

Online Productions of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*: by Edward's Boys, directed by Perry Mills, Christ Church Hall, Oxford, 2013; by Sweet Tea Shakespeare, directed by Claire Kimball, 2021; by The Show Must Go Online, directed by Amelia Parillon, 2021; and by Beyond Shakespeare (Winter Revels) at the White Bear Pub, Kennington, directed by Robert Crighton, 2023

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To Renaissance writers and artists, the fact that Aeneas founded Rome, and hence enabled most of the culture that they valued most, was far less important than the fact that, in order to do so, he had to abandon the love of his life. At least, this was how Virgil told the story in the most esteemed literary work of the period. Marlowe's (and Nashe's?) dramatization of Books Two and Four of the Aeneid is almost too much in love with the original, translating Virgil sometimes virtually word-for-word and even making the protagonists, at moments of high tension, speak the original Latin. As a result, it is rather static. Tim Carroll's Globe production (2003) gestured toward the original production by a children's company, setting the play in a giant playground: the gods were played as children, wearing shoes too big for them, and playing with adult human beings as with their toys. Though reviewers mostly disliked his emphasis on comedy and felt that he trivialised the play, later productions have also treated the gods as comic contrasts to the tragic lovers. When James Macdonald directed the play at the National Theatre's Cottesloe in 2009, with Anastasia Hille and Mark Bonnar, reviewers praised the actors and the ambition of the choice but also criticized its length; Peter Kirwan could not see a case for another revival any time soon.¹

Other theatrical directors in this century have done their best to liven up the play, with more emphasis on the visual. I have seen only the trailer for Kimberley Sykes' highly praised production at the RSC's Swan Theatre (2017) but it is clear from reviews and from the production photos that she created a beautiful world for Carthage, obviously contrasted with the militarism of the future Rome.² Here, too, the gods were largely comic, though their cruelty was also emphasized: Cupid's dart was a hypodermic syringe with blood taken from

¹ Peter Kirwan, "Dido, Queen of Carthage (National) @ The Cottesloe Theatre," *The Bardathon*, 29 March 2009, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2009/03/29/dido-queen-of-carthage-national-the-cottesloe-theatre/>.

² See "Kimberley Sykes 2017 Production," *Royal Shakespeare Company*, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/dido-queen-of-carthage/kimberley-sykes-2017-production>.

Venus' arm. Reviewers praised the moving Dido (Chipo Chung) and the unheroic Aeneas (Sandy Grierson). Most reviews made two points that recur in accounts of later performances: Dido is an obvious forerunner of Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Aeneas's enormously long account of the fall of Troy—a tour de force for which every actor is praised—makes him a textbook case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It's arguable, however, that a play of long poetic speeches rather than action (except for the multiple suicides at the end) may be better suited to radio or Zoom performance. At present, it is available online in four versions: a video of a live performance, two productions directed for Zoom, and an audio recording made before a live audience. For study of the play, these recordings are invaluable, but they are also, in their different ways, quite enjoyable.

Edward's Boys, 2013

In 2004 Perry Mills directed short scenes from early modern drama with boys at the Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford; in 2008, the company, now called Edward's Boys, performed their first full-length play, *The Dutch Courtesan*. Their repertoire since then has consisted mainly of the non-Shakespearean repertoire written for boys' companies. Their production of Dido was filmed at a one-off event on 21 September 2013, in the Great Hall of Christ Church College, Oxford: spectators dined before the play (on an Elizabethan menu) and also saw an English translation of the Latin Dido play by William Gager, performed by an all-male cast of Christ Church students.³

I always imagined that performances in dining halls involved moving the tables to the sides so that actors could use the central area for performing, but in this case the audience remained seated at their tables and the actors performed in the spaces between them as well as on a long central table that provided the main stage, often addressing each other from opposite ends of the hall. Aeneas' soldiers gazed at the portraits round the hall when they commented on the images they saw on Dido's walls. Most later Edward's Boys performances have used full texts but on this occasion the play had been cut fairly heavily out of consideration for the banqueting audience. Though the actors were impressive, the story, with its sexual and racial politics, was subordinated to the sense of occasion and the beauty of the candlelit dining hall and the music, performed by choristers of the School. The production brought out the extent to which the characters were manipulated by Cupid, with both Dido

³ "Performing Dido", a film with highlights from both performances, is currently available online. See "Performing Dido Film," *Early Drama at Oxford*, <https://edox.org.uk/projects/performing-dido/performing-dido-film/>.

and the Nurse exhibiting knee-jerk reactions to the boy's darts. The fire that consumes Dido at the end was conveyed by the reflection of red light on the black clothes of those who surrounded her. The video conveys the visual and aural beauty of the performance, but it should probably be supplemented by reading the text, which does not always come across clearly on the recording (or, perhaps, for much of the audience in so vast a space). Fortunately, Peter Kirwan's review on his blog gives a very full account of the production.⁴

Sweet Tea Shakespeare, 2021

Sweet Tea Shakespeare is a company based in North Carolina which, like other companies with "Shakespeare" in their name, frequently performs works by other people as well. *Dido* was one of ten plays performed on Zoom in what the company called the "Shipwreck Season"; it dates from 1 May, 2021.⁵ Its "prologue," taken from a broadside ballad about "The Wandering Prince of Troy," was distributed among the cast of eleven actors. This was an elegant performance (heavily cut but otherwise faithful) which wisely went for simplicity. Only one speaker was visible at a time—head and shoulders, against a plain white background; there were no thumbnails, but the absence of reaction shots was hardly missed. Costumes and headgear were appropriate and attractive. References to song in the text were acted on, with settings of the songs from Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament*. Clever lighting gave the impression of firelight in a cave for the encounter of Aeneas and Dido, while Anna and Iarbas in the final scene were seen against a red background as they gazed, aghast, at Dido's funeral pyre. Both Aeneas (Patrick M. Bentley) and Dido (Karen Alvarado) were played sympathetically, as were the other members of the tragic quartet (Danielle Scott as Anna and Ian Blackwell Rogers as Iarbas). Gary du Breuil and Brett Sullivan Santry were also excellent in a variety of roles. Though the actors at times seemed to be reading from a difficult text, the occasional mistakes did not detract from their excellent and intelligent performances. Unfortunately, however, they are let down by their technology: intrusive captions appear from time to time, the recording speed is sometimes uneven. Someone needs to edit the recording (and, above all, get rid of the captioned text) so that this admirable company can get the recognition it deserves.

⁴ Peter Kirwan, "Dido, Queen of Carthage (Edward's Boys) @ Christ Church Banqueting Hall, Oxford," *The Bardathon*, 22 September 2013, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/09/22/dido-queen-of-carthage-edwards-boys-christ-church-banqueting-hall-oxford/>.

⁵ *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, Sweet Tea Shakespeare, <https://sweetteashakespeare.com/dido-queen-of-carthage/>.

The Show Must Go Online, 2021

One of the finest flowers of lockdown, The Show Must Go Online (hereafter TSMGO), followed up its Zoom performances of all the First Folio plays with, among other things, a Month of Marlowe. *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, first broadcast in 2021, had a very strong cast who were encouraged to give full-out performances in a lightly cut text, a fact that makes it ideal for anyone studying the play.⁶ The production made the most of the fact that Carthage was in Africa and that the conflict between Romans and Carthaginians was one of races as well as civilizations, foreshadowing Roman colonialism. The parallel between Dido and Shakespeare's Cleopatra was argued several times in the critical commentary (from Margo Hendricks) and the Dido, Sojourner Hazelwood-Connell, looked as if she could easily have moved into the more famous role. Simple colour-coding made it easy to distinguish the two groups of characters: the Trojans wore orange (which had also been their colour in an earlier production of *Troilus and Cressida*), the Carthaginians were in blue. Dido gave Aeneas and his followers blue robes which they put on over their orange ones; when they decided to leave for Italy, they took off the borrowed robes.

The production was obviously pro-Dido and anti-Aeneas. Timothy Weston bravely played him as not only weak and over-emotional but an unconvincing and clumsy liar whose men (especially Achates) became increasingly fed up with him. Dido, it was hinted, probably wouldn't have fallen for him without divine intervention and might have been better off with the powerful and sympathetic Iarbus (Samuel Nunes de Souza). although the fact that he was killing a sacrificial animal (a porg, whatever that is—ah, it derives from *Star Wars* and is basically a popular toy alluding to one of the film episodes) during his speech in Act IV also showed how dangerous he was.

The cast spoke Marlowe's language admirably, though the occasional bumpy scansion made me wish that there had been some preliminary agreement about the stress of some words, particularly proper names. In case any viewer did have difficulty with the language, the text was present at the bottom of the screen (it was accurate there, but the speech-to-text feature was predictably garbled when dealing with unscripted conversation before the play and in the interval).

TSMGO was a pioneer in the development of Zoom drama and many of its impressive features are on show in this production. Video or slides were used for unzoomable

⁶ Rob Myles, "The Show Must Go Online Presents: *Dido Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe," YouTube, 16 June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/live/k_9RDK1Hk9k?si=ULY6ug9hnWUANKzS.

moments like the view of Aeneas' son sleeping in a pastoral setting while Juno and Venus quarrel over him. Impressively, in the large-cast scenes that showed many thumbnails, everyone consistently showed the right reactions to dialogue and action. For instance, when Aeneas and Dido emerged from the cave, having obviously made the most of their time sheltering from the storm, it was clear that Achates and Anna were amused and Iarbus furious. While Aeneas was visibly flustered, Dido managed to carry off the situation.

The company is very sensitive to elements that might be offensive, which, I think, must explain the deliberate playing against the lines in the scenes involving the Nurse and the disguised Cupid, in which the Nurse, like Dido earlier, lurches from one attitude to another according to Cupid's manipulations. The lines, which make it clear that she's meant to be old, jarred with what we were seeing (a very attractive young woman). Understandably, the production team probably felt that jokes about elderly women in love were tasteless. At the end (which the cast later agreed was too abrupt) Jupiter and Cupid built the fire for Dido and all the gods appeared in their thumbnails to look on, indifferently or with amusement, at the human tragedy. As the director said later, she felt that the gods should see what they had done. The soundtrack, which had been ominous even in cheerful scenes, now crackled with the noises of fire and of war—the future wars between Rome and Carthage.

When you watch this performance, you also get the chat, a development specific to Zoom performances, which allows you to see reactions moment by moment. It would be easy to be sarcastic about this: it often seems that the spectators are more interested in the companionship of other TSMGO spectators than in the play; their knowledge of the actors makes them partisan (and they would hardly make negative comments in a forum which they knew was going to be visible worldwide).

Beyond Shakespeare, 2020–24

The Beyond Shakespeare group, which is dedicated to reading and discussing every medieval and early modern play except Shakespeare's, can offer the Dido fanatic a range of performances, recorded for the most part during lockdown. On their "First Look" in 2020, they read the entire play in one sitting, following each act with a discussion (ranging from gut reaction to scholarly analysis).⁷ Many of the actors were reading at sight and, since it came early in the Zoom era, the sound quality is often poor and several of the performers were

⁷ Beyond Shakespeare, "Dido, Queen of Carthage by Marlowe and Nashe (Beyond Shakespeare Exploring Session)," YouTube, 2 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0NJAmMLW0k>.

invisible. In 2020 and 2025 more readings, with discussion, were put onto YouTube. The “Second Look,” read without pauses for discussion, is also uneven, but has many beautiful lyric moments.⁸ In many ways, these readings work best as sound recordings, since most of the actors do not resemble the characters they are playing and make no attempt to augment them visually. (There are exceptions: Alexandra Kataguida, the Aeneas of the Second Look, is always worth watching.) Those who don’t want the discussion can instead listen to the sound recording of the play as performed in December 2023 in front of an audience in the White Bear, a London pub theatre.⁹ Like the TSMGO version, it features the splendid Sojourner Hazelwood-Connell as Dido, though the rest of the cast is new (with no carry-overs from earlier readings). Keith Hill was a powerful Jupiter, doubling as Achates. Kit McGuire’s gentle Aeneas was more sympathetically portrayed than Timothy Weston’s—not so much weak as genuinely helpless in the face of his fate. Though the pub performance made gestures toward costume and interaction, it is largely focused on the poetry of the play, and is mostly a pleasure to listen to, though occasionally the sound quality lets it down.

The three companies represent an interesting range of casting and performance choices: Edward’s Boys give us boys as both Aeneas and Dido; TSMGO sets black and brown Carthaginians against white Romans; the Aeneas of Beyond Shakespeare’s Second Look is female. The Edward’s Boys production is the most thoroughly rehearsed and polished of the three, but the conditions of live performance mean that some of the (shortened) text might not be fully intelligible without a script in hand. The Beyond Shakespeare versions are essentially audio performances and generally try not to impose a reading of the text. The TSMGO is the most complete version, visually and textually, with the text in subtitles, and it offers strong views of the work (e.g., the action is often hard to watch; the gods are irresponsible, and “all the black people die at the end”). Since the ability to inspire multiple interpretations is precisely what normally gives value to a work of art, it is gratifying that a non-Shakespearean play should turn out to have such kaleidoscopic possibilities.

⁸ Beyond Shakespeare, “*The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe | Second Look | Beyond Shakespeare,” YouTube, 28 November 2020, https://youtu.be/kHtFiMd-blM?si=Kp_EBAyam0JwG88w. A “Third Look” read-through is now also available, in three parts: Beyond Shakespeare, “*Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Marlowe & Nashe | Third Look,” YouTube, 4 July 2024 (part 1), <https://youtu.be/ZFJDlcfzJW8?si=4wqdVgGo7NVp9fWN>; 9 July 2024 (part 2), <https://youtu.be/czOg-0uJdao?si=1r2RsOwOA18KuNTi>; 11 July 2024 (part 3), <https://youtu.be/0YTnkcDPSaE?si=nzP9d2SFnPCqrInK>.

⁹ At time of publication, this production is in the process of being uploaded to YouTube, one act at a time. See Beyond Shakespeare, “374: !Spoilers! *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe,” YouTube, 23 May 2025 (Act 1), https://youtu.be/2oE73sq-DGY?si=YnNze_3ph8nmqKR1; 5 June 2025 (Act 2), <https://youtu.be/VFUF3UjfpBg?si=rYVGoxxFbiYrjU1>.

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