the sacred Rites,

Shall feel our Wrath, in Chastisement, or Death.

And This, *Septimius*, take you in Charge.

Air – Go, my faithful Soldier, go.

Let the fragrant Incense rise,

To *Jove*, great Ruler of the Skies:

CHORUS

And draw a Blessing down,

On his imperial Crown,

Who rules the World below.

DIDYMUS

Recit – Vouchsafe, dread Sir, a gracious Ear

To my Request. – Let not your Sentence doom

To Racks & Flames, all, all, whose Scrup'ulous

Minds

Will not permit them, or, to bend the Knee

To Gods they know not, or, in wanton Mood,

To celebrate the Day with *Roman* Rites.

VALENS

Recit – Art Thou a *Roman*, & yet dar'st defend

A Sect, rebellious to the Gods & *Rome*?

DIDYMUS

Recit – Many there are in *Antioch*, who disdain

An Idol-Offering, yet are Friends to *Caesar*.

VALENS

Recit – It cannot be: They are not *Caesar's* Friends,

Who own not *Caesar's* Gods. I'll hear no more.

Air – Racks, Gibbets, Sword, & Fire,

Shall speak my vengeful Ire,

Against the stubborn Knee.

Nor gushing Tears,

Nor ardent Pray'rs,

Shall shake our firm Decree.

CHORUS of Heathens

For ever thus stands fix'd the Doom

Of Rebels to the Gods & *Rome*:

While sweeter than the Trumpet's Sound,

Their Groans & Cries are heard around.

Scene 2

DIDYMUS

Recit – Most cruel Edict! Sure, thy gen'rous Soul,

Septimius, abhors the dreadful Task

Of Persecution. – Ought we not to leave

The Free-born Mind of Man, still ever free;

Since Vain is the Attempt to force Belief

With the severest Instruments of Death.

Air – The raptur'd Soul defies the Sword,

Secure of Virtue's Claim:

And trusting Heav'n's unerring Word,

Enjoys the circling Flame.

No Engines can a Tyrant find

To storm the Truth-supported Mind.

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – I know thy Virtues, & ask not thy Faith:

Enjoy it as you will, my *Didymus*. –

Tho' not a Christian, (for I worship still

The Gods my Fathers worship'd) yet, I own,

Something within declares for Acts of Mercy.

But *Antioch's* President must be obey'd;

Such is the *Roman* Discipline: While we

Can only pity, whom we dare not spare.

Air – Descend, kind Pity, heav'nly Guest,

Descend & fill each human Breast

With sympathizing Woe.

That Liberty, & Peace of Mind,

May sweetly harmonize Mankind,

And bless the World below.

Scene 3

Theodora, with the Christians

THEODORA

Recit – Tho' hard, my Friends, yet Wholesom are the

Truths



Taught in Affliction's School; whence the pure Soul
Rises refin'd, & soars above the World.

Air – Fond, flatt'ring World, adieu!

Thy gaily-smiling Pow'r,
Empty Treasures,
Fleeting Pleasures,
Ne'er shall tempt, or charm me more.
Faith inviting,
Hope delighting,
Nobler Joys we now pursue.

IRENE

Recit – O bright Example of all Goodness!
How easy seems Affliction's heavy Load,
While thus instructed, & companion'd thus,
As 'twere, with Heav'n conversing, we look down
On the vain Pomp of proud Prosperity!

Air – Bane of Virtue, Nurse of Passions,
Soother of vile Inclinations,
Such is, Prosperity, thy Name.
True Happiness is only found,
Where Grace, & Truth, & Love abound,
And pure Religion feeds the Flame.

CHORUS

Come, mighty Father, mighty Lord,
With Love our Souls inspire:
While Grace, & Truth, flow from thy Word,
And feed the holy Fire.

Scene 4

MESSENGER

Recit – Fly, fly, my Brethren, heathen Rage
Pursues us swift, –
Arm'd with the Terrors of insulting Death.

IRENE

Recit – Ah! Whither should we fly? or fly from
whom?

The Lord is still the same, to day, for ever;
And his Protection *here*, & *ev'ry-where*. –
– Tho' gath'ring round our destin'd Heads
The Storm now thickens, & looks big with Fate;
Still shall thy Servants wait on thee, O Lord,
And in thy saving Mercy put their Trust.

Air – As with rosy Steps the Morn
Advancing, drives the Shades of Night;
So from virtuous Toils well-borne,
Raise Thou our Hopes of endless Light.
– Triumphant Saviour! Lord of Day!
Thou art the Life, the Light, the Way.

CHORUS

All Pow'r in Heav'n above, on Earth beneath,

Belongs to Thee alone,
Thou everlasting One,
Mighty to save, in Perils, Storm, & Death.

Scene 5

Enter Septimius

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – Mistaken wretches! why thus blind to Fate,
Do ye in private Oratories dare
Rebel against the President's Decree? & scorn
With native Rites to celebrate the Day,
Sacred to *Caesar*, & protecting *Jove*?

Air – Dread the Fruits of Christian Folly,
And this stubborn Melancholy:
Fond of Life & Liberty.
Chains, & Dungeons ye are wooing,
& the Storm of Death pursuing;
Rebels to the known Decree.

THEODORA

Recit – Deluded Mortal! Call it not Rebellion,
That thus we persevere in Spirit, & Truth,
To worship God: It is *his* dread Command,
His, whom we cannot, dare not, disobey,
Tho' Death be our Reward. –

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – Death is not yet thy Doom;
But worse than Death so such a virtuous Mind,
Which *Didymus* wants Eloquence to praise. –
Lady, these Guards are order'd to convey you,
To the vile Place, a Prostitute, to whom
Valens thinks proper to devote your charms.

THEODORA

Recit – O worse than Death indeed! Lead me, ye
Guards,

Lead me, or to the Rack, or to the Flames,
I'll thank your gracious Mercy.

Air – Angels, ever bright, & fair,
Take, O take me to your Care:
Speed to your own Courts my Flight,
Clad in Robes of Virgin White.

[Exit with *Septimius*

Scene 6

Enter Didymus

DIDYMUS

Recit – Unhappy happy Crew! – Why stand you thus
Wild with Amazement? – Say, where is my Love,
My kind Instructor in fair Virtue's path,
My Life, my *Theodora*? – has the Tyrant
Seiz'd on his guiltless Prey?



IRENE

Recit – Alas! she’s gone.

Too late thou cam’st to save, (if in thy Pow’r
To save,) the fairest, noblest, best of Women. –
A *Roman* Soldier led her trembling hence
To the vile Place, where *Venus* keeps her Court.
Yet on his Brow Reluctance seem’d to sit,
And helpless Pity bade us wait our Doom.

DIDYMUS

Air – Kind Heav’n, if Virtue be thy Care
With Courage fire me,
Or Art inspire me,
To free the captive Fair.

On the Wings of the Wind will I fly,
With this Princess to live, or this Christian to die.

IRENE

Recit – O Love! how great thy Pow’r! but greater still,
When Virtue prompts the steady Mind to prove
The native Strength in Deeds of highest Honour

CHORUS

Go, gen’rous, pious Youth,
May all the Pow’rs above
Reward thy virtuous Love,
Thy Constancy & Truth;
With *Theodora*’s Charms,
Free from these dire Alarms:
Or Crown you with the Blest,
In Glory, Peace, & Rest.

Part 2 Scene 1

VALENS

Recit – Ye Men of *Antioch*, with solemn Pomp,
Renew the grateful sacrifice to *Jove*;
And while your Songs ascend the vaulted Skies,
Pour on the smoking Altars Floods of Wine
In Honour of the smiling Deities,
Fair *Flora*, & the *Cyprian* Queen. –

CHORUS

Queen of Summer, Queen of Love,
And Thou, cloud-compelling *Jove*;
Grant a long, & happy Reign,
To great *Caesar*, King of Men.

VALENS

Air – Wide spread his Name,
And make his Glory,
Of endless Fame
The lasting Story.

Recit – Return, *Septimius*, to the stubborn Maid,
And learn her final Resolution.

If ere the Sun with prone Career has reach’d
The Western Isles, she deigns an Offering
To the great Gods, (who subjected the World
To conqu’ring *Rome*) she shall be free. – If not,
The meanest of my Guards with Lustful Joy
Shall triumph o’er her boasted Chastity.

CHORUS

Venus laughing from the Skies,
Will applaud her Votaries:–
When seizing the Treasure,
We revel in Pleasure,
& Revenge sweet Love supplies.

Scene 2

Theodora, in her Place of Confinement

[*Sinfonia*]

THEODORA

Recit – O thou bright Sun! how sweet thy Rays,
To Health, & Liberty! but here alas!
They swell the agonizing Thought of Shame,
And pierce my Soul with Sorrows yet unknown.

Air – With Darkness deep as is my Woe,
Hide me, ye Shades of Night.
Your thickest Veil around me throw,
Conceal’d from human Sight;
Or come, thou, Death, thy Victim save,
Kindly embosom’d in the Grave.

Symphony of Soft Musick

Recit – But why art Thou disquieted, my Soul? –
Hark! Heav’n invites thee in sweet rapt’rous Strains
To join the ever-singing, ever-loving Choir,
Of Saints, & Angels in the Courts above.

Air – O that I on Wings cou’d rise,
Swiftly sailing through the Skies,
As skims the silver Dove;
That I might rest,
For ever blest,
With Harmony & Love.

Scene 3

DIDYMUS

Recit – Long have I known thy friendly social Soul,
Septimius, oft experienc’d in the Camp,
And perilous Scenes of War, when Side by Side
We fought, & brav’d the Dangers of the Field,
Dependent on each other’s Arm; with Freedom then,
I will disclose my Mind. – I am a Christian.
And she, who by Heav’n’s influential Grace,
With pure religious Sentiments inspir’d
My Soul, with virtuous Love inflam’d my Heart:



Ev'n she, who, shame to all Humanity!

Is now condemn'd to public Lust. –

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – No more;

The Shame reflects too much upon thy Friend,

The mean, tho' duteous, Instrument of Pow'r;

Knowing her Virtues only, not thy Love.

Air – Tho' the honours, that *Venus*, & *Flora* receive

From the *Romans*, this Christian refuses to give:

Yet nor *Venus*, nor *Flora* delight in the Woe

That disfigures their fairest Resemblance

below.

DIDYMUS

Recit – O save her then, or give me Pow'r to save

By free Admission to th'imprison'd Maid.

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – My Guards, not less asham'd of their vile

Office,

Will second your Intent, & pleasure me.

DIDYMUS

Recit – I will reward them with a bounteous Heart,

And you, my Friend, with all that Heav'n can give

To the Sincerity of Pray'r.

Air – Deeds of Kindness to display,

Pity suing,

Mercy wooing,

Who the call can disobey?

But the opportune Redress,

Of virtuous Beauty in Distress,

All Earth will praise, & Heav'n repay.

Scene 4

Irene with the Christians

IRENE

Recit – The Clouds begin to veil the Hemisphere,

And heavily bring on the Night; the Last

Perhaps to us, Oh! that it were the Last

To *Theodora*, ere she fall a Prey

To unexampled Lust & Cruelty.

Air – Defend her, Heav'n. – Let Angels spread

Their viewless Tents around her Bed;

Keep her from vile Assaults secure,

Still ever calm, & ever pure.

Scene 5

Theodora's Place of Confinement

DIDYMUS *at a distance, the Vizor of his Helmet*

clos'd.

Recit – Or lull'd with Grief, or, rapt her Soul to

Heav'n,

In Innocence of Thought, entranc'd she lies:

Her Beauty shining still, like *Cynthia*,

Rising in clouded Majesty. – (*approaching her*)

Air – Sweet Rose, & Lily, flow'ry Form,

Take me, your faithful Guard;

To shield you from bleak Wind, & Storm:

A Smile be my Reward.

THEODORA (*starting*)

Recit – O save me, Heav'n, in this my perilous Hour!

DIDYMUS

Recit – Start not, much injur'd Princess, – I come not

As one, this Place might give you Cause to dread,

But your Deliverer; sent by just Heav'n

To save the World's unrival'd Ornament

Of Virtue, Faith, & every Christian Grace;

And that dear Ornament to *Theodora*,

Her Angel-Purity. – If you vouchsafe

But to change Habit with – your *Didymus*.

(*discovering himself*)

THEODORA

Recit – Excellent Youth!

I know thy Courage, Virtue, & thy Love;

& never can consent they should destroy

Their Author. This becomes not *Theodora*,

But the blind Enemies of Truth. – Oh, no;

It must not be. – Yet *Didymus* can give

A Boon, will make me happy, nor himself

Endanger. –

DIDYMUS

Recit – How? or What? my Soul with Transport

Listens to the Request. –

THEODORA

Air – The Pilgrim's Home, the sick Man's Health,

The Captive's Ransom, poor Man's Wealth,

From thee I wou'd receive.

These, & a thousand Treasures more,

That gentle Death has now in store,

Thy Hand & Sword can give.

DIDYMUS

Recit – Forbid it, Heav'n!

Shall I destroy the Life I came to save?

Shall I in *Theodora*'s Blood embrue

My guilty Hands; & give her Death, who taught

Me first to live? – Or say, what Right have I

To take, what just Reflection bids confess

Not at your own Disposal? – Think it too

No less a Crime, if thus inflexible

Your Safety you refuse. – Time forbids more:

Strait then resolve to gain your Liberty,



Preserve your Honour, & secure your Life.

THEODORA

Recit – Ah! What is Life, or Liberty to me,
That *Didymus* must purchase with his own?

DIDYMUS

Recit – Fear not for me. The Pow’r that led me hither
Will guard me hence; if not, his Will be done.

THEODORA

Recit – Yes, kind Deliverer, I will trust that Pow’r
To hear my Pray’r for Thee, so lately heard
For *Theodora*, who had ne’er expos’d
Her Friend, to shun a Danger, that concern’d
Only her Life – Fairwel, thou gen’rous Youth.

DIDYMUS

Recit – Farewel, thou Mirror of the Virgin State.

Duet

THEODORA

To thee, Thou glorious Son of Worth,

DIDYMUS

To thee, whose Virtues suit thy Birth,

THEODORA

Be Life & Safety giv’n;

DIDYMUS

Be every Blessing giv’n:

BOTH

I hope again to meet on Earth,

But sure shall meet in Heav’n.

Scene 6

Irene with the Christians

IRENE

Recit – ’Tis night, but Night’s kind Blessing is deny’d
To Grief like ours. – How can we think of Sleep,
While *Theodora* wakes to Misery;

And threat’ning Death hangs hovering o’er our Heads!

Be Pray’r our Refuge; Pray’r to *Him*, who rais’d,

And still can raise, the Dead to Life & Joy.

CHORUS

“He saw the lovely Youth, Death’s early Prey,

Alas! too early snatch’d away!

He heard his Mother’s Funeral Cries:

Rise, Youth, he said: The Youth begins to rise:

Lowly the Matron bow’d, & bore away the Prize.

Part 3 Scene 1

Irene with the Christians

IRENE

Air – Lord to thee, each Night, & Day,

Strong in Hope, we sing & pray:

Tho’ convulsive rocks the Ground,

And thy Thunders roll around;

Still to thee, each Night & Day,

Strong in Hope, we sing & pray.

Scene 2

Enter Theodora, in the Habit of Didymus.

IRENE

Recit – But see, the good, the virtuous *Didymus*!

Wakeful, as *Philomel*, with throbbing Heart,

He comes to join with us in pray’r

For *Theodora*. –

(*THEODORA, discovering herself*)

Recit – No; Heav’n has heard your Pray’rs for

Theodora:

Behold her safe. – Oh! that as free, & safe,

Were *Didymus*, my kind Deliverer!

But let this Habit speak the rest.

Air – When sunk in Anguish, & Despair,

To Heav’n I cried, Heav’n heard my Pray’r,

And bade a tender Father’s Care

The generous Youth employ.

The generous Youth obey’d & came,

All wrapt in love’s divinest Flame,

To save a wretched Virgin’s Fame,

And turn her Grief to Joy.

CHORUS and THEODORA

Blest be the Hand, & blest the Pow’r,

That in that dark, & dangerous Hour,

Sav’d thee from cruel Strife.

Lord, favour still the kind Intent,

And bless thy gracious Instrument,

With Liberty, & Life.

Scene 3

MESSENGER

Recit – Undaunted in the Court stands *Didymus*,

Virtuously proud of rescued Innocence;

But vain to save the generous Hero’s Life,

Are all Intreaties, ev’n from *Romans* vain. –

And high-enrag’d the President protests,

Shou’d he regain the Fugitive, no more

To try her with the Fear of Infamy,

But with the Terrors of a cruel Death. –

IRENE

Recit – Ah! *Theodora*, whence this sudden Change

From Grief’s pale Looks, to Looks of red’ning Joy?

THEODORA

Recit accompanied

– O my *Irene*, Heav’n is kind;



And *Valens* too is kind, to give me Pow'r
To execute in turn my Gratitude,
While safe my Honour.
Recit – Stay me not, dear Friend,
Only assist me, with a proper Dress,
That I may ransom the too generous Youth.

Duet

IRENE

Whither, Princess, do you fly,
Sure to suffer, sure to die?

THEODORA

No, no, *Irene*, no;
To Life, & Joy I go.

IRENE

Vain Attempt. – O stay, O stay.

THEODORA

Duty calls – I must obey. *(Exit Theodora.)*

IRENE

Recit – She's gone, disdain'd Liberty & Life,
And every Honour this frail Life can give.
Devotion bids aspire to nobler Things,
To boundless Love, & Joys ineffable.
And such her Expectation from kind Heav'n.

Air – New Scenes of Joy come crowding on,

While Sorrow fleets away;
Like Mists before the rising Sun,
That gives a glorious Day.

Scene 4

VALENS *to Didymus*

Recit – Is it a Christian Virtue then,
To rescue from the Hands of Justice, One
Condemn'd by my Authority?

DIDYMUS

Recit – Such my Religion, it condemns all Crimes,
None more than Disobedience to just Pow'r.
& had your Sentence doom'd her but to Death,
I then might have deplor'd your Cruelty,
And not attempted to defeat it. – Yet,
I own no Crime, unless it be a Crime
To've hinder'd you from perpetrating that,
Which wou'd have made you odious to Mankind;
At least the fairest Half. –

VALENS

Recit – Ay, ay, fond Man!
It was the Charms of Beauty, not of Virtue,
That prompted you to save her. – Take him Hence,
And lead him to Repentance, or – to Death.

Scene 5

Enter Theodora

THEODORA

Recit – Be That my Doom. – You may inflict it *here*
With legal Justice, *there* 'tis Cruelty.

If Blood your angry Laws require; behold,
The Principal is come to pay the Debt.

And welcome sure to *Romans* the Exchange,
A warlike Hero for an helpless Maid.

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – Dwells there such virtuous Courage in the
Sex?

Preserve them, O ye Gods, preserve them both. –

Ye *Romans*, join in the Request, if e'er

Lucretia's Memory was dear to you,

Or this your Leader's Valour, & Renown.

Air – From Virtue springs each generous Deed,

That claims our grateful Pray'r.

Let Justice for the Hero plead,

And Pity for the Fair.

VALENS

Air – Cease, ye Slaves, your fruitless Pray'r;

The Pow'rs below

No Pity know,

For the Brave, or for the Fair:

Cease, ye Slaves, your fruitless Pray'r.

DIDYMUS *to Septimius*

Recit – 'Tis kind, my Friends, but kinder still,

If for this Daughter of *Antiochus*,

In Mind as noble as her Birth, your Pray'rs

Prevail, that *Didymus* alone shall die. –

(to Theodora)

Had I as many Lives as Virtues Thou,

Freely for thee I would resign them all.

THEODORA

Recit – Oppose not, *Didymus*, my just Desire,

For know, that 'twas Dishonour I declin'd,

Not Death; most welcome now, if *Didymus*

Were safe, whose only Crime was my Escape.

CHORUS

How strange their Ends,

And yet how glorious;

Where each contends

To fall victorious!

Where Virtue its own Innocence denies,

& for the Vanquish'd the glad Victor dies!

DIDYMUS *(to Valens)*

Recit – On me your Frowns, your utmost Rage exert,

On me, your Prisoner in Chains. –



THEODORA

Recit – Those Chains

Are due to me, & Death to me alone.

VALENS

Recit – Are ye then Judges for yourselves?

Not so our Laws are to be trifled with.

If Both plead guilty, 'tis but Equity,

That Both should suffer. –

Air – Ye Ministers of Justice, lead them hence,
I cannot, will not, bear such Insolence.
And as our Gods they honour, or despise,
Fall they their Supplicants, – or Sacrifice.

[Exit.]

Scene 6

DIDYMUS

Recit – And must such Beauty suffer!

THEODORA

Recit – Such useful Valour be destroy'd!

SEPTIMIUS

Recit – Destroy'd,

Alas! by an unhappy Constancy!

DIDYMUS

Recit – Yet deem us not unhappy, gentle Friend,
Nor rash; for Life we neither hate nor scorn;
But think it a cheap Purchase for the Prize,
Reserv'd in Heav'n for Purity & Faith.

Air – Streams of Pleasure ever flowing,
Fruits ambrosial ever growing,
Golden Thrones,
Starry Crowns,
Are the Triumphs of the Blest.
When from Life's dull Labours free,
Clad with Immortality,
They enjoy a lasting Rest.

THEODORA and DIDYMUS

Duet – Thither let our Hearts aspire.
Objects pure of pure Desire,
Still encreasing,
Ever pleasing,

Wake the Song, & tune the Lyre,
Of the blissful holy Choir.

Scene 7

Irene with the Christians

IRENE

Recit – Ere This their Doom is past, & they are gone
To prove, that *Love is stronger far than Death.*

CHORUS

O Love divine, thou Source of Fame,
Of Glory, & all Joy;
Let equal Fire our Souls inflame,
& equal Zeal employ:
That we the glorious Spring may know,
Whose Streams appear'd so bright below.

Unset conclusion, printed in the libretto's preface:

Septimius to the Christians

Ye happy Christians, happy 'midst your Woes,
Behold a Convert; take me to your Fold;
Your Enemy no more, if helpless Friend.

As lovely in their Deaths, as in their Lives,
Fal'n are the matchless Pair: and falling thus,
They struck Conviction in a thousand Hearts;
But chiefly *Theodora*, whom no Threats,
Nor her disfigur'd Lover's lifeless Limbs,
Could terrify. – She saw, and with a Smile
Contemptuous on the Impotence of Rage,
Bade lead her to the Stake. – Where while she pray'd,
A sweet Effusion of celestial Joy,
Flush'd in her Cheeks, and gave her native Charms
New Lustre, ev'n such Majesty, she seem'd
Not going to Heav'n, but just come from thence;
To Lesson with this Truth the Standers-by;
That, *Whoso hopes to live, must wish to die.*
Join ye your Songs, ye Saints on Earth,
With the blest Saints above:
And hail the Triumphs of their Birth,
In Glory, Peace, and Love.