Imaging Mandane: character, costume, monument

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It is a fact that Thomas Arne's opera *Artaxerxes* was the most popular English Opera on the 18th-century London stage.[i] The reasons it does not hold a place in the repertory today are multifarious and include both Charles Burney's snobbery[ii] and England's Handelmania, but it would be idle to deny that the biggest stumbling block to modern-day performance is the unfashionability of Metastasio's particular type of *opera seria* plot. These plots (which however altered and re-interpreted) remain complex vehicles for personal and political morality, and have little interest for today's opera goers who thrive on emotional indulgence rather than intellectual engagement.[iii]

The Mandane of my title is one of the central characters both in Metastasio's original text, and in Arne's later opera, [iv] and was one played by numerous singers. [v] By family association, Mandane is the sister of the Artaxerxes of the title, and daughter of Xerxes, King of Persia. By inclination, she is the lover of Arbaces, the son of Artabanes, commander of Artaxerxes' army. In the course of the opera, that inclination causes her anguish when Arbaces is banished, precipitates a crisis of conscience when she believes him guilty of the murder of Xerxes, and joy when he single-handedly puts down a rebellion by Rimenes, a general in Artaxerxes' army.

Despite providing the opera's romantic interest, however, her reunion with Arbaces is peripheral to the resolution of the action. This turns, rather, on Artabanes' admission of responsibility for the assassination of King Xerxes; this is forced on him by a belated realisation of his love for his son. The opera's moral centre lies in the magnanimity of Artaxerxes, who banishes rather than executes the now repentant Arbaces.

Such magnanimity was not of great interest to an English audience either in relation to this opera or, indeed, to the many others with a similar moral message; they seem to have preferred Mandane's anguish, struggle, and joy. And while not suggesting that Arne had this appeal in mind as part of his compositional strategy, it seems that the role inspired him to choose the plot, for he wrote the opera to launch the career of Charlotte Brent, publicly one of his pupils and rumoured to be privately rather more.[vi] No illustration of her in the role survives,[vii] but the following anecdote of the rehearsal period has come down to us.

> When Dr Arne first brought the Opera of Artaxeres to a rehearsal, Tenducci sung the Air "Water parted from the Sea" with such effect that Miss Brent (afterwards Mrs. Pinto) for whom the part of Mandane was composed, flew to Dr Arne with some violence, and told him "he might get whom he pleas'd to take Mandane; because he had given the best air in the piece to Tenducci." In vain the poor Doctor strove to sooth her - she was ungovernable. He retired from the theatre - sat down, and having written the first words of "Let not rage thy bosom firing" composed an air to them in the same character as "Water parted," though it is inferior in other respects: This he presented to Miss Brent, who being struck with

> the application of the first line to her own violence of temper, told the Doctor "that she was appeased, and would sing to the utmost of her ability to serve him."[viii]

Brent's fit of operatic sulks provides a glimpse into the rehearsal patterns of the 18th-century London opera house and theatres; the composer was often the musical director, and works were adapted as required by particular casts.[ix] It is a warning to modern scholars that readings that rely on the internal logic of the surviving operatic artefact may be completely erroneous as far as 'composer intentions' are concerned.[x] In the case of Mandane, though, the alterations were undertaken by the composer and do not significantly change her role in the opera.

The role, written expressly to show off a singer's capabilities, was so successful in doing just that, that it was almost solely responsible for the opera's extraordinary longevity. It was prized by the singers who sang the part, and it is an indication of its status that there are at least recorded images of singers performing it; this is many more than any other role in a serious opera in 18th-century London, and more than most comic roles as well. Three of those images in particular played a part (for better or for worse) in the creation of the depicted singer's image: they were those of Elizabeth Billington, Gertrud Mara, and Elizabeth Paton.

Elizabeth Billington as Mandane

Elizabeth Billington first sang Mandane in 1787;[xi] it was her most successful serious role, and she used it as a vehicle for her triumphant return from the Continent in 1801. In

1787, the opera was the preserve of Covent Garden, and as can been seen from the table, the rival Drury Lane theatre did not mount a serious number of performances of the work until 1788 when it cast Gertrud Mara in the part. I want, however, to focus here on Billington's 1801 performances, and her choice of the role to mark her return to London.

Billington, already lauded as one of the best and most musical English singers of her generation, was even better on her return from her Continental sojourn than when she had departed. The critics were enamoured of her singing, it being thought that she had 'greatly advantaged herself of her residence in Italy; her talents have been cultivated to the utmost, and she fortunately possesses so musical a soul, that she lets not the smallest of her gifts of nature remain useless in her performance'.[xii]

Being an astute operator, Billington signed agreements with both her old impresario, Thomas Harris, at Covent Garden, and with Richard Brinsley Sheridan over at Drury Lane. By 20 July 1801, Sheridan was pleading with the Reverend William Dudley to 'use your friendly offices to remove misunderstandings on either side and preserve between Harris and me that confidence and mutual good-will in which we have so long lived.'[xiii] There is no record of the negotiations that took place, but they were entirely favourable to Billington; she sang at both theatres, with her first performance at Covent Garden on 3 October 1801 and her first at Drury Lane on 8 October.[xiv]

It was unique that the resolution of such a situation involved the *prima donna* being employed by two rival houses in the same city staging the same opera at the same time,

and its unusual nature fed the image of the 'singer as diva'; her temperament, her salary, and her figure all became part of the critical discourse. And in Billington's case, the critics who admired her voice, were equally obsessed with her *embonpoint* that must have been very much in evidence.[xv] It must also have caught the eye of the brilliant James Gillray, for in December that year, he published the first of his images of Billington. While there is no doubt that it is a caricature and one which probably reflected the reality of Billington's figure, the image is, uncharacteristically, rather gentle. [xvi]

However, the significance of the dress in this formative caricature cannot be overestimated. The source of the fashion was revolutionary France, where 'women had adopted short-sleeved while muslin gowns, sandals, and cropped curls' in 'imitation of a classical past'.[xvii] And while English women did not adopt the French semi-naked version of this mode of dress, its origins only emphasised the connection between the style's perceived sexual license and political upheaval of the French revolution. There can be no question, then, of the link between immorality and Billington that Gillray established via costume. And while the image may have been gentle in Gillray's original, he coarsened it as he (and others) reused it, most notably Williams, who by January of the following year, had adapted it and used it in his 'Theatrical doctors, recovering Clara's notes'.

The subsequent widespread use of the image encouraged comment on her supposed affair with the Prince of Wales, the Prince Regent.[xviii] There were also both veiled and outright references to the scandal of *Mrs Billington's Memoirs* of 1792, in which it was claimed that she had not only had affairs with a string of men, but had committed incest with both

her father and brother, and had married a non-performing homosexual whose 'flute' could not be made to work.[xix]

Gertrud Mara as Mandane

As already mentioned, *Artaxerxes* was the preserve of Covent Garden until 1788, when, finally, Drury Lane was able to employ a soprano capable of singing the role. That soprano, Gertrud Mara, was only on the market because she had *not* been re-engaged at the King's Theatre for the 1787-88 season. She had fallen out with the impresario Giovanni Gallini, who although known to be difficult, seems to have been tried by Mara's 'headstrong' personality. This personality involved her in a number of other controversies as lively as they were unnecessary. These included a complaint that she had been laughing during a rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah* for the Handel Commemoration in Westminster Abbey, and a refusal to stand during an oratorio after she had sung her arias; this last resulted in her being publicly expelled from the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford.

At any rate, Gallini's loss was Covent Garden manager Harris's gain, and Mara first performed the role of Mandane on 7 April 1788 at Michael Kelly's benefit, initially advertised for that night only. This, however, seems to have a been a face-saving move in case things went awry; she was clearly a great success in the part and appears to have continued sing it for Drury Lane that season. She also chose it for her own benefit on 28 May. She took up the role again on 17 November 1791, rather misleadingly advertised as Mara's 'first appearance at the theatre'; the only reason the Drury Lane company were performing at the King's Theatre was because their own was being rebuilt.

There are a number of reports of her in the role, but Sainsbury's general assessment of her singing conveys the intrinsic qualities of her performance:

> Mara was the child of sensibility: everything she did was directed to the heart; her tone, itself pure, sweet, rich, and powerful, took all its various colouring from the passions of the words…

There was an inevitable comparison:

> Her tone, perhaps, was neither so sweet nor so clear as Billington's, nor so rich and powerful as Catalani's, but it was the most touching language of the soul.[xx]

But on the whole, it seems that she was an engaged performer with a sensibility more refined that of Billington.

And this 'sensibility', discussed in terms of the 'touching language of the soul', was an intrinsic element in the way in which she was depicted in the part. [xxi] The anonymous print shows her not in obvious operatic costume or even singing, but in the pose and costume of a tragic actress. The pose as illustrated by Austin and others specifically suggests the first gesture of the two part classical acting pose of aversion or refusal, in which 'the hand held vertical is retracted towards the face' and 'the eyes and head are for a moment directed eagerly towards the object…'.[xxii] In the character of Mandane, the aversion would have been to the banishment of Arbaces, to the assassination of Xerxes, to news that Arbaces may be guilty, or the refusal to believe all three. Given that it was these aspects that attracted the audience, that same audience would have been easily to identify them in the print itself.

Mara also made the image do double service. On one hand, it showed her in one of her major roles, and one in which she was, at the point of publication, competing with Billington. On the other, the nature of the role allowed her to show herself as a tragic actress; she was able to gain respectability and prestige by aligning her image with tragedy and therefore with the 'legitimate theatre' rather than with opera. And it ran counter to the negative view of her character in circulation since the many petty controversies which had severely dented her reputation.

On a personal level, the picture probably came to stand for something else was well. When she returned to the role on 30 April 1796, the *Monthly Mirror* reported that she 'retains all her sweetness, but has lost much of her power'. She last sang Mandane for her Benefit on 25 May 1796, and with her departure, and with Billington on the Continent, the opera went briefly off the London stage. Drury Lane tried out several singers in one-off performances of it in an attempt to find a replacement - Mrs Clendinning on 11 May was one - but to no avail. The opera would not be staged again regularly at either theatre until Billington returned to the part in 1801.

Elizabeth Paton as Mandane

The last of our three illustrations shows Mary Anne Paton as Mandane. [xxiii] Paton, who made her début as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1822 and created the role of Reiza in Weber's *Oberon* in 1826, took over Mandane in the early 1820s. The image here was used by Cumberland in his acting edition of 1828, an edition that came with notes

and stage directions. On the costume for Mandane, the edition specified a 'rich satin long-train robe' with added embroidery, a body of cloth of silver - loose trousers - handsome turban and feathers', and 'the whole dress elegantly jewelled and ornamented'.[xxiv]

The source of this information is not known, for although the edition advertises itself as recording the work as it is 'now performed at the Theatres-Royal', it is perfectly possible that some of the material was either wrongly reported through natural carelessness, or simply invented for reasons of consistency and simplicity. But it does not, in fact, much matter, for it can be assumed that the details as included were thought by the publishers to be believable to those they wished to buy the edition. And what those details do, is to illustrate an assumption of (or a desire for) 'correctness'.

There had been many complaints about the unsuitable nature of costumes worn on the London stage, complaints that became more outspoken and pointed as the 18th century went on. In his *Ideas on the opera*, a 1790 polemic that demanded reform of the London theatres, A. A. Le Texier commented:

> The article of dress is not less important than that of decorations, and the Taylor of the Opera should not be a mere working clothes-maker, it is absolutely indispensable that he should be acquainted with the most necessary things belonging to his profession... to avoid the improbabilities and absurdities which are daily committed on the stage. [xxv]

'Who would have expected' he asks rhetorically 'from the ideas which a man little acquainted with history may have conceived of Porus king of the Indies' given that:

> in the opera of *Alessandro nelle Indie* performed last year,[xxvi] [the character was] dressed with a robe of white satin striped with sky blue, and all over covered with small pink feathers. The reason for this nonsense, is that our [] Porus wished to be pretty; [] certainly the rival of Alexander had no such pretension.[xxvii]

Le Texier was also keen that dress was worn and displayed with accuracy:

> I have seen Turks, who not to spoil their head-dresses, kept their hair in bags or queues; which indeed made a great disparity with the turbans.[xxviii]

It was not enough just to wear turbans; they had to be worn properly or not at all. While there is no evidence to suggest that the costume worn by Paton was created for her, it did become part of the public perception of the character, and was much reproduced. There is a further later watercolour of her in it which also reproduces what is clearly an oriental design as a background. Importantly, the straight line which cuts off the bottom of this background suggests that it is a backcloth that has been used as a source for this material. Its suitability for the scene is in contrast to one apparently used in an earlier staging of the opera; an illustration shows Artaxerxes and Arbaces in vaguely Eastern attire inhabiting what looks to be London drawing room of the 1760s.

Principles did change, however erratically; Storace's 1792 version of Metastasio's *Didone Abbandonata* was advertised as having new dresses of Tyrians, Trojans and Africans 'taken from the most accurate descriptions of the Habits of their respective

Nations'.[xxix] The image of Miss Paton as Mandane emphasises that costume had begun to play a serious part in the conception of 'theatrical character'.

Mandane as monument

The images of Billington, Mara, and Paton demonstrate just how monumental the role became; three of the greatest 18th and early 19th century sopranos had their images shaped by their performances of the role and the circulation of their image in the part. They clearly 'owned' the role, thought it was worth owning, and, to a certain extent, passed it down from chosen soprano to chosen soprano. It was territory that was defended, as was demonstrated by an incident in 1831, when Miss Sherriff made her debut:

> The announcement of a new Mandane at Covent Garden, we suppose, roused the jealous fears of Mrs Wood [Miss Paton], and she immediately determined to take the field in gallant style, against her dreaded rival, by playing Mandane the same evening, therefore *Guy Mannering* which had been underlined for last night, was taken out of the bill and *Artaxerxes* substituted. [xxx]

There was no question that it was a demanding part, and therefore a severe test:

> Mandane, we need scarcely observe, is not an effective part, and for a first appearance is always, we think, most injudiciously chosen. Its mild and monotonous features are difficult of effect in any case, but require at least a coolness and self-possession which only practice on the stage can give.[xxxi]

But if the performer could pass that test, they could expect to sing the role (and others) again and again. And of all London opera roles, it was one in which a singer was most

likely to be pictured, and the one where the picture was most likely to be a key element in the creation of that singer's image.

[i] See Roger Fiske, *English theatre music in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 2/1986), for a general discussion of the opera in context; Iain Mackintosh, 'Deciphering *The downfall of Shakespeare on a* Modern *Stage* of 1765', *Theatre Notebook*, 62/1 (2008), 1-39 for a recent re-evaluation of the effect of Arne's opera; and Michael Burden, 'Metastasio on the British Stage 1728-1840', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 40 (2007) for performances of the opera.

[ii] Burney, although not entirely negative about Arne, much of his text is coloured by opinions such as those he penned on the composer's setting of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* the following season. He declared it was 'written for vulgar singers and hearers too long to be able to comport himself properly at the Opera–house, in the first circle of taste and fashion... The common play-house and ballad passages, which occurred in almost every air in his opera, made the audience wonder how they got there ... a different language, different singers, and a different audience, and style of Music from his own, carried him out of his usual element, where he mangled the Italian poetry, energies, and accents, nearly as much as a native of Italy just arrived in London, would English, in a similar situation'. Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, IV (London, 1789), 486.

[iii] See Don Neville's various writings but most succinctly the third section of 'Metastasio', *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 2/2001), XVI, 512-13.

[iv] The adapter and translator of Metastasio's text remains anonymous, but it is widely accepted to have been Arne himself.

[v] Singers known to have sung the role of Mandane between 1762 and 1840 with date of their first recorded performance in the part: Cecilia Arne [née Young] (1780); {Miss} Atkinson (Before 5 February 1834); {Mrs} Austen (7 December 1822); {Miss} Austin (debut;16 October 1839); Mary (Polly) Barthélemon [née Young] (26 October1775); [Louisa?] Betts (debut; 17 January 1830); Elizabeth Billington [née Weichsel] 13 January 1787; Charlotte Brent [later Mrs Thomas Pinto] (2 February 1762); Ann Catley [later Mrs Francis Lascelles] (27 March 1773); {Miss} Carew (5 October 1818); Ann Cargill [née Brown] (31 January 1777); Elizabeth Clendining [née Arnold] (11 May 1796); {Miss} Coveney (debut; 24 September 1828); Martha 'Maria' Dickons [née Poole] (debut) (11 May 1807); Elizabeth Feron (28 March 1828); Catherine Maria Forde (27 March 1822); Georgina George [later Mrs John Oldmixon] (15 July 1783); {Miss} Greene (3 July 1820); {Miss} M. Hammersley (11 March 1826); Elizabeth Harper [later Mrs John Bannister] (Covent Garden debut) (23 January 1783); Elizabeth Hughes (22 September 1815); Mary Jameson [later Mrs Stewart Amos Arnold] (19 March 1774); Maria Ann Johnstone [née Poitier] (16 October 1783); Frances Maria Kelly (?); Mary Anne Lane (1821); Gertrud Mara (12 April 1788); Margaret Martyr [née Thornton] (2 May 1781); Isabella Mattocks [née Hallam] (7 April 1770); Lydia Ellen Merry (debut; 13 July 1816); Eliza Paton (28 October 1833); Mary Ann Paton [later Lady William Pitt Lennox, then Mrs Joseph Wood] (7 January 1823); Anna Maria Philips [later Mrs Rawlings Crouch] (debut, 11 November 1780); Elizabeth Rainforth (stage debut; 27 October 1836); Jane Shirreff (later Mrs Walcott) (debut, 7 December 1831); Catherine Stephens (later Catherine, Countess of Essex) (debut, 23 September 1813); Maria Turpin (later Mrs H. Wallack) (15 February 1835); {Miss} Twist (8 January 1778); Mary Ann Wilson [later Mrs Thomas Welsh] (debut, 18 January 1821); Frederika Weichsel [née Wierman] (16 November 1775).

[vi] Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and other stage personnel in London, 1660-1800*, XII (Carbondale, 1987), 4-5.

[vii] A now lost portrait was exhibited the year of the opera's premiere: 'In the Exhibition of 1762, there was a whole-length portrait of Miss Brent, a celebrated singer of that time, painted by this artist [Westfield Webb]'. Edward Edwards, Anecdotes *of the painters*.... (London, 1808), 39. 'A whole length of Miss

Brent, in the character of Mandane, in the Opera of Artaxerxes. A Whole Length of the Trimming Of Miss Brent's Dress, very exact, her Necklace and Esclavauge very finely executed'. *The St James's Chronicle*, 25 May 1762.

[viii] Gridiron Gabble, *Green Room Gossip* (London, 1808), 120-1.

[ix] There are numerous discussions of this issue; one of the best is that in Curtis A. Price, Judith Milhous, and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London. Vol. 1. The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778-1791* (Oxford, 1995). See also: Curtis Price, 'Unity, Originality, and the London Pasticcio', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, new ser., 2/4 (1991), 17–30; Emanuele Senici, '"Adapted to the modern stage": *La clemenza di Tito* in London', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 7/1 (1997), 1-22. 'Metastasio's 'London pasties': curate's egg or pudding's proof?', in Hg. von Elisabeth Th. Hilscher und Andrea Sommer-Mathis eds., *Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), 'uomo universal'* (Vienna, 2000), 293-309.

[x] See Michael Burden and Christopher Chowrimootoo, 'A movable feast: the aria in the italian libretto in London before 1800', *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 4/2 (2007), 285–289; and their forthcoming two volume catalogue detailing the use of Italian arias in the London opera libretto.

[xi] See ARTAXERXES. AN ENGLISH OPERA. As it is Performed at the THEATRES ROYAL IN *DRURY LANE*, AND *COVENT-GARDEN*. The Musick Composed by THO. AUG. ARNE, Mus. Doc. A NEW EDITION (London, 1787) [*GB-Lbl* 1342.k.37].

[xii] *The Theatrical Review; or the Weekly Rosciad*, Saturday 3 October 1801.

[xiii] Quoted in Highfill, op.cit., II (Carbondale, 1973), 126.

[xiv] The recorded performances are as follows: **1801: CG:** October 3, 7. **DL:** October 8, 10. **CG:** October 13, 15. **DL:** October 17. **CG:** October 20. **DL:** October 22, November 5. **CG:** November 6. **DL:** November 9, 11. **CG:** December 5. **DL:** December 8. **1802: DL:** January 7, March 13, 23, April 1. **CG:** April 3. **DL:** April 10, 26. **CG:** April 27, May 6. **DL:** May 26, June 3. After that date, both Billington's performances and staging so the opera tail off, but it was nearly always done once a season; see Burden, Metastasio.

[xv] See reviews in *The Theatrical Review; or the Weekly Rosciad*, Saturday 3 October 1801 and *The London Chronicle*, October1801; for a discussion of this subject see Michael Burden, 'Mrs Billington's embonpoint', paper given British Society for Eighteenth-century Studies annual meeting January 2008, now housed in the Oxford Research Archive at http://ora.ouls.ox.ac.uk:8081/10030/1660.

[xvi] A bravura air, Mandane. Coloured engraving. Drawn and engraved by James Gillray. Published by Hannah Humphrey. 22.xii.1801. [*GB-Onc*].

[xvii] Aileen Ribiero, *Dress and Morality* (London, 1986), 117-18.

[xviii] See for example, Joan Perkin, *Women and marriage in 19th-cenury England* (London, 1989), 92.

[xix] [James Ridgway], *Memoirs of Mrs Billington* (London, 1792), 6-7.

[xx] [Sainsbury's] *A Dictionary of Musicians, from the earliest ages to the present time* (London, 1824).

[xxi] Madame Mara, in the character of Mandane, in the opera of Artaxerxes. Engraving. Anon. After Nov 1792. [*US-CAh*].

[xxii] Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia* (London, 1806), 487, and Dene Barnett, *The art of gesture* (Heidelberg, 1987), 58-62.

[xxiii] Miss Paton as Mandane. Engraving. Woolnoth, after Wageman. Published by John Cumberland, 15.vii.1828. [*GB-Lbl* 624 A 10].

[xxiv] ARTAXERXES. AN OPERA In Two Acts... PRINTED FROM THE ACTING COPY ... As now performed at the THEATRES-ROYAL, LONDON. (London: John Cumberland, [1828]). [*GB-Ob M.adds. 111 f.174 (1)*].

[xxv] A. A. Le Texier, *Ideas on the opera*, trans. anon (London, 1790), 35.

[xxvi] A pasticcio version of Metastasio's text with music Anfossi, Myslivec˘ek, Piccinni, Handel first staged at the King's Theatre on 27 November 1779.

[xxvii] Le Texier, op. cit., 35.

[xxviii] ibid., 36.

[xxix] *The London Stage 1660-1800*, ed. Charles Beecher Hogan, V/2 (Carbondale, 1968), 1458.

[xxx] *The Theatrical Observer*, No. 3109, 2 December 1831.

[xxxi] *The Examiner*, 20 October 1839.