

39) Der Affektkontrast zweier folgenden Arien gehört bereits zur Norm der *Seria*. Vgl. Hücke, a.a.O., S. 262.

40) Am Ende des ersten Aktes ergibt sich eine ähnliche Konstellation. Rinaldos Arie "Cara sposa" bezeichnet den einen Affekt und das langsame Tempo (später als *Cavatina* bezeichnet), seine Arie "Venti" den kontrastierenden Affekt und das schnelle Tempo (später *Cadie Caballetta*). Die beiden dazwischen liegenden Arien verdoppeln gleichsam den Affektkontrast. Rinaldos "Cor ingrato" wirkt wie ein Abbild von "Cara sposa", Eustazios Arie "Col valor" ist dagegen eine erste Aufforderung zum Aufbruch.

Cecil Hill:

"THEODORA" AND THE 18th CENTURY FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Different explanations have been put forward for the lack of success Handel enjoyed from "Theodora". Handel himself, no doubt in a moment of despair on being told by Thomas Morell after the second performance that Sir Thomas Hankey would engage all of the boxes if he would repeat it, retorted, "He is a fool; the Jews will not come to it (as to Judas) because it is a Christian story; and the Ladies will not come, because it (is) a virtuous one"¹. Some have pointed, wrongly perhaps, to the earthquake scare that gripped London in February 1750, which peaked on the 19. February and caused the postponement of the oratorio season until the 2. March. Percy Young suggested, "It might be thought that an obscure topic from martyrology would prove too esoteric for the generality" and also "its uncomfortable insistence on the ultimate devolution of Christian values in an unchristian world and its seriousness of approach put it out of court"². Sir George Macfarren avoided the issue in the first sentence of his essay with "The riddle of public success never appeared more insoluble than in the case of Handel's 'Theodora' "³.

This paper does not claim to solve that riddle for "Theodora", nor does it intend to contradict the points of view that have been expressed by others. All of them have some degree of validity, simply because any audience is made up of individuals and factions that throw up a complex matrix of viewpoints and responses to a work, its performers and their individual and collective performances.

When Irving Singer pointed out, "In a myth the overt story is a mechanism for articulating a view of reality which the audience shares with the performers and the author"⁴, he did not mention that some myths, and "Theodora" is a very good myth, are open to different interpretations by different factions of an audience, especially at a time when there are various trains of thought running through society, pursued with greater or lesser degrees of vigour. Handel identified only two of the factions in his audience, the Jews and the Ladies; quite likely there were more. This paper attempts to draw attention only to the reaction of the Ladies to "Theodora" in the light of the feminist movement of the 18th century.

The 18th century feminist movement in England traces its origins to the early years of the English Restoration with occasional complaints of anti-female prejudice by such writers as Aphra Behn, the first woman to make a significant contribution to English drama. In the epilogue to her play "Sir Patient Fancy". (1678) she wrote:

What has poor Woman done, that she must be
Debarr'd from Sense, and Sacred Poetry?
... pray tell me then,
Why Women should not write as well as Men?

It was not only such women as Aphra Behn, Mary Astell, Lady Mary Wortley Montague and others down to Mary Wollstencraft at the end of the 18th century who set out to advocate an improvement in the status of women through better education, opportunities for satisfying employment, greater personal freedom, equality before the law and, in effect, equality with men in all things. Some men were just as strong in their advocacy, Daniel Defoe perhaps more so.

Even so, there was another point of view advocated by such men as Richard Allestree, Lord Halifax and Bishop William Fleetwood. They pointed out that a woman should be totally subservient to her husband; should maintain absolute chastity, regardless of his infidelities; should "deny herself even the most innocent liberties, if she sees they dissatisfy him"⁵; should "obey (him) without Dispute, and comply with Calmness and great Readiness, even under Doubt, Suspicion and Uncertainty of what will follow"⁶; should not question her husband's decisions or even notice his infirmities - in fact the worse he were the greater the need would be for her "to carry herself with that gentleness and sweetness that may be most likely to win him"⁷. These writers laid the responsibility on the wife alone for keeping a marriage harmonious. If you'll pardon a dreadful twist of metaphor, it is a point of view that today would set a pidgeon among the cats.

In recent studies of the 18th century feminist movement no reference seems to have been made to the views of the eminent scientist, Robert Boyle (1627-1691), on whose book, "The Martyrdom of Theodora and of Didymus" Thomas Morell based the libretto that Handel set. Though published late in Boyle's life (1687), this book had been written many years earlier, though Boyle doesn't give any information that might suggest an approximate date. It contains a number of passages that, in the light of the originality of most of the detail in Boyle's narrative and dialogue, can be interpreted as conveying Boyle's own views on women.

Boyle, like major supporters of the feminist cause, clearly rejected any view that women could not be properly educated; indeed, of his female acquaintances many were very well-educated. "I shall not scruple to own that I have sometimes had the honour to converse with ladies, that convinced me, that to attain a great proficiency of knowledge, it is not necessary to be a doctor of divinity, or so much as a man, since they discoursed of diverse things with no less wit than piety"⁸.

Inevitably in this story, female chastity received Boyle's attention, and it seems he was strongly in favour not only of maintaining a woman's right to preserve her chastity, but also in making it her duty to do so. Speaking through Didymus he stated, "... chastity in women, and especially in virgins, is so much a virtue, and their right to preserve it so confessedly inherent, that all nations agree in ascribing to them a right to defend it, without reserve, against whosoever attempts to deprive them of it"⁹; and through Theodora, "virgins have so great and clear a right to keep themselves such against all outward assaults, that monarchs themselves (whose force is not to be by force opposed, when it tends but to deprive us of our lives) may be forcibly resisted, when they strive to offer violence to our chastity"¹⁰. There are several other statements, whose adequate quotation would prove tedious, in which Boyle asserts the preciousness of female chastity with which he also coupled the characteristic of

modesty, though never making any reference to the need for male chastity - as if one could exist without the other.

Boyle put both sides of the argument about courage in women. Septimius regarded it as "at least an unrequired, if not an altogether improper virtue"¹¹, while Theodora claimed that "Christianity can elevate the courage of a woman to a degree, that they think appropriated to men"¹². A corollary of courage is heroic virtue "To hear you speak", says Septimius "one would imagine that you are not talking of a young lady, but of some ancient hero". "Heroic virtue", replies Didymus "does as little know sexes, as doth the soul wherein it properly resides"¹³. These remarks along with others on marriage (mostly based on St. Paul's views) and on female beauty are the written part of Boyle's views on women and their status. He was rather enlightened for his time, though by no means as radical as the advocates of a generation afterwards. But there are some unstated aspects of the story that formed an important part of Morell's libretto, which itself was written within a few years of the publication of Boyle's collected works in five volumes in 1744, five years before Handel composed the oratorio.

The most significant is the question of leadership by women. Theodora is clearly portrayed as a leader, whose moral authority over the Christians of Antioch was very strong. The point is only brought into focus through her relationship with Irene. Boyle does not permit her to exercise that same authority directly over the men of her sect, though it was implied; the implication is perhaps stronger in Handel's oratorio because of the intensity of his characterization.

Theodora's moral authority over Didymus is not the result of her political leadership, but of his sexual passion. He is a normal, healthy, young male, whose conversion to Christianity is the inevitable consequence of his total submission to the charms of Theodora's unrivalled beauty. While he is not insincere, he would have worshipped any god she worshipped and died for any cause she espoused. But his love is requited only by a Platonic friendship that sustains his hope. At no time does Theodora grant him the grace that only the true love of a woman can grant. Her denying him that love is the ultimate frustration with which any story can end. And it paints the less than human picture of a woman putting her role as the leader of a religious (and inevitably political) cause above that which is dearest to the hearts of the majority of human beings - and probably marginally dearer to women - fulfilment in love.

Another unstated aspect is the characterization of oppressed and persecuted Christians by devout and defenceless women and conversely the ruthless and cruel Romans by men. The Christians are the personification of good, the Romans of evil. Men are the rulers, women are the ruled. Therefore, one can be led to believe that what women are is essentially good and right, and what men do to them is essentially bad and wrong. While it is clear that there are men in the Christian camp and women in the Roman, their identities are suppressed and their presence acknowledged only sufficiently to avoid total separation of the sexes. The modicum of sensitivity that Septimius sometimes displays is suppressed by the rigidity of the social order of "the Roman discipline" and its customs ("For I worship still the gods my father worship'd"). Only Didymus emerges as a sensitive male who might be able to build a bridge between the sexes; but the social thinking he was caught up in is far too radical and he shared the fate of she who too prematurely advocated reform.

Why did Boyle draw such a sharp contrast and portray the two principal sections of the Antioch community and their relationship as he did? Perhaps the reason is attributable to two influences on him. One is undoubtedly his scientific reason. Faced with

the fundamental story, he could hardly have failed to address himself to the status of women and the absurdity of some attitudes towards them, even though he did write in his preface, "I will not here examine, whether the ignorance wont to be imputed to women be their fault, or that of their accusers; and whether it is any want of natural capacity, or rather want of instruction that keeps most of them from knowledge, though this regards not the sexes"¹⁴. The other reason could be a disappointing love affair in his youth with the beautiful and ingenious daughter of the Earl of Monmouth, to which the writing of his "Seraphic Love" has been directly attributed. Boyle never married.

In short Boyle's Theodora appears as a beautiful, well-educated and determined young woman possessing strong qualities of leadership and a singular dedication to a purpose, willing to challenge the supremacy of men even at the price of self-fulfilment in what matters most to the majority of women, yet willing to enjoy that self-fulfilment (with Didymus) if granted the privilege of following the dictates of her reason and her religion¹⁵. Theodora recognized the need for her to be the embodiment of the liberated woman in the way an increasing number of women wished to be. Her Christianity can be viewed as merely a disguise, and perhaps the best Boyle could have devised.

Morell's libretto retained the essence of Boyle's characters and message, and Handel's sublime music distinctly sharpened the focus. The five-volume publication of Boyle's works by Thomas Birch in 1744 (and the possible pre-publication of the oratorio's word-book) probably ensured that the story was well-known and that attitudes towards it were well-defined before the first performance. What evidence exists then to adduce the (precise) nature of the attitudes among Handel's Ladies?

The literature of the mid-18th century that comments on women is reported to be weighted 3-to-1 in favour of those who spoke in favour of women's liberation¹⁶. In general it set out demands that the character of Theodora satisfied. But quantifying pamphlet and article literature is a notoriously unreliable way of conducting a social survey, and as there are no formal social surveys from that time, one must look elsewhere. One argument goes that in the 18th century middle and upper class women, who had been the mainstays of the economy of the 17th century family, became less important due to the increase of luxury and the growth of the servant class. Thus these women (a hard core of Handel's audience) became trivialized, objects, toys, playthings, male status symbols if beautiful, 'the weaker sex' incapable of labour and existing only to be pampered by men. The argument continues that they sought to fit themselves into this mould, not to provoke male horror by being self-aware and self-confident, and to serve only male needs and to supervise the care of their children¹⁷.

Of course, most women accepted that role, and perhaps in most cases with gracious willingness. Given the opportunity, why shouldn't they live a comfortable social life, cared for and pampered, free from the trials and tribulations of the world of their men. The arguments of the feminists and the 'women who want to be woman' of today, and the men who support both factions, are little different in principle from what they were 250 years ago, and I venture to guess from 250 years hence.

Thus, there must have been at least two main groups of women in Handel's audience and they probably rejected Theodora for different reasons. One group would have been the feminists, who saw in Theodora a model of the kind of woman they wanted their sex to emulate. The bitter irony for them would have been her failure to survive the challenge to her assertion of her independence and personal freedom. The cruel, licentious men demanded she should submit herself to a debauchery that would have reduced her to being a toy or plaything, the clear implication of the start of Part II. The alternative to submission was abuse and death, and she chose the latter. And further, as Katherine

Rogers has pointed out "Over-emphasis on women's chastity has always diminished them, by making their sexual status the most important thing about them"¹⁸. Doubtless the feminists could not accept Theodora's devastating failure, whereupon the myth ceased to articulate the reality they desired.

Those women who were content with life would have seen Theodora differently. Here was a young woman espousing a role, that of leadership, that was totally foreign to the reality of their lives. Furthermore, she was not prepared to consider the prospect of marriage, children and a life that related to theirs. She even totally refused the pleasure of love. In this connection Morell and Handel, unlike Boyle, omitted any trace of Theodora's willingness to marry Didymus, if she were relieved of all the burden's of her cause. This surely made her appear much less amiable and agreeable to Handel's Ladies than he could have feared. And finally, to spoil a good romance utterly she and her unrequited lover were put to death in the name of a religion that was being regarded increasingly in the 18th century as a doubtful cause.

Did Handel misjudge the possible interpretations of the myth of Theodora, or did the audience misjudge the myth? Perhaps it is a little of both. Mrs. Dewes, a woman undoubtedly like her sister, Mrs. Delaney, who at least believed that men should treat her sex as intellectual equals, pleaded for Handel's work in a letter of 3. December 1750 to her brother, Bernard Granville, "surely Theodora will have justice at least, if it was to be again performed, but the generality of the world have ears and hear not"¹⁹.

Anmerkungen

- 1) Otto Erich Deutsch, Handel: A Documentary Biography, London 1955, p. 852.
- 2) Percy M. Young, The Oratorios of Handel, London 1949, p. 183.
- 3) G.A. MacFarren, The "Theodora" of Handel, in: MT 16 (1873), p. 103.
- 4) Irving Singer, Mozart and Beethoven: The Concept of Love in Their Operas, Baltimore and London 1977, p. 14.
- 5) (Richard Allestree), The Ladies Calling, Oxford, The Theater (1673), II 29; quoted in Katherine Rogers, The feminism of Daniel Defoe, in: Women in the 18th Century and Other Essays, Toronto & Sarasota 1976, p. 4.
- 6) William Fleetwood, The Relative Duties of Parents and Children, Husbands and Wives, Masters and Servants, London 1716, p. 218; quoted *ibid*.
- 7) The Ladies Library, ed. Sir Richard Steele; London 1772, 7th edition, Volume II, p. 64; quoted *ibid*.
- 8) Robert Boyle, The Works, London 1772, V, p. 259.
- 9) *ibid.*, 283.
- 10) *ibid.*, 268.
- 11) *ibid.*, 300.
- 12) *ibid.*, 281.
- 13) *ibid.*, 301.

- 14) *ibid.*, 258.
- 15) *ibid.*, 276.
- 16) Jean E. Hunter, *The 18th-Century Englishwoman: According to the Gentleman's Magazine*, in: *Women in the 18th Century*, p. 77.
- 17) *ibid.*, pp. 76-7.
- 18) Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 19) Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p. 695.