

Feminine Destruction and Masculine Protagonism: Notes on Gender, Iterability, and the Canon

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on my experiences directing Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at the Royal Opera in Stockholm in 2014, and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* at Scenkonst Sörmland, one of Sweden's regional theatres, in 2012. Both productions were part of a larger (ongoing) research project concerning gender, performance and canonical works. Exploring critical gender perspectives and norm-creativity in performance practice, I have been investigating the possibility of developing at once an acting technique and an overarching performance aesthetic grappling with questions of performativity and iterability. In this, my main concern has been structures or patterns of iterability in the performance of canonised works, as well as notions of authenticity—particularly what is deemed acceptable or believable when it comes to character portrayal, gender(ed) performance, and *mise en scène*. In these reflections, the question of subjectivity and gender as connected to dramaturgy and what I call protagonism surfaces in particular ways, casting light on some of the problems I faced and with which I grappled in my directorial work. As such, my original notes on these two research and production processes have been reframed as a reflection on dramaturgy, and on the coerciveness of gendered and aesthetic ideals.

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Indeed, every deep experience wants repetition, return, insatiably, to the end of all things.

Walter Benjamin¹

It is always necessary for a woman to die for the play to begin.

Hélène Cixous²

Prologue

As I sat down to reflect on my process of directing Henry Purcell's baroque opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) and August Strindberg's chamber play *Miss Julie* (1888), I became aware of certain points of connection between these two works, authored two centuries apart and separated by context, geography and genre, which I had not noticed while I was working on each production (in 2012 and 2014, respectively). Beyond the dramatic structure of the individual work, I began to discern a correlation pertaining to protagonist status, point of view, and ultimately the stakes of subjectivity in the relationship between plot and character development. I had planned to write a text describing my attempted incorporation of theories on iterability and (gender) performativity (primarily those of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler) into my *mise en scène*. Because notions of repetition and iterability in particular ways become central to the performance (history) of canonical works, I have chosen to approach the practice of "staging the canon" through critical discourses on repetition, iteration and citationality. This has had effects on my understanding of the notion of a canonical work, and it has also informed my way of working with the embodied performance and enactment of character and plot, including the actors' technique. However, as I considered the two works as well as their rehearsal and production processes together, a sense of recognition brought me instead to think about a different point of iteration and citation, having to do with the seeming inevitability of the death of the woman. This standard trope of nearly every classical play or

opera stages a tension between the two directions or tendencies in which repetition and citation tend to operate—either to confirm, stabilise and re-iterate, or to point to the instability and flexibility of signs and signification. The action staging and signifying the death of the woman can be carried out, that is to say performed, in many different ways, settings, and situations, and for various reasons. However, does its signification really change? It is the "thing" to which theatrical performance always returns, "insatiably", to borrow Walter Benjamin's word. Peggy Phelan has suggested that theatre and performance not only enact disappearance, but also "respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death."³ However, the rehearsal of this particular loss, the destruction of the woman as embodied symbol of femininity, seemed to me to fill a slightly different function. I could not separate it from the matter of dramaturgy, nor from the question of subjectivity as it is theorised but also enacted on stage. In what follows I try to consider these varying and various takes on performance, iterability, and gender, by reflecting on my own dramaturgical (rather than hands-on directorial) experience through a framework of critical theory.

One

As is well known, both *Dido and Aeneas* and *Miss Julie* pivot on the (self-)destruction of the female protagonist. *Dido and Aeneas* climaxes in *Dido's lament*, one of the most beloved and canonised arias in the history of opera, in which Queen Dido mournfully prepares to die at her own hand. In

Miss Julie, considered one of the most significant works of Western theatrical modernism, the ending builds seemingly relentlessly towards the suicide of Miss Julie. The last line of the drama, a stage direction, describes Julie exiting the stage resolutely, razor in hand. Both protagonists, according to their own dramaturgical logic, “have” to take their lives because, against better judgment and each in their separate context and narrative arc, they have fallen in love with, and given themselves to, a man for various reasons deemed inappropriate for a woman of their position. Additionally—and perhaps worse—they have both given themselves to a man who also betrays them, and for whom a joint existence with the female protagonist in question was never the goal.

In both cases, upon closer inspection one realises that these women are after all perhaps not the protagonists of their own stories. In fact, their stories, as presented in these canonical works, ultimately position them as object/counterpart to another subject, another protagonist, namely the men who betray them, in whose life narratives they are but an episode. These two works, which appear to be “about” the women for whom they are titled, really take as their point of identification the men for whom the conquering—and discarding—of these women is intrinsically bound up in their self-realisation. In this, they function not only as individual men, but also as symbols of a notion of ideal masculinity, as “hero” of the plot at hand. Although the age of baroque opera differs from that of literary and dramatic naturalism in many other regards, this ideal appears remarkably consistent.

Both male characters have a moment in the plot to expunge themselves; their destiny was never to become the husband of a woman they seduced out of wedlock. They are both driven by a conviction that they are destined for greater, more remote things, to obtain which they will need to travel. This is not to say that Aeneas and Jean, the characters in question, enjoy fulfilling their protagonist trajectories; on the contrary, they are tormented, anguished and at times regretful as to the seemingly inevitable turn of events in which they are participating catalysts. They do, however, fulfill this trajectory despite their apparent empathy with their female counterpart/adversary. And, significantly, their empathy, which they are given time and space in the plot to develop before encouraging or allowing the female character to come to the realisation that it will be impossible for her to go on living (abandoned, unhappily in love, having forsaken her social position and her values etc.) strengthens the audience’s sympathy with the men—not the women—as point of identification, or identificatory ideal. Suddenly (or maybe not so suddenly), the death of the female protagonist seems not only acceptable but even desirable, necessary for the narrative and the dramaturgy to “work”.

Certain smaller yet significant details pertaining to the dramaturgies of *Dido and Aeneas* and *Miss Julie* also seem to support this insight: in both works, the female protagonist makes her entry and utters her first line only after being introduced to the audience via another character. Additionally, the final lines of both works are spoken or sung by characters other than the presumed protagonist. She is neither the first nor

1. Walter Benjamin quoted in Rainer Nägele. *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. p. 61.

2. Cixous, Hélène. *Aller à la mer*. Trans. Barbara Kerslake. *Modern Drama* 24. no. 4. 1984. p. 546.

3. Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1997. p. 3.

4. Derrida, Jacques. *Limited, Inc.* Gerald Graff (ed). Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. 1988. p.9.

5. Derrida, p. 12.

6. Derrida, p. 9.

7. Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004. p. 37.

8. Enquist, Per Olov. *Strindberg. Ett liv; Tribadernas natt; Målet mot Fröken Julie*. Stockholm: Norstedts. 2012. p. 395.

9. Enquist, p. 419.

10. Price, Curtis. Dido and Aeneas in Context. In *Purcell: Dido and Aeneas: An Opera*. Curtis Price (ed). London: W.W. Norton & Company. 1986. pp. 3-8.

11. Harris, Ellen T. *Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1987. p. 148.

the last thing we see. Or rather—as directorial choices rather than textual/dramaturgical structures determine what audiences actually see on stage—in the drama, for the audience, she is neither the first nor the last point of attention. Technically, dramaturgically, it isn't obvious that she should be considered the protagonist. Her “own” drama works against her.

This more or less covert transferral of protagonist status, what I am tempted to call masculine protagonism—in which a female character, despite being indicated as the drama's point of identification (for example through the work's title), is positioned as antagonist/counterpart to (or something that “happens to”) a male character—I want to argue constitutes one form of iterative pattern among the classical tragedies of the stage.

Two

In its most basic definition, iterability indicates the capacity to be repeated in different contexts. Derrida's neologism, intended to problematise claims to authenticity and singularity in signification, points to the many potentialities and the multiple contextualities in which a given sign (or an utterance) may take on meaning, signify, have bearing. That a sign be repeatable and its signification transformed in the process of repetition and recontextualisation, Derrida argues, is no abnormality or exception to the way that language works (moreover, he suggests that these “traits” are generalisable to all systems of signification, even to notions of experience, being and presence).⁴ On the contrary, the iterabil-

ity of the sign (and with it the variation on the possibilities of meaning) is constitutive of the sign's ability to signify—what shapes the notion of normality. For, Derrida asks rhetorically, “What would a mark be that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way?”⁵

When dealing with the Western theatrical and operatic canon as performance tradition, I have found the process of repetition, citation, iteration to pull in a near-opposite direction; through repetitive enactment and affirmation, signification risks becoming overdetermined, nearly petrified. Certain tropes occur repeatedly in the composition and dramaturgy of the work; additionally, approaching a canonical work as a director means facing tradition, expectation, anticipation, even desire. The “timeless” quality of canonical works is often invoked as justification for including them in the repertoire—that is to say the notion that there is an original meaning to a work, which can speak to its audience across time, location and setting, and to which creative practitioners are expected in various ways to be faithful. The faithful audiences of these works—or so widely held assumptions suggest—come to the theatre to have their expectations and desires fulfilled, not challenged. Iteration thus risks becoming reification. At the same time, the challenge—and the fascination—for creative practitioners often resides precisely in the potential new meanings that canonised works, scenes, phrases can acquire/inspire when they are uttered and performed in changing contexts—that is to say, when the known and anticipated encounters a new framework,

or a new way of looking. In opera it sometimes seems as though both these tendencies are working at once: the directorial concept should challenge and recontextualise the thematics and/or spatial/scenic dimensions of a work, while the vocal and musical performances should reproduce, in as much detail as possible, a centuries-old ideal. As a director and researcher I have found inspiration in the challenge to stage encounters between these two patterns.

If the traits that Derrida discerns in writing can be generalised to include all experience, then obviously they can also be said to characterise the canon. Its “essential iterability” may as well be described by way of the anti-essentialist construct “repetition/alterity.”⁶ This “flexible essentialism” (a term I borrow from Shannon Jackson, who uses it to describe how theatricality and performance can often be found on both sides of an essentialist/anti-essentialist divide⁷) allows one to assume a sense of permanence, stability, unity, self-identity required to make recognition and repetition possible. Meanwhile, closer consideration will inevitably reveal patterns of alterity.

Above all, one quickly comes to the realisation that although a work like, say, *Miss Julie*, which is the most frequently and internationally staged play in Strindberg’s body of work, carries with it a series of expectations and demands related to its canonical status, it is hard to come up with an “original” performance or interpretation that would have given rise to these specific notions of authenticity. Certainly not its inaugural production, scandalous yet seen by few and largely undocumented. Further, as Per Olov Enquist shows, Strindberg’s authorial intentions with *Miss Julie* may seem obvious but upon closer inspection are difficult to discern. The famous *Preface*, composed after completion of the script, appears to rationalise Strindberg’s choices pertaining to dramatic form as well as plot, character composition, and style. However, the text of the play follows no such logic, Enquist writes, but can be interpreted “in any which way.”⁸ Addi-

tionally, the seduction of the young Julie, which is supposedly what necessitates her suicide, is barely hinted at in the Danish translation that preceded the Swedish publication of the play in 1888.⁹ Even in the Swedish edition, the central acts—sexual encounter and suicide—are merely intimated, never actually confirmed. Similarly, the origins of Purcell’s canonical opera are uncertain. No complete score exists, and moreover, baroque scores were notated so as to be open to a certain amount of interpretation and embellishment by singers and musicians. The libretto is adapted from Book IV of Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, and thus itself part of an iterative structure dating back to the Punic Wars. The context of the inaugural performance, given in the non-professional context of a school and performed “By Young Gentlemen”, is indicated on the cover of a libretto presumably distributed to the audience at the premiere and preserved today in a single copy, but information is incomplete, and the opera appears not to have garnered much critical attention or appreciation at the time.¹⁰ Productions of the opera were scarce until the late nineteenth century, when its modern performance history can be said to begin.¹¹

The process of excavation related to my own and others’ attempts to grasp the canonical framework of these two works is the subject of a separate essay. However, it seems safe to say that what definitive meanings these works appear to harbour arise out of the very process of repetition, citation, re-enactment to which they have been subjected in the course of their canonisation. Despite the claim to a standard or rule (the most basic definition of the term “canon”), even superficial scrutiny reveals alterity, absence, fragmentation and contradiction in place of any essential notions of authenticity, origin, or even singularity of meaning or interpretation. Tellingly, despite this knowledge as a director I worried constantly that I was either betraying the work or failing to live up to its standards.

12. Derrida, pp. 14–19.

13. Derrida, p. 18.

14. Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4. 1988. pp 519–531.

15. Butler. p. 519.

16. Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1993. pp. 12–15, 15.

Three

Derrida's notion of iterability, introduced as part of a critique against the seemingly essentialist usage of context and intentionality in J.L. Austin's theory on performative utterances, is in some ways from the outset bound up in theatricality. Taking issue with Austin's separation of the authentic, ordinary, normal uses of language from the inauthentic and "parasitic" forms associated with poetry and theatrical performance, Derrida instead suggests that so-called ordinary uses of language presuppose a form of citationality of the kind that Austin excludes from consideration.¹² The success of a performative utterance, Derrida writes, depends on its conformity with an "iterative model", which, while it doesn't by necessity include theatrical performance, doesn't exclude it either. Likewise this iterative model takes into account the intention(s) of the uttering subject as well as the context of utterance, but simultaneously allows for the possibility that intentionality (and with it a sense of authenticity) "will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance."¹³

While it is no impassioned defence of theatricality or the actor's speech act, Derrida's argument does however posit that words spoken from a stage or in a heightened/poetic context, rather than be considered false, inauthentic, or parasitic, should be seen to have the transformative potential that Austin accords to performative utterances. However, one thing Derrida does not account for—but which follows, inevitably, from his larger argument—is that the potential performativity of theatrical performance hardly

limits itself to the verbal expression of the characters, or even the actors. The event of a theatrical performance and the work undertaken by actors as part of such performances consist of verbal as well as non-verbal utterances on several levels, including gesture, gaze and physical/spatial relationality. Some of these may not be wholly intentional.

The bodily aspect is taken up by Judith Butler in her early essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", in which she argues for a performative understanding of gendered subjectivity and for an iterative model of bodily utterances, subject to interpretation and transformation.¹⁴ Following Derrida (although in this context it is to John Searle and not Derrida that she refers) she demonstrates how bodily utterances—"a stylized repetition of acts"¹⁵ that in different ways signify or express gender (including those deemed natural or authentic)—constitute citations within a larger iterative structure. Butler's early work on performativity likewise entails a critique of intentionality, which is sharpened in later writing; in response to misconceptions of her argument in *Gender Trouble*, in *Bodies That Matter* she clarifies that the acts to which she refers are not singular, performed by a pre-existing/choosing subject, and they are not primarily theatrical, but rather identificatory processes which "enable the formation of a subject".¹⁶

Working with canonised texts and characters, I have attempted to explore a category of bodily utterances that I would perhaps call "social" so as to differentiate them from the volitional and singular acts conventionally associated with

theatricality and theatrical performance (“acting”). These include (the actors’) bodily habits that express and confirm conventions of gender, but also the kinds of coded gestures and patterns of behaviour that convey relational systems of power. Examples might include the choice or reflex to direct one’s gaze toward or away from the other character while they speak, the quality of listening as expressed through stance and direction of attention, the space and focus that an actor takes up through bodily pose, and, for example, the distance between the actor’s feet and knees while standing or sitting—things which, while they might not be explicit or fully intentional statements, still aid the audience in their interpretive process. In my mind it would be erroneous to assume that only those verbal, gestural and bodily utterances that the actor produces intentionally and by volition would constitute meaning-making or signification for an audience or spectator regarding gender, sexuality or other aspects of identification and experience.

Rather, a critical performance practice problematises the enactment of gender onstage; if verbal language and utterance can be said to have a generative or transformative effect, likewise theatrical performance inevitably goes beyond a mere reflexive function to suggest possibilities for signification. As such, the performative function of theatrical performance lies not in the fact that it performs, but in its iterative and embodied enactment of utterances, which, in context and relation to a widely construed audience/public, participates (by generating, confirming, challenging) in the normative processes and systems we experience as social life. Very rarely would the performative utterance in a theatrical performance be located within the fictitious world of the play, or in a character’s lines or even a soliloquy (although, following Derrida, I’ll allow that it *could* happen); rather it is within the complex interaction of performer and spectator, where a performance is somehow perceived *by the spectator* as believable and in some sense generative, perhaps “authentic”, that it has the possibility of being deemed “successful”.

In this sense, every (hetero-)normative and cis-conforming performance of gender, as undertaken by an actor in character, is explicitly and felicitously performative by Austinian standards. This is because the stakes of signification, or of the perception of authenticity and believability, lie in the actor’s performance not of “character” but in the performance of gender. The character operates within the realm of the theatrical “as if”, or what is commonly termed the audience’s suspension of disbelief; its gender, in this setting, instead operates in terms of authenticity, believability, and on the basis of self-identity. This is something that is so taken for granted that most audiences hardly reflect on the many assumptions that are made about the (fictional) character based on (“real”) gender conformity. Were contemporary productions of *Dido and Julie* cross-cast (i.e. with non-confirmity regarding the gender of the character and the performer, which most likely was the case with *Dido and Aeneas*’s inaugural performance), that choice would affect nearly all levels of interpretation and would itself be considered a re-framing of the work, hardly included in the suspension of disbelief (the way that, for example, the obviously inauthentic suicide acts of both Julie and Dido are).

This view of gendered subjectivity and performance has critical bearing for character enactment if we position canonical characters in relation to iterability and patterns of repetition and signification. Miss Julie and Queen Dido are subject to the same flexible essentialism as the larger concept of the canon; they are the object of much desire and projection, from within the drama, in the audience encounter, and in their canonical legacy—identification less so. Their suicidal acts are so bound up in the realisation of the drama and anticipation of cathartic release that considerable amounts of energy and desire are invested into this moment as an expression of their character—would they really “be” Dido or Julie if they did not self-destruct? The death of the woman tends to be positioned or justified as an outcome or effect of the plot; however, as Cixous suggests, perhaps it is rather to be considered a

17. Rokem, Freddie. *Strindberg's Secret Codes*. Norwich: Norvik Press. 2004. p. 24.

18. Freud, Sigmund. Mourning and Melancholia. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV*. Trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud. London: The Hogarth Press. 1957. pp. 243-258.

19. Weinbaum, Alys Eve. Ways of Not Seeing: (En)gendered Optics in Benjamin, Beaudelaire, and Freud. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. David Eng and David Kazanjian (eds.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. p. 399.

20. Virgilius. *Aeneiden*. Trans. Ingvar Björkeson. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur. 1988/2012. p. 82.

prerequisite for the performance, for theatre itself, to work.

During the rehearsal process with actors it is my objective to complicate and problematise the iterative patterns of character (re-)enactment. This pertains in particular to gendered relations as expressions of power and subjectivity, and it operates on the level of dramaturgy as well as in corporeal (re-)presentation. If Julie, as Strindberg explicitly states, was raised as a boy, why would her body language betray no resistance to or difficulty with conventions of femininity? Similarly, if Dido is a skilled political ruler and strategic thinker, why is her character so often presented as altogether driven by emotion? Furthermore, why would the perceived value and self-esteem of two principal characters, who each in their own way have been raised to assume leadership and who on several occasions have shown exceptional independence given their social circumstances (rejecting previous suitors, among other things), rely so heavily on the commitment and approval of these men? I pose these questions not to reject any such interpretation of character, but to point to the tacit agreements that seem to render Dido and Julie comprehensible and recognisable as characters. It has been pointed out that Julie is a character created by and under a male gaze.¹⁷ Is it possible, within the repetitive process of theatrical performance, to enact a form of resistance to that gaze, or at least make the gaze visible, palpable, to the audience? Can the drama enact its plot and character trajectory while simultaneously questioning its own premises? It would entail inviting the audience to develop a double perspective

on the space and event of the dramatic action, by creating multiple simultaneous points of view. Interestingly, this is what Strindberg strives to do with his aesthetic in *Miss Julie* (at least if we are to believe his *Preface*); however, as a spectator I have rarely, if ever, felt encouraged to view performances of the play that way.

Moreover, this approach to character and dramaturgy also means interrogating (hetero-) normative gender ideals (for the drama, for the ensemble, for the audience). For despite numerous examples of characters acting and desiring otherwise, and of playwrights and librettists suggesting otherwise, works in the canon tend to be construed around the flexibly essentialist drama of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. This drama stages the fictional coherence of genders as well as normative desires and ideals. And in this drama, masculine identificatory ideals often turn out to be more cherished and consequently more fragile than their feminine counterpart. As a possible effect of this fragility, which needs to be counteracted and compensated for, both Jean and Aeneas are often projected as essentially stable and self-identificatory characters—as experiencing conflict and inner turmoil due to events in the plot, certainly, but rarely as constitutively fraught or contradictory figures.

Perhaps this is in part because they are destined by their creators to survive and prosper. An analogy to the dramaturgy of grief as developed in Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" comes to mind:¹⁸ for the male character/protagonist it is necessary that the object of loss lie outside of himself. He may grieve his loss but that loss must, precisely, be and

function as an object; his mourning (construed as a process of gradual detachment) must be successful if he is to “move on” the way it is written into his character that he will. For this to work, a complete identification becomes necessary between the female character and loss. She must be the lost object; she always (already) is. Julie and Dido will both fulfil their character arc through suicide, and they must find themselves on this teleological path from the outset of the onstage action. A penchant towards instability and destruction is therefore in some way inscribed into the character. This constitutive flaw leaves the character—and the actor—with less to uphold and defend, and paradoxically that entails less danger, less fragility. (Also, we don’t mind viewing women as victims or sites of loss. It doesn’t hurt or arouse empathy the way a loss of masculine status, or masculine destruction, would. Because we don’t put ourselves in her place. On the contrary, I argue, her loss, meaning the loss *of* her, enables our cathartic release.)

If Jean and Aeneas were represented as less stable, more dependent on the approval of the women, more capricious, less self-composed, more willing to please, would they still be recognisable as Jean, as Aeneas, within the larger dramaturgy that necessitates a certain form of character development? How would this affect their position of subjectivity? In order to explore this question, together with the actors playing Aeneas and Jean in their respective processes, I sought ways for them to fail to live up to the notion of ideal masculinity guiding the character. In both productions I used as a point of reference the following thought by Alys Eve Weinbaum: “the objectification of woman in the male field of vision has often served as the ground for securing coherent masculinity. (...) I modify this formulation and suggest that masculinity is a construct best characterised not so much by control, mastery or prowess, as by the momentary loss of all three.”¹⁹ Enacting masculinity as (momentary) loss of control and mastery means moving into largely uncharted territory where conventions of theatrical and operatic

performance are concerned; the ambition was to emulate convention while simultaneously undermining the sense of coherence upon which it relies.

Aeneas, in our reading (which is supported by passages from *The Aeneid*), becomes uncomfortable with the heroism projected onto him on account of his participation in and survival of the Trojan War. Like the young soldiers that Freud encountered and observed during and after World War I, he is haunted through dreams and visions by the traumatic memories of his experiences. In his approach to Dido he is cautious, hesitant, and when he leaves Carthage it is not only in pursuit of the (Roman) empire he is destined to found, but also in flight from the impending invasion of Carthage by their neighbour, Iarbas. Aeneas cannot force himself to face another war. At the same time, he cannot reconcile with the emasculated image projected onto him by rumours in Carthage and beyond; as mere husband of Queen Dido (a “woman’s slave” in Ingvar Björkeson’s Swedish translation²⁰) he has relinquished his role as leader and manly ideal. His inner conflict, caused by his desire and inability to emulate an ideal, which he simultaneously finds coercive and even oppressive, thus becomes a strongly motivating factor for his betrayal of Dido.

Four

In many senses, psychologically and materially, it is illogical for Dido and Julie as characters to view suicide as the only option. In both rehearsal processes, we struggled to motivate this determination to die. In both cases, I felt resistance toward acquiescing to what I perceived as coercive dramaturgies, and I wondered to what degree I could stage this resistance as part of the *mise en scène*. A strong motivation was to allow the female characters to re-emerge as protagonists of sorts, or, if not that, then at least as subjects—while simultaneously recognising and admitting their objectification within the work and its dramaturgy.

21. Butler. *Bodies That Matter*. p. 15.

22. Strindberg, August. *Miss Julie*. In *Selected Plays, Volume I*. Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams and Anna Westerståhl (eds.). Trans. Evert Sprinchorn. Stenport MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2012. p. 220.

23. Strindberg, p. 275.

Part of my interest in exploring theories of performativity and iterability as a basis for performance practice lies in the question of what is at stake in the emergence of the subject in a social as well as theatrical context. Re-interpretations of canonical works and potentially heteronormative-misogynist scenarios easily construct subject-object relationships in which subjectivity appears desirably coherent, stable and self-same, invested with agency and self-determination, and diametrically opposed to positions of objectivity. (In other words, what theories of deconstruction and performativity critique.) It may be tempting in these scenarios to reverse the situation and the subject-object relationship; however, such inversals do not alter the binary status quo, and above all they do not interrogate the category of the subject.

As Butler shows, becoming subject (“subjectivation”) entails being subjected, a process of identification with regulatory norms and ideals; “these identifications”, she writes, “precede and enable the formation of a subject, but are not, strictly speaking, performed by a subject.” And while the subject may “have” agency, it is “as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power and not a relation of external opposition to power.”²¹ Relating this notion to dramatic character (allowing myself to invoke the fictional world as a site for performative enactment without problematising this move), it is obvious that neither Aeneas nor Dido, neither Jean nor Julie, could appear as subjects in an autonomous sense, but that they need to be portrayed as subject to the regulatory norms and ideals that govern their emergence as characters. As such, the dramaturgies in question

are equally coercive when it comes to the male characters; however, their position is privileged in terms of the dramatic universe *and* vis-à-vis the audience.

One strategy I used to “re-privilege” the position and point of view of the women was to refunction and reshape the dramaturgical arc of each work, through a method of framing. Creating a circular dramaturgy in lieu of the linear, teleological narrative arc (and in the case of *Dido*, even a circular performance space enveloped by 360-degree video projections) I hoped to indicate the repetitive act of staging the canon (indeed, the repetitive act of theatrical performance) and as well the reiterations of becoming subjected and situated *as* Dido, *as* Julie. I created for each production a version of a preface/overture set in the present here and now of the onstage/audience encounter. The opera, of course, has an overture, which became the site and occasion for a return to the past, from the vantage point of the present. For *Miss Julie*, we created a musical and filmic overture, introducing the events to come.

Thus, when my version of *Dido and Aeneas* starts, Dido is already dead. Aeneas and Belinda (Dido’s aide and confidante) are on stage to greet the audience, and in the course of the musical overture proceed to reconstruct, literally and physically, the setting for the events that constitute the tragedy of Dido and Aeneas. In a slight change of order, the first musical number as listed in Purcell’s score, in which Belinda energetically encourages Dido to “Shake the cloud from off your brow” is replaced by the second, Dido’s more melancholy response, “Ah! Belinda, I am pressed with torment”; in this way

the opening scene is dedicated to Dido's perspective, which also has the effect of bringing Belinda from the present world of the overture into the past, to relive the memory of Dido.

The overture to *Miss Julie* is a film, accompanied by live music. When it ends, the screen, which doubles as stage curtain, is lifted to reveal Julie standing alone on stage with an excerpt of Strindberg's *Preface* projected onto her body and the surrounding on-stage space. Holding her razor, she gazes at the audience and proceeds to read the excerpt out loud, using Strindberg's voice to describe her character and postulate the scientifically proven inferiority of women to men. Only after this opening does Jean burst on to the scene with his famous opening line, "What a night! Miss Julie is wild again! She is absolutely wild!"²² As Jean and Kristin (the third character, who unfortunately barely gets a mention in this essay) act out the first scene of the play, in which they describe Julie as capricious, unsuitably sexually adventurous, beautiful yet unhappy, Julie remains onstage, semi-hidden in a corner, observing her servants as they shape the audience's image of her, and gazing intermittently at the audience. On her cue to start speaking, she simply enters the scene. In this manner, the audience is encouraged to develop a double perspective on the events at hand, as the gaze relates to the onstage action in a manner that is at once direct (with the audience positioned "inside" the drama) and externalised (approaching the premises of the play and watching the unfolding scene from Julie's perspective).

Similarly, for the ending, in a modification of the closing scene that Strindberg imagines, Jean delivers his closing line—"It's horrible! But there's no other way for it to end!"²³—to the audience rather than to Julie, thus providing meta-commentary not only on the plot but also on the iteration of this ending throughout the past century. The direction of his delivery also underscores Jean's own perceived helplessness before the events of the play. However, instead of Julie walking offstage to complete her

action, Jean exits clutching Julie's father's boots (which he has spent the play polishing), although it remains untold whether this is to return to the Count's service or don the boots and depart, leaving the oppressive social milieu of the mansion behind. Julie remains onstage, alone in the spot where she stood at the play's opening, razor in hand and gazing once again at the audience, as if to ask: is there really no other way for it to end?

This open-ended closing scene seemed possible (and plausible) in *Miss Julie* precisely because Strindberg situates the suicidal act offstage and technically *after* the end of the play, thus casting doubt about whether it really does happen—or whether in fact it *needs* to happen for the play to conclude. With Dido, death cannot be avoided as the opera cannot dispense with *Dido's lament* (in which Dido relieves those around her of responsibility for her fate), and this aria concludes with her dying. The closing scene in *Dido and Aeneas* consists of a chorus in turn lamenting the death of the queen.

In order to problematise Dido's ultimately beautiful, gentle and cathartic disappearance, we inserted a short passage spoken by Aeneas into the final chorus. This passage paraphrases an excerpt from Book VI of *The Aeneid*, which recounts how Aeneas, having descended into the lower world of Dis to search for his father, encounters the spectre of Dido. He begs her forgiveness, but she turns away and refuses to speak to him. In our staging, upon completion of Aeneas's words, in the final musical sequence, Dido rises from the bed in which she has lain dead, and walks very slowly across the stage, away from Aeneas (and Belinda) and into the offstage shadows. Aeneas and Belinda are left in the onstage positions they had at the opening, with Dido gone as she was when the performance began. The intimation is that Aeneas and Belinda could attempt a repeated excavation of the tragedy of Dido, but that it seemingly inevitably would end the same way. Thus, although Aeneas utters the closing phrases of the drama, followed by one last chorus

24. Halliwell, Stephen. *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. 1987. pp. 45-48.

sung by Belinda, the final (open-ended) action is yet performed by Dido. She refuses, albeit silently, cathartic release either to her audience or to him.

Five

Is there really no other way for it to end? Or, to speak with Cixous, is there no other way for it to begin? I can offer no definitive answers or redemptive solutions. I offer only this, my measure of resistance. Julie won't go. Dido won't forgive. And neither end will be over her dead body.

Epilogue

I traced the pattern of male protagonism to the classical tragedies upon which Western drama is founded, as I considered the relationship and exchange between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 BCE), Medea and Jason in Euripides' *Medea* (431 BCE), and also Phaedra and Theseus in Seneca's *Phaedra* (54 CE). The position of the men fits the Aristotelean ideal of a high-ranking character whose downfall is caused by an error in judgement (in turn caused by hubris); this cannot be equally said for the women. Granted, they too make errors in judgement, and they are also of high social status. However, Aristotle's recommendation regarding character is that the audience be able to identify with the protagonist's position and trajectory; the "terror and pity" that the drama should elicit in the audience relies on a combination of admiration and identification, brought about by the fact that the character is good yet relatable, and also constituted

mainly through the necessary and the probable.²⁴

The character flaw exhibited by the men has to do precisely with an error in judgement that is relatable and probable—underestimating a rebellious young girl, marrying a foreign woman (a reading which positions *Medea* as a xenophobic play), trusting a deceitful wife. They do not knowingly break the law, commit infanticide, or harbour—and act upon—incestuous desires (as do the women). Secondly, it is with the men that the audience remains at the end of the drama, these men who endure great loss and towards whom we feel empathy while we simultaneously experience a desire to distance ourselves ever so slightly, at least from their fates. Thinking, as Aristotle would have it: lesson learnt, I'm glad it's not me.

The women of the plays' titles instead vanish from the scene. Antigone and Phaedra, like Julie and Dido, commit suicide. Medea, as an exception, exits on a chariot drawn by dragons. However, this is rendered possible and logically probable through a case of the *Deus ex machina*, of which Aristotle disapproves. There is nothing to learn from these women. And while neither *Miss Julie* nor *Dido and Aeneas* aspire to Aristotelean dramaturgy (although Strindberg's construction of plot, character and thought indicates a preoccupation with, and desire to challenge, such dramatic principles), this reflection, as well as this dramaturgical construct, remain for me a frame of reference for interpreting the lack of subjectivity and protagonism granted the female characters.